

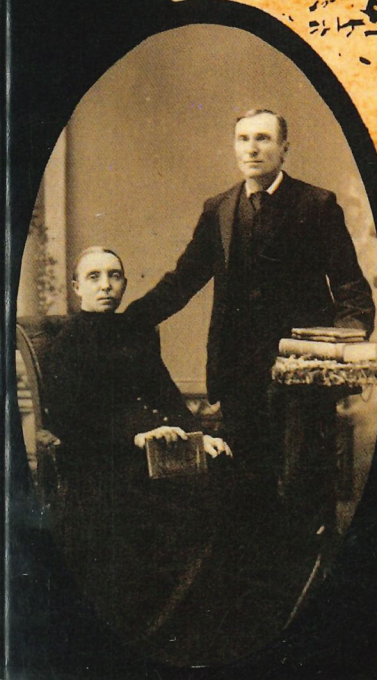


# Wir Wollen Deutsche Bleiben

The Story Of The Volga Germans



George J. Walters



Edited by Christopher D. Walters  
Updated by Charles Walters

We are all sons and daughters of immigrants. Here is a book about one group of settlers and their descendants—the Volga Germans—and it contains a unique message.

Families outlive countries!

Here is a book about one of history's most distinguished migrations. The Volga Germans came to the United States from Russia, but they were Germans, not Russians. They fled the steppes and hills along the lower Volga River near Saratov in 1876 because—in the words of one of them—"there was no opportunity." Young men drafted to Russian military service could no longer make their Easter duty, and the international wheat traders were impoverishing them all. Within two years after many of them arrived in the United States, their habits of hard work and perseverance gave birth to the seventh greatest breadbasket of the world.

The descendants of the Volga Germans who live in the United States and Canada number in the millions. Few know of their roots in the Rhine Valley, Hesse and the Bavarian Alps. Even fewer know about the great hungers of the 1920s and the demise of the Volga Republic that was built and governed by German-speaking people a hundred years removed from their ancestral homeland.

Did you ever wonder what really happened when—at the end of the Seven Years' War—so many Germans migrated to the Russian steppes near Saratov? Where are those stories great-great-great-great grandfather never wrote down? Those clashes with Kirghiz tribesmen, the social beauty of a culturally autonomous enclave in Russia, and finally the coming of communism, pauperism, ignorance, depopulation and defeat, and the battles of the red and white armies?—they are all here in one volume.

The main elements of the family tree—roots to outmost branches—have been

gathered by George J. Walters and turned into this highly readable, sorrowfully accurate and devastatingly poignant story of the Volga Germans. The author called his book *Wir Wollen Deutsche Bleiben, The Story of the Volga Germans*. The title was taken from a little poem the people recited as they were being herded aboard boxcars bound for Siberia during the bitter, 40-degree-below-zero winter of 1942.

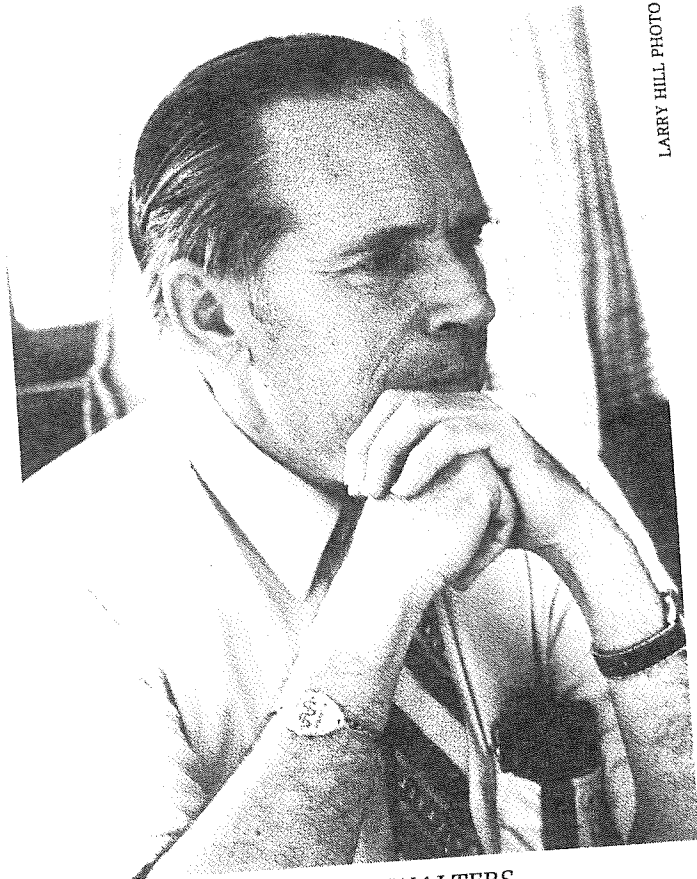
During the near 200 years in Russia, the Volga Germans refused to integrate. They treasured their Catholic and Lutheran faiths and their way of life. And when the Codex of 1871 rescinded Catherine the Great's covenants under which they had moved to Russia in the first place, many made ready to depart. They migrated en masse to Kansas and the plains states, some to South America, others to Canada. And as they settled in these new countries, they could reflect that families outlive countries, for now they had lived under landgraves, kaisers, tsars, dictators, presidents and kings. The landgraves and kaisers and tsars are all gone, but the families remain.

