

Welfare Committee – Administration of the German Immigrants in Bessarabia

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The Welfare Committee – the Administrative Authority
of German Immigrants in Bessarabia

by J. Becker, Rector

After several years of attempts, the ranks of the Russian government came to the conclusion that the German colonists could not be integrated into the Russian administration. Intensive searches were therefore made for an institution that would grasp the Germans and introduce them to the living conditions existing in the new country. After various considerations, in 1818, the Welfare Committee—the administrative body for the German settlers of Russia, was generously created. “On 22 March, 1818, the decree appeared announcing that the Welfare Committee was to be started consisting of a president, two members and the necessary number of officials.” (*The German Colonies in the Black Sea Region of Southern Russia* by Edmund Schmid, p. 3 — *Die deutschen Kolonien im Schwarzmeergebiet Südrusslands*). By starting this Administrative Institution, or Authority, the Germans had been met with great concession and understanding. At last, they had a place to turn to with confidence. The tasks of this institution grew from day to day. Therefore, it was absolutely necessary to approve “the necessary number of officials” (Schmid, p. 3).

From Gottlieb Hahn’s *The German Peasant Settlements on the Black Sea* (chapter: German Self-Administration — *Die Deutschen Bauernsiedlungen am Schwarzen Meer*), we learn the following: “The Welfare Committee was joined by 21 higher officials, to whom the state paid 36,500 rubles in salary per year. Every official was appointed; the Chairman was appointed by the Emperor, two Assistants attached to him were confirmed by the Minister, the Director of the Welfare Committee was proposed by the Board of Directors of the Emperor and confirmed by the

Minister of the Interior. The other officials were appointed by the chairman himself: 2 secretaries, 1 journalist, 1 accountant, 2 translators, 1 cashier and executor, 2 officials from the colonists and 1 surveyor.”

From the above report by Gottlieb Hahn it can be seen that the tasks of the Welfare Committee were very large and varied. It may well be significant that the object of the administration of this authority was all colonists who had already settled in this area and were still to be settled, regardless of their nation and denomination. The responsibilities of these authorities were:

1. Admission of colonists as Russian citizens.
2. Management of their settlements according to the prescribed rules.
3. Preservation of the rights, freedoms and privileges granted to the colonists.
4. The supervision of the obligations to be fulfilled by the colonists to the Russian Government. (Schmidt, pp. 3 and 4)

Through the Welfare Committee, our villages were given a soul from above that enriches our lives. Even if much depended on the determining personalities in the fulfillment, the broad-based self-administration of the German colonies resulted in such a healthy basis for the whole administration that it struggled its way through again and again. Outstanding men, good organizers, clever administrators, clever and educated personalities were at the head of this Administrative Institution. Again it is G. Hahn who gives us information about these men. In the above-mentioned work and chapter, he gives us the names of those who presided over this institution:

General Insoff	1818-1841
State Councilor von Hahn	1841-1849
Baron von Rosen	1849-1853
Baron von Mestacher	1853-1856
Islavin	1856-1858
Hamm	1858-1866
Lisander	1866-1867
Oettinger	1867-1871

These are all names that were very well known in the history of the Bessarabian Germans, yes, Russia Germans; they were all men who had their hearts in the right place. They stood with both feet on the ground of reality, otherwise they would never have been able to introduce the exemplary administration in the German colonies. How highly the Welfare Committee was valued, what tasks it had to fulfill, what competences it was entitled to and how versatile the field of activity was, is shown to us in the following report by Hahn (chapter referred to above) “In Journal No. 3 1846 of the municipality of Lichtental, on the entry of the incoming orders and mayor court notices, we read the following notice: Order from the District Office of 31 January, sub. No. 93, that the Mayor’s Court was to immediately instruct the colonists that the streets, walls, houses and chimneys, as well as the trees in them, should be put in the best condition in all haste, in that a member of the Welfare Committee will soon be visiting the colonies concerning this, and from the District Office of 10 May 1848, sub. No. 393, to the Mayors’ Offices, that the government has now fixed considerable monetary premiums, consisting of 3,000 and 1,500

rubles of silver, for those who, within a certain period of time, on an area of 50 or 25 *dessjatine* [1 *dessjatine* = 2.7 acres / 1.09 hectares], have successfully planted forests. The Mayor's Office must report its success to the District Office within 14 days." (From the Register of "Inputs".—Hahn)

In order to get an idea of how versatile the organizations and their employees had to work, we want to take a closer look at the life of State Councilor S. Kantenius, the chief judge of the Jekaterinoslaw Office (*Kontor*). Son of a pastor from Westphalia—born in 1750, he went to the Ukraine as a private tutor after graduating from university and entered Russian service as a judge in 1785. The government could not have found a more suitable man. All districts of the economic life of our colonies were close to his heart. He procured grain seeds for the villages, ran a nursery in Jekaterinoslaw, which cultivated fruit trees for the villages. Since the steppe lacked forestation, he had woodland planted in every village in order to develop silkworm breeding. He also paid attention to livestock breeding. The dairy cattle brought from Germany did not produce a good dairy breed in the cross-breeding with the steppe cattle: he therefore sent a Mr. Kornies to the Poltava Province (*Gouvernement*), to the Grand Princess Elena Pavlovna, and to the monasteries of Moscow, and brought with him from there noble breed cattle, which in time resulted in "the red Moloschna dairy cattle", which were still to be found everywhere in our country until our resettlement.

