

Wir Wollen Deutsche Bleiben
The Story of the Volga Germans
By George J. Walters, Halcyon House Publishers, 1982, 1993

“Wir wollen keine Russen sein,
Wir wollen Deutsche Bleiben!”
from *Die Heimkehr* by Dr. Peschke

Quote from the Preface: *World War II was a conflict of rare dimensions. ... In terms of magnitude, the worst atrocities of World War II were committed against civilian ethnic groups, those who were not part of mass society. Germany's actions against Jews and other non-Aryan groups during the Third Reich are well known. . . . Russia, too, engaged in genocide, yet she escaped censure for her actions and paid no reparations to surviving members of families unjustly banished, imprisoned or executed. . . . This is the story of the Volga Germans. It covers the time period from the time of Catherine II until banishment during World War II and beyond. . . . Many Volga Germans eventually settled in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, and other countries in Latin America. They settled in large numbers in Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota and several states in the Northwest. Their contributions to the areas in which they made their homes were enormous, yet history books similarly (as in Russia) devote scant space to the immigrants from the Volga region.*

Catherine the Great issued a decree in 1762 “which threw open unpopulated expanses of the empire to settlement by foreigners regardless of race or religious affiliation, ‘except for Jews.’” This First Manifesto met with no success because it was vague and unworkable. The next year she issued a Second Manifesto. “It promised all kinds of privileges, grants, and subsidies, as well as parcels of land with farming equipment.” A translation of this Manifesto of July 22, 1763, issued by Empress Catherine II on Foreign Colonization is printed in full in Walter’s book, pg. 45-48. During the next four years 8,000 families consisting of approximately 27,000 people left the various states of Europe. It was basically a German migration, but included French, Luxemburgers, Dutch and Slavs. Most settled in the lower Volga River region along the west bank (Bergseite) and east bank (Wiesenseite). Unlike the first Mennonite emigrants to Russia, these German emigrants did not send scouts ahead to verify the commissioners’ sales pitches. Thus they were more disillusioned and experienced even more difficult adjustment. “They suffered the final blow to their hopes when they were driven in wagons and oxcarts to the open steppes, the sites of their future homes. The country wasn’t at all similar to the areas of their origins, as the commissioners had told them. . . . They had been told houses, farm implements and livestock would be on hand, and the land marked out, all ready for them to occupy. None of this had been accomplished. . . . One colonist remarked, ‘We looked at each other with frightened expressions.’”

In Chapter 8, “The Villages,” the author seems to use villages and colonies interchangeably, whereas the Mennonites in Ukraine designated colonies to contain clusters of smaller villages. Also, the layout of the village was not decided by the Volga Germans themselves, but was determined by Russian officials, which I believe was not the case in Ukraine. From 1764 to 1766 one hundred and four colonies were established; 45 were on the west, mountain side, and 59 on the east, meadow side of the Volga. Lutherans founded 65 of the colonies and Catholics 38; a few were mixed, and few were Mennonite (I remember Peter J. Dyck saying he came from the Volga.) Population of each colony varied from about 200 to 1000. In all there were about 23,000 immigrants there. The first generation suffered through the trials of survival, and attacks by the Pugachevshchina. Pugachev, a Cossack, and his confederates from the eastern border lands, the Kalmuks and the Kirghiz sporadically wrought pillage and death on the villages. The immigrants were defenseless much like the Ukrainian Mennonites were when attacked by Machno more than a century later. The second generation became established settlers and faced fewer difficulties. The third generation in the Volga region became prosperous. But of course this was not to last.

By the time of World War I, the Volga Germans numbered approximately 400,000. The terrible famine of 1921-22 reduced their numbers by one-third, chiefly through starvation. The Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic of the Volga Germans contained 600,000 people, but only 379,000 were Germans when Germany invaded Russia in 1941. That same year marked the banishment of the Volga Germans. Many thousands had left Russia before, with large migrations beginning in the 1870s and continuing into the 20th Century. “By 1941 approximately 540,000 Volga immigrants from the Volga German area and their descendants lived in the United States.”

