

GERMAN RUSSIANS ON THE VOLGA
AND IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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Note: Amelia B. Auld added to this thesis after 1941 which explains
her references to " A History of the Volga Relief Society" by Emma D.
Schwabenland ; " The People on our Side" by Edgar Snow (1944) and
" A History of Russia " by George Vernadsky (1944)

The author, Amelia B. Auld was born in Katharinenstadt, Russia on June 28, 1901 and baptized in the Lutheran faith. Her parents John Henry and Anna Sophia (Roberts) Baeckel (originally Bäcker perhaps), born in Kutter and Katharinenstadt respectively, arrived with their daughters, Amelia and Freda (b. May 20, 1900) on the Lusithania at Ellis Island in 1909. They lived in Bazine, Kansas for a year where a sister of Mr. Baeckel resided. Mr. Baeckel was a carpenter by trade but became a church custodian to support his family after they settled in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Amelia and her sister Freda were educated in the Lincoln schools. The Baeckels moved once more in 1923 to become permanent residents of Portland, Oregon. Amelia returned to Lincoln to finish college and lived in the home of a botany professor, Raymond G. Poole in whose household her mother had worked earlier. After Amelia graduated from the University of Nebraska where she had studied sociology under Hattie Plum Williams, a career in the teaching field became inevitable. The call to Powers, Ore. was accepted and later terminated through her marriage to Harold H. Auld, a salesman in 1933 in Portland and a subsequent move to The Dalles, Ore.

Amelia received her master's degree at the University of Oregon in 1938. Now retired and living in Portland, her 35-year career in the Portland school system which had its beginning at Franklin High ended as a counselor at Madison High. For ten years she taught summer classes in teacher training at Rice University in Houston, Texas.

Her husband passed away on January 30, 1974. Her father had died in 1937 after which her mother married Mr. Alex Bostron in 1940 and lived until 1945. Freda, the sister married George Pfenning in 1930. The family's church affiliation included the Second German Congregational church of which Rev. H. Hagelganz was pastor with a transfer to Zion German Congregational in later years. Zion merged with Brethren, another former German congregational church in the immediate area a few years ago. Both buildings were sold and the congregation relocated, built a new edifice of which Freda Pfenning was building chairman and it became Rivercrest Community Church.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On the subject of the Volga Germans both in their home on the Volga and in the United States there seems to be a noticeable lack of interest and clearness both on the part of historians and sociologists. There is considerable confusion in the minds of many Americans who live in places like Portland, Oregon, Lincoln, Nebraska and Boulder, Colorado where large numbers of these people live. Very few know who they are, nor where they came from, nor what their native language might be.

It is the purpose of this brief history to try to answer some of these questions, and to trace this minority group whose home has been on the middle Volga for 150 years where they have remained a German island in a sea of Slavic neighbors. An effort will be made to show how they came to live on the edge of the Steppes far from the Rhine which was their original home, then how in the strange way of the human race many of their number repeated the adventures of their forefathers and migrated again, this time to the United States. Further effort will be made to show how they who came here have made greater progress in the 76 years they have been here than did their progenitors in their 150 years

stay on the Volga. Also, an effort will be made to show how those who came to America were able to help their kinsmen during the great Russian famine in 1921. Then briefly an attempt will be made to compare the lot of those who remained in Stalin's Land with that of their relatives who came to the Land of the Free and have become truly Americans.

CHAPTER II

ORPHANS OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

Their Early History on the Volga

The land of their Uhrsprung¹ would not have them and called them Ausländer.² The land of their birth would not claim them and called them Colonists. But the Land of the Free may at times call them Roosians, yet it has accepted them, educated them and made them AMERICANS.

Perhaps somewhat poetic, but this is the history of a band of people whose lot in life has been more romantic than any fiction ever written.

A minority group wherever they have gone, their history is one of failure and success, agony and glory, hopelessness, and of a promising future. The German Russians who came to Russia on the invitation of Catherine II in 1763 were a part of the great German migration caused by the economic and social disturbances of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), and more immediately the Seven Years War (1756-1763). It was this wave to which brought the so-called Pennsylvania Dutch to the American Colonies. The two groups originally

¹Uhrsprung, origin.

²Auslander, foreigner.

came from the same area in Germany.

In the 13th Century Russia became a part of the "Golden Horde," with its capital at Sarai which is situated near the junction of the Don and Volga rivers.¹

As the vast empire of the Tartars was slowly broken by the conquests of Ivan III in 1480, and the further conquests of Kazan by Ivan IV in 1552 it was annexed to Moscow in 1566. Kazan is at the junction of the Kama and the Volga rivers. It was in this way that the Volga region and the vast territories around it fell into the hands of the Russians.²

This region of the lower and middle Volga was almost unknown to its new owners. They soon learned that it was one thing to destroy the power of the Tartars, but another to control this vast territory as part of their growing empire. In order to retain a hold over the land the Moscovit Government proceeded to establish a chain of widely separated forts along the Volga. It is said that the cities of Saratov, Samara, and Tsaritsyn³ owe their existence to this plan.⁴

¹George Vernadsky, A History of Russia (New York: Scribners Co., 1944), p. 50.

