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[Home](#) > [Vol 3, No 1 \(2012\)](#) > **Dinges**

Three Countries, One People: How the Volga Deutsch Survived the West

Alexandria Dinges

Introduction

In the 19th century, America presented foreign immigrants with seemingly endless opportunities for wealth, prosperity, and the opportunity to start a new life. Immigration to America often meant an escape from politically tumultuous regions or nations where individual freedoms were limited. Additionally, economic opportunities were limited in regions which struggled politically. For those individuals and cultures suffering in poverty under oppressive and authoritative governments in Eastern Europe, the ideas and opportunities America symbolized were even more meaningful.

Throughout the history of the United States of America, immigrant groups have struggled to maintain cultural bonds and preserve tradition and language upon their arrival to America. Combined with pressures from United States' citizens to assimilate into mainstream culture, movement and relocation made such preservation a difficult task. However, some immigrant groups were successful.

The vast population and constant bustle of the eastern American cities presented challenges to those seeking to establish isolated and unified immigrant communities, but the West symbolized opportunity to agriculturally inclined immigrant groups. To the immigrant farmer, the West was not a wild and daunting land to be feared or avoided. On the contrary, it represented freedom and economic opportunity. Low population and vast amounts of land in the West allowed for agricultural exploits and the establishment of independent foreign communities. Due to their geographic isolation, these communities were not subject to the same influences from other foreign or native populations as urban communities were.

To this end, the agricultural community of Ellis County, Kansas was predominately made up of a unique group of German immigrants who accomplished this cultural preservation. Their perseverance combined with foundational values and social structures resulted in this success.

Russian Experiences

Alexandria Dinges

In the 18th century, families and communities from the state of Hesse in Germany left for Russia following aggressive recruitment efforts for settlers from the Russian government. While migration into Russia was heavily encouraged, migration out of Germany was an attractive option for many considering the heavy turmoil the region had suffered. Since the end of the Thirty Years War in the early 1760's, Germans had been subject to high taxes, conscription, recurring famine, and political turmoil.[1] Throughout this century, poverty, religious persecution, and a disorganized political system resulted in the emigration of thousands of Germans to other parts of Europe and the Americas.[2] The Russian Empire's recruitment efforts proved successful under these conditions, with seven thousand families leaving German for Russia from 1764 to 1767.[3]

By the 18th century, the Russian Empire had developed into one of the most expansive and powerful countries in the world.[4] When the German empress Catherine the Great ascended the Russian throne following the death of her husband tsar Peter III in 1762, she established new immigration policies and procedures in an effort to expand Russia's influence and make use of recently acquired lands.[5] These under populated border regions were unstable and subject to constant attack from neighboring tribes. Catherine believed the establishment of permanent communities would stabilize the region and ultimately contribute to the growth and advancement of the Russian Empire.

In December of 1762, Catherine released an official manifesto inviting foreigners to settle the uninhabited regions of Russia in an effort to, "increase ... its inhabitants," and promote the "peace of prosperity of all the wide empire." [6] This first Manifesto of 1762 was brief, but took deliberate steps to encourage migration by promising foreigners that they would be "favorably accepted for settlement in Russia," and "shown mercy and thanks." [7] In addition to circulating the Manifesto of 1762, Catherine employed recruiters to travel to foreign nations, specifically in central and Western Europe. These recruiters advertised the vast opportunities and benefits the Russian Empire had to offer and encouraged and incentivized individuals and families to migrate to the region.[8] However, it was not until the release of a second manifesto that Germans responded to Russia's invitation and began to immigrate in large numbers.

In July of the following year, Catherine took further action and issued a second Manifesto in an effort to provide, "better clarification of this matter," and once again encourage settlement of Russia's borderlands.[9] The Manifesto of 1763 was far more extensive than the previous Manifesto issued in 1762. The Manifesto 's release in 1763 specifically outlined the economic and political benefits migrants would be granted upon their arrival and settlement in Russia.

As detailed within the 1763 Manifesto, the rights being publicized by Russian officials included, but were not limited to: the freedom to settle down wherever they pleased, freedom of religion, the right to build

churches in uninhabited regions, and the right to conduct internal affairs within one's own community without interference from the Russian government. In addition, the Russian government promised to provide individuals and families with travel funds. They also established that immigrants would not be compelled to pay taxes to the Russian government or face conscription into the Russian military.^[10] Naturally, individuals living in poor and politically tumultuous regions in Western Europe found these promises of economic assistance and personal liberty attractive.

Catherine the Great's promises of economic compensation, free land, exemption from military service, and religious freedom ultimately resulted in increased immigration. Many Germans left their homeland in the hopes that Russia would allow for improved living conditions, extensive economic opportunities, and the freedom to freely practice their religion.

In all reality, settlement in Russia initially presented the immigrants with many hardships. Upon their arrival in Saint Petersburg, some elements of the offers made within the manifestos were modified. Instead of being free to settle wherever they chose, German immigrants were forced to settle the region of Saratov located along the Volga River.^[11] As a result, the immigrants were isolated from the Russian population and restricted to agricultural endeavors.^[12] Settlement in this region also meant that these German immigrants would be left to their own devices to form communities, construct a society, survive economically, and protect themselves from the attacks of the neighboring tribes who resided along the perimeter of Russia.^[13] Even prior to colonizing the region, the long and difficult journey to Saratov demoralized the immigrants and deemed their survival along the borderlands unlikely.^[14]

The first generations of German colonists did not fare particularly well.^[15] Without any established political or communal organization, the foreigners had many difficulties overcoming the obstacles they faced in colonizing a foreign territory.^[16] They had arrived unprepared to cope with the difficult climate, treacherous wildlife, and the aggressive territorial conflicts that would emerge with nearby tribes upon their settlement.

