HISTORY: The history of the ethnic group known as the Germans from Russia, or German-Russians, basically began on July 22, 1763, when Catherine the Great of Russia published a manifesto inviting stressed, war-weary families from western Europe and the area that is now Germany, to come to Russia to become farmers on the Russian steppes, on vast areas of vacant land similar to the prairies of North America. The new farmers were to be examples to raise the cultural level of the Russian peasantry. In 1789 they numbered about 23,000, growing to more then a million in the early 1900s.

Catherine II, a princess from the German province of Anhalt-Zerbst, had come to Russia to married Czar Peter. After Peter’s death, she was faced with the problem of feeding Russia’s growing cities. The Czarina believed that Russia’s steppes could be farmed successfully and remembered the excellent farmers back in her home country.

To encourage immigration to Russia the following generous promises were made to those wishing to become settlers in Russia: The freedom to practice their religion. Tax exemptions for 30 years. Government loans to build homes and farms. Self government in their colonies and villages. Exemptions from military and civil service against their wishes. These privileges to extend to themselves and their descendants. Free land for eternal time. Free transportation to their homes in Russia. The freedom to leave Russia if they wished at any time.

The first emigrant farmers from the German states were settled along the Volga River and became known as the Volga Germans.

In 1804, the grandson of Catherine, Alexander I, again set up recruiting offices in Germany. He was aiming to populate the Crimean Peninsula and the area north of the Black Sea and Bessarabia. Emigration from Germany continued up till 1862. These farmers were identified as the Black Sea Germans.

After first encountering difficulties common to all pioneers, their villages, also called colonies, started to flourish and grew from 300 to ten times that number. They created a satisfying life for themselves and their families and made Russia the bread basket of Europe.

Each village was of the same religion. A little over a quarter were Catholic, most were Lutheran, though some were Mennonite, Evangelical, Baptist, and a few others. Their distinctive culture, food, customs, language, musical style, and attitudes were remarkably similar throughout the settlement region.
During the reign of Czar Alexander II, in 1874, freedom from military service was ended. The colonists felt deeply betrayed by the suspension of this promise because it had been embedded in both manifestoes and in a separate agreement with the Mennonites. When Alexander III, who reigned from 1881 - 1894, instituted a general Russification policy, which threatened the cultural identity of the German villages.

In 1862, the Homestead Act, was passed by the United States. Word soon reached Russia giving the colonies an alternative to the increasing marginal existence caused by the new laws and the shortage of farmland. Starting as early as 1849, about 300,000 colonists immigrated to the United States and Canada, with similar numbers going to Central and South America. Today some 6,000,000 people in North America trace their ancestry to Germans who were born in Russia.

The immigration to the North America first was only a trickle. The very first became wine grows at Kelly’s Island in Lake Erie near Sandusky, Ohio in 1849. California attracted wine growers. Around Fresno, California, they produced raisins. Some worked in the sugar beet fields in Colorado. The largest numbers settled primarily in the wheat growing areas of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, and Washington State. Some moved to Argentina, Paraguay and Mexico.

The ethnic German presence in the Russian Empire did not come to an end with the migrations of German-Russians to the US, Canada, and Latin America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Even events leading to the creation of the Soviet Union did not end this presence. Large numbers of German communities remained along the Volga River, the shores of the Black Sea, the North Caucasus, Siberia, and other regions of the Russian Empire. These settlements remained despite World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. Most of these villages only ceased to exist in 1941, when the Stalin regime forcibly removed virtually all German-Russians from the European areas of the USSR, and transplanted them to Siberia and Kazakhstan. The survivors of this ethnic cleaning and their descendants, continued to form a large identifiably German minority within the Soviet Union.

They numbered over two million people by the time of the last Soviet census in 1989. Soviet policy varied greatly between 1917 and 1987. During the 1920s, the Soviet government granted them a significant degree of cultural autonomy. In the 1930s this gave way to deportation, imprisonment and execution. The repression of the German-Russians reached its most extreme level during the 1940s with deportation of most of the population east of the Urals. Here the Stalin regime placed over 90 percent of all German-Russians classifying them as special settlers. Authorities then mobilized over a quarter of the total German population into forced labor detachments known as the “labor army.”

After Stalin’s death in 1953, conditions gradually improved for the German-Russians. They remained second class citizens in the USSR. During the 1960, a movement to restore cultural autonomy emerged and failed. They then agitated for the right to emigrate to West Germany. This had some success. But it was only in 1987 that Gorbachev removed all restrictions on emigration from the Soviet Union. After this the German population in Russia and Kazakhstan
drastically declined. Today less than a million German-Russians remain in the former Soviet Union.

