

A Brief History of the Germans in Russia

by Sylvia M. Hertel

In 1762, Catharine the Great, Empress of all Russiasⁱ, a German princess, put out an invitation to the German farmers to come to the Volga region and farm.ⁱⁱ Her reasons for wanting them to settle there were many, but primarily to develop the productivity of the land, hoping they would teach the Russians how to farm, and the colonists would make a good buffer zone against the continual problem of invading tribes from the east. Many Germans from the central and northern parts of Germany, as we know it today, accepted the very gracious invitation. Included in the offer were freedom of religion; their sons being exempt from military conscriptionⁱⁱⁱ ^{iv}; freedom to speak their own language; to run their own schools; have their own government (subject only to the Tzar of Russia); and financial assistance for their travel there and getting started in their new homeland, if they needed it. The Germans who accepted this invitation went to the Volga region, but since I don't know as much about the history of the Volga region, I'm going to concentrate on the Black Sea region in Ukraine.

Catharine's grandson, Alexander I, a little before 1800 had conquered Ukraine, annexing it to Russia. He thought the Steppes would be good for farming, and decided his grandmother's "experiment" had been so successful that he reissued her invitation about 1792.

Many German farmers^v answered his invitation, too, and basically, for the same reasons as those who went to the Volga region. Their sons were inheriting smaller portions of land with every generation. Probably the biggest reason for emigrating, though, was the countries bordering them were constantly warring against each other, which meant between the battling, which frequently took place on German land, and the traveling armies, the crops were repeatedly destroyed, leading to famine and the usual plagues that go along with war, such as typhus, diphtheria, cholera and yellow fever. They also had no taste for Napoleon, who had just conquered Germany, nor for French Catholicism, although many Catholics accepted the invitation also.

The tzar pretty much decided which villages these immigrants would settle in, much like the U.S. government did with their German-Russian immigrants.^{vi}

The Black Sea region prospered a little better than the Volga region, because of the difference in their governmental systems, but many farmers by the Black Sea became very wealthy. By the time the younger generations came along, they were running out of land, so many from those generations had a considerably smaller income. Fathers bought land from the Russian nobles around them to set their sons up with farms, but the poorer fathers with more sons were having difficulty keeping up.

The early rumblings of the workers' movement, which later became the Bolsheviks, began in the late 1860s. Alexander II was a very liberal monarch and made many reforms toward modernization. For that, he was assassinated.^{vii} His assassination was to have a profound affect on his grandson, Nicholas II. After Alexander II signed the 1870/74^{viii} decree, rescinding the freedom from conscription privilege the Germans enjoyed, among other groups, many things began to change. Pogroms began against the Germans, and the political scene just continued to get worse from there.

My great grandmother, Eva (Schock) Hertel, told my father some stories about this, one of which took place in 1889, and was the final blow behind her decision to not wait for the rest of her family to come over. She had gone to the store to buy some salt for her mother. In Russia at that time, sugar and salt were brought in by the truckload, and dumped on the ground behind the store. So, she went out the back door of the store, wiped the surface of the pile away for clean salt, and discovered a man's hand. The man had been killed and put into the pile the night before. That was the last straw for her, and she insisted on coming over with her newly-wed sister and brother-in-law, a few months before the rest of the family planned to make the trip.

The Black Sea region was a beautiful place to live and farm. The climate was mild, and perfect for growing vineyards, orchards, and many grains, and private gardens were full of all sorts of vegetables, herbs, and fruits. The winters brought lots of snow, which made for lots of mud in the spring, but overall, it was a beautiful place, especially for the Germans, who stayed in their own enclaves. The lifestyle was very similar to what they had in Germany. So, it's no wonder they hesitated to move to yet another country, and especially one that took them across a great ocean. Most of the Black Sea Germans had lived there no more than about 75 yrs. – two or three generations were born there.

The Volga Germans had lived in Russia closer to 125 yrs., and their lives weren't quite as good, so they were a little quicker to make the trip. Thus, they came early enough to fill up Kansas and Nebraska, along with the large numbers of other immigrants who came directly from Germany, and other Germanic countries, but why go to the U.S., and we can't forget those who went to South America instead?

