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### The "Germans from Russia"

A people on the run, remembering two homelands

"The Volga Germans haven't just sat.

They didn't just sit still.

All of these centuries, they've adapted." <sup>1</sup>

Get into the mindset of someone running away from their homeland. They must pick up whatever items they can carry, leaving behind their homes, their farms, and their communities, as well as the memories of their families, loved ones, and ancestors. They can no longer visit their parents' gravestones or where their ancestors have been buried. The roads they grew up on and the trees planted by their ancestors remain behind.

Imagine their perspective: They were not just leaving for a vacation to Brazil; they were leaving their homeland and everything they knew, bound for America and with no intention of ever returning. They were faced with a new world, one that didn't share their language, culture, or even their existence. Why would they make such a brave, risky decision to leave every single aspect of their lives behind? It was because they were fleeing persecution by a government, and the knowledge that they could never return.

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<sup>1</sup> Mai, Brent. Personal interview. 4 April 2023.

Moreover, they were leaving in the aftermath of the Holocaust, where 1.5 million of their fellow countrymen were murdered, and more were sent to concentration camps.

This group of people was known as the Volga Germans, and they lived in Russia. When a Franc was from France, this group of Germans in Russia migrated under invitation from an Empress, leaving forever what they knew but maintaining their culture, language, and religion in a foreign land. When they fled again one hundred years later and made new homes in new parts of the world, one would begin to ask what happened to such a group of people. What made them leave, was it easy for them to leave, and did this particular group begin to stack their identity, remembering multiple moves back, as they made their way into new lands and homes? What is the power of identity that lives in the abstract for more than 100 years? And what continues to define such a people across generations?

## 1. Origins

### **FROM GERMANY to RUSSIA - First a Tsarina, then her People, But Why?**

In 1729, a princess named Sophie Friederike Auguste was born in the Kingdom of Prussia, known today as Germany. Sixteen years later, Sophie married the future Emperor of Russia, Peter III (son of Peter the Great) who would be crowned December 25, 1761, and renamed Екатерина Алексеевна Романова or “Ekaterina Alekseevna Romanova” -- “Catherine Alekseevna Romanov.” History paints her new husband, Tsar Peter III, as a weak figure, uninterested in the politics of Russia. He spent his youth in Germany, never learning Russian and never taking an interest in Russian affairs or the

deep work of governing.<sup>2</sup> This created distance between him and the clergy, the government officials, the army, and all the elite he would need to support his position in power over time<sup>3</sup> - including his wife. Unlike Peter, Catherine took a deep interest in Russian politics and governing. While Peter was uninterested in even learning Russian, Catherine quickly became fluent in Russian. Six months into their marriage and Peter's rule, Catherine formed an alliance with court advisors and initiated his removal from power. In fact, Peter was killed in captivity just several months after his overthrow, and the circumstances behind his mysterious death are still unknown.<sup>4</sup> Peter was on the throne for six months when Catherine replaced him, and she would go on to have a 34-year reign over Russia, known to all history as "Екатерина II Великая" or "Catherine the Great."

In the background of these events, Europe's Enlightenment period was taking place, and Catherine brought these values and a deep interest in progress with her from Germany to what she perceived as an incredibly backward country at the time. As Catherine took hold as the ruling Tsarina and grew in influence, Russia began to participate in Europe's Renaissance, with new ideas about science, culture, and technology beginning to flow from Europe's center into this geographically massive empire.<sup>5</sup> Land was literally a part of this; Catherine was attracting new ideas, but she also needed to have Russia's vast land better settled and defended. She believed the answer to that was to attract the large-scale migration of people particularly from her

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<sup>2</sup>Maranzani, Barbara. "The Troubled Marriage of Catherine the Great and Peter III." Biography.Com, [www.biography.com/royalty/catherine-the-great-peter-iii-marriage](http://www.biography.com/royalty/catherine-the-great-peter-iii-marriage). Accessed 11 May 2023.

<sup>3</sup>"Peter III." *Biography.Com*, [www.biography.com/political-figures/peter-iii](http://www.biography.com/political-figures/peter-iii). Accessed 11 May 2023.

