

The Migration of the Russian-Germans to Kansas

Note From the Editor: This article is being presented in four sections as monthly features for May, June, July and August 2004. It was written by Norman E. Saul and first published in the Spring, 1974 (Vol. 40, No. 1) of the Kansas Collection: Kansas Historical Quarterlies. It has been digitized with permission of the Kansas State Historical Society. Endnotes to the article will appear in Part 4. Mr. Saul was reared on a farm in Indiana, received his B.A. degree from Indiana University and his doctorate from Columbia University. He has published widely on Russian-American relations and has served as a faculty member of the History Department, University of Kansas. Although the article refers at times to the Swiss-Mennonite, it also provides a much broader perspective of Russian-German immigration into Kansas.

Part I "The Russian Background"

ONE HUNDRED years ago several thousand German-speaking people from Russia settled on lands in Kansas and left a considerable impact upon the history of the state. The purpose of this article is to examine some of the reasons for the move from Russia, why Kansas became the chief host state, the distinguishing features of their settlement and reception, and their contributions to the history of Kansas. Since the scope of the subject and limitations of space will preclude a thorough analysis of all aspects of the topic, the focus will be on a presentation of a general outline of events, discussions of sources, and thoughts and questions concerning new approaches. [1]

The Russian-Germans [2] who arrived in Kansas in the 1870's settled in two main geographical areas of the state that also correspond to separate places of origin in Russia and, for the majority, to different religious backgrounds. The first to arrive in large numbers, in 1874, were the Mennonites, mainly from the Tauride province of South Russia, who concentrated in Marion, Harvey, and McPherson counties. The other major area of settlement in Kansas, in Ellis, Russell, and Rush counties, was colonized by the Volga Germans of Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Baptist denominations. Of course, many counties of western and central Kansas became the homes of Russian-Germans, but many of these came later and often involved people who immigrated first to other states or to Canada, Mexico, or South America.

The Russian-German immigrants were distinctive in several respects from other newcomers to the prairie in the 19th century. First of all, they moved in large groups, settling whole areas, founding their own social and religious communities. Strong religious faith and attachment to particular customs gave these people greater ability to sustain the difficulties of a long trip and reduced the shock of adaptation. That is, unlike most settlers and immigrants, the Russian-Germans maintained, and perhaps even strengthened, their community consciousness. In this respect the Russian-Germans of all denominations resembled the Amish, Hutterite, Mormon, and other religious groups who made the North American frontier their homes.

The new arrivals from Russia were also similar to religious sects in the fact that they were separated from a developing national consciousness for so long. They had not lived in Germany during the 19th century, the age of nationalism, but in colonies within a particularly non-German society, preserving the customs and traditions of Slavic social and economic institutions. Most of the Russian-Germans, who came to Kansas could, in fact, speak some Russian as well as German. The differences in appearance, manners, and language from other German immigrants

were so great that people on the scene quickly and easily referred to them as Russians or "Rooshians." To obtain a basic understanding of these people it is important to examine in some detail where they came from and why they left.

The Russian-Germans were not the only people of Germanic ancestry residing in the Russian Empire in the 19th century. Germans formed an important part of the merchant population of Moscow and St. Petersburg, and another large German ethnic group was absorbed as the result of territorial expansion, particularly in the 18th century. The "native" Germans consisted mostly of the "Baltic" Germans living in what are now the Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. By contrast, the "Russian" Germans were those who migrated to Russia to farm, beginning in the reign of Catherine the Great (1762-1796) and continuing through the first third of the next century. The first territory to be settled by these Germans was on both sides of the middle Volga River near the cities of Samara and Saratov. Catherine the Great was interested in the agricultural development of this region and the pacification of an unruly frontier when she first issued the invitation for foreigners to colonize in 1762. A subsequent manifesto of July 1763 promised free lands, expenses for the move, freedom from taxation for 30 years, and exemption from civil and military service for themselves and their descendants. The empress's agents recruited settlers especially from the poorer German states devastated by the Seven Years' War. [3]

Several thousand colonists, usually from towns rather than villages, both Roman Catholic and Lutheran, accepted the Russian invitation and made the long trek eastward across Russia to the Volga. Under haphazard military supervision and through the turmoil of the Pugachev revolt (1773-1775) they suffered great hardships, but by the beginning of the 1800's, under the more lenient supervision of a special office of the Ministry of Interior, the Volga Germans prospered, at least relative to the Russian peasantry in general. Others joined them, especially during the Napoleonic wars, and by the 1860's they numbered around 250,000, approximately the then population of the state of Kansas, and dominated the economic life of two of the Russia's most productive agricultural provinces; Samara and Saratov.