In time, the Germans became better adapted to these conditions. Most importantly, they familiarized themselves with the climate and soil along the Volga River Basin, which ultimately made farming the most profitable pursuit within the colonies. The native crops of wheat and barley flourished in the black soil belt of Russia, and the German population began to flourish once the initial struggles of settlement were behind them. ^[17]

Ultimately, many of the conditions that made life difficult for the Germans when they first arrived in Saratov proved to be culturally beneficial. While seclusion initially heightened the struggle for survival, in time it made it possible for the foreigners to preserve their German language, traditions, and practices. These circumstances ultimately resulted in the development of a uniquely Volga German spirit

Alexandria Dinges

and culture that valued survival and endurance above all else. Their migration to a unique new environment in the Volga basin resulted in a distinctive culture that was rooted in German tradition but developed independent of any direct influence from Russian or German institutions. This growth was fostered by the fertility of the Volga basin, which sheltered the Volga Germans from the rampant starvation that frequently plagued native Russian, Ukrainian, and Slavic populations throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.[18] When placed under difficult circumstances, the immigrants who survived fostered communities that would continue to grow stronger and advance with each generation.

Leaving Russia

For a time, the German immigrants were completely safeguarded from intrusion or conflict that other native populations were suffering from. As a result, Volga German communities were able to foster the growth of their population and culture while maintaining many, if not all, of their German traditions.

The death of Catherine the Great ushered in a new, more oppressive, political era in Russia. Minority populations became less tolerated, food and land were less plentiful, and tax benefits and social and political freedoms dissipated. By the 19th century, the Russian authorities began issuing a series of military edicts which chipped away at their original promise of exemption from military service.[19] As a result, the initial success and prosperity experienced by the Volga Germans was halted and many communities began looking for opportunities elsewhere. Many chose to leave Europe altogether and set their sights upon the Americas for new opportunities and the freedoms they desired.[20]

Religion

Volga German colonies in Kansas were established strategically and with an explicit purpose beginning in the 19th century. Having suffered religious persecution in both Germany and Russia, many German ministers were eager to develop their own communities based upon Christian principles. The Western regions of the United States provided ample opportunities for the establishment of such communities.[21]

The New England Emigrant Aid Company assisted German ministers and congregations in their efforts to relocate from eastern cities to western agricultural settlements beginning in the 19th century. In an 1857 correspondence, one German Minister, Francis M. Serenbetz, expressed to an executive committee member of the Emigrant Aid Company his desire to bring his congregation over to establish "a Christian community in Kansas." [22] The group was struggling in the urban municipalities of the eastern United States. They found themselves uncomfortable with the moral depravity of the cities; and so, they wished to leave for the West in an effort to escape "all those elements so destructive to the prosperity of a Christian community." [23] Within this new German-Christian community, Serenbetz expressed that, "

...drinkers and unbelievers in the gospel (could not) possibly find themselves at home," but, "for good Christian people, it (would) be a point of attraction."^[24] For many German immigrant groups, including the Volga Germans, migration to the West represented more than just economic opportunities. Rather, it was an opportunity to form communities and build settlements which would work to protect and promote the religious ideals and cultural practices that were so highly valued within this ethnic group.

The religious goals of the first German ministers and leaders determined who would be permitted to settle with the congregation and how these chosen few would go about settling in the west. While the Germans from Russia were not discriminating with regards to Christian denominations, they did discriminate between those who legitimately practiced the principles of the religion and those who did not. By the early 20th century, the settlements professed to practice a variety of Christian religions, namely Catholicism, Evangelicalism, and Lutheranism.^[25] While tolerant of most Christian religions, the German settlements in Kansas were not tolerant of immorality or irreligious attitudes. Minister Serenbetz excluded single men from the community. He desired whole families who would invest and remain in the community, for this would lead to population growth and productivity of the settlements. This was true of all Russian German settlements in Kansas.

Unskilled laborers were not particularly welcome within the Volga German agricultural communities of Kansas, even more so than heretics and non Christians. Even Christian ministers were wary of the hardships that settlement in the west would present, such as unpredictable weather and violent threat from Indian tribes. Acknowledging this reality, Serenbetz called for, " ...skillful mechanics or agriculturalists ... having smelled gunpowder before seeking a home in the western world."^[26] As a result, the original Volga German immigrants who settled in Kansas were an exclusively selected group of occupationally qualified Christians who were legitimately invested in the future of the community.

The German colonies in the west were settled in a purposeful and organized manner. The leaders of these communities were not merely seeking laborers or bodies to work the fields. Rather, they desired permanent communities which would strive for moral excellence and success in agricultural pursuits. Therefore, the congregation of Serenbetz established a communal structure in which each individual was held accountable for contributing to the community prior to establishing their settlement in Kansas. They outlined their purposes and goals prior to their arrival in Kansas, stipulating that, "for the limited space of two years (we will) combine our labors in all the field work ... that agricultural implements ... are to be considered the common stock of the company, until at the expiration of the time."^[27] This constitution reflected the Volga German's willingness to work communally in an effort to survive and grow in a new territory. It also acknowledged their appreciation for hard work and communal contribution, while revealing how selective the community could be.

Alexandria Dinges

The religious zeal of the German immigrants played an important role in garnering them financial support for relocation. With the tensions between Free States and Slave States escalating, both sides were eager to encourage like minded individuals to move west so they could gain political power in the territories. The Russian-German immigrants were ostensibly free thinking Christians and adopted an anti-slavery attitude.^[28] In his letters, German Minister Ephriam Nute described, "This struggle for civil liberty is favorable to the cause of Ecclesiastical freedom," and believed, "The ground is well broken up in this community for the seed of Free-thinking Christianity."^[29] When the Volga Germans settled the territory and they chose to involve themselves in political matters because of their beliefs and their desire for independent German colonies in the West.

Despite the fact that settlement in the new territory often presented dangers and potential conflicts as a result of political tensions, the German congregations made their way West with the understanding that the New England Emigrant Aid Company would support them financially and politically.^[30] Many of the settlers did fall victim to acts of violence from pro-slavery "whiskey-drinking" individuals who would attack the printing presses, interfere with political participation, kill farm animals, and threaten lives.^[31] In these instances, the religious leaders became even more visible within the community and took on political roles. Many ministers had previously acknowledged that their roles would extend beyond the congregation. In writing to the New England Emigration Aid Society, Minister Serenbetz declared, "I am to be the spiritual guide as well as the political leader."^[32] As a result of this hierarchy, religious doctrine and values heavily influenced all Volga German social structures.

