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From Catharine to Khrushchev: The story of Russia's Germans

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BOOKS IN REVIEW

FROM CATHARINE TO KHRUSHCHEV:

The Story of Russia's Germans

ADAM GIESINGER

Printed by Marian Press, Battleford, Saskatchewan

1974, 443 pp., \$12.00

Available from the author at 645 Oxford Street, Winnipeg

In 1763 Catharine II of Russia, a German princess, invited fellow Germans to become colonists in the far-flung territories of her adopted country in an attempt to bring western culture and industry to Russia. To attract them, generous promises were made: free transportation to the site of settlement, interest-free loans for ten years, tax exemptions for a period of time, local self-government, freedom of religion, freedom from military service, and freedom to leave if they found Russia unsuitable. All privileges were applicable not only to the colonists but to their descendants forever.

During the following century over 100,000 people migrated from Germany to Russia and settled on the banks of the Volga, in the Black Sea area, and in the province of Volhynia. Among the emigrants from Germany were Mennonites, Roman Catholics, Jews and people of Reformed faith. However, the majority — about 75 per cent according to the census of 1897 — were Lutherans. While the first century was filled with hardships and privation, Russia's Germans generally became prosperous and by 1870 numbered about 450,000.

After a century of relative peace during which Russia's Germans enjoyed a large measure of local self-government and were able to preserve the language, culture and religion they had brought with them from Germany, they began to experience an erosion and then the abrogation of the privileges which they had promised. The later emperors of Russia undertook harsh measures to Russianize the Germans. Then Russia's Germans found themselves caught up in the cross-fire of the Communist revolution and accompanying civil war. They endured famine, purges and deportations by Stalin, and finally a second world war with complete liquidation of all German settlements in European Russia. While about 1,800,000 Germans still live in Russia, they are now scattered over vast areas of Siberia and Central Asia, deprived of contact with co-religionists and rapidly losing their language and culture.

This is the story told with scholarly detail but readable style by Dr. Giesinger, a professor at the University of Manitoba for many years. The book does not focus on the history and development of the Christian Churches in Russia. Its intention is to tell the story of the identifiable German population in Russia. However, since language, culture and religion were so closely interrelated for Russia's Germans, the book also includes helpful information about the establishment and development of the religious groups whether this be the Mennonites, Roman Catholics or Lutherans. As such it helps to fill a gap in the knowledge we have about the church back-

ground experience of many Lutherans who constituted the early German congregations of our church in western Canada.

Since large numbers of the German immigrants to western Canada around the turn of the century and following both world wars came from various parts of Russia, present-day members of these congregations may do well to attempt to assemble information from church records about the places from which the pioneers came and to use this book to pinpoint their locations. Giesinger provides no less than twenty-five maps of German settlements in Russia and lists virtually all of the German communities. Thus, in addition to detailing the origin and settlement of larger areas such as Volhynia, Bessarabia, the Volga, etc., the book also gives names to individual communities.

The book does not, of course, include the stories of Germans who participated in a parallel migration to Galicia, Bukowina, etc., in the Austria-Hungary Empire. That story still lies buried, as far as I know, in German books on individual territories such as those upon which Giesinger based this overall study of Russia's Germans. Giesinger is to be commended for carrying out the monumental task involved in gathering the data and in putting together the story of the German-Russian experience.

NJT

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