²Vernadsky, Ibid., p. 61.

³Tsaritsyn...Stalingrad.

⁴Emma D. Swabenland, German Russians on the Volga, p. 4.

The Government was unable to get Russians to settle in this region because it had such a bad reputation. Nomad tribes of Bashkirs, Kirghis, and Tartars made frequent raids upon many of the settlements. Malcontents of all kinds and vagabonds, as well as ruined nobles, defrocked monks, military deserters, fugitive serfs, highwaymen and Volga Pirates found here refuge from Russian law.¹ In fact the songs and stories of Russia are filled with their exploits. The writer can recall many trips on the Volga when the caves of these pirates were pointed out and the tales of their exploits told and retold.² There is an old Russian proverb which tells the reputation of all who lived on the Volga: Na Wolga Shitz wormal slyty.³

The Cossack marauder Stephen Razin also comes into this story, for he and his band in search of plunder and food terrorized this area from 1667-1671. Returning from a successful expedition into the Urals he opened his campaign on the Volga in 1670. He took the towns of Samara, Saratov, Astrakhan and Tsaritsyn. He killed the officials of the central government and forced the lower class of people into his army. At last he was defeated at Simbirsk by government troops and although he fled to the Don he was turned over to

¹Alfred N. Rambaud, History of Russia, Vol. II, pp. 209-212.

²Personal observation.

³All who live on the Volga are robbers.

them by the house-owning Cossacks and was executed in Moscow in 1671.¹

As a result of this constant warfare the few Russians who had moved into the region found it expedient for reasons of personal safety to either join the rebels or to return to their former homes. For a time the Moscow government dispaired of ever establishing permanent settlements.

Why the Germans Settle on the Volga

On January 10, 1744 a little girl, Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst not yet turned fifteen left her home in the company of her mother to make the arduous trip to St. Petersburg at the request of the only remaining daughter of Peter the Great, and the then ruling Empress Elizabeth.² Then by a series of events which though interesting do not come within the scope of this paper, this German Princess was married to the Prince who would later become the Czar. In 1762 with the help of the Brothers Orloff she became Catherine II, the Empress of all the Russians.³

Energetic Catherine the Great had a driving ambition to make her reign the most outstanding in Russian history.

¹Vernadsky, op. cit., pp. 64-79.

²Francis Gribble, The Comedy of Catherine the Great, pp. 1-13.

³V. Poliakoff, When Lovers Ruled Russia, pp. 191-197.

Catherine met her "national emergency" by introducing more western civilization than had Peter the Great. As she conquered more territory from the Turk in the south, she threw the Crown lands open to colonization by Germans.

In December 1762 she issued a manifesto inviting people of all nationalities, except Jews, to come to Russia to settle. In doing so she was not setting a precedent for Ivan III, Ivan IV, Boris Godunof and especially Peter the Great had invited foreign merchants, craftsmen, artisans, and professional people of all kinds to come and help Europeanize Russia.¹ This manifesto met with little success perhaps largely because the Seven Years' War was then going on, and also because she gave no special inducements. On July 22, 1763 she issued a Royal Ukase aimed directly at the Germans to come as colonists to Russia. This was directed by a German to Germans, and it is this appeal that brought the Germans as colonists to the Volga.²

She promised them full cost of transportation from their homes to any place in Russia. Free accommodations for six months after reaching their destination, full religious liberty, subventions by the State toward the cost of establishing places of worship were also promised. They were

¹Ramnaud, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 130.

²Fritz Heinz Reimesch, Die Deutschen Wogakolonien (Berlin: Bernard and Grafe, 1922). p. 5.

further to receive financial aid for ten years without paying interest, exemption from all forms of taxation for a period of thirty years, local autonomy, and a fairly liberal measure of self government. They were even offered the free cost of return transportation including any wealth they might acquire while in Russia. War weary as these people were, the thing that appealed to them most was the promise of freedom from military service fur ewigen zeiten.¹

Caught in the chaos of the depression which followed the Seven Years War, these people say ^Win Catherine's manifesto a hope of freedom to develop their economic independence, to worship as they pleased, to build their own churches with lofty bell towers and maintain their own schools, to be free of military service.

