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Kassidy Whetstone
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, whetsk1@unlv.nevada.edu

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A Series of Political Russian Events to Exploit and Destroy the Volga Germans, 1914-1921

Kassidy Whetstone
HIST 451-1001
Dr. Tusan
Immigration, although at times it may seem like a modern issue, has been controversial for hundreds of years. A major facet surrounding the issue of immigration is how well the new immigrants are able to adapt to the culture of their new country. Despite hopeful initial intentions, immigration is not always a successful endeavor; policies (and policy failures) on behalf of the hosting country as well as inflexible demands of immigrants may lead to civil discord between the two parties. This was precisely the case for the Volga Germans living in the Russian Saratov region, which was unfortunately the case of an immigration experiment gone wrong. Although there has been much debate over what exactly led to the perceived failure of the Russian immigration experiment, it has been agreed upon that the experiment ultimately was a failure, as it turned violent and has been investigated as a possible instance of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

For this project, I will be investigating the Volga Germans living in the Russian Saratov region, and analyzing the relationship between the Germans and their Russian neighbors in the early 20th Century. This paper will use primary sources including journal and diary entries from individuals either living in the Volga region or visiting for relief purposes, letters sent from Volga Germans, newspaper articles describing major events occurring within the Volga region, as well as maps and photographs from the time. This paper will also include secondary sources from various historians and scholars who have investigated the Volga Germans and the catastrophes surrounding them, with works in the forms of books, journal articles, speeches, and maps. These resources have been obtained through the databases of WorldCat, JSTOR and Historical Abstracts, or through
university library resources including the physical book stacks, online resources, interlibrary loan, and microfilm.

This paper will seek to answer the following question: What event, or series of events, served as the breaking point in the relationship between the Volga Germans and the Russians, leading the failure of the immigration experiment? In 1762, when Catherine II drafted the proclamation that would invite foreigners into Russian territory to revive the agricultural economy, she expressed hopeful intentions. If the Russian government was hopeful in bringing Germans into Russia, and the Germans were hopeful in starting new lives in Russia, what went wrong? This paper is driven by the thesis that a series of events, consisting of World War I, the 1917 Russian Revolution, and the 1921 Russian Famine together led to the deterioration and ultimate demise of the relationship between the Volga Germans and their Russian counterparts, thus rendering Catherine's initial immigration experiment a failure. While the First World War and the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution generated much tension between the Volga Germans and Russians and weakened the autonomous German society, it was the Famine of 1921 that delivered the final blow to the suffering Volga Germans and virtually incapacitated them. This paper will seek to understand the depth of Germanophobia throughout Russia, to analyze the consequences of anti-German campaigns on future Volga German affairs, and to understand why Catherine's immigration experiment, which may be the largest in Russian history, ultimately failed.
Historiography:

Historians agree that the years from 1914-1921 were a tumultuous time for the Volga Germans and their Russian neighbors due to a series of events that generated tension between the two parties. The first trial in this series was the First World War, in which Germany and Russia were engaged in combat against each other. In 1914, Germanophobia began to spread throughout Russia, as the Russians feared that the villagers were aiding the German enemy at the onset of World War I. According to Colorado State University history professor James Long, media and newspaper campaigns were launched as “The Volga Germans were invariably described as the lowest form of humanity, debauched, devious, dishonest, and deceitful, whose only purpose in coming to Russia had been to exploit the Russian land and people.”¹ Army instructor and historical society officer George J. Walters also recognized 1914 as the “beginning of the end” of the Volga Germans, as it marked the last 25 years of the Volga Germans’ existence in Russia. With such hostile Germanophobia, Walters argues that “everything German became suspect within the Russian Empire” and that the Volga Germans became known as the “enemy within.” This led to severe hateful actions taken against the Volga Germans, including attempts at ethnic cleansing, which will be discussed in more detail in the following pages. Although Walters attributes the entire period from 1914-1922 as being detrimental to the villagers as acts of “war, famine, murders, and exile” led to their eventual annihilation, the year 1914 was vital in marking the beginning of the end for the Volga Germans.²

With 1914 and the onset of World War I being the first event which damaged the relationship between the Volga Germans and the Russians, the second event to provide additional damage was the 1917 Russian Revolution. As the Bolsheviks were rising to power, the Volga Germans were known for running successful farms, despite the anti-German campaigns that were attempting to weaken them. Because the German farms were so successful compared to the Russian peasants and that the Volga German society was still autonomous, Katarzyna Maniewska argues that they were “dangerous to the newly-arising Bolshevik state.” The Bolsheviks needed a way to control the Germans without linking the Bolshevik state to Germany, which resulted in what Maniewska calls “war communism” as the Russian army initiated requisitions of German resources.\(^3\)

