“The Evil Itself… Descended on the Earth”: Mapping Manmade Famines and Ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union, 1921-1922 & 1932-1933

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I feel myself incapable of describing all of the atrocities, which I have seen…. One gets the impression, as if the evil itself had descended on the earth…these fields will never bear fruit again.
—Malcolm Muggeridge as translated by Theodor Innitzer, 1933

Abstract

“Гражданин!” [Citizens]
Let this poster remind you about the unprecedented horror of famine that will come to you tomorrow if you do not help the Volga region today. [in photo text reads “Volga”]

This GIS project serves as a compliment to my paper, titled “ ‘The Evil Itself… Descended on the Earth’: Manmade Famines and Ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union, 1921-1922 and 1932-1933.” The paper examines the 1921/22 famine the Volga region and the 1932/33 Holodomor (Death by Hunger) in Ukraine as experienced by Soviet Germans and understood by their co-ethnics in the West. Using German, Russian, and English language primary documents, including travel literature, Nazi reports, memoirs, letters, government papers, and maps this project nuances the current historiographies of both famines via analysis of the German experience. Several scholars have accurately demonstrated the class motivations for and genocidal nature of the Soviet terror famine(s). However, this paper extracts the underlying, often obscured, ethnic experiences of and motivations for class based genocide. The argument is two-fold. As part of its program against kulaks and unruly nationals, Soviet officials intentionally targeted ethnic German colonies for grain requisitions, resulting in a subsequent ethnocide(s). Secondly, the paper implies that 1921 famine in the Volga region may have served as a training ground for its successor—the Holodomor. One stark difference remains. Lenin, realizing the catastrophic consequences of his policies, allowed the West to offer aid during the 1921 famines. Stalin, fully aware of the 1921 context, refused Western aid and blocked foreign intervention. Copies of this paper are available on request.

The GIS element of this project demonstrates the geographic relationship between the famine zones and ethnic German populations. Moreover, it seeks to analyze the impact of the famines at the village level. Data for population analysis is incomplete; however, remnants of the 1897 Russian census, village censuses conducted prior to 1921, and the 1926 census of the Soviet Union remain. Unfortunately, the Soviet government postponed the 1933 census, which was completed in 1937. After which, the government ordered its destruction. Several scholars have speculated that this was an attempt to obscure population losses after forced collectivization and the Holodomor which numbered in the millions. The multi-village Am Trakt settlement and the Volga Mother Colonies will serve as examples of this methodology.

German Migrations to Russia

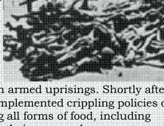
The Idealized Village: Section Volga Colonies Map, 1760s

Ethnic Germans maintained a significant presence in the Russian Empire dating back to Catherine the Great’s July 22, 1763 royal declaration, which enticed German immigrants to settle the lower Volga regions with promises of religious and cultural freedom, tax relief, military exemption, and the right to return to their homeland at any time. The colonizing program ceased operation in the summer of 1766. In the late 18th century, she negotiated a similar arrangement with German immigrants willing to colonize the Black Sea region of Ukraine, and her grandson Alexander I launched a comparable plan in 1804. A large population of ethnic German Mennonites, fleeing military service in West Prussia, joined the Germans along the Volga in 1853, and a fourth migration of ethnic Germans to Volhynia, a region in northern Ukraine, occurred throughout the last half of the 19th century. State-sponsored settlers, they established enclaves in all three regions. The enclaves enjoyed relative peace and prosperity until Tsars Alexander II, Alexander III, and Nicholas II shattered Catherine’s promises between 1871 and 1917. Throughout this period of Russification many ethnic Germans were forcibly conscripted, subjected to religious intolerance and compulsory conversion, forbidden from speaking German, surrounded by anti-German hysteria, prohibited from immigrating out of Russia, threatened with expulsion, and punished with a decree mandating their involuntary deportation to Siberia. The once-peaceful ethnic enclaves became victim diasporas, living in and altered by an empire dead set on eradicating their culture. Many fled to the Americas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Those who remained suffered through the 1917 revolution and two disastrous manmade famines.

See, Fred C. Koch, *The Volga Germans: In Russia and the Americas from 1763 to the Present* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978); James W. Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed, the Volga Germans, 1860-1917* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988); Karl Stumpp, *The German Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering.* trans. Joseph Height (Lincoln, NE: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (hereafter AHSGR), 1978); Hattie Plum Williams, *The Czar’s Germans, with Particular Reference to the Volga Germans*, eds. Emma S. Haynes, Phillip B. Legler and Gerda S. Walker (Denver, CO: World Press, Inc., 1975); George J. Walters, *Wir wollen Deutsche bleiben: The Story of the Volga Germans* (Kansas City, MO: Halcyon House, 1982.