The United States and Argentina, both put out invitations for farmers to fill their plains and pampas, respectfully, at the same time. Both promised, among other things, freedom of religion, "free" land, a place they could live and work in peace. Given Europe's political upheavals of the time, this sounded very good to hundreds of thousands of farmers.

Those who went to Argentina were mostly Catholics, although many Mennonites ended up there also, when they were turned away by Canada.^{ix} From Argentina, many went to Brazil and other South American countries.

The U.S. was building their transcontinental railroad, and the government gave them large amounts of land for that purpose. When considering the wide-open plains with very little population (the Great Plains was thought to be a wasteland), they thought the railroad would be a much more profitable endeavor, if it was populated with people who would need the railroad to get goods to market, and to travel. They decided to put an invitation out to

the best farmers in Europe, the Germans, but they also invited farmers from other Germanic countries. The invitations were well received, and they came in floods. Immigration to the Americas turned out to be a good thing for the shipping industry, too. Ships had to be built to be much larger, faster, and much safer for travel across the Atlantic Ocean. Many immigrants traveled in steerage to save money, and in the earlier years, many died along the way from plagues that broke out in the terrible conditions that went along with traveling in steerage.

I have one page of a passenger list for 1889 - 60 people, where four passengers died, all children, three of diphtheria and one of typhoid. The dead had to be buried at sea. There were babies born at sea, also.

Most boarded ships from Hamburg and Bremen, but later, many boarded at Antwerp. Most came into the port of New York, but many came into the port at Halifax, Nova Scotia, and a few to ports in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Orleans and Galveston, Texas. Later, some even came to Savannah, Georgia and other such seemingly unlikely ports. Those who came to the southern U.S. ports often settled in the south. There are many German-Russians in south Texas. Those who came to Halifax, often stayed in Canada. From the east coast ports, they took the train inland. In the Dakotas, the first stopping point was usually in what is southeast South Dakota today. They would stay there for up to a year, working to replenish their funds, and buying the basics they would need to start a farm.

The earliest Black Sea Germans started coming in about 1873, but the flood really began about 1876, and those Germans settled in, what is today, southeastern South Dakota. As the land filled up, they started moving north, all the way into northern North Dakota and Canada, and west, into the western Dakotas and spread westward from there, many ending up along the west coast. The flood of immigration finally dropped off about 1913.

Germans who didn't get out of Russia in time

Millions of Germans didn't get out of Russia before the borders were closed to emigrants. I've read stories where Jews helped Germans get out through the Jewish underground, but those were very few, I think.

By 1905, the politics had heated up quite a bit in Russia, and the first attempted revolution took place that year. The Bolsheviks were fully organized by then, and Lenin was at the head of the party. In 1917, another revolutionary attempt was made, and this time succeeded. Nicholas II had abdicated the year before, and he and his family, along with a few faithful servants, including their doctor, were assassinated in 1918 - a huge shock to the whole world.

With Lenin, the ethnic cleansing began. Anyone who wasn't Russian was a target, but the Russian nobles and elites were also targeted, because of their wealth and privileged social status. Most of the Germans fell into both categories, so they were especially hit hard, but they earned their wealth through hard work and financial diligence, unlike the Russian aristocracy. They were privileged only in the sense that they could afford nicer things, buy land for their sons to farm, and send their children to good schools, usually in Germany.

The name kulak was first used for wealthy German farmers, later it included other wealthy peoples. The word gulag, as in camps, was derived from the word kulak.

1917-1945 were the years of the persecutions.^x Often they didn't even bother with arrests; they just went to homes in the middle of the night, drug their victims from their beds and out of their home, then shot them just outside the door. Quotas of deaths had to be met.

