A. German Immigrants in Russia (the Russian Germans)

Russia has been a multiethnic nation. Germans made up a small part of the different ethnic groups living in Czarist Russia, but there were about 1,770,000 Germans in Russia at the end of the 19th century.

Historically, Germans came to Russia long time ago and played an important part in the process of Russian modernization. Most Germans who lived there in the 19th century were those who immigrated from Germany at the invitation of Catherine II and Alexander I at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. Such Germans are called “Russian Germans.” Czars wanted them to become a model of farmers in Russia. They colonized in the Volga region and southern Russia, and were given special rights such as access to free land, tax exemption for a certain period, no military service obligation, religious freedom, and self-government in their colonies. In 1768, there were 30,000 settlers in the Volga area, most of whom were Lutherans followed by Mennonites, Calvinists, and Catholics.

At the end of the 18th century in Germany, people suffered from severe living conditions due to succeeding wars. As a result, some people wished to emigrate to Russia with dreams of living in a “Paradise,” but such dreams were shattered when they observed the real situations in the planned regions to colonize, where they had to start from cultivating the desolate land. The colonists worked diligently, and their farming became more affluent than that of the neighboring Russians. However, in the middle of the 19th century, their administrative position as a privileged status changed.

After the defeat in the Crimean War, Alexander II carried out the abolition of serfdom, and other administrative, economic, military reforms toward the modernization of Russia in the 1860s. In this process, the legal status of Russian Germans was vigorously debated, and the privileges which had been granted to them were abolished in 1871: the universal conscription system was applied to them in 1874 as well. Among the German inhabitants there was widespread anxiety about the forced introduction of the Russian language at their schools, the loss of religious independence, and the economic conditions such as shortage of land. Under the policies of the Russification and the public trends of Germaniphonia, some Germans began to emigrate to North America and South America.

Political, economic and social disorders, and turbulences occurred at the beginning
of the 20th century in Russia, which included assassinations of leading figures, student movements, the Russo-Japanese War, the Revolution of 1905, government’s attempts for the modernization (establishments of a fundamental law and a national assembly, and the reforms by Stolypin toward the transition from the communal to the private landownership). Under such circumstances, the First World War broke out. To the Germans in Russia this war was against their fatherland, and to the Russians the Germans living in their country turned out to be the people of an enemy country. The young Russian Germans joined the army and went to the battle front, which resulted in sacrifices of severe casualties. It was prohibited for the Germans to use the German language at school and church, and to publish German newspapers in Russia. The Russian Germans living near the border between Russia and Germany were deported to Siberia in February 1915 under the pretext of conducting espionage.

In 1917, the February Revolution broke out during the First World War, which ended the Romanoff dynasty and the October Revolution led by Lenin which began to establish the socialist state. In this process, however, Russia had to be confronted with numerous problems. Russia suffered from the great famine at the beginning of 1920s, which caused millions of people to starve to death. Then the Soviet government adopted the New Economic Policy for the economic reorganization, using a market mechanism in part. Under the rule of the Communist Party some ethnic self-government republics were founded which included the Volga German Autonomous Republic in the Volga in 1924. After Lenin’s death in 1924, Stalin took control over the Communist Party and carried out policies such as establishment of the communist system in the agricultural collectivization, the Five-Year Plan of Industrialization, anti-religious campaigns, and so on. However, implementation of these policies caused a great deal of difficulties and sacrifices as seen in the great famine and a series of political purges with millions of victims in the 1930s. Some of the Russian Germans who suffered under Stalinism wished to emigrate to other countries, such as Germany, the United States, or Canada, and applied to the Soviet government for the exit visas. In reality, it was very difficult to acquire such visas, as the government tried to forbid their emigration. Under these circumstances some people wished to cross the border secretly and illegally to escape to other countries.

When the war between Germany and Soviet Russia broke out in September 1941, Stalin introduced the policy to deport the Russian Germans of southern Russia and the Volga to Siberia and Kazakhstan, by treating about 650,000 people as “betrayers.”

In 1956, in the process of the “Criticism to Stalin,” following his death in 1953, the Russian Germans could be given the restoration of their honor, although they had no rights to come back to their former dwelling regions. However, after the conclusion of the Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Soviet Union in 1972, the emigration movement of Russian Germans to German countries began, which accelerated over the period of Perestroika and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in
1991. Sometimes, the movement involved over 200,000 people in one year. The total numbers of the Russian Germans who returned to Germany are now estimated to be over 2,500,000, including younger generations who were born in Russia and could not speak in German. It was very difficult for those young people to assimilate into German society.