<sup>4</sup>Maranzani, Barbara. "The Troubled Marriage of Catherine the Great and Peter III." Biography.Com, [www.biography.com/royalty/catherine-the-great-peter-iii-marriage](http://www.biography.com/royalty/catherine-the-great-peter-iii-marriage). Accessed 11 May 2023.

<sup>5</sup>"Catherine the Great." *Wikipedia*, 7 May 2023, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine\\_the\\_Great](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine_the_Great).

homeland.<sup>6</sup> Initially, Catherine focused on trades and technology, inviting German tradesmen to practice their crafts as they pleased. Catherine wrote one of, if not the most important, documents in Volga German history, a manifesto inviting these Germans to Russia: “Our pleasure to the foreigners who would like to settle in Our Empire, we now issue for a better understanding of our intention.”<sup>7</sup> Catherine worked through two manifestos to make this migration happen. The first, written in 1762, was largely unsuccessful, having been written vaguely and just not attracting much attention. Her more famous manifesto was written in July of 1763, an invitation that started the birth of a group of people who would come to be known over almost 300 years and several generations as the Volga German people.

The Enlightenment was not the only important historical moment happening in Europe at this time. In fact, Germany was enduring the Seven Years’ War at home and this helps answer the question why any of these people would want to leave their home in the first place and move to an entirely foreign country—likely never to see their homes again. The effects of the Seven Years’ War left the German land devastated, now fractured into several city-states, taxing their citizens heavily and changing the official religions of the city-states often<sup>8</sup>. With few options and less food, Catherine’s invitation to resettle on the wide open farmland of the Russian Steppe and begin a new life came to German war survivors at just the right time and was an echo of a call they would hear again, 100 years later, as Europe prepared for war in the 20th century.

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<sup>6</sup> Bosch, William. *The German-Russians in Words and Pictures*. William (Bill) Bosch, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> “Catherine’s Manifesto 1763.” *NORKA*, [www.norkarussia.info/catherines-manifesto-1763.html](http://www.norkarussia.info/catherines-manifesto-1763.html). Accessed 11 May 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Koch, Fred C. *The Volga Germans: In Russia and the Americas, from 1763 to the Present*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

## **A Culture Remembered Over Distance and Time**

These Germans landed across a large barren geography in Russia, but they displayed the characteristics of the small German villages and religious communities they originally came from. Over time, this grew into characteristics locally that would be unique to the Volga Germans, or the Black Sea Germans, among others. The reason for this is that when they left their villages in Germany for Russia, they took a snapshot of the culture with them, frozen at a particular moment in time. These communities would band together in Russia, and share their ‘Germanness’ -- disconnected from Germany yet not fully connected with Russia<sup>9</sup>, either. They missed the evolution of their German language into modern-day German, so if a German from the 21st century were to talk to one of these Volga German communities, the Russian Germans would sound like the equivalent of Shakespearian English<sup>10</sup>. And this cultural preservation was not unique to language; they took their customs, their faith practices, their educational practices, agricultural practices, everything that makes up their culture, their music, architecture, art, and folklore - all preserved at a moment in time that Germany moved on from, but these communities did not.

“So for Germans, watermelon is Wassermelone, but the Volga Germans call it Shleckzul. Why did the Volga Germans call it Shleckzul? Because that’s one of the dialects for Russian for watermelon.”<sup>11</sup>

All the old German culture didn't just stay at a standstill; it connected with Russian culture and grew in its own direction into something unique, something Volga German.

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<sup>9</sup> Mai, Brent. Personal interview. 4 April 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Mai, Brent. Personal interview. 4 April 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Mai, Brent. Personal interview. 4 April 2023.

They spoke the tongue of old German and new Russian. This new fusion culture would be a defining factor of the Volga people going forward, connecting them together across continents.