Walters argues that the Bolshevik Revolution turned the German villages into battlefields, as the Russian army ransacked villages and murdered villagers who did not fully comply, devastating the villages. Walters argues that this devastated the villages more than the army acknowledged, as the villages’ production of agriculture plummeted due to the farmers being afraid to work in the fields alone.\(^4\)

Historical society member and Volga-German born Fred Koch argues that the Bolsheviks not only suppressed the Volga Germans economically in terms of agriculture, but also socially and culturally in terms of religion. Koch argues that various forms of religion, including both Protestant and Catholic, comprised a major portion of the Volga German identity, which posed a threat to the secular state. When the Bolsheviks removed religion from the German schools and imprisoned and even murdered church leaders, it was another violent attempt through the revolution to suppress German culture and


\(^4\) Walters, Wir Wollen Deutschen Bleiben, 161, 163-164.
identity among the Volga villages.\textsuperscript{5} By 1919, historian Robert Conquest argues that the Bolsheviks had lost all cordiality with the Volga Germans, and initiated what he calls the “Peasant Wars,” in which the German villagers took up arms and retaliated against the Russian army.\textsuperscript{6} Orlando Figes, a British professor of history at the University of London, also argues that the conflict was directly aimed at the requisitioning brigades. Figes describes instances of revolt in which “the villagers attacked the brigade with pitchforks, axes, and pikes, disarmed it, and chased it out of the village.” More than 150,000 Volga Germans participated in these conflicts, and took up arms directly against the requisitioning squads. The result of these uprisings was devastating, however, as the Russian army ultimately won the battle and instilled harsh consequences among the rebel villagers, often in the form of even harsher requisitions.\textsuperscript{7} These requisitions worsened the famine state that had already begun developing among the Volga region, and the Volga German state was so incredibly weakened by this combination of violence and starvation, that it would not be able to recover in a timely manner.

Unfortunately, the Volga Germans were never able to recover before the third major event: the 1921 Russian famine. Conquest argues that the famine was largely caused by political influence, because of the destruction caused by the Russian army’s violent and devastating requisition of Volga German resources. Conquest argues that the requisitioning had two effects on the German farms: 1) the villages were stripped of resources to produce more crops, and 2) the villagers were left with little incentive or

motivation to farm again. Maniewska also argues that the famine was a result of the severe Bolshevik requisitions.

Although the famine was devastating throughout Russia, it was especially severe for the Volga Germans because they were still being targeted for their food supplies. Maniewska argues that because the Russians were envious of the German success in agriculture, German villages were the first to be targeted and forced to supply grains throughout the rest of Russia. Maniewska argues that the Volga Germans already had scarce resources to begin with, but this made the situation even worse. Samuel Sinner also attributes political causes to the severe devastation of the Volga Germans during the famine, as Lenin issued even harsher requisitions of Volga German goods in 1921. Sinner argues that over 300,000 Volga Germans “needlessly died” as a result of these requisitions because the Germans were supplying more resources than they were keeping for themselves.

Hundreds of thousands of Volga Germans succumbed to the famine, and Walters argues that the damage was so severe that they would never be able to recover. The United States and England were major relief sponsors during the famine, although their relief still only reached a fraction of those in need. While the relief efforts did save millions of individuals from starving to death, it did not restore the strength needed for the Volga Germans to be as prosperous as they once were, at least compared to their peasant Russian counterparts. The famine completely devastated the Volga Germans

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8 Conquest, The Harvest of Sorrow, 55.
beyond any sort of recovery, so that they were totally defenseless against Stalin’s future extermination efforts, and their only options were to leave Russia or be executed.\textsuperscript{11}

For my research, I will be using the previously mentioned historians and scholars to analyze World War I, the 1917 Revolution, and the 1921 Famine as the core events that fed the (eventually successful) Germanophobic efforts to drive the Volga Germans out of Russia. As Maniewska states, much attention has been given to the 1921 Famine, yet very little has been given to the Volga German experience surrounding these events.\textsuperscript{12}

Based on the arguments from the previously mentioned historians and scholars as well as research from other sources, this paper will aim to serve as a response to the complaints of historians, and generate an analysis of the Volga German experience surrounding the events from 1914-1921. In order to understand these events, a brief background of the Volga Germans is crucial.

\textbf{Background:}

After the Seven Years’ War in the 18\textsuperscript{th} Century, the German states within the Holy Roman Empire were plagued with unemployment, poverty, religious persecution and tense social-class relationships. Life for peasants was miserable, as members of the elite classes abused their standings and often times forcibly sent commoners to foreign lands as mercenaries. On July 22, 1763, Russian tsarina Catherine II issued a proclamation inviting foreigners into Russia to serve as buffer populations on the outer region, and it appeared to the German peasants as a promising opportunity. To make the invitation even more appealing, foreigners were promised religious freedom, tax

\textsuperscript{12} Maniewska, \textit{The Famine of 1921-1922}, 88.
exemption, and guaranteed suitable land. These were features that had been absent from peasant life in Germany, and naturally a large amount of German peasants from all walks of life answered the call, primarily relocating along the Volga River. While immigrants from several different countries traveled to Russia, Germans comprised the majority, and settled in the Saratov Province on the Northern portion of the Volga River [Fig. 1].

