The Plight of the Volga Germans

An examination of their ethnic history and the WELS endeavors to strengthen them in the face of persecution

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On May 24, 1911 the ship Hanover arrived at Philadelphia carrying passengers who had heard of the bountiful lands of opportunity which America had to offer. Numbered among those voyagers was a couple by the name of Bader with their young family. They also had come to seek a new life in this land of liberty. Behind them lay a homeland which had treated them and many generations before them as strangers and aliens. They were German Russians who like their forefathers long before, left their homes and relatives in search of a better life. A few short years' delay might have meant the difference between living in the U.S.A. where personal freedoms are all too often taken for granted and living in the Soviet Union where such freedoms are hardly even dreamed of. Many questions may arise in our minds. Why were some so blessed as to come to a land where we can confess Christ without any fear of reprisal, while their brothers and sisters endured harsh and bitter persecution instigated by the government? What exactly is the history of these oppressed Germans who made Russia their home, particularly from the religious point of view? What can we as Christians and WELS Lutherans do to bolster the faith of our brothers and sisters in Christ whom Satan is assailing so vehemently with his attacks? The first of these questions we must leave to the wisdom and providence of our Almighty God. The latter will be the subject of this paper as we attempt to scratch the surface of the story of the Volga Germans.

I. A Brief History of the Volga Germans

Conditions in Europe

It was during the reign of Catherine the Great, empress of Russia that the migration of more than 7000 German families to Russia took place. A brief glimpse into the situation of the "Holy Roman Empire" will make it clear why many of the German people were dissatisfied and looking for a chance for a new start. Religious differences and lack of feligious toleration embittered the lives of many people. Following the time of Luther and the Reformation there was a host of religious wars desimating the population and devastating the land. The Peace of Westphalia failed to do away with the many problems, although it ended the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), "Which has been branded as the most horrifying and devastating in the history of mankind."[1] Estimates of the loss of population range from one third to one half of the total population. The sufferings of the two Hessian states and the Rhine Palatinate were the most severe as they bore the ravages of war. The end of this war touched off the Hessenkrieg, a struggle between the Hessian states themselves, which was followed closely by the conquests of French king Louis XIV. Devastation was again ushered in by the War of Spanish Succession. "Thus, at mid-eighteenth century, at least five generations had been suffering miseries resulting from political turmoil in the numerous Germanies. . . ."[2] In 1756 all Europe plunged into war again in Austria's war of revenge known as The Seven Years War.

It goes without saying that the German peasant of 1763 was groaning under a tremendous burden. The land had been crossed, re-crossed, and crossed again during the numerous conflicts. A host of young men had been impressed into the fighting forces in the process. Industry and trade were completely disrupted. Taxes were at an all time high, partially to support the overabundance of the lavishly living royalty of the more than 300 states and principalities. Poverty, unemployment, disease, and malnutrition were the general rule of the day. "To a Germany thus affected came the agents of Catherine II of Russia bringing the news of a paradise in the East."[3]

The Manifesto

Early in her reign, Catherine II had plans to bring industry and progress to her underdeveloped frontier areas, hoping that the immigrants would set an example for the Russian peasants. Only twenty-one days after her coronation in 1762, she issued a vague manifesto inviting foreigners to settle in Russia. This invitation had little effect. After rethinking her plan, on July 22, 1763 she issued a new Manifesto which has come to be associated with the birth of the Volga German minority. This was a "master-piece of immigration propaganda, which became the cornerstone of Russia's colonization policy for a century."[4] This document detailed the broad spectrum of privileges and benefits to be granted.

The ten sections of the document painted an alluring picture of Russia as an area with large tracts of virtually uninhabited fertile land, well-watered regions, rich in minerals and ores waiting to be discovered, and lucrative opportunities for the establishment of industries. Catherine added a list of promises which many of the oppressed Germans could not resist. Besides this was the offer of thirty desyatiny (about eighty acres) to each family, the promise of free transportation from the German ports of embarkation to their destinations, freedom to settle anywhere in the country, freedom to practice any trade, interest-free loans for ten years to get established, freedom from customs duties, freedom from taxes for thirty years for those settling in wilderness areas, local self-government for those establishing colonies, freedom from military service, and freedom of religion. All these privilges were to perpetuate to all of their descendants as well. To remove any remaining doubts the potential immigrants might have had there was also the promise of freedom to return to their lands of origin at any time.

