

## 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 Selected from German language newspapers in the United States—and some from unpublished sources—the letters in this collection cover a time period which begins in 1915, roughly a year after the last of the ethnic Germans departed Czarist Ukraine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—*mischt*—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

24 August, 1922



Kirtum, Latvia

15 May, 1922

Dear Mr. Pastor and wife,

It is hard to write, because to write is to remember the pain. The village of Grossliebental in South Russia still stands, but with sadness and tribulation as it stares into the future. You know exactly the history of the village up to the year 1920. But now the situation has reached a critical point. The hunger grows worse, affecting more and more people, and if their loved ones do not give their help and support at the right time, the situation there will be the same as on the Volga.

Just yesterday, we received a letter from Papa. Oh, all the things that have happened since we left the village. A person almost can't grasp the extremity of it. Each day from ten to seventeen people die. Entire families die out at the same time. Papa writes that he can't total all of the dead, but gave some names. The old Schmidtgall is one. He was already quite starved when we were still there. His old wife still lives. Margaret Plochner is another. Elizabeth is in her last days. Widow Rivinius. Three Haberle brothers. Johan who lived on Gypsy Street. Karl from the old village. Fritz and his oldest son from Steinbuckel. Johann Fuchs, my brother-in-law's brother. Ludwig Fuch's son, who graduated from the central school. He drove to Podolia to get bread and died of spotted typhus. Almost all who went to Podolia had to stay there or else died after returning to home. They brought often back nothing more than a pound of bread, if even that. Yes many, as it is said, won't come back, and how the poor people are now tormented.

When I read Papa's letter, I was overcome with pain. He said the church committee has it very difficult lately. Each day they must go to the cemetery and watch that the corpses are buried deep enough in the graves, because the laborers who dig graves don't care. In one grave four to six corpses are put without caskets. Papa himself has prayed at many of these burials, as entire families are buried, the man, the woman, and next to them, on each side, their children. Weak, hungry people stumble around on the streets like drunks. Where such circumstance will lead people have no idea. The leader is a Russian from Alexandrovka, a former laborer about thirty years old with a wife.

This situation will give rise to such a slaughter of Jews such as history has never known before. Even babies in their cribs will not be spared, for the Jews have earned this terrible reward. The central administration in Russia consists of three Russians, two Armenians, and

seventeen Jews, and the entire Soviet regime consists of five hundred and eleven members, with four hundred and seventeen Jews and sixty-four from international areas.

People are hypnotized by this strange regime. Yet miserable and groaning they await with great longing the day of redemption. And they die of hunger. Oh it pains me so terribly, everything I have endured, suffered, in this Russian paradise. And the poor people who languish there, who has pity on them? How long, oh how long will this all last? Who knows. I see that I've deviated completely from my central point.

Yes, all these children in the orphanage are dressed only in old clothing. Each can have only two pieces of clothing. The wash is done communally. The head of the orphanage, the housefather of the institution, handles them roughly and threatens them with a revolver. Nevertheless, the foster children must praise their situation and say their lives are better than earlier. The sisters had all of their laundry and livelihood taken away and dare not raise a complaint. Sister Margret has been chased from her room like a dog, and the head of the orphanage lives in there now. We can't trust them. Not when you see how fast the older foster children die.

He allowed the oldest of the German foster children to suffer with terrible hunger until autumn. He said, "I want to see if there won't be fewer of them." First he wants to expose them, and to then allow them to starve. Up to Christmas all the older women had starved, up to nine of them and all men including Michael Scherle. If the tyrannical situation hadn't come about, they would have had enough for everyone to eat until the month of May. Nobody wants to intervene. Papa made attempts in Odessa to complain to higher authorities. He was stomped upon by the cultural revolutionaries, and after that all of his movements were observed. More of that later. The foster children are all buried without coffins, completely naked, and without any words said over their corpses, with four to six of them tossed at a time into one hole.

The housefather of this institution often stands there and laughs with pleasure. Once I was there when they were burying corpses like that. Sister Marie Wiedenbach took some pieces of old rags and laid them upon the countenances of the dead, lifting her eyes to call on our Father in heaven to give His blessings as she spoke over the corpses. On the way back, she wept so bitterly and I wept along with her. Pastor Koch has no more allegiance or devotion to the institution. The hall has been made into a club room for the foster children. All the pictures were taken away and in their place come photographs and posters of Trotsky, Lenin, Marx, and others. The housefather said, "You can no longer pray to your God, but instead to these men who are your benefactors."

If I described everything that would require a thick book. They also took away all of Mrs. Shrenk's belongings and also everything from the new house. Sister Kaethi is happy now for