

## Chapter 8

### Historical Background: The Gathering Storm in Tsarist Russia

In this chapter we will explore the factors that explain why so many of the descendants of the German colonists chose to leave Tsarist Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which by that point had been their family's homeland for 80 years or more.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn once quoted an old Russian saying from Tsarist times: "The German is like a willow. No matter which way you bend him, he will always take root again." That is an apt description of the German colonists in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They had many obstacles to overcome, but through sheer persistence, hard work and sacrifice they slowly transformed their mud huts on the steppe into prosperous villages.

The colonists came from different regions of Germany and Alsace, but over the years their regional differences melded together through intermarriage and shared hardships. Instead of being *Pfälzers* and *Schwaben* (Swabians), they became *Russland-Deutschen* (German-Russians). Each of the small, isolated farming colonies became a cultural island, where life was centered around the family and the parish church (Catholic, Lutheran, or Mennonite), which was the heart of village social life. Unique dialects formed, reflecting the regional mix from which the original settlers had derived. Together, these local dialects were referred to as "Colonist German" (*Kolonistendeutsch*). These were the dialects and the customs which we experienced in our childhood.

Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the colonists remained a distinct ethnic group within the Tsarist empire, preserving their own language, religion, farming, and social practices. To a large extent this was the result of Tsarist policies, which from the beginning had regarded them as ethnically separate and guaranteed their rights to preserve their religious and ethnic identity. Tsarist Russia was a pluralistic empire, and little pressure was placed on ethnic minorities to assimilate into the mainstream until late in the century. The Colonist Welfare Committee monitored the internal affairs of the colonists and strictly limited their freedom to settle outside the colonies. Their dealings with the indigenous population – many of whom were still serfs -- were effectively controlled to preserve the self-interests of the regime and the Russian nobility, as well as to assuage the concerns of the Russian Orthodox Church.



**Concentrations of German Settlers, South Russia 1905<sup>1</sup>**

It is estimated that at least 100,000 Germans emigrated to Tsarist Russia from 1763 through the 1860s. By 1820 they had founded 300 “mother” colonies along the northern fringe of the Black Sea and the Volga river region. The colonists soon outgrew their original land allotments, so in 1842 they were granted the right to lease and purchase new land to provide for their young families. The colonies used their reserve capital funds to acquire farm land from the nearby Russian nobility, who were happy to do business with these productive entrepreneurs. Land was relatively cheap at that time, it rented for 30–60 *kopeck* per *dessiatin* and it could be purchased for about 5 *ruble* per *dessiatin*.<sup>2</sup> Soon they had branched out into at least 3,000 “daughter” colonies and privately owned *khutor*, spreading to the east above Nikolaiev and as far away as the Caucasus mountains.<sup>3</sup> By the 1870s there were approximately

<sup>1</sup> Map source: Paul Langhans (ed.), *Deutsche Erde*, 1905, p. 228.

<sup>2</sup> Height, 1972, p. 238.

<sup>3</sup> The Black Sea colonists ended up owning a large percentage of the arable land, an estimated 11 percent in Bessarabia, 20 percent in Cherson, 38 percent in Taurida (Crimea), and 25 percent in Jekaterinoslaw (Karl Stumpp, *The German-Russians*, Bonn: Edition Atlantic-Forum, 1971, second edition, p. 25).

450,000 ethnic Germans in various portions of the Russian empire. By the end of the century their numbers had blossomed to about 1,800,000.<sup>4</sup> In the province of Cherson at that time, the colony of Rastadt had a population of 3,691, and München had 1,928.<sup>5</sup>

However, storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. As the German colonies were reaching their apex of prosperity, larger forces were taking shape in Tsarist Russia which eventually proved to be their undoing. Russia had added vast new territories through conquest and annexation, but this heritage of conquest was not without a price. As Russia expanded, it had annexed enormous blocks of Ukrainians, Poles, Balts, Armenians and other “national minorities,” who were about 40 percent of the population overall and who comprised the great majority in the border regions. The regime had to wrestle with the thorny problem of controlling all these ethnic minorities, who had become increasingly restive as they strove to preserve some degree of autonomous identity. Russia’s expanding sphere of influence also came into competition with Austria-Hungary and the Ottomans in the Balkans, then later with the newly unified German empire.