Despite Catherine's alluring invitation disseminated throughout Europe by posters, fliers, and proclamations, the response from the destitute populations was still rather disappointing. Thus the Empress introduced a new set of recruiting techniques. The Russian government made agreements with enterprising individuals who agreed to bring a specified number of immigrants to Russian in exchange for special privileges in the new settlements and other considerations.

Most of the new recruiters, called Menschenfaenger (people catchers) or Seelenverkaeufer (soul sellers), were Frenchmen of doubtful background. They wisely worked the areas of Germany which were especially oppressed by poverty and forced conscription for foreign wars. Many proved to be unscrupulous in their behavior by misleading "both the Russian government and the Germans they signed up for Russia."[5] A short time later the Crown set up its own government controled recruiting organization in addition to the foreign service salesmen. Finally, after the stream of immigrants had swollen into a river, Emperor Joseph II (of the Holy "Roman Empire) became alarmed and forbad all further emmigration from Germany in 1768. During the four years before that time, during 1764-1767, the bulk of the Volga Germans made their move to "paradise." It was just as well that the immigration ceased as the response to the Manifesto was far greater than anticipated and the colonization program had already run out of funds.

The Move to Russia

Catherine had set up a supervisory body in St. Petersburg to arrange for the reception and eventual settlement of the German immigrants. Arrangements and temporary accommodations along the way were the first of many disillusionments to come. To the consternation of the colonists, they soon learned that they were not free to go where they wished as the Manifesto had promised, but were to go to the distant Volga River region. In spite of the fact that "barely half of the colonizers were farmers,"[6] they were all expected to

work the land, another breach of contract. In reality, the settlement in the Volga region, in violation of the colonists' rights, probably helped to save the colonists from extinction in their early struggle for survival.

The journey to their new homeland proved to be a long and arduous one. Their hardshops included traveling in the bitterly cold weather of late fall, sickness, and frequently death along the way. Some were forced to winter with Russian peasants where they got a firsthand experience of the customs of their new homeland. If they could have, many probably would have returned to Germany immediately. However this was impossible. Added to the problems was the fact that the authorities were far from ready to receive the steady stream of settlers that had begun to arrive. Along with the lack of organization came tremendous shortfalls in supplies and equipment. What little there was in the way of provisions was usually not distributed equally but was practically up for grabs to the first takers.

As the government leader would lead the wagon trains through the trackless steppe for weeks on end he would deliberately steer clear of the already established "villages" of tents and huts in order not to bring further disillusionment to the colonists. At a convenient time (for him) he would order the train to stop in the middle of nowhere; they had arrived at their destination! Thus the harsh realities learned on the treck were only the beginnings of their problems.

These colonists who had come from the oppressive life

in Germany, some for religious freedom, some for free land, some for freedom from military service and burdensome taxes, and some failures who were lazy and shiftless and looking for an easy life, were forced to dig in and build a new life. The land of wealth and life of ease remained only a far away dream.

Altogether during the four years the emigrants numbered more than 7000 families, "an estimated 25,000 to 27,000 people."[7] A large per cent of these were from Hesse, but other parts of southwest Germany seemed to be well represented also, with a sprinkling of other areas of Germany and some neighboring countries.

Conquering the Land

Housing was the most pressing problem that the colonists faced. Although Catherine's agents had promised housing ready on arrival, in most cases the newcomers found neither shelter nor lumber. Lumber was a precious resource and had to be floated down the Volga from far away. Meanwhile Russian style mud huts had to serve as home for the first several years before houses could be built.