The year, 1871, was the high water mark for the Volga Germans. Agriculture formed the base of their economy. Progress in all areas of life was notable. They had a high birth rate. Their growth in numbers and prosperity facilitated the acquisition of more land and material goods. Education and cultural advancements were developing. But, according to Walter, "it was precisely this prosperity that led to their undoing." The Tsar's Codex of 1871 abrogated significant promises made by Catherine II in 1763, which afforded opportunities for settlement in the lower Volga, and which the Volga Germans made good on through sacrifice and hard work. From 1871 on progress was halted and the colonies started to decline. They were victims of the Russification of their German culture.

After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 the future looked bleak indeed. However, for a time in the 1920s Walters says there was "an interlude of peace and hope." The Tsar Russification policy had already ended as a result of the 1917 revolution. The Reds looked for support from the workers and peasants (proletariat) in their struggle against the capitalists and old ruling class (bourgeoisie). But the peasants balked. By 1921 Lenin concluded that the communist economic system was not working and scrapped Marxism temporarily for the New Economic Policy (NEP). Limited private enterprise was allowed and better times were restored until Lenin died in 1924. According to the author, this was "a real tragedy. While the Volga Germans were not admirers of Lenin or communism, the man who followed him was the greatest catastrophe that ever befell them and the entire world. The man who followed Lenin would destroy the Volga Germans as a people. His name was Josef Stalin."

The year 1914 marked the 150th anniversary of the Volga settlements in Russia. There were many celebrations. The "Guns of August" that same year brought sorrow and hardship to Volga Germans. "The sesquicentennial itself marked the beginning of the last quarter-century for the Volga Germans. When it was over there was no Volga German state and the people were either dead or dispersed over undesirable areas of the Soviet Union, and they no longer existed as an ethnic group. . . . The sesquicentennial year also marked the end of mass migrations from the colonies. Only a few managed to leave after the war (World War I). Almost all who tried were prevented from exiting Russia." If this is so, it is contrary to the history of Ukrainian Mennonites, thousands of whom exited Russia in the 1920s in their second mass migration from the colonies (the first such migration was in the 1870s.)

A table on p.124 gives Volga German population in selected years from 1763 (27,000) to 1941 (390,000); 1914 (600,000); 1920 (700,000). The author laments the failure of the Volga Germans to record their own history. An interesting inclusion is "The German Republic on the Volga – A German Visitor's View of the New Republic in 1924" by Adolf Grabowsky, translated by Adam Giesinger, pg. 191-199. He is favorably impressed by the German culture and history of Volga Germans, and faults his home country, Germany, for not assisting them more. "Yet this German Republic could still become the pride of the German people, culturally and economically, if only the fatherland would finally take an interest in these Germans." He discusses three cultural factors: the schools, churches and press. "In addition to the school, the church is extremely important for the preservation of German nationality. Approximately two-thirds of the Volga Germans are Protestant, the rest Roman Catholic. Grabowsky compares these Germans to Volga Mennonites: *"Economically more advanced than the typical German villages are the Mennonite villages in the Canton Kukkus. The Mennonites, who came to the Volga only about 60 years ago, stand out economically everywhere. They have never known the mir system, have individual ownership and therefore give their land better attention. They raise livestock successfully. Even the appearance of their villages is better. While other German villages are aesthetically joyless, with no trees or gardens, one sees green trees and flowers in Mennonite Villages. Intellectually, however, the Mennonites, like the rest, have failed to make any contribution. It is noteworthy that not one really outstanding man has emerged from the ranks of the Volga Germans. . . . Here we reach the sorest point: The Volga Germans have an honorable history, but they lack the energy to perform deeds beyond the ordinary."* He then speculates on possible reasons for this.

This book includes fine b and w photos, helpful maps, charts, and a wealth of information called "Notes" at the end of the book. Included is a list of all Volga German colonies with their religion identified, a list of all the surnames of the Volga German villages, and locations of Volga German settlements in North America.

Before reading this book I was mostly ignorant of the history of Volga Germans. There are many parallels to the history of Russian Mennonites, but as I have pointed out there are some differences as well. The Volga Germans were greater in numbers and lived in a supposedly "Autonomous Republic" in the 20th Century. Even in the pre-Soviet era it seems their villages may have been less autonomous than were the villages of Ukrainian Mennonites.