Adding to the growing internal crisis of trying to hold together this sprawling, multi-ethnic and polyglot state, Russia still had an antiquated medieval social structure, with most of its indigenous Slavic population still locked into serfdom. The rest of Western Europe had long abandoned serfdom and their countries were developing constitutional monarchies and forging ahead into the Industrial Revolution. Russia remained deeply fragmented by class and ethnicity, loosely held together by the Tsarist autocracy. The Orthodox clergy, the townsmen, the nobility, the Cossacks, Tartars, Baltic Germans, and other groups each had their own laws, legal rights, privileges and courts that had been granted by various Tsars. The German colonists were simply another group added to the list. They were exempt from the laws of the provinces in which they lived, and they were administered by a special Welfare Committee for the Foreign Colonies, headed by Tsarist appointees.

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<sup>4</sup> The 1897 census figures showed 1,790,489 German-speaking subjects in the Russian empire, 1.3 million of whom lived in agricultural colonies. By the onset of the Soviet era the number of ethnic Germans had grown to about 2,000,000, and they had established more than 10,000 villages (Ingeborg Fleischhauer, “The Germans’ Role in Tsarist Russia: a Reappraisal,” in Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans, Past and Present*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986, p. 13). They were the 14<sup>th</sup> largest among the approximately 125 ethnic groups in the Soviet Union (Gerd Stricker, “Preface,” p. xxv in Samuel Sinner, *The Open Wound, the Genocide of German Ethnic Minorities in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1915 – 1949 – and Beyond*, Fargo, N.D.: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Figures cited in *Deutsche Erde*, edited by Paul Langhans, Gotha: Justus Perthes, 1902 volume, p. 179.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century these internal fissions in Russian civil society led to a rising “anti-foreigner” backlash among Russia’s intellectuals, which took on a decidedly anti-German flavor. Reactionary anti-Germanism first took root among the educated classes during the reign of Nicholas I (1825–1855). When Nicholas assumed the throne he was confronted with the so-called Decembrist revolt in 1825, led by a group of reformist military officers who tried to force the adoption of a constitutional monarchy. Tsar Nicholas crushed the revolt and imposed political repression throughout the empire. Western European influences and the press were censored, since they were blamed as the source of the discontent. The Western press in turn appropriately branded Tsar Nicholas as the “gendarme of Russia.”

The Tsar had the enthusiastic support of the Slavophiles, an influential group of Russian intellectuals whose ideology reflected the nationalist sentiments of the time. The Slavophiles felt that Russia should be purged of the Western influences that had predominated since Peter the Great. They advocated a return to an idealized and simpler Slavic past, when Mother Russia had one folk and one language, with land owned communally (the so-called proto-Communist *Mir* system) and everyone believed in the Orthodox Church, which was headed by the Tsar. They especially disliked Germans because they were emblematic of Western influence which predominated in the upper echelons of Russian society. The University of Dorpat, with its German educational system, was the center of intellectual life in the Baltic region at that time and Germans were leaders in the arts and technology. The Slavophiles particularly targeted the wealthy and influential Baltic German nobility, many of whom had received key administrative and advisory posts in the tsarist regime. By the 1850s the Slavophiles had grown into an influential national party; however, their ambitions were held in check by Tsar Nicholas, who was wary of their fervor and distrustful their contradictory ideas, which mixed freedom of conscience, egalitarianism, and traditional loyalty to Tsar and the Orthodox faith, with the proviso that the state should not interfere in local affairs.<sup>6</sup> When the head of the Orthodox Church tried to take advantage of the anti-foreigner backlash to supplant Lutheranism, the Baltic Germans made a direct appeal to the Tsar, who rebuffed the Slavophiles for having gone too far.<sup>7</sup>

The colonists had been spared the brunt of the anti-German rhetoric up to that point, which was largely directed against the Baltic Germans. The colonists were still generally admired as role models of diligence and loyal supporters of

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<sup>6</sup> Basil Dmytryshyn (ed.), *Imperial Russia, a Source book, 1700-1917*, second edition, Hinsdale, Illinois: The Dryden Press, 1974, p. 229. See also Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974, pp. 266-274.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Martin, “The German Question in Russia, 1848-1896,” *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 18, No. 4 (1991). See also Hattie Plum Williams, *The Czar’s Germans*, Lincoln, Nebraska: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1975, pp. 161-173.

the Tsar. The Russian peasantry had always viewed the German colonists with a mix of resentment, dislike, and admiration, as was noted in early reports by travelers like J.G. Kohl in 1838 –“The Russian, it is said, hates the Germans,” but the Russians nevertheless adopted their methods, saying ‘*Tak I Niemetzi sdällyut*’ (that’s the way the Germans do it).”

