



Germans from Russia: An Overview

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OBJECTIVE

- This guide will provide a broad overview of emigration from Germany into Russia, the formation of mother and daughter colonies, migration within Russia, and immigration to the Americas. As a result, the reader will be able to better understand historical context as well as reasons for emigration.

INTRODUCTION

- More than 100,000 Germans migrated to the Russian Empire between 1763 and 1871, settling in German-speaking colonies scattered throughout the empire.¹ From then on, hundreds of “daughter” colonies were created as the population grew. Through the formation of rural farming colonies and communities, Germans made a substantial mark on the economy and agricultural development of Imperial Russia before the majority of them immigrated to the Americas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Millions of their descendants can be found today in the United States, Canada, Brazil and Argentina. However, in order to uncover an individual’s story, we must first understand the broader story of Germans from Russia.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Early Baltic German Migration – 12th Century

- Although we typically think of German migration into the Russian Empire as an occurrence of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Germans actually arrived in the Russian Empire as early as the twelfth century. These Catholic German migrants were both crusaders and traders and in the early thirteenth century, they conquered areas in the Baltic that now constitute modern day Estonia and Latvia. The conquerors gained control of the government and became the elite noble class, known as the German “Balts.” The Balts enjoyed prominent political and military status in the region until 1918.²

¹ Arthur Kramer, “Migration of Germans to Russia,” *American Historical Society of Germans From Russia* (January 1985).

² “The Germans from the Baltics,” *University of Alberta*, www.ualberta.ca.

Catherine the Great's Manifest – 1762/3

- In 1761, German-born Catherine the Great, became empress of the Russian Empire. At the time of her rise to power, Russia was an underdeveloped agricultural land, lagging behind the development of Western Europe. Her solution was to invite her fellow Germans to come to Russia and cultivate the land. Catherine's first formal invitation was extended in 1762, but it elicited little response. After some thought, Catherine decided to add some benefits for coming to Russia. In the second manifesto of July 1763, Catherine proclaimed that German emigrants would receive the following:
 - free transportation to areas of settlement
 - free land and interest free loans
 - the right to create their own self-ruled colonies
 - religious freedom and the right to build churches and schools
 - thirty years of tax exemption
 - exemption from military service

These privileges were not only extended to the German immigrants, but to their children and descendants, even if they were born in Russia.³

Reason for Leaving Germany

- For Germans who had recently experienced years of wars, invasions and religious persecution, the benefits listed in Catherine's manifest were very appealing.⁴

Alexander I's Invitation – 1804

- In the late eighteenth-century, the Russian Empire obtained areas of eastern Poland as well as Turkish lands and the Crimea to the south. These new areas were in need of settlement, and the solution came when, in 1804, Alexander I repeated Catherine the Great's invitation. Nearly 50,000 Germans from southern and western Germany emigrated.⁵

EMIGRATION AND MIGRATION GROUPS

- Germans from Russia can be divided into three main emigration groups: The Volga River Germans, who settled on a strip of fertile land near the Volga river following Catherine the Great's manifesto, the Black Sea Germans, who came in droves at the turn of the nineteenth-century as a result of Tsar Alexander I's invitation, and the

³ Catherine Alekseyevna, "Manifesto of Catherine the Great," translated from German to English by Ingeborg W. Smith, *Germans from Russia Heritage Collection*, Fargo, ND, www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

⁴ Arthur Kramer, "Migration of Germans to Russia," *American Historical Society of Germans From Russia* (January 1985).

⁵ Arthur Kramer, "Migration of Germans to Russia," *American Historical Society of Germans From Russia* (January 1985).

Volhynia Germans who settled in what is now modern-day Ukraine between about 1816 and 1881. In addition to the “mother” colonies formed by these early settlers, “daughter” colonies, or colonies formed by descendants of those from the “mother” colonies, were founded in the surrounding areas. Although most Germans belonged to either the Catholic or Lutheran faiths, Mennonites and Hutterites also formed colonies throughout Russia. Let’s discuss each of these groups individually.

Volga River Germans –18th-19th Centuries

- In the first five years following Catherine the Great’s invitation, nearly 8,000 families (27,000 individuals) left their German homelands in Hesse, Wurttemberg and the Palatinate to become colonists in Russia. After a difficult voyage across the Baltic Sea, Germans spent a few weeks to months in temporary settlements near St. Petersburg before traveling to their new homes along the Volga River in southeastern Russia. German immigrants founded 104 “mother” colonies clustered along the Volga River, two-thirds of which were formed by Lutherans, while Catholics accounted for the other third. As time went on, new “daughter” colonies were settled nearby to allow for the growth in population.⁶

St. Petersburg Colonies – 18th Century

- At about the same time that the colonies of the Volga River were founded, areas near St. Petersburg were also settled. Lutheran emigrants from southwest Germany created 13 colonies around St. Petersburg.⁷

German Colonists from Denmark – 18th Century

- In 1759, King Frederick V of Denmark invited 5,000 Germans from south-western Germany to settle in the Duchy of Schleswig. These emigrants, escaping poor economic conditions hoped to find better prospects in the Duchy of Schleswig; however, between 1762 and 1765, the majority of German colonists in Denmark emigrated to colonies in Russia. The German colonists from Denmark settled in the Volga region.⁸

⁶ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Marian Press: Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1974).