**HERITAGE ORGANIZATIONS:** Some Germans from Russia heritage organizations with well stocked libraries and websites that can help you do your family research are:

* American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, (AHSGR), 631 D Street, Lincoln, Nebraska 68502-1199, Phone: (402) 474-3363, Website: www.ahsgr.org/

* Germans from Russia Heritage Society, (GRHS), 1125 West Turnpike Avenue, Bismarck, North Dakota 58501-8115, Phone: (701) 232-6167, Website: www.grhs.org/

* Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, (GRHC), North Dakota State University Library, 1201 Albrecht Boulevard, P.O. Box 5599, Fargo, North Dakota 58105-5599, Phone: (701) 231-8416, Website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc

* Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland e.V., Raitelsbergstr 49, 70188 Stuttgart, Deutschland (Germany), Website: www.deutscheausrussland.de

* Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Bessarabien e.V., Florianstrasse 17, 70188 Stuttgart, Deutschland (Germany), Website: www.bessarabien.de

**INTERNET GENEALOGY:** Here are some websites to help you do your family research, and indicates what is present at these sites.

* Germans from Russia Heritage Society, www.grhs.org/ The Society’s Bismarck headquarters is ideally located in the heartland of our ethnic group on the continental northern plains. It has become the leading research center for the Black Sea Germans from Russia in the United States and Canada. The aims of the Society are educational and social. Its purpose is to bring together people who are interested in discovering the common history unique to Germanic-Russian ethnics and to preserve the many elements of this rich heritage. The Society collects, lists, and catalogues published materials and personal documents that tell of the European migrations and exodus to the United States and Canada and also of the pioneer life on the plains. The site will let you: Check for the area where your Black Sea ancestors lived. Find Village Coordinators. Discover Regional Interest Groups. Check obituaries on-line to find birth and death dates. Located resource links to other genealogy organizations. Peruse on-line Map Collections. Do research in the Odessa Library Collections. The EWZ indexes of interviews of ethnic Germans being returned to Germany from Russia during the 1940s offer much family data. Many times two or three generations of a family can be found documented, as well as some pictures.

* American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, www.ahsgr.org/. The mission of
AHSGR is to discover, collect, preserve and disseminate information related to the history, cultural heritage, and genealogy of Germanic settlers in the Russian Empire and their descendants. The site will help you: Find Village Coordinators to work with you in your search for ancestors. Search the “saving our ancestral records” (SOAR) files to find your relatives. The SOAR obituary database includes over 300,000 names. The AHSGR GEDLIST is another feature to check out. This resource now has more than 497,265 individuals and more than 190,890 marriages. This is the site to investigate if your ancestors were Volga Germans. Here you will find over 6,000 books, manuscripts, journals, family histories, maps, census lists and other publications. Here you can procure books covering the history of this unique ethnic group.

* German from Russia Heritage Collection - North Dakota State University Library, www.ndsu.edu/grhc. This is the largest Germans from Russia website. The mission statement for the Collection reads as follows: Our mission is to collect, document, preserve, exhibit, translate, publish, promote, and make accessible resources on the culture, history, folklore, textiles and clothing, and footways of the Germans from Russia. Our focus is on Bessarabian, Black Sea, Crimean, Dobrudscha and Volhynian Germans and their descendants in North Dakota and the Norther Plains. The Collection has expanded its activities and projects to include: Audio oral history interviews, clothing and textiles, Dakota Memories Oral History Project, Electronic discussion groups, Heritage tours to Ukraine and Germany, Online resources, Outreach programs, Photo archives, Publications, and Translations.

* Institute for Regional Studies. Room 117, 1305 - 19th Avenue North, Fargo, North Dakota 58108-6050, Phone: (701) 231-8914, Website: www.ndsu.edu/archives. The Institute has a variety of resources to aid in learning about your family’s history in North Dakota. It has developed a number of searchable databases including: The North Dakota Biography Index, The Dakota Territory 1885 Census index, and the Fargo Forum obituary index. It also makes available the North Dakota Naturalization index. For Cass County records there are searchable databases for its marriage licenses, probate records, divorce records and civil cases. In addition the Institute has an extensive collection of published North Dakota community, county, church and family histories. The Institute preserves close to 100,000 photographic items that may be of interest to family historians, particularly images of North Dakota cities and towns. Over 4,400 images have been digitized and are now available on Digital Horizons.

