

The German question in the State Duma of the Russian empire on the eve of and during the first World War, or how "Russian Germans transformed from first-class citizens of Russia into a subject of hatred"

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Abstract

This article examines the national policy of the late Russian Empire in the period leading up to and during World War I, based on the example of the "German question." Attitudes towards Russian-Germans are considered through a prism of categories "ours-othersstrangers," examining how archival materials such as verbatim reports of the State Duma sessions (1906-1917), documents of political parties and other sources refer to this national group. It is shown that the German question, in comparison with more extreme ethnoreligious issues regarding Polish, Jewish or Muslim communities, was on the periphery of the government national policy in the early days of the Duma. With the beginning of World War I, however, the attitude towards Russian Germans changed drastically. The issues of "German domination" and treachery started to be sounded more pointedly in the Duma. It can be seen that during this period the national question was sharply aggravated, xenophobia and intolerance increased, and the German and Ukrainian questions were linked despite the comparative loyalty of the German community and the Duma's substantial German elite. Pogroms, deportations of Germans from the frontlines and the formation of a special commission on the struggle against "German domination" in the Fourth Duma represented a peak of anti-German policy. In 1915, in contravention of the Duma, laws on the restriction of land property and land tenure by Austro-Hungarian and German "citizens and natives" were passed. Repressive measures affected up to half a million "enemy citizens of Empire." Thus, during the war Germans transformed from "ours" to "strangers." German deputies, disappointed in the politics of Octobrists, shifted to other factions. The crisis of Imperial national policies, reflected in the Duma, manifested in a new anti-German course by the ruling powers, developed against the background of strengthening xenophobia and ethnic intolerance, which in fact aggravated the general conflict and hastened the subsequent disintegration of the Empire.

Keywords

Anti-German repressions, Ethno-confessional identity, German question, Mennonites, Orthodox germans, Refugees, Russian Empire