

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

A Tale of Two Migrations:
The Dependence of the Volga German Refugees of 1917-1923 on the Earlier
Volga German Migrations of 1871-1914.

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Abstract

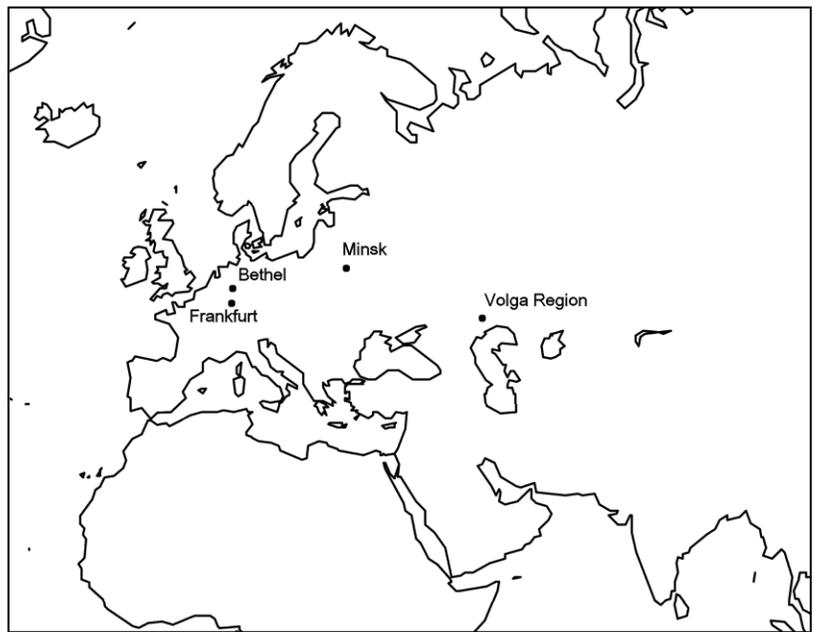
This paper focuses on the Volga German migrations to the United States, and the degree to which the migration of 1917 to 1923 was dependent upon earlier migrations beginning in 1871. The catalyst for the first major Volga German migration was the repeal of the German colonists' military exemption. This, combined with encouragement from the United States and the Volga Germans who had already relocated, brought a steady stream of immigrants to the U.S. until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The Volga Germans who remained behind were drafted into brutal warfare, deprived of their livelihoods, and then threatened with starvation and exile. Hearing of their plight, the Volga Germans living in the U.S. formed relief societies which sent thousands of dollars to save their fellow countrymen and assisted them at every stage of their difficult migration during a time of war and civil strife. Transcripts of oral interviews, autobiographies, newspaper articles and Volga Relief Society records are used to support the claim that the migration of Volga Germans following WWI would not have been possible without the assistance of the Volga Germans already residing in the United States.

Historiographical Introduction

Lydia Maier was 11 years old when she left her home in Gnadenthau, Russia, for America in 1920. Her father had fought for Russia against the Germans in WWI, and when the Volga German troops came home in 1916, he wasn't with them. That was how it worked in the Russian army. No letter, no telegram. They just didn't come back.

Lydia lived with her mother and her younger sister in her paternal grandparents' house. Her grandparents were wealthy, and when the Bolsheviks began to kill and exile the affluent, who the Soviets saw as robbers of the poor, her grandparents dug up the gold they had hidden in the backyard, gave it to Lydia's mother, and told her to take the girls, and go.¹

The Germans who live in the Volga region of Russia settled there on the invitation of Czarina Catherine II, also known as Catherine the Great, in 1763. Herself a German princess, she sought skilled farmers to tend to the newly conquered land in the region of the Volga River, which flowed into the Caspian Sea. These



Map taken from: "Bristol Stories." *Bristol's Museums, Galleries and Archives*. June 2007. <http://www.bristolstories.org/> (accessed 2 March, 2009).

colonists would also serve as a buffer between her enemies and the greater part of Russia. As incentive to migrate, Catherine offered the German colonists a manifesto, granting them special

¹ Emilie Maier Koldoff and Marie Lorenz Jachimstahl, Interview by June Hasche, 27 January 1981, interview transcript, Demsien Family Collection, Two Rivers, WI.

**This is a family history of the author, who is the great granddaughter of Lydia Maier.

rights and privileges which weren't available to the Russian citizenry. These rights were to last for eternity, according to her stipulations, but as the Russian government changed hands, first between Czars, and finally into the hands of the Bolsheviks, these rights were ignored and the lives of the German minority became progressively worse, convincing many to immigrate to the United States.

The current historical literature on Volga German emigrants to the United States has a clear focus on the most pronounced waves of Russian German migration which took place between 1871 and 1914.² While discussing the events and famine which resulted under Bolshevik rule, the most well known works stop at the outbreak of the First World War, thereby neglecting the emigration that continued during the war and in the immediate aftermath. Contemporary accounts document that thousands of Volga Germans attempted to escape the oppression of Russia for the United States between 1917 and 1923, and those which succeeded did so only through the assistance of those immigrants which went before them.

The earliest history in English on the Russian Germans of the 19th and 20th centuries, along with their immigrations to the United States, dates to just before WWI, although it wasn't published until 1975. *The Czar's Germans* offers a comprehensive history of the Russian Germans from 1689 up until 1912, and relies heavily on primary sources gathered from state and city archives in Germany and the archival records in Moscow.³ The extensive research within Williams' manuscript is cited by three of the most notable Russian German works following its publication,⁴ *The Volga Germans*, (1980) by Richard D. Scheuerman and Clifford E. Trafzer,

² The author was limited to literature in the English language.

³ Hattie Plum Williams, *The Czar's Germans: with Particular Reference to the Volga Germans*, Edited by Emma S. Haynes, Phillip B. Legler and Gerda S. Walker (Lincoln, NE: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1975), xiv.

⁴ Richard D. Scheuerman and Clifford E. Trafzer, *The Volga Germans: Pioneers of the Northwest* (Moscow, ID: Idaho Research Foundation, 1980); James W. Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed: The Volga Germans, 1860-*

From Privileged to Dispossessed, (1988) by James W. Long, and *The Volga Germans*, (1977) by Fred C. Koch. These three works comprise the most comprehensive histories of Russian Germans. Another notable work is “Russian-German Settlements in the United States,” (1974) by Richard Sallet. It contains invaluable statistics as to both where the Volga Germans originated from in Germany, and where they eventually settled upon reaching the United States.

There are a number of secondary sources on the migrations between 1871 and 1914. Hattie Plum Williams’ narrative, *The Czar’s Germans*, focuses on the Germans’ original migration into Russia and their time in Russia up until the 1870s. The last quarter of the book is dedicated to immigration to the United States; however, very little attention is given to immigrants after 1914. This section on immigration addresses the Russian laws which motivated immigration and presents statistical data comparing immigration by the Russian Germans, Russian Jews, and native Russians between 1901 and 1912. The reasoning behind the 1870s migration, the laws concerning immigration, and the immigration data are all useful in the discussion of the earlier immigrants. Williams’ text documents the early immigrants’ problems in Russia and difficulties in immigration in contrast with those who immigrated following WWI and the Revolution.⁵

From the Steppes to the Prairies, (1963) by George P. Aberle presents a narrative of the suffering and migration of the Russian German people, whom he argues were mistreated by their rulers. He first divides his book into sections based on settlement, discussing the Germans in the Volga in one chapter and those on the Black Sea in the next. Later his chapters change to areas of relocation, such as South America and Kansas. In these later chapters he discusses the various waves of immigration beginning with the 1870s and continuing through 1914, filling much of the

1917 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988); Fred C. Koch, *The Volga Germans: In Russia and the Americas, from 1763 to the Present* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977).