Much needed domestic animals were usually in short supply and farm implements were of the crudest nature. Seed grain was always late, and the essential cold weather clothing was constantly lacking. Shortages of food and clothing prevailed everywhere. Profiteering Russian officials unscrupulously took advantage of the colonists by cutting

rations of the few things that they did have. The forces of nature added to the burden with the bitterly cold winters and spring floods which washed away their mud huts. Crop after crop failed in the dry blazing summer sun. It took years of trial and error to learn how to coax the soil to produce a satisfactory crop. It was not until nearly ten years later that a good crop was harvested which made them less dependent on government help. Meanwhile huge amounts in debts had been accumulated.

The freedoms promised by the Manifesto were, for the most part, nonexistent. "Any kind of initiative on the part of a colonist was discouraged."[8] Every detail of life was regulated and restricted including travel, and even the buying and selling of livestock. It is no wonder that discontent and disillusionment were the rule of the day.

Another scourge were the bands of outlaws that flourished along the lower Volga. To travel alone or in small groups was to invite a murdering raid by these criminals, deserters, and ex-serfs. At times entire colonies were forced to form posses to seek out the strongholds of the bandits and avenge their losses. This problem plagued the colonists for nearly a century before it was remedied to some extent.

The immigrants were forced to dig in and make a life in their new homeland. Hands which had never done manual work learned to master the farming tools. "German ingenuity and techniques brought from the homeland improved on the methods of the Russian peasant and finally made the land

productive,"[9] which was Catherine's original intent. The older and weaker soon died off but the younger and stronger strove to improve their lot in life in the savage land. From the fires of trials they eventually forged the "wasteland" into the land they called home. These German colonists were giving birth to a new people, the Volga Germans, an ethnic branch with its own proud identity. Although a stray Russian word crept into their native dialects, the winter survival garb of the Russian peasants were quickly adopted, and vodka supplanted Rhine wine and beer as a stronger household drink, the Volga Germans clung tightly to the essential character of the German culture so that they did not lose their identity as a distinct ethnic group.

Dr. Sidney Heitman points to four important factors which have united the Volga Geramns by certain common bonds. Among the more that 100 Soviet nationalities[10] the Volga Germans comprise a minority with a distinctive history. The same bonds remain important factors in uniting Volga Germans to this day in the Soviet Union as well as in other countries around the world. They are: "their common history and traditions, their language, their religions, and their folk-ways."[11]

Religious Life

One can hardly speak of the Volga Germans without an insight into their religious life. The religious freedom promised by Catherine in the Manifesto was undoubtedly an important factor in determining whether these people would

immigrate to Russia or not, at least for many. The Empress, although she confessed an "everyone gets to heaven in their own way" philosophy, was hardly a pioneer in the religious freedom line of thought. In fact her own people of the Christian faith were subjected to a rigidly controled state-church. Already in 1702 Peter the Great had issued a manifesto proclaiming: "We . . . gladly concede that every Christian shall be responsible to make the concern for his salvation his (own) business."[12] Even with this Peter was anticipated by Ivan IV, the Terrible. It was already in 1576 that the first Lutheran church was built in Russia, located in a Moscow suburb he had created for professional and technical immigrants recruited in the German states. The only right excluded was the right to proselytize among the Orthodox.

The bulk of the Germans who answered the invitation of Catherine were deeply devout people. Their lives revolved around the seasonal needs, caring for their flocks and fields, and their religious calendars. Their social lives were completely interwoven with the German churches and the activities of the congregations. Of particular interest to us here is the religious makeup of the immigrants. Adam Giesinger states that "about 76 per cent were Protestants of the Lutheran faith."[14] Of the remainder, 15-20 per cent were Catholics with Mennonites, Reformed, and a few other sects mixed in. The religious repression of Western Europe made Catherine's gateway to Paradise seem appealing to quite a number of religious denomination.

