

"...we are Russian Germans!"

Traveling exhibit prepared in 1993 by the [Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Rußland](#), Stuttgart, Germany. Permission granted from the Landsmannschaft for use of the exhibit for this website page. Our thanks to the [American Historical Society of Germans from Russia](#) for translating the exhibit.

Germans of the Former Soviet Union History, People, Destiny

In the last four or five years there have been numerous reports in the media about the increasing flood of immigrants from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The problems connected to the mass exodus have been publicly discussed at length and in detail.

For some, Germans from the East are welcome guests, for others, they are foreigners, asylum-seekers, or simply economic refugees.

Because they have not mastered the German language, because they have a different lifestyle than the Germans here, they are, in the eyes of many who have always lived in Germany, not proper Germans.

Ignorance is usually the reason for such a mistaken assessment.

Those who know the history of the Russian Germans know that they have guarded German traditions throughout generations. Since the beginning of the Second World War, however, it has become increasingly more difficult to protect their national identity.

They come to Germany in order to be able to live again as Germans among Germans.

Journey into an Unknown Land

1762

Already during the reign of Peter the Great, many German craftsmen, doctors and architects moved to Russia.

When Catherine II issued a manifesto in 1762, in which she invited foreigners to move to Russia, mostly Germans followed her call.

They were granted privileges, such as political autonomy, religious freedom, freedom from military service and tax exemptions. Above all it was farmers who left their homeland. Some out of fear of famine and war, others for religious reasons.

They came from Wuerttemberg, the Palatinate, northern Bavaria, northern Baden, and Hesse and hoped for a better future for themselves in Russia. They received land allotments in the Volga and Black Sea regions.

The early years were extremely hard for the immigrants. Many died from cold, hunger or in raids by nomads from the Steppes.

"I know the history of the Russian Germans from stories of my ancestors and acquaintances of the older generation."

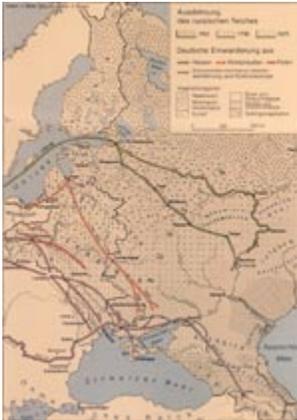
Nineteenth Century

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Southern Germans flocked to Russia.

The provisions on the trip were so bad that the people were weakened by hunger and disease. Therefore, only a small number reached their destination. The survivors were assigned to colonies in the Black Sea area--the Crimea, the Caucasus and Bessarabia. They bought more land and brought it to a higher standard of living than the settlers in the Volga region, who had undertaken the division of land collectively.



Market day in Balzer, Volga.



The map shows areas of settlement in Russia in the years 1762, 1796, and 1825 relative to migrations from the areas, Hesse, West Prussia, Poland and Southwest Germany and further migration from Southeast Europe. The settlers gave their villages names like Frankfurt, Rastatt, Hamburg, München, Speyer to remind them of their old homeland. They were a German village collective in a foreign land: their commune was led by a German Schulze (mayor); there were German newspapers, their children were allowed to go to their own school, and on Sundays they went to the church of their own denomination.

The Russian population soon viewed the Germans with distrust because of their privileges. This consequently affected the "German-politic" of the Russian tsars.

Life Becomes More Difficult

The Czars Alexander II and Alexander III introduced numerous reforms that affected the Germans living in Russia. Among these were the introduction of the draft and the suspension of their autonomy.

These reforms and an increasing Russian nationalism worsened the situation of the Germans.

Especially under Alexander III there was an extensive "Russification-politic," out of fear that the areas of German settlement would become "Germanized" rather than "Russified."

In 1887 a law of Russifying the German educational system and other measures caused over 100,000 Russian Germans at the beginning of the twentieth century to leave their chosen homeland.



Figure 1 German Reformed Church in St. Petersburg.

A few went back to Germany; the majority immigrated to the U.S. and Canada. Many, however, did not want to leave their farm, their home, and stayed.

1915-1917-1924

Their situation worsened during the First World War.

Due to the "liquidation law" of 1915, part of the colonies in Volhynia were dissolved. With the November Revolution of 1917, the political climate changed in the Russian Empire which was now the Soviet Union. Numerous peoples, including the Germans, strove for autonomy.



Vineyards in the Caucasus.

Along the Volga an "Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic of Volga Germans" emerged in 1924; in other areas with German populations, districts (Rayoni) were formed in which German became the official language.

Once again there were German newspapers, German schools and German theater.

For the Germans in the Soviet Union, these were improvements, although their situation degenerated into an even worse state due to the political events that followed.

1941

With Stalin's rise to power, possibly the darkest chapter in the history of the Germans in the Soviet Union began.

After Hitler's troops marched into the U.S.S.R. in 1941, the Germans overall were reviled as Fascists. Individuals were arbitrarily singled out, accused of espionage and quickly sentenced to death.



