Reise:
The Emigration of the Germans to the Russian Empire

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Although they tend to be ignored by persons other than their descendants, the story of the Germans from Russia is nevertheless a significant one. The Germans from Russia were a part of a great emigration movement from Germany though they went east instead of west to America like their better known cousins. The descendants of the Germans from Russia today have a unique sense of identity as is evinced by the many historical societies they have set up in America and their continued transmission of traditions and culture. In Russia, the German colonists were isolated in a foreign land and so they created a little Germany around them and did the same when they moved to the United States, or at least that is what they like to believe. There is evidence, however, that the Germans in the Russian Empire did not hold themselves completely separate as they exchanged culture and probably some genes with the people native to their new home. A study of the German-Russians provokes questions concerning such cultural interaction as well as many others including why this mass movement took place and what became of the Germans in Russia.

The term 'Germans from Russia' is somewhat misleading as relatively few Germans settled within the modern boarders of Russia. Instead the distinct areas of German settlement were the Volga region, the Volhynia region, southern Ukraine, the Crimea, Bessarabia and the Caucasus. The Volga Germans settled on both sides of the Volga river around the town of Saratov.\footnote{Karl Stumpp, \textit{The German-Russians: two centuries of pioneering}, trans. Joseph S. Height (New York: Atlantic Forum, 1971). Stumpp includes an excellent map inside the front cover of this book which shows areas of origin, settlement areas, and the routes taken between them. This information is dealt with elsewhere and in other sources, but Stumpp's map brings it all together quite well. The monolingual researcher should be warned that the map and its key are in German but not German script.} The Volhynia region was once a border land siting astride the border between the Ukraine in the Russian Empire and Poland.\footnote{Ibid., 14. This area is not on the front cover map because its settlement was not part of the pattern of migration at the invitation of the Russian Czars. However, Stumpp does include an excellent map of this area on page 14 and one can discern the modern day location of the Volhynia from that by comparing it to any modern political map.} Nowadays, the whole of the Volhynia region is inside Ukraine, west of Kiev. The southern Ukraine refers to a relatively large region encompassing colonies from the Dniester river west of Odessa to the
tributary to the area just off the north-west bank of the Azov Sea. The Crimea refers to the Crimean peninsula which is connected by a slender land bridge to main land Ukraine but is otherwise surrounded by the Black and Azov seas. Finally, Bessarabia is the region between the Dniester river and the Prut river with the Danube river as the southern border. Nowadays, Bessarabia is the modern state of Moldova. The Caucasus region lies between the Black and Caspian seas and the German settlements they lay mostly on either bank of the Kura river near the city of Tiflis. A few scattered colonies did exist outside of these main regions, but they were small and isolated.

The climate of the Black Sea region was not exactly what the German colonists were used to. The settlers complained most of the constant wind. A Swiss immigrant known only as J. B. wrote home that: "There are seldom two or three days without a blowing wind. It often blows across the Black Sea in this direction so strong and so cold that one wouldn't think of traveling even a distance of only an hour without a fur coat. . . a strong wine blows almost all the time in the summer as well, but if this were not so, the Germans wouldn't be able to endure the heat." Otherwise the climate was fairly warm with temperatures ranging from about -4°F Fahrenheit to as much as 122°F in Odessa. Obviously the idea that the Germans from Russia chose North Dakota as their new home because the climate was similar is inaccurate except for the wind.

Although a number of Germans emigrated to Russian cities in previous decades and centuries, the beginning of the saga of the German-Russians can be dated July 22, 1763 with Czarina Catherine

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4 Ibid., 14-15. Keller details all the rivers of the region but only has a reprint of Stumpp's map.

5 Stumpp, *The German-Russians*, cover. Note: The river Kura and the Town Tiflis are German names and may be otherwise called now.

6 Freidrich Fiechtner, ed, *Fateful Danube Journey: a true account of an emigration to Russia 1816-1817*, trans. Theodore C. Wenzlaff. (Bismarck: North Dakota Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1973), 45. This book is a translated and footnoted version of a collection of three long letters written by a Swiss immigrant known only as J.B. which were published in Germany in an attempt to discourage emigration to Russia.