With printed copies of the Ukase and other implicit instructions promising even further privileges for the colonists, her paid agents traveled the length and breadth of Germany soliciting colonists. So successful were these agents that the local rulers passed stringent laws providing for the punishment of both emigrants and agents, but with little or no effect. For two years a great stream of Germans poured into Russia.²

¹For all eternity.

²Reimesch, op. cit., p. 7.

To get the complete picture it must be remembered that this exodus was neither an adventure nor an accident, but rather an outgrowth of the bad economic and political as well as social conditions growing out of the Thirty Year's and the Seven Year's War which fell hardest perhaps upon the Rhine and Platinate Provinces. Beside foreign invasion there was domestic strife in which the small German principalities were in constant conflict with each other. The people were compelled to change their religious faith several times to correspond with the faith of each new ruler. While the people fought the wars, lived in poverty and want, the rulers revelled in wealth and luxury.¹ Thus, the masses to better their economic and social conditions eagerly accepted the glowing offers made by Catherine's agents. Even the most credulous of the Germans were forced to believe the agents when they saw how promptly the transportation money was paid.

Life on the Volga

In a single year as many as 26,000 people answered her appeal.² There were people from all walks of life, farmers,

¹Thomas Watson, The Story of France, Vol. I, pp. 524-536.

²Ramnaud, op, cit., Vol. II, p. 210.

doctors, students, artists, and craftsmen, those who worked with their hands, those who had never worked with their hands, and even those who lived by their wits.

Catherine had made glowing promises indeed, and no doubt she had intended to keep them. Unfortunately, the men who served her had no experience in organization for such a colonization project, nor were they above appropriating much of the money for their own pockets. It is said that the Volga project cost her 5,000,000 Rubles.¹

Their trip to the Volga was a long and hard one, part of the way by water and part by land, and sometimes consumed the better part of a year. On arrival in St. Petersburg they met their first of many disillusionments. When they found that they could not settle in any part of Russia but were to go to the Volga region many were ready to return home only to find that such a thing, too, was impossible. They must go on.

On reaching the Volga they found themselves in a wild almost treeless country with the winter close upon them. They also found that no arrangements had been made for their coming except some rude sheds, and having seen one Russian winter they knew that other measures would have to be taken and these through their own efforts if they wished to

¹Swabenland, op. cit., p. 15.

survive. Learning from their less civilized nomad neighbors, they built partial underground huts called semlinkin. Throughout the winter they lived miserably and in great need, hanging on only until the Spring when they might return to Germany. But when Spring came they found no means of returning, and those few who were able to struggle through reached the frontier only to be turned back by the Government. They were there to stay, they found.

Here on the Volga, far on the outskirts of civilization, their only neighbors the wandering Kieghes hordes from whom they were forced to defend themselves, they lived an isolated life. There was no opportunity to mingle with neighbors or to develop a national spirit. They did not become Russians. Their native language, their customs, and the rich folklore of their German forefathers were carefully remembered and taught to the younger generation, and thus were preserved. One change did take place in these people. Having the spirit of adventure and freedom which had caused them to leave Germany, they continued a slow but steady growth in their love of liberty.

Catherine had accomplished her own ends. She had organized a string of settlements along the lower Volga and secured the territory for her empire. She had done a good deed in providing homes for thousands. She had set up governmental bodies to care for her orphans, so now in true Russian

she forgot about them and left them to work out their own futures.

She had founded nearly 200 towns, of which Ekaterinburg, Ekaterinoslof, and Katarinenstadt, were named for the "glory of Catherine." In 1793 Pallas estimated the population in Saratov as 33,000.¹

Since there was little or no hope of returning to their Fatherland, the colonists set to work to adapt themselves to the new conditions, and make the best of a bad bargain. Slowly step by step with the true German thrift and will power they worked out their new lives. They thrived and became more prosperous than the Slavs around them. Although in her second manifesto Catherine wished these immigrants from a higher culture to disseminate their industrial and agricultural science among her subjects, the historians agree that the Volga Germans exerted little or no influence upon their Russian neighbors. As time went on the greater privileges held by the Germans tended to create a spirit of jealousy toward them.² Wallace makes this plain when he says:

The Russian muzhik looks like the German almost as beings of a different world--as a wonderfully cunning

¹Ramnaud, op. cit., p. 211.