### **Promises Made; Promises Broken**

Catherine invited these Germans to settle on the Steppe with a range of promises: they would be given land to farm; they would not have to join the Russian army; they would be allowed to govern themselves and maintain their language and traditions; in essence, they would be allowed to hold onto all aspects of their cultural identity in their new home. They would also share their knowledge in farming and technology with the Russian locals. This was appealing to the Germans and it seems that it initially worked in their first decades as they resettled. Catherine promised she would allow the German immigrants to worship as they chose, with no pressure to convert or conform. This alone was hugely important to these communities, and these communities also were not one religious block. Religion was very important to these Germans, who were mainly Protestant and Catholic. As these Germans answered her call to resettle, they came in religious community groups and they stayed in those groups when they settled -- they did not mix religions in their new home; it was taboo.<sup>12</sup> So Catholics who moved from Germany to Russia would be directed to settle with their Catholic countrymen; the same would happen for Protestants. Of the Volga German migration, one-third of them were Catholic and two-thirds were Protestant.<sup>13</sup> Of these Protestants, one-third of this group were German Reformed. To make good on her

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<sup>12</sup> Mai, Brent. Personal interview. 4 April 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, Michael. Personal interview. 2 February 2023.

promises, Catherine split up and segregated the different religious groups into different colonies and geographical areas. There were Catholic colonies, Reformed colonies, and Lutheran colonies across the lower plains. She split them up because the Seven Years' War was driven by religious conflict in the first place, and she wisely believed it was safer to keep these groups separate.<sup>14</sup>

These groups remained largely individual, with villages close to each other having separate accents, allowing people and traders to be identified by their accents.<sup>15</sup>

“For instance, in the Kolb colony, the word for hammer was pronounced Hahmer, while the inhabitants of Frank, six miles distant, called it Hohmer.”<sup>16</sup>

So it took a lot of promises to encourage these people to move from Germany to Russia. But promises seem hard for leaders to keep. After the long journey, some Germans arrived with nothing but the clothes on their back. They expected what they had been promised: land, shelter, basic buildings, and farming materials<sup>17</sup>. But there was nothing; they arrived to nothing that they had been promised, no infrastructure or supplies. The magnitude of the problem this presented is shown by the fact that they literally dug into the steppe, the earth, to survive their first Russian winters<sup>18</sup>. Amazingly, they stayed; they helped each other, and their communities began to stabilize. But the

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<sup>14</sup> Miller, Michael. Personal interview. 2 February 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Koch, Fred C. *The Volga Germans: In Russia and the Americas, from 1763 to the Present*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

<sup>16</sup> Koch, Fred C. *The Volga Germans: In Russia and the Americas, from 1763 to the Present*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> Bosch, William. *The German-Russians in Words and Pictures*. William (Bill) Bosch, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Bosch, William. *The German-Russians in Words and Pictures*. William (Bill) Bosch, 2015.

legacy of broken promises would continue, even into the 20th century just before their next migration and flight to the new world as the world prepared for its biggest war yet, and the Volga Germans would be directly in the crossfire.

## 2. Displacement and Migration

One hundred and fifty years go by. The initial settlements in 1762 were made up of 2700 Germans across the Volga region. By 1910, there were almost two and a half million flourishing across the region.<sup>19</sup>

Recognizing their significance during his rise to power, Lenin granted the Volga Germans their own statehood in 1923, which allowed them to govern themselves under the name of the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, or VGASSR.<sup>20</sup> This independence allowed them to prosper and gave them a further sense of security.<sup>21</sup>

But the tide turned for this community when Stalin came to power after Lenin's death in 1924. As Stalin consolidated a more totalitarian approach to power and WWII influenced Soviet fears and priorities, by 1940 Stalin began turning against his own people in order to consolidate his power. Stalin wanted to unite the Soviet Union under one people and one banner; he wanted to purify the Soviet Union and to lead under his own vision. To do so, he needed the population of the USSR to be Soviets (formerly

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<sup>19</sup> "History of Germans in Russia, Ukraine, and the Soviet Union." Wikipedia, 21 Apr. 2023, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Germans\\_in\\_Russia,\\_Ukraine,\\_and\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Germans_in_Russia,_Ukraine,_and_the_Soviet_Union).

<sup>20</sup> "Soviet Rule 1918-1941." NORKA, [www.norkarussia.info/soviet-rule-1918-1941.html](http://www.norkarussia.info/soviet-rule-1918-1941.html). Accessed 11 May 2023.