7 Keller, *German Colonies* v.1, 19.
The Russian government sought to create a barrier between Russia proper and the marauding tribes left over from the Mongol hoards who were continually attacking the Volga region. There was minimal response to Cathrine's first call for immigrants made on December 12, 1762, but the July 22, 1763 manifesto was much more successful, in part because the Seven Year's War had ended in 1763. The manifesto was published in German but officially aimed at all Europe. Catherine offered potential immigrants many incentives such as as follows: free land; freedom of religion, though not freedom to convert anyone besides Muslims; thirty years of tax exemption for settlers in new areas an five for settlers in preexisting cities; loans for setting up new enterprises; money for the purchase of tools of their trade; self-government though settlers had to abide by Russian laws; duty-free import of belongings and on three-hundred rubles worth of goods for sale if the settlers stayed in Russia for ten years or more; freedom from military service forever and from other service after their period of tax exemption; free food and transportation from the Russian border to wherever they planed to settle; a ten year exemption from export taxes for industrialists; and money for transportation costs from their homes to the Russian border. All of this was offered to those who would emigrate to Russia and their descendants provided they conceded to make an oath of loyalty to Russia.

If the first wave colonists who answered Cathrine the Great's call, the Volga region colonists, thought that Cathrine's offer was to good to be true, they were right. Although promised to be allowed to settle anywhere in the Russian Empire, Germans who did not state their destination as the Volga region were mired in reams of red tape in St. Petersburg, usually until the changed their minds and

8 Karl Stumpp, *The Emigration from Germany to Russia in the Years 1763-1862* (Lincoln, Nebraska: The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1973), 15.
9 Ibid., 24.
headed to the Volga. As a result, St Petersburg, the port of entry for the German settlers, was soon full of Germans waiting to be allowed to leave that were eventually settled into villages outside the city that had early been formed by Germans invited in by Peter the Great. It was around this time that the German colonists were given a new name by the rank and file of their Russian hosts, 'Nyemtzy,' which originally came from a word meaning 'dumb' and now means only 'German.' This may have had as much or more to do with the Germans' inability to speak Russian as it did with the colonists perceived stupidity. Semantics can be complicated and difficult to unravel.

From St. Petersburg, the Volga Germans traveled by one of two routes to their new homes, depending on whether they settled north or south of the city of Saratov. The northern route involved traveling east south-east overland from St. Petersburg to the northern tip of the Volga river and then heading down it until they reached the colonies. The second, more southern, route was virtually entirely by land, heading through the towns of Novgorod, Tver, Moscow, Ryazan and Penza.

Considering the dissatisfaction and deprivation provided by the Seven Year's War, it is easy to see why Germans flocked to the call of Cathrine the Great, who after all was a German herself. Also people from Hesse were particularly eager to emigrate because they were subject to being forced into military service and then sent as far away as America by Frederick II so that he could fill his coffers with the money such arrangements brought in while their homeland was devastated by the Seven Year's War. Under Cathrine's stipulations, emigrants did not necessarily need the resources generally required for emigration and so the poor peasant had a chance for a new life and a farm all his own. Besides military related reasons, two push factors were involved in persuading Germans to head for Russia that


12 Stumpp, *The German-Russians,* cover. Stumpp's map shows these routes quite well though the names of the cities are in German. The Russian city names detailed above were translated by this writer with the help of a modern map of Russia. The German names are Saratow, Nowgorod, Twer, Moskau, Rjasan and Penza.
involved land. It was the practice in parts of Germany for a father to divide his land evenly among his sons. The plots of land on which a family was expected to subsist therefore grew smaller and smaller. The prospects of large tracts of land in the Volga region was a great influence; unfortunately, the settlers then used the same practice in their new home and had the same problems. The other land related push factor was the inability of the Mennonites to acquire new land, both due to local practices and due to the Mennonite Edict of 1789, which made the acquisition of land by Mennonites illegal.