The Famines

1921/22: The Povolzhye Famine



Famine Victims, 1921

After the Revolution, The Red Army targeted Wealthy and progressive Germans, raping, robbing, shooting, and torturing them. In response, many joined the counter-revolutionary White army and participated in armed uprisings. Shortly after, the Soviet government implemented crippling policies of grain requisition, seizing all forms of food, including produce farmers grew in their own gardens, meat, eggs, and dairy products. Coupled with intense drought, these policies resulted in the 1921 famine. Affecting nearly 25 million people and killing over 5 million Soviet citizens, the famine took a heavy toll on Soviet Germans, killing 72,000 of the 431,000 ethnic Germans in the Volga region alone, over 25% of the population. In August of 1921, Lenin allowed humanitarian aid in from the West. Joseph Stalin, watched from the sidelines. A decade later, he oversaw one of the largest manmade famines in recorded history.

See James W. Long, “The Volga Germans and the Famine of 1921,” Russian Review 51, no. 4 (1992): 510-25; Ronald J. and Joshua J Vossler, trans., The Old God Still Lives: German Villagers in Czarist Russia and the Soviet Ukraine Write their American Relatives, 1915-1924 (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, 2005).

1932/3: The Holodomor

In order meet the first five-year plan, which required the sale of grain overseas to fund industrialization, the Soviets implemented harsh grain requisition policies. In summer of 1932, reports warned Moscow that famine would ensue in the coming year, but the regime stepped up grain requisition to meet the plan’s 1933 deadline anyway. Stalin accused the peasantry of hiding grain, sabotaging machinery, and stealing Socialist property. They became enemies of the state, enemies he would defeat with starvation. The government conducted raids, barricaded villages, and stood idle as millions starved to death. Shootings, beatings, and other forms of torture occurred daily in the villages. When the famine was in full swing, the Soviet government continued the export of grain, sending 18 million hundredweight of grain overseas to fund the industrialization efforts. The famine affected up to 75% of all Soviet Germans, a majority of which died.

Famine Victims on the Street, 1933

See Stéphane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panné, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartošek, and Jean-Louis Margolin, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, trans. Alfred Clayton (Malaysia: Pearson Education Limited, 2001).

Mapping Ethnic Germans

Source Maps:

Ingenieurbuero fuer Kartographie. “Deutsche Auswanderung nach Russland im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert,” *The Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University*, http://cvgs.cu-portland.edu/archives/maps/russia.cfm.

Karl Stumpp, “Index Map of German Settlement Area’s in the USSR.” *Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University*, http://cvgs.cu-portland.edu/archives/maps/russia.cfm.

“племена сп.и н.поволжья,” 1901, *The Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University*, http://cvgs.cu-portland.edu/archives/maps/volga_region.cfm. “Germans” are shown in blue.

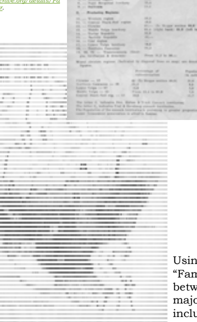
“Races of the Lower Volga,” *The Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University*, http://cvgs.cu-portland.edu/archives/maps/volga_region.cfm.

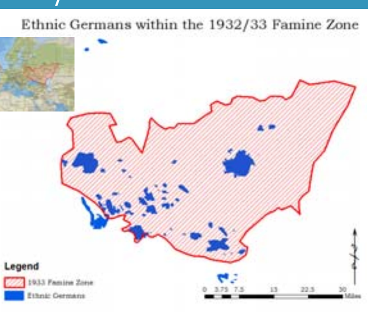
A combination of the geographic information pertaining to ethnic Germans displayed in four historical maps (pictured above), which detail German migrations to the Russian Empire and the ethnic composition of the Volga region, this map pinpoints the locations of ethnic German settlements in the Russian Empire (later the Soviet Union).

After Georeferencing each of the source maps, graphics were generated based on the location of ethnic Germans and converted to features (See example below).The features for all four maps were overlaid to produce the map titled “German Settlements in the Soviet Union.”