²Gregor Alexinsky, Russia and Europe (New York: Scribners, 1917), p. 43.

and ingenious people, who have been endowed by Providence with peculiar qualities not possessed by ordinary Orthodox humanity. To him it seems in the nature of things that Germans should live in large clean, well-built houses, in the same way that it is in the nature of things that birds build nests; and as it probably never has occurred to a human to build a nest for himself and his family, so it has never occurred to the Russian peasant to build a house in the German model. Germans are Germans, and Russians are Russians--and there is nothing more to be said on the subject.¹

The Growth of the Colonies

So as time went on the colonies grew in number and became prosperous. The climatic difficulties of this new environment, lack of capital, oppression by officials, and attacks by the Kirghiz and Kalmucks diminished their numbers 50 per cent in the first 10 years.² Even worse suffering was in store for them during the Pugatchev Rebellion.³ Emelian Pugatchev, an illiterate Cossack who claimed to be Catherine's dead husband, Peter III, lead the rebellion.⁴ He abolished serfdom in the Czar's name, and later stormed and took the city of Saratov where he murdered twenty-two government officials because they refused to recognize him

¹D. M. Wallace, Russia (New York: Henry Holt Co., 1877), p. 248.

²Encyclopedia Britannica, 1946, p. 232.

³Ibid., Pugatchev.

⁴Vernadsky, op. cit., p. 112.

as the Czar. On the whole the officer class remained loyal to the regime and for that reason, lack of proper leadership, his rebellion was doomed to failure. Later Pugatchev was seized and brought to trial in Moscow where he was executed in 1775.¹

Suffering all the hardships of frozen winters and blistering summers which intermittently froze and burned their crops, the Germans made the best of things. Conditions remained bad until 1776 when they harvested their first really good crop.² Then as time went on their period of great travail seemed to be over. A new generation was growing up who had known no other home than Russia, and they were all better satisfied; they even became adjusted to the climate!

¹Ibid., p. 112.

²Swabenland, op. cit., p. 33.

CHAPTER III

A PROMISE IS BROKEN

The Land System

Only one real promise had been kept; they were given land. But even here it was not what they had expected, for they had to use the mir¹ system then in use in Russia. The origin of this system is disputed by historians, but it is very old. Each member of the community had a right to a share in the land, but not outright ownership. The land lay open and was divided into three sections, arable and meadows, then forest, and then waste land. The house of the farmer was built on what was considered the waste land. As the community grew the land was redivided, and the shares in each section became smaller and smaller.

Reimesch and others tell us that according to Catherine's orders the land was to be divided into Bezirke,² sixty to seventy versts³ in circumference, each of which was to serve 1,000 families. Each family no matter what its size could

¹mir, community.

²Districts.

³Two-thirds of a mile.

claim thirty dessiatines,¹ of this five dessiatines could be used for a house and garden and as meadow land. This was to be more or less the property of the colonist, except that in actual practice and because there was not enough good land to go around, he got only a few acres for his personal use.² All the rest was held as communal property under the mir system, just described, and redivided as often as every 12 years. Naturally with the increase in population the strips after each division became smaller and smaller.³ Yet the Volga Germans still had more land per person after 1861 than did the peasant who had just been freed; the latter saw this and resented it very much.⁴ It was not until the Stolypin land reforms of 1906 that the colonists like the peasants could buy the land which was held by the mir.

Russification by Alexander III

So far in our study we have accounted for the factors and conditions which brought these Germans to Russia to build a string of ^{towns} ~~towns~~ near one another on the fertile shores of the Volga for a distance of about 300 miles.

¹One dessiatine = 2,170 acres.

²Reimesch, op. cit., p. 5.

³Ibid., p. 6.

⁴Ibid., pp. 7-8.

(MAP I). The western bank of the Volga is rather hilly and the Germans call it Bergseite.¹ The colonies here lie in a narrow strip between the Medwdiza and the Volga rivers. On the eastern or Wiesenseite² the land is more level prairie and here the towns are spread over a much larger territory. As we can see from (MAP II) the colonies in the government of Saratov, the Bergseite are almost all south of the city of Saratov, and extend from Schilling to Kamyschin.

The average colony on the Volga has 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants: Katherinenstadt (now Marxstadt) has 20,000, and Norga has 17,000. While the majority of these people are Protestants about one-fourth are Catholics, but even so they have always felt a sense of unity because of their common nationality.³

But by 1873 most of the privileges the Germans had enjoyed for 100 years were gone. In 1861 the serfs were freed by royal decree.⁴ The general hunger for land was increased and the peasants became more and more jealous of the superior rights and privileges of their more prosperous German neighbors.

¹Bergseite, Hill side.

²Wiesenseite, Forest side. *Wiesenseite*

³Nicholas Mikhailov, The Land of the Soviet (New York: World Book Co., 1946), p. 131

⁴Vernadsky, op. cit., p. 158.

