

The Old God Still Lives

**Ethnic Germans in Czarist and Soviet Ukraine
Write Their American Relatives
1915-1924**



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INTRODUCTION

The letters in this volume chronicle a decade of correspondence from German-speaking villagers in Czarist and Soviet Ukraine to their relatives, friends, and acquaintances in the Americas. Selected from German language newspapers in the United States—and some from unpublished sources—the letters in this collection cover a time period which begins in 1915, roughly a year after the last of the ethnic Germans departed Czarist Ukraine for America; and ends with letters published or written during 1924, by which time the Soviet regime had seized power.

This volume is meant as a companion volume to *We'll Meet Again in Heaven: Germans in the Soviet Union Write Their American Relatives, 1925-1937*. Together, the two books include a cross-section of over two decades of correspondence from German speaking villagers in Ukraine to their relatives and friends in the Americas: members of a distinct, although little known, ethnic group known as Germans from Russia, Germanic speaking craftsmen and farmers invited into the Czarist Empire, beginning in 1762 (Height, 1985).

Describing the gradual dissolution of an entire way of life—"Think of how good we once lived here," writes one German villager to a relative in America—the letters here reveal the perspective of German villagers under both the Czarist and Soviet regimes: "history from below" as scholars call it; and even the most mundane letters are richly informative of life in the steppe villages the Germans from Russia in America once called home: about harvest and seeding, about religious beliefs and superstitions, about family relationships and bonds of responsibility between German villagers in Ukraine and those who'd moved on to the Dakotas, among other places, in earlier decades.

During the World War I period—the letters clearly show this fact—hatred of all things German exploded into demonisation and racial prejudice against these once prosperous villagers, so easily identifiable in their colonies. Between 1915 and 1945, at least a million members of this ethnic minority died from starvation, exposure, and execution (Sinner, 2000a).

An overlooked tragedy was mass expulsion of Volhynian Germans from their villages in 1915-1916. It was a preemptive measure, taken with immense disregard for human life; the regime, under Czar Nicholas, saw ethnic German farmers in that location as a ready base for an attack by the German military during WWI; and the expulsion was a direct act of anti-German fervor against colonists, who in living so detached an existence from the native

population in the Czarist Empire, were deemed untrustworthy (Gatrell, 2005).

Several letters in this collection, written by Volhynian Germans, describe their plight as they were forced eastwards from their homes; another letter by a colonist from the Black Sea region mentions the refugees who'd come to his village, and their hair-raising stories. Great numbers of the Volhynian German expelled, at least fifty thousand, and up to one hundred forty thousand, succumbed to hunger, disease, and exposure (Giesinger, 19-81; Rummel, 1997).

The letters often mention the conscription of the German villagers' sons, who fought and died in great numbers on the "slaughter fields" of WWI, while, at the same time, besides the onus of the field and farm labor on those least able to do it, there was the restriction of the language and overall rights of German-speaking villagers. It was, for instance, illegal to speak German in the presence of Russians.

Then, in the wake of WWI came the Russian Revolution, and the Civil War, when a variety of political factions, including Bolsheviks, Makhno's anarchists, Ukrainian nationalists, and monarchal Whites, were engaged in the fight for control of the country. During that same time, other countries, Germany, Austria, France, and Bulgaria among them, were present in Ukraine in various roles, further complicating the situation (Height, 1985).

At one point in 1919, the German villagers staged an armed uprising against Bolsheviks, whose extreme cruelty—tongues were cut out, eyes gouged, and helpless citizens maimed, raped, and killed—provoked much fear and panic. Those who were able, fled. Once the Bolsheviks seized power permanently, life in the German villages remained precarious.

Between 1919-1921, this ethnic group, so easily identifiable in their German enclaves, paid a heavy toll. During Lenin's ruthless war-communism phase, the Bolsheviks requisitioned grain at gunpoint; those opposed were executed. There were mass executions of German villagers in Selz, Grossliebental, and Rastatt (Height, 1985).

Under the fledgling Bolshevik regime the economic system, hastened by drought, and by grain requisitions, broke down. In 1921 and 1922, Ukraine suffered widespread famine. Millions died. Finally, this famine was ended with aid in the form of food packages and mobile kitchens provided by the American Relief Association. During the New Economic Policy period, Lenin relented on his push to eradicate private property, though conditions in German villages did not much improve (Giesinger, 1996; Patenaude, 2002).

During this decade, American relatives provided much help to their families and friends in South Russia, now Ukraine, whether in the form of clothing, food drafts, newspapers, or emotional sustenance. That their American relatives prayed for them and cared for their welfare, emotionally and physically, was important to German villagers, who rejoiced that the bond of “*alte Liebe*”—old love—remained steadfast through the decades, helping many endure stunning poverty (Vossler, 2001).

Imagine naked children during December when temperatures dipped below freezing; or clothing was made from sacks; or families so impoverished members took turns wearing the same item of clothing to attend church or leave the house. Why were German villagers in such dire need of clothing? The simple answer, if the letters are accurate: the Bolsheviks removed the clothing, from the elderly, the sick, and, even, a wounded veteran; they also took personal property, livestock, tools, horses, harnesses, furniture, and, of course, grain. All this because the once prosperous German villagers were an easy target—many colonies were within several hours of Odessa—and also because they were considered as *kulaks*—a Russian and Ukrainian word for fist—which came to mean a privileged class, to be stripped of their wealth in the Soviet Paradise. The Bolsheviks were directly responsible for countless deaths in the German villages, not only by executions and murder, but from starvation, epidemics, diseases associated with malnourishment, and deaths from exposure, particularly among the elderly and children. Appropriation of property—obtained illegally, it was said, through the sweat of others—broke down the village system of the ethnic Germans. The worst was when draught animals were removed. That meant there was no more dried animal manure—*misch*—to burn for fuel; and without livestock, farmers were forced to hitch themselves to their own plows, if any remained.

