The GERMANs from RUSSIA

Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie

This teaching guide was prepared jointly by Prairie Public Television and North Dakota State University Libraries to accompany the award-winning documentary film Germans from Russia: Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie. Totaling 55 minutes in length, this documentary traces the origin and rich history of an ethnic group which has played an important role in the history of North Dakota, and also in the history of the Great Plains in general. In-class viewing of the entire video is not required; each of the following four segments may be viewed separately:

1 Origin of Germans from Russia
10 minutes

2 Paradise on the Steppe
10 minutes

3 Bound for the New World and Those Left Behind
12 minutes

4 In America
23 minutes

Origin Of Germans From Russia

SECTION 1
10 minutes

The history of German speaking settlers in Russia stretches back to the 1500s, when German scientists and technicians helped to westernize Czar Peter the Great’s cities. But our story, that of large scale movements of German speaking agricultural settlers into Russia, begins later, in 1762, and continues from that time, intermittently, for almost a century.

Invited into Russia, German speaking settlers left their original homelands in western Germanic provinces and eastern France, including Alsace-Lorraine, Palatinate, West and East Prussia, Baden, Bavaria, Hesse, and Wuertemberg. Though different in speech, language, and religion, these settlers held in common a quest for peace, land, and a better life.

Throughout their two hundred year history, Germans from Russia have been known by many names, including Catherine’s Germans, the Czar’s Germans, Russo-Germans, and even “Rooshians”—an inaccurate term that later generations of German Russians in America resented.

ACTIVITIES

• Ask students to locate places important to German Russian history on the map: western Germanic provinces; eastern France; Danube River; St. Petersburg, Russia; Vienna, Austria; Volga River; Black Sea; Crimean Peninsula; Caucasus Mountains.

WEBSITE Activity

1. Ask students to go to the website http://www.prairiepublic.org/tv/localproduction/GFR/ and then

   a) click on and read Follow the Migration for the Germans from Russia Historic Timeline.
   b) click on and read About This Program, to learn about this documentary’s production.
   c) click on and read Interview with the Author to gain insight into the making of this documentary.
   d) ask students to briefly summarize, orally, or in writing, what they learned from a, b, or c.

1756–1763 Seven Years’ War devastates Germanic provinces
1762 Catherine, a German princess, ascends to Russian throne
1763 Catherine issues Manifesto inviting foreigners to settle in Russia
1764–1767 First wave of German speaking agricultural settlers into Russia
1804, 1813 Czar Alexander I, Catherine’s grandson, renews Manifesto’s promises
1781, and, especially, after 1804: Second wave of German speaking settlers into Russia
In Russia, some of the first German settlers were overwhelmed at the great expanse of the steppe, so unlike the forested hills and valleys of their native provinces. In the Volga region, particularly, many felt duped about the climate and nature of the land. With few options to return to their homeland, settlers began to build a new life.

From parts of “New Russia”—an area along the fringes of the Black Sea—settlers wrote to friends and kin in their Germanic homelands, describing the bountiful harvests and rich land, thus spurring further immigration. Few if any pastors, teachers, or professionals immigrated to Russia. The German settlers, absorbed in farming, distrusted both white collar Russian officials, and though each village had a German elementary school, education in general. (The priorities were clear: in the village of Neudorf, in the Glueckstal Enclave northwest of Odessa, the school cost 1,500 rubles and the church 15,000 rubles.)

Despite high infant mortality, large families of fifteen or more children were not uncommon. In time, more land was put under cultivation; daughter colonies were founded; and, despite many setbacks, life in German villages, which was centered both socially and religiously in the church, became prosperous and bustling.

Activities

- To learn more about German Russian building techniques, from a local lawn or garden shop, buy a small amount of “sod.” Have students trim the grass as short as possible on the sod. Then, after cutting the sod into small blocks, have each student construct a model sod house. Students may need to add small nails to hold the sod blocks together. A roof and windows might be added, using sticks and construction paper.

- To learn more about German Russian architecture, students might take a field trip to a local farmstead, where they could attempt to locate a “summer kitchen,” root cellar, or other structures. Ask students if they can determine whether any structures resemble those in the documentary, the age of the buildings, and what methods, such as “batsa” brick, stone, wood, or sod, were used in their construction.

