

**History of the  
Volga German Colonists**

**Jacob E. Dietz**

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The American Historical Society  
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Lincoln, Nebraska

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## Preface

The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, International (AHSGR) is pleased to be able to bring this English translation of a monumental work on the German Russians as authored by a German Russian, Jacob Dietz. The book, originally written in Russian has been translated into German, and now, English. For those who have ties to Russia through their ancestors, this book is a fascinating documentation of the history, lives, economics, and politics of their times. It should be pointed out that Jacob Dietz was a lawyer, and like most individuals in his profession, he paid the greatest attention to detail and legal terminology. While Dietz based many of his observations and conclusions on established fact, he also expressed his opinion on many issues of the time. Readers will have to decide for themselves if a particular viewpoint he expressed is based on historical fact or an unsubstantiated opinion. Those seeking more information may turn to other works published on the history of the German Russians and make their own conclusions. However, Dietz gives the reader an insight into how the colonists lived and the many challenges they faced during their stay in Russia.

Many editorial changes had to be made to the original Russian translation in order to provide a modern day English version. In some cases, the wording could not be changed much in order to preserve the original meaning expressed by the author, Jacob Dietz. However, as much as possible, every attempt was made to make the work readable in modern English and a smooth transition from one part to the next without losing any meaning or the author's intent. It is hoped that these efforts will make the book an interesting, informative, but yet entertaining piece of work.

The translation has been many years in the making. However, it is completed, and there are many individuals and organizations to thank for making this work possible. First, Richard Rye did the translation, and we are most grateful to the time and dedication he spent in bring-

ing this work into fruition. Thanks also go to Ed Hoak, President of AHSGR for providing the leadership necessary to push this work into completion and finding the necessary resources to bring it to completion. His understanding of the significance of the work, of the resources required, and his encouragement were most instrumental in keeping this project on track. Thanks also go to Charlotte Hoak for her many hours of time and dedication at a word processor in compiling the original draft and then undertaking the many editorial changes that were necessary. Thanks also to Gladys Wyatt, Richard Kisling, and Dr. Timothy Kloberdanz for the many hours they spent in reading the manuscript in its rough form and making editorial changes. Finally, a great many thanks go to Dr. Elizabeth Yerina, Director of the National Archives in Engels, Russia, where the original manuscript in Russian is located, for her support in this project and the Saratov Archives officials who provided permission to undertake this project and print this translated version of a historical classic on German Russians. Our gratitude also is extended to Professor Igor Plevé who has been instrumental in bringing both genealogical and historical information to the many people whose ancestors settled in Russia and who was an editor of the Russian version.

## Contents

Foreword .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
1. The Appearance of Foreigners in Russia .....	9
2. Previous Homeland of the Volga colonists .....	17
3. Colonization Measures .....	24
4. Movement of Colonists to Russia .....	49
5. Measures to Settle the Colonists .....	55
6. Housing Those Arriving in the Colonies .....	68
7. Pugachev in the Colonies .....	77
8. Attacks of the Kirghiz-Kaisack and Kalmyk Hordes on the German colonies .....	91
9. Order in the Colonies .....	112
10. Submission of the Colonists to Common Management .....	116
11. Management of the Kontora of Oversight of Foreigners ....	121
12. Management and Justice in the Colonies .....	132
13. Administration of the Directors of the Economy .....	152
14. The Saratov Kontora of Oversight of Foreigners, Renamed in 1833 as the Kontora of Foreign Settlers .....	163
15. Influence of Oversight Management on the Colonies .....	189
16. Land Tenure .....	200
17. Relocation and Establishment of New Colonies .....	211
18. Two Lawsuits: Colonists vs. Treasury .....	227
19. Farming in the Colonies .....	245
20. Industry and Trade .....	249

21. Sarpinka .....	253
22. Flour Production .....	258
23. Church Management of the Volga Catholics and the Establishment of the Tiraspol Roman Catholic Diocese .....	260
24. Church Management of the Protestants and the Establishment of the Saratov Evangelical-Lutheran Consistory .....	270
25. Religious Sects .....	311
26. The School .....	319
27. Life and Character, Habits and Customs of the Colonists ...	352
28. Superstitions .....	370
29. Famous Colonists .....	378
30. The Saratov German Quarter .....	386
31. Trans-Volga Mennonites .....	393
32. Sarepta .....	403
Name Index .....	438
Geographic Index .....	452

## Foreword

Each year more and more new books about the Volga Germans come to light. They open previously unknown pages of the history of these people. Lately it has become possible to overcome many of the misconceptions of the place and role of the Volga Germans in the life of Russia.