The Germans who accepted Catherine’s invitation faced many tribulations in traveling to Russia, as many German states were forced to prohibit the emigration due to a drop in the population of peasants remaining in Germany. In addition, Russia was overwhelmed by the response, and ships bore unsanitary conditions due to overcrowding. To the peasants, however, these were minor obstacles that they could overcome because they believed that the life in Russia would be worth the struggle. Upon arrival to the Volga region, however, it was immediately apparent that the Russian government had not fulfilled all of their promises. Many Germans arrived to infertile and dry grasslands that were not suitable for farming. This would prove to be difficult for many Germans, as farming was the primary occupation of the peasants. However, they found solutions to these issues by traveling to farther lands that were suitable, or pursuing different occupations.

For the most part, the newly named Volga Germans were willing to overlook these broken promises, largely because they could freely practice religion. Religion was

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14 James Mynde, A Most Accurate Map of Those Parts of the Astracan Government upon the River Wolga Where in the new Colonies are Settled, Taken from Original Drawings & Observations Made in a late Survey of Those Countries, map, Bibliothèque nationale de France: 1765.
incredibly important to the Volga German culture, as it was often implemented into regular school programs, and allowed the villagers to retain their German identity.

During the first several decades of the Volga Germans living within Russia, the villagers were able to adapt to their new lifestyles and develop successful village communities. Churches were the staple of communal life, and the newly developed schools provided education superior to that within the Holy Roman Empire, and even surpassing the quality of many Russian schools. Russian peasants began to resent how successful the schools were becoming, and often denounced the lifestyles of the Volga Germans; the Russians viewed the Germans as too strict and stubborn, while the Germans viewed the Russians as lazy and unorganized. Because of these cultural differences between the two groups, they typically avoided each other and stayed within their own communal groups.\textsuperscript{16} While at the time this seemed to be the solution to avoid conflict, it only brewed resentment between the two parties.

In 1871, under the reign of Alexander II, the promises made by Catherine had been revoked and the Volga Germans were subjected to what later became interpreted as “Russification.” The German language was banned from schools, German teachers were replaced with Russian teachers, and Volga Germans were forced to convert to the Russian Orthodox religion. By 1881, all of Catherine’s policies had been reversed and the Volga Germans became the equivalent of Russian peasants, also subject to military service and tax payments.\textsuperscript{17}

It must be noted, however, that at this point the Volga Germans were still viewed as an autonomous people, living in the Autonomous Republic of Volga Germans. The villages were allowed to host local government systems, as long as they would still adhere to the national Russian order. In the 1860s, the Russian government installed zemstvos as a branch of government to place Russians alongside the Volga German officials. This was not received well, however, and was viewed as another component of Russification. Despite the animosity toward these systems, the zemstvos remained in operation for several decades.

By 1897, it was reported that the population of the Volga Germans had reached 1.8 million, and was continuing to grow. The Russians feared these growing numbers, and continued to enforce Russification in order to gain some form of control over the incredibly large state. From the 1860s until the early 1900s, animosity toward Russification continued to brew among the Volga German villages, especially when changes were made in land distribution among the peasant class, placing the Volga Germans at a disadvantage. The main act of Russification that the Volga Germans would not tolerate, however, was the secularization of German Kirchenschulen (church schools) under the branch of the Ministry of Education in the 1890s. The Russian government had previously released decrees stating that religion would no longer be practiced in the Volga German schools, although no official actions had been taken towards it. When the zemstvo system, which linked local Volga German governments to the national Russian government, allowed this to happen, the Volga Germans rejected the zemstvos. A revolution occurred among the villages in 1905 in an attempt to overthrow the zemstvo system and revive German culture and autonomy, although it was not successful in

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initiating any major policy change.\textsuperscript{19} Although the revolution did not bring any long-term changes, it was significant in showing that there was growing tension in the relationship between the two parties, and that there was disagreement over economics, culture, and government.

Although the tension was growing stronger as years progressed, there was rarely violence between the Volga Germans and their Russian neighbors. Eventually, however, the tension would boil over and the relationship between the two parties would begin to crumble in 1914, with the onset of World War I.

