

Mennonite Settlements in Melitopol and Mariupol Districts

Source: DAI Microfilm T-81; Roll 606; Group 1035;
Item 1405; Frames 5396845-854
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Abstract

Military Post Unit No. 10 528

O.U. 01 Nov 1941

German Affairs in the area of Kriwoi-Rog, Saporoshje, Dnjepropetrowsk, in the District of Melitopol and in the District of Mariupol. Preliminary Statement, in particular the Mennonite Settlements

I. Settlements in Kriwoi-Rog region (and southward)/ Nikopol, Saporoshje and Dnjepropetrowsk

This region is interspersed with an abundant number of German colonies, the major portion founded during the czarist time, but some Soviet collective settlements also. Whole, almost purely German settlement areas can be found south of Kriwoi-Rog on both sides of the Ingulet River (about 28 settlements) and near Saporoshje on the west bank of the Dnjepr River (over 20 settlements), and in between and northward from Kriwoi-Rog on the Dnjepr. In every direction on the Kriwoi-Rog/Dnjepropetrosk road are even more settlements (about 15) from older times. In Stalindorf Rayon (eastward from Kriwoi-Rog), in a Jewish settlement area, there exist isolated settlements numbering around 60. Northeast of Kriwoi-Rog there are 5 settlements on the stretch toward Dnjepropetrowsk. Southward from Kriwoi-Rog lie 3 settlements, which, according to a statement from the Defense Force (*Einsatzgruppe*), were founded around 1929/30 by Germans from the Odessa area, the Crimea and the Volga District. The number of German colonies in this district can be estimated to be around 130 settlements. This number is fixed rather too low than too high. The total number of ethnic Germans could be as many as 40,000-50,000.

The colonies lie in an old German settlement area from the end of the 18th and the early decade of the 19th century. Since World War I, German people have experienced displacement in Bolshevik times to the point that in the district the various family groupings of Germans in Russia have met up with each other: Volhynian Germans next to Germans from the Volga District, Germans from the Crimea and others from the Black Sea area and Low Germans. The German folks in Russia, in Bolshevik times, were in intense restless commotion. Terror and years of starvation, also specific voluntary resolve caused a migration, the extent of which is not yet perceived today. Volhynian Germans migrated into the Black Sea area or to Siberia and then

back again to Ukraine. Germans from Siberia came into the Ukraine. From the southern part of the Ukraine, Germans migrated into the central and northern part. Out of the north, Germans migrated to the south. Numerous sections of the people emigrated from the USSR, especially to America. Moreover, despotic changes came by way of the Bolsheviks. They evacuated whole villages and settled them in another region. Also, they created new collective settlements. Individual families and especially fathers of families were deported and went missing. In the vast majority of settlement villages a large portion of men are missing. In one village 60-70 were deported, one often hearing, as a rule, 100 to 200 families. Russians displaced the families who were evacuated or migrated from the German villages.

Yet, a considerable portion of the German folks were also able to keep going in the old colonies of czarist times.. This is especially true for the settlements on the Inguletz River and on the Dnjepr near Saporoshje (Chortiza), an historical district renowned for the Saporoshje-Cossacks.

The overall picture of these villages is essentially the same in both river districts. Villages in a line with wide streets, most with the gable side of the house built toward the street. Individual farm buildings bound together with walls, with strong timbers used in the buildings so that German settlements on the Steppes could already be recognized from afar. The houses originated from the czarist times and are in poor structural condition. The Germans have made no significant repairs so as not to be considered "bourgeois" and then be deported [*verschleppt*= dragged off] or imprisoned. In addition, the houses, coated in white lime, by Soviet order had shabby gray streaks of lime applied, comparable to aviation camouflage. Structural deterioration and the gloomy paint of the houses, in any case, always portray a rich image of what these settlements had to yield to up to the World War. Also, in their present situation, the German settlements, as foreign folk, have this to reflect upon. The German homes are not to be compared at all to that of the Ukrainians or the Russians. The German homes are clean throughout. It is at the door of the German houses that the might of the Bolsheviks halted.