The Mennonites made up the second wave of Germans to go to Russia from about 1789-1809. Fittingly, the Mennonite migration shared aspects of both the Volga migration and the 1804 migration. Like the Volga settlers, the Mennonite migration began under the Manifesto of Catherine the Great though it finished under the Rescript of Alexander I. Although some Mennonites settled in the Volga region, however, the destination of most of the Mennonites was more alike to that of the Black Sea Germans.

Besides the land issue, the major push factor for the Mennonites was that they were religiously committed to non-violence. The assurance against forced military service for perpetuity in Catherine the Great's Manifesto was therefore extremely attractive to the Mennonites. The Mennonites came from the area around Danzig in Prussia and traveled thence, primarily by land, to enter Russia at the city of Riga in modern day Latvia. From there they moved south-east and into three areas: Khortitza, Taurida (Halbstadt district,) and later in the district of Samara with Khortitza becoming home to about four-hundred families, Taurida to 1,049 families and Samara to 438 families.

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14 Ibid., 166.
16 Stumpp, *Emigration*, 166-167. The reason the later two numbers are so precise when compared with the first is probably because after Alexander I's rescript, German immigrants were only allowed to emigrate in family groups of particular definition which will be discussed later. Khortiza is also spelled Chortitza, and Taurida is als spelled Taurien.
Alexander III Russification policy, beginning in 1871, took away the exemption of the German-Russians from involuntary military service, among other privileges. As can be imagined, this caused a great uproar, about one-third of the Mennonites living in Russia left for the New World between 1874 and 1880 despite a May 14, 1875 law which gave the Mennonites special permission to abstain from military service. Nevertheless, 65,907 Mennonites remained in Russia in 1897.

The third, and by far the largest, wave of German emigration to the Russian Empire followed Czar Alexander I's rescript of February 20, 1804. Essentially, the Russian government complained of the quality of German emigrants and this rescript was intended to address these problems. The new restrictions were as follows: potential immigrants must prove that they had at least three-hundred Gulden in cash or goods; they had to be in families, preferably consisting of more than just husband and wife; express amounts of free land, namely sixty dessiatines per family except in the Crimea, were stipulated; travel money once inside the Russian Empire was to be determined precisely at ten kopecks per adult per day and five kopecks per child per day; after arriving at their new home settlers could receive five to ten kopecks per day, but this money had to be paid back; emigrants could leave whenever they wanted as long as they paid off their debt to the Russian government plus taxes for three years; emigration was not to exceed two-hundred families per annum; and immigrants had to be able to produce papers testifying as to their good character. The document also affirmed and clarified the rights and privileges of the German colonists as detailed by Cathrine's Manifesto.

18 Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 203.
20 Stumpp, *Emigration*, 166-499. Stumpp takes up 49 pages for his list of emigrants to the Volga region, 38 for Mennonites and 295 for the Black Sea Germans.
21 Height, *Memories of the Black Sea Germans*, 8-13. Here is printed professor Height's translation of the original document written by the Russian minister of the interior, Count Viktor Kotschubei, and signed by the aforesaid, two other civil servants and Alexander I's "So be it."
This third wave lasted from 1804 until about 1862 with emigration especially high in the first six years. A major reason for this exodus from Germany was the invasion of south-west Germany by Napoleon which was sometimes followed by forced conscription into military service and, in the case of Alsace, incorporation into France.\textsuperscript{22} Emigration from Württemberg in the years 1816, 1817 and 1818 was additionally influenced by a religious movement there.\textsuperscript{23} These people believed that the second coming of Christ was set for 1836 on Mount Zion and so desired to be as close as possible when it happened, namely, in the South Caucasus region.\textsuperscript{24}

There were two main routes to South Russia: one brought people into the Russian Empire through Lemberg\textsuperscript{25} or Radzivilov\textsuperscript{26} and the other involved bringing settlers in through Galatz (Galati) or Ismail.\textsuperscript{27} In the first route, settlers traveled from their homelands to gather into large caravans at Warsaw, Krakow, Vienna, or Budapest from which they entered Russia through Lemberg or Radzivilov and then branched out again to Kischinjew ((Chisinau or Kishinev) Bessarabia,) Odessa or Kherson from which they headed to their final destinations. This route was almost entirely overland, depending on where they started off from.\textsuperscript{28}

The second route was on the Danube river from Ulm through Vienna, all the way until nearly the Black Sea and then by land to their final destination. This route is much better documented; a number of letters have been published that were written about the journey. This could be because of

\textsuperscript{22} Stump, \textit{Emigration}, 25.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{24} Fiechtner, \textit{Fateful Danube Journey}, introduction.