He also succeeded in getting the government to buy Spanish merino sheep from abroad and distribute them among the people in order to promote and improve sheep breeding. In this way, the reserve lands allocated in the municipalities could be used as "shepherd land". In this varied activity he did not fail to travel often to the colonies in order to instruct the people, to cheer them up, and to punish the guilty in case of disputes. When founding villages, he was always careful to select suitable land near water sites, designed the plans for this purpose and always found permission at a higher level.

He was no stranger to the emperor either. For his merits, Alexander I awarded him "1st Class" on the occasion of a visit to the German villages, an imperial distinction that had previously only been awarded to the historian Karamzin. Before his death, Kantenius bequeathed 15,000 rubles to the Central School in Sarata. It is also thanks to his initiative that, immediately after his death in 1830, agricultural commissions were set up in all the district offices to promote the various branches of agriculture.

The basis of self-government was the Land Regulation (*Landordnung*). This was designed after the Russian "Mir", limited by the Court (*Hof*) System. Schmid, p. 4, reports precisely about this in his work: "The Crown Land (*Kronsland*), that is, the land granted by the Russian state to the German colonists, was allocated to the municipality in its entirety, it was the municipality that was the owner of the land and had the right of disposal over it, not the individual farmer. The municipality paid the land taxes to the state. It was able to exclude a bad member from the community and thus from land ownership. — Within the municipality, the land was divided equally among the fathers of the families who had gathered together in the community. Each father of a family was given a courtyard on which he could build a house, his farm buildings and his threshing floor and his claim to land. Each farmyard or farm (*Wirtschaft*), as they are called there, was given 50 to 60 *dessjatine* [135-162 acres / 54.5-65.4 hectares]. In the individual

municipality, the size of the farm was completely the same, only in the different municipalities it fluctuated in the number of *dessjatine*—between 48 and 65.” The municipality determined the division of the land into Summer field, Winter field, black fallow (*Schwarzbrache*) and green fallow (*Grünbrache*) and pastureland. If the quality of the land was different, this was taken into account in the distribution. The community land that was in each colony was used jointly. Part of it remained pasture for the animals of the colony inhabitants and the other part remained as hay cutting (*Heuschlag*)—as meadow. The hay mowed here was left to feed the community animals: stallions, bulls, and so forth. In order to ensure equal use of the pastures, the municipality established a rate that allowed each owner to bring his share of the land to pasture according to cattle. In the beginning, it was even the case that the land that was left over from the distribution to the municipalities was not assigned to the municipalities, but to the next higher administrative level—the *Wolost*, or Senior Mayor Office (*Oberschulzenamt*), for the common administration and productiveness of all the municipalities of the whole area.”

Schmid, p. 4 further reports: “The individual farm was thus not the property of the farmer, but only in his use. Personal property was only the buildings he had built on his farmyard. The farmer did not have the right to sell his farm or borrow money on it. The farm, however, was hereditary in the male line, in a descending direction. If there were no more brothers, it reverted to the municipality. Women and daughters had no claim to municipality land. Over the years, however, a customary right of sale developed, but it was severely restricted by the municipality. Property in the municipality could be sold, but only to its own municipality members and with the consent of the municipality. The useful consequence of these regulations and practices was that the colonies remained purely German, that no foreign elements could penetrate them.”

Of the greatest importance was also the regulation of the Welfare Committee, that the farms could not be divided more often than once, but at most twice. This avoided the fragmentation of the property. In Bessarabia, this could no longer be maintained by the Russian laws and, after the annexation to Romania, by the Agrarian Law of 1918. The fragmentation of property occurred and the impoverishment of the municipalities could no longer be contained. (The colonists lost 55,977 hectares at that time).

The business owners formed the entirety of the municipality, the Municipal Assembly. Taxes were levied on the farmyard. The calculation was as simple as the circumstances. The municipality elected the Regent, the mayor, who had great rights, which he did not share with any committee. The author reports the following about this in his book *How it was at Home*, chapter—Administration: This one (the mayor) was honored and respected by all municipality members. He was even allowed to impose penalties. Usually, the most capable and courageous of the farmers was chosen from the municipality. The drunkards and lazy people were very often dealt with harshly. Music and dancing could only be allowed by the village mayor. However, the inspector’s approval still had to be obtained. For this purpose, the wording of an old piece of writing, which was once taken from the municipal archive, should follow: “According to the Mayor’s Office report for Beresina Colony from 8 November, 1860, No. 308, the colonists and farmers there, Gottfried Dobler and Gottfried Nitschke, are allowed on the basis of the decree of 20 January, 1853, and the rules contained therein on music and dance, to hold some music and dance in their house at their upcoming weddings, whereby the Mayor’s Office has not yet approved Paragraph 5, Point ‘c’ of this Regulation.