The law of January 1864 establishing both the district and provincial zemstvos at first effected the Volga Germans very little, but by 1871 they were put on the same basis as the Kronbauern¹ and they had the privilege of sending representatives to the zemstvos meetings, but because of the predominance of the Russian representation this was of little use to them.²

On January 13, 1874 the great blow fell. In accordance with the plan then followed in Europe, Russia introduced universal military service, which meant that for the first time the Volga Germans must serve in the Czar's army.³

Now, they felt that they had been betrayed. A promise had been broken. Catherine, they claimed, had promised them fur ewigen zeiten that they need not serve in the Russian army. But Alexander is supposed to have said that the agreement was for "100 years, which was a kleine Ewigkeit."⁴ Tradition tells us that the Germans appealed to Bismark for his help and protection, and through his influence a ten years extention was secured for them.⁵

To many of us this may seem a most trivial excuse for

¹Crown peasants.

²Swabenland, op cit., p. 96.

³Ibid., p. 97.

⁴ A small eternity.

⁵Swabenland, op cit., p. 98.

leaving a country, but to them it was a vital issue. We must remember that this was in the days when army reforms had not even been heard of. A wide-spread horror of the Russian army existed. The men were treated like animals and the conditions under which they served were inhuman. The Russian army was not alone in this respect; conditions were the same in other countries. The men had to leave home for a period of approximately eleven years and even in time of peace many were never heard from again. And anyway because the Volga Germans had lived in a compact group of their own people and had very little contact with the Russians whom they considered below their social level they had never bothered to learn the Russian language.

To further extend his Russification policy Alexander III now insisted on putting a Russian teacher in every German school, and if the colonists objected the school was closed.¹ The reactionary leaders tried to steam roller the Germans and all the other heterogeneous national elements but only succeeded in driving them out of Russia. They attempted to substitute one tradition for another and this the Germans would not tolerate. When the new Russian teachers not only taught Russian but tried to develop a Nationalistic spirit as well, the Germans felt the end had come indeed. Their German

¹Ibid., p. 99.

language and customs which they had preserved for 100 years were now fast disappearing, and many of them felt it was time to seek a new haven.

CHAPTER IV

AGAIN THEY BECOME WANDERERS

Migration to the United States

When the Volga Germans in large numbers decided that the social and economic conditions would not improve for them in Russia, and that there was no hope of evading the military service, they decided to leave.

According to the records some of the Catholics went to South America. Some of the colonists were assisted to return to Germany, for in Berlin in 1909 there was organized the Fursergeverein fur Deutch Ruckwanderer.¹ But the members of the society soon found that the isolation of the Volga Germans in Russia had so retarded them that they could not cope with the industrial development that had gone on in Germany. Those that were settled in Germany had to do farm work or enter the low class unskilled labor groups.²

Although many countries were bidding for these immigrants most of them came to the United States. While at first only the wealthy class were able to come, and these tradition tells us sent agents to America to find land

¹A society for the care of returning German immigrants.

²Swabenland, op cit., p. 107.

similar to their old homes, others soon followed.¹

As a further result of the hard times growing out of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877 a great exodus of Volga Germans took place. These were of the class which did not have sufficient wealth of its own for even a steerage ticket, but borrowed the money from friends in America or at home with the understanding that they in turn would send tickets to those left behind. A rather interesting sideline on these people is that is what did indeed happen. Their debt was a moral obligation which they did not fail to pay.

This immigration is closely connected with our own westward expansion, for this was the period when the great railroads were building up the west. Perhaps it is nearer the truth to say that they were anxious to assure themselves future freight and passenger business for the lines they were building. They were willing to sell land for very little and on long term loans, a generous Government had granted them. This worked well for the land hungry immigrant who had even a little money, for the railroads and for the country.

Those who could not buy the land came to work for these same railroads, who were more than anxious to get cheap labor. This worked to their mutual benefit, for while the one gained

¹Ibid., p. 108.

cheap labor, the other gained the ready cash needed to start life again and to pay the debts incurred.

Williams tells us that the German Russian immigration is of the assisted type, that is the aliens who come here do so for the most part on prepaid tickets.¹ Of the Russian-born Germans living in Lincoln, Nebraska in 1914, 65 per cent had come on prepaid tickets, and only 35 per cent had paid their own passage.²

As a rule we find that assisted immigration of this sort is not desirable, but this has not been the case with the Russian Germans. Those in Lincoln, Nebraska who for twenty-five years have come "assisted," show that there is no relation between the desirableness or undesirableness of these immigrants and the fact that their passage is paid for them.³

Indeed it does not even indicate their financial status. Sometimes a married man of a well to do family wishes to go to America but the father refuses to give him a portion of the family wealth, so he writes to a brother or cousin in America and secures tickets for himself and family.⁴ Some

¹Hattie Plum Williams, A Social Study of the Russian Germans (University of Nebraska: 1916), p. 15.

²Ibid., p. 15.

³Ibid., p. 15.

