Liebental Germans: Their History in the 1930s

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Probably no other ethnic German group
living in a foreign country endured so much suffering as ours.
Leonhart Gustin (1955)

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(German settlement Freudental)
Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it
George Santayana

Foreword

This work is dedicated to German settlers of Liebental district during one of the hardest periods of their history. I would like to uncover some historical truth about the ‘Holodomor’—man-made famine (1932-1933), repressions against German national minority, and the creation of two German national districts from previous Liebental ones. My study provides detailed information about the agricultural life, education, medicine, transport and communication of the villages. The main question of my work is:

‘Soviet national policy in the thirties: myth or truth?’

This work is provided for the general reader and descendants of German colonists from Liebental villages.

I worked with a significant number of historical documents, discovered some old photographs, and carried out archaeological excavations to provide a better overview of the researched period. I have visited many German colonies around Odessa to talk to the remaining ancestors of German villagers. I interviewed Lyudmila Rissling—the director of German colonist museum in Selz (Limanskoe).

(Having a conversation with Lyudmila Rissling, my collection of German coins found in German settlements)
I am deeply convinced that we should remember our history and never repeat its mistakes. For years of Soviet period almost no word was said about Germans in Ukraine. Those who returned to their native villages faced many difficulties: they must not speak their language, needed to change their names and surnames, could not practice their religion – they were unfairly called Nazis and fascists.

Now the time has come to be absolutely sincere and tell truth about the history of our Germans. I hope that my work may serve as memorial to German colonists who played a significant role in making Odessa region successful and beautiful!

Mikhail Mishin
Spartacus (Gross-Liebental) German national district (1926-1939)

a) General information

Spartacus national district was named after unsuccessful ‘Rebellion of Spartacists’ of 1919 in Berlin, Germany under command of German communists Karl Liebknecht and Rose Luxembourg.

(The borders of Spartacus German national district. The map is created by Dr. K Stumpp. I drew the borders myself according to historical maps of the 1930s)

The district center was the village of Spartacus (original name Gross-Liebenthal). It included 10 national villages: Freudental, Peterstal, Josefstal, Mariental, Neuburg, Alexanderhilf, Franzfeld, Gross-Liebenthal, Klein-Liebental, Karlstal. In 1927 new village appeared on the map of the district. Lenintal was founded by poor German peasants from different villages. In 1928 the number of homesteads had reached 101.

The district’s area was 31.9 thousand square hectares. Ploughlands: 21941 hectares, gardens and vineyards: 2904 hectares, pastures: 2166 hectares, backyard: 1252 hectares, forests: 199 hectares, hayfields: 70 hectares. In 1935 the population reached 14629 people with 3479 living in Gross-Liebental. 91.4% of district’s population were Germans. Almost all of them were able to read and write.
b) Education

The education in the district in 1935 was represented by 3 kindergartens (82 children), 4 primary schools (316 pupils), 6 secondary schools (1783 students), 1 high school (663 students), and 1 agricultural college (126 students) founded in 1930. There were 6 playgrounds, 9 village clubs holding 9 libraries with 14416 books, 27 radio installations. Two cinemas existed. One of them was organized in Neudorf church another was in the Gross-Liebental church. 100% of children studied regularly. 70 teachers worked in district’s educational institutions.

Six of them had higher education, 47 finished secondary schools and colleges all the others finished specialized courses.
The colonists produced their own newspaper called «Kollektiver Aufbau». From 1935 it was renamed «Für bolschewistische Kollektive». More than 2000 copies of this newspaper were printed.

c) Agriculture and local products

Statistics provide good information about the agriculture of the district and local products. Colonists planted wheat, rye, barley, oat, buckwheat, corn, peas, sunflowers, potatoes and other foodstuffs. German villagers managed to create their own breed of cows, called the “Red Colonist” during the years of
homesteading. It was said to give more milk and was very hardy. They had 1114 cows of such bred in 1935 and 2025 of crossbred.