This book by Jacob Dietz will undoubtedly attract the attention of the professional historian and ethnic researcher alike, as well as academics and sociologists, descendants of Volga Germans in Russia and abroad, and simply the reader who is not indifferent to the fate of these people. Historians have long known of the existence of the manuscript of Jacob Dietz, which has been included in a series of bibliographic guides, but its location was long unknown. It was found only a few years ago in the Engels branch of the State Archive of the Saratov Oblast during the development of the manuscript collection at the Engels museum.

The personal life of the book's author is interesting. Jacob Dietz was born in 1864 in the German colony of Kratzke (Pochinnaya), Kamyshin uyezd, Saratov province. His grandfather David Dietz and son Georg David arrived on the Volga from the *Kurfürst* of Erbach with the first colonists in June 1765. After receiving an education as a lawyer, Jacob went to the Oblast of the Don Cossack Forces where he resided for almost twenty years. There he had a practice as a lawyer and he acquired a reputation among both the Don Cossacks and the colonists settled there as a knowledgeable and honest advocate.

The political events of 1905 and an enormous desire to return to his native home brought him back to the Volga. In October 1905 he became a lawyer of the Saratov *okrug* (district) court in Kamyshin. As editor of the newspaper *Povolzhskii Krai* (*Volga Region*) from January 1906, Jacob made many journeys from Kamyshin to Saratov traveling through the German colonies. This gave him material for the publica-

tion of a full series of articles in which he wrote with bitterness about the pitiful condition of the Volga colonies. Jacob Dietz was disturbed by the fate of the former colonists and described them as similar to the peasants, as Germans and Russians alike suffered from the anti-people politics of the state and the bureaucratic collapse in the localities. Both the Russian and German peasants, Dietz was convinced, had the same problems, and that there existed between them neither hatred nor antagonism as testified by the history of their mutual residence along the Volga. He saw the future of the Volga Germans in the development of local self-control and in the rejection of any form of autonomy that disconnected the people of the country.

His popularity and respect among the population, not only of the *uezd* (district), but also in the province, allowed the election of Jacob Dietz as deputy from the Saratov Province to the first State Duma. In the Duma he united with the *Trudoviki* (Labor Party) where he worked actively and productively: he was a member of the Presidium, a member of several important commissions, and secretary of the XI Department of the Duma.

The dissolution of the first State Duma in July 1907 disturbed both the general population and the deputies. Jacob Dietz was one of those who signed the so-called Vyborg Appeal as a sign of protest to not pay taxes or submit to service in the army. After the dissolution of the Duma and the signing of the appeal, Dietz returned to the Volga. Then the former deputy of the Duma and the signer of the Vyborg Appeal was indicted for exciting disobedience and other illegal activities. The matter was investigated by a Special Session of the Petersburg Court Chamber and the court pronounced his sentence: three months incarceration.

The police apprehended Dietz on August 15, 1906, but they were unable to arrest him. As the church bell rang, almost three thousand people gathered near his home and on the nearby streets. Jacob Dietz addressed the crowd with a speech, the theme of which was his belief that the people had gathered not so much in defense of an individual person, but in defense of the idea of representation of the people. The attempt at arrest could have caused great social disorder, and the prosecutor considered the possibility of changing the arrest and expunging Dietz's sentence.

A new session of the Petersburg Court Chamber brought forth a new sentence: three months of incarceration. Prolonged lawsuits began, which concluded with Jacob Dietz's letter of May 13, 1909 to the prosecutor of the Saratov District Court with the request that he

be sentenced to three months of solitary confinement. After his release from jail, Dietz settled on the Volga, at the edge of the Russian village of Danilovka, not far from the colony of Müller. He then had the possibility to fulfill his long-held dream, to write a history of the Volga German colonists.

The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1914) of the settlement of colonists on the Volga was approaching. A large number of popular articles and serious research on the history of the Volga Germans had appeared at this time. Dietz, as a jurist by education, examined the history of the Volga Germans in a different manner than other authors (Bauer, Beratz, etc.). He based his research on the compilation and analysis of the government's legal acts. He gathered an immense quantity of documents that no one had used previously, some of which have not been preserved today. He utilized all the memories of the older colonists to which he had access from various periods of their residence in Russia. In addition, Jacob Dietz included the memoirs he himself had collected from former co-workers of the Saratov Kontora of Oversight of Foreign Settlers.