Deportation 1941.

In 1941, at the beginning of the war between the Soviet Union and Germany, thousands and thousands of Germans were deported to Siberia. The Volga Republic was dissolved; the German districts (Rayoni), founded a few years earlier, were liquidated. Those who did not die during the deportation were placed under strict supervision.

"The evacuation and expulsion I experienced personally. This place where I was born does not interest me--I am much more interested in my parents' homeland. In faith and church we had identified ourselves as Germans. Church was more for us than a cultural place, rather a meeting place for Germans. It was arbitrarily destroyed."

Some of the deportees had to do hard labor in the war industries; others were drafted into the "work army." During the war a few managed to flee to Germany.

About half of these Russian Germans at the end of the war were returned to the Soviets by the Allies. They were to have been "repatriated," that is, relocated to their previous areas of residence. Upon arrival in the Soviet Union, they were brought to the special supervision settlements mentioned before.

The Germans' Life in Russia and Kazakhstan 1955-1957

After Adenauer's visit to Moscow in 1955, the situation of the Russian Germans began to improve. They were allowed to leave the special supervision settlements and no longer had to do forced labor.

Complete rehabilitation was, however, not yet fulfilled. Not only were they not allowed to return to their previous areas of settlement, they did not receive any reparations for their lost property. The reestablishment of the Volga Republic was then also ruled out. They had practically no chances to advance professionally or politically.

Most worked as unskilled laborers in industry and the service sector. In 1957 it was again possible for the Germans to attend school for the first time in sixteen years.

German was to be offered as a subject of study which, however, was often not possible due to a shortage of qualified teachers and materials. An increasing Russification of the Germans was the result.

1964-1985

A decree issued in 1964 brought about some relief for the German population in the U.S.S.R. The accusation that they had collaborated with the German occupying forces during World War II was dropped.

It became easier to advance professionally. Return to their previous areas of settlement was again denied, whereupon a Russian-German movement for autonomy originated. Their negotiations with state and party leadership concerning the reestablishment of the Volga Republic were unsuccessful.



Forest work in the "work army."



Forest work in the "work army."

Out of resignation many applied for immigration to the Federal Republic of Germany.

With the political upheavals in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev from 1985 to 1991, the support for the reestablishment of the Volga Republic was renewed. It is questionable if this demand is achievable.

The inhabitants of the former German areas of settlement struggle against a resettlement of Germans and against the establishment of a German Republic.

Now increasing nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism are the major problems of the Russian Germans.

In Kirghizia and Kazakhstan, regions in which most of the Russian Germans still live, they are under strong pressure to emigrate.

The present difficult political problems, the national conflicts in the Commonwealth of Independent States (C.I.S.) and the historical experiences of the Russian Germans cause many to file an application for immigration to Germany.

The New Life in the Federal Republic of Germany

With their immigration to the Federal Republic of Germany, their problems are not yet solved. They must overcome administrative, economic, and social obstacles.

Immediately upon their arrival they are brought to an intermediate camp, from where they are assigned to the states emergency lodgings. They live in most cramped space in temporary lodging complexes, inns, and other mass quarters.



Mennonite prayer house in Siberia.

here.

"Sometimes I pity the natives: they are materially rich, but are very lonely and unprotected loners. Otherwise everything here is much better.



Hopeful emigrants outside the German Embassy in Moscow.



German miner (female) in Karaganda, Kazakhstan.

After a certain provisional time, which can sometimes last years, the immigrants must search out an apartment themselves.

For most very large families it is a problem to find a suitable apartment that is large enough. The short apartment market does the rest.

Next to the housing problem the language is a problem for most of the Russian Germans. Because they rarely had the opportunity to speak German or even to learn it in school, they have to learn it

Mainly the professional circumstances are entirely different: they entail a different sense: one does not do drudge work in the name of the Party and Communism, one does one's work according to conscience, not according to slogans."

Also the world of work is completely new. Professional structure and training differ essentially from what they knew in the former Soviet Union.

Craftsmen and industrial workers have the best prospects to find work. It is different for those immigrants who previously worked in the service sector. The completely different and automated style of work and the lack of language proficiency present the immigrants with particular obstacles.

The German Russians came to Germany in order to live as



Russian Germans in their old homeland.

Germans among Germans

But they soon notice that the image that they had of Germany and which they perpetuated for generations, is no longer accurate.

The majority of Germans here, because of the experiences of the Second World War, are rather skeptical of a sense of German nationality.

The deep religiousness characteristic of the Russian Germans is also foreign to the people of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The assimilation process is for many

a long and difficult path...

"The desire to emigrate was always there: from generation to generation: one has no choice but to progress, to discuss aloud the history of one's ancestors, that was taboo in the USSR I hate the Soviet powers for the fact that my parents had such a difficult fate, although they were very intelligent and came from a very good family. In 1988 my family's dream was fulfilled: to be German and to be free."



Russian Germans in their old homeland.



In a temporary housing unit.