Religion's central role within the community was evidenced by the early establishment of many churches in the Kansas settlements. Aside from homes, the very first structures the settlers erected were churches, beginning with St. Fidelis Catholic Church in 1876.^[33] Despite limited resources and financial support, St. Fidelis Church was the largest Catholic Church west of the Mississippi River when it was constructed. The church began as a small structure attached to one of the parishioner's homes, and a growing congregation eventually made it necessary to expand the church to accommodate the increasing population. In 1890, a second Catholic congregation established Saint Catherine's Church.^[34] Despite the difficult terrain and unpredictable nature of the Western front, these congregations established themselves and managed to develop communities based upon their religious principles.

Catholicism was not the only religion that was established in the German settlements of Kansas. Other religious groups also sought opportunity to start anew in the West. By 1879 a Presbyterian congregation managed to construct a small stone church which served as a religious sanctuary for those who opposed the immorality and rambunctiousness of the Western Front.^[35] After several years, those individuals

whose actions were at odds with religion and spirituality were driven out of the area and were replaced by devout settlers who increased their numbers and influence.

The early 20th century was marked by the growth of Volga German communities in Kansas. By 1904, St. Joseph's Catholic Church was erected, and was ultimately expanded into a parochial school by 1908.[36] Ellis Congregational Church was established in 1907 and continued to expand architecturally throughout the early 20th century.[37] Despite the hardships and uncertainties the West presented, the Volga German settlers managed to form communities and social structures founded on religious principles to assist in their survival. The religious foundations of the settlements contributed to communal cooperation and ensured that the families included were committed to the success of the settlements in the present and future.

Discrimination

While the west presented the Russian German immigrants with a relatively fresh start, they nonetheless had to contend with the reactions and dispositions of their fellow immigrants who had already settled the West and natives of the United States. The sentiments these populations expressed towards the Volga German immigrants were varied and unpredictable. The Russian Germans were in an interesting predicament as a result of their cultural and geographical background. They struggled with their foreign identity given that both their German ethnicity and Russian experiences did not often evoke positive reactions from the American population.

By the late 19th century, animosity towards German immigrant populations had worn off to some degree. However, this occurred only because of a new dislike for immigrants from Slavonic countries.[38] Columnist Kirk Munroe shed light upon why Americans regarded foreign immigrants so poorly, and wrote, "They are charged with crowding out the native-born American ... clinging to their own language and customs, refusing to become Americanized ... reducing the price of labor." [39] Slavic groups in particular struggled to find a place in American politics and culture upon their arrival. Many Americans were suspicious of eastern European politics, cultures, and beliefs.[40] As a result, acceptance into American society proved difficult for the Russian Germans.

The politics surrounding nativist sentiments and rhetoric were so pronounced that American magazines and newspapers released a series of articles which attempted to explain the origins and background of the Volga Germans and set them apart from their ethnically Russian and Slavic counterparts. When the Know-Nothing party began to target Slavic immigrants, Munroe attempted to clarify the origins of the Russian Germans and wrote that these immigrants, "were of Teutonic stock, and not Slavs at all, save as they had adopted Slavic customs and modes of life during a residence of several generations in

Alexandria Dinges

Russia."^[41] The complex origins of the Russian Germans made them a unique immigrant group which garnered much interest from the American public.

Natives remained skeptical of the fact that the Volga German immigrants could not speak English well and appeared content to continue their own traditions instead of adopting American ones.^[42] Both Americans and the Russian German immigrants struggled to identify with one another and therefore, struggled to accept each other. Munroe eloquently described this relationship in his article. He explained, "The native-born regards the naturalized citizen with dislike and contempt; while the newcomer has to overcome both fear and mistrust of those whose ways are so different from his own."^[43] Given the conditions and realities of immigrating to a foreign country, it is not surprising that many cultural groups secluded themselves and struggled to adapt to mainstream American society.

In a sociological study of the Russian Germans, sociologist Hattie Plum Williams stated that, "In the west, another nationality denominated 'Russian' occupies the lowest seat in the localities where he has settled."^[44] Williams went on to conclude that, "These local opinions are significant ... because they explain in a large degree the relations which exist between these immigrants and the communities in which they live."^[45] It is difficult to discern whether the animosity that natives exhibited towards Russian German immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a result of the immigrants' efforts to isolate themselves, or if these sentiments resulted in the cultural and geographic isolation of the immigrants. It was likely a combination of the two. Regardless, this isolation ultimately contributed to the preservation of language and cultural traditions.

Acceptance and Respect

While friction between native and immigrant communities was prevalent, other voices spoke for those who were either moderately curious about the new immigrants, or even those who held them in high regard. When debates regarding slavery were reaching their pinnacle in the United States, associations such as the Emigrant Aid Society singled the Russian Germans out as allies of liberty and the anti-slavery movement. *The New York Daily Times* expressed confidence in the fact that the immigrants would assist in anti-slavery efforts and reported that, "They form a nucleus of honest, industrious, free laborers who will support free labor and not consent to work side by side with slaves."^[46] This understanding was beneficial to the Russian German immigrants who were striving for success in a new nation.

In *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Munroe wrote of the Russian Germans almost as though they were the founding fathers of Eastern Europe, and described them as, "liberty-loving people" who "excited so much discontent in the downtrodden communities in which they dwelt that the Russian authorities became alarmed."^[47] According to Munroe, the Volga Germans understood American values and the Western Revolutionary spirit. They were in fact westerners who suffered at the hands of a foreign

eastern European government, and should therefore be admired in America. *The New York Daily Times* defined the German immigrants as, "good friends of Liberty," and boldly stated that, "The Germans in America ... have been on the side of Liberty."^[48] Those who held the immigrants in high regard for their ethics and politics encouraged other United States citizens to treat the immigrants with respect and to develop and some appreciation for their values and contributions.^[49]

Many journalists also went to great lengths to dispute nativists' claims that the Russian Germans who settled in the west were dirty, uneducated, and reluctant to adopt American customs, language, and traditions. Several journalists visited Russian German settlements in the west and even stayed with families to explore their customs and habits, and to assure the American public that these foreigners were not to be despised. Munroe directly addressed many of the criticisms of the immigrants and concluded, "They attend schools where only English is taught ... and celebrate the Fourth of July as though to the manner born."^[50] While much of Munroe's column was meant to be flattering and complimentary, those qualities which he valued revealed American sentiments towards foreigners. Essentially, these immigrants were only to be respected because they are so Americanized. Their acceptance into American society was wholly dependent upon the sacrifice of the culture, language, and traditions they had developed and valued to highly within their communities.

