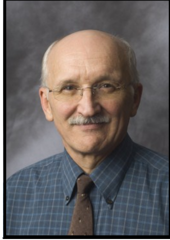
Island Hell



By Ron Vossler

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This is the story of the Solovetski Islands, a Soviet labor camp. This place has a bloody and direct connection to the Germans from Russia ethnic group on the American prairie. The Solovetski Islands, a six-island cluster in the White Sea just below the Arctic circle, once was the site of a monastic outpost with a benign history.

Under the Tsars, the place became a strategic fortress; then a penal colony; and during the 1920s and 1930s, under the Soviets, an epicenter of some of this past century's worst crimes against humanity. It was here, on the Solovetski Islands, that many relatives and friends of German-Russian immigrants to the Dakotas were exiled. It was here that the thousands of prisoners—known as "white coal" because of their expendability—became slaves for the Soviet regime, and then, once they could no longer work, were exterminated.

In the early 1920s, the fledgling Soviet Union gathered the first wave of its imagined, and real, enemies. These included anti-Bolshevik insurgents, Ukrainian nationalists, and also clergymen. Among the prisoners was Reverend P. Weigel, a Catholic priest with German-Russian background. He was arrested soon after the Vatican sent him to investigate the repression of believers in the USSR.

The prisoners on the Solovetski Islands and the other camps in its vicinity included many members of the so-called wealthy—kulaks, who in the eyes of the regime were synonomous with hardworking German villagers. In actuality, a person could be named a kulak for just owning a single cow, for having hired labor, for refusing to join the collective, and for any number of other both real and imagined infractions. In Lenin's words, the kulaks, as a class, were "to be exterminated."

One elderly eye-witness to that earliest wave of repression in the USSR told me in broken English that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he'd watched German farmers, "driven like cattles" along the main-street of Neudorf, now Karamanova, Moldova. Such an event was replicated in hundreds of other German villages in that time – as supposed enemies of the Soviet regime were arrested.

Where were they taken? An often deadly journey in closed railcars ended in Siberia, the Ural Mountains, or penal camps on the Solovetski Islands or in that vicinity. Alexander Solzhenitsyn claims the full extent of that regime's crimes has not yet fully penetrated the West, and certainly not American universities. A brief glimpse at the names of labor camps in just the Archangelask region of northern Russia alone gives some credence to that claim: Portaminsk, Kipnar, Keznaz, Khabarka, Sandarmokh, Kego, Rotviesk, Cholmogorn, Nastabua, Kem, and, the largest of all of them, Nikquish. Strange sounding places, lost in the backwaters of history, where tens of thousands, including large numbers of German-Russians, were worked to death.

Between 1925 and 1937, the German-Russians on the prairie, in the form of personal letters, reports, and news items published in German-language newspapers in the Dakotas, learned at least fragments of the fate of their relatives and friends, who had not immigrated to the prairie. Many letters, which inundated newspapers especially in 1930, described extreme conditions in penal camps. They were signed by, or else mentioned, such common Dakota German last names as Hettig, Zuern, Leicht, Scheifele, Hepperle, Bieber, Hummel, Roth, Fried, Hornbacher, Burgard, Wagner, Siebert, Kludt, and Gienger, among hundreds of others.

Island Hell

The Solovetsky Islands of northern Russia (commonly known as Solovki) are probably best known for the Solovetsky Monastery, a great medieval monastery that became a notorious Soviet prison camp. Photograph provided with permission from PrintZ Photography.

"Many of our Germans (from Ukraine) have been sent to the swampy, northern regions, where life is short. They are taken there, often in the winter. Many freeze...The pen fails to describe the experience. ...A person has to wade up to 50 kilometers through the swamp, with water up to the knees, just to escape. Many died in the swamps. Woe to any escapee falling into the hands of guards...People live in fear and terror...The young girls are only to be pitied. They have totally frozen their hands and feet. Still, they are forced to work. Many have hands and feet swelled up from the terrible cold...We are already thin, wearing tattered clothing, and almost all of us are barefoot. Many have already frozen...Our misery and sorrow scream to the heavens. We find ourselves in terrible sadness...We are true slaves here and are treated as animals needed only for labor...Everyone from the age of 13 to the oldest is chased out each day to work...into the forest, and in snow that is up to our abdomens...Mother, who is soon to be eighty years old, must also work."