What of those who did not emigrate when the time was right? *Wir Wollen Deutsche Bleiben* has some of the answers. For many there was the police state's famous "knock on the door" at midnight, and slavery and death unknown. For all it means transportation into exile, with thousands unloaded from the boxcars in Siberia like cordwood, frozen to death.

Most of the exiles to Siberia did not fare well. But the Volga Germans—they had the stoutest, neatest houses and the best animals. "Their daughters grew up to be much-sought-after brides, not only because their parents were well off, but—in the depraved world around the camps—because of their purity and strict morals," the legacy of their culture.

**WIR WOLLEN DEUTSCHE BLEIBEN†**  
**†WE WANT TO REMAIN GERMAN**

**THE STORY OF THE VOLGA GERMANS**



LARRY HILL PHOTO

GEORGE J. WALTERS

# WIR WOLLEN DEUTSCHE BLEIBEN†

†WE WANT TO REMAIN GERMAN

## The Story of the Volga Germans

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AMERICAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
OF GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

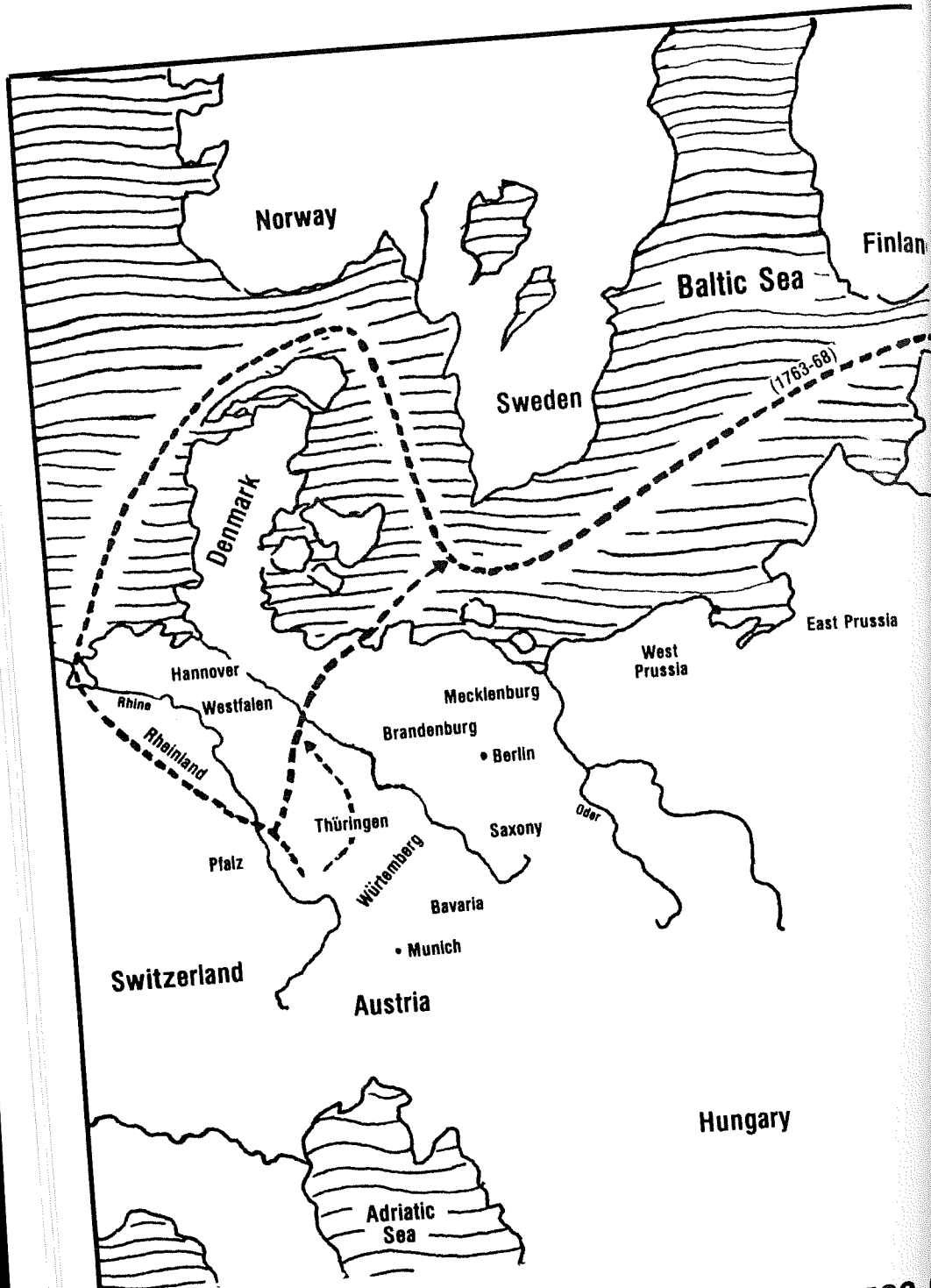
Honoring our Past • Embracing the Future

WIR WOLLEN DEUTSCHE BLEIBEN  
THE STORY OF THE VOLGA GERMANS  
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Germans from Russia

