



Sacramento Valley Chapter of Germans from Russia

Germans from Russia Story

Before a unified Germany existed, many Germans were demoralized by years of religious strife, political chaos, and economic hardship. The story of the Germans from Russia had its beginning in 1763 while Catherine II, a former German princess of the principality of Anhalt-Zerbst, was Empress of Russia. The Czarina found herself in possession of large tracts of virgin land along the lower course of the Volga River in Russia. Catherine was determined to turn this region into productive, agricultural land as well as to populate the area as a protective barrier against the nomadic Asiatic tribes who inhabited the region.

In 1763, Catherine issued a manifesto inviting foreigners to settle in Russia, in the vast uncultivated lands of her domain. As an inducement to encourage emigration to Russia, the manifesto offered many rights and privileges to incoming foreign settlers.

1. Free transportation to Russia.
2. The right to settle in segregated colonies.
3. Free land and the necessary tax-free loans to establish themselves.
4. Religious freedom and the right to build their own churches. (Implied in this was the right to establish their own schools).
5. Local self-government.
6. Exemption from military or civil service.
7. The right to leave Russia at any time.
8. Therefore mentioned rights and privileges were guaranteed not only to incoming settlers but also to their descendants forever.

These rights and privileges offered a chance for a better life and many thousands of people emigrated to Russia from the Germanic states and principalities of Central Europe. The reasons that so many Germanic people took up this Russian offer were many. The Seven Years' War had just ended in 1763. Whole regions in Germany lay devastated and poverty was widespread. Many Germans emigrated at this time to other lands, including the New World, in order to make a new start in life.

The first German-speaking colonists who responded to Catherine's manifesto were directed to lands along the Volga River in the years 1764 to 1767. Later, as Russia acquired the Ukrainian lands north of the Black Sea from Turkey, colonists were invited to settle in those areas. Similarly, when the Crimean Peninsula and Bessarabia were added to the Russian Empire at Turkey's expense, colonists settled there. These later emigrations occurred 40 to 50 years after the great Volga emigration. The Black Sea Germans responded to an invitation that was issued in 1803 by Alexander I, the grandson of Catherine. Since so many responded to the Czar's invitation, the Russian Crown feared that unsuitable immigrants might enter Russia. Accordingly, in 1804, a restrictive decree was issued that embodied the generous terms of Catherine II but required that all future immigrants must possess cash or goods worth at least 300 guilders, be skilled in farming or handicrafts, and be people with families.

The colonists of 1804-1818 had either a long and difficult overland journey or had to travel by river barge down the Danube. (Those in 1804 to 1812 could not use the Danube River because of the 1806-1812 Russo-Turkish War.) Those who traveled to Russia in 1817 went by boat down the Danube and, due to inexperience, many thousands died of disease and exposure.

Approximately 300 mother colonies were founded throughout Russia during the settlement years and as the population grew, more acreage had to be acquired for the landless. Thus, numerous daughter colonies were founded. Eventually there were more than 3,000 ethnic settlements in Russia.

Their schools and churches provided instruction in their native language, German. Life was generally good for the colonists and they maintained the distinct customs, dress, musical tastes, and dialects of their ancestral homelands. Many adjustments to Russian ways, however, were inevitable.

In 1871, Czar Alexander II revoked the preferential rights and privileges given to the colonist settlers by the manifestos of Catherine II and Alexander I. The colonists, as a result, were reduced to the level of the Russian peasants and under the same laws and obligations to which they were subject. In 1874, the colonists' sons were drafted into the Czar's army for the first time.

The natural result was that the colonists were dismayed and angry, feeling that the Russian Crown was guilty of a breach of contract. As there was nothing they could do, their thoughts turned toward leaving Russia. But where could they go? To return to Germany did not enter their minds, for when their ancestors had left Germany years before, they had no intention ever to return to their native country.

Alexander III came to the throne of Russia in 1881 after his father, Alexander II, had been assassinated. Russification became the official policy and greatly affected the former colonists. Classes later had to be taught in the Russian language and business was required to be transacted in Russian. Also, it became increasingly difficult for the German-speaking colonists in Russia to purchase the land necessary for their expanding numbers. All of the rights of self-government in their villages were lost by the colonists under the changed conditions.

Because of the requirements of the U.S. Homestead Act of 1862, the German-Russians who took up homesteads in the United States were required to live on their 160-acre farms. They could not live in villages or colonies as they had in Russia. Many Volga Germans settled in cities in the Middle West of the United States, while the Black Sea Germans acquired land and homesteaded in Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas. Others settled in western Canada by purchase and homesteading.

A large number of German-Russians, descendants of those who elected to remain in Russia, still live in the Soviet Union. The census of 1959 counted over 1,600,000 Germans living in the Soviet Union and that number grew to 2,300,000 by 1983.

By 1920, it was estimated that 116,539 German-Russians were in the United States. The largest concentration was in North Dakota, where some 70,000 lived in 1920, coming from the Black Sea region and Bessarabia. Other large settlements were in Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska who came primarily from the Volga region. Today, the families of Germans from Russia are spread throughout the United States and Canada concentrating in the Great Plains states, California, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington as well as the prairie provinces of Western Canada.

Source: Germans from Russia Heritage Center, North Dakota State University.

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