\textsuperscript{25} Stumpp, \textit{The German-Russians}, cover.

\textsuperscript{26} John Philipps, \textit{The Tragedy of the Soviet Germans: a story of survival} (Privately printed, 1983), 11.

\textsuperscript{27} Stumpp, \textit{The German-Russians}, cover.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
the lengthy post-Turkish land quarantine required before entering Russia. One published letter of the journey is the one by J.B., an otherwise anonymous Swiss baker who was headed for the Caucasus for the second coming of Christ with his parents, wife and son.  

J.B.'s letter was published, in Germany in 1818, to discourage emigration as is clearly indicated in the dramatic preface written by an unknown publisher. The publisher refers to the emigrants as being in "want of judgment" and declares that "they must truly suffer from insanity." Ironically, J.B.'s advice to those left behind differs sharply from that of the publisher. In fact, J.B.'s father, also called J.B., wrote in a second letter that accompanied the first that "He who suffers on account of bodily wants would do well to move to Russia for there is a rich livelihood for everyone here, easy to obtain, and with room enough for many thousands yet." J.B.'s father also assures his brother that he will not have to go through the same trials as he had if he only takes to land route instead of the Danube, good advice that does not really further the publisher's cause. Indeed, the publisher's purpose would have been better served if he had published only the part of the first letter that describes the journey to the Black Sea region and had left off everything else.

The first part of the first letter is indeed enough to give a potential emigrant pause. All the members of J.B.'s family are described as very ill at one point and several were ill for most of the journey. The first death in the family was that of J.B.'s son, Johannes, who died in the quarantine camp at Ismail. The trouble with the river route was that it passed through Turkish lands and the Russian


30 Ibid., xv, xvi.

31 Ibid., 71.

32 Ibid., 24. It seems possible that, as the son's name was Johannes, J.B. was also Johannes and probably J.B. senior as well. Certain names were often kept in the family. In the Renner genealogy
officials insisted that immigrants undergo a lengthy quarantine because they were concerned about
diseases that the immigrants could contract there and bring into Russia, apparently with good reason as
1,328 emigrants were buried at Ismail.  

J.B. describes his family's forty-nine day stay at Ismail beginning with examinations by doctors
employed by the Czar who sent the sick to stay in a hospital, J.B. and Johannes in this case, while the
others slept in their tent and visited the sick ones in the hospital with permission. The supposedly well
ones were also on and off victims of a fever that would not let them leave their beds. J.B. refers to one
of the sicknesses going around the camps as *herzgesperr*, which the translator suggests might be
angina pectoris. J.B. attributed Johannes' demise to the Danube river water that he drank without
vinegar on the sly because of the great thirst caused by his illness. The quarantine does not seem to
have been a great success because J.B. and his family, with the exception of the dead and buried
Johannes, were still somewhat sick to the point that J.B.'s mother died en route to the colony of
Marienthal where they were put up for the winter by a German farmer at low rent. Once everyone was
well again, J.B. began to describe the Black Sea region as a kind of paradise on earth where a man
could get rich quickly if he just put in a little effort. The last that we hear from J.B., he and his family
have decided to stay in the Black Sea region until God indicates otherwise because their bakery
business is very successful due to a lack of other sources of white bread for the innkeepers and wealthy

book a relative assembled, the Renner's seem bound and determined to have a Johannes and a Matthias
is every generation even though as a result some times a single family had three sons named Johannes
with each subsequent Johannes born after his predecessor's demise, which also says much about the
child mortality rates among the German-Russians.


