

Roland Wagner Translator's Preface: Some Reflections on Hans Rempel's German Farming Achievements in the Black Sea Region, Population and Economy, 1825

(Original title: *Deutsche Bauernleistung am Schwarzen Meer, Bevölkerung und Wirtschaft 1825*, S. Hirzel Verlag, Leipzig 1940).

by

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Hans Rempel's study on the German colonies in the Black Sea region was the third volume in the *Sammlung Georg Leibbrandt* (the Collection of Georg Leibbrandt, Sources for the Study of the Russian Germans), a series of works published by S. Hirzel Verlag in Leipzig between 1939 and 1942. The bulk Rempel's book consists of a compendium of data, tables of statistics gathered from the 1825 reports of the Tsarist Office of Guardianship for the Foreign Colonies. The numbers largely tell their own story. There is an ideological flavor to some of Rempel's remarks in his introduction, which is not unusual given the historical context in which he was writing. For example, in the final paragraph he comments: "The German colonization phenomenon in Russia is not an isolated occurrence. We see it many times in the course of the great German movement to the east, and we regard each individual and scattered settlement, speech island, and isolated settlement region as a forepost of German culture in eastern Europe." Rempel bestows high praise on the farming accomplishments of the German colonists and notes that they played a pioneering role in opening up the agricultural lands in the Black Sea region. The achievements of other ethnic groups in the region pale somewhat by comparison, especially those of the Jewish colonists. However, Rempel does not dwell overly long on these comparisons. He notes that the ethnic Germans were dedicated farmers and bearers of technological advancement in the eastern Slavic realms, and that the Jewish colonists, in contrast, eschewed agriculture and focused on animal husbandry. These comments are consonant with the Nazi themes, but that does not automatically render the details and statistics untrue. One way to evaluate the reliability of Rempel's generalizations is to compare them with other writers on rural conditions in Tsarist Russia.

Assessments of the Achievement of the German Colonies

The contributions of the German colonists to agriculture in Russia and the extent to which they served as role models has been documented in numerous publications, and we need not dwell at length on that information because it is relatively well known.¹

¹ See, for example, Roger P. Bartlett, "Colonists, *Gastarbeiter*, and the Problems of Agriculture in Post-Emancipation Russia," *Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 60, no. 4, October, 1982; Ingeborg Fleischhauer & Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans*,

Rempel was not exaggerating when he emphasized that the German colonists were very successful farmers – indeed, their skyrocketing land acquisitions in the Black Sea region became a source for their undoing when they became targets of the growing Russian nationalism in the latter two decades of the nineteenth century.

One of the earliest observers of the colonies in South Russia was August von Haxthausen, writing in 1843.² During his visit to the Mennonite colonies Haxthausen noted:

The Mennonites grow a lot of potatoes, even as fodder. The Russians living nearby have gradually adopted from them the practice of raising potatoes...The growing of fruit is beginning to become very significant...The Russians living nearby were inspired by their example and also began to take up growing fruit...Most important, however, for the future of southern Russia are the woodlands belonging to these colonies, since they offer practical proof of the feasibility of turning certain areas of the steppes into forests.³

Haxthausen described the economic importance of the Germans as follows:

One great value these foreign colonies have for Russia, -- a territory of considerable extent, formerly a perfect desert, has been converted by them into a cultivated country; they form oases in the steppes, points from which cultivation may be extended, and in the neighborhood of which new colonies may increase and prosper...In 1843 there were 2,846,300 fruit trees, 700,000 mulberry trees, and 12,455,000 grape vines in the southern Russian colonies. This year 775,865 barrels of wine were pressed. Much has been done for cattle raising. In all of the colonies there are very good communally owned bulls, horses, and sheep kept for breeding. The livestock total in the southern Russian colonies in 1843 was 78,600 horses, 207,500 horned cattle, 735,180 Spanish sheep, and 150,810 ordinary sheep. The majority of the colonies are flourishing. After years of hardship and oppressive poverty, the settlers have become prosperous, and some have grown rich.⁴

Blum provides an overview of agriculture in South Russia during the 19th century, drawing upon a variety of Russian and German sources, and he too mirrors several of these points:

Potatoes were an unimportant crop [in Russia] until the middle of the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century they had been all but unknown except among the German colonists in the steppe, who had brought the plant

Past and Present (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); Adam Giesinger, From Catherine to Khrushchev, (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Marian Press, 1974).