Because of the trying conditions among the Volga Germans it is not difficult to see why there was a shortage of pastors from the beginning. As hard as it was to get a pastor, it was even more difficult to keep him there. The demands made on them were often simply too much to bare. The Russian government recognized the religious needs of the colonists from the beginning and tried to provide for them. Already in November of 1763 the decision was made to recruit two Protestant pastors, one Lutheran, the other Calvinistic, and a Catholic priest, for the planned Volga settlement.[15]

In 1765 the building of a church in each colonist district was made possible by a loan from the crown, and six years later twelve churches, along with parsonages and schools, stood in the Volga region. The government even went so far as to pay the first two years' salaries for the clergymen, whereas later on a tax was collected for this purpose. In 1769 the government issued "Instruktion" which set forth in great detail the religious duties of the colonists and the clergy under the threat of harsh punishments for deviations from this standard. Such taxes and regulations were strongly resented by the Germans who had been promised freedoms from such restrictions.

In spite of the government's clergy recruiting program there were dire shortages of pastors in the early years of settlement. "It is said that between 1764 and 1772 there were but six ministers to serve 73 Lutheran and Reformed colonies. By 1820, the number had increased only to 17."[16] The huge, widely scattered congregations in a region of harsh climate,

where roads were nonexistent and transportation both primitive and dangerous, were probably least inviting for the church worker. In return for his strenuous labor the pastor often received a salary too meager to support his family.

Doubtlessly it was difficult for a Volga pastor to be dedicated to his work and a dedicated family man too, for he was always on the go. With only a handful of clergymen, large circuits for each to care for, and difficult travel in between, the clergymen were, in reality, more preachers than pastors. The contact between pastor and congregation was little more than the worshop service and special services such as weddings and baptisms, which were often performed in larger groups. The average number of parishioners in a circuit was over 13,000 members[17] so time for individual calls was extremely limited or nonexistent. Koch describes the typical Sunday visit this was:

> As a rule, the pastor arrived in a village on Sunday morning an hour or so before the ten o'clock service and proceeded to the schoolmaster's residence to inform himself about the state of the community. The worshipers first saw him when he entered the chancel from the vestry and stepped before the altar during the final stanza of the opening hymn. Following the benediction, he would retreat into the sacristy. . . . By the time the congregation had sung the last verse of the closing hymn he usually had already disappeared into the schoolmaster's home across the street where he was to be the dinner guest.[18]

It appears that, at least in the early years, "there were not many outstanding men among the pastors who served in the Volga colonies."[19] One reason for this may have been the kind of pastors that were attracted to the colonies. Some may well have been those who had encountered problems

in their congregations in Germany or could not obtain a desirable assignment there and thus immigrated to get a fresh start. Added to this was the problem that the pastors were not native to the colonies but came from a diversity of backgrounds and religious training schools. Differences in practice and even doctrine resulted. "Frequently there was an aura of aristocracy. . .that could not readily attune to the economic, social, and unscholarly status of the colonists."[20] These factors contributed to the rather fast turnover of pastors as many returned to their home regions.

The government must shoulder a portion of the blame for placing a wedge between pastor and parish because of the insufferable limitations the bureaucracy placed on pastors. The previously mentioned "Instruktion" of 1769 strictly limited the functions of pastors to spiritual matters and ordered them not to become involved in any kind of secular affairs. The guidelines established in this matter were quite arbitrary. For example the planning and construction of a church building was considered to be strictly a secular affair.

One can hardly speak of the religious life of the Volga Germans without at least a brief consideration of the role of the school. The schoolmaster served an integral part in the spiritual life of the colonists, especially since there was such a shortage of pastors. At the time of immigration the school system was well established in the German states and the colonists brought this system along with them. During the long weeks of absence of the non-resident pastor, the school-

master was called on to perform most of the ecclesiastical functions. He often was also a decon, village registrar, counselor (spiritual and secular),town clerk, and even first-aid officer.[21]

It usually fell to the duties of the schoolmaster to conduct most of the church services. If there were six congregations in a parish, he was required to officiate on five successive Sundays. Although the order of service was virtually the same, the schoolmaster was not allowed to preach his own sermon. Rather he could select and read a sermon from the church's Predigtbuch. Since he was not ordained, he was forbidden to officiate from the pulpit so he delivered his message from a lecturn. Neither was he allowed to give the benediction nor make the sign of the cross. Since the schoolmaster maintained such close contact with the parishioners however, he was often more of a spiritual shepherd than the regular pastor was.