Mapping the 1932/33 Famine

A. Markoff, *Famine in USSR* (Paris: Russian Commercial Institute in Paris, 1933) *Way Back Machine Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/FamineInUssr.





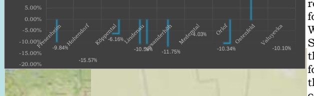
Using “German Settlements in the Soviet Union” and a georeferenced map of “Famine in the U.S.S.R,” this map demonstrates the geographic relationship between the B and C famine zones and ethnic German populations. A majority of the ethnic German populations fall within the famine zone, including the densely populated Volga and Black Sea colonies.

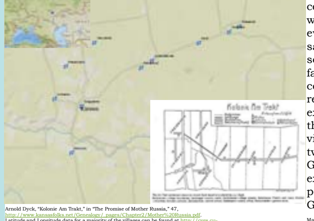
Mapping the 1921/22 Famine

“European Russia, Showing the Famine Area, Ports, and Main Railways, *Russian Information and Review* 1, no, 1 (October 1921):3.

Using “German Settlements in the Soviet Union” and a georeferenced map of “European Russia, Showing the Famine Area…,” this map demonstrates the geographic relationship between the famine zone and ethnic German populations. The Mennonite Am Trakt settlement, Samara colonies, and densely populated Volga colonies, are located near the center of the famine zone. The Black Sea colonies linger on its periphery in a semi-autonomous Ukraine (1918-192).

The Mennonite Colonies: Am Trakt





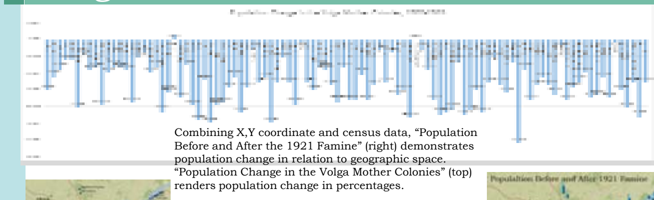
Arnold Dyck, “Kolonie Am Trakt,” in “The Promise of Mother Russia,” 47, http://www.kansasfolks.net/Genealogy/_pages/Chapter2/Mother%20Russia.pdf.
Latitude and Longitude data for a majority of the villages can be found at http://cvgs.cu-portland.edu/settlements/MennoniteColonies.cfm.

Recollections of the Famine in Am Trakt

Maria Wiebe grew up in Am Trakt. Soviet officials forcibly removed her family and their neighbors from their land, forcing them to cultivate inferior plots a great distance away. When they failed to meet the impossible grain quotas, the Soviets accused the “kulaks” of sabotage and confiscated their livestock. Officials searched kitchens, and labeled those found with any “surplus” of food as counterrevolutionary, the equivalent of treason. The fear of a death sentence coupled with starvation led to extreme paranoia. In Maria’s words, “Neighbors reported Neighbors, and fear was everywhere.” One neighbor turned the Wiebes for hiding a sack of flour. Officials ransacked their house, took every scrap of food and clothing from them, and arrested her father. They sentenced him to death; he fled before they could carry the sentence out. Some farmers fought back. In response, the Soviets enacted a policy demanding the execution of ten farmers for every communist death. Shortly thereafter, Soviet police forced several old men from the village to dig a mass grave. As retribution for the death of two communists, they lined up and shot twenty-one young German farmers in front of it. Throughout the famine and executions, Maria was sure of one thing, “the Russian peasants were not terrorized as much as the ‘wealthy German farmers.’”

Maria Wiebe, “Our Story: Our Life in Russia and Our Escape,” *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia* 12, no 4 (1989): 1-6.

Volga Mother Colonies



Combining X,Y coordinate and census data, “Population Before and After the 1921 Famine” (right) demonstrates population change in relation to geographic space. “Population Change in the Volga Mother Colonies” (top) renders population change in percentages.

Both the Am Trakt Mennonite and Volga Mother Colonies suffered population losses during the 1921/22 famine. However, despite their geographic proximity to the Volga Mother Colonies, the Am Trakt colonies noted significantly lower losses—ranging from 9.67% growth to 15.57% decline. In contrast, the Mother colonies noted 2.61% growth in Frank. The remaining colonies suffered significant losses ranging from stagnation to 61.7% declines. Further research is needed to explain these differences; however, it should be noted that Mennonites are generally pacifists. The Volga colonies were not.

Latitude, Longitude, and Census data for a majority of the villages can be found at http://cvgs.cu-portland.edu/settlements/MennoniteColonies.cfm.