Fields which the German colonists inherited from their ancestors, promised to them “for an eternity” by the Russian crown, were taken away. Land was then re-divided, with each soul receiving two *dessiatines* of land, roughly five acres. Communal granaries—the place where grain was stored as insurance against failed harvests during the time of the Czars—were also eliminated. When grain was removed from the German villages, either by high taxation, or by the regime’s grain requisitioning parties, disaster often followed.

One important aspect of these letters is that from the onset they reveal the true nature of the Bolsheviks, not only by the use of terror, but by the use of food as a weapon against both German and Ukrainian villagers in the early 1920s. Those two policies—terror and forced hunger—remained, overall, quiescent during the New Economic Policy years. It was their resurgence during Stalin’s collectivization push, starting in 1928, which resulted in millions of

deaths from forced hunger, executions, and exile of peasants to labor camps.

Most of the letters in this volume were written with the censor in mind. Censors actively read letters entering and leaving Ukraine and other parts of Russia, both under Czarist rule, especially during WW1, and again, when the Bolsheviks seized power. Not a few writers attempted to circumvent or outwit censors. One writer placed a letter between the pages of the family Bible, hoping God's power might restore what the censor blacked out.

One editor of a German language newspaper provided the code for one letter, so readers could translate the mundane details of an angry father fighting with his wife into its real reference—that the Czar was unable to control his Duma, the elected legislative assembly: information considered politically sensitive. Other letters in this collection, especially the ones which relate rather disturbing or confusing information, may also contain messages to which we don't have the codes. Other accounts of letters written during the Soviet era make mention of similar codes (Schmemmann, 1999).

Aware of the regime's scrutiny, most writers avoided specifics about the broader political situation, usually settling on the mundane recitation of complaints, of high prices, of little food or clothing, along with hints or direct statements about the value of remaining silent. Restraints didn't hinder messages written by German refugees from Ukraine settling elsewhere in Europe—letters extremely critical and specific about the unsettling events in the German villages. One letter, especially, is worthy of mention: it was written in 1922 from Kirtum, Latvia, by a female, the daughter of a person of note from Grossliebental, which was a German village in the Odessa district.

This writer details Bolshevik atrocities, including a recitation of how the director of an orphanage sadistically enjoyed the murder, from starvation or exposure, of the German children under his charge, murders of racial hate in the writer's eyes. The letter writer blames the Jews for removing all the grain from German villages, causing many to starve to death during the 1921 famine.

The writer also claims large numbers of Jews occupied positions of authority in the Soviet regime. Other letter writers make the same claim—"all the commissars are Jewish..."—which has some basis in fact, since Bolsheviks were at least one faction, perhaps the only one, which didn't discriminate against Jews in Ukraine, especially during the Civil War.

It was during this time Jews enlisted in large numbers in the regime's secret police and Red

Army; and grain requisitioning in German colonies during this same period was “generally carried out under leadership of Jews...” (Height, 1987, p. 369).

Some of these letters may be a footnote in the study of the Holocaust, revealing as they do at least one way that anti-Semitism, as part of cycles of ethnic revenge, was both spread and fueled in Europe and Ukraine. It seems quite likely that events in Ukraine during the early Bolshevik regime were the origin of a prejudice that Jews were Bolsheviks, thereby erasing the distinction between the regime itself and the activists who enforced its ruthless policies.

This prejudice—which Hitler and the Nazi leadership also espoused, out of either ethnic hate, expediency or both—ignored one simple fact: “...many Jews were conservatives, liberals, social democrats, or else apolitical...” (Burleigh, 2000, p. 572). Most chilling was the vow of revenge penned by the Kirtum writer in 1922, whose virulent language seems to presage the Holocaust: “This situation will give rise to a slaughter of Jews such as history has never seen. Even babies in their cribs will not be spared, for the Jews will have earned their own terrible reward.”

Overall, the letters in this volume were written by people who, to use the infamous phrase, were the “eggs that were cracked” to make the Soviet omelet; and it is our intention, in completing these translations, to let the writers speak for themselves—bitter, anti-Semitic, resigned, dignified, thankful, desperate, lonely, and religious.

These letters make it obvious, given the wide-spread circulation of the German language newspapers in America that the entire Dakota pioneer generation knew about events in the old homeland; these letters, then, are the tragic, Greek-like chorus against which many of the pioneer generation measured their New World experience; they counted themselves lucky if they had food and a roof over their heads, and, inured to difficulty and privation, taught their American descendants the same attitude.

Yet members of this ethnic Germans from Russia in America rarely, if ever, mentioned the grim events in the old country to their rapidly-assimilating offspring, despite the fact that it was their own direct relatives—parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and even siblings—who were starved, murdered, or exiled. It seems clear enough why the pioneer generation said so little about the old country to their offspring. They wanted to spare them the burden of their grim ethnic history—something true in the 1920s, and which became even more true during the Soviet collectivization years, which began in 1928.