A fact which complicated the religious scene was that the Protestant immigrants were by no means unified in their religious beliefs. The pietistic and rationalistic divisions of Lutheranism found in the Fatherland were brought along by the colonists. A minority of Reformed also existed, who sometimes founded their own parishes and even colonies. The first generation of settlers generally lived peacefully together, although they remained apart ecclesiastically. Soon however the seeds of conciliation and unionism were sown. This was brought about by a combination of factors including local

circumstances, a Tsar with Protestant sympathies, and the instrumental work of a man named Ignaz Aurelius Fessler.[22] He redivided the parishes into regional districts without regard for denominational differences. Holy Communion, celebrated only twice a year, was soon made available to both groups though the differences in doctrine were recognized and differentiated in the manner in which the sacrament was administered, namely serving each demomination as a separate group and allowing the Reformed to eat and drink by their own hands.

Education

The German Russians had barely finished their crude dwellings when they organized classes for the instruction of their children. This was in stark contrast to the Russian culture where even the members of the elite class were largely illiterate. Thus even though the schools were primitive in comparison to the one room schools of the American frontier tradition, the parochial schools stood out as a shocking cultural innovation. Catherine's Manifesto, which seemed to cover nearly every detail of life, was silent on the subject of education.

Among the original immigrants there were enough well educated persons that virtually every colony could select a well qualified teacher. However these men were limited by the fact that the government expected them, like all colonists, to farm their portion of the land. Consequently school was

held only in the winter months. By the turn of the century, when economic conditions were improving for the German colonists, one might expect educational advance as well. However the opposit was the case. As the first generation of teachers passed away, their successors had to be drawn from the ranks of men with only local parochial school training. For the most part these were far from qualified to serve as schoolmasters.

An adding factor to the problem of quality of the teachers was the manner of hiring. It was the place of the citizen-parishioners to hire the teacher, who unfortunately often gave the job to the teacher who "offered his services for the least money, who had a loud, strong voice to outshout a room of youngsters, and who could wield a stick."[23] His qualifications were usually a secondary consideration. Thus the quality of education degenerated alarmingly after the first generation of teachers. With a usual classroom size of 200-400 youngsters in a single room with a single teacher, it is no wonder that it took years to bring the standard of education up to what it had been in the early days. In spite of these manifold inadequacies the system accomplished a great deal. "It can be said that most men and women were able to read and that in later years writing too became a relatively common skill."[24]

World War and Change

In 1914 rumors began making their way through the settlements. Conjecture and speculation was the topic of the day. By midsummer the continent's principal nations were embroiled in World War I. Anti-German agitations intensified quickly

and in January of 1915 a government decree banned the use of the German language in church, school, and other public places. But before the ban could be put into effect by the disorganized monarchy, Kerensky's overthrow nullified the interdict. Within the year however, the Bolshevik revolution struck down the new moderate Kerensky rule. "One imminent crippling blow to the Volga German ethnic structure had been averted--but the expected relief was only at the eye of a hurricane."[25]

Communist doctrine demanded the destruction of religion. Marx termed religion the "opiate of the people" which rulers used to keep their subjects in submission and subjection. However the Communist leaders recognized the strength that the church, especially the Orthodox church, had on the people. A direct move toward immediated destruction of religion would have brought about their own end. Thus the party subtilely "employed the maneuver of attrition rather than an assault."[26]

The government quickly siezed all bank accounts and any other material posessions of the churches. Huge rental fees were charged to congregations for the use of their own buildings. Immediately anti-religious propaganda was circulated throughout the land. Early on, many pastors were singled out as enemies of the state and were accused of counter-revolutionary propaganda. They were heavily taxed, evicted from their homes, and arrested on the flimsiest excuses. Finally many were deported to slave labor camps in Russia's polar regions, while the church buildings were closed or

turned into dance halls, theaters, or granaries.

A brief reprieve came in the 1920's when the Volga Germans enjoyed "their own autonomous administrative units."[27] The persecution again intensified in 1928 under Satain's Five Year Plan. Courses in atheism were an essential part of training for military recruits. Schools were converted from nonreligious to anti-religious institutions. A campaign against the observance of Christmas was soon launched. Many other colonists besides clergymen were shipped off to forced-labor camps in the Ural mountain forests and mines.