These camps used forced labor, primarily Ukrainian and German prisoners, in the headlong effort by the Soviet regime to industrialize and militarize, since, by exporting lumber for sale on Western markets, the regime could acquire the much needed foreign exchange. (Other ways the regime gained foreign exchange included extorting gold, silver, and jewelry from tortured prisoners, and from frequent money orders sent by German-Russians in America, to various Soviet owned stores—called Torgsinn—that even during the worst starvation had its shelves well-stocked with food items.)

Conditions of one camp in the Solovetski region were described in 1931 in a German newspaper widely circulated on the prairie, in an article entitled "Mass Murder in the Russian Forests." It was the sworn statement given by a head steward from a British trading ship, which visited the area often, and the victims described were both German villagers as well as Ukrainians: "...wherever a person went, there were forced labor camps...in the region of Archangelsk, 50,000 prisoners, men, women, and children...working in forests, placed there to chop and haul timber....In this camp there were in a hospital roughly 300 sick people...it was the most terrible sight of my life. Small children, women, and men, limbs eaten by disease...all lay together...clothed in fouled and revolting rags...They were dying of hunger and had a terrible appearance...It was simply horrible to see all the young women and girls… 'What will happen to these poor young girls,' I asked the doctor. 'They will be killed as soon as they are unfit for labor,' the doctor replied."

The first true Soviet death camp was established at Cholmogorn, in the vicinity of the Solovetski Islands. In 1921, about 4,000 officers and soldiers of Wrangel's anti-Bolshevik army were forced onto a barge,

which was then sunk at the mouth of the Dvina, a river that flows into the White Sea. Those who managed to stay afloat were shot. (I have recently heard the same story, and others like it, from a Siberian-born Lutheran pastor.)

About the same time, the passengers from another barge, mostly women, forced to a small island near Cholmogorn, were machine-gunned. According to eye-witnesses, 100,000 people were shot. The stench caused the majority of inhabitants of the nearby town of Cholmogorn to abandon their homes. The rumors of atrocities committed in the camp kept spreading. In 1922, the head of a commission was sent from Moscow to investigate these northern camps, and specifically those at Cholmogorn and Portaminsk. The commission head grew outraged at the horrors he'd uncovered. On one estate, termed the "White House," corpses were piled to the ceiling. The commission head ordered all the camp commandants shot. As for those who did the bulk of the killing, the Chekist secret police who were cruel forerunners to the OGPU and NKVD, they were at first dismissed and then pardoned. Later on, they were placed in similar positions in the south, in Soviet Ukraine. More on that later.

In the mid-1920s, despite the commission the camps saw a resurgence of cruel and violent acts against prisoners. For well over a decade, as indicated by the many letters published in the German-language newspapers in the Dakotas, the Solovetski region remained the place most feared by German villagers. And although they knew of its reputation for murder and death, many misspelled the name of this hell on earth, calling it, variously, Solonik, Solovet, or Solanika.

Beginning in 1928, there was a total of 30,000 people imprisoned in Soviet work and penal camps; in 1930, over 600,000; in 1931-32, 2 million; and in 1933-35, 2-4 million. In those numbers one can glimpse the rising repression of the collectivization era. The average life span in the camps between 1929-1934 was 1-2 years.

During a second large wave of repressions between 1928-1933, masses of Ukrainian and German villagers were sent to these northern camps. Later, in 1937, during a third wave of repression in the Soviet Union, Captain L. Matveyev, a secret police agent stationed in the Solovetski Islands, during a two-month period single-handedly murdered at least 1,100 prisoners while wearing a butcher's apron to keep from being spattered by the human brain matter.