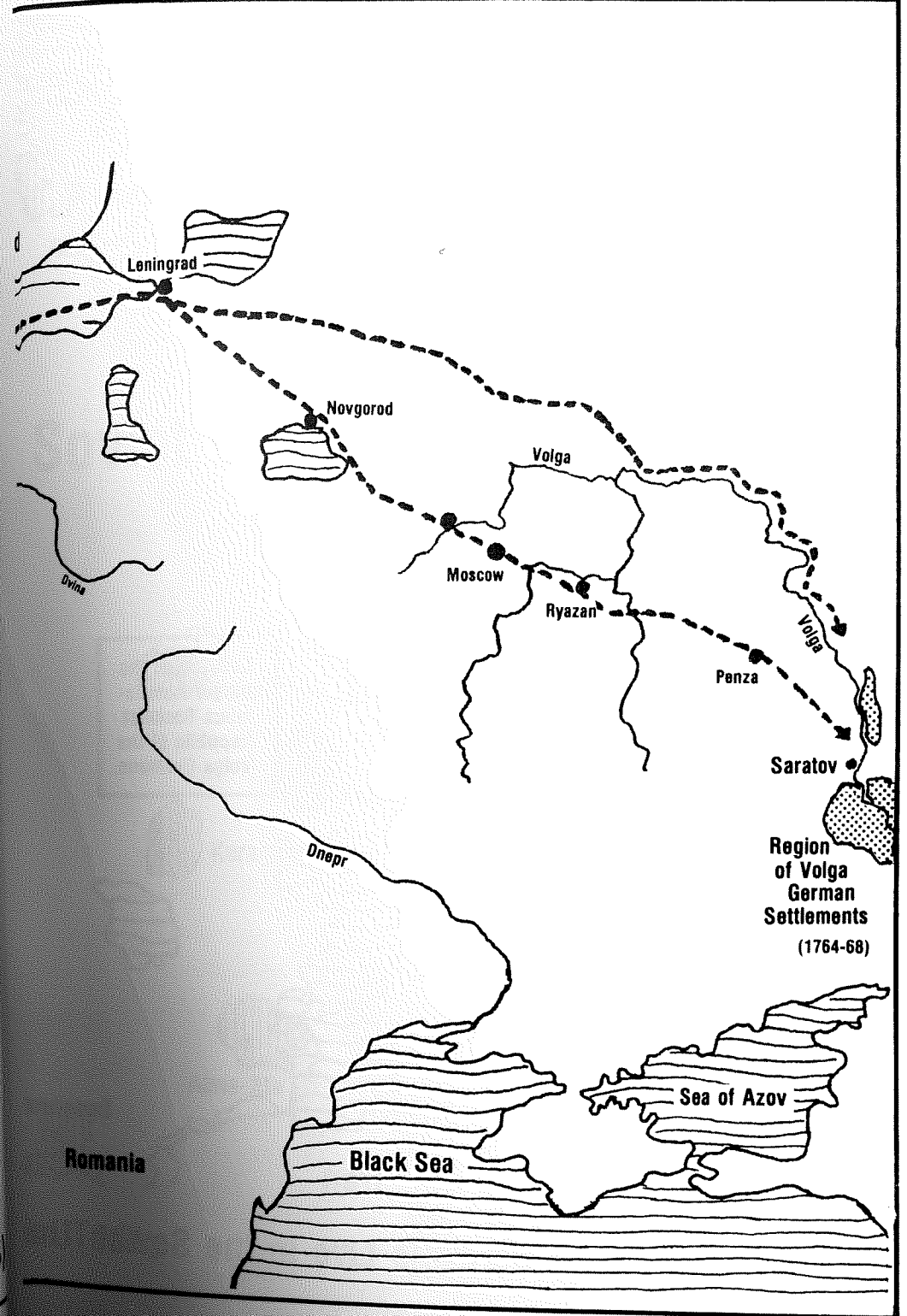
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For the Volga Germans who survive  
in the Commonwealth of Independent States today,  
and for all those who have returned  
to their ancestral homeland.



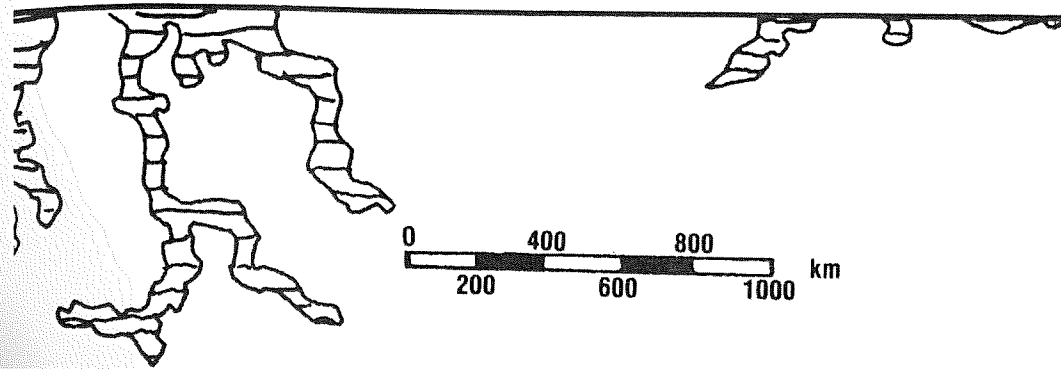
**Migration Route of the Volga Germans (1763-68)**



**Region of Volga German Settlements (1764-68)**



Where Exiled Volga Germans Live in the Soviet Union Today



# Soviet Union



Where Exiled Volga Germans Live in the Soviet Union Today

This symbol designates locations where exiled Volga Germans were resettled during the hard winter of 1941-42.

DATES

Most of the Volga German terms used in this book are defined in the context of their usage. Still, in reading *Wir Wollen Deutsche Bleiben*, it might be useful to keep in mind the fact that dates before the Communist takeover are expressed in terms of the old style Julian calendar ... those after the Revolution, in terms of the new style Gregorian calendar.

Also, here are conversion factors for distances, areas, weights and measures.