⁴Ibid., p. 16.

borrow money from Jew money lenders in Russia and when they come to America relatives and friends raise money for them to pay back to the Jews and thus save the high interest rate. This willingness of the Volga Germans to help their kinsmen across the ocean is a sign that those who have come here have not yet become grasping and selfish in their new found prosperity, and keep fresh in their minds how they came to America.¹

The First Years in America

In many respects their first years in America seemed to parallel the experiences of their ancestors of 1773. Here they too came to a new environment, came in contact with a people speaking a strange language which they had never heard. But now the immigrants were completely on their own and did not have a paternalistic supervising government as had been the case in Russia. Then too it was different in that, the bustle and efficiency of the average American town in the seventy's and eighty's must have been a shock to this slow moving stolid backward people.

From all accounts the first winters on the prairie lands of Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas were full of the same hardships as those of their ancestors.

¹Ibid., p. 16.

Those who came to cities like Lincoln, Nebraska found work almost the next day. The young bustling Burlington railroad needed all who wanted to work. Here they could work under a straw boss who spoke their own language, who might have been a nobody at home in Russia, but now he had the social advantage of several years residence and could speak a little of this strange tongue. While having lived all of his life on the Volga he had never bothered to learn Russian, but now it was an economic advantage to learn English.

Again according to Williams, Lincoln and Sutton, Nebraska seemed for a long period of time to be the gathering place for these Russian Germans.¹ As the years went by many of them came west, mostly to Portland, Oregon, which now has a larger German Russian population than Lincoln, Nebraska, and with more individual wealth.²

It is very difficult to trace these people to the United States, or find much record of them here, for the census of the United States does not distinguish between nationalities but gives only place of origin. But we find that in 1930, Oregon had 6,278 born in Russia, Nebraska 11,234, Illinois

¹Ibid., p. 18.

²Mrs. George Repp, Portland, Oregon, personal interview.

87,026, and North Dakota 22,617. California had 44,047.¹
These are the states having the greatest number of Volga
Germans and it is the guess of church leaders that there are
about 250,000 of them in the United States.²

¹Abstract of Fifteenth Census of U. S. A., p. 133.

²Rev. H. Hagelgauz, Portland, Oregon, personal interview
and Encyclopedia Brit. Inc., Chicago: 1946, Vol. 19, p. 232.

CHAPTER V

STALIN INHERITS CATHERINE'S ORPHANS

Then Comes the Revolution

This story would not be complete without taking time now to go back and take a look at those Volga Germans who for one reason or another decided to remain on the Volga or became scattered over Russia.

To help fix the picture in mind it may be necessary to repeat somewhat. The people under discussion in this study in this part of the story are the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, occupying an area of 10,900 sq. miles and lying on both sides of the Volga in the Saratov and Samara area. Opposite the city of Saratov is the city of Engels (formerly Pokrovsk) the Capital of the Republic. Oh, yes in the heart of Russia 872 miles south of Moscow it is still a German settlement if a little changed from the one founded in 1773.

The colonists survived all hardships, kept their language and religion, and even during the bad times in Russia made considerable growth. The World War of 1914 was a great hardship to them, for the suspicion of partisanship fell

upon them. They were forbidden to speak the German language and their churches were closed.¹

The United States did not go that far in 1917 but many did look with disfavor upon anyone speaking the German language.

In Russia in 1915 a law was passed which would have deprived all foreigners of their land and property, and later the Czar gave the Volga Germans ten months notice after which he would move them en masse to Siberia. The Red Revolution came before this action could be carried out, and for a time they were safe.²

Because many of them prospered they were labelled as kulaks³ during the soviet agrarian collectivization. This led to hardships, forcible deportation and the liquidation camps, the more fortunate ones were able to escape.

The writer has talked to many of these people both in Shanghai, China and in Portland, Oregon and has marvelled at the ability man can develop when he has to save his own skin. Such things as forging passports, hiding during the day and travelling at night, or riding in a hay cart which the soldiers often would explore with their bayonets were common

¹Mikhailor, op. cit., p. 130.

²Literary Digest, February 13, 1937, p. 15.

³Kulaks - rich peasants.

place events.

Bread Upon the Waters

Crop failures and drought had been their lot in life in Russia, and always they had been able to survive, either through the aid of the Government or through their own savings. But when the Soviets gathered their grain and the great drought of 1921 came they had nothing to fall back on. The marks of the recent Civil War were still to be seen everywhere. Slowly the news came to the rest of the world through such writers as Walter Duranty who cabled the Literary Digest that this was a national disaster on a scale the modern world had not seen outside of China. Thousands would starve unless aid came at once.¹

This and other articles were seen by Mr. and Mrs. George Repp of Portland, Oregon. They knew that letters had arrived from the Volga asking for help, so they thought up the idea of organizing The Volga Relief Society.² They arranged to work with the American Relief Society under Hoover and then in Europe.