**World War I: The Onset of Germanophobia**

1914 and the First World War proved to be not only a difficult time for the Russians as they were at war with Germany, but for the Volga Germans as well. At the onset of World War I, the Russian military issued drafts to all male citizens, regardless of national origin. In a 1915 letter by an unnamed Volga German villager, it was stated that, “on the 19\textsuperscript{th} of next month [March], nineteen-year-old boys will be drafted. They exempt nobody from the military service.” At the same time, however, the Russian sentiment toward the Volga Germans was becoming more visible, as the nation was at war with the Volga Germans’ country of origin. In the same letter, the villager captured Volga German fears of what the future would hold when they continued, “Today…speeches were made against citizens of German origin. They want to exile us.”\textsuperscript{20} Volga Germans began living in fear, as they were uncertain of what the Russians would do with them. Many of them

were drafted into the Russian army, and had to fight against their home country of Germany. Many Volga Germans willingly volunteered to serve in the Russian army, as a service to the country that they now lived in. Others stayed in the villages and dealt with the daily harassment and discrimination from the Russians. The Russians feared that the Volga Germans were acting as spies and supplying their harvested grain to the German military. The finishing touch was the fear that the Volga Germans had strategically been placed within the Russian borders by German military forces to exploit the nation from within its borders. Once these paranoid ideas began to spread throughout Russia, Germanophobia surfaced in what James Long refers to as an anti-German “witch-hunt.”

Newspaper campaigns were launched that depicted the Volga Germans as barbarous traitors who were exploiting Russia’s resources and destroying the country from within. The Germans were viewed as a “yoke,” and many Russians believed that the Germans must be cast out of “Mother Russia.” In 1914 the Russian Council of Ministers banned the German language in schools, and made Russian the only acceptable language. By 1915, the German “unorthodox” religions were removed from education, and the Kirchenschule (church schools) were shut down. At the same time that this was happening, the “Society of 1914” an anti-German political group, began spreading rumors that the Volga Germans were a greater threat than any national military could ever pose, and that the Volga Germans were conspiring an economic takeover from within. In addition, the Fundamental Laws of February 1915, also known as the Liquidation Laws, called for the expropriation of German villagers and the transfer of their land to Russian peasants. Many Volga Germans sold their lands before the government could get to them, which made it more difficult for them to be located and
deported. As a result of the Volga Germans remaining ahead of the laws, the Fundamental Laws were not enforced for very long. Nonetheless, there was an active threat against the Volga Germans, who had been living in Russia for over 150 years by the start of World War I. However, because they were of German origin, and because of the tension between the Volga Germans and Russians that had been brewing up to this point, World War I allowed for official discrimination and Germanophobia toward the Volga Germans. This Germanophobia began to take a violent turn, and became so extreme that even Russian citizens with German ancestry were persecuted.\(^{21}\)

The anti-German campaigns during World War I became so severe, that Samuel Sinner estimates that there were around 100,000 Volga German casualties from the Fundamental Laws alone, since the expropriations often turned violent. Sinner argues that this fact has received very little attention, though, since Russia classified it as an emergency wartime action.\(^{22}\)

For many of the Volga Germans, there was uncertainty as to what should be done in response to these discriminatory acts from their Russian neighbors. They could emigrate out of Russia, as some did, but where would they go? Germany was at war, so returning back to their homeland was not a feasible option. Many Volga Germans decided to stay in Russia, and hope that the current situation would subside and that they would be able to resume to their normal lives once again.

Unfortunately, the Volga Germans who stayed were wrong; World War I was just the beginning of mass-scale destruction to the villagers and the breakdown of the Volga German-Russian relationship, and they had already been alienated from the rest of

\(^{22}\) Sinner, “The German-Russian Genocide,” 3.
Russian society. Russian animosity toward the Germans had finally boiled over, and chaos would ensue in the following years. For a short period of time, the Volga German situation began to look up around the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution, as the revolution diverged much attention away from the villagers and the witch-hunts against them. However, as will be argued in the following pages, the early hopeful events of the 1917 Revolution were short lived, as the Volga Germans were once again relentlessly targeted as the enemies within.

**Revolution and Internal Threats**

In 1917, the Russian Revolution was initiated in a series of political efforts to end imperial rule in Russia and implement a new, Communist government that would bring power to the peasant class. These events were monumental for Russia, and incredibly controversial. Two primary parties leading the revolution were the Bolshevik Party by Vladimir Lenin, and a moderate-liberal party led by Alexander Kerensky. During this time, life began to improve for the peasant Volga Germans. While they were still subject to discrimination and witch-hunts, the political upheaval helped relieve some of the attention that the Volga Germans had been receiving, and the violence against them had dramatically reduced. The moderate party led by Kerensky, which for some time was at the forefront of the revolution, sought to emphasize human rights and restored religious equality throughout Russia, and achieved some success in doing so. By February 1917, the Volga Germans revived their culture and believed that peace had finally arrived. In April of 1917, a Volga German villager by the name of Amalia wrote a letter to her sister in the United States. In the letter, she demonstrates the change in attitude toward the
villagers with the start of the revolution. Social events had been organized, to which members of all nationalities and ethnic origins were welcome to attend. Upon attending an event alongside Armenians and Georgians, Amalia reflected, “it was so merry that I just wanted to say something pleasant to everybody. And all the people became so polite, as if they were quite different people.” Russian society seemed to have completely abandoned its recent anti-German ideals, and the Volga Germans thought that this would start a new peaceful era. However, they did not realize that life had been peaceful under the moderate Kerensky’s party, which was not pushing the Germanophobic agenda. By the end of the year, the Bolsheviks defeated Kerensky’s moderate party, and to Vladimir Lenin and the leaders of the Bolshevik Party, the Volga Germans were a threat.