The author was greatly knowledgeable about the culture and ethnography of his people. His remarkable descriptions of the holidays and traditions of the Volga Germans, even today, are of inestimable value. The social and economic processes in the Volga colonies at that time remained practically unstudied.

Individual parts of the book (the founding of the first colonies, Pugachev in the colonies and the Kirghiz-Kaisak attacks) were published in the *Saratovskii Listok* newspaper in July 1914; but the war began in August, and the complete book did not materialize. During the war, Jacob Dietz continued to work on the manuscript until his death in August 1917. In the years of Soviet power in 1926, his wife and daughter transferred the rights of publication of Jacob Dietz's work to the People's Commissariat of Education of the ASSRNP (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Germans on the Volga); however, for unexplained reasons, the manuscript was not published, but given to a museum.

The publication of this manuscript became possible through the support of the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Matters of Nationality and Federal Relations, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Germany, the International Union of German Culture, and the Executive Director of the Institute of German and East European Research, Dr. Alfred Eisfeld. Almost eighty years have passed since the author placed the last period in his manuscript. Having laid for

long years in the archive, now the manuscript has become a book in the hands of the reader. Within the pages of this book, the author appears an outstanding jurist and wonderful person, worthy son of his people, Jacob Yegorovich Dietz.

*E. M. Yerina, I. R. Pleva*

And in this great,  
In this free, new work,  
Don't forget to remember  
Me with a kind, quiet word.

*Taras Shevchenko, "Testament"*

## Introduction

To write a history is not an easy task. From a long series of subjective thoughts and narratives that are not always complete or accurate, and often contradict each other, the historian must impartially extract objective immutable facts and inscribe them on the sacred tablet of history. It is understandable that the more cultured the period of time described and its people, the easier it is to establish facts and events, and vice versa. In this case, it would seem that the researcher of the colonies should be in exceptionally favorable conditions, because the colonists were invited from a country of culture. Included among the emigrants from what is now Germany were people of the most varied professions and conditions, even people with university educations, who could not but fix their impressions about such events as the arrival in Russia. Educated immigrants should have left manuscript memoirs, family chronicles, and other types of notes for their descendants about such an important time which they spent in a foreign country.

But memoir material by itself cannot satisfy the researcher, because every communication, even of the most educated and well-intended contemporary, is unwittingly subjective. Facts are illuminated by authors under individual impressions, how they were accepted by them, and how they understood and evaluated them. Often the chronicler was unwittingly tendentious, because in laying out a fact or event, he tried to justify himself or the contemporary society in which the fact or event was accomplished. For the historian, it is important to receive bare facts, without any later development or stratification, inexorable data and figures, and draw from them objective conclusions. This material, which is official in nature, is located in government establishments and is extracted from the archives by historians.

The settlement and control of the colonies was conducted by a special government establishment, the Saratov *Kontora* of the Chancery of Oversight of Foreigners, which was replaced by the Saratov

*Kontora* of Foreign Settlers. It was eliminated in 1877 after the colonists became subject to general Russian control. It would seem that the task of the historian of the Volga German colonies would be only to open the doors of the archive of the Saratov *Kontora* of Foreign Settlers, call up the information on the colonists, and then collect together the preserved memoirs and the notes of their ancestors. The materials indicated are unfortunately absent.

The invitation and settlement of the colonies was conducted from 1763 to 1772, and all documents and acts regarding this time were concentrated in the Saratov *Kontora* of the Chancery of Oversight of Foreigners. In August 1774, Saratov was visited by Pugachev. This insurgent and his gangs, in an attempt to destroy the legal documents which turned the peasants into serfs, "set fire to the barracks belonging to the organs of oversight of foreigners, that same in which the *Kontora* documents were kept. All the chancery files, plans, and surveying instruments were pilfered and destroyed."<sup>1</sup>