Mr. Repp, a merchant in Portland and an American citizen, was sent by his society to the Volga to supervise the relief.

¹Literary Digest, August 6, 1921, p. 32.

²Emma Swabenland, The Volga Relief Society, pp. 30-31.

The Central States Relief Society organized in Lincoln sent Rev. Wagner. These two men and the money which was raised by the German Russians in the United States fed 60,000 adults and 75,000 children, as well as distributed medicines, shoes, and clothing sent from America.¹ The secretaries of the various relief societies state that approximately \$7,500,000.00 was raised by the German Russians living in the United States and sent to the Volga Germans, either through the general fund or by food and clothing drafts.²

Years later in 1926 when Hoover made a visit to Portland the following quotation appeared in the Oregon Journal:

HOOVER SEEKS LOCAL HERO

There is a man in Portland that Hoover asked particularly to see again. He is George Repp, proprietor of a butcher shop at No. 774 Union Avenue North. 'Repp is of German extraction, but he is really a Russian, or he was until he became an American,' Hoover said. 'He left his butcher shop when Russia was in such a bad state and made up a relief fund among his own people in this country. It was when the American Relief was extending help to those people on the Volga that Repp came to me in Washington. As soon as I saw him I sent him right over. Why those people over there worshiped him like a god, and when his work was done he came back to his butcher shop.'³

It is impossible to tell here the story of the complete work of the relief, but from the many articles in the Welt Post⁴

¹Swabenland, op. cit., p. 173. ²Op. cit., p. 173.

³Portland Journal, August 23, 1926.

⁴German language papers published in the United States.

and California Post,¹ the letters and some of the records of the Volga Relief Society which the writer has seen, it was indeed Bread Upon The Waters.

A Communist Is Ungrateful

The famine of 1921 killed at least 171,000 people in the Volga area, the drought of 1936 was even worse, but it brought no famine. This is the story of collectivism.

As we have seen the Volga area became a Republic in 1924. Of its 12 Cantons, 5 have purely German inhabitants, 4 mixed German-Russian, or German-Ukranian inhabitants, and 3 are predominantly Russian or Ukranian. In 1939 their population was 605,542. The Volga German Republic had permanent representatives at Berlin.²

The chief crops are hard wheat, sunflowers and mustard. Collectivization has reached a hundred per cent. During the time of the Soviets 18 large enterprises have been erected in the Republic, and the industrial output has increased fifteen fold. Twenty newspapers are published, and there are two German theaters.³

On 412 collective farms and 27 state farms, 456,000 peasants wring better crops from the dry soil with machinery

¹German language papers published in the United States.

²Britanica, op. cit., p. 232.

³Literary Digest, op. cit., p. 15.

than they could get from the same land farmed in little strips. In the Village of Stahl 393 families, 1,660 persons farm 12,500 acres of arable land and 5,000 acres of pasture owned by the state but leased to the farmers in perpetuity. Collectively owned stock comprises 337 horses, 80 cows, 3 camels, 104 sheep and 406 chickens.¹

For their own use each family has a house, two acres of land, one cow, a few pigs, a few sheep, also chickens and bees. It has been reported that they did even better in their individual garden patches than on the communal farms.²

75 thousand acres already are irrigated. To irrigate 4,000,000 more moscow has allocated 20,000,000 rubles.³

They are very proud of their schools. Under the Czars they had 178 teachers, under the Soviet 3,000. In the old days the population was 44 per cent literate, even this was far above the 5 per cent for the rest of the country, but now the literacy is up to 98 per cent. Even if this figure is a little high, the interesting thing is that the literacy is bilingual. In fact the Soviets have learned from the Czars, for all of the minority groups are now being bilingually educated.⁴

From this brief review of the progress made by the Volga

¹Mikhailov, op. cit., p. 139.

²Literary Digest, op. cit., p. 15

³Ibid., p. 16.

⁴Ibid., p. 16

Republic one would think that even a Stalin would be satisfied. Perhaps he would have been, too, had not the ambitions of another Dictator intruded on his Atheistic Paradise. When Hitler and his Germans came too close, Stalin remembered that his Volga Republic was German by culture and language, and perhaps he felt that they did not love him any too much any way. By a strange irony of fate the child that Catherine had adopted became the fondling on the door step that had to be removed before the visitors became too friendly. Stalin seems to have done just that. For he moved them, perhaps in the dead of night, for the whole thing seems shrouded in mystery. The writer has made a number of inquiries of people who still have relatives on the Volga, from whom at least they heard before the wars, but not a word since. Letters sent are lost. American correspondents who have been in this section seem to have found out very little. Snow reports:

Late that evening our train pulled slowly over the bridge at the Volga to enter the former German Republic.