The farm buildings (barns, tool shops, granaries) are seriously neglected due to the forced labor in the collective. So this does not leave the Germans with a free day to work in their own farms. All of them, women, men and even half grown children must work from early morning until nightfall. Only the night belongs to the family. It is during the evening hours that the most essential things get done, whereby especially the women are completely overworked. During the night they have to put the house in order and also fix the meal for the next day.

Of the settlements of Germans, the villages of the Mennonites are the focus here. The Mennonites, adherents of a protestant sect, are farmer families of Friesian heritage, who came to Russian from West Prussia. Chortiza, the major center of the Mennonites along the Dnjepr River, was founded by them in 1790. In West Prussia, the Mennonites settled in the low-lands of the Vistula River, especially around Kulm, Graudenz, Marienwerder and there developed the agricultural emphasis in the Werder district near Danzig, Marienburg and Elbing.

The Mennonites in Russia, even during the Bolshevik era, had a reputation as being strong in tradition and skillful farmers. During czarist times, they were known as the best landlords among all the Germans settlers in Russia. Even today, the Mennonites, out of all ethnic Germans, make the best physical and spiritual impression. This manifests itself especially in the

Melitopol District, where the Mennonite settlements were terribly decimated by the Bolsheviks, of which more will be said later.

Mennonite Settlements, in the region of Kriwoi-Rog/Saporoshje, are along the Dnjepr and Inguletz Rivers

Identified as ethnic German colonies of the Mennonite settlements along the Dnjepr River are as follows: Scheunenberg, Osterwik, Kronstal, Schoenhorst, Neuendorf, Rosenbach, Neuhorst, Nieder-Kortizza, Blumengart, Burwalde, Rosengart, Rosental, Kortizza, Einlage, Neuenburg, Kronsweide. In the villages live between 300-600 Germans.

The Mennonite settlements along the Inguletz River, about 60 km south of Kriwoi-Rog, are on the west bank of the river, with 11 settlements on the east bank, which are more than likely of German origin. Presently, there are 16 Mennonite villages, the inhabitants of a 17th village were annihilated during the Machnowey Reign of Terror in 1920. The largest village is Orlow #6 (with right around 650 Germans). The old villages were designated by numbers.

It is remarkable how similar the farm land in the colonies along the Dnjepr are to that of the low-lands of the Vistula. The old colony house of the Graudenz and Danzig low-lands was clearly preserved in the layout of the areas along the Dnjepr. Just like in the Reich region of Danzig, West Prussia, so here there prevailed two house frontages: the elongated low-German farm house with living area and barn in one straight line, constructed in the right corner of the yard. There is also the similarity of the kitchen and living room, in the shape of the window and the application of decoration. A scrupulous specialist in West Prussia would find it near impossible, if he were to look at a picture of a Mennonite house by the Dnjepr, to distinguish whether it was a place standing by the Vistula or a place in South Russia.

The Mennonite settlements along the Inguletz must have been especially well-to-do before World War I in light of what the magnificent yards still reveal in their present condition. Much reveals itself in the interesting further architectural development of the original form of the low-German farm houses in the settlements along the Inguletz, for example, in Orlow.

The cultural strength of this low-German settlement group is especially evident when one takes into consideration that the memory about the West Prussia origin, with little exception, was lost by the Mennonites. They, out of that cultural heritage of the past, through individual, independent effort also developed these villages. Noteworthy is also the holding fast to the traditional style of furniture over against the otherwise customary use of mass produced furniture.

Today, the relatives of the Mennonites still live in West Prussia. One only has to compare names of those there and these here, such as: Weibe, Wins, Nickel, Janssen, Friesen, Froese, Penner, Pauls, Dirksen, Dyk, Clasen and many others. Their speech is a pure West Prussian dialect. The racial picture is to some extent excellent, generally good. Things German are genuinely adhered to. There are a few that are mixed. The attitude toward Bolshevism is one of bitter rejection. Nevertheless, the Bolshevik era had an outward effect on the Germans. This is especially

manifest in the conduct of the youth. Nevertheless, in order to eliminate this outward influence of Bolshevism, it is just a matter of promoting right up-bringing.

In winter, the food for the ethnic Germans in the mentioned settlement area is reliable. Seed-corn in the spring, cattle and horse supply, farm machinery and implements make up the rest.