34 Fiechtner, 22. It seems possible that the quarantine of J.B.'s family was extended due to
sickness as other quarantine durations can be found elsewhere.
The Germans from Russia tend to view themselves as entirely separate from the peoples who surrounded them or even their counterparts of a different religion, Lutheran or Catholic. In fact, for a people who had emigrated hundreds of miles, the Germans from Russia could be remarkably adverse to change. A good example of this trait can be seen in the way they tended to emigrate en mass. One large group of emigrants moved from Kulm, Bessarabia, to Kulm, South Dakota and then to Kulm, North Dakota.\(^{36}\) It is probably the German-Russian feeling of uniqueness that has resulted in so many heritage societies across America.\(^{37}\) Perhaps the idea of the Germans from Russia as decidedly not Russian can be seen in what they call themselves. The term 'Germans from Russia' implies a separation from actually being Russian in a way that the less-liked 'German-Russians,' though the later is easier to deal with grammatically. The Volga Germans refer to themselves as just that which again emphasizes that they are German rather than their location. 'Black Sea Germans' has the same effect. It can not realistically be denied, however, that the Germans from Russia are not entirely German in culture, language or necessarily blood either. In this way the Germans from Russia are the result of interaction with the peoples around them, Russian and Ukrainian, rather than entirely separate.

J.B., in his slight disgust over the Germans, wrote that "Instead of the Russians being enlightened and cultivated by the Germans," the intent of the Czars, "the Germans more often imitate the Russians."\(^{38}\) When J.B. writes this he is referring to the superstitions of the Germans, even including fortune telling. One superstitious practice of the Germans from Russia was the chanting of

\(^{35}\) Ibid. J.B.'s letters make for interesting reading, and he goes on to describe conditions and prices in more detail than can be described here.

\(^{36}\) Sallet, 26.

\(^{37}\) See the bibliography for examples.

\(^{38}\) Fiechtner, 58-59. I am, as an example not provided by J.B., descended from a locally well known practitioner in the art of the divining rod.
verses as a part of healing.\textsuperscript{39} As even J.B. admits, doctors were expensive and not to be called upon lightly. Instead, mother's and grandmother's were usually the doctors. Aside from any chants, the folk remedies of the Germans from Russia were actually quite effective. One famous remedy for sore throat was a hot beverage made by mixing hot water, brandy, lemon juice, honey and ginger.\textsuperscript{40} It is, however, difficult to say how much of the German-Russian superstition came from their neighbors and how much came from Germany. It is more indicative of Russian and Ukrainian influence to look at such cultural indicators as food and language.

The difference and similarities of Russian and Ukrainian influence among the Volga and Black Sea Germans, respectively, can be illustrated by a study of halupsi. Halupsi are known in English as 'pigs in the blanket' and consist of meat (traditionally ham but beef could also be used,) rice and onions rolled up in boiled cabbage leaves. The Volga Germans learned their halupsi recipes from the Russians and called it goluptsi\textsuperscript{42} from the Russian golubitsy.\textsuperscript{42} Black Sea Germans, on the otherhand, learned it from Ukrainian haluptsi makers and called it halupsi or halupsa.\textsuperscript{43} The difference but relation of the Russian and Ukrainian languages can be seen here as well as the way in which the Germans incorporated it into their own cultural recipe books. One dish that Germans from Russia, Russians and Ukrainians could enjoy under the same name was borscht.\textsuperscript{44} There are many other recipes shared

\textsuperscript{40} I have used this remedy, minus the brandy, myself. I have personally benefited from many German from Russia folk remedies so they must work.
\textsuperscript{42} Arends, 99.
\textsuperscript{43} Arends, 214. The Ukrainian spelling came from a *Minot Daily News* article.
\textsuperscript{44} Kloberdanz, Arends, and any given western Dakota cookbook all agree on the spelling and I
among the Germans from Russian, Russians and Ukrainians such as blini that can also be found and enjoyed by the connoisseur.

The Germans from Russia spoke a dialect that was noticeably different from High German and with the addition of a number of Russian and Ukrainian loan words. Loan words aside, the student of High German will still be able to find distinct dialectal differences between High German and German-Russian. A simple example that can easily be found in German-Russian texts is the substitution of the German-Russian nit for the High German nicht. The grammar and conjugation of German-Russian is also simpler than the complex rules of High German and capitalization is not so emphasized.