Another area, in South Russia, was opened to colonial settlement after Russian acquisition of the Black Sea Coast and especially after the annexation of the Crimea in 1783-1784, by which a large expanse of thinly inhabited steppe became part of the Russian Empire. Prince Gregory Potemkin, Catherine's lover and favorite, was particularly interested in attracting farmer of proven industry to help develop the economic potential of this region called "New Russia." And in addition to Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, and other peoples from southeastern Europe, he invited a large number of Mennonites, particularly from the area around Danzig that had fallen under Prussian control as a result of the partitioning of Poland. Coming under heavy pressure from the modernizing ambitions of Frederick the Great to pay taxes and furnish recruits, the Mennonites there decided to accept the Russian conditions of 1763, which were even improved by negotiation to include a substantial subsidy for each family; many more followed after the disruptions of the Napoleonic wars in central and northern Europe. Unlike the Volga Germans, the Mennonites generally moved as religious communities with years of agricultural experience behind them. Many were, in fact, Dutch or Swiss in cultural and linguistic heritage rather than German proper. [4]

The two largest Mennonite colonial areas of South Russia were Khortitsa, on the Dnieper river about 175 miles northwest of the port of Berdiansk (now Osipnenko) on the Sea of Azov, and Molochna, centered around the market town of Halbstadt, about 90 miles from Berdiansk. Other settlements were scattered along the Black Sea coast, in the Crimea, in Bessarabia, and in Russian Poland. The total Mennonite Russian-German population of "New Russia" was about 40,000 by 1869, half of whom lived in the Molochna colony, while the number in all of the Russian Empire was probably not over 75,000. [5] They fulfilled Potemkin's original expectations, developing a widely diversified agrarian economy that included orchards, dairying, sheep herding, silk culture, and, of course, the raising of grain. By the middle of the 19th century, their wheat production had become a significant part of Russia's Black Sea exports to Western Europe. Mennonite entrepreneurs were handling and processing their own products for the Russian or foreign markets, and the Mennonite "oases" of South Russia (as they were referred to in contemporary Russian accounts) were relatively prosperous.

Though much of the economic and social history of the German settlements in Russia remains to be written, major achievements appear to have been accomplished in those areas. Why, then, did many Russian-Germans decide to move to a new, unknown land? The reason most often cited is that the exemption, which all had enjoyed, from military service was being withdrawn and that the Mennonites in particular, as conscientious objectors, could not tolerate the change in status. It is true, and somewhat ironic, that the Russian government in a liberal-rational course of modernization after the Crimean War was attempting to treat all people living within the Russian boundaries equally, and the new military reform law, devised to create modern, efficient armed forces and which went into effect in 1874, did propose to make everyone, noble and peasant Russian for foreign in origin, subject to the draft. The removal of the special exemption must be considered at least as a catalyst for the idea of emigration. The fact is, however, that only a portion of the Mennonites, and an even smaller percentage of the Volga Germans, actually left Russia at this time. In the case of the Roman Catholics and Lutherans there were no religious scruples against military service, and, of the Mennonites that remained, probably none actually served in the Russian army before the Russian Revolution, since, after several frustrating efforts to settle the issue with the government in St. Petersburg, the Mennonites obtained a compromise that made it possible for them to serve in alternate forestry work under their own administration. [6]

Those who could not claim a right to alternate service were subject to the new recruitment, and the first were drafted during the annual November processing in 1874. Hostility to serve in the Russian army was quite high, however, because of the conditions that prevailed for recruits, perhaps exaggerated by rumor, bias against advancement for non-Russians, and the predominance of Russian Orthodox religious services. [7] Despite this situation, which would become much worse in the 1890's, the priority of the removal of military exemption as a cause of emigration needs more substantiation than has been offered in the past, and other political, religious, and socio-economic factors should be weighed. It is interesting to observe, for example, that the arriving immigrants in Kansas did not appear to include a particularly large number of recruitment age.

Politically, the status of the Russian-German colonies was being closely examined in the middle of the 19th century by the imperial government, and the inhabitants could probably not avoid

becoming suspicious and restless when on Russian surveying team after another came through their territory. Beginning especially in the 1840's with their transfer to the new Ministry of State Domains, the central government began to treat the colonists more and more as Russian state peasants. The reform movement of the 1850's and 1860's shook the fabric of Russian-German society as well as that of the rest of Russia. Efforts to equalize landholdings among the agricultural population in the peasant emancipation (beginning in 1861) affected the Russian-Germans, especially the Mennonites, whose landholding statistics reflected a wide disparity; from the several thousand-acre estates of Jansen, Miller, Cornies, Shroeder, Peters, etc. to the many landless, poor families, who, according to Russian records of 1865, included one third of the total Mennonite colonists. [8] By a series of government decrees, the richer colonists were being forced to contribute land and supplies for the less fortunate, despite the existence of relief programs within the communities, and Russian courts were examining titles closely for illegal alienation of land that might have resulted since the original grants. Speculation was current that a single family should have only the amount of the first awards, about 175 acres. [9] In any event, the result was a marked increase in Russian interference in the internal life of the Russian-German communities in 1860's. This caused particular concern within the central organizations in South Russia, The New Russian Mennonite Brotherhood and the Halbstadt Agricultural Society, and may account for the active leadership for emigration by prosperous leaders such as Cornelius Jansen and Bernard Warkentin. [10] Separate schools and social and economic autonomy in general were being threatened in addition to the military exemption.