However, the colonists too were soon caught up in the unfolding of broader events. Great national discontent was triggered by the disaster of the Crimean war (1854-56), when Russia was defeated by Britain and France. In the wake of the defeat, there were renewed ambitions for independence among the ethnic minorities in the border regions. Lashing out at the ethnic minorities, the Slavophiles focused their blame on the Baltic Germans, accusing them of having profited from the military expenditures. At that juncture, Tsar Nicholas died in 1855, leaving all these problems to be solved by his successor Alexander II (reigned 1855–1881).

As a result of the humiliating defeat, the new Tsar embarked on a great campaign to transform and modernize Russian society. He scaled back Russia’s foreign policy objectives, refraining from expansionism and concentrating instead on strengthening the borders. He is most remembered for abolishing serfdom in 1861 and for his administrative reforms in 1864. He established independent local judiciaries throughout the empire and created uniform self-government through rural assemblies, known as *zemstvos*, which consisted of elected representatives of all the classes.

The German colonists were alarmed by these changes because it meant that they were no longer protected by the Tsarist regime and they had lost their guarantees of cultural freedom. In 1871 the Chancellery for the Guardianship of Foreign Colonies was dissolved and their special “colonist” status was abolished. In its place, they became treated as legally equivalent to the newly freed Russians serfs (*muzhiks*), and they were made subject to local *zemstvo* administrations which had control of all aspects of their lives. Their German-language schools, churches, land purchases, taxation, and the courts they could appeal to for redress, all were in the hands of predominantly Russian district councils that were not sympathetic to their interests. The German names of the villages were Russianized and every village was given two names, an official Russian name and the German name that the people continued to use. The judiciary reforms of 1876 eliminated the colonists’ own courts and judges, which had been promised to them by earlier Tsars, and replaced them with Russian magistrates. Complaints soon began to surface about how the laws were being laxly enforced by Russian police and judges, many of whom were corrupt and resentful of the German colonists. They levied fines for concocted infractions, such as smoking in the presence of a police officer, having a muddy street after a rain storm, or when young people were boisterous after 9:00 in the evening. On the other hand, petty thefts and more serious crimes by Russian *muzhiks* were overlooked

or dismissed with ridiculous leniency. This ushered in a period of rampant thievery against the colonists, as organized gangs of bandits began operating in the Black Sea and Volga region. The colonists resorted to posting guard-dogs and armed men in the barns over-night, to protect their property.<sup>8</sup>

The next especially heavy blow to the German colonists came in 1873, when they lost their exemption from military service and universal service was implemented in 1874. By 1876, several thousand German colonists had to serve in the Russian military.

Although Tsar Alexander II and his Minister of War, Dmitry Milyutin, introduced reforms to humanize the living conditions in the Russian army, military service was still generally regarded with dread throughout Russia. There was a long history behind this dread. Under Tsar Peter the Great, the term of duty had been expanded to life; conscripts had to leave everything behind – wife, family, and careers – and men were physically and spiritually broken after spending decades in the military. Catherine II reduced the term to 25 years in 1793, Tsar Nicholas reduced it to 20 years in 1834, and finally Alexander II reduced it to 6 years. In most cases the tour of duty varied from 3 to 5 years, depending on the level of education of the conscript and the branch of service to which he was assigned. Young men had to register for the draft between the ages of 16-20, and at age 21 they participated in a lottery until the quotas for their districts were filled (about 1/3 of those registered). Those who were the sole providers for disabled parents, or for orphaned siblings, were exempt from military service. However, in one reported case, a young man served his term of duty, then had to serve a second term for his brother, who was lame.<sup>9</sup> After serving active duty, they had 9 additional years of reserve duty, subject to recall in the event that Russia mobilized for warfare, and 5 years service in the militia until age 40.<sup>10</sup>