The Volga Germans were also respected for their work ethic, and more specifically, the immense output of grain they produced, which was a positive contribution to both state and local economies.^[51] Some articles described them as, "hardworking, generous, and honest to a fault,"^[52] and reflected great interest in their unique history of immigration and agricultural roots.^[53] Their approach to agriculture and farming was unique and unfamiliar to many Americans. Munroe drew comparisons between the traditional American approach to raising stock and the Volga German approach to raising stock and concluded that, "the narrow minded and conservative methods" of the foreigners were beneficial in the west, where weather patterns were harsh and unpredictable.^[54] In an era where the West presented new opportunities and new frontiers, many valued and respected those individuals who were daring enough to venture into unknown territories in pursuit of wealth and success.

For any and all immigrant groups, relocating to unfamiliar regions is a struggle. Integration into the native society is generally difficult and almost always means that the immigrant group must sacrifice many of their traditions, practices, and language. As a result, many immigrant groups, including the Russian Germans, choose to isolate themselves, which often resulted in resentment from native citizens. The Volga Germans approached this conflict uniquely in that they isolated themselves geographically and culturally, but also played an important role in the agricultural and economic success of the regions they settled. Despite the animosity displayed by some natives, there were those who were grateful for

Alexandria Dinges

the Volga German communities and their contribution to the budding agricultural economies of the west.^[55]

Agriculture

Within Volga German settlements, agriculture played a vital role in the shape and form of families and communities. Having experienced so much agricultural prosperity during their settlement in Russia, the Volga Deutsch naturally desired a similar livelihood in the United States.^[56]

In the late 19th century, the local and state governments of Kansas were doing everything in their power to increase immigration into the state. Having only recently becoming a state in 1861, Kansas had much land available for those willing to settle in the West. The Kansas State Board of Agriculture distributed pamphlets advertising all that the state had to offer and providing vital information with regards to land, natural resources, geography, population, and agricultural statistics for prospective farmers. These pamphlets described the legalities regarding homesteads and pre-emptions in an effort to make the process of obtaining land less daunting, especially to foreigners who were trying to navigate their way through unfamiliar lands and governments. ^[57] The state of Kansas, as represented and described by the State Board of Agriculture, was an attractive option for the agriculturally inclined Russian German immigrants.

Private companies even contributed to this process of encouraging individuals to settle in Kansas, with the Kansas Pacific Railroad Company releasing a similar pamphlet which included descriptions of the region and an outline of the monetary value of certain crops, " ...for the information of persons seeking homes in the great west."^[58] The pamphlet boasted that since its birth as a mere territory in 1854, " ...Kansas began to attract a thrifty and desirable class of emigrants ... from Canada and the civilized nations of Europe."^[59] Several pages of the pamphlet were devoted to crop yield in relation to the number of acres needed and the monetary value of the crops. ^[60] The emphasis placed on the monetary value of crops in both the Kansas State Board of Agriculture pamphlet and the Kansas Pacific Railroad Company pamphlet revealed how economically dependent the state was upon agriculture.^[61] The Kansas Pacific Railroad Company pamphlet described, "In a general way, it may be said that Kansas is, primarily, and agricultural state, and its soil is its wealth ..." and therefore, " ...every person who desires to engage in farming or stock raising should come to Kansas."^[62] Given the experience the immigrants had with agriculture along the Volga River Basin in Russia, Kansas was a reasonable choice for settlement, as it provided the opportunity to use their agriculture skills and rebuild their communities in a familiar territory.

While the pamphlets such as those previously mentioned did contain valid and helpful information, they are more accurately described as advertisements as opposed to sources of objective and truthful

information. These pamphlets neglected to mention many, if not all, of the hardships one would encounter in pursuit of agricultural success in an unpredictable climate.[63] Despite the encouraging and exaggerated rhetoric of these advertisements, farming still required heavy labor from individuals who were familiar with the effects climate and natural resources could have upon crops.

The Russian Germans were successful in their agricultural exploits because of their willingness to work communally.[64] The Volga Germans rarely harvested wheat crops without the help of neighbors. Photographs taken in the early part of the 20th century reveal that, despite technological advancements in agriculture, harvesting wheat and operating a threshing machine involved upwards of ten men.[65] In fact, while machinery may have made harvesting easier or more efficient in some respects, it also generally required more supplies, men, and even animals to be used effectively.[66]

In 1905, the Kansas State Board of Agriculture released a report on economy and production as it related to farming within the state. This report revealed a shift in the way farming and agriculture were approached at the turn of the century and stated, "A(n) ... effect of recent agricultural development is therefore to make farming more difficult than formerly, and to exactly that extent it has become unsuited to the extremely ignorant and the grossly incompetent." The common farmer was no longer "common." State leaders attempted to elevate the status of agricultural labor, as the pride of the state of Kansas rested upon its ability to yield immense profits through agriculture. Most importantly, farming had become a competitive business, which Eugene Davenport of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture claimed, " ...call(ed) for high attainments in scientific and practical knowledge, together with a considerable degree of financial ability." In the opinion of government leaders and those politically devoted to the growth and prosperity of Kansas at the turn of the century, agriculture, " ... challenges the best of intellects and rewards the finest training and the keenest study ... it is engaging the attention of best men." [67] If Kansas were to achieve respect and acknowledgement from business interests and marketplaces, it would do so based on agriculture production. As a result, the Russian German population became a vital force in growing the economy of the regions they settled.

