



Madison County Genealogical Society



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Notes from the AHSGR (American Historical Society of Germans from Russia) website.

When and why did Germans go to Russia?

Although Germany was not unified as a nation until 1871, the German principalities and kingdoms have historically shared an inextricable link with Russia. For centuries Germans have lived within the borders of Russia. The Germans were especially prominent in the Baltic States where they were the landowners. During the time of Peter the Great, many Germans were appointed to government advisory positions. However, under Elizabeth I, government positions were purged of their foreign, primarily German, officers.

On December 4, 1762, Catherine the Great issued a Manifesto inviting Western Europeans to settle in Russia. However, it was her second Manifesto of July 22, 1763, which offered transportation to Russia, religious and political autonomy, and land that incited many Western Europeans, mostly Germans, to migrate to Russia. This Manifesto was issued after the end of the Seven Years' War in which German peasants suffered many losses. Conditions among the German people were very unstable. At that time, the area that is now Germany was a conglomeration of more than 300 principalities and dukedoms which frequently changed hands, and therefore religions, as well. Many German peasants, seeking a way to practice their chosen religion and to improve their social standing, accepted the offer to settle in Russia.

The first wave of migration occurred in the Volga River region beginning in 1764. By the late 1760s some isolated settlements were already founded in South Russia. Hutterites first settled in Russia in 1770 and Mennonites began to settle in Russia by 1789. In 1803, Alexander I reissued the Manifesto of Catherine II, prompting another wave of migration, primarily into South Russia. By the mid-nineteenth century the areas of Volhynia, Crimea, and the Caucasus were being settled by Germans. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the first decade of this century, settlements were being founded by Germans in Siberia. At the end of the nineteenth century Russia had a population of approximately 1.8 million Germans

When and why did the German Russians leave Russia?

When Alexander II revoked the privileges offered to the Germans who had settled in Russia more than a century earlier, such as exemption from military service, the emigration of the Germans from Russia to the Americas began. 1872 was the beginning of a large wave of emigration of Germans from Russia as a result of the social conditions in Russia. There was a growing sentiment of hostility towards foreigners, particularly Germans, and a policy of Russification was adopted to make the populations in the empire more Russian. Later emigrants left Russia due to worsening living conditions, caused by war and famine.

Where did the German Russians settle in the Americas?

The first settlers came to the Midwest of the United States Illinois, Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas as this region resembled the areas they had left behind in Russia. These immigrants spread out to settle in Colorado, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, Oklahoma and Texas. Immigration to Canada, Brazil and Argentina quickly followed. Many who immigrated to South America had first attempted to settle in North America but were turned away due to disease.

Where is village xyz on a current map of Russia?

Many German villages no longer appear on present-day maps of Russia, as most were destroyed as a result of the 1941 deportation of the German populations in Russia to work camps in Siberia and Middle Asia. Those villages that were not destroyed either deteriorated with time or were resettled by non-German populations. Due to the many changes that have taken place in Russia this century, these villages seldom appear as they did when inhabited by their German populations.

However, we have a number of maps and map indexes which indicate the German settlements in Russia and their (former) location, as well as a number of maps for specific villages that depict the village layout, occasionally listing surnames of former inhabitants.

Why were there so many Germans in Poland?

People of Germanic origins lived throughout the regions which are now Poland and the Baltic States. A large part of Poland was once within Prussia's boundaries, and until the end of World War II, the eastern border of German lands extended much farther than this border today. Germans settled the former Polish area of Volhynia heavily from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, largely due to the Russian abolition of serfdom and the second Polish Insurrection.

What connections do German Russians have to Prussia?

Prussia was initially inhabited by Slavic tribes and later settled by Germanic tribes. These tribes in turn were conquered by the Teutonic Order, which brought Christianity to the region. Prussia at one time was incorporated into Poland but was never part of Russia. Prussia grew significantly in influence and power under the leadership of Frederick the Great in the eighteenth century. The regions enclosed by Prussia's boundaries under Frederick's rule included Brandenburg, Pomerania, Silesia, Danzig, West and East Prussia. The Prussian Prime Minister, Otto von Bismarck, implemented the unification of the German states following Prussia's victory in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, establishing the German Empire.

The Mennonites who settled in the Black Sea region of Russia emigrated from West Prussia. Following Germany's defeat in World War I, the Danzig Corridor of Prussia was granted to Poland, thus dividing Prussia. After World War II, most of the lands that were once within the borders of Prussia were granted to Poland.

Why didn't my grandparents talk about their German-Russian heritage?

During World War I and World War II there was a great deal of animosity towards German immigrants and German-speaking immigrants in this country. Many states passed legislation restricting the use of the German language as a measure to curtail the influence of their German populations. Either forcibly or voluntarily, many German-speaking citizens restricted or concealed their "Germanness." After World War II came the Red Scare, and although most of the German-Russian immigrants entered this country before the Bolshevik Revolution and implementation of Communism, the fact that they were from Russia was reason

enough for antagonism to be brought against them. Many German-Russian families found it easier to conceal their origins rather than endure the prejudices that a large part of society held towards their language, culture and country. As a result, many descendants of Germans from Russia are learning, late in life, of their heritage and origins.

Why did my relatives speak German instead of Russian?