1931-1933 were the years of the Holodomor – the man-made famine that was so severe....^{xi} There is no way to explain the full horror of it. Ron Vossler's book and DVD, We'll Meet Again In Heaven, contains hundreds of letters from German families in S. Russia sent to their relatives in America.^{xii}

I first saw the word, Holodomor, on three or four large Jewish websites. The word was part of a favorite saying of the Jews. "Always remember the Holocaust; never remember the Holodomor." The accompanying saying was, "The only purpose for the gentile is to serve the Jew." One of the websites was the Jewish Virtual Library. Mind you, this did, and does reflect the attitude of the Zionist Jews, not all Jews. The Bolshevik leadership was almost entirely Jewish – ethnic Jews they called themselves later. Most of them changed their names to hide their ethnicity.^{xiii} These are not to be confused with the Orthodox Jews, who are actively fighting against these Zionists and claim that the modern state of Israel is not ordained by God.^{xiv}

German-Russians in WWII

In 1941, The German army invaded Russia. Like their invasion of Poland in 1939^{xv}, Hitler's goal was to rescue the Germans, who were being persecuted and massacred by the hundreds of thousands. The Germans of the Volga region were deported to Siberia en masse earlier that year. Many of their villages were razed, and no human was allowed to live where the village once stood, others were taken over by surrounding peoples, but the Germans were never allowed to come back to their homes where they had lived, worked, worshipped and played for almost 200 yrs.

In the Black Sea region, there were few Germans left, by comparison to the numbers who lived there 50 yrs. previous. Hitler sent Dr. Karl Stumpp, who was born in this region, went to school in Germany, and on the completion of his schooling, decided to stay in Germany. It was Stumpp's task to gather all the vital records of the Black Sea Germans. Hitler's intent was to take over and establish a German government. The German Russians were very glad to be liberated from the Soviet oppression, but the German military began to lose their grip on S. Russia, and so, in three columns between mid 1943 and early 1944, 350,000 Germans were escorted out of Russia into Greater Germany for resettlement. The people were comprised mostly of old men, women and children. All other men had either been sentenced to hard labor in gulag camps, executed or conscripted into the Russian military.

This Trek, sometimes called the Great Trek, or the Long Trek^{xvi}, was an extremely difficult journey for all involved. The last column was likely the most difficult one in that the Russians were hard on their heels. While crossing the mouth of the Dniester River, a very slow process because the ferries couldn't hold very many people at a time and it was a long

way across, hundreds at the end of the last column were shot down by the Russian army who had caught up to them.

There are many stories left behind by people, who were a part of this trek - about everything they went through and all the losses of life and property - including much beloved horses and cattle, which had served them well. They also tell the heart-rending stories of the pets and cattle they had to leave behind. These German farmers were very attached to their animals, and knew the pain of cows that bellowed to be milked, chickens that knew it was time to gather their eggs, etc., and all the animals knew when it was feeding time. Many tears were shed over the pets they had to leave behind, knowing that it would be very difficult for them to fend for themselves, and what their fate would be, ultimately. Babies were born along the way; children, old folks, and mothers died. Many died out of sheer exhaustion.

In those days, people understood that when such travelers came through their community, tradition expected them to provide whatever food, shelter and fodder they could to ease their travel, but many were afraid to give aid out of fear of the Soviet retribution.



Evacuation of 400 households with 1,900 ethnic Germans from the village of Glückstal on 18 March 1944. A German soldier captured this dramatic moment on the street next to the Flemmer homestead. Most of the pictures documenting the "Long Trek" of 1943-1944 were taken by Nazi military and civilian officials who oversaw and accompanied the refugees. Most of the already preoccupied, distracted and anxious refugees did not own cameras either. Photograph provided to Dr. Eric J. Schmalz, courtesy of Mr. Ken Flemmer.

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Once in Greater Germany, the earlier arrivals were settled deep within the German borders. Later arrivals were settled in the area that had been Poland and eastern Germany. When the Soviet army came into Berlin from the east at the end of the war, nearly all the German Russians were captured and forcefully repatriated back to Russia, with the full consent of Britain and the U.S. Along with these, they also took other German captives – mostly women. The Rape of Berlin is well documented, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote about the sexual atrocities he witnessed there.