Hardships

Immigrant Elam Bartholomew's diaries chronicled how disagreeable weather and climate made agricultural subsistence a difficult pursuit in Kansas, and how dependent neighbors and families were upon one another. By fall and winter, snow storms and sleet were common but occurred erratically. By summer, weather was often oppressive and hot, with rain storms occurring sporadically.[68] High winds in particular made it difficult to complete agricultural tasks.[69] On days when the weather was agreeable, neighbors and family were quick to assist each other in sowing, threshing, cutting, and harvesting wheat. [70] The result of these difficult conditions was a tight knit foreign community.

Alexandria Dinges

The productivity of these agricultural communities was not achieved easily or independently. Members of the community relied heavily upon one another. The difficult realities of climate, weather, and the general unpredictability of the West required that the immigrants maintained strong communal ties to ensure survival. When conditions of nature and weather made survival or productivity difficult, it was necessary for the community to band together to develop new technologies or innovations for survival and efficiency.

Insects and unpredictable weather patterns proved to be the most difficult and continuous obstacles for these farmers. When Kansas suffered grasshopper plagues and wind storms along with other agricultural communities, individuals within the community developed a grasshopper poison which ultimately benefitted all and ensured that the settlement would survive yet another year despite the difficult conditions.^[71] Community cohesion was required to combat the harsh climate and strenuous living conditions in the west. In the Russian German settlements, survival was a group effort.

Despite the difficulties and struggles faced by the Russian German immigrants who settled the West, their communities were ultimately fruitful and thriving. Fortunately, many of the hardships they had experienced along the Volga River Basin in Russia were similar to those they would face in the American West.^[72] They were agriculturally successful, particularly in the production wheat crops, and in fact became well known and respected in the region for their tremendous productivity.^[73] By 1903, Ellis County, Kansas had one of the highest total crop yields and some of the highest crop yields per acre of farmed land in the state.^[74] While temperamental weather and laborious farming was difficult on an individual scale, a community had an easier time at overcoming these struggles of survival and combining the resources necessary to succeed agriculturally in the West.

Familial Structure

As previously mentioned, the Volga Deutsch settled in Kansas not as individuals, but as families. Hattie Plum Williams observed, " ... immigration (had) always been a family movement."^[75] Within Russian German settlements, strong families were the foundation of the community.

Large families, combined with the fact that the Volga Deutsch rarely married people from outside of the community, helped communities grow and strengthen despite their isolation from American society. These conditions ultimately ensured the survival of their culture. Family members depended upon each other to fulfill responsibilities both within the community and within smaller familial units. They were bonded not only by blood, but also by the mutual desire for individual and cultural survival.

While Russian German's rural settlements were initially small, they grew as a result of the emphasis placed upon family. In 1867, the population of Ellis County, Kansas was 5,046.^[76] By 1904, the

population had grown to 11,117.^[77] Given the exclusivity of the ethnic group, bringing outside citizens into the community was not an option.^[78] Marriage with an individual from outside of the ethnic group was difficult for both social and logistical reasons. The Russian Germans were both geographically isolated from American society and unwilling to receive outsiders into their communities. Therefore, population growth had to take place through relations that already existed within the community. This often meant that a few family members would set off for the United States with the intention of earning enough money to pay for the passage and migration of extended family members. Williams commented that, "This immigration (did) not result from ... advertising literature, but almost universally from the encouragement of relatives who preceded the immigration to America."^[79] While the Volga Deutsch valued the fresh start and new agricultural opportunities in the United States, they also placed heavy importance upon family and believed that they would ultimately be more successful if they maintained these relations.

The manner in which the Russian German immigrants related to each other differed from mainstream American society. Williams noted that, "Relationships (were) recognized to a much more extended degree than with us, and second or third cousins, or relatives by marriage, with the relatives thereby acquired, (were) counted as a part of one's 'family.'" As previously mentioned, marrying within the community was highly encouraged. Williams concluded that the Volga Germans' practice of endogamy for, " ... a century and a half has literally made the inhabitants of each village one large family."^[80] Families within some of these communities were so close that outsiders were often of the opinion that all members of the Russian German settlements were related in some way.^[81] The results of such intimacy were large, extended families that grew into whole communities. Therefore, the Russian German communities of the Western United States can best be understood as a family. In relating to each other, they acted as more than just a group of individual family units that comprised a community. They operated as a large and cohesive family.

High birth rates within the Volga German settlements resulted in bigger communities largely held together through kinship. Williams deduced that the average Volga German family consisted of nearly six members while in the same year the average American family consisted of only four. More strikingly, Williams found that nearly seventy percent of Russian German families consisted of eleven to twelve members while American families consisting of as many members was just over twenty percent. Most importantly, youths made up a large percentage of the Russian German populations.^[82] If the Volga Deutsch wished for their unique culture and settlements to continue, they had to nurture future generations.

In creating large families, many Russian Germans were considering the realities of infant mortality. Josef Dillman remembered, " ... large families with children ... A lot of them died." Malaria, pneumonia,

Alexandria Dinges

whooping cough, and other illnesses frequently took the lives of young children.^[83] Russian German families understood that survival was not guaranteed, and therefore took measures to ensure the continued existence of the family by creating large families with many children.

Children

Because families were the base of Russian German communities, the strength of the community and its future was reliant upon the younger Russian German generations. Children were the foundation of the community, and they played a prominent role in the furtherance of the community through their labor and participation in cultural traditions and customs. ^[84]

Parents and children worked together to keep households running, and parents were highly reliant upon the labor of their children.^[85] Russian German children were well aware of their parents' dependence upon them. Bertha Aman emphasized, " ... you didn't tell your parents what you preferred They needed me We were all needed."^[86] Rose Sanger Baeumgartner articulated that Russian German families were structured so that, "Everybody had a job Everybody had their own duty Even as a child."^[87] Russian German children in the agricultural communities of the Western United States were forced to take on difficult and challenging responsibilities as a result of the strenuous living conditions. Childhood held a different meaning for these youths. They were raised to understand the important role they played not only in the family, but in the community as a whole.