² August von Haxthausen, Studies on the Interior of Russia, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1972.

³ Haxthausen, 1972, p. 171-172.

⁴ Haxthausen, 1972, pp. 42, 196-97.

with them when they migrated from their homeland in the latter half of the century.⁵

Concerning farming implements, Blum notes:

The agricultural implements used by the peasants, like the tillage systems, changed little if at all from what they had been for centuries, and there was remarkably little interest shown during the eighteenth and for most of the nineteenth centuries in adopting more efficient tools. The most important implement in all of the non-black earth, and in most of the chernozem, too, was the ancient hook-plow, the *sokha*. This light tool, made of wood save for its iron shares, could be drawn by a single small horse. Because of its weight and inefficient design, it could only cut a shallow furrow... Heavier plows were ... used in districts bordering Little Russia, and in New Russia and along the middle Volga, where, probably, they had been introduced by the German colonists.⁶

Blum also comments on the German role in the introduction of specialized livestock breeds, such as merino sheep:

Sheep raising was the great exception to the general disinterest in animal husbandry...[A]t the beginning of the nineteenth century the government succeeded in establishing merino sheep herding as a major industry by offering vast stretches of empty land in New Russia, and sometimes loans, to persons raising these animals. ...A number of those who took advantage of these offers were foreigners who had gained experience in merino breeding in their homelands and were attracted to Russia by the lures held out by the government. A Spaniard named Rouvier was given 30,000 desiatins of land in the Crimea...A German named Müller received 130,000 desiatins on condition that in three years he was to have a flock of 30,000 sheep, a third of them pure merinos and the rest of mixed blood. These men, and other foreigners...became the pioneers of merino production in the empire.⁷

Bartlett⁸ also discusses how the colonists attempted to develop a silk industry (which he characterizes as largely a failure), a wool industry based on Spanish merino sheep (which he judges as successful), and that they did extensive planting of forests near their villages.

⁵ Jerome Blum, Lord and Peasant in Russia from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 334.

⁶ Jerome Blum, 1961, p. 334.

⁷ Jerome Blum, 1961, p. 341.

⁸ Roger P. Bartlett, Human Capital, the Settlement of Foreigners in Russia, 1762-1804, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979, pp. 216-27.

The Jewish Colonies

Rempel's generalizations about the Jewish villages in South Russia are much more problematical and they may strike the reader as suspect, given our knowledge of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda. For example, the 1825 records supposedly show that the Jewish colonists focused on raising cattle rather than agriculture, and that they did virtually no weaving. Rempel was struck by the near absence of these industries, in comparison with the other foreign colonists in South Russia. Do these observations about the Jewish colonies in South Russia match those of other independent scholars?

Perhaps the best overview has been offered by Dmitry Feldman, who recently synthesized the documents available in the Russian archives on the history of the Jewish colonies and developed a series of articles to this topic.⁹ From 1807 to 1866 the Russian regime launched a great experiment to turn Jews into farmers and resettled many into farming communities in South Russia, in the provinces of Jekaterinoslav, Kherson, and Bessarabia, following the model of the earlier foreign colonies (which were predominantly German). Most of the Jewish settlers were originally from urban areas, and they had little agricultural experience.

In Kherson province, eight Jewish colonies were established between 1807 - 1809. The resettlement plan was temporarily suspended in 1810 due to a decrease in funds allocated for this purpose, as well as "the deplorable conditions for newcomers." Jewish colonization resumed in 1822, after the guardian for the southern colonies issued a positive review. In 1823 an edict was issued forcing Belorussian Jews to abandon their existing leases for businesses and to resettle in cities, or turn to farming. The pace of founding new settlements in Kherson province had slackened by the end of the 1830s.

The neighboring province of Jekaterinoslav became the next focus for settlement. Twenty "Hebrew colonies" were founded in the 1840s, in cooperation with representatives of the Jewish emancipation. These colonies were located near the existing Mennonite colonies, which by that date were flourishing. An interesting example of inter-ethnic cooperation took place when the authorities commissioned experienced Mennonite farmers to reside in the Jewish villages to teach them agriculture.¹⁰

Bessarabia province was settled latest of all, since it didn't become part of the Russian empire until the end of the Russo-Turkish war in 1812. There was a large, intact Jewish population already in existence. Nicholas I approved a statute in 1835, allowing Jews to cross over into the farmer class without any restrictions, and setting aside crown lands for this purpose. By the mid 19th century 16 Jewish colonies had been established, with 10,589 residents. However, Feldman notes that they "...eventually returned to their traditional occupations: commerce, inn keeping, private trading, and so forth."¹¹ He cites a petition filed by a local Jewish resident in 1889, requesting that he be removed from the grain-farming class and be transferred to the class of town dwellers. The

⁹ The following summary is drawn from an article by Dimitry Feldman, "Archival Sources for the Genealogy of Jewish Colonists in Southern Russia in the 19th Century," RAGAS Report (vol. V, No. 1, Spring, 1999), pp. 12-19, translated by Patricia A. Eames.