By the time that the Bolshevik party was rising to power at the end of 1917, Russia was still at war with Germany. The Bolshevik leaders still believed that the Volga Germans were loyal to Germany, and that they were an internal enemy. There was debate over how to handle the Volga Germans due to Russia’s critical state with Germany; to fully accept the autonomous Volga German state would link Russian ideals with German, but to completely unleash on them could be considered an act of violence toward the German state. As a result, the Bolshevik party turned their narrative against the entire peasant class.

Two major actions by the Russian government led to Volga German revolt, as the two actions respectively attacked two core Volga German ideals. First, in January 1918, the Bolsheviks separated church from state. This was a continuation of Kerensky’s 1917 freedom of religion, since it removed government policy from the practice of religion,

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except the Bolsheviks intended to slowly rid of religion entirely. Church leaders were targeted and arrested for promoting in “counterrevolutionary propaganda,” and thousands of religious leaders were tortured and executed. To the Volga Germans, this was a direct attack on their way of living, as religion was a staple of communal life. It was so important, that Koch referred to it as the “center of the colonists’ intellectual world.”

This second removal of religion from societal life was a repeat of the Codex of 1871 and secularization of Kirchenschulen from the Ministry of Education, as well as the 1915 attempt to ban the German “unorthodox” religions. This was all too familiar to the Volga Germans, but there was still another lingering element of the Bolshevik’s attacks on them.

The Bolsheviks decided that they could no longer ally with the peasant class, and in May 1918 the Commissariat of Food called for “excess grain” to be taken from farmers. The Bolshevik party was still trying to decide how they would control the Volga Germans, and at this point, the villagers’ farms were known for their success compared to other Russian peasants. By passing laws directed to the peasant class as a whole, the Russian government could specifically target the Volga Germans. The villagers knew this, and reduced the amounts of their farmland and production in an attempt to make themselves less noticeable and fall below having any sort of “excess” measurements. This did not help them, though, as the Bolsheviks were determined to drive the Volga Germans out of Russia. These intentions were noticed throughout the world, and began to concern various nations. In 1918, the New York Times posted an article in which it was

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24 Koch, The Volga Germans, 128, 132-133.
noted that the Russian “masses are becoming more definitely anti-German,” and that it was largely an issue of social class.25

By 1919, Vladimir Lenin and his Bolshevik party passed even harsher requisition laws, making German fields subject to random attacks. And for the first time, the Volga Germans decided that they would take up arms to retaliate against this exploitation. This retaliation started what Robert Conquest describes as the “Peasant Wars,” in which peasants of all ethnic backgrounds joined the Volga Germans and fought to defend themselves against the Red Army’s requisitions. An example of this would be the Antonov Rebellion, which originated in the Tambov Province, next to the German Saratov Province. In a short time, the rebellion had reached the Saratov region as well as surrounding provinces, and a militia of 40,000 peasants was formed.26 These conflicts turned the Volga villages into battlefields, as the Bolsheviks requisition became brutal and violent.

The requisitioning squads incited fear in the villagers, as their attacks were unpredictable and gruesome. Vladimir Lenin understood the severity and brutality with which his forces ransacked the villages, as he stated in a quote, “we took all the surplus grain-and sometimes even not only surplus grain but part of the grain the peasant required for food.”27 These requisitions had detrimental effects on the Volga Germans for various reasons, as the majority of the fighting took place within the villages. Agricultural production of the villages dropped dramatically; first by the villagers’ own hand, but later at the hand of the Red Army. Much of the villagers’ resources had been destroyed or

26 Conquest, Harvest of Sorrow, 51.
ceased, so there was little left for the villagers to harvest. In addition, the villagers were left with little motivation to continue farming, as they were often scared to enter the fields alone in the event of another Bolshevik raid. This would lead to a small-scale famine in 1920 among the villages, which would ultimately spread and affect other regions of Russia.

Germany was aware of the situation unfolding with their subjects in Russia, and it could be argued that the Volga German experience inspired anti-Bolshevism propaganda. An example of this is a 1919 poster from Berlin [Fig. 2]. In German, it headlines “Not, Elend, Hunger, Zerstörung bringt der Bolschewismus”, which I translated literally to “Need, Misery, Hunger, Suffering, brings the Bolshevism”. The poster depicts a German family, huddled together and watching in distress as mounted Bolshevik troops raid and torch their cabin, leaving with their livestock. The poster bears such strong resemblance to the experiences of the Volga Germans, that it can be argued that this was Germany’s response to the Russian treatment of their subjects.