'And what happened to the Germans, after the Volga Republic was dissolved?' I asked Trantzev. He pointed eastward. 'Kraganda' he said.

'But there must have been some good Soviet citizens among them?'

'Yes, maybe there was a good one. But in war we can not take chances. The Volga Germans held a knife on our backs and never could we tell when they would use it. They had to go. Maybe they will come back after the war.¹

¹Edgar Snow, People on Our Side, p. 76.

A foreign official recently stationed in Russia gave a Newsweek Stockholm correspondent the following story:

The whole German Colony along the Volga has been sent to Siberia. Russia now being combed for all persons of German origin, even though their families have lived in Russia for generations. Soviet authorities say that there is room for 100,000 inhabitants in Siberia. Of these 10% will be Germans.¹

Chamberlin in a recent report on the existance of Soviet racial equality writes:

There have been a few instances when considerations of practical policy had led to abandonment of the theory of racial equality. One of these was the mass deportation of the inhabitants of the German Volga Republic to Central Asia during the first months of the war with Germany. There was apparently no attempt to sift out possible Nazi sympathizers from others. The entire population of some hundreds of thousands of people, descendants of German Colonists who were brought into Russia in the eighteenth century, were uprooted, no doubt because of the fear of fifth column activity in the rear of the red army.²

It does seem strange that misfortune should follow these people generation after generation. Perhaps it was their arrogance in thinking themselves superior, that brought their own downfall; only time will tell.

¹Newsweek, February 12, 1945, p. 59.

²Soviet Race and Nationality Policies, William Henry Chamberlin, The Russian Review, Vol 5, No. 1, Autumn, 1945, p. 6.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The Orphans Find a Home at Last

The picture of these Volga Germans is not all black, however. The conclusion of this story lies in the United States. It was stated in the introduction that a comparison would be drawn between the two groups and their social adjustment. For the story of those remaining in Russia there was a fair amount of information until they were lost in a mass deportation. For further information on those living in the United States one must depend on observation and opinion, since no recent scientific study has been made about the Volga Germans.

From wide reading on the subject in both the English and the German language, from living in Lincoln, Nebraska for many years, as well as living in Portland, Oregon and teaching here in a high school where most of the children of these people attend, from a friendship with Mrs. Williams¹ as well as working with her as a student at the University of Nebraska, the writer has come to the following views and conclusions. The writer hopes to make a further study of the

¹Williams, op. cit.

Americanization of these aliens and their absorption by Americanization.

The Americanization of the Volga Germans has been a slow and hard process, as both the Williams and Swabenland studies have shown.¹ Both of these studies were made some time ago, the first in 1916 and the last in 1929. From observation at present it can be seen that their greatest progress has been made during the last twenty years. This progress has been due to several reasons, and can be shown by a half hours walk in the district in north Portland, Oregon from Freemont to Alberta and from 7th to 15th Streets. Here are modern well kept homes with well kept yards, and many places double garages. In all fairness we must state that one garage houses a refuse truck, but the other houses the family car, and that is not of the cheaper make. The refuse truck is as clean and shinny as the family car. Without a doubt their economic condition and standard has kept pace with the average for the rest of the United States if not a little higher.

Because of a growing generation that has only heard of Russia, in fact now a third generation, and because of compulsory education laws the children have received better training than the first generation. This without a doubt

¹Swabenland, op cit.

is reflected in their improved standards at the present time. Many have entered skilled trades, there are several good sized business firms whose credit rating runs well into three figures to be found on Union Avenue belonging to Russian Germans. They control without a doubt the refuse collection business in Portland and strange as it may seem have not lost cast, for many of these trucks are paying for University educations right now. Many a good clerk working in "Portland's Own Store" was graduated from Jefferson High School and lives near seventh street.

By 1926 there were only two graduates from the Russian Germans from the University of Nebraska, a boy and a girl.¹ Now there are many with even M. A. and Ph. D. degrees. Miss Emma Swabenland, M. A. University of Colorado, was in Germany acting as interpreter at the War trials.

Although there are four or five German churches in this section of Freemont the writer has been told that all services are now held bilingually. Many of the younger generation marry out of their own group and move away from the district. The writer has been told by some of her students in History classes, that they knew that Grandfather on Mother's side came from Russia, but they could not understand that he did not look like the Russian sailors one sees on the

¹Personal knowledge.

street, and they were certain that when Mother talked to Grandfather it was not in Russian.

Perhaps a study of these people is a good experience for any one who some times wonders if public education and Democracy do work. Democracy and education have removed from the Volga or Russian Germans the stigma of the variant. They have become one with the mode, for you can seldom tell them from a Mayflower American. They are now Americans. The Orphan has found a good home at last. No longer do they parade their arrogance of being different. Now they wish to be only Americans.

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