Under their parents' guidance, children became skilled in agriculture, homemaking and general survival, including medicine and sanitation.^[88] From caring for younger siblings to tending to crops and livestock, children were entrusted with difficult tasks at a young age.^[89] Within the agricultural settlements of the West, Bertha Aman expressed, "You were your own doctor."^[90] Children were generally expected to care for themselves and their siblings when one fell ill, and could not depend on outside care, or even their parents, who were often otherwise occupied with household chores and responsibilities on the farm.

Once the children were old enough, certain responsibilities were passed onto them from parents or older siblings. Theresa Kuntz Bachmeir recalled that when she finally learned how to sew, "I sewed everything for the children. Sometimes I was sitting until 4 o'clock in the morning and sewing."^[91] Rose Sanger Baeumgartner recalled driving harvested grain into town with the horses at the young age of twelve, "I had to drive the header box. I had to drive it until I could drive it with my eyes closed ... I'd drive so darn fast with the empty box."^[92] Each family member had a distinct role and set of responsibilities, resulting in efficient and successful households in which the children played prominent roles.

Children taking on household chores and responsibilities on the farm did not mean that adults in the family were left to indulge in leisurely activities. When children assumed household responsibilities and elementary tasks women were expected to undertake more grueling work on the farm. Alvina Deutscher Ebel remembered going out to work in the fields when she was 50.^[93] Because survival was a struggle in these rural communities, individuals believed that one must always strive to be a contributing member of the family.

Older generations relied upon the youth for the future flourishing of the community, and large families ensured the survival and productivity of the immediate and extended families, as well as the community as a whole. Despite their isolation from general American society, the Russian Germans enjoyed close geographic proximity, and strong communal and familial bonds within their settlements. The close proximity of extended family encouraged cultural cohesion and resulted in the continuance of language and tradition. The focus upon future generations was indicative of the Russian Germans' concern with the continuance of their culture and communities.

Education

While familial structures laid the foundations for Volga Deutsch communities, language and tradition were the cultural elements that held families together. Despite the fact that the Russian Germans had relocated to two different nations and had not lived in Germany since the 18th century, they managed to preserve their native language and maintain their cultural traditions. Their German background and Russian experiences made them a unique group that did not easily fit into the confines of one ethnic description. The communities' emphasis on tradition and culture, their strict adherence to religious values, and their geographic isolation in both Russia and the United States resulted in tight knit ethnic groups that successfully sustained a unique culture.

Many historians have criticized the limited role that formal education played in Volga German communities as a result of the need for child labor during harvest. When they settled in both Russia and the United States of America, their priority was the education of their children, and therefore they set about building a schoolhouse immediately.^[94] However, it is important to note that while communities did build school houses to educate the youth; children's primary obligations were to their family and the farm. Education frequently took a backseat to the tasks that were necessary for the family to survive and for the farm to be successful.^[95] Nevertheless, education and schooling, however limited when compared to today's standards, played a vital role in the passage of language and tradition to the youth.

Many children had fond memories of the education they received during their childhood. Upon reflection, many Russian German immigrants expressed their love of school and their reluctance to miss school. When Bertha Aman was taken out of school to care for her ailing mother before she passed the

Alexandria Dinges

seventh grade, she remembered, "Well, I felt kind of bad because I wanted to go to school."^[96] The reality that they would not be able to attend school for long did not stop the Russian German parents and their children from appreciating education. Many students even desired more schooling, as it presented much more amusing challenges when compared with farm work and household chores.^[97] Where farm chores were often grueling and tedious, school allowed for the children to socialize with their peers and experience a life independent of their family and household responsibilities.

Most children were not able to stay in school for very long, as they were expected to take on important farm tasks and familial responsibilities at a young age. If and when family tragedy hit, children were even less likely to receive an education past very rudimentary reading and arithmetic skills.^[98] As a result, formal education was a luxury for Russian German children. While the community valued education and learning, the survival of the family and the community as a whole was dependent upon labor and agricultural skills as opposed to reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. Most education did not take place in a school house, but on the family farm.^[99]

The schools of Russian German communities were generally one room country schools that did not offer schooling past the eighth grade, because most students were expected to assume an increasing amount of tasks and responsibilities at home around that age.^[100] Particularly in the early years of settlement, these schoolhouses functioned as both a church and a school. Each community took responsibility for the construction, expenses, and organization of their own schoolhouse.^[101] Additionally, students only attended school for five to six months out of the year. During these months, school was in session in the early morning until around noon, when the children would return home to assist the family with chores.^[102] Girls frequently received more schooling than the boys. This was because boys were desperately needed to assist in harvesting and caring for the livestock which the families subsisted on.^[103]

Regardless of the fact that children only attended school for a limited number of years, education, combined with Sunday school, ensured that the German language would not dissipate in the United States settlements. Teachers at the country school houses most often taught in German and sermons were delivered in the native language of the congregation.^[104] When the nation's school system began to develop, the Russian Germans had to forfeit much of the influence and control they previously held over the material taught in the schoolhouses.^[105]

The development of the modern school system provided state officials with more influence as they began to hire instructors who taught lesson plans in English. To compensate for this perceived loss, the Volga Deutsch often worked together to hire a teacher who would conduct religious sermons in German

and teach their children the language.^[106] As a result, one of the most important elements of Volga Deutsch culture, the German language, managed to survive in a foreign nation.

While formal education within the Volga German settlements was not as extensive and was not structured like the education system in other regions of the nation, it did not mean that these immigrants did not value education. The realities of life in the west often made it difficult for one to pursue a formal education, but the little education opportunities the children did receive were highly treasured. Within the Volga Deutsch settlements, most of one's education took place on the farm as opposed to in the school house.

Customs

Traditions, customs, and celebrations all played a vital role in maintaining a strong Russian German community. Such events lifted spirits and were a consistent reminder of the group's native culture and traditions. Holidays and celebrations such as Christmas, matrimony, and even funerals, were opportunities for the entire community to gather and connect with one another within more jovial settings.^[107]

The Russian Germans had a unique approach to holidays such as Christmas. Within these communities, young children did not look forward to Santa Claus delivering gifts during the night. Instead, the children were visited by the *Christkindle* an angelic child who wore a white dress adorned with lace, and a veil to cover her face. The *Christkindle* would directly question each child about their behavior throughout the year and determine whether or not they were deserving of gifts.^[108] On Christmas morning, the little Christ child would extend bags of candy to the children who had behaved throughout the year. As the children reached for the goodies, she would hit their hands with a small swatch she carried.^[109] For Christmas, children received small candies and toys, but nothing to the extent of what children in the United States receive today. Oranges were the most coveted of all, but these were rarely received.^[110] Practices such as these-ones of mythical figures who distribute punishment and modest gift giving-symbolized the value of discipline within the communities.