In addition to the above-mentioned history of the Russian Germans, today, I would like to present a history on their escapes from Russia against Stalinism. They crossed borders between Russia and China, crossing either the Amur River or the Ussuri River, secretly and illegally, to reach Harbin in China in order to emigrate further to other countries before and after 1930. These experiences of the Russian Germans are part of history of the 20th century that mankind must not forget.

B. Escape of the Russian Germans against Stalinism
   —From Siberia to Harbin, China—

I. Migrations to Western Siberia
   In the second half of the 19th century, there was a lack of land due to rapid population increase that occurred in most of the agricultural regions in Russia, and some Russian and German peasants wished to move to Siberia. The government then prohibited or restricted this movement. In the 1890s, however, the government implemented a positive policy for peasants’ movement to Siberia, with prospects for economic effects to be brought by the construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad. Furthermore, on March 19, 1906, the law permitting anyone to move to Siberia without any restrictions was promulgated, and Stolypin, Prime Minister, adopted a policy to promote peasants’ movements to Siberia as one of his important policies. Consequently, peasants’ movement to Siberia, including the Russian Germans’, increased remarkably.

   It was in the 1890s when the first Russian Germans in the Volga and southern Russia moved out to western Siberia. According to the 1897 census, 7,141 Russian Germans (Mennonites, Lutherans and Catholic) were found in three states of western Siberia and the population of Russian Germans in western Siberia gradually increased. For example, the population of Russian Germans in the state of Akmolinsk was 8,327 in 1905, 19,822 at the end of the 1910s, and 36,039 by the outbreak of the First World War, and 36,000 at the outbreak of the First World War in the state of Tomsk.

   With the outbreak of the First World War, the Russian Germans in western Russia were deported to western Siberia and the Maritime Province of Siberia. To the latter region, over 150,000 people were transported from the department of Volhynia by boxcar for livestock, most of whom were Lutherans.

II. Opposition to Stalinism
   (1) Stalin’s policies: Forced supply of grain by peasants, extermination of
“kulak” (wealthy peasantry), agricultural collectivization, and anti-religious campaign

The October Revolution in 1917 and the succeeding Civil War brought about serious turmoil and negative impacts to the life of Russian Germans in western Siberia. The area of sowing fields, the number of livestock, and farming implements decreased, and the agricultural production became a strenuous situation. People suffered from the forced supply of grain, the tax burden imposed by the Communist Party, and the great famine at the beginning of the 1920s. The administrative rule of the Communist Party to the Russian Germans was also established in western Siberia. Some Russian Germans emigrated to other countries out of Russia.

Even in such conditions, the economic life of Russian Germans in western Siberia was relatively better than that of surrounding Russian and other ethnic peasants. In the period of the New Economic Policy (NEP), the agricultural production of Russian Germans developed through their industrious labor in spite of the difficult conditions though there was the differentiation of peasantry as the wealthy, the mediums, and the poor.

However, the life of the Russian Germans was seriously damaged by Stalin’s policies from the end of the 1920s: forced supply of grain by peasants, extermination of “kulak” (wealthy peasantry), agricultural collectivization, and anti-religious campaign.

Furthermore, western Siberia developed more and more merciless taxations, the forced supply of grain by peasants, the extermination of “kulak”, the dissolution of cooperatives, and the construction of collective farming (kolkhoz and sokhoz). The people who refused government demands were accused criminally as “kulak” and “enemy of the Soviet,” and their surplus grain was confiscated. In 1929, 93.2% of the wealthy peasants in western Siberia were regarded as guilty, and these tendencies were extended to the medium and the poor peasants as well. One peasant of medium stratum was forced to walk around in his village with a board of “a hoodlum” on his chest, crying “I was a fool. I did not supply grain.” Many of Russian Germans were economically declining in dread of threats and banishment.

The 15th Communist Party Convention in 1927 promoted to develop the collectivization furthermore. To the Russian Germans the collectivization was heterogeneous by nature, who had intention to own their private lands. In the collectivization they saw the danger of being deprived of not only their economic returns but also their cultural and ethnic identities. Hence, the construction of kolkhoz and sokhoz developed very slowly among them.

From the summer of 1929, however, the “Whole Collectivization” by the government began. The construction of kolkhoz and sokhoz intensively developed everywhere in the Soviet Union, which also included western Siberia. This meant the whole execution of the “kulak” extermination. Toward the construction of kolkhoz and sokhoz, the land, livestock, and farming tools of “kulaks” were confiscated, and they
were expelled from their villages.

The suppression by the Soviet government deprived the Russian Germans of their economic independence, but also their religious freedom.

(2) Resistances by the Russian Germans

What actions did the Russian Germans take under the above-mentioned suppressions of the Soviet government?