Of the German-Russians, who were forced back to Russia, all went to Siberia, if they weren't executed before, and a large number of them were sent to gulag camps where most died. Vital records on these people are called the EWZ (Einwandererzentrale) records.^{xvii}

The men who were conscripted and were serving in the Russian military during the time of the Trek, came home only to find their family gone. On learning they had left for Germany, they went to find them, only to be conscripted into the German military. There were cases where a German-Russian soldier found himself in a German POW camp, was released, went to Germany to find his family, was conscripted in Germany and found himself in a Soviet POW camp. Many men finally got information on the location of their family in Germany, but when they got there, found that their family had been taken back to Russia. This period is so full of chaos for the German-Russians that it would be impossible to describe it. Hundreds of families were split asunder, and it took many years to find a family member, and sometimes many more to learn the fate of family members, who could never be found.

Today, the German-Russian organizations still get many requests for help in finding family members whom they had lost track of in this nightmare. There are also people who are still trying to "buy" family members out of Russia. Russia is not extremely cooperative, despite the international laws made to stop all hindrance to those Germans who want to leave. These laws apply to other minority ethnicities in Russia, too.

Epilogue

Those who came to the U.S. and went to S. America have done well. Their children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, even down to their fourth great grandchildren, have succeeded in many areas of endeavors. Among other accomplishments, there are large numbers of post-doctoral degrees, musicians, artists, writers, self-made millionaires, stage performers, architects, engineers, doctors, pastors – the list goes on, but there are still a great number of farmers, too. Farming was the roots of this entire culture, and the place where good work ethics developed, faith in God remained strong, and the knowledge of what was important in life, and in the world, was learned. In the face of all the family, who were lost and lost track of - family became the greatest priority to them, next to God.

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ⁱ (Catharine) (...born Sophia Augusta Frederike, known as Frederike or Fredericka, in Stettin, Germany, on April 21, 1729....daughter of Johanna Elizabeth, princess of Holstein-Gottorp and Christian August, prince of Anhalt-Zerbst) met her future husband, the Grand Duke Peter, on a trip to Russia at the invitation of the Empress Elizabeth, Peter's mother, who ruled Russia after taking power in a coup. Elizabeth, though married, was childless, and had named the Grand Duke Peter as her heir to the Russian throne.

Peter, though the Romanov heir, was a German prince: his mother was Anna, daughter of Peter the Great of Russia, and his father was the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp. Peter the Great had fourteen children by his two wives, only three of whom survived to adulthood. His son, Alexei, died in prison, convicted of plotting to overthrow his father. His elder daughter, Anna, was the mother of the Grand Duke Peter, whom Catherine married. Anna died in 1728 following the birth of her only son, a few years after her father died.

<http://womenshistory.about.com/od/catherinegreat/p/catherinegreat.htm>n the crown than the person in making this marriage.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.norkarussia.info/catherines-manifesto-1763.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ The realities of the history of Russian military service are very difficult to find, and because I have seen Wiki used so often for the propoganda of the Zionist Jews, I don't trust anything on the Wiki websites for truth. Anything out of Britain has similar problems, because of their close ties to the Zionists. However, I have gleaned this from what I've read in a variety of places.

The military system of the 1800s was established by Peter the Great in the early 1700s. The age of conscription varied, according to the time and the area of Russian rule, from 17-24. During the mid - late 1800s in S. Russia, it was 21. The time of service also varied from 25 yrs., with a minimum of 5 yrs. of active duty and the remaining years being available at a moment's notice, to 7 yrs. with a minimum of 1 yr. active duty. During the mid – late 1800s in S. Russia, it was 20 yrs. with a minimum of 5 yrs. active duty.

Training and punishment, for anything, was severe, in keeping with the Russian bent for brutality, and sexual perversion. Even today, the practice of hazing is known to kill many new recruits every year, and those who don't die from the practice directly, commit suicide, which is in far greater numbers (about 15 who die as a direct result, and over 100 who commit suicide as an indirect result, in a year). It's also well known, historically, that Russia doesn't arm their soldiers adequately, and depends instead on their large numbers to fill the ranks of the high death tolls in war. They place little value on human life.

^{iv} On hazing and other brutal practices.