- To learn about other historical events, ask students to investigate one date from the German Russian time-line at the bottom of this page, and write a brief summary of what was occurring in American history at that same time.

Website Activities

1. To learn German Russian history from book reviews, ask students to click onto http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/ and then
   a) in the index, click on Bibliography, Book Reviews and History, and, after that
   b) in the Book Reviews section, click on and read book reviews of From Catherine to Khrushchev: The Story of Russia’s Germans by Giesinger; and Homesteaders on the Steppe by Height.
   c) ask students to summarize, orally, or in writing, either or both of the book reviews.

2. To learn German Russian history from magazine and newspaper articles, ask students to click onto http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/ and then
   a) in the index, click on Magazine Articles first. Then go back to the index and click onto Newspaper Articles.
   b) in each section, ask students to locate and read at least one article on German Russians, as published in regional newspapers and magazines.
   c) ask students to summarize, orally, or in writing, the contents of at least one, or both articles.

Books To Consult

The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture by Shirley Fischer Arends
From Catherine to Khrushchev: The Story of Russia’s Germans by Adam Giesinger
Let’s Talk German-Russian with Ernschtina un Hanswurst by Arnold H. Marzolf
The Emigration from Germany to Russia in the Years 1763 to 1862 by Karl Stumpp
Homesteaders on the Steppe: The Odyssey of a Pioneering People by Joseph Height
Plains Folk: North Dakota’s Ethnic Heritage edited by William Sherman and Playford Thorson
Russian-German Settlements in the United States by Richard Sallet

Topics To Explore

Germans from Russia architecture
Germans from Russia music
Germans from Russia religion
Nineteenth century agriculture

Paradise On The Steppe

Section 2
10 minutes

1871 Russian governmental decree abolishes “special colonist” status of German settlers
1872 First major German Russian settlements in America, north of Yankton, Dakota Territory
1874 Russian law drafting all fit male subjects, including German colonists, into Russian military
1881 Czar Alexander II assassinated; succeeded by Alexander III, a Russian nationalist
1882 Crop failure in areas of Ukraine
As early as the 1840s, a small group of Germans from Russia had settled in America, near Sandusky, Ohio. When Ludwig Bette, their leader, returned to Russia, visiting his home village—about the same time Czar Alexander revoked many of the privileges assured by the Manifestos—what Bette said about his success in America spurred great interest. In 1872, soon after Bette’s visit, and drawn by the promise of free homestead land, the first group of settlers from the Beresan district in Russia departed for America, eventually establishing, north of Yankton, in what is now South Dakota, the “Odessa settlement.” In the years that followed, and until 1914, tens of thousands of German Russian villagers soon followed.

Those who did not immigrate to America suffered through the Russian revolution of 1917; an ensuing Civil War, during which they tried to remain neutral; and between 1919 and 2021, predations by robber bands and Bolshevik food requisitioning squads, which resulted in massacres in the villages of Selz, Rastadt, Landau, and Grossliebental, in the vicinity of Odessa. There was also much loss of life during a famine (1921). After that there was forced collectivization of agriculture under the dictator Stalin (1929); then a second great famine (1933), this one “engineered” by Stalinist policies.

Invading German troops (1941-44) took control of the Ukraine and its villages. When the German army retreated, many German Russians trekked to areas under German control. After the war, some of these people were forcibly “repatriated” to the Soviet Union, where they were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan, joining countrymen sent to those locations earlier in the war.

With the fall of the Soviet Empire and communism (1989), German Russians were invited back to Germany, where several million have now returned, struggling to start life anew in the land of their ancestors. Many others still remain in the far reaches of the former Soviet Empire.

Activities

- To learn about family traditions, ask your students what traditions—like quilting, sausage making, canning, or other activities—have been passed down from previous generations of their family. Ask students to draw or paint a scene illustrating a family tradition, and/or to write a brief description of traditions they’d like to pass to their own children and why.