One of the provisions of the Manifesto issued by Catherine the Great in 1763 was that the colonists would be able to maintain their German language and culture, as well as their own schools and churches. Thus, until the twentieth century, when an active policy of "Russification" was adopted, the German colonists spoke primarily, oftentimes exclusively, German. The dialect spoken by the various groups of Germans in Russia is an interesting subject as these dialects are very distinct from the dialects now spoken in Germany. When the German colonists immigrated to Russia, their language was not subject to the same influences as other German speakers and was more or less isolated, resulting in a dialect that has survived for more than 200 years.

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American Historical Society of Germans From Russia

Our Mission Statement

An international organization dedicated to the discovery, collection, preservation, and dissemination of information related to the history, cultural heritage and genealogy of Germanic Settlers in the Russian Empire and their descendants.

Headquarters hours, (631 D Street, Lincoln) including use of the Research Library, are Monday through Friday, 9:00 am to 4:00 pm.

Outside tours of the Village Museum items are available Monday through Friday at 2:00 pm, 1 April through 31 October.

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Important Dates in the History of German Russians

April 21, 1729 Sophia Augusta Frederica of Anhalt-Zerbst was born in Germany. She later ruled Russia under the name Catherine II. (Catherine the Great)

1756-1763 Seven Years' War. Important factor in bringing Germans to Lower Volga to establish colonies.

June 28, 1762 Catherine II ascends the throne of Russia

December 4, 1762 First Manifesto issued by Catherine II, inviting foreigners to come to Russia. It brought few results.

July 22, 1763 Catherine II issued second manifesto. It spelled out the conditions under which they could immigrate and granted special rights and privileges. Large numbers of German peasants accepted the invitation.

1764-1767 Founding of German colonies along the Lower Volga River.

1771-1774 Kirghiz Raids and Pugachev's rebellion, called the Pugachevshchina, ravished the Volga colonies.

1786 Mennonites from West Prussia began immigrating to Russia due to 1772 Partition of Poland, which threatened their military service exemption as conscientious objectors. Settlements were established primarily in the Taurida region of South Russia.

1793 Second Partition of Poland grants area of Volhynia to Russia. Polish landowners invite German peasants to lease land for cultivation.

November 6, 1796 Death of Catherine II at age sixty-seven.

1796-1801 Reign of Czar Paul I, son of Catherine II

1801-1825 Reign of Tsar Alexander I, the well beloved, grandson of Catherine II.

February 20, 1804 Alexander I modifies and reissues manifesto of Catherine II, inviting foreigners to settle in New Russia.

1825-1855 Reign of Tsar Nicholas I, Grandson of Catherine II, and brother of Alexander I.

1830 Polish Insurrection brings about immigration of many Polish Germans to the Bessarabia and Volga Region.

1855-1881 Reign of Tsar Alexander II, great-grandson of Catherine II, son of Nicholas I.

1860s Another wave of Germans immigrate to Volhynia prompted by 1861 abolishment of serfdom, leaving significant drain on work force. Second Polish Insurrection of 1863 brought more Polish Germans to Volhynia and other areas of Russia.

1871 Germany unified as a nation for first time. Created unease among European nations and Russia. Time of increased animosity towards foreigners in Russia due to Slavophile movement and growing nationalism.

June 4, 1871 Imperial Russian Government issues decree repealing the Manifestos of Catherine II and Alexander I, terminating the special privileges of the German colonists.

January 13, 1874 Imperial Russian Government issues second decree amending the previous one. This decree instituted compulsory military conscription for the German colonists. These decrees impelled thousands of German Russians to immigrate to North and South America

1881-1917 Reign of Tsar Nicholas II, descendent of Catherine II. He abdicated during World War I. On July 16, 1918, the Bolsheviks executed him and his family. Nicholas II was the last monarch to rule Russia.

July 28, 1914 Outbreak of World War I.

1915 Advancement of Eastern front. Volhynian Germans deported to Volga and South Russia.

December 13, 1916 Volga Germans ordered to be banished. This order was never carried out because of internal troubles in Russia.

November 7, 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia led by Vladimir Lenin. The beginning of the Communist regime. (October 25, 1917 by old-style Russian Calendar).

June 29, 1918 Lenin established Autonomous Volga German Workers' Commune, forerunner to the ASSR of the Volga Germans, founded in 1924.

1920-1923 1920-1923 Period of famine in Russia. Death by starvation in the Volga-German colonies alone estimated at 166,000 lives, one third of the population. American Relief Administration provided assistance.

January 1924 Autonomous Socialistic Soviet Republic of the Volga Germans established.

1928-1933 Second period of famine again claims many lives throughout Russia.

1928-1940 German farms and property expropriated by Soviet government. Germans forced into collective farms or migrate to the cities. Period of Stalinization.

September 1, 1939 Outbreak of World War II.

June 22, 1941 Nazi Germany invades Soviet Russia.

August 20, 1941 Beginning of the banishment and exile of the German populations in Russia. Crimean Germans deported.

August 28, 1941 Decree ordering deportation of Volga Germans to northeastern part of Soviet Union, Middle Asia, and Siberia.

October, 1941 Germans in the North and South Caucasus deported. St. Petersburg Germans also deported.

1991 Fall of Soviet Union.