<sup>21</sup> "Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic." Wikipedia, 14 Mar. 2023, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volga\\_German\\_Autonomous\\_Soviet\\_Socialist\\_Republic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volga_German_Autonomous_Soviet_Socialist_Republic).



Russians) and the large numbers of immigrant minorities dotting the then Soviet landscape undermined his vision for a growing Communist empire.

However, for Stalin's vision of a purely Soviet empire to come true, it would be at great cost to the Volga Germans. In 1941, Stalin revoked the autonomy that Lenin had granted the Volga German community, ending their statehood.<sup>22</sup>

Stalin began to vilify these groups, conflating ethnic Germans with the Nazi regime. He went even further, saying that ethnic Germans everywhere were a racial enemy to the Soviet people. He broadcast propaganda not against the Nazis or fascists or "the enemy," but against the Germans in his country—the German Russians who had been living in *Russia* for over one hundred and fifty years—people who by that point had known no other home other than *Russia*. Stalin pushed his anti-German campaign right to the edge, saying that the ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union were an invading force, and uniting ethnic Russians/Soviets against them with calls like "Death to the German Occupiers."<sup>23</sup>

"Stalin's regime had no evidence to support the charge that there were thousands of potential spies and saboteurs among the Volga Germans. In the months previous to the deportations, the NKVD (Soviet secret police) had unearthed very few people suspected of political disloyalty among the Volga Germans."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic." Wikipedia, 14 Mar. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volga\_German\_Autonomous\_Soviet\_Socialist\_Republic.

<sup>23</sup> "Death to German Occupiers-WW2 Soviet Propaganda Poster." *Peda.Net*, peda.net/ahtari/yhteiskoulu/luokat-oppiaineet/hjy/8hl/8c-propagandakuvat/dtgosp. Accessed 11 May 2023.

<sup>24</sup> "Deportation 1941." NORKA, www.norkarussia.info/deportation-1941.html#:~:text=By%20decree%20of%20Stalin's%20government,the%20military%20and%20government%20officials. Accessed 11 May 2023.

But regardless of what the NVKD had found, Stalin wanted them out. Ethnic Germans are recorded as the largest deported nationality from the Soviet Union at this time, with around 800,000 people being removed from their homes by the NKVD and deported.

To escape this persecution, many groups of German Russians picked up what little they could carry and ran, including my own family. They primarily fled to North America and South America, with large colonies today surviving in the United States, Canada, and Argentina.

Life in America posed a whole new set of challenges for these “German Russians” arriving in huge numbers. America’s Homestead Act was in place by the 1920s, allowing them to claim farmland and encouraging them to help settle the West. However, there was a problem: this Homestead Act required new landholders to live on the farmland the government was giving out. In Russia, these German Russians had not lived on their farms; instead, they lived in villages together and went out to work daily on farm collectives<sup>25</sup>. America’s ‘gift’ of land ownership had the unintended consequence of straining this community’s culture and ties by separating them across vast tracks of rural American farmland. As a result, their culture faced disintegration.

Argentina took a different approach. By contrast, the Volga Germans there better preserved their culture and ties to each other because their setup in Argentina allowed them to live in their villages and travel out daily to farm collectives to earn their livelihood.<sup>26</sup> Though another one hundred years have elapsed since these immigrants arrived in Argentina, and though the German Russians have since adopted the local

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<sup>25</sup>Mai, Brent. Personal interview. 4 April 2023.

<sup>26</sup>Mai, Brent. Personal interview. 4 April 2023.

language and moved homesteads,<sup>27</sup> there are still communities there who, three and four generations later, as Germans from Russia, remember and practice their connection to a Russian way of life with German influences long in their past.

“They build houses that look like Volga German houses. If you saw some of these places down there, there's a blue color. They still paint their houses in Argentina that same color, and that comes from Russia.”<sup>28</sup>

The story of the Volga Germans in America versus Argentina showcases the significance of how displaced people are treated when they arrive in a new country. Although America's Homestead Act offered the immigrants the opportunity for farmland and space, it inadvertently separated them from their culture. In contrast, Argentina's approach allowed the Volga Germans to maintain their way of life and cultural ties by allowing them to live in Villages close to each other and work together, allowing their culture to live on.