⁵ Williams, *The Czar’s Germans*.

time range which was merely brushed over by Williams. He details the various reasons for leaving and the factors which impeded Russian German entrance into the United States throughout these years.⁶

Fred C. Koch's book, *The Volga Germans: in Russia and the Americas, from 1763 to Present*, (1977) is the first comprehensive history of the Volga Germans. Rather than focus on early Russian German history like Williams, or examine all of the various Russian German settlement regions and migrations like Aberle, Koch covers the entire history of Germans living in the Volga region. Koch discusses immigration by examining each migration in turn, always returning to his main source of interest, the Volga Germans still in Russia. Koch's book is very useful for gaining background information on the Volga Germans between the years 1871 and 1923, serving as a relative encyclopedia on the topic.⁷

Richard D. Scheuerman and Clifford E. Trafzer added another Volga German narrative to the existing works in 1980 with the publication of their book *The Volga Germans: Pioneers of the Northwest*. Their work follows the Volga Germans from their colonization in Russia beginning in 1763 to the early immigration waves to the U.S. in the 1870s and 80s. These waves first resulted in settlements on the American prairie and, later, into the American northwest. This narrative gives an extremely detailed account of the trials and fortunes these Volga Germans experienced, and was helpful in understanding the earlier Volga German migrations.⁸

From Privileged to Dispossessed, (1988) by James W. Long, mentions immigration waves, but focuses primarily on the Volga Germans who remained in Russia. He argues that the Russian Germans, despite being an isolated cultural community, nonetheless continued to

⁶ George P. Aberle, *From the Steppes to the Prairies: The Story of the Germans Settling in Russia on the Volga and Ukraine; also the Germans Settling in the Banat, and the Bohemians in Crimea; Their Resettlement in the Americas - North and South America and in Canada* (Bismarck, ND: Bismarck Tribune Company, 1963).

⁷ Fred C. Koch, *The Volga Germans*.

⁸ Scheuerman, *The Volga Germans*.

develop and adapt to the changing world around them.⁹ This book follows the Russian Germans and their culture from 1860 to 1917, and offers insight into the various forms of persecution and privation faced by the Russian Germans who stayed behind through each of the migrations.

Secondary sources on the post Russian revolution migrations (1917) are much less prevalent. There are, however, a number of articles published in the *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia* as well as more general texts on emigration from Russia.¹⁰

City of Mercy: the Story of Bethel by Margaret Bradfield (1964) markedly breaks the trend in literature concerning the Russian Germans. Originally published in German, *City of Mercy* chronicles the history of Zion Church in the town of Bethel, near Bielefeld, Germany. Throughout its existence the church and surrounding town undertook various efforts to help those in need, especially focusing on mentally and physically disabled children. This church history also includes a chapter dedicated to the “Refugees from the Volga Basin” which discusses Bethel’s assistance to the Russian Germans in 1922.¹¹ The chapter explains how the people of Bethel obtained visas to rescue those attempting to escape Russia, gives details as to the state of the refugees, and estimates the number who died before their arrival. The details offered in “City of Mercy” were essential in documenting the acute suffering of those attempting to leave the country following the Bolshevik Revolution.¹²

In contrast, *Russian Refugees in France and the United States between the World Wars*, (1991) by James E. Hassell, focuses very little on the Russian Germans; rather it examines the

⁹Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed*, xi.

¹⁰ Adam Giesinger, “The Volga German Refugees of 1921-1922,” *The Journal of the AHSGR*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 21-26; Emma Schwabenland Haynes, “The Fate of a Wealthy Warenburg Family,” *Journal of the AHSGR*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 13-15; Barbara Christy Wagner, “Fugitives from Fear,” *Journal of the AHSGR*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 11-16.

¹¹ Fritz Bodelschwingh, “Refugees from the Volga Basin, 1922,” In *City of Mercy: the Story of Bethel*, ed. Margret Bradfield, 133-136, Bethel, Germany: Verlagshandlung der Anstalt Bethel, 1964, 133.

¹² Bodelschwingh, “Refugees from the Volga Basin, 1922.”

White Russians, the people who served and remained loyal to the Czar during the Revolution, which included both Germans and native Russians. It suggests that the White Russian refugees faced a bleak future, even after settling in their new adopted homelands. Discrimination and racial prejudice against southern and eastern Europeans was evident even in France and the United States, the two countries in which the Russians were most accepted. This was due in part to housing and employment shortages following WWI and later by the Great Depression, which is evident in the newspaper articles Hassell uses to make his point. Especially relevant to this paper's thesis is Hassell's discussion of the US immigration laws which were passed in the early 1920s.¹³

The above overview of the existing Russian German literature and its discussion of Volga immigration suggest that, when it comes to the Bolshevik revolution, most scholars neglect to discuss immigration after the beginning of the First World War. Indeed, some scholars view immigration as having dried up as a result of the conflict. George P. Aberle in *From the Steppes to the Prairies* (1963) goes so far as to declare that: "the constant flow of emigration continued for over forty years up to the time of World War I, when all emigration was stopped."¹⁴ While the "constant flow" of Volga Germans to the U.S. may have lessened, primary sources document it continued throughout the war and picked up again during the Russian civil war that followed.

Interview transcripts, found in both the University of Colorado archives and in the family collection of the author, support this claim along with the argument that the later immigrants depended on the earlier migration. In addition to interviews, short autobiographies published in the *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia* provide compelling

¹³ Hassell, James E. *Russian Refugees in France and the United States between the Wars*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1991.

¹⁴ George P. Aberle, *From the Steppes to the Prairies*, 71.

evidence to support the thesis. Newspaper articles and Volga Relief Society records are also used to prove that the migration of Volga Germans following WWI would not have been possible without the assistance of the Volga Germans already established in the United States.

Yet, with few exceptions, scholars in the historical field have chosen to ignore immigration during and after the Bolshevik Revolution, with occasional historians picking up again in the 1940s. Clearly research needs to be done to fill this thin spot in the literature, which tends to focus only on the privations suffered by those living in Russia and fails to view the bittersweet triumphs of those few who were able escape in the period following WWI. Rather than focusing on one or the other of these migrations, which is the pattern of the current literature, this thesis will examine both migrations, creating a link between them and showing their relationship based on the dependence of the later emigrants on those already living in America.

To create this link, I first address the immigrants who migrated to the United States between 1871 and 1914, the reasons they left Russia, why they chose to come to the United States and where they settled. In the second section, attention is turned back to Russia and the Volga Germans who stayed behind. Here the focus is on the governmental shifts and persecution which resulted in starvation and exile, and eventually in help from the United States. This section addresses why the Volga Germans sought to leave Russia, and why they were unable to do so without the assistance of the earlier migrants in America. The last section, “The Blessing of Ethnicity,” shows the migration out of the Volga Region and the obstacles encountered on every step of the journey to the United States. In this section, attention is again drawn to the necessary assistance received from the Volga Germans in the United States.

The Volga German Immigrants: 1871-1914

*Lydia's family had cousins who had moved to Nebraska during this early migration. It was near these relatives that the family intended to settle upon reaching the United States. The support of family could be counted on to help them acclimate to their new lives and to lend them financial support until they were able to provide from themselves. The desperate immigrants of the Bolshevik period relied on their relatives in the United States to lend them this necessary support.*¹⁵

It would be impossible to discuss the assistance of the earlier Volga German immigrants to later migrants without first understanding the motivations and outcomes of these early migrations and their lack of the dependence which so characterized the migration of the Bolshevik period. The early immigrants came to the United States pursuing freedoms they were being imminently denied in Russia and were welcomed to the United States as potential settlers of the frontier.

In June, 1871 the Russian government rescinded part of Catherine II's manifesto. This segment had given the German colonists freedom from military service for all eternity, which the Russian government now ruled to mean 100 years. As compensation, the Russian Germans would be given ten years of grace in which they would not be conscripted and in which they could freely immigrate. However, in November 1874, this promise too was broken, as Russian German men were immediately drafted in the Czar's army.¹⁶

The first immigrants to leave the Volga region on account of this legislation were the Mennonites, for whom military service was also against their religious beliefs. In 1872 they contacted the United States consulate in Odessa regarding prospective settlement in the U.S. and

¹⁵ Koldoff, Interview by June Hasche.