When the German colonists first came to Russia, living conditions in the military were still very grim and the exemption which they had been granted by the Tsar was very important to them – especially since many had fled

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<sup>8</sup> Numerous sources comment on the corruption of the local Russian government officials and judiciary, and the rampant thievery unleashed against the German colonies. Williams 1975 provides an excellent legal summary. S. Joachim, "Toward an Understanding of the Russia Germans," an address delivered at the Western Conference of the Dakota District of the American Lutheran Church, August, 1939, provides several graphic anecdotes, as does Aberle 1963, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> Private note, internet, April 9, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Koprince, "The Russian Conscription Law of 1874," *Heritage Review*, Germans from Russia Heritage Society, Sept. 1981, pp. 3 – 12. There are also several internet sources on military service in Tsarist Russia—see, for example, [www.roots-saknes.lv/Army/military\\_service.htm](http://www.roots-saknes.lv/Army/military_service.htm). See also Aberle 1963, p. 67 and 1966, vol. 2, p. 265.

conscription in Napoleon's army, or in the armies of his satellite allies, all of which suffered enormous casualties in the Napoleonic wars. Despite Tsar Alexander's attempts to reform the military, the backlog of fear had not lifted. Living conditions in the Russian army remained notoriously brutal. Self-mutilation by young men was common as a means of avoiding service. Joachim Boehm, who was a neighbor of the Wagner family in North Dakota, served two years in the Russian army before emigrating to the USA. He told stories about how terrible their living conditions were. The soldiers didn't have enough meat in their diet, they were usually given frozen fat to eat, which they ate with disgust. He remarked that in the USA, that kind of food was fed to the dogs. Russian junior officers practiced ruthless hazing, often singling out the German colonists and other ethnic minorities, such as the Jews, whose knowledge of Russian was rudimentary. Discipline involved merciless beatings, often for minor offenses.

Matters took an even worse turn when Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 during a growing "nihilistic" revolutionary movement. The reign of his successor, Alexander III (1881-1894), was marked by a resurgence of Russian nationalism, which became pervasive at the highest levels of government. Within five years after coming to power, the new Tsar had quickly reasserted autocratic control and established a network of secret police agents and informers. The empire was effectively reduced to a police state.<sup>11</sup>

Anti-German rhetoric heated up in the 1880s during the so-called Pan-Slavism movement, which built upon the romanticized themes of Slavophilism and combined it with fervent and messianic Russian nationalism. Russia, it was asserted, was the direct heir of the Byzantine Empire and it had a predestined role to be the champion and protector of Russia's "little brethren" Slavic peoples throughout Eastern Europe.<sup>12</sup> This rhetoric signaled a rebirth of an aggressive foreign policy, which was a direct challenge to the empires in the West.

In 1882 the "May Laws" were passed, targeting in particular the Jews. Strict quotas were placed on the number of Jews allowed to enter universities, and some professions were declared off-limits. Jews were forbidden to purchase land in rural areas, their Pale of Settlement was reduced in size, and pogroms broke out in Kiev, Odessa, and elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Soon a massive emigration was under way, with more than two million Jews leaving Tsarist Russia from 1881 to 1920.

The ramifications were clear for other ethnic minorities in the empire, as they too soon became targeted. "Russification" efforts intensified to promote the

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974. See chapter 11, "Towards the Police State."

<sup>12</sup> Edward Crankshaw, *The Shadow of the Winter Palace*, NY: Viking Press, 1976. See chapter 14, "How Great is Russia!"

<sup>13</sup> Richard Charques, *The Twilight of Imperial Russia*, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 44.

Russian language, the Orthodox faith, and Russian autocracy throughout the empire among all its subject peoples.<sup>14</sup> Roman Catholics in Poland, Lutherans in the Baltic region, and Moslems in the east were subject to rigorous restrictions, while Eastern Orthodoxy – under the nominal head of the Tsar -- was fostered at their expense.

