

Germans from Russia Summary

by Clyde Eisenbeis (a:3.1.5.3.7-4.8.2.1.3-7.1), 1 May 1988. The following information comes from "The Emigration from Germany to Russia in the years 1763 to 1862", by Karl Stumpp, and from many other sources listed in the Acknowledgments.

Imagine being told, "Come live in my country. No taxes. You won't have to serve in the army. Interest free loans for ten years. We'll give you free land. You can run your churches as you like. You can run your schools as you like. You can run your villages and judicial courts as you like. No export or import taxes. We'll even pay for your transportation after you reach our borders. The only stipulations are that you have a skill or trade, that you have a family, and that you have some money."

That sounds pretty good, even by today's standards! Add to this that in your own country you are being persecuted for the religion that you follow, the land has been subdivided so often there is nothing left to inherit from your parents, and the rulers periodically take your sons and sell them to other countries to fight wars as mercenaries.

The offer in the first paragraph was made by the leaders in Russia, and the living conditions described in the second paragraph were the plight of the Germans. It is easy to see why thousands of Germans moved from what is now Germany to Russia.

In the late 1700's, Catherine the Great of Russia, and later her grandson, issued proclamations inviting Germans to resettle on the southern steppes of Russia, first in the Volga River region and then later in the Black Sea region (also known as the Odessa region). This land had been reclaimed by Russia from Turkey, and now Catherine the Great wanted to add a buffer by inviting people who had no loyalty whatsoever to Turkey. In addition, the area had great untapped potential as an agricultural center, and what better way to develop this area than by using the hard working, industrious Germans.

Catherine the Great issued a proclamation on 22 Jul 1763 inviting all Europeans to move to Russia. The proclamation included:

1. We permit all foreigners to come into Our Empire, in order to settle in all the gouvernements, just as each one may desire.
2. After arrival, such foreigners can report for this purpose not only to the Guardianship Chancellery established for foreigners in Our residence, but also, if more convenient, to the governor or commanding officer in one of the border-towns of the Empire.
3. Since those foreigners who would like to settle in Russia will also include some who do not have sufficient means to pay the required travel costs, they can report to our ministers in foreign courts, who will not only transport them to Russia at Our expense, but also provide them with travel money.
4. As soon as these foreigners arrive in Our residence and report at the Guardianship Chancellery or in a border-town, they shall be required to state their true decision, whether their real desire is to be enrolled in the guild of merchants or artisans, and become citizens, and in what city; or if they wish to settle on free, productive land in colonies and rural areas, to take up agriculture or some other useful occupation. Without delay, these people will be assigned to their destination, according to their own wishes and desires. From the following register* it can be seen in which regions of Our Empire free and suitable lands are still available. However, besides those listed, there are many more regions and all kinds of land where We will likewise permit people to settle, just as each one chooses for his best advantage.
5. Upon arrival in Our Empire, each foreigner who intends to become a settler and has reported to the Guardianship Chancellery or in other border-towns of Our Empire and, as already prescribed in § 4, has declared his decision, must take the oath of allegiance in accordance with his religious rite.
6. In order that the foreigners who desire to settle in Our Empire may realize the extent of Our benevolence to their benefit and advantage, this is Our will --:
 - We grant to all foreigners coming into Our Empire the free and unrestricted practice of their religion according to the precepts and usage of their Church. To those, however, who intend to settle not in cities but in colonies and villages on uninhabited lands we grant the freedom to build churches and belltowers, and to maintain the necessary number of priests and church servants, but not the construction of monasteries. On the other hand, everyone is hereby warned not to persuade or induce any of the Christian co-religionists living in Russia to accept or even assent to his faith or join his religious community, under pain of incurring

the severest punishment of Our laws. This prohibition does not apply to the various nationalities on the borders of Our Empire who are attached to the Mahometan faith. We permit and allow everyone to win them over and make them subject to the Christian religion in a decent way.