Despite the loss of their spiritual leaders, devout Lutherans continued to meet clandestinely in small groups at irregular times. Laymen conducted the devotions, performed baptisms and marriages, and for a time, instructed the children from the catechism at home. This was an extremely hazzardous practice because leaders were often subjected to charges of counterrevolutionary activity.

Although the period of time between the wars was an upheaval which effectively uprooted Germans and destroyed much of their culture, especially on the religious scene, there were periods when the pressure on the Volga colonists eased a bit. For a time there were nearly twenty German autonomous districts (though under Communist headship.) It was in the mid-thirties, soon after the rise of Hitler and the circulation of German propaganda promoting Russia as handy Lebensraum that the Volga Germans were put under the heaviest yoke of oppression. Undoubtedly Stalin's fear of the

Hitler menace was one of the causes of the great purge of 1936-1938. In 1935 the Germans were forbidden correspondence with any foreign contact under penalty of traitor charges. The German autonomous units were dissolved and many of their inhabitants deported to the east. Soviet Germans were purged from any status they had attained in the Party. Schools and institutions of higher education were closed and publication brought to a hault. Leaders and potential leaders were systematically removed from the German villages and put safely away in slave labor camps.

The August (1941) decree which banished the German population some 2000 miles to the east, to the Omsk and Novosibirsk regions in western Siberia, the Altai region of the Kazakhstan republic and "neighboring localities rich in land"[28] continued to be carried out during and after the Second World War. As a result of this deportation only about ten per cent of the surviving Germans remained in other scattered places of exile or in European Russia. Nearly the entire German population was transplanted. The move of the estimated population of up to one million people was a brutal one, which decimated the number of Germans as some half a million perished along the way.[29]

When the deportation began nearly all the personal posessions of the victims were siezed. They were herded into cattle or freight cars at railroad stations where family members were purposely separated from one another. Packing 40-60 people in each car, the Soviets often had to let a

train stand for up to a week before leaving as people were getting harder and harder to capture. Many died before the train even left on the 2-3 week treck because of lack of water and sanitary conditions. To make matters worse the strong who survived the trip were not allowed to re-establish themselves as family groups. The working age men particularly were taken away from their families and sent to other slave labor camps.

Present Day Situation

After 1955 conditions gradually improved for the German Russians as they established new homes and lives. To an extent they began to revive their old traditions. Although the situation may have improved there are many forces at work today in the Soviet Union which are putting pressure on the Germans toward Russification. "The rise of a new generation of Soviet Germans, born during or since the war, educated in Soviet schools, reared without the traditional cultural influences of homogeneous German communities, employed in modern factories, farms, and offices alongside non-Germans, and exposed to a ceaseless barrage of Soviet propaganda has all accelerated the processes of assimilation and threatens the eventual disappearance of German culture."[30]

The one facet of German culture which is most important, the Soviet government does not yield, and that is religion. Although the constitution of the U.S.S.R. states in Article 52 "Citizens of the U.S.S.R. are guaranteed the freedom of conscience, that is the right to profess or not to profess any religion, and to conduct religious worship or atheistic

propaganda. Incitement of hostility or hatred on religious grounds is prohibited,"[31] any true measure of religious freedom is nonexistent. The Soviet government is still an atheistic regime which obstructs and harasses both preachers and believers. The handful of old clergymen who did survive the long internment of slave labor camps were not permitted to resume their ministries. If they tried they did so under the constant threat of re-imprisonment.

Although there is now a very limited toleration the regime never ceases to exert pressure against religious beliefs. Special efforts are made to win the youth to atheism and thus assure belief in God will die out. The education system propagates atheism in schools. The law forbids the teaching of religion to children under the age of eighteen. Public media ridicules religion as a superstition acceptable only to the ignorant and gullible. Any person striving for a position in the Party, education, or any other position of success must not only never be seen in a religious service, but must actually work to promote anti-religion among their follow citizens. Such efforts undoubtedly are have their effects, especially among the younger Germans and those who are located more in the urban areas. One scholar states, "most Soviet Germans have abandoned their faith"[32] in the face of such pressures.