¹⁶ Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 198

were granted assurance their religion would be respected. In addition, “the Northern Pacific Railroad and others could assist them in finding desirable lands to purchase as well as offer reduced transportation rates and temporary employment on line construction.”¹⁷ Following the exploration of twelve Mennonite elders, a migration to the American Midwest began in 1874.

Other Volga Germans, consisting mainly of Lutherans and Catholics, were also concerned by the nullification of this section of Catherine’s treaty. However, they were more reluctant to immigrate immediately. Even with the threat of military service, life was comparatively good in Russia. They still retained other privileges, including freedom of religion and their own local government, schools and land. It wouldn’t be until the years prior to WWI that these too would become reasons for immigration, as anti-foreign and especially anti-German sentiment increased in Russia. In the meantime, it would take a better offer to convince Volga Germans to leave the villages in which they had been happily living for generations.

This offer came from the United States. At the same time Russia was repealing the rights of the Volga Germans, the United States was encouraging immigration and settlement onto the Great Plains, most specifically Nebraska. The Nebraska State Board of Immigration distributed pamphlets and maps and advertised in newspapers across Europe, declaring immigration as Nebraska’s greatest need.¹⁸ This promise of both land and freedom in the United States, where military service was voluntary, convinced hundreds of Russian Germans to immigrate and to exclaim of the Dakota Territory, “Here it is just as it was in Russia.”¹⁹

Other promotional literature, some distributed by railroads seeking profit, also appeared among the Volga Germans. G. Shwabauer’s “Emigration” was one such example. Himself a German from the Volga region who had immigrated to the U.S. some years before, he released

¹⁷ Scheuerman, *The Volga Germans*, 94

¹⁸ Williams, *The Czar’s Germans*, 176

¹⁹ Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements*, 17.

his brochure in 1875. In the pamphlet, he outlined the reasons for and against emigration, along with giving advice on traveling.²⁰ He told emigrants what to bring with them, transportation prices, how to choose a port of departure and arrival, and how to decide which state to settle in. Detailed information on numerous states was included, such as prices for cattle and grain in Arkansas, and what to expect for wages. Between these detailed pamphlets and the letters from those who had gone before, immigration became a very desirable option and in 1876, migration began in earnest, continuing steadily until 1914.²¹

Throughout this period the reasons for immigration remained heavily aligned with an aversion to military service, especially in light of the frequent wars in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This aversion was well founded and felt by the Russians and Russian Germans alike. The conditions and treatment were extremely harsh. “Every five years the Russian villages were compelled to furnish their quota of recruits ‘who were treated as slaves.’ Mistreatment and cruelty were commonplace—and so was draft evasion.”²² The term of military service was four to seven years²³ for which the men were paid 1 ruble (50¢) a month, just enough for food and clothes.²⁴ One man recounted the temperature at 60 below zero when a local woman offered him a cup of tea, but his Colonel knocked the cup out of her hands and wouldn’t let him have it.²⁵ The soldiers who died were buried where they lay, without their families being informed of the

²⁰ G. Shwabauer, *Emigration*, in *The German Emigration from the Volga Region to America in the Nineteenth Century to the 1970s: Preconditions, Reasons, and Results*, ed. Elena V. Ananyan (Lincoln, NE: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 2007), 85-89.

²¹ Elena V. Ananyan, *The German Emigration from the Volga Region to America in the Nineteenth Century to the 1970s: Preconditions, Reasons and Results* (Lincoln, NE: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 2007), 51.

²² Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 200.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Henry Frank, interview by Timothy J. Kloberdanz, 23 May 1976, interview transcript, Sidney Heitman Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Colorado State University, Denver, CO, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

loved one's death.²⁶ Particular to the case of the Russian Germans, ethnic prejudice ran deep and the colonists were singled out for "cool treatment that was administered by the Russian officers and noncommissioned officers."²⁷

Along with the threat of military service, the gradual repeal of former freedoms and the famines of the 1880s and 90s also played a crucial role in immigration from Russia. The reigns of both Alexander III and Nicholas I were marred with prejudice and suspicion of foreign influence. In the words of the chief of the state police, the Czars strove "toward the complete liberation of Russia from the foreign element,"²⁸ a condition which applied to the Russian Germans. On March 26, 1892, private ownership of land by foreign residents was forbidden, as well as the leasing of land to foreigners unless the individual applied for naturalization and joined the Russian Orthodox Church.²⁹ The German schools also came under attack. Legislation passed in 1890 required each school to have a Russian teacher and in 1897 it was ruled that Russian was to be the primary language for instruction.³⁰

The civil freedoms which had been taken away in the later part of the 19th century were reinstated with the Revolution of 1905. Czar Nicholas II was forced, through the strikes which were taking place in mass throughout the country, to sign a manifesto on October 17, 1905. This manifesto granted civil liberties including the freedoms of "conscience, speech, assembly, and association" and instituted the Duma, an elected legislative body which was to approve every law before it took effect.³¹

²⁶ Ibid., 6.

²⁷ Philip Legler, interview by Kenneth W. Rock, 23 February 1977, interview transcript, Sidney Heitman Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Colorado State University, Denver, CO, 2

²⁸ Scheuerman, *The Volga Germans*, 96.

²⁹ Ibid., 97.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Gilbert S. Doctorow, "The Government Program of 17 October 1905," *Russian Review*, vol. 34, no. 2 (April 1975): 134.

However, the manifesto of 1905 by no means ended the governmental prejudice against foreign influence.³² In 1906 a law was passed prohibiting the German colonists from “purchasing or settling on state lands” in their district.³³ This law became increasingly onerous when the land allotted by the Mir system became their private property the same year. Under the Mir system, the communal land of the village was redistributed periodically as the population grew, but by 1906, these portions of land were barely enough to sustain themselves,³⁴ As a result, the inability to purchase land was a serious blow. Along with the governmental discrimination, the Volga region was hit with crop failure in 1884, 1889, 1892 and 1897.³⁵ With such misfortune, family after family left, hoping for a better life in America.

As families decided to leave, household auctions --formerly a rare event in areas where families had lived for generations --became common place throughout the Volga colonies.³⁶ “When news of an impending *V'shteyeroong* (*Versteigerung*) spread through a village it meant one thing: ‘Auction! Another family is departing for America!’”³⁷ A woman recalled her departure from Russia in the 1890s to avoid the drafting of her uncle, “so we got ready, and sold everything we had that could be sold.”³⁸ By selling their homes and personal possessions many were able to attain the funds to reach the United States. This included the necessary community sanction for departure and for their passports from the Russian government, which amounted to 12 or 13 rubles each.³⁹

³² Scheuerman, *The Volga Germans*, 97.

³³ Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed*, 132.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁵ Scheuerman, *The Volga Germans*, 97.

³⁶ Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 210.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Alice Miller, interview by Kenneth W. Rock, 9 February 1977, interview transcript, Sidney Heitman Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Colorado State University, Denver, CO, 3.

³⁹ Ananyan, *The German Emigration*, 52.

The common course of travel for these immigrants was to take a train from Russia, often from Saratov, into Germany, where they would climb aboard a ship bound for America. One woman, who immigrated in 1911, recounted, “it took us three days to travel through Russia, three days through Germany, we had to lay three days in Hamburg, and then took us two weeks on the ocean.”⁴⁰ By the time her family reached their destination it had taken almost a month of travel.