<https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/russia/russia1102-01.htm>

<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1075412.html>

<http://www.businessinsider.com/hazing-is-holding-back-russias-military-2014-5>

<https://russia-eastern-republic.com/2014/06/13/dedovshchina-the-russian-army/>

^v The Germans from Russia are discovering that many of these German farmers were titled. Though not of the ancient noble/royal lines themselves, they were allowed to marry into those lines, and many of the siblings of these farmers chose to migrate to America instead of Russia, so we're finding many 5th-8th cousins in the U.S., who are descended from those siblings. There are those who don't understand this history, because our great grandparents in the U.S always claimed so much poverty (I always see the claimer's tongue in cheek, or a little impish grin on their face when I read most of the family stories in the town jubilee books), and why would anyone leave financial success and social status for poverty and persecution. These people are projecting the values of today onto people who lived over 200 yrs. ago.

Think about it for a minute. First, their values began and ended with religious beliefs (the Holy Roman Empire wasn't called "holy" for no reason at all, and it didn't come to it's end until 1806. Second, these farmers weren't impressed by their social status. Most of them understood well that they were on the bottom of the noble ranks. Third, work and providing for their families were far more important to them than social status, and were a serious part of their religious beliefs. Fourth, it takes a lot of money to migrate to another country. The expense of the travel alone is very high. Then when they arrived, they had to build homes (they couldn't foresee that some of their homes would be provided for them), buy equipment they couldn't bring with them, and they knew the first crops from the virgin soil were unlikely to produce the best crops the first year or two, and that's providing the weather cooperated. Fifth, hindsight is always 20/20. There was no way they could foresee the change in the political climate. They left their motherland with high hopes of a better life for their families.

^{vi} For village locations see:

<https://www.google.com/maps/@46.6694758,27.2521408,485032m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m2!6m1!1szFmiOKDRna9c.kQytbv16tO3g>

^{vii} <http://countrystudies.us/russia/6.htm>

<http://www.historyinanehour.com/2012/05/18/tsar-nicholas-ii-summary/>

^{viii} There's some disagreement/confusion, about the year he actually signed the decree.

^{ix} We (Never) Don't Forget: Germans From Russia in South America, DVD, by Germans From Russia Heritage Center (GRHC), NDSU, Fargo, North Dakota, Executive Producers, Bob Dambach and Michael Miller.

^x Harold Ehrman did an extensive amount of work on the repressive periods, but by no means was his work completed. <http://ehrman.net/ss/martyr/sec2.htm>.

^{xi} <http://holodomorct.org/history.html>, <https://holodomorinfo.com/>

^{xii} You can buy them at GRHC: https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/nd_sd/vossler2.html . The book and the DVD contain the same information. It's just a matter of which form you prefer.

^{xiii} http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v14/v14n1p-4_Weber.html,
<http://www.orthodoxchristianbooks.com/articles/371/bolshevism-jews/>

^{xiv} <https://youtu.be/awCOSRg-gks>, <https://youtu.be/DIT9sLz29iQ>, <https://youtu.be/nMQ9C6vni0w>,
<https://youtu.be/nMQ9C6vni0w>

^{xv} These Germans were separated from their motherland by the Allied countries' "carving up of Europe" after WWI. See the various treaties from the end of that war.

^{xvi} Heritage Review, "Step by Steppe: Exodus from the Ukraine", p. 2-8, "Removal from the Homeland: A Surviving Eye-witness Documentary Report on the Evacuation of Ethnic Germans from the Black Sea Region of Ukraine to Germany in Early 1944 (Part 1), p. 9-25, Vol. 38, No. 1, March 2008, published by the Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS), Bismarck, North Dakota, Copyright 2008, ISSN: 0162-8267. The latter article continues in Vol. 38, No. 2, p. 35.

<http://odessa3.org/collections/articles/link/schlaht.html>

This is the Mennonite story of the Trek. [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Great Trek, 1943-1945](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Great_Trek,_1943-1945).

^{xvii} There are other sources for these records, but it seems like people have an easier time finding records on their family on the National Archives website. <http://www.dpcamps.org/capturedRecords.html>. There are also some Russian websites where records can be found. <https://lostrussianfamily.wordpress.com/>, <http://www.findrussianheritage.com/>,