II. Pertaining to Germans in the Melitopol District.

North and northeast of the city of Melitopol is a large German settlement area, made up of some 100 villages of ethnic Germans, which in earlier times was inhabited by 50,000—60,000 people. The number is estimated at 30,000—40,000 after the losses encountered during the evacuation and deportation.

This settlement is essentially the region of the Mennonite Germans. On the west bank of the Molotschna River, stretched out in a north/south line, lie the southwest German colonies, while an area, which extends eastward from the Molotschna from 70 to 80 km west to east and some 40 km from south to north, makes up the Mennonite region. The design of the villages and the low-German house designs of the Mennonite villages clearly indicate here in particular the West Prussian origins of the settler, from where even the place names originate, for example, Fischau, Tiegenhagen, Ladekopp, Gr. Weide, Rudnerweide, Petershagen, etc.

Both groups of settlements on the Molotschna suffered greatly under the anti-German measures taken by the Bolsheviks in this war.

SS-Untersturmfuhrer Schott gained information about the situation in the colonies west of the Molotschna. In various southwest German colonies on the west bank of the Molotschna, he was able to come by the following:

Prischibi, a one-time pure German, very well-to-do, blossoming colony, cultural center of the evangelical Germans in Molotschnaja (Melitopol District), is completely destitute and in ruin, with an additional 220 Russians and Ukrainians settled among the 233 Germans, without the village becoming enlarged. As in other places, here too the men for the most part have been dragged off. Because of the quick advance of the German troops, these families were also supposed to be evacuated. They were delayed for six days at the railroad station in Halbstadt while waiting for removal, but due to a lack of rail-cars and the speedy German advance it did not take place and the people were able to return to their homes.

Grains, with the exception of maize, potatoes and castor beans, is brought in. Grains for bread were handed out to the collective workers in Soviet times, whereby the Germans were severely deprived since, for the most part, they had not worked in the communal farms, so very little was handed out to them to the point that they had very little to live on during the winter.

A civil defense (*Selbstschutz*), no doubt armed, but not really perfected, has existed for some time.

As for clothing, the colonists are somewhat provided for with only a great need for shoes.

Hochstaedt: This village was completely laid to waste, but for a short time 15 German men and 7 young women returned to here when set free by the German troops in the vicinity of Kiev, where they were used as trench diggers. Everyone else is dragged off and, as one says, off to Kazakhstan, Tschamburowa Station. Those remaining are all young people. The mayor, put in place by the German Army, is a young man of 22 years. He also directs the collective. They are supplied with what is necessary for the winter.

Leitershausen: Of the 160 families, there is a total of three German men left there; otherwise, all are dragged off. Today, a family from Tiefenbrunn was taken in.

Mayor Peter Glas supervises the communal farm, but complains that the Russians (35 families) do not want to listen to him.

Wasserau: Of the 36 German families, there only remain 8 men and 24 women, everyone else is dragged off. They have sufficient supplies for the winter, but complain that the Russians in the village (28 families) are all thieves. Most of the houses are standing empty. The furnishings are scattered around in the yard, all destroyed.

Weinauh & Durlach: Here I met up with an unexpected cheerful picture. There are up to 10 German families where the men are all missing. One can even note some prosperity.

The provisions of food are enough until the next harvest.

The civil defense consists of 5 men and needs to be strengthened to 15 men.

As for clothing, there is a great need, especially for shoes.

Alt-Nassau: 195 German and 30 Russian families. A large number of men are missing from among the German families, who, in 1933-1938, were banished. The village has sufficient food until the next harvest. However, there is a serious shortage of clothing.

The Mennonite colonies on the east bank of the Molotschna River present the same picture. The aim of the Bolsheviks was to deport all Germans in the Melitopol District, which already started earlier in 1933 when some of the German folks were evacuated and replaced with Russians. The Soviets had more time to be active in their aim against things German during their campaign east of the Dnjepr than in the district west of the Dnjepr.