Unfortunately, immigrants didn’t always enter the United States so swiftly or easily. On smaller ships, the voyage itself could take an entire month, in which immigrants were crowded together in stifling steerage compartments, rolling with sea sickness. Some immigrants, upon reaching Ellis Island, found they didn’t have \$10 on their person, a necessity for entrance into the United States, and consequently would be returned to Europe. However, the most common obstacle encountered was failure of the medical examination. Most often, in the case of the Volga Germans, their failure was due to glaucoma or trachoma, both diseases which affected the eyes. The stories of these rejected immigrants are plentiful, one woman recounted, “I had an aunt, she couldn't come with us, my father's only brother, his wife, she had glaucoma...they had to go to South America.”⁴¹ A man recalled, “My mother and oldest sister Katherine were forbidden to travel further because both of them were suffering from Trachoma.”⁴² The plight of the Russian German immigrants was realized by a Texan physician who spent nine months in Russia, in which he met many Russian Germans who had been turned back at Ellis Island after a positive diagnosis of these diseases.⁴³ After examining their eyes, he decided they didn’t have the

⁴⁰ Amalie Klein, interview by Timothy J. Kloberdanz, 18 September 1975, interview transcript, Sidney Heitman Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Colorado State University, Denver, CO, 18.

⁴¹ Miller, interview by Kenneth W. Rock, 13.

⁴² Legler, interview by Kenneth W. Rock, 6.

⁴³ Williams, *The Czar's Germans*, 212

diagnosed diseases after all, but “were merely suffering from inflammation due to wind, dust, and bad air in the steerage.”⁴⁴ The *Dakota Freie Presse*, upon learning of the immigrants’ plight, printed columns addressing the issue and then encouraging Russian Germans to clip out, sign and send the columns to their congressmen.⁴⁵ The government decided to uphold its position on the matter and, rather than risk taking the journey only to be rejected, prospective immigrants began to receive a routine examination at Saratov before departure. These fears of rejection led to a marked decrease in the number of Russian German immigrants following 1909.⁴⁶

The Volga Germans, and Russian Germans in general, are most widely known for their settlement in the Midwest, especially Nebraska, Kansas and the Dakotas. However, their settlements stretched west to Washington, Oregon and California, south to Oklahoma and Texas and north to Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Settlers were also known to reach one region, only to decide to resettle in another. In 1876, five families arrived in New York and “were persuaded under false pretense to go as wood cutters into the forests of Northern Wisconsin.”⁴⁷ They lasted only four days before taking a train from Chicago and relocating to Hastings, Nebraska. One man went ahead of his family to Argentina, then to San Francisco, and finally ended up in Idaho working in the sugar beet fields where he was joined by his family. After a few years, the family relocated to Wiley, Colorado with the hope of owning their own land.⁴⁸

The differences in the environmental conditions were especially troublesome to the first Russian German settlers. Sick of living in sod houses, dug outs and tents and discouraged by three consecutive years of crop failure, 160 immigrant families from the Great Plains moved to

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements*, 43.

⁴⁸ Howard Hankel and Katherine Hankel, interview by Kenneth W. Rock, 21 March 1977, interview transcript, Sidney Heitman Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Colorado State University, Denver, CO., 3-6.

the Pacific Northwest.⁴⁹ A family in Michigan was also unhappy with the “climatic conditions,” “The peals of cracks and thunder would echo and re-echo through the forest and my grandparents, they thought that the God of Wrath was going to destroy them.”⁵⁰ This family soon relocated to Colorado. The prairie fires and locusts were also a great plague on the Russian Germans of the Great Plains; however, unlike many of the other settlers, the snow storms and blizzards were taken in stride, as the winters of Russia had been much more formidable.

While the United States held hardships in the forms of weather and living conditions, the Russian Germans were met with less religious or ethnic discrimination than other immigrant groups, and certainly with less than they had received in Russia. They were, however, often mistakenly referred to as simply “Russians” due to their characteristically Russian dress of the Volga region.⁵¹ Despite this misconception, they were recognized as hard workers with a desire to learn English.⁵² The Russian Germans were also positively regarded owing to their appreciation for the public school system.⁵³ In 1876 a Kansas newspaper, the *Russel Record*, remarked, “what pleases us the best is to see them [the Russian Germans] sending their children to public school. We will risk any people’s becoming Americanized who patronize free schools.”⁵⁴

The Afflictions of War and Revolution: 1914-1923

Lydia’s mother declared herself a widow in September of 1916, so it can only be assumed that her father died in the Turkish offensive of WWI. However, there was no government

⁴⁹ Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 217.

⁵⁰ Ostwald, interview by Timothy J. Kloberdanz, 50-51.

⁵¹ Timothy J. Kloberdanz, “The Volga Germans in Old Russia and in Western North America: Their Changing World View,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 4 (October 1975): 209-10.

⁵² Scheuerman, *The Volga Germans*, 106.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Scheuerman, *The Volga Germans*, 106.

*acknowledgement of his death, merely his failure to return to them, and the word of his returning fellow soldiers.*⁵⁵

As has been shown, the Volga Germans from 1871 to 1914 were a very distinct ethnic minority. They remained isolated in their own villages, denominations and culture, and were generally unable to communicate in the language of greater Russia. Their motivation for emigration was often based on discrimination or an aversion to military service. With the outbreak of WWI and then the Bolshevik Revolution, a huge gap was formed between the motivations and experiences of the former and contemporary emigrants. The reign of the Czar, and the Provisionary Government under Kerensky, perpetuated the definitive difference between the Volga Germans and the Volga Russian peasants. However, with the Bolshevik takeover in November 1917, the Germans' isolation was broken as war raged in the region, and the commonalities of the German and Russian peasant farmers of the Volga drew them together for a common cause.

Thousands of Russian German men fought and died on the Russian Western Front of WWI. Yet, as the German army advanced, the surviving soldiers were treated with suspicion and sent to the front in Turkey, where they were placed under the leadership of the “the colonist-hating Grand Duke Nicholas.”⁵⁶ Here they were given the mission of laying siege to the fortifications of Erzerum which “was ringed by at least eighteen outer forts and defended by some 350 heavy guns.”⁵⁷ An estimated 40,000 Volga Germans were killed, due not only to the brutal fighting, but also to hunger, disease and freezing temperatures.⁵⁸ With the campaign an

⁵⁵ Koldoff, Interview by June Hasche.

⁵⁶ Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 245.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 246

⁵⁸ Jakob Mohrland, *The History of Brunnental – 1918-1941*, translated by Jo Ann Kuhr, Marie Krieger and Donald Herzog (Ellhofen, Germany: by author, 16 January 1986), <<http://www.brunntental.us/brunnental/index.html>> accessed 20 February, 2009, 5.

eventual success, Czar Nicholas saw fit to repay the valiant service of the Volga Germans by setting their date of exile for February 1917. Fortunately, rather than their exile, this date marked the collapse of Czar Nicholas and his monarchy.

The Volga Germans cheered in the new Provisional Government, lead by Kerensky, hoping he would end the governmental prejudice against them. And indeed the new government did seem to favor blanket equality, as it soon passed Article X, declaring all the various ethnicities of Russia equal, with the sole exception of the Germans.⁵⁹ Although this clause was swiftly removed thanks to the intervention of a German professor, the permanent repeal of German banishment was refused and merely deferred.⁶⁰

The Provisional Government's popularity also dwindled in the eyes of the greater Russian populous. WWI continued as Kerensky was determined to save face with Russia's allies and the men continued to fight under deplorable conditions. With the advancing German line, the cities flooded with refugees and soldiers, fleeing the front. Along with the cities' increased populations, strikes were prevalent as the working class demanded shorter workdays of the new government, which they had expected would bring about change. By April provisions were in short supply, and rations were instated to curb the growing shortages.⁶¹ Food riots soon followed, and the streets were rampant with thieving and murder.⁶² Unemployment also rose as factories and mills closed due to the lack of raw materials and equipment.⁶³

⁵⁹ Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 249.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁶¹ Donald J. Raleigh, *Revolution on the Volga: 1917 in Saratov* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 151.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 153.

With the growing discontent, November 1917 saw the government once again change hands, now falling to the rule of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Almost immediately the Bolsheviks installed the “Declaration of Rights of the People of Russia,” proclaiming:

1. Equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia.
2. The right of the nationalities of Russia to secede and establish independent states.
3. Suspension of all nationalistic and religious privileges and restrictions.
4. Unrestricted development of the national minorities and ethnic groups populating the territory of Russia.⁶⁴

It seemed as if they were finally given a government who would treat them equally. And indeed equality was valued by the Bolsheviks.

