



Book Review, by Ken Vogele, Black Hills Chapter, SD

“The German Colonies in Volhynia: The Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century”

By Mykhailo Kostyuk, PhD, Translated by Inna
Stryukova, Edited by Richard Benert

This book presents the most definitive history of the Volhynian Germans to date. Its author, Mykhailo Kostyuk, is Ukrainian. He has researched Volhynian minorities, especially Germans, since 1993 and has over 100 scholarly articles to his credit. Much of his information comes from a comprehensive study of vast Ukrainian archives that had been ignored by Soviet historians because of their overriding anti-German bias.

Volhynia was a gubernia (province) in the Russian Empire, today part of northwestern Ukraine. Colonization along the Volga, in South Russia, and in Bessarabia had been by invitation and with the support of the Tsarist government. Settlers to Volhynia came on their own. The bulk of settlement occurred between the abolition of



serfdom in 1861 and 1890. Most were poor, landless peasants whose families had earlier immigrated from German speaking states to the Vistula River area of what is today Poland. Volhynia was rural, sparsely settled, forested and swampy, perfect for Germans from the Vistula lowlands who were experts at developing and farming marshy land. By 1908, almost 210,000 Germans lived in Volhynia. They made up 5.69% of the population, owned over 10% of the land, and lived in at least 800 colonies.

Almost all Volhynian Germans were farmers, even those who lived in towns and cities. Surprisingly, most colonies were not compact villages as elsewhere in Russia but khutor type villages where colonies consisted of a group of individual farm families living separately on their own parcels, not unlike homesteaders in the United States. About two thirds of farmers owned their land. German farmers were about twice as efficient as local peasants whose activity was controlled on the village level. Three fifths of German farmers owned an average of 20 desyatinas (54 acres) in 1885, but the remainder owned more, often much more.

Settlers were self-sufficient, making and repairing most of what they needed. Thus, there were relatively few craftsmen in the colonies. Early on, women in most of these families spun wool and wove broadcloth as a sidelight. In 1897, only about 20% of Germans were not involved in farming. Of those, only a few percent lived in cities. Germans made pottery, worked in the lumber industry and made paper, were blacksmiths and millers of oil or flour, manufactured carts and farm equipment, brewed beer, distilled spirits, administered landowners' estates, among other things. Most were workers, but some Germans owned the enterprises. German carts and horses were exceptional, so many worked at freighting.

Kostiuk describes in detail the average German farmstead including the farmhouse and all the outbuildings. Neighbors came together to help build homes. Once the framing was completed, someone climbed up and fastened a green branch to the peak of the roof as a sign to the owner to treat all to a shot of vodka. Where water was close to the surface, an above-ground cellar was built. Religious sayings and photographs were common in homes. New arrivals from Prussia might have pictures of Chancellor Bismarck and the Prussian Emperor on their walls. These could be misinterpreted by authorities as signs of subversion despite their owners' loyalty to the Tsar.

Most khutors were small, between fifteen and twenty-five families. Colonists usually settled their own disputes rather than taking them to government officials. Ukrainian peasants tended to respect the Germans, but there was also tension since Germans were utilizing land that the locals felt was rightly theirs. Families were large, but child mortality was also high, averaging 15% in the first year with another 8% in the next four years. Three percent of children were illegitimate. In 1900, the most common boys' names were August and Adolf, with Alvina and Bertha for girls.

Almost all Volhynian Germans were protestants, 95% of whom were Lutherans. Churches were found mostly in population centers. Khutors and villages had prayer houses which also served as schools and meeting centers. School was taught by the

same man who officiated at religious services, the so-called *Küster*. Kids went to school from age seven through fifteen, with instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion, the main goal being to prepare children for confirmation. The average number of students per teacher was 43 in 1911. Instruction was generally poor, but still much better than in non-German schools. Despite that, the overall literacy rate for Germans in Volhynia in 1897 was only 38.2%.

Throughout the book we learn what the authorities and locals felt about the colonists. Universally, they were admired for their work ethic, use of modern farming methods, and efficiency. The opinion of authorities changed over time, becoming more and more critical as WWI approached. The Empire attempted to regularize its laws beginning in the 1870s. For Germans, this meant loss of autonomy and Russification. Germans did everything they could to maintain their language and culture which was looked on with suspicion despite lack of evidence of disloyalty to the Tsar.

Many books lack adequate glossaries and indices. This book, thankfully, does not. There are lists of weights and measures and of governmental subdivisions and a glossary of Ukrainian words used in the text. The book is well illustrated. There is a surprisingly large number of tables. The Appendix includes a list of 316 names that appear in the text, most of them German.

I can't praise this book enough. Its 262 pages of text are chock full of information, a taste of which I have given above. The editing is exceptional, and the book reads as if it were originally written in English. Anyone with genealogical ties to Volhynia can learn a great deal about how life was lived by their ancestors. For those with a general interest in the German-Russian story, Kostiuk has filled an historical void. Unfortunately, the emigration from Volhynia to the Americas is barely touched upon. Also, the book ends just before onset of WWI, so the author did not cover the confusing period of the Liquidation Laws which deported tens of thousands of Volhynians to the East.

The German Colonies in Volhynia was published by the Society for German Genealogy in Eastern Europe in April 2021. Go to the "SGGEE Home" website to purchase a copy. For non-members, a digital copy is \$10.00, soft cover edition \$16.79, and hard cover \$32.99. Consider your purchase a bargain.