While new political currents were very much in evidence in Russia in the 1860's, religious changes were also occurring in a complex, interacting process. West European pietism reached the Mennonite colonies in the 1840's, and by 1870 a number of church communities had been fragmented by religious controversy. And the revival of sectarianism even influenced the more remote Roman Catholic and Lutheran colonies, where the German Baptist and Methodist movements gained converts. Disputes over church doctrine added to the impulse to get away and start over; to make a trek; which was already a part of the Mennonite tradition of founding daughter colonies. One group of Mennonites, the Hüpferites, left Molochna for a new territory in the Russian Caucasus in 1865, but initial reports on conditions there were discouraging. [11] A split in the Alexanderwohl church in the 1860's was apparently a prime cause of the transplantation of a large part of that Molochna community to Kansas. And the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren was an other offshoot of the 1860's that joined the emigration. Perhaps a thorough analysis of the religious affairs of the Russian-Germans would result in the conclusion that they were the most important cause of emigration.

A Russian source (Klaus) emphasizes the relationship of the pietist movement to poorer economic conditions. There may be an interconnection, but none is readily apparent in the Russian-Kansas migration. More relevant are the socio-economic conditions prevailing in Russia around 1870. That Russia at this time was a backward, agricultural country is generally recognized. The growth of rural population was quite rapid in the middle decades of the 19th century, caused especially by the lowering of the death rate through, for example, decreasing the incidence of cholera epidemics. And few new frontiers were open in European Russia that could be cultivated by existing methods. Population pressure (or land hunger) affected the Russian-Germans perhaps higher and death rates lower due to better living conditions. One must remember in this context that the German colonists were not affected by military recruitment and

the forced or voluntary labor migrations that relieved some of the pressure from Russian villages.

The colonies of South Russia, however, were generally in better condition than those of the Volga, because of their proximity to the Black Sea ports and larger per capita allotments of land. According to the Russian census of 1858, Volga villages such as Pfeifer and Herzog averaged 15 acres of land for each male inhabitant, while Alexanderwohl, a typical Mennonite community, had about 30 acres for each male. An average family holding in the Volga region was around 35 acres and in South Russia over 100 acres. [12] On the other hand, although wealthy landholders can be found among the Volga Germans, equality of farm size was much more prevalent there because of more widespread use of the Russian communal land tenure that provided for a re-division of village land periodically. By contrast, in the Molochna area, 32 Mennonite families owned 250,000 acres in 1860 and hired several thousand Mennonite and Russian laborers. [13] The Mennonite landless complained to local Russian authorities about their situation, but the result was greater Russian interference and the setting up of more communal land associations, which probably frustrated both rich and poor.

Besides the land-population crisis, all colonists suffered from declining grain prices due to increased competition from the United States, tax rises (25% between 1840 and 1868), and the withdrawal of economic privileges such as exclusive licenses for the brewing of beer. [14] Another factor that needs closer study is the effect of the death in the 1860's of Joann Cornies, long time patriarch of the South Russian Mennonites who had considerable influence with the government in St. Petersburg. [15]

One escape remained open, and it may have been the Russians who first brought this to their attention. In 1864 an offer, directed especially to the landless Mennonites, of free land, reduced taxes, and guaranteed exemption from military serve was made to those who would move to Eastern Siberia, to the newly acquired Amur river basin. Some, such as Bernard Warkentin, Sr., seriously considered this possibility and made an inspection trip to Siberia, but the remoteness of the land and lack of railroads for exporting grain discouraged further pursuit. [16] Besides, the logistics of such a move would be just as great, perhaps greater, than a move to Kansas.

By 1870, before the terms of the military reform law were known, a number of factors stirred the Russian-German colonies and stimulated projects for movement, and leaders were beginning to discuss the possibilities; Canada, Brazil, the Near East, as well as the United States. German language newspapers circulating in both South Russia and the Volga region brought information about immigration, and the Russian government, still of a relatively liberal disposition, made it clear that those Russian-Germans who were not satisfied with their status (as confused as it was) were free to leave the country, an attitude that would later change. But with so much of the world open to them, how did it happen that a large portion of the first Russian-German emigrants came to Kansas?