If this was indeed Germany’s form of response, it was ineffective, as the Bolsheviks continued to target and exploit the Volga Germans. Many villagers left Russia and went all throughout the world, while others remained within the Saratov region hoping for better days. Yet again, a third wave of destruction was quickly approaching, as the miniature famine that the Volga Germans were facing in 1920 was a precursor to a much larger and more destructive famine. At this point in time, the Volga Germans had survived six years of witch-hunts, violent xenophobia, and oppression. The Volga Germans had been weakened by the past few years, but not yet destroyed as the Russians’

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had hoped. The anti-German campaigns during the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution were part of a larger political mission to achieve an ethnic cleansing of Russia; so far, it had been unsuccessful and the Volga Germans were still steadily clinging to their way of life. However, the next event, the Famine of 1921, would render them so weak and defenseless beyond any sort of recovery, leaving them vulnerable to whatever events would transpire in future years.

The Famine of 1921: The Last Straw

The Famine of 1921 was the final event that aided in the weakening of the Volga Germans, before the reign of Joseph Stalin decimated them over the course of the next decade. In 1920 the Volga Germans faced a small-scale famine due to the harsh requisitions of their harvests by Russian soldiers, although it was dismal in comparison to the large-scale famine that would kill millions of men, women and children throughout Russia. The Famine of 1921 is important to analyze when investigating the treatment of the Volga Germans, as the power of the famine was largely motivated and fueled by political influence of the newly-formed Bolshevik government.

In 1921, the English Save the Children Fund generated a map to display the various levels of devastation throughout Russia in an attempt to conclude where aid should be delivered [Fig. 3]. According to this map, the Saratov Province housing the Volga Germans was the most heavily affected, with the darker color signifying more devastation. The United States also conducted a relief effort, and it was reported that because of the gruesome conditions in the Volga regions, many relief workers were

reported to have emotional breakdowns upon arrival.\textsuperscript{30} Although the famine brought destruction all throughout Russia, what makes the Volga Germans unique in this event is that the famine was largely a continuation of the anti-German sentiment in the region, and that the Volga Germans were targeted extensively for their resources.

The Bolshevik requisitions of Russian goods was detrimental to the Volga Germans, and caused so much destruction that the villagers had little resources for harvest in the spring of 1921. Despite them not having resources, Vladimir Lenin continued to demand that the Volga Germans provided food, livestock and other resources to the rest of Russia. In 1914 the Volga Germans collectively possessed around 1.2 million cattle; however, there were only around 200,000 by 1921.\textsuperscript{31} Despite these statistics, Lenin continued to raise the requirements placed upon the Volga Germans, and villagers who could not meet the demands would be imprisoned, turned into servants, or sometimes killed.\textsuperscript{32} The villagers could not meet these demands, and the Bolshevik army continued to raid the villages and take whatever resources were available. The raids were brutal, as troops would arrive unannounced, storm houses and barns, steal whatever resources could be found, and then torch the dwellings before leaving. Among the Volga Germans, the requisition squads became known as the “Iron Broom.” As a Volga German pastor noted in 1921,

“The gang was known as the ‘Iron Broom.’ And it was a fit and proper name. For like roaring lions they came to the settlements, and any order on produce that had not been collected in full, was forcibly collected afresh. All houses, barns, stables, cellars, lofts, were searched, and literally swept of everything they contained, down to the last dried apple, and the last egg.

\textsuperscript{31} Maniewska, \textit{The Famine of 1921-1922}, 93-94.
These Tula\textsuperscript{33} labor gangs caused such a terror and such a panic in the settlements that many women swooned when a gang was approaching. No prayers, no supplications would help. And woe to the farmer in whose possession flour or any other produce was found; he was tortured and whipped to the blood. Some of the settlers who had thus been tortured succumbed to their wounds: such was the case with two men in the settlement Blumenfeld.”\textsuperscript{34}

Because the Volga Germans were not only suffering during the famine, but also being targeted in a series of xenophobic witch-hunts, they became the favorites of the relief workers sent to the Russian region. It is important to note that the devastation was felt all throughout Russia, and it cannot be ignored that Russian peasants were oppressed as well. However, the large scale of devastation felt by the Volga Germans is important to study due to it being caused by such heavy political motivation. The requisitions allowed the Russian government to oppress the Volga Germans in ways that the previous Germanophobic campaigns never could. While the requisitions were directed to the general peasant class, there was resentment against the Volga Germans due to their successful farms. Unreasonable demands were placed upon the farmers, and they could not feed their families due to their obligation to feed the rest of Russia. This led to disgusting conditions, once again while throughout Russia, particularly in the Volga German villages, the villagers were forced to eat pets such as cats and dogs, and occasionally each other. In a 1922 letter sent to Pauline Lehl, Volga villager Amalia describes the horror in the villages. Individuals were arrested after they “killed people and sold them roasted or cold at the market. Mostly they kill children…there are persistent rumors circulating about the loss of several children, mostly orphanage

