

Ups and Downs of Grain Production in the Early Years of Bessarabian Mother Colonies

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Recently I've been closely reviewing the 1848 chronicles submitted by each Bessarabian-German mother colony to the Welfare Committee for Foreign Colonists in South Russia. Based on my research, I've been able to get a sense of the ups and downs in grain production during the almost three decades or so of the colonies' early existence.

If you have any experience with grain farming, the usual way to indicate crop yield is by a volume amount per unit of land. In North America, we have used bushels per acre. In our ancestors' time, the Russian measurements seem to have been chetverts (1=6 bushels) per dessiatine (2.7 acres). Unfortunately, the 1848 chronicles do not even once report on yields in this way. Instead, the chronicles described them as follows:

- Complete crop failure (CF) – no return; no sowed seed back
- Poor (P) – barely enough yield to get sowed seed back
- Fair (F) – some surplus grain to sell for income
- Good (G) – considerable surplus grain to sell for income

Methodology

I have used these descriptions in the graph on the last page. I arrived at these results by accumulating the information from all the chronicles, which generally agreed with each other for many of the years (21 of the 29, to be exact). When they didn't, I have chosen an average result. For example, if the chronicles indicated CF, P, and F for one particular year I chose the average—P. If the chronicles showed only two results for a certain year, I chose the higher result, to give the benefit of the doubt. No yield results were reported for a few years. In those cases, I chose F, as a sort of “average” yield, because I suspected that the chronicle writers viewed it as neither an exceptionally good or exceptionally poor yield, and it was therefore not noted in their histories.

Impact on Yields

In addition to showing crop yields, I also indicate what impacted them. The chronicles most often mentioned locust/grasshopper and/or field mice infestations, hail damage, and drought. Where no impact was mentioned for a particular year, I simply left the graph bar unpatterned (i.e. gray) to represent that year.

Average Crop Yield

I was very curious to see what the average harvest was in the Bessarabian German colonies between 1819-1847. Of course, this requires some sort of numeric indication. Because the chronicles didn't represent yields based on something with numbers, I chose a rating system to determine the average. For each G yield, I used 3; for each F yield, I used 2; for each P yield, I used 1, and gave each CF yield a 0. The results? The average for the 29 years was 1.41. This meant that the farmers in Bessarabian German colonies had crop yields less than halfway between poor (barely enough to get their sowed seed back) and fair (producing some surplus grain to sell for income). If one looks at it on a percentage basis, 48 per cent—nearly half—of the crop yields were poor or complete failures! This is not at all good and shows how difficult those initial years were for the new colonists hoping to turn their settlements in Bessarabia into a bread basket of south Russia.

Why?

What were the reasons for such a poor harvesting record? Well, we have already touched upon several natural ones: infestations of locusts/grasshoppers and/or field mice, which ate up the crop to varying degrees before it could be harvested.

Drought was an additional challenge. Several chronicles explain that due to the abundance of clay-filled soils in the area, a lack of rain for four to six weeks quickly yellowed and burned grassland and grain crops. One states specifically that crops were only satisfactory if rains fell at least five times from spring seeding to harvest time.

As well, the colonists at first weren't familiar with the natural qualities of the land they were seeding. One chronicle explains that they had to increase their seed sowing by four and eight fold before they got adequate harvests. Many colonists didn't have the means to buy enough sowing seed to reap the full benefits from the land. Another colony reported that with more dry years than wet ones, the same fields couldn't be used too often—they had to be rested for 6-8 years to regain soil nutrients! The learning curve was steep, and by all accounts, the Czarist government didn't give the new settlers any orientation in using this new frontier land.

In many cases, the initial years of a colony experienced little actual seeding because not enough land was plowed and prepared for sowing. One major reason was that the Crown gave each colonist family only two oxen (sometimes "spoiled" and in "poor shape"), yet it took 6-8 to break the virgin steppe land. The colonists had to pool their animals to do any plowing. Some of the best farmers were held back in turning their lands into grain growing fields because they were forced to care for orphaned children of fellow colonists killed by disease. This involved working the orphan's family land until they came of age and could farm it themselves.

And to top it all off, there were several years where fever epidemics struck old and young alike so hard in virtually all families that they were too weak to work at harvest time. Crops were lost, left to rot and be eaten by birds.