At the outbreak of the war against the USSR, all German men, without exception, along with some older men and some sick ones, were removed from the ethnic German villages in Melitopol District. They were used to dig tank traps and ditches. Others had to drive the animals of the village in an easterly direction. Some were inducted into the Red Army, and by far the greater part were gathered together and either by foot or by railroad were dragged off into an easterly direction. At first, women and children stayed in the villages. And then the Soviets resolved to also deport women and children. Particularly by Jewish Commissars, they gathered together the

villagers and brought them to the nearest railroad stations with deprivation and under the threat and penalty of death. It is said that in Tokmak 45,000 women and children were to be removed, after a wait of a few days and nights (Tokmak near Halbstadt). In the advance of the German troops, the disorganization of the Reds "they did not have the timely and sufficient rail material", thousands of women and children found their salvation. They returned to their villages where they came upon the homes which the Russian families of the village had plundered. The Russian folks in the villages, revealed also after the conquest of the district an attitude of hostility toward Germans. Moreover, many men, who were pressed into forced labor, managed to return to their home, some even who were underway with the animals and ended up being liberated by the German troops.

From this comes the present situation in the German colonies of Melitopol District. The overall picture is horrible. Many villages are totally destroyed. Only master-less dogs, a few cows and pigs roam around in the farm yards or on the village streets. The homes are plundered. Vacated, for example, are these Mennonite villages: Altonau, Muensterberg, Blumstein, Grosswerde. Other villages are only half occupied such as, Rudnerweide, Sparrau, Gnadenfeld. In other villages, besides the women and children, there are only old men and some half-grown boys, as in Fischau, Fuerstenhagen, Tiegenhagen, Montau, Lichtenau, Ladekopp, Fabrikwiese, Schoensee, Liebenau. In Rueckenau, for example, out of 110 families, only 60 remain. Among them there are only 5 old men while all the rest have been deported.

There are different reports from the ethnic Germans concerning the path of the banished. Transport moved in two directions: Siberia and Kazakhstan, which goes all the way to the Himalayas and is known for its unhealthy climate. Also mentioned was that particular Red [Army] railroad transports were made to derail deliberately (near Stalino). Others had reports of men that managed to go with Volga Germans over the Volga District. Various ethnic Germans, after their return home from forced labor, found their family missing and so departed for the east in order to bring their relatives back or discover some news about them.

Food for the folks for the winter is assured through left-over supplies. For the most part, the fields are prepared, seed-corn, animals and horses, farm machinery and implements are to be replenished.

Southwest of Melitopol, in the immediate vicinity of the city, there are still a few colonies. Here also only the women and children stayed behind. The economic situation is essentially the same as in the Mennonite settlements.

III. Pertaining to Germans in Mariupol District by the Sea of Azov.

During the course of the war, some 10,000 Germans were to have lived in the city of Mariupol. Remaining are a few women. A total of five announced themselves to us. The rest, as the folks who announced themselves put it, were murdered by the Reds.

Northwest of Mariupol is a settlement area of about 30 German villages, which, as their names indicate, were founded by Southwest Germans (for example Darmstadt) and mainly by North German Mennonites. The places are Tiegenhof, Heubude, Klein-Werder and Gross-Werder,

Kampenau, Tiegenort, Grunau and others. According to statements by ethnic Germans, Mennonites no longer live here. They already migrated from the area in earlier years, their places taken over by Lutheran or Catholic Germans from other locations. The Germans of this district suffered most severely during their eastern circumstances under the Bolsheviks. Figures are still incomplete to determine the number of Germans. Villages, where German residents were not entirely deported or murdered, are the exception. Here are some examples from this district:

In **Jamburg**, 150 families remained: 1 man, who was wounded and was not dragged off, and 1 woman, who just now gave birth to a child (*gebar*). All the others were deported.

In **Rundewiese**, out of 50 German families there remained only 1 woman and 3 men.

In **Village #7** (not aware of the name), 14 Germans out of 300 remained.

In **Village #8**, only 6 families remained without men and also 3 young boys.

In **Reichenberg (#9)**, 10 persons remained. One being a female German teacher who managed to escape the deportation and slipped through the Red lines by claiming that she was Greek.

In **Schoenfeld**, out of 80 German families, only 12 returned. In addition there were 16 men from forced labor, but they did not belong to the families that returned.

The Germans who stayed behind were menaced by the hostile-minded Russians. Red Army stragglers also stayed over in the empty villages.

The statements of this report are from 19—23 September, 1941 for the Kriwoi-Rog / Saporoshje District, and from 17—24 October, 1941 for the remaining districts.

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