The Decree of Land was instated, under which privately owned land was expropriated and became property of the state.⁶⁵ The wealthy citizens, whose estates were being confiscated, were often Germans, since their villages had been given land upon colonization, which had been divided among them as of 1906. One wealthy survivor recalled:

The Bolsheviks took over and people had to move out of their homes. The Bolsheviks took the Germans who were wealthiest first. These were those with the most property. They killed them or deported them to Siberia and took what they wanted. They would find any reason to put you away. They would just as soon shoot you as look at you. It happened in many cases.⁶⁶

In light of the Germans’ perilous position, various cross denominational meetings were held in which Catholics, Lutherans and Mennonites met together to discuss the best course of action. In early 1918 it was decided that it was in the best interest of all of the Germans of the Volga to become a state, for which they appealed to Moscow. Lenin acquiesced to their plea in June 1918 and the “Soviet Commissariat for the Affairs of the German Volga Colonists” was

⁶⁴ Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 252.

⁶⁵ Alexander Weber and Anna Mueller, “Brunntal/Seelman District, Founded 1855,” *Frank/Brunntal Village Newsletter*, Summer 1994, translated by Terrie Schmidt-Crosby, <http://www.brunntal.us/brunntal/weberhis.txt> (accessed 20 February, 2009), 1.

⁶⁶ Miller, David, “Miller Family,” transcript of tape recording, edited by Glenn Mueller, <http://www.webbit.com/volga/lower/drmiller.htm> (accessed 20 February 2009), 1.

created.⁶⁷ The new state status, however, was created with stipulations which placed it under tighter government control and fulfilled the Bolshevik agenda. The right of the local government to confiscate goods from the people was transferred to the regional government, making the goods more easily accessible to the dictatorial government.⁶⁸ In fall 1919, a state congress was held to decide its administrators. A government official listed the “candidates” which had been handpicked by the government and asked for objections.⁶⁹ When the colonists asked for a vote, it became clear that to contradict the Bolsheviks was fatal. The colonists, who clearly had no say in their government anyway, accepted the candidates.

With the Bolshevik takeover, the situation in the cities failed to improve. The country was divided in two, with the Red army of the Bolsheviks controlling the Volga and the White army of the old regime controlling “the other main grain-producing areas of the former Russian Empire -- the northern Caucasus, the Kuban’, the Don, the Ukraine, and western Siberia.”⁷⁰ This created acute Bolshevik dependence on the Volga not simply for food but for the success of their cause.

The peasants of the Volga, German and Russian all conserved their resources and focused on their consumption needs “in opposition to the government’s increasing market controls.”⁷¹ The government ordered and threatened yet the peasants refused to sell their grain as it would do them little good since the price they would receive was barely enough to pay for the seed.⁷² Governmental frustration over the peasants’ unwillingness to supply food to the urban areas,

⁶⁷ Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 253.

⁶⁸ Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 253.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁷⁰ Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution, 1917-1921* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 249.

⁷¹ Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War*, 247.

⁷² Edward John Amend, “Escape from Starving Russia,” *Journal of the AHSGR*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Winter 1981): 17.

combined with the ideology credited to Lenin, “rob the robber.”⁷³ The result was disaster for the Volga peasants, as accounted by one Volga German;

The authorities in Moscow knew that the Volga Germans, because of the Revolution and disturbances, had held back grains. So the Russians sent their hungry out of their Russian towns to attack, as a brigade, the German villages. They came to Brunntal [the man’s village]. They took all the grains and good[s] which had been prepared in advance...even to the last pound. They not only took all the grains, but emptied all of the granaries. This continued as more brigades arrived from many Russian towns--banks like the “red guard”, “Cossacks”, etc. They all plundered and robbed the farmers until not a crumb was left.⁷⁴

This account, of course, applies to the Russian agricultural villages of the Volga as well. The raiding parties didn’t hesitate to use brutal tactics in confiscating all accessible goods. Barns and cellars were raided until there wasn’t seed left to plant. The grain was taken to the cities where it was distributed according to profession: Soviet officials received the most, soldiers next, then city workers with more strenuous jobs and so forth. Overall, the citizens whose occupation required the most manual labor were given the most food. Farmers, however, fell to the bottom of the Bolshevik’s priorities and their share never arrived.⁷⁵ With too little left even to plant, the farmers appealed to the government asking for seed. They were told to “sow what you’ve hidden.”⁷⁶ However, by this time, there was nothing left hidden. Besides the pillaging, civil war was raging in the region, villages often changed from Red to White possession and each time the village was again sacked by the soldiers who were living off the land.

The people of the Volga region were starving to death, eventually too weak to bury their own dead and still the raids continued. The people were threatened under penalty of death; “they knocked the farmers down and tortured them in order to have the farmers find more

⁷³Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 257.

⁷⁴Mohrland, *The History of Brunntal*, 6.

⁷⁵ Amend, “Escape for Starving Russia,” 18.

⁷⁶ Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 258.

provisions.”⁷⁷ Eventually, with no more food, the farmers were forced to sell clothing, household utensils, furniture and cattle.⁷⁸ Diseases struck as well and thousands died of cholera, typhus and malaria. Venereal diseases which had rarely touched the region previously were spread by soldiers and raiders who raped and plundered. In 1921, a famine hit and compounded the matter. The little bit of seed which had been scrounged up and planted, withered in the dry heat.

According to an account written by two survivors:

The dead were collected each week, and on Sundays 30-40 people were placed in a common grave. During this time, some families (the wealthier ones) got themselves ready and fled to Germany. Through them, the rest of the world found out what was happening on the Volga.⁷⁹

The value of the Soviet currency was rapidly depreciating, and the selling and purchasing of dry goods was illegal anyway.⁸⁰ Trade, also illegal, became the main means of procuring the necessities and personal possessions were often traded for food or clothing on this black market.

One man recalled how he accumulated the money to escape:

There were then, besides the current Bolshevik paper bills, three types of money in circulation, each of which had its own special value: the Kerensky money, the Czarist rubles, and gold and silver. I continued to collect all kinds of old money and to lay it aside until I had quite a little fortune. This was the only system by which one could save anything, because, while the value of the current paper money diminished constantly, the value of the “old money” steadily increased.⁸¹

Unfortunately, few of the Volga’s farmers were able to take advantage of this system since they were no longer able to produce grain and had received no money from the government for what they had produced.

Between the years 1918 and 1921 the peasants banded together in uprisings on various occasions, attempting to defend the lives of themselves and their families. The largest uprising

⁷⁷ Mohrland, *The History of Brunntental*, 6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁹ Weber, “Brunntental/Seelman District,” 1.

⁸⁰ Amend, “Escape for Starving Russia,” 19.

⁸¹ Amend, “Escape for Starving Russia,” 19.

was the Club War, a series of rebellions which took place in the spring of 1921. In the most famous incident, 5,000 to 6,000 German and Russian peasants marched on Balzer, the Bolshevik administrative center of the region.⁸² Lacking firearms, the farmers carried “forks, hoes, shovels, scyths, and clubs,” seeking only to beg the administration to grant them relief.⁸³ However, the Bolsheviks responded with first a shower of machine gun fire, and then an armed cavalry, no quarter was given.⁸⁴ This cruelty however, was two-sided. In the village of Neu-Laub, a mob of people attacked the communist prisoners who had been taken and gouged out their eyes, cut off their ears and noses, and proceeded to kill them with pitchforks.⁸⁵

This uprising only made things worse for the peasants. A list of the leading participants was generated, along with the punishments assigned to each, over 20 were to be shot and about 10 others were to have five years imprisonment. The retaliation of the Bolsheviks was intensely brutal. Reports included the Red soldiers shooting a man on the school steps while forcing the villagers to watch. The man had run away, and was assumed to be a traitor.⁸⁶ Another report told of a terrified mentally retarded man hiding in a church steeple when the soldiers came through the village. “The soldiers forced him down, tortured him and finally dismembered him, again forcing the villagers to watch.”⁸⁷ A German article, published in 1923, reported that the atrocities “were a revenge for even worse horror-deeds committed by the angered Volga farmers.