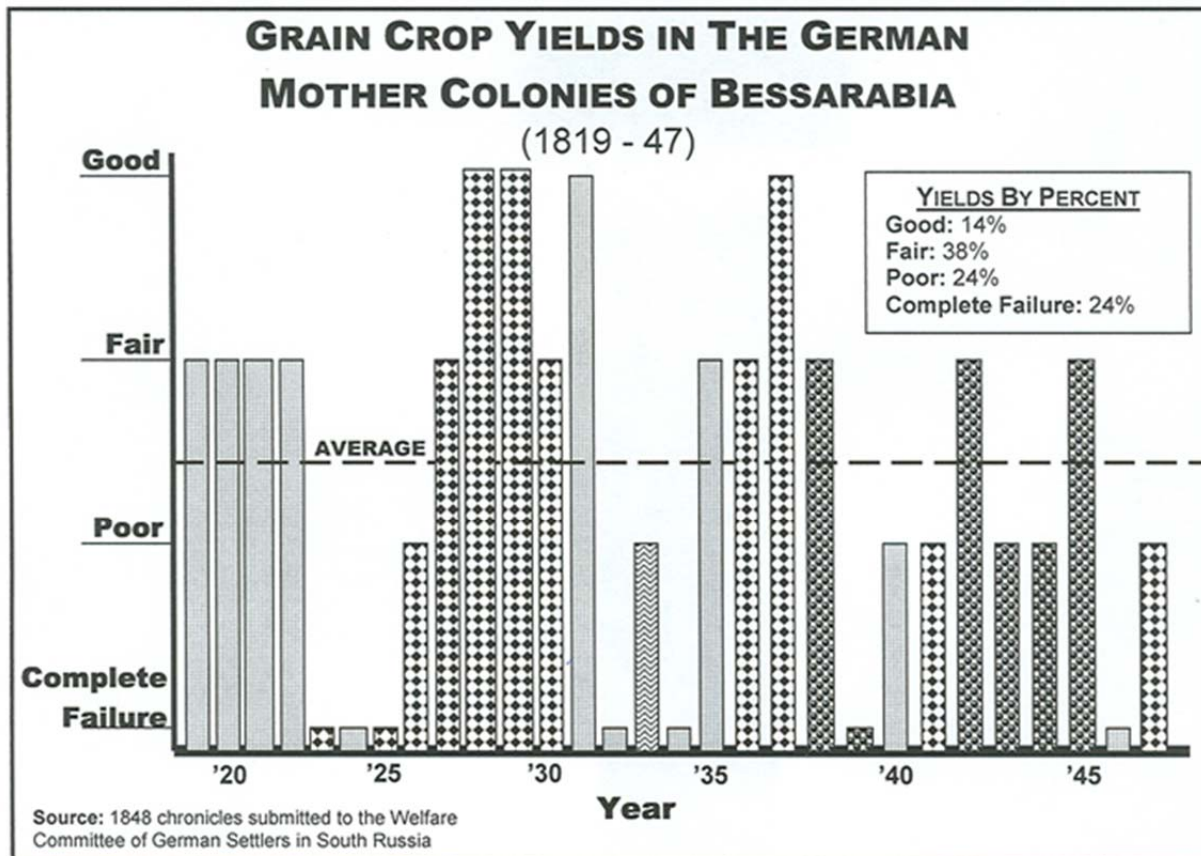
By the late 1830s and early 1840s, many colonies began building community grain reserve storehouses to use in emergencies. One was built with instructions and expenses provided by the Crown; it held 733 bushels of wheat.

Switching to Other Products

One chronicle explains that with good grain harvests being so rare, and with the grain needing to be taken to port, the cost and time was often not worth it. With results like this, it is no wonder that the colonists expanded and diversified their farming base— according to the chronicles, namely to beef and grapes mainly. Several stress that increasing efforts were made to raise cattle and plant vineyards.




Cattle were hit by occasional epidemics that killed one half to all of the herds, but raising cows still seemed to be more profitable than grain, especially during dry years. One colony reports that by 1848, land set aside for cattle pasture amounted to 1,662 dessiatines, nearly 50 per cent more than that used for grain growing.

Vineyards, said one chronicle, seemed to produce equally well, regardless of wet or dry growing seasons. In one colony, 56 of the 90 farmers planted 1,500 stalks on one side of their village. In another, it is reported that several farmers harvested enough grapes to make more than 500 gallons of wine. Several reports stress that the prosperity of the colonies was elevated quite significantly by the fruit of the vine.



KEY:

Good = Healthy surplus of grain to sell for income
 Fair = Some surplus of grain to sell for income
 Poor = Barely enough yield to get seed back
 Complete Failure = No return; no seed back

 Locust (grasshopper) and/or field mice infestations
 Drought
 Hail damage