Colony of Tarutino, 9 November 1860.
Inspector of the Bessarabian German colonies:
signed: Logorie.

Very strict action was taken against thieves and slanderers. The quarrelsome, who had often caused quarrels and inconveniences in the municipality, were expelled from the municipality.

The colonists had to show respect to the officials: Mayor, Assistants, Pastors, Teachers, and so forth.

Above the [position of] Village Mayor stood the Senior Mayor. The latter was appointed to be over several municipalities and was also a Judge. All mayors, as already mentioned above, were subordinate to the Colonial Inspector. In addition to the mayor, other officials were active in the administration of our municipalities. They were also elected by the municipalities. There were partial commissioners such as the Treasurer, the Orphan Father and Church Father (later called Curator), the Police Organization, Herder and Fire Chiefs. However, the municipality reserved the right to decide.

Every reorganization, every change, every institution, every expense had to be brought before the entire community. Land redistribution, house building, garden lay-out, road construction, construction of dams, church affairs, school needs, employment of herders and, above all, every expense and its distribution had to be presented to the Municipal Assembly in a well-founded decision, that is, a protocol or motion. There it was debated and the vote was made by signing the motion. If it received the necessary number of signatures, half, or two thirds for important matters, then the motion was accepted. If it did not receive it, it was rejected.

It sometimes took hard struggles, especially in later times, to get some important motions passed. The municipality also hired all its officials and paid them out of its funds. This also included the Pastors, usually serving several parishes together, the Teachers and Sextons, the Clerks, the Bailiffs, the Herders.

The church conducted its own affairs completely alone and independently.

Above the Mayor stood the Senior Mayor; the latter stood at the head of the District, the *Wolost*. He was elected from among the colonists belonging to the *Wolost* and also had great rights. At his side stood the District *Wolost* Clerk, the one administering the District Office. Various men of the municipalities elected for this purpose took part in the consultative meetings of the District to decide on the resolutions concerning the District. These had to do with: General Affairs, Establishment of Fire and Orphans Funds, Central School, Administrative Questions, and so forth. The Court in the *Wolost*, which consisted of the Senior Mayor as chairman and several representatives elected by the municipalities, called Assistants (*Beisitzer*), seems to me to be very important. The language of negotiation in all matters was German.

Above these two administrative stages of the German colonists stood the individual departments of the Welfare Committee, the Office of Inspector in Odessa, Parkau, Landau in the Kherson

Province (*Gouvernement*), Josephstal and Grunau in the Province of Jekaterinoslaw, Prishib and Neusatz in the Province of Taurida and Tarutino in the Province of Bessarabia, and the three Welfare Agencies of the Bulgarian Colonies in Kamrat in the Bessarabia Province and the Hebrew Colonies of Großnagartow in the Province of Kherson and in Grünau in the Jekaterinoslaw Province (Schmid, p. 6). The German colonists from German lands have done exemplary colonist work on Russian soil.

Until 1833, there were still 3 offices (*Kontore*) above the Office of Inspector. These three offices had to administer the District and Village offices and pass on the regulations of the Welfare Committee. So the official channel was as follows: Village office, District office, *Kontor* and Welfare Committee (the offices were dissolved in 1833, the Offices of Inspectors were retained). The latter were subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior, from then on to the Ministry of Imperial Domains in Petersburg.

Each office had 11 officials: 1 chairman, 2 assistants, 1 secretary with assistants, 1 accountant, 1 cashier and executor, 1 colonial doctor and 1 veterinarian. They received 16,400 rubles per year.” (Hahn, chapter *The German Self-Administration of our Colonies until 1871 — Die deutsche Selbstverwaltung unserer Kolonien bis 1871*).

“Above all stood the Welfare Committee itself, which had its seat from 1818 to 1822 in Jekaterinoslaw, from 1822 to 1833 in Kishinev and from 1833 to 1841 in Odessa.” (Schmid, p. 6). Through the Welfare Committee, our villages were given a soul from above that stimulated our lives. It usually took care of the fulfillment of the rights of the German colonists, but also insisted, sometimes very firmly and authoritatively, on the fulfillment of the duties to the colonist. Later, too, the Germans fulfilled their duties to the state in an exemplary manner; this was the fruit of the good education of the state, of the education of capable citizens of the earth, by the Welfare Committee.

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