⁸² Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 262.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Koch, *The Volga Germans*, 262.

⁸⁵ Emma Schwabenland Haynes, “The Fate of a Wealthy Warenburg Family,” *Journal of the AHSGR*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 14.

⁸⁶ Terri Tidwell, “Escape from Brunntental – 1921/1922,” In *Frank/Brunntental Village Newsletter*, Summer 1994, <http://www.brunntental.us/brunntental/refugees.txt> (accessed 20 February, 2009), 4.

⁸⁷ Tidwell, “Escape from Brunntental – 1921/1922,” 4.

Commissioners were clubbed to death, thrown into the icy water of the Volga or into a dung-hill.”⁸⁸ In the end, the hostilities had resulted in the deaths of 35,000 people.⁸⁹

Not all the peasants, however, were against the Bolsheviks. Many, who before the revolution had been poor, saw in communism a hope to improve their position.⁹⁰ These people worked against their fellow villagers to help the Bolshevik cause, causing internal rifts and additional brutality.⁹¹ While starvation constituted the main cause for emigration, some also left due to this bitter atmosphere which had seized their villages.⁹² Between WWI, the Revolution, the Civil War between the Reds and Whites, starvation, executions and exiles, and finally emigration, the population of the Volga Germans was cut almost in half, dropping from 600,000 in 1914 to 359,000 in 1921.⁹³ According to a German Communist, “Some 80,000 persons were evacuated or fled from the area, 50,000 to 70,000 persons died of hunger.”⁹⁴

News of the atrocities in the Volga soon reached the outside world through the pleading letters of the sufferers and through those who were able to escape. A British newspaper reported of one Volga refugee camp, “I shall never forget the wizened dead face, pale green of a silently weeping little girl, whose feet were simply bones over which was stretched dry skin that looked like blue-black leather. And she was one of hundreds.”⁹⁵ The article continued by telling of the illnesses rampant in the camp and of the death toll, both from starvation and disease. The Volga

⁸⁸ “The Volga Refugees from Minsk: A Visit in the Refugee Camp Frankfurt/Oder,” *Heimkehr*, no. 2 (1923), <http://heimkehrlager.wordpress.com/2008/02/26/the-volga-refugees-from-minsk/> (accessed 20 February, 2009).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Adam Giesinger, “The Volga German Refugees of 1921-1922,” *The Journal of the AHSGR*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 21.

⁹¹ Adam Giesinger, “The Volga German Refugees”, 21.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹³ Scheuerman, *The Volga Germans*, 199.

⁹⁴ Bernhard Bartels, *Die Deutschen Bauern in Russland*, in “Conditions in the Volga Region 1919-1922.,” ed. Adam Giesinger, *Journal of the AHSGR*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 8.

⁹⁵ Arthur Ransome, “Famine on the Volga,” *Guardian Century* (Manchester, UK), 11 October 1921.

Germans in the United States, upon hearing of the terrible plight of their friends and relatives still in Russia, began to form relief organizations.

Desperate to help, a family in Portland, Oregon, wired the American Relief

Administration in August, 1921:

There are approximately fifteen hundred people in Portland that came from German colonies located in Russia near city of Saratov along Volga River. These people are anxious to help get food into that stricken district of Russia. They have received letters from relatives appealing for help. Will you be good enough to wire us how to proceed...Have hopes extending work of this committee to other places where our people are located in California, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Colorado, Dakotas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Kansas...⁹⁶

A response was received the following day which stipulated a willingness to help, though only through the feeding of children.⁹⁷ On August 11th a meeting was held at Zion Congregational Church in Portland and the Volga Relief Society was formed.⁹⁸ A second meeting was held on August 18th, which yielded pledges totaling \$6,075 and the creation of a circulating letter which would be sent to the other Volga German settlements throughout the United States.⁹⁹ Delegates were assigned, one to Russia to assist the ARA and others to settlements around the United States to expand their relief efforts, on August 21st.¹⁰⁰ Formed in September, the Central States Volga Relief Society soon joined the Volga Relief Society, closely followed by the Rocky Mountain States Volga Relief Society.¹⁰¹ These later combined to form the American Volga Relief Society (AVRS) which continued to work alongside the American Relief Administration to bring aid to the people of the Volga. By February, 1922, the organizations' combined efforts succeeded in regularly feeding 40,000 children.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Scheuerman, *The Volga Germans*, 200.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 202.

In addition to collaborating with the ARA to feed children, the AVRS broadened their efforts to also assist adults in order to reinstate the economy of the Volga region. To determine how best to help, the AVRS asked the village leaders to answer questions regarding the living conditions of their villages in both 1914 and 1923. These questions included the numbers of inhabitants, widows and orphans, and livestock, and also “what the village needed most in terms of assistance.”¹⁰³ Food, livestock, clothes, and equipment were all sent to help the poor people of the Volga. A man wrote of his village, “help from the foreign countries was now received in large quantities—seed corn, agricultural inventories, and also ready money (cash).”¹⁰⁴ An article written by a Volga German and published in the Communist periodical, *Unsere Wirtschaft*, in 1923, included this sentiment:

Of the more than 60 million dollars, for which ARA in the course of the past year has delivered foodstuffs, clothing and medical supplies to the famine regions of Russia, the calloused hands of the Volga German workers in North America contributed a lion’s share through their relief societies. They are credited with having contributed more than half of the amount that was distributed as famine relief through ARA in the German Volga region.¹⁰⁵

But despite the assistance rendered for them to rebuild their lives, many of the farmers had had enough of the Bolsheviks and their mistreatment. They packed their meager belongings and began a new ordeal, as refugees.

¹⁰³ “American Volga Relief Society: letters and documents,” *Nebraska State Historical Society*, http://www.nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/treasures/volga_relief.htm (accessed 20 February, 2009).

¹⁰⁴ Mohrland, *The History of Brunntal*, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Sinner, “Our Volga Germans in North America,” in “Conditions in the Volga Region 1919-1922.,” ed. Adam Giesinger, *Journal of the AHSGR*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 8.

The Blessing of Ethnicity

Lydia's uncle drove her and her mother and sister to the train station in the family's wagon. In the crowded conditions on the boxcar, their passports and all of the gold they had brought with them were stolen, leaving the widow and her children destitute.

After reaching the border town of Minsk, Lydia's mother became ill with typhoid fever and entered one of the hospitals set up by the Red Cross and the American Relief Administration. The girls were sent out to foster in Russian homes, circulating between seven of them, each day a different home, where they would help with chores to earn their keep. Their mother came and found them six months later. She had recovered, and remarried. The man's wife had died in Minsk earlier that year, due to the family's meager diet of potatoes and vegetable oils, and he had been left with five children to take care of. Lydia's mother would provide care for the children and he would provide passage to America and the necessary American relative to overcome the new quota act.¹⁰⁶

Finally, after two years in Minsk, a train came from the German Red Cross on December 9, 1922 and took the family to Germany. Lydia was number 170 on the list of Volga Germans who rode the train allowing them entrance into Germany.¹⁰⁷

Throughout the Revolutionary and Civil War period, the Volga Germans became less tied to their ethnic identity, and increasingly connected with the experiences of the native Russian peasants. However, in emigrating, they found themselves receiving necessary aid from their German brothers every step of the way. As a German Mennonite from the Volga stated, "Germany's care for her adopted children in these rescue operations reinforced the impact of

¹⁰⁶ Koldoff, Interview by June Hasche.

¹⁰⁷ "List of Volga German Refugees: who arrived at Frankfurt on the Oder from Minsk on December 9, 1922," *Journal of the AHSGR*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 21-29, ed. Emma Schwabenland Haynes, 25. Lydia's sister is number 171 on the list, and her mother and step family are numbers 862-868.