**CONVERSION FACTORS**

<i>Multiply</i>	<i>by</i>	<i>to obtain</i>
dessiatines	2.7	acres
dessiatines	2400	square sazhen
hectares	2.5	acres
kilograms	2.2	pounds
kilometers	.6	miles
liters	2.1	pints
miles	2262.85	arshins
miles	754.2857	sazhen
miles	1.508571	versts
Pods	36.1128	pounds
Pods	0.01806	short tons
pounds	0.02769	Pods
short tons	55.383	Pods
versts (also wersts)	3500	feet
versts (also wersts)	0.6629	statute miles
versts (also wersts)	500	sazhen

**CONTENTS**

Foreword . . . . .	xi
Preface . . . . .	xiii
1 Banishment . . . . .	3
2 Eighteenth Century Russia . . . . .	9
3 Catherine the Great . . . . .	19
4 Emigration from Germany . . . . .	33
5 Catherine II's Invitation . . . . .	39
6 Exodus . . . . .	49
7 The Settlers . . . . .	57
8 The Villages . . . . .	65
9 The Pugachevshchina . . . . .	71
10 Life in a Village on the Volga . . . . .	85
11 Social Institutions . . . . .	101
12 The Codex of 1871 . . . . .	115
13 The Sesquicentennial . . . . .	135
14 The Great Tidal Wave . . . . .	157
15 The Famine of 1920-21 . . . . .	165
16 An Interlude of Peace and Hope . . . . .	189
17 Stalin . . . . .	205
18 Terror Along the Volga . . . . .	223
19 The Volksdeutschen . . . . .	239
20 The Rise of the Third Reich . . . . .	265
21 Operation Barbarossa . . . . .	275
22 Empty Villages . . . . .	299
23 A Volga German Soldier . . . . .	307
24 The Curve of History . . . . .	317
Afterword . . . . .	331



Bibliographic Essay . . . . .	345
The Facius Documents . . . . .	347
August Walter's History of Migration . . . . .	349
The Marriage of Frederick Walter(s) and Sophia Meier . . . . .	355
The German Settlers on the Volga Jagodnaja Poljana and New Skatowka . . . . .	356
The Families . . . . .	362
Volga German Settlements in the New World . . . . .	378
The Volga Colonies . . . . .	379
Partial List of Daughter Colonies . . . . .	382
About the Author . . . . .	385
Index . . . . .	393

**W**ir Burgermeistere und Rath dieser des  
 Heil. Reichs Freyen Stadt Frankfurt am Mayn,  
 fügen hiermit zu wissen: Nachdeme Wir zeithero zu Unserem grosten Mißver-  
 gnügen vernehmen auch in der That selbstn erfahren müssen, daß in hiesigen  
 Gegenden sich verschiedene ausländische Emillaren eingefunden, welche durch Zusicherung und Verspre-  
 chung allerhand zu gewarten habender Vortheile, sowohl hier verbürgerte und im Schutz stehende  
 Personen auch deren Kinder und Angehörige, als besonders viele hiesiger Stadt und anderer benach-  
 hartten Herrschaften Unterthanen an sich zu locken und anzuwerben auch demnächst außser Landes und  
 denen Gränzen des Reichs in weit entfernte Colonien zu führen sich angemasset, Wir aber diesen, an sich  
 Reichsgesetzwidrigen, zu Entvölderung derer Lande des Heil. Römischen Reichs gereichenden, höchst-  
 strafbaren, Unternehmen in dieser Stadt und deren Gebiete auf einige Weise nachzusehen nicht ge-  
 menuet sind: Als ergethet hiermit an alle hiesige Burgere, Besessenen und Schutzangehörige wie  
 überhaupt an die Unterthanen derer, Unserer Gerichtsbarkeit unterworfenen, Dorfschaften die ernst-  
 liche und gemeffene Anweisung, Verwarnung und Befehl: nicht nur in dem Fall dergleichen fremde  
 Emillaren sich iso wirklich oder künftig in hiesiger Stadt oder deren Gebiete betretten lassen sollten,  
 davon, zu Verordnung der Gebühr gegen selbige, alsofort einem derer wohlregierenden Herren  
 Burgermeistere oder respective löblichen Land-Amt die geziemende Anzeige zu thun, sondern auch  
 zu heimlicher höchstahndungswürdiger Verführ: Anwerbung und Transport dergleichen in fremde  
 Landen ziehenden Colonisten sich weder directe noch indirecte gebrauchen zu lassen, überhaupt aber  
 ohne Unsere besondere Erlaubniß nicht wegzuziehen, noch denen aus denen Landen anderer Herr-  
 schaften hier vorbey und durch die hiesige Dorfschaften und deren Bezircke passirenden dergleichen  
 Emigranten weder mit Vorspann, Heberbung, Abzug noch sonst, immassen die Schultheisse  
 gedachter Dorfschaften davor haften sollen, an Handen zu gehen oder ihnen in einige Weise Vorschub  
 zu thun, gestalten dann dicjenige, welche sich dieser Unserer ernstlichen und wohlbedächtlichen Ver-  
 ordnung, deren Inhalt Wir außs genaueste befolget wissen wollen, nicht fügen oder sich dagegen  
 das mindeste zu Schulden kommen lassen würden, mit willkürlicher nachdrücklicher Strafe belegt  
 und selbige an ihnen, ohne alle Nachsicht oder Entschuldigung, exequret werden soll. Wornach sich  
 jederman zu achten.