First, a tendency to reduce their farming rose among the wealthy peasants, by decreasing each seeding farmland, livestock, and agricultural implements. Secondly, their objections to the Soviet government grew, which involved the movements with uprisings to obtain permissions to emigrate to other countries. Thirdly, some peasants, with no exit visas from the government, attempted escapes to neighboring countries for further emigrations secretly and illegally.

Since the end of the 1920s, the government strictly restricted the emigration of Russian Germans to other countries. The leaders of peasants who wished to emigrate were arrested and exiled as “anti-revolutionary persons.” Nevertheless, new movements for emigration rose among the peasants who were not only German but also Russian and Ukrainian. One of Mennonite German villages declared at their meeting, “we will all begin to prepare to emigrate in coming spring. If we have no train tickets, we will go on foot!”, and they prepared nothing for seeding. They slaughtered their livestock and sold out their possessions in order to pursue their emigration. At the same time, the preparation for emigration brought out miserable conditions in the region. “Everywhere in the fields were scattered carcasses of horses, cows and calves, and the terrible poverty is widespread. In the villages, there are deserted houses in which nobody is dwelling, and nowhere a customary life of the peasants is found.” The government moved forward with the policy to further restrict the peasants’ emigration. Under such circumstances, there were no other possibility but to escape for people who could not give up their hope to emigrate in order to realize their dreams. They wanted to return to Germany or preferably emigrate to the United States or Canada, for which purpose they had to cross the border to China as a first step.

III. Escapes to Harbin, China, crossing the borders illegally

There were three main routes to escape from Russia to China. First, there was the route from Blagoveshchensk, the Amur region, to the territory of China, crossing the border over the Amur River, from where emigrants went to Tsitsikhar by bus and further to Harbin by the Trans-Manchurian Railway, or from Blagoveshchensk they headed by ship to the confluence of its river and the Sungari River, and from there up this River to Harbin. Many Mennonite Germans used this route. Second, there was the route from the Maritime Province of Siberia to the territory of China, crossing the border over the Ussuri River, from where emigrants went on foot to any railroad
stations or to any wharfs on the Sungari River, and further to Harbin by train or by ship. This route was used by the Lutheran Germans who had lived in the Maritime Province. Third, there was the route from Manjuur, western of Blagoveshchensk, to the territory of China. This route was used by many Russian emigrants.

To the Amur region, where Blagoveshchensk was the base for the move to China, many Germans moved from western Siberia with the definite intention to escape. Germans who had been deported from western Russia during the First World War and who emigrated at the end of the 1920s from western Siberia lived in the Ussuri region as well.

Our earliest record on the crossing of the Amur River shows the summer of 1928, and succeeding records are in January of the same year; March and April in 1929; and March, July, October and December in 1930. As to the Ussuri River, we have records of the crossings in June 1931. The control by Russian border guards was reinforced stronger and stronger, and the emigrants were shot to death by them many times.

Usually, crossings were attempted in winter, by sleigh or on foot, and in summer, by boat. The most critical factor for emigrants was not to be discovered by the border guards, and for this reason, the time of day was carefully chosen to cross the river in accordance with different conditions. Times were, for example, in the middle of the day when the border guards were scanty on the assumption that they thought no sane person would cross the river, or later in the afternoon when the guards were insufficient, or at nightfall when the border guards were dazzled by the bright light of the setting sun, or during the moonlit night. One emigrant family crossed the river, wrapped in white sheets at midnight during a full moon in March, and another family between 11 p.m. and 12 a.m. during the guards’ shifts in the dark, cold night in March.

There are documents which mention that escapes were carried out by two or three persons, or by some families (for example, 11 families composed of 62 people with 11 sleighs), or by 217 people of one village with 60 sleighs together. Chinese guides were usually hired for these escapes, but there were also tragic cases when Chinese guides had contacts with the border guards. Crossing the river was accompanied with tremendous fear, and involved victims who were shot by the border guards. Even after arriving at the Chinese shore safely, the emigrants had to endure great hardship and troubles before reaching Harbin, such as death of children, frostbites, and exploitations by unscrupulous Chinese people. In the city of Harbin, too, they had extreme difficulties to live and to continue further emigration to other countries despite the supports provided by many organizations.

Here, I will introduce the reality of the situation of crossing the Amur River and the Ussuri River based on the records written at the time.