Almost no German colonist families were untouched by the trauma and death of the time. Some years it was hard to tell which was the worst place to be—in the German villages or in the camps near the Arctic circle. In both places there was forced labor, starvation, and a high mortality rate from diseases and epidemics associated with malnutrition, such as typhus, not to even mention the executioner's bullets. Much of that mortality from starvation was brought on by the Soviet campaign to gather grain to dump in huge quantities on Western markets. With Soviet officials setting impossibly high quotas, squads of activists, called the Iron Broom, went house to house; they removed not only the peasants' grain, but when the levied grain quotas were not met, other edibles were taken as well – the so-called "in-kind" requisitions – which left households without food. In 1932-33, entire families and entire villages died out. Overall estimates of the starved vary, but the number is well into the millions, some say as high as ten to fifteen million. Ukrainians bore the brunt of the mortality; but at least 300,000 German-Russians died, including those starving in the Volga region.

At this point, the spectre of Solovetski again intersects with the fate of the German villages. In 1932-33, during the height of the starvation, 325 Ukrainian villagers were arrested. The crime? Cannibalism. Even Russian citizens brought in to resettle Ukrainian villages which were depopulated by starvation abruptly returned to former homes. They said we just are not able to live in a place "where people ate their children." Those arrested were taken to a special camp established for cannibals—to Solovetski. (There have also been reports about the

Soviet regime placing posters, done in social realist art-style, which announced "It is a crime to kill and eat your children.")

The offspring of Dakota German farmers remember letters arriving from their relatives in Ukraine, remember the old stoic pioneers, who had troubles of their own, struggling in the Great Depression to keep their own families fed, weeping as they read the letters from their relatives in the Soviet Union. One rural matriarch, after reading a letter from relatives, threw down the missive and wept bitterly, saying "*Russland, Sauland*." ("Russia, land of pigs.")

The cause of the starvation wasn't famine, or poor crops as some American academics with Marxist sympathies claim. Despite the fact that crops that year were good, even very good—*ausgezeichnet*—yet still villagers starved. "But you know who eats their fill," was what one German villager wrote. He meant the well-fed cadres of regime officials and the secret police. Who were these officials? Some were communists from Latvia or Austria, as well as several other countries. Communism was an international movement, drawing true believers, like a magnet, to the supposed Soviet paradise. Some were the dregs of society, including various thugs and drunkards and bums, raised by the Soviet regime to positions of power, well above their level of competence.

Some, if not most, of the communists were outsiders, brought in as community organizers. In Marxist terminology, another name for the people who, under the guise of Committees of the Poor, urged the settling of old village grudges against the more successful. That helped provoke class warfare in the villages and was the most pernicious element, because it helped destroy the social fabric of the close-knit and closely intermarried German villages.

One much feared collective official was a German villager from Neudorf, who was termed "the American," since in earlier years he'd immigrated to the prairie; but he'd returned, telling Neudorfers to avoid settling in the Dakotas. "Too many rocks," he said. He was known as ruthless; breaking into people's homes, where he'd brandish "*sei Pistole*" (his pistol) demanding to know the whereabouts of anyone crossing him, assiduously delivering them over to the secret police.

As for the secret police in the Odessa region, here again there is a connection with bloody Solovetski. Many of these secret police agents had learned their gruesome craft upon that island camp—a single bullet fired into the back of a prisoner's head. Once dismissed and pardoned, they were eventually reassigned to southern Russia and to Ukraine. There, with their Nagan pistols and their beaked caps, they continued their penchant for murder. Many German villagers were their victims, especially during the Great Terror of 1937-38. In Hoffnungstal (Odessa), Ukraine, I've seen up close the long barns where the secret police held up to 300 prisoners rounded up in the Great Terror of 1937. During that period half a million death sentences, or more, were handed down in the Soviet Union; and secret police agents were given quotas of people to arrest and shoot. To this day, survivors still say the dreaded initials of the secret police, NKVD, in hushed whispers. I've heard them. I've seen them as they snap their right index finger against their temple to indicate the manner of execution.