Geschlossen bey Rath,  
 den 21<sup>ten</sup> April 1766.

*Above, the text of a  
 Frankfurt am Main prohibition  
 against migrating.  
 Dated April 21, 1766,*

Nun Freunde muessen wir uns trennen  
Die Uhr zeigt uns den Abschied an.  
So wohl als wir uns Freunde mennen,  
Du bist und bleibst ein braver man.

Ei wie fällt es mir so schwer,  
Aus Katharinenstadt zu gehen,  
Wenn die Hoffnung nicht waer,  
Auf das wieder wieder sehen.

Lebe wohl, lebe wohl, lebe wohl!  
Auf das frohe wieder sehen,  
Lebel wohl,

—a song often sung by  
the author's father.

Und solliesst man uns in Ketten ein,  
Wir Wollen sie zerreiben,  
Wir wollen keine Russen sein,  
Wir wollen Deutsche Bleiben!

—from Die Heimkehr  
by Dr. Peschke.

## FOREWORD

When I was a small boy, probably about five, I watched a large Russian thistle, twice as big as a bushel basket, roll across a flat western Kansas field. I asked my parents, where did they come from, those large weeds that scattered their seeds so widely. "They came from Russia. They came over in the seed wheat that we brought along."

That was perhaps the first time I became conscious of the fact that my parents had come from Russia. At home we considered ourselves German.

I started to school later that same year, and soon found that our American schoolmates did not consider us Germans at all. They derisively called us "Rooshian." More often than not, it was "those dumb Rooshians." Since this was about the time of the Communist takeover in Russia, we were also called Communists.

Naturally, we resented these slurring remarks, especially the Communist bit. My father on many occasions talked about the horrors of socialism. He used to say that they wanted to divide everything evenly all over the world and according to him, "Everyone will get a dime." Father had become quite prosperous by the early twenties, and of course wanted no part of a socialist division of assets on a worldwide scale.

I was the youngest of a large family, and George J. Walters, the author of this book, was the son of my oldest sister. She had four children by the time I was born, so George was seven years younger than I. He was not old enough to remember news of the revolution in Russia.

I have memories of my father receiving a letter from an uncle. Five of dad's uncles stayed in Katharinenstadt when as an eleven-year-old boy his parents came to Kansas, also bringing along my grandfather's mother.

The uncle wrote asking for financial help. "We are starving," he said. Dad sent him a money order for one hundred dollars. We never heard from him again.

For a long time my folks talked about this incident. They wondered how farmers could be starving in as fertile an area as the meadow side of the Volga River they remembered.

A great many people, when reading Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, are amazed at the brutality and ferociousness of Stalin

and Lenin. Yet, in very early youth, occasionally some word from the old country would filter through and we would hear similar horror stories about the brutality of the Communist regime.

By this time we considered ourselves Americans, and lucky that grandpa had had the courage to come over to a strange land. But also we still considered ourselves Germans. Never did we consider ourselves transplanted Russians.