- end of Part I of IV-

ENDNOTES

NORMAN E. SAUL, reared on a farm in Indiana, received his B. A. degree from Indiana University, and his doctorate from Columbia University. He has written a book on Russian interest in the Mediterranean and several magazine articles on Russian-American relations, and although a member of the history department faculty at the University of Kansas, he is presently an exchange professor at University College, Dublin, Ireland.

[1] For general information, insights, and encouragements the author is indebted to many individuals and institutions. Among those who were generous of time and assistance were: Dr. Cornelius Krahn and John Schmidt of the Mennonite Historical Archive and Library, North Newton, August Kirksen and Martha Unruh of the Goessel Historical Society, John Dinkel of Herzog, and Irwin Staab of Catherine; special appreciation is also extended to the cooperative staffs of Bethel College Library, Fort Hays State College Library, Hays Public Library, Kansas State Historical Society, Regional History Division of the University of Kansas, and the Lenin Library in Moscow. Curtis Rohland and Cobb Rogers, graduate students at the University of Kansas in the Department of History and Slavic and Soviet Area Studies, respectively, provided valuable research assistance. The study was supported by the General Research Fund of the University of Kansas.

[2] The term "Russian-German" is used in this article because it is the one most often found in historical literature, but it is not entirely satisfactory. One alternative preferred by many descendants is the more awkward "Germans from Russia," and some think that "German-Russian" is more appropriate. For a discussion of this problem see the June, 1973, Newsletter of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia.

[3] The German historian, Karl Stumpp, is the chief authority on the Volga Germans. One of his major works, *Die Russlanddeutschen: Zweihundert Jahre Unterwegs* (Freilassing in Bayern, Pannonia-Verlag, 1965) has been translated into English by Joseph Height: *The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering* (Bonn, Atlantic-Forum, 1967). Stumpp has also compiled an exhaustive list of Volga German immigrants to Russia: *The Emigration From Germany to Russia in the Years 1763 to 1862* (Tubingen, published by the author, c1972). The most complete treatment of the move to Russia is G. G. Pisarevskii, *Iz Istorii Inostrannoi Kalonizatsii v Rossii v XVIII v.* (Moscow, Snegirevyi, 1909). Much historical and genealogical interest has been generated by the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, whose Kansas membership chairman is Mrs. Martha Heinze Miller of Independence.

[4] An old but still reliable guide to the Russian-German Mennonites is C. Henry Smith, *The Coming of the Russian Mennonites: An Episode in the Settling of the Last Frontier, 1874-1884* (Berne, Ind., Mennonite Books Concern, 1927). Also of great value are: *From the Steppes to the Prairies (1874-1949)*, edited by Cornelius Krahn (Newton, Mennonite Publication Office, 1949), and Karl Stumpp, *Die Deutschen Kolonien im Schwarzmeergebiet dem Früheren Neu (Süd)-Russland* Stuttgart, Ausland und Heimat Verlag, 1922).

The best literature on the Russian-Germans, though indispensable to any serious study, is

Unfortunately not widely known and generally of an introspective nature and narrow in focus. Much remains to be done on comparative social analysis within the broader framework of ethnic studies. And for this the potentials of oral history and the collection of private letters, diaries, pictures, etc., must not be neglected:

[5] This estimate is compiled from the best source on the Russian-Germans just prior to the emigration of the 1870's: A. A. Klaus, *Nashi Kolonii: Opyty I Materialy po Istorii I Statistike Inostrannoi Kolonizatsii v Rossi* (St., Petersburg, Nusvalt, 1869), which is a collection of articles from the widely circulated Russian journal, *Vestnik Evropy*. Unfortunately, Klaus does not include Russian Poland in his statistics.

[6] The new option was tendered by the Russian government only a few days before the departures of the largest groups from South Russia.—Newton Kansan, October 1, 1874.

[7] "Grandmother Reminisces," in Amy Brungardt Toepfer and Agnes C. Dreiling, *Conquering the Wind* Garwood, N. J. Victor c. Leiker, 1966), p. 164.

[8] Klaus, *Nashi Kolonii . . .*, p. 161.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 184-186.

[10] The roles of individuals in promoting emigration needs more investigation. The biographers of Jansen emphasize his religious motivation and international connections, but he was also a recent arrival (1850) in Russia who retained his Prussian citizenship.—See Gustav E. Reimer and G. R. Gaeddert, *Exiled by the Czar: Cornelius Jansen and the Great Mennonite Migration* (Newton, Mennonite Publication Office, 1956).

[11] Klaus, *Nashi Kolonii . . .*, p. 195.

[12] *Ibid.*, App. II

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 165.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

[15] Cornelius Krahn, intro., *From the Steppes to the Prairies*, pp. 3-4