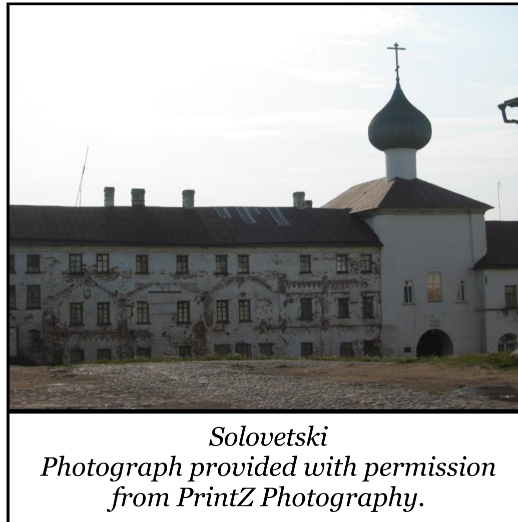
I've also listened as an elderly Ukrainian—just a boy of twelve at the time of the incident—related how relatives of the prisoners, coming to say final goodbyes the next day, were not always able to recognize their kin and friends, so badly had they been beaten. (Ironically, another survivor from Hoffnungstal, an elderly, now-deceased lady from Lodi, California told me the same story almost verbatim; the same story, by two survivors separated by an ocean, a language, and nearly three-quarters of a century.)

The men held in the Hoffnungstal barns were taken to Odessa, and in the prison there, shot by the regime's death-squads, by murderers who learned their gruesome craft in the north, at Solovetski.

We know the reactions of the Dakota Germans to the fate of their relatives and kin

during this time, for many sent these "sorrow letters" they'd received to the German-language newspapers of the time to be published. Sometimes these Dakota farmers would include an accompanying message, about how they would never again have any peace in their souls if they didn't allow their letter to be printed; about how communists, who shot their relatives, were just like "wild animals"; about how it was that they shook with rage while reading the letters describing the suffering of their relatives and friends.

Many wonder just how German-Russians farmers managed to survive on the North Dakota prairie through all manner of disease and hardship, including the Great Depression. If any North Dakota ethnic group managed to "stay on," to endure, it was German-Russians. Part of the reason they managed to endure was knowledge that despite the hardships of immigration and the vagaries of life on the prairie, compared with relatives and friends left behind in Soviet Russia, they were lucky and they knew it. Despite what happened to them on the prairie, they thought of it as a great ethnic ark, which had kept them from dying in far off places like the Solovetski Islands.



Solovetski
Photograph provided with permission from PrintZ Photography.

Even where I grew up in the Wishek, North Dakota locale, an area continuously inhabited by members of this ethnic group for over a century, there was only silence about our origins and connections to the old country; never the briefest mention, that I ever heard, about the fate of relatives, the million German-Russians murdered or helped into an early grave by the Soviet regime between 1915-1948.

It is hard to imagine that members of this ethnic group, whose very identities grew from *Freundschaft*, or family connections, would so easily slough old blood ties with their home villages. It may well be that German immigrants just wanted to forget the terrible letters, to forget whatever it was they knew about their relatives' fate, about Solovetski, and other places like it. But one thing seems clear. The Dakota German pioneers wanted their own children and grandchildren to begin anew – without the burdens of the old world; without carrying on their backs the cemeteries of their ancestors. Thus, German-Russians as a whole do not feel a sense of victim-hood, or of entitlement – something that often haunts the other groups in America who have suffered and who want recompense, recognition, museums, remembrance, special treatment.

We can only guess at the ways that those of us in later generations have been affected by the silence about our origins. As one German villager complained bitterly in a letter to his relatives living in rural Wishek, because they'd not answered a question he had previously asked: no answer is also an answer. So it is that silence is also an answer – part of our legacy as Dakota Germans. Someone, from the high stilts of history, will look back at this past century and give an answer, how we were affected by the silence, by the secret hidden in the silence.

Some Dakota Germans felt guilty, or not always able or willing, to meet requests for aid; knowing that beyond sending aid (in the form of money or packages, which saved many lives), not much, if anything, could be done about Soviet injustice. A few wrote irate letters to their representatives or congressmen. Why was the Soviet Union recognized in 1933 – the very year of the terror famine, the forced starvation? Some letter writers whose loved ones had been sent to Solovetski turned their righteous

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Translation reprinted from *We'll Meet Again in Heaven: Germans in the Soviet Union Write Their American Relatives, 1925-1937*, by Ronald J. Vossler. This letter was sent to the newspaper by Adam Hepperle, Plevna, Montana.