The short poem from which George Walters took the title of this book,

*Wir Wollen Keine Russen Sein  
Wir Wollen Deutsche Bleiben!*

certainly conveys the attitude with which we grew up.

My father, who was never quite happy with any president, was very unhappy when Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized the Communist regime. To him it meant condoning their excesses.

George J. Walters covers the famines of the Volga area in detail, along with the fact that the United States saved many people from starving. I have so often thought about the ones who didn't migrate to America, and now George's book sheds a great deal of light on them.—*Fidelis G. Weilert*

## PREFACE

World War II was a conflict of rare dimensions. Clashing ideologies joined forces to crush a common foe, and having accomplished their goals they promptly resumed their pre-war battle of ideas. The United States and the British Commonwealth nations won decisions on the fields of battle only to abandon many of their gains at the Yalta conference table. The Allies disclaimed commercial interests and fought for pure and high ideals, yet one of those Allies banished a minority people within its borders and practiced genocide.

In terms of magnitude, the worst atrocities of World War II were committed against civilian ethnic groups, those who were not part of the mass of society. Germany's actions against the Jews and other non-Aryan groups during the Third Reich are well known. Germany is still paying reparations to surviving widows, men and children for crimes that go beyond denunciation. Russia, too, engaged in genocide, yet she escaped censure for her actions and paid no reparations to surviving members of families unjustly banished, imprisoned or executed. Years after the war, the Soviet government issued statements rehabilitating injured people and releasing some from banishment. But first the offended were made to sign a statement—one releasing the government from any claims under Soviet law.

This is the story of the Volga Germans. It covers the period from the time of Catherine II until banishment during World War II and a bit beyond. Volga German history pre-dates the American Revolution and the birth of the United States. Many Volga Germans eventually settled in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Argentina and other countries in Latin America. They settled in large numbers in Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota and several states in the Northwest. Their contributions to the areas in which they made their homes were enormous, yet history books barely mention them. In standard texts about Russia, no more than two or three pages are devoted to the Volga Germans. American histories similarly devote scant space to the immigrants from the Volga region. Even the Library of Congress has little to offer researchers about the Volga Germans and their descendants in the United States and other countries.

The Volga Germans endured more years of hardship and suffering than peace and prosperity, both in Russia and in the United States. They came to Russia after they were guaranteed certain rights, especially the right of cultural autonomy. When the Codex of 1871 negated the rights granted them in perpetuity by Catherine II, many emigrated. In America they wanted to retain their identity as a people, so they settled in virgin areas. But the pressures of the melting pot broke up their cultural enclaves after a few generations, and many forgot their history. Then came the war with Germany in 1917. Suddenly they were German ethnics again, although a century removed from their root beginnings. Hatred of everything German brought much suffering to those not living in tightly knit colonies. The famous alien and sedition cases in Nebraska still haunt history. One man, for instance, was thrown into prison for four months for not buying war bonds, even though he did not have money to do so. Others were beaten and run out of town or the country.

Next came the Bolshevik revolution, and now the Volga Germans were considered Russians. Persecution caused many to deny their heritage. Some changed their names. Now it was better to be German than a German from Russia. It is therefore not surprising that many Germans from Russia have difficulty establishing their origin from the Volga area, even though their ancestors came to America little more than a century ago.

The effects of World War II have not yet run their course. The winners on the fields of battle became—for the most part—the losers. The vanquished in turn have become strong economic powers. Among the Allied Powers only the Soviet Union came nearest to reaching its objectives. Former Congressman Hamilton Fish once assessed the legacies of World War II as follows.

1. A communist China.
2. A communist Poland as well as communist powers in all eastern European nations.
3. The Korean War.
4. The Vietnam War.
5. And a staggering cost of defense against a former ally, the Soviet Union, which—according to former Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird—stood at \$1,000,200,000,000 (one trillion, two hundred million). During his term of office, Fish made these statements on a Columbia Broadcasting System network program in the spring of 1971. Ultimately the cold war cost \$6 trillion.