German culture upon the Russian Mennonites.”¹⁰⁸ This sentiment could of course apply to all the Volga Germans.

The common route of the Germans in Russia followed a path north to the border town of Minsk, where they awaited entrance into Poland. This route was necessitated by the lingering prejudice against Germans in the aftermath of WWI. As one man stated regarding his immigration, “We wanted to go to Poland, because the Poles accepted the Germans better than some of the other border countries.”¹⁰⁹ From Poland they entered into Germany, and from there, the vast majority of immigrants sailed to the United States, often joining relatives who had gone before.

In the aftermath of the famine, the destitute German peasants couldn’t scrounge up enough money to eat, let alone travel to the United States. The value of the ruble had plummeted. Worth 50 cents in 1914, by 1921 one American dollar was the equivalent of 11 million rubles.¹¹⁰ Lacking money, one family collected sea salt in buckets, a rare commodity in the west, with which they bribed the trains’ engineers all the way to Minsk.¹¹¹ Some had silver, gold and other valuables which had been buried in their yards and with which they were able to sustain themselves through the first leg of their journey.¹¹² More often, intended emigrants relied on their friends and relatives in the United States to send them aid. An emigrant recalled his experience, “I had one address of a relative in the United States, and I sent a letter asking for

¹⁰⁸ Robert Chadwell Williams, *Culture in Exile: Russian Émigrés in Germany, 1881-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 153.

¹⁰⁹ Miller, “Miller Family,” 2.

¹¹⁰ “After Two Years Marked by Misery and Death, Family of Konrad Lorenz Here from Russia,” *The Manitowoc Herald News*, 13 August 1923, 1.

¹¹¹ Merritt, Elizabeth Weber. “Escape from Brunnental – 1921/1922.” In *Frank/Brunntental Village Newsletter*. Summer 1994. <http://www.brunntental.us/brunntental/refugees.txt> (accessed 20 February, 2009), 7.

¹¹² Haynes, “The Fate of a Wealthy Warenburg Family,” 15.

help with our passage to America. They answered and sent \$10.00 in U.S. money and \$721.00 for our passage.”¹¹³

As soon as they were able, the refugees packed what few belongings they had and made their way to the nearest train station, some driven in sleighs or wagons by those staying behind, many others by walking. One family, their horses having been taken by the Bolsheviks, walked 30 miles to the nearest train station.¹¹⁴ The stations were overcrowded with hundreds of destitute people, some fleeing the famine, others heading back to their homes in the west which they had vacated during the war,¹¹⁵ and many with nowhere to go and no real destination.¹¹⁶ Thieving was rampant and emigrants took every precaution to protect their few possessions, constantly guarding them, even sewing their money into their clothing.¹¹⁷ When a train arrived, the hoards of people lying on the floors of the station would swarm the train, attempting to find a place in one of the freight cars lined with shelf-like bunks.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile the trains’ passengers would jump off to fill their kettles with hot water and their traveling companions would guard the door against newcomers.¹¹⁹ The conditions on the trains were poor, with 50 people packed into a single boxcar, and with the cars left standing on the side of the tracks for days at time, taking the trains several weeks to reach their destinations.¹²⁰ A contemporary article reported on the state of the refugees:

Beginning of last year [1922], about 7000 Volga-Germans started out to Minsk, some with horse and wagon, some on foot or by train. In Saratov most of them had to go by train since the horses couldn’t go on anymore. The way to White-Russia took several months, therefore it was March/April until the refugees arrived there. A lot of people were dying on the train already, and it got worse when everybody had to leave the train in

¹¹³ Miller, “Miller Family,” 3.

¹¹⁴ Merritt, “Escape from Brunental,” 8.

¹¹⁵ Ransome, “Famine on the Volga,” 1.

¹¹⁶ Amend, “Escape from Starving Russia,” 18.

¹¹⁷ Barbara Christy Wagner, “Fugitives from Fear,” *Journal of the AHSGR*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 11.

¹¹⁸ Amend, “Escape from Starving Russia,” 20.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Miller, “Miller Family,” 1.

Minsk. Women, men, children, the healthy and the sick were cramped in lonely houses and sheds without windows, tables, chairs and beds, and it wasn't long until the sick outnumbered the healthy. The typhoid fever was especially bad. One has to assume that more than half of the refugees died in Minsk.¹²¹

When they finally arrived after weeks of travel, it was to discover that Minsk was no better than the villages they had left behind. The city was crowded with refugees who couldn't afford the necessary papers to cross the border and were therefore stranded, unable to move forward, yet now too poor to return. The Soviet government began by demanding 20 million rubles for a single passport, then 70, then 90, and finally 120 million.¹²² While the amount was only a few dollars in American money, it was more than most of the families could afford.¹²³ Months passed for the emigrants and soon most couldn't afford to purchase food. They resorted to selling clothes and personal items, and even so, lived on potatoes and vegetable oils.¹²⁴ A woman recounted how her father found work, "they worked on the railroad by digging out ground for the new railroad ties. They were paid for their work with hard dark rye bread and a few cents."¹²⁵ Others hired out to White-Russian farmers or worked in the kitchens of the American Relief Administration.¹²⁶

Even with the little some the refugees managed to earn, thousands grew weak with hunger and succumbed to typhoid fever. While the German Red Cross took care of them the best they could, the economic situation in Germany was worsening and by September 1922 it was considering abandoning the camp.¹²⁷ The *Wolgadeutsche Monatshefte* (Volga-German Monthly

¹²¹ "The Volga Refugees from Minsk," 1.

¹²² "After Two Years," 1.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Koldoff, Interview by June Hasche, 14.

¹²⁵ Merritt, "Escape from Brunental," 7.

¹²⁶ "The Volga Refugees from Minsk," 1.

¹²⁷ "The Fate of the Refugees," 1.

Magazine) informed its readers that by winter the unfortunate migrants would be living in “completely inadequate wooden barracks that only have curtains for doors and windows.”¹²⁸

With such a desperate situation in Minsk, a few emigrants, rather than attempt to gain legal passports, stole over the border by alternate means. A number of families rode across the border after procuring Polish papers, others hired sleds to take them to the border in the middle of the night. One group of emigrants walked 63 miles across the border to the nearest train station where they caught a train to Warsaw:

We appealed to the Polish Red Cross for aid, and they shipped us by boxcar to an old army camp. It was a six hour train ride with no heat in bitter cold. One child and one grown up in our car froze to death before we got there. It was a mile walk to the old prisoner of war camp...Six hundred people were put in that barracks.¹²⁹

Another family reported having “stayed in an unheated-barn like structure with about 1000 people”¹³⁰ Poland, itself poor after WWI could ill-afford to take care of the refugees who were pouring over the border from Russia, consequently the accommodations were terrible, the rations were scant, and like in Minsk, thousands perished of starvation and disease.¹³¹ It wasn’t until months later that the German Red Cross brought the refugees out of Poland to the German refugee camp in Frankfurt on the Oder.¹³²

Back in Minsk, 4000 to 6000 of the refugees died of typhoid fever and starvation, and hundreds of orphans were placed in Russian orphanages or foster care with Russian peasants.¹³³ These orphans proved to be the salvation of almost 1000 Volga German refugees who at last managed to escape Russia. An orphanage in Bethel, Germany, among other organizations, fought

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Miller, “Miller Family,” 2.

¹³⁰ Merritt, “Escape from Brunental,” 7.

¹³¹ Wagner, “Fugitives from Fear,” 14.

¹³² Merritt, “Escape from Brunental,” 8.