\textsuperscript{33} Tula is a city just Northwest of Saratov.
\textsuperscript{34} Unknown author, “Memorandum of N.N.,” American Relief Administration, Russian Operations, Box 99, (November 10, 1921): 4. As quoted in James Long, From Privileged to Predisposed, 514.
adults and children alike were afraid to travel alone, as reports were circulating of individuals being abducted, butchered, and sold. And while many arrests were made on those who were caught, these problems were running rampant throughout the Russian region as the entire region was entering a chaotic state of emergency.

Both English and American relief workers set up food kitchens, and their efforts hundreds of thousands of lives throughout Russia [Fig. 4]. Sir Benjamin Robertson from the English Save the Children Fund visited some of these kitchens and refugee camps in the Saratov Province, and made a journal of his observations. In the journal, he notes that the conditions of the refugees are “indescribably bad,” and that there was an average of two-dozen deaths daily during his visit. There was also controversy in the winter of 1921 when heavy snow and ice prohibited relief teams from reaching the villages. Instead of travelling by sled, as many teams from England and the United States had done, many troops of the Russian army instead kept the resources for themselves and neglected to deliver them. This was a large controversy, as newspapers throughout the world questioned this as another component in the attempt to rid Russia of the Volga Germans. Although the strategy may not have been to kill them off by starving them, the strategy, based on analysis of previous attempts from prior years, could have been to starve them enough to motivate their emigration.

36 Photographer Unknown, “Line of the Starving to the Dining Hall-Baronsk,” (1921), Photograph, from Saratov Museum of Regional Studies, donated to The Historical Society of Germans From Russia by John and Sue Groh.
37 Sir Benjamin Robertson, Descriptive Notes on Tour In Saratov and Samara Provinces, (1922): 10. Obtained through Western Aid and the Global Economy microfilm reel 30.
Relief workers from the United States and Britain showed suspicion toward the Russians, as they felt that the Russians could not be trusted to deliver the needed resources. In January of 1922, Dr. Cornick had been stationed in the Saratov Province to assist with general relief efforts and to tend to the ill. In a letter to his sister, Dr. Cornick stated that, “I don’t believe I have ever had such a profound contempt…as I have for the Russians…I really believe that their intentions are good, but they can’t follow simple instructions to save their lives, and can’t count ten bottles on a shelf and get the same result three times straight along.”

Over the course of the famine, the German suitable land decreased in some areas by more than 60%, leading to 95% of the population to be starving. A combination of the requisitions and of eating any available food resulted in the disappearance of more than half of the villages’ horses alone. Many families did not own horses, or ate the ones they did, despite owing them to the Russian army. In the course of two years, from 1920-1922, more than 100,000 people died in the Volga German villages from starvation alone, with thousands more dying at the hands of Russian soldiers for not surrendering the demanded resources. More than 250,000 of approximately 370,000 Volga German families were starving, but while Germany was aware of the situation of its subjects, the country was facing its own consequences from the First World War and was not in a position to be able to provide much assistance. The only thing that kept the Volga Germans alive was the combined effort of England and the United States in the form of relief projects.

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The American and English relief projects were what saved the Volga Germans from complete extinction during this period, as it was estimated that the efforts were what stopped the Volga German population from starving entirely. While the projects were vital in keeping the Volga Germans alive, they could not revive their communities. These projects are credited with keeping the Volga Germans in a stable condition until the famine would eventually ease by 1923. Because of the heavy population losses incurred over the course of the famine, which in some regions amounted to nearly all of the villagers, the Volga Germans would never be able to gain the strength back which was needed to run successful farms as they once did. And of the villagers who did survive the famine, many of them emigrated out of Russia as soon as they were healthy enough to do so.