- None of the foreigners who have come to settle in Russia shall be required to pay the slightest taxes to our treasury, nor be forced to render regular or extraordinary services, nor to billet troops. Indeed, everybody shall be exempt from all taxes and tribute in the following manner: those who have been settled as colonists with their families in hitherto uninhabited regions will enjoy 30 years of exemption; those who have established themselves, at their own expense, in cities as merchants and tradesmen in Our Residence St. Petersburg or in the neighboring cities of Livland, Esthonia, Ingermanland, Carelia and Finland, as well as in the Residential city of Moscow, shall enjoy 5 years of tax-exemption. Moreover, each one who comes to Russia, not just for a short while but to establish permanent domicile, shall be granted free living quarters for half a year.
 - All foreigners who settle in Russia either to engage in agriculture and some trade, or to undertake to build factories and plants will be offered a helping hand and the necessary loans required for the construction of factories useful for the future, especially of such as have not yet been built in Russia.
 - For the building of dwellings, the purchase of livestock needed for the farmstead, the necessary equipment, materials, and tools for agriculture and industry, each settler will receive the necessary money from Our treasury in the form of an advance loan without any interest. The capital sum has to be repaid only after ten years, in equal annual instalments in the following three years.
 - We leave to the discretion of the established colonies and village the internal constitution and jurisdiction, in such a way that the persons placed in authority by Us will not interfere with the internal affairs and institutions. In other respects the colonists will be liable to Our civil laws. However, in the event that the people would wish to have a special guardian or even an officer with a detachment of disciplined soldiers for the sake of security and defense, this wish would also be granted.
 - To every foreigner who wants to settle in Russia We grant complete duty-free import of his property, no matter what it is, provided, however, that such property is for per-sonal use and need, and not intended for sale. However, any family that also brings in unneeded goods for sale will be granted free import on goods valued up to 300 rubles, provided that the family remains in Russia for at least 10 years. Failing which, it will be required, upon its departure, to pay the duty both on the incoming and outgoing goods.
 - The foreigners who have settled in Russia shall not be drafted against their will into the military or the civil service during their entire stay here. Only after the lapse of the years of tax-exemption can they be required to provide labor service for the country. Whoever wishes to enter military service will receive, besides his regular pay, a gratuity of 30 rubles at the time he enrolls in the regiment.
 - As soon as the foreigners have reported to the Guardianship Chancellery or to our border towns and declared their decision to travel to the interior of the Empire and establish domicile there, they will forthwith receive food rations and free transportation to their destination.
 - Those among the foreigners in Russia who establish factories, plants, or firms, and produce goods never before manufactured in Russia, will be permitted to sell and export freely for ten years, without paying export duty or excise tax.
 - Foreign capitalists who build factories, plants, and concerns in Russia at their own expense are permitted to purchase serfs and peasants needed for the operation of the factories.
 - We also permit all foreigners who have settled in colonies or villages to establish market days and annual market fairs as they see fit, without having to pay any dues or taxes to Our treasury.
7. All the afore-mentioned privileges shall be enjoyed not only by those who have come into our country to settle there, but also their children and descendants, even though these are born in Russia, with the provision that their years of exemption will be reckoned from the day their forebears arrived in Russia.
8. After the lapse of the stipulated years of exemption, all the foreigners who have settled in Russia are required to pay the ordinary moderate contributions and, like our other subjects, provide labor-service for their country. Finally, in the event that any foreigner who has settled in Our Empire and has become subject to Our authority should desire to leave the country, We shall grant him the liberty to do so, provided, however, that he is obligated to remit to Our treasury a portion of the assets he has gained in this country; that is, those who have been here

from one to five years will pay one-fifth, while those who have been here for five or more years will pay one-tenth. Thereafter each one will be permitted to depart unhindered anywhere he pleases to go.

9. If any foreigner desiring to settle in Russia wishes for certain reasons to secure other privileges or conditions besides those already stated, he can apply in writing or in person to our Guardianship Chancellery, which will report the petition to Us. After examining the circumstances, We shall not hesitate to resolve the matter in such a way that the petitioner's confidence in Our love of justice will not be disappointed.

Given at the Court of Peter, July 22, 1763 in the Second Year of Our Reign.

*The register lists the areas where the immigrants can be settled.