Many of the Soviet Germans are drifting away from their historic religion. Yet a small group is taking another course, the path of defiance and resistance to the authority of man

in order to listen to the authority of God. They persist in worshipping the Lord in the face of the harsh consequences threatening them. Geissinger has this to say about their worship:

> The typical religious congregation among Soviet Germans now is a group of like-minded people . . . led by an older layman of strong faith, who meet for prayer and Bible study in a private home. The leader preaches, baptizes, witnesses marriage ceremonies and buries the dead. If the group is large, the meeting place is often a cemetery, where the meetings are usually not interfered with. Church buildings are generally not available. . . .[33]

Several notorious cases of martyrdom among Soviet Germans were given wide publicity in the West German press, but little has resulted from it. "The Germans are all but alone in their courageous defiance."[34]

II. Linked to Lutherans through the Airwaves

The plight of these Soviet Germans who share the heritage of the Reformation with American Lutherans has not gone completely unseen and unheard. In August of 1983 the Forty-seventh Biennial WELS Convention adopted a memorial with the intent of strengthening and serving the nearly two million Soviet Germans with the Gospel. The resolution was intended to serve to celebrate the quincentenary of Luther's birth in a special way, by sharing the blessings of the Reformation with those Germans in Soviet Central Asia who have undergone such affliction for the faith. With the passing of this

resolution the Central Asia Radio Committee was appointed by President Mischke.

At the present time this is an ad hoc committee consisting of Pastors Delmar Brick, John Brug, Kirby Spevacek, John Trapp, and James Werner. This committee had consulted also with both the Synod's Interim Committee and the executive secretary of the World Mission Board. The committee subdivided into two smaller committees, a program committee to direct the actual production of the broadcasts, and a research committee to investigate and engage a reliable broadcasting company.

After researching the field the committee contracted for the broadcasting services of Far East Broadcasting Company of California, an independent corporation which owns and operates a network of transmitters. This company (an all religious Christian broadcasting company) was selected because it allows freedom to send out our own material. At a cost of under $16,000 the Committee purchased 52 hours of prime air time (30 minutes per week on both a shortwave station broadcasting from Saipan and an AM station broadcasting from South Korea). During the past three months the Far East Broadcasting Company has graceously increased the broadcasting time from one to seven hours per week in order to give the new program as much exposure as possible by re-running the broadcast at various other times.

The program committee decided to use a format of a half-hour German worship service. The program consists of

an abbreviated liturgical service, Scripture readings paced to facilitate copying by hearers, hymns, and a ten to twelve minute sermon. A customized musical introduction and closing, based on an original theme by Mr. John Barber and written by Pastor Trapp, was recorded in performance by the Master Singers of Wisconsin Lutheran College in Milwaukee. The program is entitled "Dies ist der Tag" based on Psalm 118, and was first broudcast on Epiphany Sunday, January 6, 1985. A ready source of materials and recorded hymns was found in the files of a Sunday German radio broadcast which has been aired for nearly a half century on KNUJ in New Ulm, Minnesota.

The committee selected Pastor Helmut Flegel to serve as the regular radio speaker, with the possibility of guest preachers from time to time. Pastor Paul Eckert was chosen to be the program announcer. The executive producer is Professor Delmar Brick and Mr. John Barber is the sound engineer and chief broadcast consultant. The estimated cost of maintaining the existing program of producing and broadcasting to the isolated Soviet German Christians is $25,000, which is funded by non-budgetary gifts. This seems to be a rather modest price tag when compared to the listening potential of more than a million souls.

A question that might quickly arise is this: "Who, if anyone, is listening to the broadcasts?" It is probably too early to tell at the present time. Some correspondence has reached the post office box which the broadcast mentions weekly, but little has been heard from the Soviet Union.