Gift giving among adults was rare for all occasions, including Christmas.^[111] In general, Christmas festivities among the people were not commercialized. Instead, these festivities were focused upon spirituality. These occasions were anticipated because these immigrants valued time with family above all else. Children and adults alike visited with each other and enjoyed each other's company in a modest celebration of Christmas. This celebration is evidence of the Volga Germans' ability to preserve their traditions and culture, as these were practices brought over from Germany.

Alexandria Dinges

Matrimony was another cause for celebration, and the Volga Germans went to great lengths to give the couple in question a happy beginning, with the wedding festivities lasting for two to three days.^[112] Courtship was a more serious matter that often involved the whole community in some way. The young couple had to obtain the blessings and permission of both families, in addition to undergoing rigorous examinations by local religious leaders.^[113] Such a union involved the family, church, and general community on many different levels. Following the fulfillment of such obligations, the community set about planning for the actual wedding celebration.

With hundreds of guests in attendance, weddings were often wild and exciting occasions for the community.^[114] Eating, dancing, and drinking in celebration of a marriage would often last for a few days. Several women in the community would be asked to cook throughout the celebration. Such a request was considered a compliment and an honor. Rye bread, sausage, vegetable soups, salads and cake would sustain the wedding guests. At the end of the two or three days, the cooks would emerge from the kitchen and receive applause as a hat was passed around and filled with money in appreciation for their hard work. ^[115] Without the contributions of the community, such festivities would not have been possible.

As previously mentioned, adults did not often exchange gifts for holidays or celebrations. In the event of weddings, the Volga Deutsch developed unique games and events that allowed the wedding guests to contribute to the couple's future monetarily. In lieu of tangible gifts, those who wished to dance with the bride would pin money on her dress. Presumably, the more the guests indulged, the larger the donations became. Additionally, it was customary for a member of the wedding party to steal one of the bride's shoes and auction it off to the guests. The funds would of course be given to the newlyweds at the end of the celebration. ^[116] Such practices are again examples of how the community supported each other in an effort to ensure the overall success of the settlement.

While all were jubilant and excitable during the wedding festivities, there was an understanding that work and labor would commence soon after. The young bride would have to adjust to the new expectations of her role as an adult and housewife. One Volga Deutsch verse expresses the sentiments of young wives after the wedding:

Bride, take off your bridal wreath
Hang it there upon the wall,
Grieve no more, it is too late,
For you now have sealed your fate
And a housewife you're withal.^[117]

Immediately following the wedding jubilee, the community, including the newlyweds, resumed the hard work and labor necessary for survival. Regardless, this reality did not hamper the spirited and merry atmosphere of Volga Deutsch weddings. These unique traditions revealed that marriage within a Russian German community did not only involve the two individuals getting married. The families, church, and neighbors played a vital role in the couple's beginning with the understanding that the newlyweds would soon become supporting members of the society.

While funerals were in no way high occasions, the Volga Deutsch managed them with unwavering piety and steadfast faith. Sick individuals approaching death spent their last days at home, being cared for by women within their family.^[118] Upon their passing, the local church again played a vital role in funeral gatherings, and was the first to announce the death of a community member through the ringing of church bells.^[119] Religious beliefs proved to be a comfort to the Russian Germans in the event of death.

In the days after the death of an individual, neighbors and extended family would visit the grieving family's home and show their support by bringing food and often leaving at least one person to stay with the family overnight.^[120] The deceased relative would be kept in a coffin in the home, and the family would cease normal sleeping hours to pray for the departed. Gatherings would often include card games and socializing as the family and their loved ones passed the time until the funeral.^[121] A small religious ceremony was held in the home in the days following their death.^[122] While such gatherings were mournful, their pious nature provided the Russian Germans with comfort and assurance. Although the deceased's body was no longer with them on earth, it was believed that their soul lived on with God.^[123] Therefore, death did not necessarily represent the end to the Volga Germans. It was mourned, but accepted. Most importantly, the grieving family could spiritually and tangibly depend upon the love and support of their neighbors and extended family.

During all of these celebrations, the guests prepared and indulged in German food, German songs and music provided entertainment, and all partook in German dances.^[124] Unique German elements of mainstream holidays such as Christmas remained intact and were passed on to the children of the settlements to ensure that the traditions would survive.^[125] German foods in particular served to bridge the gap between generations, particularly between mothers and daughters.^[126] In celebrations, food was cooked and shared by all, and functioned as a tangible symbol of a mutual heritage and culture. When the German language was abandoned by the youth who were being forced to assimilate, German food remained a strong and consistent pillar of the community. German food was traditional in its preparation and occasion, and provided regular opportunities for the community to indulge and partake in unique German traditions.

Alexandria Dinges

These celebrations provided reprieve from the realities of survival and the tedium of household chores and farm work. They also assisted the community in the preservation of their culture. Traditions and celebrations gave individuals the opportunity to build fuller and more substantial relationships based upon something other than survival or productivity. Ultimately, these customs and traditions guaranteed the continuance of productive Russian German communities.

Conclusion

For the Germans from Hesse, migration to and settlement in Russia was an escape from the violence and political oppression that the German region still suffered from following the Thirty Years War. While this even in their history may seem trivial, it is important to recognize how the immigrants' Russian experiences influenced their culture and development. Their experiences in Russia allowed for them to experiment with social structures and define themselves as a unique community.