This grand experiment displays the fact of the two very different possibilities for a displaced people depending on how they are treated when they arrive in a new country. If the country provides support for the immigrants to maintain cultural ties and community connections, that country can help the immigrants build new lives while preserving what they hold so dear, their unique identities.

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<sup>27</sup>Mai, Brent. Personal interview. 4 April 2023.

<sup>28</sup>Mai, Brent. Personal interview. 4 April 2023.

### 3. One Hundred Years and Two Major Moves Later.

“The Volga Germans in Argentina speak Spanish, the Volga Germans in Brazil speak Portuguese, but they’re still Volga German”<sup>29</sup>

The Volga Germans, a unique diaspora with a shared history have settled across the world, and throughout America. Today, the Volga Germans are a diverse and vibrant community, proud of their history and traditions. In fact, their perspective is unique precisely because of their intertwined German and Russian heritage. There are now centers designated to preserving the past, with Dr. Brent Mai leading tours to the Volga-German ancestral homes<sup>30</sup> and chapters all over America led by the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia or AHSGR.<sup>31</sup> Societies around the globe are connected and dedicated to preserving this precious culture.

Today, the Germans From Russia, sometimes called The Volga Germans, are Americans. They are Argentinians. They are Oregonians. They are Californians. North Dakotans. In fact, many are still Russians—those who never left. A shared historical moment binds together this diaspora, spread out across the globe. The Volga German perspective is unique, particularly because of their unique history. It is a German history that intertwines with Russia. It is a group of people in North America, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, and Australia, who make strawberry pasta from Germany at family gatherings, and Kulich at Orthodox Easter - sweet bread made in coffee cans that celebrate the shape of the Russian onion domes. They do this in

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<sup>29</sup> Mai, Brent. Personal interview. 4 April 2023.

<sup>30</sup> “Tour Leaders.” Volga German Tour to Germany in 2023, 7 Apr. 2022, [volgagermantours.com/tour-leaders/](http://volgagermantours.com/tour-leaders/).

<sup>31</sup> “Ahsgr.” American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 23 Feb. 2023, [ahsgr.org/](http://ahsgr.org/).

places like - Portland, Oregon. They teach their children to make sauerkraut from scratch on their back porches. I know this because I am from a Volga German family; my mom has made the Kulich and my grandmother has four hundred-year-old photographs of her German Russian ancestors hanging on the wall in her office. Volga Germans don't stop remembering.

Despite the challenges they faced, through not just one, but two displacements and an attempt to erase their people. The Volga German population thrives today, in the culture they share through their food, sharing memories together in meetups all throughout America. Local chapters of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia meet in San Francisco to come together and celebrate their culture and they share the idea of who they were and who they are. What we're learning is that connecting with their past seems to help them make more sense of who they are today - like it's not enough to just be an American or an Argentinian. Being part of a diaspora like this - connecting with others in that group helps make sense of these many layers of identity that collect over the years.

## **Conclusion**

The story of the Volga Germans is a testament to the resilience of a culture and the perseverance of a people who left their homeland twice to create a new and better life in a foreign land. Regardless of the challenges they faced, they managed to maintain and preserve their culture, language, and traditions, and pass them down to future generations.

Today, the descendants of the Volga Germans are scattered all over the world, but they maintain their connection to their past heritage through their food, language, and cultural celebrations, regardless of where they are. The Volga Germans' story reminds us that even in a rapidly changing world, where culture is no longer connected to a location, people and culture are constantly changing and evolving, it is still possible to maintain a deep sense of identity and belonging to a group. Their story is a reminder of the importance of preserving cultural identity and the value it has for our interpersonal relationships and shared humanity.

Telling the story of the Volga Germans is bigger than simply exploring a particular diaspora and their experience moving into America. The Volga German exodus and experience, going back several hundred years and more than one national move, is a story about how we understand who we are. The whole world is moving right now; people are moving states, countries; they pour across borders in dangerous conditions, fleeing *into* America, fleeing out of America. Ideas are on the move; people are on the move; everything is on the move. Telling this story is how we come to make sense of a world where movement is becoming increasingly common, and how we remember where we've been is what holds people together. The Volga German experience is both unique to this group, and it is universal to everyone's experience.