Despite Bismarck's adroit diplomatic efforts, relationships between Russia and Germany continued to deteriorate, especially after Russia's ambitions for greater control in the Balkans ended in disappointment at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. The turning point came in 1887 when Bulgarian nationalists managed to shake off their dependency on Russia, with tacit support from Germany and Austria-Hungary. The "Three Emperors League" collapsed and Russian foreign policy took a decidedly anti-German turn towards alliance with France.<sup>15</sup>

The fate of the German colonists soon became mired in this rising tide of anti-Germanism. They had been resident in the Black Sea region for about three generations by that point, and even longer in the Volga region. As a group, they had become extraordinarily successful in their farming ventures and their acquisition of farmlands from local Russian gentry was skyrocketing. They had generally been valued as loyal subjects and highly productive citizens. But step-by-step, they were becoming a vulnerable target.

During the reign of Alexander II their legal protections had been stripped away, and now under the autocratic reign of his successor Russification measures ratcheted upwards. State-run schools were introduced with mandatory instruction in the Russian language, which undermined their Church-run schools that used German as the language of instruction. In some colonies the private schools were closed and locks were placed on their doors. Non-Orthodox churches were required to obtain special permission to build or expand structures, which was no longer easy to obtain. The military was ordered to be self-supportive by taking whatever it needed, so Russian officers began casing the German colonies, making inventories of their resources and their young men who could be called for military service.<sup>16</sup>

More ominously, state restrictions soon ratcheted upwards on allowable land purchases by the German colonists. Their economic success and their ethnic distinctiveness had made them high profile targets. Concerns about growing German land ownership initially centered on the western border provinces of Volhynia, Kiev, and Podolia where Russian officials had become alarmed by a massive influx of German settlers since the 1860s.<sup>17</sup> In 1863 there was an abortive

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<sup>14</sup> An excellent discussion of Russification policies is provided by Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863-1915*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Charques, 1972, p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Howard J. Brumley, *The Weitz Saga*, privately published, 1986, p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Fleischhauer, 1986, p. 343.



Polish insurrection, which also aroused concerns for the security of this western periphery of the empire. Although the new German settlers didn't have the legal status of the earlier "colonists" in the Volga and Black Sea regions, German farmers everywhere had become viewed as alike by that point.<sup>18</sup> As the rhetoric about protection of the western provinces heated up, it began to color perceptions of ethnic Germans throughout the empire. Despite the fact that the older colonist settlements in the Volga and the Black Sea posed no credible threat to national security, policy debates came to center on their ethnic and linguistic traits.

This was an ominous portent of even worse things to come. As Neutatz<sup>19</sup> points out, conditions were ripe for turning the German colonists -- now unfortunately associated in Russia's national consciousness with a powerful foreign competitor -- into scapegoats for the unresolved problems of Russia's agrarian policies. Alexander II had emancipated the serfs, but he didn't make adequate provision of farmland to meet their needs. This made ethnic Germans targets of envy and resentment. Rather than being regarded as a successful experiment in economic development of the border regions of the empire, as the Tsars had originally planned, the colonists now were viewed as "privileged foreign intruders" in Russia. In the 1880s anti-German rhetoric reached near hysterical levels in the nationalist Russian press. Articles dwelled on the "problem" of controlling the land acquisitions of the German colonists. These loyal and staunch supporters of the Tsars now became subject to suspicion and slander. These "foreigners," it was charged, were taking over lands that had been "sanctified by Russian blood" and they were displacing "native Russian people." More ominously, wild assertions were made that the colonies had been strategically planned by Germany as an advance wave of "conquest by foreigners of Russian soil," and they were the "spearhead" of an impending assault by Bismarck's armies.<sup>20</sup>

Legislative efforts to curtail the growth of land ownership by ethnic Germans soon followed, undercutting their ability to provide for their growing families. The colonists were excluded from access to the Peasant Land Bank, which had been established in 1882 to provide long-term, low-interest loans for the transfer of gentry and state lands to the Russian peasantry. The Germans argued -- without success -- that they should be treated equally because their special "colonist" legal status had been taken away from them by Alexander II in 1871 and they had become subject to local *zemstvo* administration, along with the general Russian peasantry. They hoped that lawmakers would reject the widespread stereotype that all the colonists were

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<sup>18</sup> Martin, 1991, p. 408.

