Presentation on the Volga Germans by Darrell Weber

Class title: The Volga German settlements in Russia

Class descriptions:
The family history records of the German populations along the Volga River.

1. How did a large population of Germans settle along the Volga River in Russia?

The Czarina of Russia in the 1750 was a German woman called Catharine, the Great. She was brought from German to marry the Czar of Russia. In a complicated plan the Czar planned to remove Catharine but the Royal Guard supported Catharine and the Czar was removed and killed. As Catherine, the Great ruled, she began to worry about the lands along the Volga River. Other groups began to move towards the Volga lands and the risk of losing the land area to other groups became real. Catharine decided that settlement of farmers in the area would keep the land belonging to Russia. She didn’t have much faith in the Russian pheasants but know that the German farmers could be successful in establishing communities along the Volga area.

2. Inviting German colonists to settle in the Volga region.

Catherine the Great sent Russian Diplomatic Representatives to Europe to invited Germans to settle the area along the Volga River around 1767-1770. They gave many promises to attract the German colonists. The colonists would not have to serve in the army. They would have freedom of religion. They could teach their school children in German. Catherine said they would provide money for transportation to the Volga area. Some 40,000 Germans agreed to come to the Volga region to live and farm.

3. Establishment of the villages in the Volga region.

The colonists came by large boats and then on riverboats. Some traveled overland. The villages were set up with all the village member being of one religion (normally Lutheran or Catholic). The settlements followed the Mir system where the German family received an allotment of land to farm based on the number of boys in the family. The men did not have to serve in the army and German was the language spoken. They took censuses of the villages about every 20 to 30 years. Most of these Censuses are available in published books or on line. The German farmers were successful in growing crops and in storing 1/3 of their crop as a resource in case of a crop failure. The population of the Volga Germans increased to over one million. Addition settlement areas were established in the Black Sea region. Many of the villages established second villages, as the population of the village grew too large.

4. The Russian government changed the rules around 1780.

Around 1870, the Russian government changes the rules and men had to serve in the army. They required the villagers to speak Russian. Many Volga Germans moved to the US, Brazil and Argentina because of these changes. When Germany
turned and attacked Russia in World War II, Stalin declared all Germans to be enemies of Russia. In a short time (a few days) he sent the Volga Germans to Siberia to work in slave labor camps. Around 15 years latter they were given their freedom back, but not their land and houses. Many of the Volga Germans stayed in Siberia or moved out of Russia.


The best source of finding family history information is in the Volga German Census Books. Igor Pleve published a listing of the original settlers in the book, "Einwanderung in das Wolgagebiet 1764-1767". Brent Alan Mai published 2 volumes of the 1798 census of the German colonies along the Volga. He also has used the LDS films to record specific villages for latter censuses. The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia had an extensive listing of obituaries, which they charged for searches. They provided the information to the LDS family search and you can search the records for free now. Many of the Volga Germans moved the Nebraska, North and South Dakota and Kansas area. LDS family search provide a great research for searching family history.

Short Bio

Dr. Darrell Weber  
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Education  
University of Idaho BS and MS  
University of California, Davis PhD  
University of Wisconsin, Madison Post Doc

Positions  
University of Houston, Assistant Professor 4 years  
Brigham Young University Professor 33 years

Scientific publications 170 articles

Longer Biography

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Education  
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Number of students completed MS and PhD degrees.

Several Post Doctoral individuals came and worked in my laboratory for several years at a time.

I work as a consultant in LDS family history center in Lindon, Utah