Website Activities

1. To learn about German Russians after their arrival in America, go to the following website http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/ and click on Bibliography, Book Reviews and History. Then locate the History category and click on A Brief History of the Germans from Russia.

   a) click on A Bit of Europe in Dakota for a journalistic report from pre-1900 about German Russian immigrants in the Eureka, South Dakota area.

   b) ask students to summarize, orally, or in writing, the content of this article.

2. To learn about those who remained in Russia, go back to the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection index at http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/ and click on Bibliography, Book Reviews and History.

   a) locate the History category, then click onto and read From the Early Days of Stalin’s Great Terror.

   b) after that, locate Germans from Russia Series of articles from The Bismarck Tribune and read the article and click onto Those Who Stayed Behind by Karen Herzog.

   c) then in the Special Links category, click onto and read Letter of Death about conditions in a German Russian village during the Russian civil war (1919).

   d) ask students to summarize, orally, or in writing, the contents of at least one of those sources that they read.

3. Ask students to go to the website http://www.ahsgr.org/ahsgrfaq.html

   a) ask students to briefly summarize in writing the answer to their most frequently asked question(s) about Germans from Russia.

1872–1914 300,000 German Russians immigrate to America
1917 Russian revolution
1918–1920 Russian civil war
1933 “Terror famine” in Ukraine, lower Volga, and Northern Caucasus regions
1940–1941 Deportation of Volga Germans during WWII to Siberia and Kazakhstan
1944–1945 End of German villages in Russia
In America

**SECTION 4**

23 minutes

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**TOPICS**
**To Explore**

- **Homestead Act of 1862**
- **German Russian foods**
- **German Russian folk beliefs (faith healing, or “Brauche”)**
- **German Russian art (iron grave crosses, fabrics, embroidery)**
- **German Russian family life and characteristics (work ethic)**
- **Climate and terrain of Ukraine and North Dakota**
- **German language (German Russian dialects)**

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**Activities**

- Learn more about family history by asking students to consult, at the local or high school library, county or town histories. Most useful would be the “Jubilee” books, that mark the fiftieth anniversary, and “Centennial” books, that mark the one-hundredth anniversary of your town. Ask students to write down or photocopy material about their grandparents, great grandparents, or other relatives, summarizing the results for the class.

**Website Activities**

1. To learn about “famous Germans from Russia” ask students to go to the website [http://www-personal.umich.edu/~steeles/gerrus/](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~steeles/gerrus/) and then
   a) ask students to find and read about one famous German from Russia who interests them.
   b) ask students to use a library source, in addition to the website, on that German Russian, and then, in writing, or orally, report to the class.

2. To learn more about German Russian food, ask students to go to the website [http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/](http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/) and then
   a) click first on Culture, Customs, and Foodways, and then click Recipes and Foodways
   b) ask students to choose a simple recipe, such as Knoephla Soup and prepare it at home.
   c) ask students to summarize, in writing or orally, the procedure of the food they prepared, and to describe the result.

3. To learn more about German Russian humor, ask students to go to the website [http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/](http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/) and then
   a) click on Bibliography, Book Reviews and History and then locate the Special Links category. Click on Prairie “Spass.”
   b) read the material there on German Russian folk humor.
   c) ask students to gather from parents, grandparents, or other acquaintances any German Russian jokes, stories, puns, or sayings, in either English or German, or both.
   d) ask students to write them down and share these with the rest of the class.

4. To learn more about oral interviewing, ask students to go to the website [http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/](http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/) and then
   a) click on Oral History, and after that, in order, Guide for Interviewing Family Members, Interview Questions, and Sample Interviews
   b) ask students to use that material as guidelines to compose a series of written questions for their own brief oral interview with a resident at a local nursing home, or with an elderly relative or friend.
   c) ask students to transcribe an interview, with both their questions and the interviewee’s responses, into writing and/or report the results to the class.

5. To learn more about German Russian textiles, fabrics, and clothing, ask students to go to the website [http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/](http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/) and then
   a) click onto Outreach Programs
   b) ask students to locate at that website a photograph of an embroidered shawl or other fabric.
   c) ask students to briefly, orally or in writing, give the class a vivid description of the article, along with information about how it was fashioned and/or used.

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