<sup>19</sup> Dietmar Neutatz, *Die "deutsche Frage" im Schwarzmeergebiet und in Wolhynien, Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Östlichen Europa, Band 37*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993, p. 436.

<sup>20</sup> Neutatz, 1993, p. 142.

wealthy. They pointed out that many of them were also suffering from the growing problem of landlessness. German farmers were especially distraught when lands that they had leased and developed at their own expense were taken over by the Land Bank, then resold to Russian peasants. With very few exceptions, Germans remained excluded from the Land Bank until the end of the Tsarist regime. As one historian noted, “[a]lthough they were technically excluded on the grounds of being 'settler proprietors' rather than 'peasants,' the exclusion in truth resulted from the rising xenophobia, particularly the anti-German feeling fueled by the press, the rampant nationalism, and the Russification policies of the government of Alexander III.”<sup>21</sup>

The Tsarist regime turned a deaf ear to the appeals of the former colonists and offered them two alternatives – they could either accept the mandated restrictions, or leave the country. A stark option was also offered– they could relocate to Siberia if they wished.<sup>22</sup>

In 1887 foreign settlers lacking Russian citizenship were forbidden to acquire land outside urban areas in Volhynia, Kiev, and Podolia. The primary intent of this legislation was to stem the tide of German settlers and to restrict investments by German companies, although diplomatic expediency prevented them from being singled out as an ethnic group.<sup>23</sup> By the end of 1889 the vast majority of applications for citizenship by ethnic German immigrants remained turned down. In 1892 a stricter version of this law was enacted, forbidding persons of foreign ancestry – even if they were Russian citizens – from acquiring land outside urban areas in Volhynia and the other western provinces. Persons of Russian ethnic origin and those who had embraced the Orthodox faith were exempt from these restrictions.<sup>24</sup>

Such efforts to stem the growing German presence soon began to backfire when Russian gentry realized that the law imposed restrictions on their own best customers, thereby reducing their property values.<sup>25</sup> It also became evident that investments by German enterprises in the region were economically crucial and that numerous exceptions had to be made.<sup>26</sup> As is always the case, the Russian government ran up against the problem that discrimination is difficult to implement when it affects the business interests of persons other than the targeted minority. This economic reality continued to plague efforts to erect bureaucratic barriers against the German minority over the next quarter century.

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<sup>21</sup> J. W. Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed, the Volga Germans, 1860 – 1917*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988, p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> Aberle, 1963, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Neutatz 1993, p. 75-77.

<sup>24</sup> Neutatz, 1993, p. 120-121.

<sup>25</sup> Neutatz, 1993, p. 92.

<sup>26</sup> Fleischhauer, 1986, p. 349; Neutatz, 1993, p. 125-127.

On the opposite side of the empire in the Volga region, restrictions were also imposed on land acquisitions by the colonists, despite the fact that they posed not even the remotest risk to national security. As their population steadily increased, the Volga colonists also suffered from chronic land shortages. As late as 1905 their petitions to access the Peasant Land Bank continued to be turned down by the Ministry of Finance, which "...lamey justified its decision on the grounds that approval would set a precedent that would encourage petitions from other [German] colonists." In 1906 the Volga colonists were dealt a crushing setback when they were forbidden to purchase or settle on state lands in Samara, Orenburg, and Ufa provinces, which until that point had been their major means for augmenting the lands available for their tillage.<sup>27</sup>

Nicholas II (1894-1918), the ill-fated last Tsar, haphazardly continued some of these policies, although not with the persistency of his predecessor. During the revolutionary outbreaks of 1905 the pent-up resentment of non-Russian minorities erupted. To restore order, Nicholas agreed to convene a parliament (*Duma*) and he made promises of religious and cultural freedom. The brief period of quasi-parliamentary rule from 1905-1906 brought large blocks of minorities into national political life for the first time. A broad spectrum of parties began to vie for their support. These included the leftist Social Democrats (both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks), the Socialist Revolutionaries, and the centrist "liberal bourgeoisie" parties, the Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) and Progressives.<sup>28</sup>

Although most German colonists didn't actively participate in the revolution of 1905,<sup>29</sup> they were encouraged by the prospect that the Duma would restore and enhance their ethnic rights. For a brief period the nationalistic Right withheld attacks against the Germans in recognition of their loyalty to the Crown. However, after 1907 the tsarist government reasserted power against the Duma and renewed the old policies of suppression of the national minorities.<sup>30</sup> Debate soon resumed about enacting further legislation to restrict land

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<sup>27</sup> Long, 1988, pp. 126-128.