A portion of the destroyed documents undoubtedly were restored after the Pugachev rebellion, based upon documents of the Petersburg Chancery of Oversight of Foreigners and the accumulated files of the *Kontora*, which in 1782 had been dissolved and the colonists had been placed under the care of the Director of the Economy and the Treasury Chamber. But something unexpected happened even to these documents. They disappeared from their appointed place without a trace, just as those had from the hand of the rebellious gangs of Pugachev. When the second Saratov *Kontora* of Oversight was established in 1797, Chief Justice Yeremeev demanded the *Kontora* files from the Treasury Chamber, but no one at the Chamber knew anything about them. He had to locate former members of the first *Kontora* in order to locate these files. He questioned clerk Niberg (Nieberg, Neuberger?), who explained that "a significant quantity of the *Kontora* files were so rotted that it wasn't possible to work with them. In addition, the military servants on guard at that time took the white sheets of paper from the files to use for cartridges and fuses, and I don't know what happened to those sheets written upon."<sup>2</sup>

The documents about the colonists from the second *Kontora* of Oversight of Foreigners were not lucky either. In 1800 almost all of

<sup>1</sup> File "About the thief and traitor Emil'ka Pugachev" preserved in the archive of the Astrakhan Provincial Directorate.

<sup>2</sup> File "About the opening of the *Kontora* of Oversight of Foreigners in 1797," preserved in the archive of the Saratov Provincial Directorate.

Saratov burned, including the buildings of the *Kontora* and all the files. Thus, the files of the *Kontora* have their beginning only from 1800 and continue to 1877, when they were transferred to the archive of the Saratov Provincial Directorate, where they again suffered an unhappy fate. Some evil fate hung over the files about the colonists.

Before transfer to the archive, the files of the *Kontora* were divided into three categories. Those files to be preserved in perpetuity were consigned to the first category. They included the file on Pugachev, which had by some miracle been preserved. It was then passed on to the Saratov Archive Commission. This first category included files about the surveys for allocation of land to the colonists, sent to the Penza-Saratov Directorate of State Property, and files about the opening of the second *Kontora* and about the ownership of land of the colonists, etc. The second category included those closed administrative and judicial files given to the archive. Those files remaining open were given to the colonial district directorates. When he was allowed access to the archive files in 1898, the author was completely overwhelmed, because at that time he found very little historical material for his work. The remaining files were consigned to the third category and were scheduled for destruction.

Among the people sorting the files of the *Kontora* were those so ignorant that the name lists of all the colonists settling on the Volga in individual colonies - with listings of professions, places of exit from Germany, times of settlement in Russia, age and composition of the family, the size of loans of cash and material goods - all of this material so valuable for the historian was consigned to the third category and the documents were scheduled for destruction. Fortunately, the former keeper of the archive valued these lists, kept them for himself, and made revenues which allowed colonists interested in their ancestry access to the information. Part of these books and copies made from others, after significant financial expenditures, came into the hands of the author and Pastor Erbes. They of course constitute valuable material for the historian of the Volga colonies.

The files with the memoirs and other notes of the first immigrant colonists intended for their descendants fared even worse. The descendants, left without education and reduced to ignorance, hardly valued the notes of their illuminated ancestors, and little has reached us.

In 1830, colonist Peter Lippert approached the first immigrants from Germany who were still alive, requested they cite their memories of immigration and settlement in the Volga colonies, and send him the

notes kept about this time by those who had died. Five colonists responded to this request, and an example of the memoirs was sent. These memoirs were published in the Protestant publication *Friedensbote* in 1900 and 1901. Only a few of them, however, have significance for a historian of the colonies. Indeed, the attempt to obtain new memoirs from the colonists did not meet with success.

Where did the multitude of memoirs compiled by the first immigrants, those that contained the memories of the colonists, go? This question weighed heavily upon the author of this book, and he accidentally found the answer during an analysis of one of the circular letters of a Protestant parish preserved in a church archive.

On November 30, 1848, Froese, director of the *Kontora* of Foreign Settlers, approached the district heads and priests of the colonies with the following words:

“From 1764 the ancestors of the Saratov colonists settled in the province, and their descendants now own significant lands, flowering colonies, special control, and freedom of religion. Under the protection of the highest authority, current customs and manners developed. But how this happened and under what circumstances the current situation arose, there is no data other than several oral traditions from the elderly, and even these traces will vanish with their deaths. In addition, there is immense interest for every member and every community: 1) From where did their ancestors immigrate, in which years, in what capacity, under what conditions and of what material substance? 2) How did individual communities arise and develop to their present condition? 3) What special and significant events influenced the present condition of the colonies? 4) Who had special influence on the colony and were distinguished by especially beneficial influence on the community? 5) How was the current system of farming developed and how did it reach current fruition? 6) How were the names of the colonies developed, German and Russian? 7) It is desirable to receive precise descriptions of the manners and customs in general, and in part for weddings, baptisms, burials and other events; descriptions of family life, work, and summer and winter activities, the work force, farm implements, working the fields, construction, clothing, means of subsistence, animal husbandry, etc.; generally everything that might serve as a source for the

historical establishment of the condition of the colonies according to written documents and oral stories by the elderly. Because of the complete absence of such materials in the archive of the *Kontora*, such documents could at least give the possibility of gaining an understanding of such material, and in view of the desire to establish a historical overview of the Saratov colonies, I would ask that every colony gather all examples of this material for a period of about eighty years, both written and oral, and upon compiling the materials send them to me.”

What the parish clergy did with this instruction is not evident from the archive. It is doubtful, however, that the regional heads and clergy gathered all the material that had been preserved on the history of the colonies and transferred them to their leaders with the intent of compiling a historical overview of the colonies. But the unexpected appearance of this idea, either by inability to complete it, or because of laziness, was just like a mass of other beginnings and ideas for using the colonists under the guardianship of their leaders, and simply a fantasy created by the idle colonist leaders.

Thus, these valuable materials, the basis on which history is written, are absent for the historian of the Volga colonists. When the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the colonies approached, a mass of people and corporations appeared with the desire to compile and publish the history of the colonies; but these intentions were not realized because of the absence of first-hand material. Orders were given for the retention of several materials, and sometimes the public was intrigued by non-existent materials. A. E. Lane considered himself competent to declare in the press that Johann Baptiste Cattaneo, pastor of the Norka parish from 1784 to 1828, left valuable notebooks in which he gave impressions of the first five to ten years of the existence of the colonies. But the notebooks had mysteriously disappeared and were carried abroad. However, the notebooks of pastor Cattaneo in fact had been published in 1876 in the *Rizhskii Kalendar (Riga Calendar)*, but they pertained only to the personal life of the pastor and had no historical significance. Other people who considered themselves informed declared that there was rich material about the colonies in the archives in Petersburg, Moscow, and even in archives abroad; but they immediately and skeptically added that these materials first had to be extracted from the archives, published, and then utilized to compile and publish a history, which would demand many decades. This old and favorite



reception, to stop and completely bury this good work, immediately cooled almost all the entrepreneurs who decided that the compilation of the history of the colonies would remain unrealized, or in any case remain work for the distant future.

The author of the current book retained a special opinion, and not only did not abandon his work, but increased it, utilizing materials he had acquired in the course of thirty years. These materials gave him nothing less than entire archives. As a judge/jurist bases 90 percent of his verdicts not on direct, but on circumstantial evidence, the sum total of which brings him to the doubtless conclusion of the guilt of the accused, the historian must not base his conclusions on established and first-hand facts. Such circumstantial materials for the study of the colonies are completely sufficient.

The invitation and recruitment of colonists abroad was analyzed according to archive documents by G. G. Pisarevskii in his work *Iz istorii inostranoi kolonizatsii v Rossii v XVIII veke (From the History of Foreign Colonization in Russia in the Seventeenth Century)* (M., 1909). Colonist Züge, who escaped from Russia in 1773, wrote an interesting booklet about the settlement and initial establishment of the Volga colonists, *Der russische Kolonist oder Christian Gottlob Züge's Leben in Russland. Nebst einer Beschreibung der Sitten und Gebriuche in den Asiatischen Provinzen des Russichen Reichs (A Russian Colonist, or Christian Gottlob Züge's Life in Russia. Together with a description of the customs and way of life in the Asian provinces of the Russian Empire)* \* (1802).

Valuable material about the colonists is kept in the archives of church parishes and the old district directorates of the colonies. Much material and statistical data has been scattered in Russian and foreign literature. There are even special works available, the authors of which utilized official materials (Klaus, A. A., *Nashi Kolonii (Our Colonies)*, Spb. 1869; Velitsyn, A. A., *Nemtsy v Rossii (Germans in Russia)*, Spb., 1893. Finally, the local press organ of the Saratov colonists, *Deutsche Volkszeitung (German People's News)* in later years published a mass of material on the lives of the colonists at the end of the Eighteenth century, extracted from the archives of the Ministry of State Property.