Following are two sentences given first in the German-Russian dialect, second in High German, and third in English:

Unser bigel sind nit so hoch, eure side viel Hoeher.
Unsere Berge sind nicht sehr hoch, die euren sind viel hoeher.
Our mountains are not so high, yours are much higher.

Das Wort kommt vom herz.
Das Wort kam ihm vom Herzen.
The words came from his heart.

The latter sentence was chosen to display how German-Russian grammar is easier than High German and the former to show some differences in actual words. There are many Russian loan words, but among the most common are words for units of measurement or currency and such words as: babushka

was unable to find a different spelling for Russian and Ukrainian as transcribed into western script.

45 Here we deal with common written German-Russian. There are also different German-Russian dialects compounded both by where they settled in the Russian Empire and from whence they came in Germany. My grandmother was once thrown down a flight of stairs because she was not Swabian and so somehow inferior, according to her cousin.

46 Arend, 70.

47 Arends., 88.
48 Ibid., 89.
German-Russian is a dying language. Here in America, parents no longer teach it to their children beyond perhaps a few sayings and songs, and in Russia, German was periodically banned, most recently from 1941 to 1956, and so German-Russian has suffered with twenty-five percent of German-Russians living in the Soviet Union in 1959 giving Russian as their mother-tongue.

Perhaps the most indelible evidence of German-Russian interaction with their neighbors is intermarriage. It should be pointed out that German-Russian elders even today do not entirely approve of their offspring marrying outside the faith much less would they approve of intermarriage with Russians or Ukrainians, but that does not mean it did not happen. Because this is a somewhat taboo topic, the most and best evidence to be found is in the Soviet definitions of who was and was not a German when preparing to deport the Germans from the western part of the Soviet Union just prior to the invasion of the Nazi's in World War Two. It was decreed that Russian wives of German colonists could choose to abandon their families and remain in their villages or to go with their German families into exile while German wives of Russians were not deported. If their was no intermarriage, there would be no need for any such regulations. That the Germans in Russia went through cultural exchanges with the Russians and Ukrainians is then certain.

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49 Kloberdanz 114-117. These were chosen because they were non-food-related terms recognized by my grandmother.

50 I grew up knowing a few sayings, *O Tannenbaum* and *Stille Nacht*, much more than most, probably because I showed an interest.


52 Apparently a Missouri Synod Lutheran marrying a Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Synod Lutheran counts as intermarriage, or at least did in 1950.

53 Koch, 286.
As is referred to above, the fate of German-Russians who did not emigrate elsewhere in the late Nineteenth or early Twentieth Centuries but remained in the Russian Empire were subjected to great hardship. Their special privileges were taken away in the late Nineteenth Century\textsuperscript{54} and the Twentieth Century brought the Russian Revolution which resulted in the persecution on the Kulaks, collectivization and ultimately deportation in 1941 as Hitler's troops advanced into the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{55} Those who could not be deported before the Nazi's arrived were deported west when the German Army retreated and then later forcibly returned to the Soviet Union where they were sent to the gulags until pardoned and repatriated by Khrushchev in 1955.\textsuperscript{56} The decline of German-Russian culture in the United States is due to attrition, but the decline of German-Russian culture in the Soviet Union was due to forced suppression.

Perhaps the German-Russian idea of a separate identity was a reaction to early attempts to suppress their cultural identity, but it is more than likely that the Germans from Russia sought to keep themselves separate because of the natural human wariness towards those who are at all different. In any event, the Germans from Russia consider themselves to be a distinctive group and celebrate their heritage through such entities as the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia and others. One quality that the writers and translators whose names appear in the bibliography have in common is that they are descendants of Germans from Russia or married to descendants of Germans from Russia. It is German-Russians throughout the world that are concerned with German-Russian heritage and history even though the Germans from Russia represent important historical trends of migration.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 198-199.
\textsuperscript{55} John Philipps, \textit{The Tragedy of the Soviet Germans: A Story of Survival} (privately printed, 1983)
\textsuperscript{56} Koch, 289.
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