* The German Genealogy Network, www.genealogienetz.de/genealogy.html. This German site has extensive sections in the English language. Click on the “Regional” link and spend some time seeing what can found out about your ancestor’s German state of origin. In many of these sections you will find historical descriptions of important records and how to access them, archive addresses, important links and much more. The “GOV” link will take you to a wonderful gazetteer.

* East European Genealogical Society Inc., www.eegsociety.org. The group began when informed researchers with varied interests in east European family history and genealogy met on a regular basis to develop and share genealogical knowledge about eastern Europe. Membership includes a quarterly periodical, the location of record sources in East Europe, The historical background to East Europe, experiences of research trips, queries, success stories, and a library.
* FamilySearch, www.familysearch.org. This website is a first stop for anyone doing German research. This gives access to the world’s largest genealogy database. Find the name of your ancestor in the millions of names included on the IGI (International Genealogical Index). There are also historical maps. Word lists and guides for using specific records.

* Ancestry, www.ancestry.com. This is a fee-charging website with a large collection of European records. This site is pricey but has the largest source of collections. Data bases include: The US census, US passenger and boarder-crossing lists, WWI and WWII draft registration cards, passport applications, newspapers, and family and local histories.

* Ellis Island Passenger Arrival Records, www.ellisisland.org. The number of names in this database can be overwhelming, some 25 million records of arriving immigrants. This has records of people who arrived from 1892 to 1924. The index is linked to scanned lists.

* Castle Garden Passenger Arrival records, www.castlegarden.org. The Castle Garden station began functioning as New York’s first immigration receiving station in 1855, but the site includes records beginning in 1830. The records extend until 1892, when Ellis Island was opened. The date lists about 10 million people, with about two million still to be added.

* Bremen Passenger Lists 1920 - 1939. www.schiffslisten.de/index_en.html. Bremen was one of the most important ports of departure for European ancestors coming to the United States. Unfortunately, the majority of the Bremen records have been lost through war or in an effort to conserve space.

* Mennonite websites: These are included because most of the ancestors that were of the Mennonite background have remained separated in their own organizations, www.mennonites.ca/, www.mennonites.ca/russia_chortitza.html, and www.mennonites.ca/faqs.html.

LIBRARIES: Much time and great sums of money and many hours of member volunteer work has gone into making the libraries of all the Societies and Heritage Collections great places to do family research. A helpful and knowledgeable staff that can provide assistance where and when needed is an additional plus. Connections to archives and researchers in Russia keeps new fresh information flowing into the repositories. Much of the German language data has been or is being translated into the English language to make it more user friendly for the current researcher who no longer is able to read German.

* American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, Lincoln, Nebraska. This Society is the holder of more then 6,000 books published information, archival records copies, genealogical information, journals, biographies, maps, photographs and artifacts representing the lives of the German-Russians, both while residing in Russia and following the departure of those who immigrated to the Americas and elsewhere in the world. Village coordinators and village information is available. Staff members are on hand to provide assistance to family researchers. If your background is of Volga German ancestry, this is where to start your research.
* Germans from Russia Heritage Society, Bismarck, North Dakota. The Black Sea and Bessarabian Germans are the focus of the large library collection at the Society’s headquarters. On the shelves here are a large number of books, periodicals, reference materials, obituaries, cemetery records, census records, passenger lists, newsletters, maps, county and community histories, family histories, microfiche and microfilm records, pedigree charts/family group sheets, village coordinator records, and much more. Experienced staff members can provide research help.

* Germans from Russia Heritage Collection - North Dakota State University Library, Fargo, North Dakota. One of the largest collection of Black Sea and Bessarabian books, maps, films, videos, DVDs, song books, CDs, cookbooks, maps and much more. You will find numerous award-winning documentaries. The GRHC works closely with Prairie Public Broadcasting, providing financial assistance and research for acclaimed documentaries such as “Schmeckfest: Food traditions of the Germans from Russia,” and “Prairie Crosses, Prairie Voices: Iron Crosses of the Great Plains.” Staff members will provide help in doing research.

* Red River Valley Genealogical Society, 112 N. University Dr., Suite L-116, Fargo, N.D. 58106-9284, Phone: (701) 239-4129, website: www.redrivergenealogy.com. The library has over 4,000 family books, most Germans from Russia publications, as well as some books on the history of this ethnic group. They have a large collection of cemetery books, and a large selection of books on the other ethnic groups which populate the local area.

Research information to be found in area and associated libraries is so vast and of such quality that the excuse, “I was unable to find what I needed.” will no longer suffice for not doing your family research. There is also satisfactory expert assistance available locally to no longer have any excuse for not getting started or continue doing your family research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