<sup>28</sup> N. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, second edition, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 457-58.

<sup>29</sup> In the Saratov region some Volga Germans participated in the broad-based liberation movement that swept the area (James Long, "The Volga Germans of Saratov Province Between Reform and Revolution, 1861-1905," pp. 139-159 in Rex A. Wage & S. J. Seregny, eds., *Politics and Society in Provincial Russia: Saratov, 1590-1917*, Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> H. Seton-Watson, "Russian Nationalism in Historical Perspective," in Robert Conquest (ed.), *The Last Empire, Nationality and the Soviet Future*, Stanford University: Hoover Institute Press, 1986, p. 23.

ownership by Germans in the western provinces.<sup>31</sup> A “Neo-Slavic” movement sprang up in the newspapers. The Germans were again charged with disloyalty for preserving their ethnic language and folkways, and their Duma representatives were accused of being “against the national Russian people and the interests of the state.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1910 Stolypin, the Minister of Internal Affairs, attempted to revive the law of 1892 prohibiting citizens of foreign ancestry from owning land in the three western provinces of Volhynia, Podolia, and Kiev.<sup>33</sup> The Polish delegate was reassured that the specific intention of the law was not directed against Poles, but rather against the German “*Drang nach Osten*.” A group of German Octobrists, headed by Karl Lindemann, managed to defeat the measure in 1911.<sup>34</sup> After Stolypin’s assassination that year, his successor, Makarov, introduced a reworked version of the law in 1912. The proposed legislation was expanded to include Bessarabia, with exclusions for ethnic Poles, Czechs, and persons of the Orthodox faith. The Black Sea Germans became greatly alarmed when they realized that legislation no longer targeted just Volhynia and the western provinces. Karl Lindemann’s “German group” again managed to defeat the initiative when it reached the Duma in 1914, with support from Russian banking interests and others concerned about the economic and political impact of the proposed law.<sup>35</sup> At that point the issue became moot when events were overtaken by the First World War.

Most of this summary above of the rising tide against the German colonists is taken from a longer essay which I wrote as a supplement to my translation of the works of Hermann Bachmann, in 2002.<sup>36</sup> The reader is invited to continue the story of the tragedy of the German colonists in that publication, in which I trace the history up through the Soviet era. We are fortunate indeed that members of our Wagner family (and other related families) left Russia in the 1890s, before the rising tide led to a Holocaust against the German-Russians

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<sup>31</sup> B. Pinkus, & I. Fleischhauer, *Die Deutschen in der Sowjetunion*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1987, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Neutatz, 1993, p. 155-157.

<sup>33</sup> Neutatz, 1993, p. 162.

<sup>34</sup> Neutatz, 1993, p. 175; see also David G. Rempel, “The Expropriation of the German Colonists in South Russia During the Great War,” *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 4, no. 1, March, 1932, p. 51.

<sup>35</sup> Rempel (1932) provides a detailed summary of the sequence of events around the proposed legislations of 1910 and 1912.

<sup>36</sup> Roland Wagner, “Epilogue – Bachmann’s Historical Context: the Rising Tide to the Deluge,” in *Through the German Colonies of the Beresan District, and Colonist Tales*, by Hermann Bachmann, forward by Joseph Schnurr, translated with commentaries by Roland Wagner, Ph.D., Germans from Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo, N.D., 2002.

during World War One, and in the following Bolshevik period. Not all members of our family emigrated, some remained behind and were executed. The names that are available are listed in the final chapter of this family history. Descendants of Germans from Russia owe it to their ancestors to remember this history.

### Other Precipitating Factors for Emigration

As we have seen, Tsarist Russia had provided a safe haven for the German colonists in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the climate of tolerance began to deteriorate in the 1870s, and eventually the guarantees and freedoms which they had been granted when they first immigrated to Russia were revoked. The German colonists had become regarded as dangerous “enemy aliens.” The cruelest and most decisive blow was that their opportunities for purchasing new farmlands were blocked by discriminatory laws. They had experienced rapid population growth, but their ability to create daughter colonies for the younger generation was effectively sealed. They had to turn elsewhere to meet the needs of their growing families.