During their settlement in Russia, the Volga Germans managed to organize themselves in a manner that encouraged economic success while allowing for personal liberties. Colonizing the desolate borderlands of Russia along the Volga River was initially challenging, and many immigrants found themselves unable to cope with the difficult realities of the Russian borderlands.^[127] Despite these initial struggles, the group managed to develop productive and rational religious, political, and familial systems which aided in the groups' survival and an agricultural flourishing.

As previously mentioned, this era of triumph along the Volga River was relatively short-lived, as the Russian Empire was swallowed up in political turmoil which often led to violence against and abhorrence for minority populations. By the 19th century, the Volga Deutsch began looking to new horizons where they could be free from political, economic, cultural, and religious oppression.^[128] In studying the Volga Deutsch, it becomes evident that their Russian experiences ultimately laid the foundations for their successful immigration to and settlement in the United States of America.

By the 1860's and 1870's, the Russian Germans began making their way out of the Russian steppes and into the eastern United States of America. Though happy to be settled in a nation that allowed for the religious, personal, and economic freedoms they desired, many found the urban centers of the eastern United States stifling, and many struggled with the moral decay they witnessed in the cities. Additionally, agricultural pursuits were difficult, if not impossible to undertake in the east.

German ministers and religious leaders were the first to explore the vast opportunities the West had to offer.^[129] Many German religious leaders saw the west as a chance to begin anew and lay the foundations for pious and moral communities.

On the other end, the federal governments, local governments in the west, and private foundations heavily promoted and encouraged migration to the west.^[130] The federal government recognized that the expansion of the United States was wholly dependent upon the movement of peoples westward. Additionally, the debate over slavery meant that private foundations such as the New England Emigrant Aid Society were eager to support groups and communities who supported their ideas and values.^[131] The anti-slavery sentiments of the Russian Germans ultimately benefitted and earned them financial support for their travel and settlement in the West.

Just as religion played a vital role in maintaining structure and values within the Volga Deutsch culture, agriculture also played a central role. It was the agricultural roots of these communities which set them apart from other German and Russian cultures which existed within the United States.

To many, the west was a mysterious and wild region saturated with unknown dangers. Exaggerated accounts of hostile climates, wild animals, and ruthless Indian tribes kept many individuals and groups from exploring the west. For the Volga Deutsch, such tales did not deter them, as they had already survived similar calamities on the Russian Steppes.^[132] Instead, these immigrants dealt with such climactic struggles communally and creatively. Rarely did they yield to nature despite its frequent ferocity and aggressiveness.

Many of these natural obstacles served to strengthen the community. The immigrants understood that survival in the remote settlements of the western United States required that they contribute to the community and support one other. As detailed by many Volga Germans themselves, the farms were only productive when families and communities worked together.^[133]

Because they remained relatively secluded from mainstream society, many outsiders had little understanding of the Russian Germans' origins and culture. Eastern European immigrants suffered a low social status as many charged them with being un-American and felt their jobs were threatened by immigrants who worked for low wages. As a result, many outsiders remained suspicious of the foreigners and even displayed mild animosity towards them.^[134] One could argue that such conditions resulted in further isolation and exclusion from mainstream American society.

While some citizens did express negative opinions of the foreigners, many acknowledged the hard work and productivity put forth by the Russian Germans in the Midwestern United States. Journalists in particular expressed a desire to better understand the Russian Germans and the unique communities they independently built. While many journalists sought to encourage understanding and acceptance of the Russian Germans, their positive opinions of the immigrants were often based upon their assertions that they were in fact highly Americanized.^[135]

Alexandria Dinges

The Volga Deutsch were not valued or respected for their unique traditions and culture or the efforts they displayed to maintain them. They did, however, receive much recognition for their economic contributions to the state in the form of high agricultural production during the 20th century. [136] Additionally, as previously mentioned, their communities were respected for their morality and values, especially as they pertained to the issue of slavery. [137]

Given that the immigrants did not use slave labor, the economic successes of their farms were completely dependent upon assistance from other community members and primarily, their children. This reality resulted in high birth rates among the Russian Germans. [138] The effects of such large families combined with geographic isolation resulted in closely related communities. Family laid the foundation for the community as a whole, and familial relations were highly valued amongst the Volga Germans.

Such high birth rates and dependence upon familial support meant that a family's survival was almost primarily dependent upon the children. In effect, the survival and furtherance of the Volga Deutsch culture and community rested solely upon the youth. Children assumed complex and difficult tasks at a young age, and essentially assisted the parents in every household task, from raising the younger children, to completing household chores and farm work. [139] This reality often meant that children sacrificed their formal education in exchange for an education in sanitation, child care, and agriculture. [140]

Traditions, language, and customs were important elements of the Russian German culture and were responsible for community interactions outside of work and labor. Celebrations and holidays were an exception to the generally grim and routine lifestyles of the immigrants. Traditional food and language connected the immigrants in a ways that mutual struggles and hard labor never could. If not for such celebrations, the individuals would have little to hold them together aside from the pragmatic reasons previously mentioned.

The wanderlust of the Volga Deutsch throughout the 18th and 19th centuries was ignited by their consistent determination and desire for freedom and success. Their cultural values and the strength of their communities played a vital role in their survival and their ability to flourish in foreign nations. While the unique and personal elements of many immigrant cultures tend to dissipate once they arrive in America and assimilate into mainstream culture, the culture of Germans from Russia remained strong and intact. The Volga German culture is an example of a unique, tight knit society that managed to retain many, if not all, of the cultural elements that set it apart from America culture. The present existence of Volga German societies and institutions testifies to the ethnic group's prominence within the Midwest. To this day, their presence is strong within the Midwest. The Russian German community

was built upon the common understanding that they needed one another to survive and that they would continue German traditions together.

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[8] Ibid., 19.

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[11] Hattie Plum Williams, *The Czars Germans: With Particular Reference to the Volga Germans*(Nebraska: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1975), 101.

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[13] Ibid., 115.

[14] Ibid., 106.

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[16] Ibid., 126.

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[18] James Mayfield, "The Vanquished Volga German Community,"<http://expelledgermans.org/volgagermans.htm>, 27 January 2011.

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Alexandria Dinges

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[31] Ibid.

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Alexandria Dinges

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68 Voces Novae, Vol 3, No 1 (2012)

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