«Crossing the Amur River in March 1929, by the family Neufeld, Mennonites, based on the diary of Jacob Neufeld (Harms 1998:44-45)»
We came to the decision that we had to leave Russia. The Amur River was solidly frozen over, it would not be too dangerous to cross with a horse-drawn sled. The only danger was the border patrol. To be caught trying to cross was sure death if they discovered us. But we really had nothing to lose. To stay in Russia was sure death as we were slowly starving to death. It is hard to hear your small children crying for food when there was nothing to give them, not even a crust. Because of our hunger we were not afraid anymore. It was fortunate that I was able to trade our good milk cow for a good horse and an extra 100 rubles.

On March 30, 1929, we drove out of Russia over the frozen Amur River to China to live with the heathen. The ice cracked and groaned and made all kinds of noises, but after a couple of hours on the ice we came to the shores of China. We met a Chinese border guard who could talk some Russian. He wanted us to keep on going towards the mountains before the Russian border patrols would come and look for us and arrest us like criminals and take us back to Russia. After three days the Lord directed us to a Chinese farm where we were given a place to live in exchange for helping with the farm work. We also were able to earn enough flour, meat and beans so we would not starve. Finally on June 1st the steamships began to run again and we were able to board a ship which went down the Amur River and eventually up the Sungari River which took us to Harbin where we arrived on June 7, 1929.

«Crossing the Ussuri River in October 1932, by a family that consisted of four members, Lutherans, based on the report of Charles Kastler, a pastor in Harbin»

A family who had lived in the Maritime Province of Siberia was sent to the concentration camp, but their mother and three sons escaped and walked further for a long time, hiding themselves in the caves and among the woods, and crossed the Ussuri River to the territory of China, where they were arrested by the Chinese border guards who demanded payment of ransom of 1,000 dollars. The Mother decided to make only her sons, 13, 4, and 2 years old respectively, leave for Harbin. The eldest brother walked with his youngest brother on his back. They walked for ten days, asking help for lodging and food, and arrived at a railroad station. The station employee kindly helped them get on the rail for free. On June 2, 1931, they were able to stand at the front door of the Mission of Lutheran Faith in Harbin. They were skin and bone in rags owing to the starvation. One week later, their mother was released from the Chinese guards in exchange for 1,000 dollars sent by the pastor in Harbin, where the children threw themselves into their mother's arms, and the mother tightly embraced them. Then, she lost her consciousness and fell into a coma bordering between life and death for one week, but slowly made a recovery. There was no information about how their father was released from the concentration camp, but after some years, his name was also
recorded on the passengers’ list on the ship for Brazil with his family.

IV. From Harbin to further other countries

The German refugees in Harbin wished to emigrate further to other countries, but under the worldwide economic depression, it was difficult for them to fulfill their wishes. They were forced to live for some years in poverty in Harbin.

For the German refugees’ daily life and emigration to other countries, supports were given from organizations such as the Missions of Christian denomination, their refugee committees, or overseas relief associations. According to the records of March 15, 1931, 544 Mennonite and 434 Lutheran refugees were counted in Harbin. The refugees who had crossed the borders and stayed in China were deprived of their horses, farm implements, and other possessions by Chinese people, and in Harbin they had to live on borrowed money and with help from relief organizations. Women acquired opportunities to work as housemaids in Chinese families, but for men it was very hard to find employment. The refugees had to experience a great deal of difficulties: amputation of limbs caused by frostbite, the spread of typhus, diphtheria, scarlet fever, and other contagious diseases, and so on. Moreover, many lives of refugees were lost: according to one record, 7.8 % of German refugees died in one year since October 1930. Nevertheless, even in such conditions, the Germans steadily began to live better. German doctors worked in a hospital, and a school for themselves was founded with four teachers and 148 pupils.

Concerning the further emigrations to other countries, emigrations via Japan to the United States were carried out by the quota system from 1929 to 1930. However, in the autumn in 1930, the United States stopped accepting immigrants due to the Great Depression. Canada had closed the door for immigrants earlier. The organizations supporting refugees in Harbin looked for countries that the Germans could be accepted with the help of overseas organizations. The Chinese government demanded that the Russian Germans must move out to other countries within a certain period of time, and, if it were not done so, they were to return to Russia. In 1932, the Chinese government set a time limit as March 31 of the same year. The opportunity for acceptance was provided by the countries of South America such as Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia. The Russian Germans themselves were not willing to go to these countries, where, however, some Germans had already colonized from Russia since the end of 19th century. There were also problems with transportation for the emigrations of Russian Germans. Nonetheless, after the resolution of many difficulties, the Lutherans departed from Harbin for Brazil and the Mennonites for Paraguay twice in 1932 and 1934 respectively. They moved first to Dalian by train, then to Shanghai by Japanese ship, and from there to Marseille by French ship, and from the French ports such as Le Avre or Bordeaux to the respective countries. There the Russian Germans started a new life once more as immigrants.
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