27 March, 1931
Dakota Rundschau

"Letter From The Banished"
25 January, 1931

We received your letter, but unfortunately there is so little in it about our one main concern, that we wish for deliverance from our life as slaves, which we wait for with each hour. You just can't imagine our situation. On the 20th of February it is already a year that we have been here, without a single day of rest, without clothing or shoes or the money to buy them. Everyone from the age of 13 to the oldest, is chased out each day to work. Men and women, we all under the power of the commander, who forces us to work in the forest, in snow that reaches to our abdomens. We are ragged, men overgrown with hair, aged, and looking wild, wearing tree-bark shoes called lapti, working from 7 in the morning until 6 in the evening, when it is already dark. About our eight hours of working there is no way to describe that in words. Whether we get food depends on how much we have accomplished. If a person has done much, turning his entire energy to work, then he receives bread, 900 grams grits, 100 grams sugar, 15 fish-heads, and frozen potatoes that rattle like nuts, 600 grams of cabbage...and 10 grams of oil. If we hadn't been deported here with good people, then we would have long ago starved, and been completely naked.

It doesn't matter what kind of weather there is, snow or rain or cold, it doesn't matter, we have to work. To illustrate, they gave out payments the other day, giving each of us two kopecks, and for the rest they will owe us, they said. Enough to make one scream to the heavens. The entire day, all we hear is the thunder of cursing, one person's voice over the top of the others. Terrible, cursing against God and everything. There are people sick with typhus, from which there are already deaths. The dead are buried and their friends are not allowed to pause or stop. If you are not wildly sick, then you don't get any food, and if the healthy don't want to give their food to them, then they must starve. God only knows who will live until spring, and if no help comes to us from above, then we are totally abandoned.

Pity, have pity for us, and help redeem us from our fate. You still buy things, especially wood which we've cut and worked by our bitter slave sweat and blood. God will demand of you our blood, for it will come to God, just as it did with Cain and Abel.

It snows every day, but not much. Of wild animals, we have seen only a few rabbits and squirrels, otherwise nothing. Our brother, who was a preacher in Odessa, has also been arrested, just as Braun, Pritzkau, Zimmerman, Weljer, Litke, Herman. On Christmas, all church ceremonies were forbidden, no songs, no poems—nothing. We celebrated the holy holiday with saw and hatchet in the forest. Fr. Hummel and J. Rot are also here with us. Webers have left here, released to go home. Those from Neu Freudental still here are Stotz, H.J., Burgard, R., K. and Holz E., Fried K. and family, Hornbacher, R., from Kuluscha with his family, Wagner J., and his family, out of Olgino, Siebert Sam., Eiler Christian, from Neusatz, and Kludt Konrad and his wife, who died here. I must stop my writing, so that we don't run out of kerosene.

We are not only hungry, we must also live in the dark. In a few ways we are rich—with walking, bed-bugs, and fleas. There is so much more I could write about, but I am not permitted. Pray for us and hear our shouts for rescue. Such is our request to all nations.

(Continued from page 5)

anger towards their relatives in the Dakotas, bludgeoning them with guilt: "You still buy things, especially wood which was cut and worked by our bitter slave sweat and blood. From you, God will demand recompense for that blood, for it will all come back to God finally, just as it did with Cain and Abel."

None of these emotions was communicated to later generations. We do know from letters, though, that after prairie church services or during the traditional Sunday afternoon visiting sessions in their living rooms, our forefathers did speak about these matters, about "*da driva*"—about over there, about the old country; even, perhaps, about the Solovetski Islands. And if they ever repeated those two words, those stoic pioneers, at least one thing seems certain: lips trembled.

Ron Vossler is a published writer, university instructor, and recipient of several fellowships and awards. He is a member of the International Committee of the Ukrainian World Congress. Ron was raised in Wishek, North Dakota, and now lives in East Grand Forks, Minnesota. His website is located at http://www.ronvossler.com/.

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