But there are still other legacies of that war. As the loser, Germany was saddled with a guilt complex which still affects her foreign policy. The principal German war criminals were either executed or imprisoned by the Allied Powers for crimes against humanity. No such demands were made of the Soviet leaders. Eventually, of course, the Soviet Union collapsed. Thanks to the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia

interest in the history of the Volga Germans and other Germans from Russia is being revived. The Volga Germans started down the long road to annihilation as an ethnic group in Russia with the issuing of the Codex of 1871. The last twenty-seven years of their existence, 1914-1941, were particularly difficult. Then war with Germany arrived, and a decree calling for banishment was carried out during the bitter winter months of 1941-42. The reason given was fear of wholesale attempted sabotage. Banishment amounted to genocide. The area of the former Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic of the Volga Germans was still off limits to foreigners as recently as 1990. The action of the Soviet Union was so embarrassing that even Khrushchev refrained from mentioning the Volga Germans as one of the six groups banished by Stalin.

## Advertisement.

Nachdem es ohnehin schon offenkundig ist, daß alle und jede russisch Kaiserlichen Manifests de dato Peterhof den 22sten Julii 1763. in dem russischen Reiche häuslich niederlassen, und insonderheit bey dem Anbau fruchtbarer, aber noch uncultivirten Ländereyen, eine gute und reichliche Nahrung suchen wollen, von den russisch Kaiserlichen Gesandtschaften durchgängig die willfährigste Aufnahme und Förderung zu gewarten haben: So diener hiernit weiter männiglich zur Nachricht, daß nunmehr auch die Anstalt ist getroffen worden, daß selbigen sofort nach ihrer Ankunfft und Anmeldung in Hamburg oder in Lübeck bey den dortigen russisch Kaiserlichen Ministris und Commisarius, nachstehende Vortheile angebeten sollen:

Erstens empfänge täglich eine erwachsene Manns-Person Acht Schilling, eine Weibsperson Fünf Schilling, und ein Kind, ohne Unterschied des Geschlechtes, Drey Schilling schwer Geld zum Unterhalt, welches in Reichs-Münze respective ohngefähr zwanzig Kreuzer, zwölf und einen halben Kreuzer, dann sieben und einen halben Kreuzer betraagt, nichtin für eine ganze Familie etwas nahmhafteS ausmachtet.

Zweitens wird in Hamburg für ihre gemächliche und wohlfeile Einquartierung, bis zur Zeit ihrer Abreise nach Lübeck, Sorge getragen, und allenfalls noch, zur Erleichterung der kurzen Reise von Hamburg nach Lübeck, für die Weiber und kleinen Kinder ein Fuhrwerk verschaffet.

Drittens wird in Lübeck gleichgestalt, nach aller Möglichkeit, für ihr Untertommen gesorget, und zur Bestreung des Quartiergeldes und ihrer übrigen Bedürfnisse, werden ihnen vorbemeldete Taggelber, bis zu ihrer Einschiffung nach Rußland, immer richtig abgereicht.

Viertens, ehe sie sich in Lübeck wirklich zu Schiffe setzen erhalten sie befagte Taggelber für vierzehn Tage mit einander auf einem Brete, damit sie sich die benöthigten Lebensmittel und andere Erfordernisse zu dieser Seefarth daroon anschaffen können. Endlich und

Fünftens, wann eine genügliche Anzahl solcher Colonisten in Lübeck bespammen ist, wird zu ihrer Ueberfarth nach Rußland ein eigenes Schiff, das sonsten keine andere Ladung befordert, bedungen; und da sich für eine jede Familie mehr als ein besonderes Schiff betrachten läßt, so dürfen die in Lübeck antommenden Colonisten daselbst nur so lang verweilen, bis sich ihrer so viele gesamlet haben, daß sie ein eigenes Schiff besetzen können.

One of the many advertisements published in Germany to lure people to the Lower Volga.



The Right Reverend Joseph Kessler, D.D., was the last Bishop of the Diocese of Tiraspol. Condemned to death, Bishop Kessler fled Russia and for a time visited Volga German communities in the U.S., raising money to alleviate suffering during the famine of 1921-1922. He was never able to return to his diocese, and died in Germany in 1933. The Diocese of Tiraspol encompassed the Volga Republic.