¹⁰ Ingeborg Fleischhauer, *Die Deutschen im Zarenreich*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1986, pp. 237-238.

¹¹ Feldman, 1999, p. 14.

petitioner comments the Bessarabian provincial government had decreed that year that all the Jews registered as grain farmers in three colonies were "...excluded from the class of agricultural settlers because they actually did not perform grain-farming," and he acknowledges that "...all the time we were in the agricultural class we actually did not farm and we lived outside the colony in the town of Brichany."¹²

In 1866 Alexander II canceled the legislation ordering the transformation of Jews into farmers. During this entire colonization period, 22 settlements were created on crown lands, and six on privately owned land in Kherson, Elizabetgrad, Alexandrovsk and Tiraspol districts. By the end of the 19th century, the 1897 census showed that there were 5,142 Jewish colonists in Jekaterinoslav province, residing on 740 farms, owning 17,230 dessiatines of land; in Kherson province there were 19,419 Jewish colonists, owning 43,863 dessiatines of land.

Feldman notes that the Ministry of State Property established prizes to reward Jewish farmers for successful harvests, and he cites the names of 24 colonists who received such prizes, ranging in amounts from 50 to 200 rubles. Certainly this suggests that the great experiment by the Russian government to transform Jews into farmers met with some success in individual cases, although it was very mixed and varied widely between colonies.

Some contemporary observers offered very candid assessments, which to some extent may have reflected their own personal biases. Friedrich Matthäi, writing in 1866, provides a description of the pitiable conditions in one Jewish village which almost makes the later Nazi rhetoric seem tame by comparison:

When one approaches such a Jewish colony, one can recognize already from a distance which houses belong to the Jews and which to the German settlers, because in front of the latter there stand trees, well tended and large, while such plantings are completely lacking in front of the Jewish houses, or represented only by recent or stunted vegetative trees. A well-provisioned barn is a rarity, mostly lacking up to this point, and standing in its stead is a dugout provided with the requisite support post and straw roof, within which a pitiful horse can hardly stand upright...Yes, in the entire colony no plows can be found...Each house contains two separately created dwellings, by means of a wall set in the middle, dividing one half from the other...According to the original plan, each immigrant Jewish family was intended to have an entire house, but because of a shortage of buildings they decided to divide the houses in this manner, as described above...It is completely incomprehensible how all can arrange themselves at night time, or during the winter, since there are only about two bedrooms available for seven or eight persons...When one speaks out in this manner to his companion and notes that, in his opinion, the Jews completely lack a sense for agriculture, he is countered with how there had been failed harvests in previous years, as well as last year, that the Jews had too little land, and that they lacked the necessary capital to pursue their enterprise. That would, to be sure, explain much, such as why there is not a single complete plow to be found in the entire large colony...[T]he author of an article that appeared in

¹² RAGAS Report (vol. V, No. 1, spring 1999), p. 1.

the Odessaer Kalender in 1853 ("Hebraeische Kolonien, etc.), who appeared to be more accurately familiar with the conditions of the Cherson [Jewish] Colonies, also did not speak favorably. According to this, he offered the general observation that commerce and the inclination for commerce restricted their progress in agriculture, and when he spoke about tilling of the soil by the Jews, he was unable to express anything positive that could be called praise; concerning cattle raising he said that this was in sad shape, irrespective of the large land holdings that the Jews had at their disposal, and he described the installation of forests as very neglected, also that plantings by the Jews were completely unknown until the year 1847, and so on.¹³

This assessment was echoed later in the observations of Donald Mackenzie Wallace, in his classic study of Russia in 1905:

But of all the colonists of this region the least prosperous are the Jews. The Chosen People are certainly a most intelligent, industrious, frugal race, and in all matters of buying, selling, and bartering they are unrivaled among the nations of the earth, but they have been too long accustomed to town life to be good tillers of the soil. These Jewish colonies were founded as an experiment to see whether the Israelite could be weaned from his traditionary pursuits and transferred to what some economists call the productive section of society. The experiment has failed, and the cause of the failure is not difficult to find. One has merely to look at these men of gaunt visage and shambling gait, with their loop-holed slippers, and black, threadbare coats reaching down to their ankles, to understand that they are not in their proper sphere. Their houses are in a most dilapidated condition, and their villages remind one of the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the Prophet. A great part of their land is left uncultivated or let to colonists of a different race. What little revenue they have is derived chiefly from trade of a more or less clandestine nature.¹⁴

Even some contemporary Jewish authors echoed these themes. For example, Ber Borochof, writing in a Yiddish newspaper in 1916, commented that the "back to the earth" movement had affected only a small minority of the Jewish population. "The vast majority of non-Jews gain their livelihood from nature (...i.e., agriculture and basic industry), whereas the majority of Jews earn their living directly from other men. In Russia and Galicia 70-80% of non-Jews earn their livelihood directly from nature; a similar percentage of Jews earn theirs from men."¹⁵

¹³ Friedrich Matthaei, *Die deutschen Ansiedlungen in Russland; ihre Geschichte und ihre volkswirtschaftliche Bedeutung fuer die Vergangenheit und Zukunft*, Leipzig: H. Fries, 1866, pp. 160-162.

¹⁴ Donald Mackenzie Wallace, *Russia: On the Eve of War and Revolution*, published in 1905, ch. 16 (available on internet at the Project Gutenberg web site).

¹⁵ Ber Borochof, "The Economic Development of the Jewish People." This article was first published in 1916 as a series of articles in the Poale Zion Yiddish weekly, *Der*

However, as is true for all generalizations, there were always exceptions! In addition to the prizes cited by Feldman above for successful harvests by some Jewish farmers in 1863, additional testimony for Jewish industriousness comes from a rather surprising source, a Catholic priest, Fr. Konrad Keller, who was a great admirer and champion of the German colonists. In his classic history of the German colonies in South Russia published in 1905, Keller acknowledges the hard work and the pioneering role the Germans played in tilling the soil of the Ukraine -- yet he also chides them because they still carried on agricultural practices modeled after the "old pattern," and they lacked an agricultural school comparable that established by the Jews at Novo-Poltavka in Jekaterinoslav province.¹⁶

By way of summary, it is apparent that Rempel's introductory comments and his compendium of statistics should not be dismissed merely as Nazi rhetoric or propaganda. The German colonists did indeed make an important contribution to agriculture in Tsarist Russia, and Rempel's high praise for them was certainly not unwarranted. While the Nazis may have trumpeted their historically well documented agricultural success, this should not diminish respect for the undeniable fact that many thousands of German farmers did in fact risk everything, they transplanted themselves and their families into a new and challenging environment, they managed to survive through great hard work and perseverance, and eventually to flourish.

Likewise, several sources agree that the experiment in founding Jewish agricultural colonies in South Russia met only limited success. It should be kept in mind that Rempel's overview is based on a snapshot of conditions in 1825, when some of the Jewish colonies were still relatively new, while most of the German colonies had already been established by that date, although they had certainly not yet put all the setbacks of the pioneering stage behind them. Another crucial difference that should be highlighted is that the German colonists were voluntary resettlers, who eagerly took advantage of the offer by Alexander I to escape from poverty, military conscription, and ruinous taxation during the years of Napoleonic hegemony in Central Europe. They were skilled farmers or tradesmen, although these skills had to be modified to suit the environmental conditions in Russia. Many of the Jews, in contrast, were not eager resettlers, but rather were targets of legislative and ideological experiments to disrupt their accustomed mode of economic activities and to transform their lifestyles. Agrarian skills were alien to the lifestyles they had developed in eastern Europe. Such considerations undoubtedly played a role in explaining the statistics documenting the varying agricultural achievements of these ethnic groups in South Russia in 1825.

Yiddisher Kaempfer in New York. The English translation is taken from *Nationalism and the Class Struggle: A Marxian Approach to the Jewish Problem* published in 1937.

¹⁶ Rev. P. Conrad Keller, *The German Colonies in South Russia, 1804 to 1904*, translated and published by Anthony Becker, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (originally published in Odessa, 1905), p. 91.