

## ~~~ Roots ~~~



### I) The Origin of Germans in Russia:

In the 18th century there were basically four empires in eastern Europe vying for supremacy: Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Turks, Russia, and Sweden. The Russian Tsar Peter the Great managed to expand his empire both north, occupying parts of the Baltic lands, and southward toward the Black Sea. During the latter half of the 18th century, Russia came under the rule of Empress Catherine the Great. Catherine was born Princess Sophie of Anhalt-Zerbst in Germany. She was wed to Tsar Peter the III. This intermarriage of the royal houses of Europe was a common practice at this time. She came to power following a coup d'état which saw her husband overthrown. Under her reign, Russia was revitalized; it grew larger and stronger and was recognized as one of the great powers of Europe.

Catherine recognized the need to settle new land that had been seized from the Ottoman Empire around the Black and Caspian seas. Otherwise, if left unoccupied, the Turks may have been encouraged to take back what they lost. In 1763 she issued a proclamation allowing open immigration for foreigners wishing to live in the Russian Empire. German immigration was motivated in part by religious intolerance and warfare in central Europe as well as by frequently difficult economic conditions.

Catherine's declaration freed German immigrants from military service (imposed on native Russians) and from most taxes. It placed the new arrivals outside of Russia's feudal hierarchy and granted them considerable self-governance. Feudal hierarchy refers to a system in which those on the bottom rung were not much better than slave laborers. The masters they served - the nobility - were the landowners who in turn were allowed to keep their status by agreement with the ruling class. In the case of Russia that would have been the Tsar. All things considered, this was a powerful incentive for Germans to immigrate.

Source: [wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Germans\\_in\\_Russia,\\_Ukraine\\_and\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Union](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Germans_in_Russia,_Ukraine_and_the_Soviet_Union)

## II) German Colonies in Russia:



### 1) Black Sea:

The Black Sea Germans were ethnic Germans who left their homelands in the 18th and 19th centuries, and settled the region north of the Black Sea of the Russian Empire and modern-day Ukraine.

### 2) Volga River:

The Volga Germans were ethnic Germans who colonized and lived along the Volga River in the 18th century.

### 3) Caucasus:

These were part of the German minority in Russia. They migrated to the Caucasus largely in the first half of the 19th century and settled in the North Caucasus.



Map to the left shows North Caucasus region of Russia. The area indicated by the blue-bounded box is detailed in the bottom-left image. This is a portion of a larger map that was given to Bernard Geier by Eugene Schander. He traveled to Russia some 40 years ago to visit the homeland of both the Geier's and the Schander's. The editions you see (circled place names) were made by him. Karlsruhe was located in, what today is called, Stavropol Krai of the North Caucasus Federal District of Russia.

How can we be sure this is where the Geier's and Schander's lived before emigrating? For one, the village of Dowsunskoye, circled on the map, is named on Charles Geier's citizenship application as his place of birth. Secondly, Grandpa Carl told me that a certain man founded four of these villages and named them after his four sons: Herman, Johann, Karl, and Wilhelm. Today, Karlsruhe is called Iskra and Dowsunskoye is called Progress.

### III) Geography:

The great grasslands of every continent on Earth are the product of climate and terrain, which lends them perfectly for agricultural utilization. Too little rain and you have desert, while wetter conditions favor the growth of forests. The German colonies in Russia were located on the Eurasian Steppe which extends from north of the Black Sea, including the Ukraine, eastward to the Altai Mountains of Asia. This region is analogous to the Great Plains of North America, so naturally it became the breadbasket of Russia. The climate is similar to that of the Central Great Plains states of Kansas and Oklahoma. Winters were not so severe as we have in the Dakotas and the Canadian Prairie Provinces.

### IV) German Villages in Russia:

This may not true of the older established villages around the Black Sea or Volga River colonies. The typical village described to me had one main street. Along this and centrally located were the public buildings: Post office, school, and at least one church. Villagers houses fronted the main street and behind these were buildings for livestock. Beyond that could be found fenced in areas of variable size which served as grazing land and feed storage for the livestock in winter. Most of the villagers were farmers but from early on, and for the purpose of communal protection, they resided in the village. So a typical work day would find the villagers tending their livestock in the morning, leaving the village for their farms, and returning at the end of day.

### The Village Garden:

Unlike most homeowners today, the German colonists living in their villages as a rule did not have backyard vegetable plots. Instead, there was a communal garden. Each spring an individual was hired to prepare this piece of land. He would till the soil and then divide and mark each plot according to the number of families. Finally, this person would plant broom corn around the entire margin of the village garden. This served two purposes: As it grew it provided a beneficial wind break and when mature, of course, became material for making new brooms.

One very popular garden staple were melons and squashes of all kinds. In late summer, when the watermelons were ripening on the vine, a common sight was the children playing and running about while eating slices of the sweet fruit. Anyone who has eaten watermelon knows how the juice will run down their chin and onto their clothing. But children took no care about this and eventually their shirts became saturated which eventually hardened as they dried. This amused the elderly citizens communing in public areas, watching the children with their now hardened clothing rattling in the wind.

Another staple of the German diet is cabbage, either fresh or fermented into sauerkraut. Carl Geier related one interesting difference between his homeland in Russia and that of North Dakota. According to him, a critical piece of hardware in making sauerkraut is a large rock that is placed on the lid of the crock pressing it down on the fermenting cabbage. In Russia, kraut makers who needed a rock had to go to the mountains to get one, but in North Dakota rocks were more than plentiful. To this day I am still not sure I believe this tale about the need to go to the mountains to get a rock.