The Mennonites were the first to emigrate on a massive scale in the 1870s. They were especially concerned by the loss of exemption from the Russian military, which conflicted with their religious pacifist values. The regime became concerned about the loss of these highly productive farmers, so it offered them a compromise, allowing them to serve in the medical corps or the forestry service. However, once the first trickle of emigrants began to leave for greener pastures in the USA and Canada, the outflow could not be stopped. About one-third of the Mennonites left Russia by 1880. Emigrants sent word back to their home villages reporting the opportunities available in the New World, and the pace of emigration continued to grow. By the 1890s a full-scale exodus was underway from all the former German colonies, continuing unabated until World War One, which resulted in the collapse of the Tsarist empire. Those who had not left by that point were trapped, the borders were sealed and conditions were virtually impossible for the safe passage of families.

Another factor, which is rarely mentioned in the histories of the emigration movement, was the great Russian famine and agrarian crisis of 1891-1892. This famine was centered in the Volga region and it affected 17 provinces in the Black Earth zone of Russia, an area equivalent in size to the entire American Midwest. It quickly turned into a national catastrophe, one of the most important crises in Russian history from 1861 to 1905. The rains did not come for several weeks during the spring of 1891, resulting in a complete crop failure, compounded by failure of garden vegetables. By August, 1891, most of the village storehouses had been emptied and people began to beg for food. By the fall of 1891, over 1,500 people in the German villages were dying of hunger.

Malnutrition made the people vulnerable to epidemic diseases. Typhus broke out late that summer, followed by cholera in the summer of 1892. Riots broke out in the cities along the Volga and spread into the countryside. The death rate was running into the thousands and the orphanages were soon overflowing with children. Russian newspapers were full of stories about the scope of the disaster, some predicting that it would take generations for the country to recover.

At that point, word of this national disaster began to attract world attention. The Tsarist government took the drastic step of closing the grain export markets from the fall of 1891 to the spring of 1892, and diverted emergency stores of food to the stricken areas. Livestock in the famine areas were butchered on a massive scale. In Saratov only one-third of the horses and one-eighth of the cattle remained alive.<sup>37</sup> In March, 1892, relief shipments of grain began to arrive, funded by charity organizations in America. This timely aid prevented the crisis of 1891-92 from becoming an even worse disaster.<sup>38</sup> Statistics showed that Russia had the poorest harvest in 10 years, the harvest of all cereals was down by 25% and the death toll was as high as 650,000. The economic repercussions affected the entire country.

While the colonies in the Black Sea region were spared the brunt of the crop failure and famine of 1891-92, they were greatly concerned about the devastation of their compatriots in the German colonies in the Volga region. Word of the crisis spread throughout the country and it was undoubtedly a factor which led to the decision of many young German-Russians, such as Adam Wagner, to emigrate in 1891.

Coincident with these “stick” factors that promoted emigration, there were also important “carrot” factors that lured immigrants – most importantly, the availability of free homestead lands. In 1862 the USA passed the Homestead Act and Canada passed the Dominions Land Act in 1872. Both Acts provided the opportunity for a homestead consisting of a quarter section, or 160 acres, to the head of a family, widows and single men over 18 years of age living with their parents. They also had the option of buying another quarter of land at a reasonable price on easy terms.

Word about these new opportunities spread quickly. The *Odessaer Zeitung*, the major German newspaper in the Black Sea region, published numerous stories and letters sent back to the home colonies about the free land and cultural freedoms in the New World. Husbands often went in advance, and after they had earned enough money they sent money back to Russia to purchase tickets for their families. Families tended to emigrate as groups from the same

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<sup>37</sup> J.Y. Simms, “The Economic Impact of the Russian Famine of 1891-92,” *Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 60, no. 1, January 1982, pp. 63-74.

<sup>38</sup> Helen Eichstedt, *Alla Lizzie*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: Kennedy Associates, 1995, pp. 13-15.

colony, following a pattern of “chain migration,” as happened with other ethnic groups coming to the USA.