Apart from their own breed colonists owned a great number of other purebred animals: white English pigs, grey Ukrainian cows, Berkshire pigs, Russian trotting horses. Altogether the number of livestock is said to be 2202 horses, cows and bulls: 5636, pigs: 2556, sheep: 193, goats: 350.3 dairy farms, 3 pig farms, 4 rearing farms existed.

The machine tractor station included 59 tractors and 9 trucks. The local products gave a regular income of more than 2 million Soviet rubles per year. It was definitely a great sum of money.

There was a wine factory, a steammill, a brick factory with 70 workers, three woodworking enterprises, 2 sunflower oil production companies, 2 sewing factories, shoe factory, stockings factory, spinning mill. The last two ones were under the guidance of Olga Miller.
d) Healthcare

Gross-Liebental district Germans had a developed system of healthcare including 2 first-aid posts, 2 ambulant clinics, 2 maternity hospitals with 10 beds, 4 medical assistance posts, 1 hospital with 45 beds for the patients. 15 of them were for future mothers. The total number of medical personnel was 22 including 5 doctors and 17 paramedical staff. There was also one pharmacy.
e) Trade transport and communication

Trade turnover in one quarter of the 1935 reached 852 thousand of Soviet rubles. There were 24 outlets in the villages. The transport system was represented by the railway. There was a railway station in Gross-Liebental. The communication included 8 postal and telegraph stations. Heads of 9 villages had telephones in their offices. Machine tractor station and 12 collective farms had telephones too.

f) Famine of 1932-1933 ‘Holodomor’ and mass repressions

In 1932 the colonists fulfilled their plan of grain procurements in November but the communists continued to take away more and more. They did not only take grain but food and animals, leaving the colonists starving during the 1932-1933 winter. The exact number of people starved to death is still unknown. They were mostly men because they gave their portions of food to women and children. From 15 to 20 people had died during the most severe days of famine. Many colonists wrote letters of prayer of help to Germany and USA. Some of these letters were caught by the communists. It was enough it accuse poor hungry people of being public enemies and served as a reason for organizing another wave of repressions.

During 1934-1939 repressions reached their peak. 44 people were arrested in Klein-Liebenthal. 18 of them were shot: the District’s council secretary Durmayer, head of the education department Mauer, the head of Gross-Liebental high school Bachman born in 1898 in Rohrbach, Albert Reich the lecturer of pedagogical university in Odessa, docent, born in 1904 in Gross-Liebental,
newspaper editor Lefler, the head of collective farm Walguni and many others. The head of wine factory Burnstern fought in the Red Army during the WW2. The databases of the repressed are already available both in Ukraine and abroad.

( Centner Oscar Born:1923
Birthplace: Klein-Liebental
Occupation: teacher
Sentence: repressed for being German; mobilized to labor army, January 21, 1942. Tagil, Siberia)

g) First success under the Soviets
During the 1930s the Spartacus district was considered as one of the most successful in Odessa region. It was rewarded with Diplomas of Honor and cash bonuses from the communist government of Ukraine. It is a nice example of agricultural success of the colonists. You can understand how lowly was the work of colonists valued. They almost never received wages. They were given some portions of food or grain instead. See my translation of one of such documents dated February 22, 1934.

Order №75.
On the celebration of the success of the struggle of the Spartacus district for increasing crop yields and pre-execution of state tasks.

I. It should be noted that the Spartacus district, based on the correct implementation of the Leninist national policy, the steady implementation of Comrade Stalin's instructions and the implementation of the decisions of the party and government, has achieved great victories in the organizational and economic strengthening of the collective farms, in fulfilling the obligations to the state for raising the material and cultural level of the working people.