⁷ George Rath, “Emigration from Germany through Poland and Russia to the USA,” *World Conference on Records and Genealogical Seminar* (August 1969), 4.

⁸ Alexander, Jacob and Mary Eichhorn, *Die Einwanderung deutscher kolonisten nach Danemark und deren witere Auswanderung nach ussland in den Jahren 1759-1766 (The Immigration of German Colonists to Denmark and Their Subsequent Emigration to Russia in the years 1759-1766)* (GmbH & Co: Bonn, Germany – Midland, Michigan, 2012).

The Mennonites – 18th-19th Century

- In the late 1780s, approximately four-hundred Mennonite families from West Prussia emigrated to Russia. They were drawn by the promise of religious freedoms and settled just northwest of the Sea of Azov in Turkish lands recently acquired by the Russian Empire. There were also a small number of Mennonites who settled along the Tract River in the Volga region. By 1870, about 9,000 Mennonites had migrated to Russia.⁹

The Hutterites – 18th-19th Century

- Hutterites, a religious sect with roots in the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century, first came to Russia in 1770, where they settled at Vishenky, northeast of Kiev. Due to internal conflicts, and social and economic difficulties, the Hutterites were forced to move further south to Radychiv, and finally settled in the Black Sea region near the Mennonite Colonies. Although the Mennonites and Hutterites shared common Anabaptist beliefs, the two settlement groups remained separate.¹⁰

Black Sea Germans – 19th Century

- Approximately 50,000 Germans were among the first responders to Alexander I's 1804 invitation. These German emigrants primarily traveled overland and eventually settled on the northern coast of the Black Sea in Odessa and Bessarabia. Throughout the 1840s, Germans also traveled south and established villages between the Danube river and the Black Sea. Much like the Volga River Germans, as the population grew, land availability decreased, mandating the need to spread out and form daughter colonies.¹¹

The Caucasus – 19th Century

- In 1817, Germans from several Black Sea and Volga region mother colonies began forming new colonies in the Caucasus. A large number settled near the city of Tbilisi, Georgia.¹² Additionally, five-thousand Separatist Germans departed Wurttemberg and traveled to the Caucasus where they believed Christ's second coming would occur.¹³

⁹ "Russian Mennonites," *Germans from Russia Heritage Collection*, Fargo, ND, www.ndsu.edu/grhc. Sue Wiebe, "From Prussia to Russia," *Low German Mennonites*, www.mennoniteeducation.weebly.com; Norman E. Saul, "The Migration of the Russian-Germans to Kansas," *Kansas Historical Society* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1974).

¹⁰ Jesse Hofer and Dora Maendel, "Hutterite History Overview," *Hutterite Brethren*, www.hutterites.org.

¹¹ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Marian Press: Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1974).

¹² Michael M. Miller, *Researching the Germans from Russia* (Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University: Fargo, ND, 1987), xvii.xix.

¹³ "Как немцы искали рай на Кавказе," *DW*, <http://www.dw.com/ru>.

Volhynia Germans – 19th Century

- What sets Volhynia apart from other settlement areas in the Russian Empire is that most settlements did not come through governmental support, but rather through private interests. In 1816, Germans from Danzig and the Palatinate came to this region as tenant farmers and worked on the estates of landlords. Fifteen years later, following the Polish Revolt of 1831, many Germans living in Congress Poland decided to move to Volhynia. The third wave of emigrants from Germany arrived in 1861, after the second Polish Revolt. At about the same time, serfdom was abolished in Russia, and estate owners, having lost their cheap and ready supply of labor, were in need of tenants and buyers. Germans escaping the Polish revolt proved to be excellent candidates.¹⁴

Asiatic Russian Colonies – Late 19th Century

- By the late nineteenth century, population growth in German colonies was booming and farmland within the colonies was quickly becoming scarce. In general, the oldest son inherited his father's property, and younger sons were forced to relocate in order to find farmable land. As a result, Germans began to leave the mother and daughter colonies they had formed in the western Russian Empire and traveled eastward towards the Ural Mountains and into Siberia. They also established many colonies in what are now modern-day Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.¹⁵

Lutheran Religious Jurisdictions

- In 1819, all Lutherans in Imperial Russia were united into a single Evangelical Church. Several years later, in 1832, the General Evangelical Lutheran Consistory was formed, which was divided into eight consistorial districts – six in the Baltics and two others: The St. Petersburg and Moscow Consistories. The St. Petersburg Consistory covered parishes in the northern, western and southern areas of the Russian empire while the Moscow Consistory covered the remainder of the Russian empire – including the Volga River area. Duplicates of records kept by individual parishes were sent to consistorial offices. The St. Petersburg duplicate church records are available through the Family History Library; however, the location of the Moscow Consistorial records is unknown.¹⁶

Catholic Religious Jurisdictions

- In 1772, Catherine the Great established the Archdiocese of Mogilev. This archdiocese covered all Catholics living in the Russian-Empire. In 1847, the Diocese of Kherson was created for areas in the southern Russian-Empire. The Black Sea region fell under this

¹⁴ "Kurze Geschichte der Wolhynieendutschen," *Wolhynien.de*, www.wolhynien.de.