**Conclusion:**

For years, the Volga Germans were the leading supplier of grain resources to the rest of Russia, and for years, the Volga Germans were one of the most oppressed groups within the Russian region. The case of the Volga Germans is the case of an immigration experiment gone wrong, the case of immigrants and a country’s natives living uncomfortably together. In 1763, Catherine II had the right intentions when she invited Germans into Russia, and hoped that prosperity would come to both parties. However, a series of corrupt leaders led to the exploitation and eventually extinction of the Volga Germans. After Catherine’s rule, Russians made attempts to be rid of the Volga Germans, as they were viewed as the enemies within. Russification efforts went into effect with the 1871 Codex, as the Russians began to resent the foreign Germans for how successful they
had become when the Russians could not reap success from their own land. Tension grew with animosity between the Volga Germans and Russians, and the animosity finally took major action in 1914 with the onset of World War I. The Russians now had an “excuse” to hate the Germans, and used the war as a justification for discriminatory and xenophobic anti-German actions. The Germans were stripped not only of their rights within Russia, but also of the German culture that they had taken with them. Anti-German Russians engaged in witch-hunts to search for and be rid of any German they could find, leading to a nationwide attempt at ethnic cleansing. The 1917 Revolution only worsened this, as the Volga Germans were seen as a potential threat to the rising Bolshevik state. Leading the Bolshevik Party, Vladimir Lenin used the Volga Germans’ success against them and demanded that they supply large quantities of their resources to the rest of Russia. These harsh requisitions led to small-scale famine, which eventually transformed into a nationwide famine in 1921. Hundreds of thousands of Volga Germans were killed either by starvation during the famine, or at the hands of Russian soldiers for “noncompliance”.

Over the course of these events within a 7-year period, the Volga Germans faced discrimination, murder, starvation, and exploitation at the hands of the Russians. Together, World War I, the 1917 Revolution, and the 1921 Famine collectively eroded the condition of the Volga Germans, and left them weakened and barely existing by 1923. Right when the situation started to look up after Lenin in 1924, a heavy hand was struck upon them by Joseph Stalin, which caused destruction more extreme than everything they had faced previously. By the time that Stalin struck with his iron fist, however, the Volga Germans were still rendered defenseless from the period of 1914-1922, and were
removed from Russia either by mass emigration or death. By 1939, the Volga German population had shrunk from approximately 1.8 million to 392,000 and the Autonomous Republic of Volga Germans was destroyed. By 1941, the remaining Volga Germans were commanded to leave Russia or face death, and historians have called for the Soviet Union’s actions to be investigated as genocide.

In the decades following these brutal witch-hunts and forced emigration, the relationship between Volga Germans who had fled Russia and the Russians became awkward, as the Russian government later attempted to amend the wrongdoings by inviting Germans to return. However, due to further political limitations, very few did and it is expected that in 1998, only 17,000 individuals with Volga German heritage resided in Russia.41

The horrors from the Volga German experience speak to a larger issue of the brutality occurring within Russia and the Soviet Union, as well as immigration narratives. The Volga Germans were not the last group to be exposed to such extreme xenophobia and hatred, as the Ukrainians shared a similar experience in the 1930s. The Ukrainian experience has been investigated as genocide, and due to its striking similarity to the treatment of the Volga Germans, has led to recent calls for the Volga German story to be told as one of genocide as well.

The story of the Volga Germans has received very little attention by historians or general society. It is very important, however, to understand the tragic story of these immigrants, who trustingly travelled to an unknown land to make better lives for themselves. The Volga Germans contributed greatly to the Russian economy and general society, and generally abided by the rules imposed upon them. However, due to cultural

41 Author Unknown, *The Volga-Germans*, 25.
differences, they were also outcasts in the very society to which they contributed so much. The Volga Germans were the primary supplier of resources to the Russian people, yet the Russians returned the favor with anti-German witch-hunts and eventually their extermination. Because of the destruction of many primary source items from the Volga Germans, it is up to their descendants to tell their ancestors’ devastating story, and to understand this failed immigration experiment in the larger context of history in a world where immigration and culture are still at the forefront.
A map of the original Volga colonies. The Saratov Province, where the majority of the Germans settled, is noted at the top. Fig. #1, James Mynde, *A Most Accurate Map of Those Parts of the Astrakan Government upon the River Wolga*..., map, Bibliothèque nationale de France: 1765.
A 1919 German, anti-Bolshevik propaganda poster displaying a family watching in grief as their barn is raided by Russian troops. It translates: “Need, Misery, Hunger, Suffering brings Bolshevism—that’s why you all should stop Bolshevism from practicing far.” Fig. #2, Unknown Author, “Not ,Elend, Hunger, Zerstörung bringt der Bolschewismus” Propaganda Poster, Heymann & Schmidt, Berlin, 1919.
A map displaying the devastation during the 1921 Famine; the darker the color, the more devastation.

Fig. #3, Save The Children Fund, *The Russian Famine: Appalling Disaster, Millions of Children Doomed, Great Crusade of Rescue*, map, 1921.
Fig. 4, Photographer Unknown, “Line of the Starving to the Dining Hall-Baronsk,” (1921), Photograph, from Saratov Museum of Regional Studies, donated to The Historical Society of Germans From Russia by John and Sue Groh.
Fig. 5, photograph of a requisitioning brigade after collecting resources, 1919. Soviet Photography 1917-1940: The New Photojournalism, as cited in Orlando Figes, Peasant Russia, Civil War.
Fig. 6, map of battle strategies during the Peasant Wars. As found in Oscar Figes’ *Peasant Russia, Civil War*, p. 323.
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