By grouping around the Soviet asset and the masses of collective farmers, popularizing the historic decisions of the January plenum of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) and the decisions of the party and government aimed at strengthening the collective farm system, the RVC and the council of the Spartakivskyi district, provided the mobilization of the collective-farm masses in the struggle with the class-hostile elements - cooperation of the collective farms in implementing Comrade Stalin's slogan to turn all collective farms into Bolshevik and all collective farmers into the rich.

The average grain yield in the district in 1933 is 11 centners per hectare, the cost of working day 10.5 kilograms of bread, 4.5 liters of wine and 1 ruble 80 kopecks of money. In some collective farms ("New Life" of the Joseftal Village Council) the working day in natural products is 16.5 kilograms, including 10.5 kilograms of wheat.

The district has fulfilled its obligations before the state in advance: the bread supply-10.08, the natural tax payment for machine-tractor stations-19.08, meat supply-20.11 by 102%, milk supply-20.11 by 121%, annual plan for raising funds by 121%.
Autumn sowing was completed on October 12, plan of plowing was fulfilled by 105.7%, high-quality seed funds were created.

It means that the slogan of Comrade Stalin about the transfer of all collective farms into the bolshevik ones and all collective farmers into the rich is definitely true.

II. To celebrate the successful struggle of Spartacus district for increasing crop yields and pre-execution of state tasks, the Presidium of the VUTSVK decides:

1) to reward Spartacus district as the advanced one with the Diploma of Honour from the VUTSVK;

2) to reward the head of RVC Comrade Merz with a cash prize of 500 rubles;

3) to order Comrade Merz to award the best heads of village councils and district employees with 3000 rubles;

4) to order RVC to award the advanced village council with complete set of musical instruments for the brass band;

5) to reward Comrade Pfaff (maybe Peter) for active work with women from the collective farms of the district with Diploma of Honour.

Kharkiv, February 22, 1934.

Head of VUTSVK Petrovskiy

Secretary of VUTSVK Wojciechivskiy

List of special terms:
Spartacus district (1926-1939)-previous Gross-Liebental district,

VUTSVK: All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee-the highest legislative, regulatory, executive and supervisory body of state power in communist Ukraine;

RVC: District Executive Committee-the same body of state power on the district level;

VKP(b): All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks.

(Peter Pfaff-the head of Freudental collective farm with his colleagues. Peter is the last one on the right)
h) The disbandment of Spartacus German national district.

The Spartacus German national district was disbanded on April 7, 1939. German villages became parts of the newly formed Ukrainian districts of Ovidiopol and Belyaevka. German national schools were closed. Some people from the government mentioned: ‘The Germans around Odessa plunged into grief and sorrow so much that they stopped singing their national songs and creating theatre plays’. The people became very cautious.

The government had been thinking up how to deport the colonists for a long period of time but the start of the military actions on the Eastern front in 1941 did not let them to fulfill it completely. The German villages were located in the center of a great battle, called the Odessa Defense.
Conclusion

The statistics shows that Germans remained successful even during the dictatorship of the Soviets. Unfortunately the Soviet repressive policy destroyed powerful German homesteads, took all their properties and made them work as slaves. The German national policy in Gross-Liebenthal district was a complete failure.

Those who did not want to enter collective farms were repressed. The hunger of 1932-1933 was a severe blow for the colonists. When the Nazis came to power in Germany the repressions became extremely desperate. The honest people were called Nazis spies and saboteurs. No one was sure about tomorrow. Communists came very often taking away the best men and women.

Due to anti-church policy all churches were closed some of them were even decapitated. All church supplies were confiscated. The priests were arrested. Most of the churches were turned into village clubs some of them became warehouses.

We cannot change the huge tragedy which happened more than 70 years ago but we can certainly learn the lesson from history and make important conclusions. We do not need to divide people by nationality and religion. Representatives of national minorities must be honored. Every nation has the
right to its cultural, religious identity, the preservation of its traditions. We must be able to analyze historical data and understand the negative effects of totalitarian regimes.

(Monument to the founders of Freudental)
Sources and literature list

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