¹⁵ "Colony Group: Asiatic Russia," *Germans from Russia Settlement Locations*, www.germansfromrussiasettlementlocations.org.

¹⁶ Thomas Kent Edlund, *The Lutherans of Russia* (Germanic Genealogical Society of St. Paul: St. Paul, Minnesota, 1994), xiii.

jurisdiction. A few years later, a third diocese, the Diocese of Tiraspol was created, with headquarters in Saratov, Russia. Church records were kept in Latin prior to the 1840s, at which point records were required to be kept in the Russian language. Duplicates of records kept by individual parishes were sent to consistorial offices. These records have been preserved and are located in the State Archives of the Saratov Oblast in Saratov, Russia. These records have not been made available digitally.¹⁷

EMIGRATION

Decline and Emigration of the Germans from Russia – 1871-1917

- In 1871, Alexander II revoked the unique rights given to Germans by Catherine the Great's 1763 manifesto. Germans were no longer exempt from military service and were required to conform to Russian laws. After 1871, thousands of Germans, particularly Mennonites and Hutterites, emigrated to the United States, Canada and South America. As time progressed, conditions for Germans living in Russia steadily declined. Poor economic conditions, famines and increasing anti-German sentiment pushed many Germans to leave Russia.¹⁸
- Some Germans returned to their ancestral homelands in Germany; however, the majority emigrated to North or South America. Russian Germans were farmers, so they tended to settle in rural agricultural areas. In the United States, most Germans from Russia settled in the states of Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, Colorado and the western provinces of Canada. Others ended up in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay or Uruguay.¹⁹

Those Who Stayed Behind – Post 1917 Revolution

- Following the 1917 Revolution and formation of the Soviet Union, conditions for Germans reached an all-time low. In the 1930s, Volga Germans experienced a forced starvation inflicted by the Soviet regime. Millions of people perished in this famine. Later, in 1941, Stalin began deporting Germans living in Russia to labor camps in Siberia and Central Asia. Many German colonies and communities were destroyed at this time.²⁰

¹⁷ "The Catholic Church Records of South Russia," *Black Sea German Research*, www.blackseagr.org.

¹⁸ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Marian Press: Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1974); Arthur Kramer, "Migration of Germans to Russia," *American Historical Society of Germans From Russia* (January 1985).

¹⁹ Gayla Aspenleiter, "Researching in South America," *Black Sea German Research*, www.blackseagr.org; Michael M. Miller, *Researching the Germans from Russia* (Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University: Fargo, ND, 1987), xvii.xix.

²⁰ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Marian Press: Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1974); Arthur Kramer, "Now They Left Russia," *American Historical Society of Germans From Russia* (January 1985).

Conclusion

This overview, though brief, should provide you with a working knowledge of the history of and reasons for emigration from Germany, the formation of mother and daughter colonies and migration within Russia as well as emigration from Russia to North and South America. Understanding the broader story of Germans from Russia will help you to better understand the story and experience of your German ancestor from Russia.

Further information

There are many useful resources to learning more about the history of Germans in Russia. For more information, please refer to the following:

“Germans from Russia History,” *FamilySearch Wiki*, www.familysearch.org/wiki.

“Germans from Russia Historical Geography,” *FamilySearch Wiki*, www.familysearch.org/wiki.

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, www.ahsgr.org.

Germans from Russia Settlement Locations, www.germansfromrussiasettlementlocations.org.

“History of Germans in Russia, Ukraine and the Soviet Union,” *Wikipedia*, www.wikipedia.org.

“Germans from Russia,” *Wikipedia*, www.wikipedia.org.

“Baltic Germans,” *Wikipedia*, www.wikipedia.org.

“Russian Mennonite,” *Wikipedia*, www.wikipedia.org.

“Volga Germans,” *Wikipedia*, www.wikipedia.org.

“Black Sea Germans,” *Wikipedia*, www.wikipedia.org.

“Volhynia Germans,” *Wikipedia*, www.wikipedia.org.

“Caucasus Germans,” *Wikipedia*, www.wikipedia.org.

Many maps in the presentation are available through the *Germans from Russia Heritage Collection* and *Germans from Russia Settlement Locations*.