This manifesto was very soon followed by many supplementary stipulations', for instance the enactment of March 19, 1764, concerning the right to own land.

The proclamation was distributed to all European countries. It was mostly Germans who responded. Russia contracted private entrepreneurs, notable French, Swiss, and Belgians to help recruit.

About 30,000 Germans accepted Catherine the Great's offer in the 1760's and moved to the Volga River region. Later during the reign of Tsar Alexander I, grandson of Catherine the Great, more than a hundred thousand emigrated to the Odessa Region of South Russia.

Over a period of a century they established villages and schools and churches. They built an agricultural center that became the "bread basket" of the European world. They grew enough food to feed Russia and still had enough left to export to other countries. And they kept their German language and traditions.

By the late 1800's, the Germans comprised only 10% of the population but owned 90% of the land. Many Russians were working for the Germans as hired-hands and servants. It was one of the best examples of capitalism in action (in Russia of all places) where people were given a free hand to develop an industry!

The tide began to turn in the late 1800's. Russians had been complaining about having to serve in the army when the Germans didn't and that the Germans ran many of the towns, churches, and schools. It didn't seem right to the Russian citizens that these foreigners, many of whom had retained their German citizenship, were controlling things in Russia. Eventually the rulers of Russia agreed and began to change the rules.

At first the Russians began to assume roles as judges, and, in court, in cases of Russian vs. German, the verdict usually came out in favor of the Russians. Over time, things got worse, and some Germans left Russia. In 1871 all privileges were revoked; from then on the Germans became subject to military service.

During this same time, in the mid to late 1800's, railroad companies in the U.S. were making major progress in building railroads across the Midwest to the west coast. To help cover their costs, they were given land alongside the railroad which they in turn sold to new settlers. But there weren't enough people in the U.S. who wanted to move, and so the railroad companies began to solicit customers in European countries.

This combination of the Germans wanting to move from Russia and the need for more settlers by the U.S. railroads led to a mass migration of Germans from Russia to North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, where fertile land was open and available.

An additional factor in the movement to the Dakota's, Nebraska, and Kansas vs. settling in Ohio, Iowa, and Minnesota (where land was also available) had to do with the cultural background of the Germans.

In Russia, the Germans were used to living together as one community. Lutherans lived in one colony, and Catholics lived in another. And the Schwäbisch dialect they spoke was slightly different.

People married those from their area and lived there too. German was the native tongue and was spoken in business, in church, and in school. They celebrated together and lived together, because Catherine the Great gave them that option when they first moved to Russia.

In the U.S. things were different. They had to live wherever they could find land. While there was land available in other parts of the U.S., in the Dakota's, Nebraska, and Kansas they could obtain contiguous tracts of land and all live close together as a community as they had for centuries before.

And this they did. The land they homesteaded was next to land that friends and relatives from their Russian communities homesteaded. They built their towns and churches and schools in these areas and kept the German customs and language an integral part of their lives.

Home life, social gatherings, business, and church were all conducted with the German language (until the 1950's and 1960's in parts of the Dakota's). The customs and the language of the community were German.

But some things were different. Speaking German in school was not part of the curriculum and in some schools was not allowed. And so generations began appearing who spoke more English than German.

But the greatest hardship was a provision of the Homestead Act. This act, established by the U.S. Congress, provided inexpensive land for the risk-takers who wanted to settle a new frontier. To discourage land speculators from buying the land and later reselling it at a higher price, the act required the owner to live on the land.

This forced a hardship on the Germans from Russia, as they were used to living as a community in a village and traveling daily out to the country to farm the land. Now the farmers could no longer live together. They had to live "on the land". This caused enormous loneliness, especially for the wives who hardly ever traveled anywhere.

But survive the hardships they did! When the Germans from Russia first arrived in the Dakota's, they were overjoyed to see the vast amounts of rolling hills covered with grass and no trees! Instead of having to clear trees like the settlers did in Wisconsin and Minnesota, they could put the plow right into the ground and plant a crop immediately in the spring.

Being industrious and knowing how to farm the land, they created for the second time, another major "bread basket" of the world, an extraordinary achievement!