Letters have arrived from as far east as West Germany so it is certain that the message is, at least at times, getting through. The jamming conducted by the Soviet government is one factor which must be contended with, however that is concentrated mostly around the larger cities, areas which our broadcast is not particularly aimed at. Because of the enormous distances involved in the remote areas, the Soviet government itself uses short wave to broadcast its regular programing in the areas in which most of the German Russians are concentrated, so there is ready access to short wave radios in these localities. (The broadcast from Saipan is on short wave.) There is also some indication that programs are tape recorded and are thus more widely accessible than to only those who hear the original broadcast.

The problem which causes the lack of feedback from the German Christians is the continued persecution. To attempt to slip a letter through the closely censored Soviet mail is a hazzardous thing, especially when it is addressed to a destination in the U.S.A. It would certainly be a needless risk for the Soviet believer to take, with little to actually be gained by the risk. The hope is that through personal correspondence of relatives around the world the message about the times and stations broadcasting can be spread more widely. This effort is being made by placing notices in publications of German Russian historical societies here in America and in West Germany so that relatives can inform their Soviet German relation about them.

What the future holds for the Central Asia Radio broadcasts only the Lord of the Church knows. It is hoped that the Central Asia Radio Committee and its work of broadcasting to bolster the faith of the persecuted and isolated brothers and sisters in the faith will be made a permanent part of the WELS world mission program. Perhaps the work can be expanded to include a greater number of the scores of nationalities which make up the U.S.S.R. in more of an evangelism outreach program in the future.

By the wisdom and providence of God, and by his grace, we are largely ignorant of what it is like to confess Christ under a regime whose aim it is to stamp out religion. We pray that the Lord of the Church would spare us from that cross and strengthen those who are currently bearing it so that they can stand up under it. We would do well to search our own hearts and ask how readily we would confess our Savior who sacrificed himself for the sins of the world if we were asked to make the sacrifices that the Soviet Germans have. According to the Great Commission our work is clear. The work of the Central Asia Radio Committee is a first step in supporting those who are fellow heirs of the Reformation in the Soviet Union.

This is a brief look at who the Volga Germans are. It attempts to give some insights into what this people has endured and how history has affected their situation, particularly in the field of their religious beliefs. It

is the hope of this writer that this brief overview of the history and current spiritual plight of this predominantly Lutheran-background Soviet minority will move us to thank the Lord for the liberties he has granted us and move us to assist those who are resisting the atheistic pressures of the Soviet government, by our prayers, by our broadcasts, and by whatever means the Lord places before us.

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[1]Fred Koch, The Volga Germans (Pennsylvania State University Press) p. 4.

[2]Ibid., p. 5.

[3]Adam Giesinger, From Catherine to Khrushchev (American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, Lincoln, NE) p. 8.

[4]Ibid., p. 5.

[5]Ibid., p. 9.

[6]Koch, Op. cit., p. 21.

[7]Giesinger, op. cit., p. 10.

[8]Ibid., p. 16.

[9]Ibid., p. 17.

[10]Sidney Heitman,"The Soviet Germans in the USSR Today" informational paper, p. 133.

[11]Ibid., p. 32.

[12]Koch, op. cit., p. 109.

[13]Giesinger, op. cit., p. 156.

[14]Ibid., p. 155.

[15]Ibid., p. 157.

[16]Koch, op. cit., p. 111.

[17]Ibid., p. 123.

[18]Ibid., p. 123.

[19]Giesinger, op. cit., p. 158.

[20]Koch, op. cit., p. 124.

[21]Ibid., p. 122.

[22]Ibid., p. p112.

[23]Ibid., p. 139.

[24]Ibid., p. 149.

[25]Ibid., p. 132.

[26]Ibid., p. 133.

[27]Heitman, op. cit., p. 35.

[28]Mela Meisner Lindsay, The White Lamb (American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, Lincoln) p. 288.

[29]Heitman, op. cit., p. 18.

[30]Ibid., p. 21.

[31]Helen Jackson, Seattle Times, 4-7-85

[32]Heitman, op. cit., p. 47.

[33]Giesinger, op. cit., p. 331.

[34]Heitman, op. cit., p. 49.

[35]Central Asia Radio Committee report, 3-25-85

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