¹³³ Fritz Bodelschwingh, “Refugees from the Volga Basin, 1922,” In *City of Mercy: the Story of Bethel*, ed. Margret Bradfield, Bethel, Germany: Verlagshandlung der Anstalt Bethel, 1964: 133.

for these children for months --“pleaded and begged whenever and wherever possible.”¹³⁴ Finally, thanks to the German Red Cross, travel permits were obtained for children lacking both parents and for 300 adult companions.¹³⁵ However, a sympathetic German doctor in Minsk, while loading the train, listed the 200 youngest children as “hand luggage,” creating 200 extra places.¹³⁶ Along with these 200 extra people, 300 more had hidden on the train. These, and the original 500 expected refugees, amounted to 1000 Russian-German emigrants to the refugee camp in Frankfurt on the Oder on December 9, 1922.¹³⁷

While it was the German Red Cross that carried out many of the operations which led to the Volga Germans’ rescue, it was the American money that truly accomplished the deed. A contemporary article read, “Only the American money made it possible to feed the refugees in Poland and get them across the border into Germany.”¹³⁸ Inflation in Germany was fast approaching unprecedented levels and while the German organizations worked hard to save the lives of their countrymen, without the capital from the Volga Germans in America, thousands more would have perished in the refugee camps of Russia and Poland.

The arrival at Frankfurt on Oder was a happy relief for the emigrants since they were now in the hands of their own people who ardently sought to help them reach their destination. An emigrant who reached Germany by way of escaping into Poland recalled his arrival:

On 18 March 1922, the first permission came for transport to Germany. We arrived in Frankfurt on Oder at sunset. It was warm. A minister was in charge of the transport, and he encouraged us to sing gospel songs in German. And we did, even though we were half starved. And the German people there on the station platform sat down and cried. Germany was poor at that time, but they nourished us back to life with small amounts of food at first, so we wouldn’t get sick from eating too much. The next morning, I woke up and saw sunshine, and heard people outside speaking in German. It was wonderful to

¹³⁴ Bodelschwingh, “Refugees from the Volga Basin, 1922,” 133.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 133-134.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 134.

¹³⁷ “The Volga Refugees from Minsk,” 1.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

hear our own language again. Once we were in Germany, we knew we were safe from Communism.¹³⁹

Once in Germany, the orphans and many of the other children were taken to an orphanage in Bethel while the adults stayed in Frankfurt on the Oder attempting to secure entrance into America.¹⁴⁰ Thanks to the quota system which had been instated in 1921, access to the United States was more difficult than it had been for the previous waves of Volga German immigrants. Only three percent of the number of each nationality which had been present in the United States as of 1910 would be admitted.¹⁴¹ These restrictions were based on place of birth, and unfortunately for the Volga Germans, there were plenty of other Russian refugees attempting to flee to the United States. Also the government refused to slacken the quota for refugees, due to the overall bias against foreigners following WWI.¹⁴²

Once again, however, the Volga Germans who had gone before to the United States proved to be their salvation. Immigrants with relatives already in the country received priority. The law stated, “That in the enforcement of this Act preference shall be given so far as possible to the wives, parents, brothers, sisters, children under eighteen years of age, and fiancées.” Citizens, those who had applied for citizenship or had served in the armed forces also received priority.¹⁴³ In order to take advantage of this preference, it was necessary for the American relative to acquire letters of recommendation for themselves proving they were industrious citizens or future citizens.¹⁴⁴ An “Affidavit of Support” was then filled out listing the immigrants for which they spoke, their relation to them and their own personal information including

¹³⁹ Miller, “Miller Family,” 2.

¹⁴⁰ “The Fate of the Refugees,” 1.

¹⁴¹ U. S. Congress, House, *Emergency Immigration Act*, 67th Cong., 1st sess., H.R. 4075, *Congressional Record*, 8, no. 5, daily ed. (19 May 1921): 5.

¹⁴² Hassell, *Russian Refugees*, 34.

¹⁴³ U. S. Congress, House 1921, 6.

¹⁴⁴ Frank Hoffman to whom it may concern, 5 February 1923, transcript typed by Frank Hoffman, Demsien Family Collection, Two Rivers, WI; C. W. Murphy to whom it may concern, 31 January, 1923, transcript typed by C.W. Murphy, Demsien Family Collection, Two Rivers, WI.

citizenship or intent of citizenship, address and income.¹⁴⁵ The “Affidavit of Support” was created in triplicate so that two copies could be sent with prepaid tickets to the shipping line, and the other could be sent to the “prospective passenger.”¹⁴⁶

With their paper work in order, their tickets funded by their American relatives and a clean bill of health, the potential immigrants proceeded to Hamburg, where they would board the ship which would take them on the last leg of their journey.

Conclusion

The Volga German migration which took place between 1917 and 1923 could not have taken place if it hadn't been for the earlier migrations which went before them. In the years following WWI the conditions in the Volga region took a violent turn for the worse as land was seized, the wealthy were killed or exiled and finally all food and provisions were expropriated by a desperate Soviet government. Hearing of the crisis, the Volga Germans in the United States formed relief societies with which they sent thousands of dollars to save their fellow countrymen. The immediate disaster abated, many of the Germans decided it was time to leave Russia and, some through their own means and others through the help of American relatives, reached Minsk only to meet more starvation and despair. Once again the emigrants received aid from the Volga Germans in America, as they provided funding to the German Red Cross for the sustenance and transportation of the refugees. Further obstacles were to be encountered upon reaching Germany due to the United States' installment of the quota. This problem too was

¹⁴⁵ George A. Hoelzer, “Affidavit of Support,” 1 February 1923, Form 500, F 2754, Demsien Family Collection, Two Rivers, WI; Philip Lorenz, “Affidavit of Support,” 31 January 1923, Form 500, F 2160, Demsien Family Collection, Two Rivers, WI.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

alleviated, since those with relatives in the United States were granted first priority. Ultimately, it was to the earlier migrations of Volga Germans to the United States that thousands of refugees owed their lives.

The current literature on the Volga Germans heavily focuses on the early migration to the United States in the mid to late 19th century and on those who stayed behind and suffered through Communist rule. Literature on the migration of the greater Russian populace following the Bolshevik Revolution mentions the German minority only briefly. This paper fills a gap in the English historiography on the Volga Germans by addressing the little known migration of Volga Germans which followed the Bolshevik Revolution. It also examines this later migration's relation to the better known migration of the 19th century and the extent to which one was dependent upon the other.

After arriving in Frankfurt, Lydia and her sister were again separated from their mother. The children were taken to Bethel and their parents stayed in Frankfurt, awaiting the necessary paperwork which was to be sent by the American brother of Lydia's new stepfather. When it finally arrived, the family qualified for the July quota. On August 1, 1923, Lydia and her family of 9 set sail from Hamburg to begin their new life, in America.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Koldoff, Interview by June Hasche.

Appendix A: Timeline of Volga German Migration, 1762 to 1923

1762	Czarina Catherine II invites Germans to colonize the Volga Region
1763	Offers a second Manifesto with specific guarantees (see Appendix B)
1871	Announcement that Catherine's Manifesto will be repealed; beginning of the "10 Years of Grace"
1874	First Russian German men drafted, the "Years of Grace" forgotten
1877-78	Russo-Turkish War
1904-05	Russo-Japanese War
1905	Revolution, Czar Nicholas II signs the manifest granting civil rights and creating the Duma
1906	Mir system dissolved
1914-17	WWI
1917	February-November: Provisional Government ruled by Kerenksy
1917	November: Bolshevik Government under Lenin
1921	Famine in the Volga Region
1921	US quota instated
1922	December: Train sent to deliver Volga German refugees in Minsk to Frankfurt

Appendix B: Catherine II's Guarantees for German Colonists, 22 July, 1763¹⁴⁸

1. Religious liberty
2. Tax exemptions for ten years in cities and thirty years on the land
3. Exemption from military service or civil service, against their will, for all time
4. Cash grants for the purchase of buildings and cattle
5. Equality with native Russians
6. Exemptions on import duty for colonists up to 300 rubles per family, in addition to the moveable property of each family
7. Permission of professional people to join guilds and unions in the Russian empire
8. All lands allotted for the settlement of colonists were to be given for eternal time, not however as personal property but as the communal property of each colony
9. Settlers were permitted to depart at any time after payment of a portion of the assets they had acquired in the Russian empire.

¹⁴⁸ Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements*, 10.

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