In addition to these materials, the author of this book, a jurist by profession, used mainly for his work the Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire, in which almost 1,000 pages are dedicated to all types of legal aspects regarding the colonists. As is known, the Complete Collection of Laws is a textbook for the jurist. Not only the text of

the law is quoted in it, as in the Code of Laws, but also the bases, motives, and historical material leading to the issuance of the law are included. We consider this material the most valuable and reliable, because it is derived from official data which served as a legal basis for the introduction of one law or another active in the colonies, and normalizing for decades the life and ways of the colonists. All the remaining material and memoirs of the colonists in this work have only illustrative significance and do not present any independent value.

The originality of this work is that both the jurist and the historian constantly work hand in hand - but mostly the jurist. How reliably the author fulfilled the task he set before himself is a matter for the critic and reader. The author was permeated with the earnest desire to truthfully portray the history of this small people to whom he himself belonged, without exaggerating its merits or hide its sins. In the presence of these desires and biases, people of varied camps can come to contradictory conclusions. One will acknowledge that the colonists brought life to an undeveloped part of Russia. Others will acknowledge that they were only a leech on the emaciated body of Russia. But impartial people who read this work without preconceived notions will derive from it much use: the history of the colonies, that 150 year experiment with a farming population which teaches what a peasant must accept, and what he must avoid.

This, specifically, is the chief task of the author; and if this work gives the reader the possibility of gaining an understanding of these two situations, the author will be completely satisfied.

In conclusion, here are several words about the origin of this work. The author did not attempt to write the history of the colonies: over the course of many years, he gathered material, and so to speak, compiled an archive of the history of the colonies. Busy with his professional matters, the author, at odd moments, wrote various articles about the colonists in newspapers and journals. He dreamed of passing on the material collected to his son, a representative of a more progressive and educated generation. Old age is always conservative; its scope is more narrow and restrained.

But special conditions in the life of the author prompted him to labor personally on this work. An original thinker and signer of the Vyborg Appeal, the author survived three months of incarceration; and in his spare time, within his confinement, he wrote the first half of the general part of this history. Future limitations of the rights of the author and deprivation of his professional labors forced him to live far from

people in a lonely home near his native village on the Volga. The long snowy winter nights with howling winds aroused the need within him to work with something distant and to chat with spirits beyond the grave.

There ripened the author's conclusive thought to himself to finish the history of his kinsfolk, even though in that time of gloomy reaction there was no hope this work could come to light. Then the approach of war with Germany made it even less favorable for works about Germans to appear.

But the gloomy night is always replaced by the bright day; and the author, who believed in a happy future for Russia, hoped that the light was not beyond the mountains, and the dark night of reaction would come to an end. So he continued his difficult work in the certainty that the auspicious moment for its publication would one day arrive.

## Chapter 1

# The Appearance of Foreigners in Russia

The long and heavy chains of the Tartar Yoke strongly held Russia back in its intellectual and economic development and kept it out of the general European family. When she was able to overturn this hated yoke, Russia began to look to the illuminated West for her teachers.

Even during the reign of Ivan IV, we see a mass of Germans amongst his closest circle. They opened the first printing establishments in Russia. Mikhail Fyodorovich gave the Dutch company of merchants privileges to trade in various cities and sent his military people to Sweden and Prussia to hire soldiers.

In Moscow, the Germans settled in a special quarter beyond the Kokui River, so the quarter was at first called Kokui or Kukuevo. But from 1652 onward, it was called the New Foreign Quarter, and at the beginning of the Eighteenth century it was renamed the German Quarter. Germans also lived in Moscow itself, where they had their own churches in both the city and the quarter.

The situation of the Germans was not noted for distinction, however. If they were able to secure a protector and influence in the court, they were in good graces. But if the purely Muscovite trend prevailed, they were in a pen. When the wedding of Danish Prince Woldemar and Great Princess Irina failed because of disagreements between the Orthodox and Lutheran clergy about wedding rites, the Lutheran churches in Kitai-gorod and along the earthen rampart were destroyed in accordance with the Decree of Mikhail Fedorovich on March 2, 1643, and the Germans were transferred from the city to a foreign quarter. Under Alexei Mikhailovich, the Germans had a protector in Matveev and they lived better. Next to their quarter was the beloved village of Alexei