

The German-Russians

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By George Kraft

The history of the German-Russians is not too well understood in the USA. We all remember being referred to as Russians, until the USA became allies with the USSR against Germany during World War II, then suddenly we became Germans. Most foreign-born Americans still have a home county to return to, such as: Western European countries, the Orient, and the Mediterranean countries (Italy and Sicily). The German-Russians have no home country to call their own. Twice within one century these German people were forced to take to the road. First, from Germany to Russia, and later to North and South America. The treatment received by the German colonists by their Russian hosts was not unlike the treatment that the Japanese-Americans received in the USA during the months following the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Very little is written about the settlement of the Germans in the Ukraine; what had been published by these great people was systematically destroyed by the Communists following World War II. The re-creation of the history of the German-Russians has been verbal, passed down to our generation hoping that some of us would record it.

With my limited ability and historical knowledge, I have attempted here to write a brief biography of our dear parents, least we forget even their struggle in providing us this life, in spite of almost insurmountable obstacles through many periods of their existence.

In the history of man kind, why have segments of society broken away from their homeland to settle in other lands, sometimes thousands of miles away? For example, why did the Pilgrims leave England to settle on the bleak and barren coast of what later became New England? Our American history textbooks teach us that the pilgrims were a religious sect, known as the Separatists in England because they had separated from the Church of England. They met and worshiped secretly for which they were fined for nonattendance at church, and many too, were thrown in jail, whipped, and fined for their practices. To escape persecution, they fled first to Holland, later migrating to America, crossing the Atlantic Ocean in the *Mayflower* in 1620. This little band of fearless zealots became the Pilgrim Fathers of history, revered for their courage and resoluteness in the face of overwhelming odds.

In the case of the Germans who migrated to Russia in the 18th and 19th centuries, what impelling reasons caused them to leave their native country to settle in Russia? And why would many of their number later leave Russia to settle in North and South America? It has been suggested that the only reason for the migrations of the German-Russians was simply to avoid military service. Valid as that reason may seem, it is an oversimplification. The reasons were more complex, and the reasons were different for different Germans, depending in some cases on factors of time and place.

As the first migration of colonists from Germany to Russia occurred from 1764 to 1768, it is logical to examine first the reasons for that migration. Important to this first migration was the fact that Catherine the Great became Empress of Russia in 1762. Though she had previously renounced her German nationality and German Lutheran religion when she married the Russian Grand Duke, she still admired her German countrymen for their industry, thrift, and perseverance. Hoping to settle German colonists along the Volga River in Central Russia in order to develop that region as well as to erect a bulwark against the ravages of the nomadic semi-savage tribes of Kirghiz, Bashkirs, Tatars, and Kalmicks roving along the border there, Catherine issued the manifesto in December of 1762, only five months after becoming empress, inviting Germans and other foreigners to settle in Russia. As the manifesto contained few inducements and because the Seven Years' War was still raging in Europe, there was no response to the invitation.

As a result of all this fighting, much of Germany lay in ruins. Fields were waste, commerce and industry suffered heavily, and extreme poverty was the lot of the common man. Only the nobility lived in luxury at the expense of their heavily-taxed subjects. Small wonder that many Germans entertained thoughts of emigration, and many came to America at that time. Then came Catherine's attractive invitation and thousands turned their faces toward the East -- to Russia. The result was that of 27,000 persons, mostly from Hesse, migrated to the Volga River region and the Petersburg District from 1764 through 1767. The alarmed German states halted further emigration in 1768.

Thus we can see that the chief reasons for the first mass migration of Germans to Russia were both political and economic, largely the result of the Seven Years War. Politically, the emigrants had been suppressed by the ruling nobility, and they had been drafted into the military service to serve both at home and abroad in a bloody war about which they knew nothing. The words of the poet applied to them with particular aptness: "Theirs is not to reason why, Their but to do and die." (Tennyson--- "The Charge of the Light Brigade")

Their economic distress was evidenced by their ravished fields, their ruined homes, their burdensome taxes, and their extreme impoverishment. The future appeared only bleak to them where as emigration to Russia offered an opportunity at least to better their living conditions. They had little to lose while offered a chance for a new and better life.

Again, it can be said that political and economic reasons occasioned the mass migration of Germans to Russia, this time to the Black Sea area, drawn there by the generous terms offered to colonists and impelled by the war-torn economy at home.

Suddenly, in the midst of all their prosperity and isolation, the world of the German colonists was turned upside down. On June 4th, 1871, Czar Alexander I, abolished the special status of the colonists, reducing them to the level of the Russian peasants. At the same time, the colonists were greatly disturbed and agitated by rumors that compulsory military service for all classes of the population was about to be introduced. This struck terror in the hearts of all for service as a common soldier at that time had to serve for 25

years under a cruel discipline, and if he survived; he came home a broken man.

In conclusion, reflecting on the migrations of the Germans, first to Russia and then to the New World, one can sense that a search for freedom was basic to all their wandering. We know that they had little freedom in Germany; and so they sought it in Russia. There, in Russia, living their lives in isolation from the rest of the world, while occupied in converting the virgin barren steepes into fruitful farmland, they had freedom for a time. But when that freedom was threatened in Russia, despite the good life they had made for themselves, they were ready to migrate thousands of miles across an ocean to a new land, again in search of freedom. In the words of Emerson, one of America's earlier poets:

"For what avail the plow or sail,
Or land or life, if freedom fails"

June 4th, 1871, abolishing the Fuersorgekomite of the Black Sea colonies into the improve system of local government, there no longer was an doubt. There was no mistaking that the colonists had lost their special political status and were now reduced to the level of the Russian peasant. Understandably, they were dismayed, angry, and worried. Though the decree said nothing about losing their freedom from military service, they knew full and well that if all their other rights and privileges could be abolished thus autocratically, so too could their exemption from military service in the Russian army, a fate at the time believed to be equal almost to that of death.