

STARVING ON THE VOLGA

PITIFUL CONDITION OF GERMAN COLONISTS IN RUSSIA.

WORSE OFF THAN THE NATIVE PEASANTS—NEGLECTED IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF RELIEF—REASONS WHY THEY ARE THUS IGNORED.

LONDON, March 7.—The special correspondent of Reuter's Telegram Company who is visiting the famine-stricken portions of Russia sends the following letter from Saratoff, under date of Feb. 22, descriptive of the German colonists on the Volga:

"The German colonists on the Volga number about 300,000. They may be roughly classified as Protestants, Catholics, and Mennonites. With the exception of the last mentioned, they all came over during the latter part of the eighteenth century in response to a manifesto issued by the Empress Catherine. In that proclamation Catherine promised them certain privileges, the most notable of which were immunity from military service, self-government, and religious freedom. These privileges were granted 'na vek,' which means forever, but the phrase has recently been construed to signify a century only. There is just enough ambiguity about the expression to admit of this interpretation, but it is a quibble.

"When universal military service on the German system was introduced into Russia, the German colonists were told that they must either serve or go. Many of them, especially the Mennonites, who are a kind of Quakers, chose the latter alternative and departed. The next thing to go was the self-government. The colonists used to be governed by a sort of elective council, which met at Saratoff, and was called the 'Office.' This body controlled the vagaries of the village commune. The 'Office' has been abolished, and the Zemski Natchalnik now reigns in its stead. The German colonists have thus been gradually brought under the controlling influence of Russian institutions. Even their religion is threatened now. Fresh encroachments upon their civil and religious liberty are of almost daily occurrence, and their independence may already be described as a thing of the past. The steady decline in the fertility of the soil, which has culminated in chronic famine, and the inhospitable attitude of the Government have brought home to the colonists the conviction that they have in Russia no abiding place. They are therefore emigrating in large numbers to the United States.

"The advent of the Russian Zemski Natchalnik among these sturdy, honest Germans was quite uncalled for. The Zemski Natchalnik is a sort of substitute for feudalism. The Russian people are sadly in want of guidance and guardianship. As serfs they had their master who looked after them, but since they have been emancipated the village commune has led them a sorry dance. It is no part of the Czar's policy to make the peasant an educated and independent member of society, hence it was found necessary, after twenty-five years of bad management and thriftlessness, to protect the peasant against himself and put him under the tutelage of a Zemski Natchalnik. Whenever possible the people selected for this office were gentry resident in the neighborhood and already known and respected.

In the case of the German colonies there was, in the first place, no necessity to appoint such officers, and in the second place there was no gentry to select them from; consequently, Government officials were appointed. The authorities might have compromised the matter by selecting prominent colonists. There are not wanting among the German colonists men of energy and ability who have, by dint of perseverance and industry, risen to wealth and influence. Thus the Village of Messer, together with the whole surrounding neighborhood, is practically dependent upon Herr Schmidt, originally a weaver by trade, who has become a miller and a timber merchant as well, and is gradually monopolizing all the trade of the district.

"But it did not suit the Government to appoint such men. The colonies were to be Russianized. Hence, Russian officials had to be appointed. The result was ludicrous in the extreme. These officials, with salaries ranging from £200 to £250 a year, arrived, armed with full powers, and commenced to give themselves airs. The influential colonists, however, passed the word among themselves, and the Zemski Natchalniki were boycotted. They could get neither lodging nor food nor any of the necessities of life, so they had to capitulate and pay homage to the local magnate, who then, in nine cases out of ten, gave them free quarters, and thus was enabled to keep them in a proper state of humility and dependence.

"The German colonists can only be described as so many nineteenth century Rip Van Winkles. Imagine a body of men taken out of the eighteenth century, carefully preserved and kept apart from the influences of modern progress, latter-day customs and ideas, and you have the German colonists of the Volga. They all look like figures out of old German woodcuts, with their solemn, sallow, obstinate, clean-shaven faces, their hair dressed like a periwig, their gaunt forms and their curious old-fashioned garments. They all wear stocks and they are all very dignified and stately. They have still the same furniture which they brought with them more than a hundred years ago, and sleep in funereal four-post bedsteads. Their women, when young, have the pure and beautiful faces of the Gretchen type.

"To come among these people in the midst of the semi-Oriental Russians is a great surprise to the traveler and fills him with wonder. Their cottages are substantially built and contain large and lofty rooms, yet the family generally sleep in one room, the heavy-curtained four-posters—of which I have seen as many as four in one room—securing almost as much privacy as so many separate apartments.

"The mortality of the colonists is really worse than that of the Russian peasants in other districts, inasmuch as the former have no natural protectors or guardians. The estate owners, to whom the Russian peasants formerly belonged, still take a sort of patriarchal interest in them and help them in their distress. But the German colonists have no one to whom they can look except a few wealthy employers of labor. For hundreds of miles you can travel in the steppes which bound the Volga without coming upon a country gentleman's seat. The colonists have a feeling that they are being left alone to die. No hand is stretched out to save them. Even the Government aid, scanty enough in all conscience, has been meted out more grudgingly and in smaller quantities to them than to others. The Red Cross Society has passed them by altogether. This is how it comes about that, while the inhabitants of the Russian villages in Saratoff are fed, the Germans are starving. The moral the Russians point to is different. They maintain that the existing state of things is an argument in favor of the Russianization of the colonists.

"As you enter a German colonial village you become aware of an extraordinary odor, heavy and unpleasant, which seems to pervade the whole neighborhood. This is the odor of burned manure, which is the only fuel the German colonist is able to find. He is consequently unable to manure his fields. It was touching, on entering the cottages, to see the industry of the inhabitants. All were busy, working for their very lives. Most of the colonists on what is called the mountainous side of the Volga are weavers, and by dint of very great labor they are able to earn about 6s. a month. This is not paid to them in cash, but in kind. They are all hopelessly in debt to their employers or sweaters, and these, of course, take full advantage of the circumstance. The only educated people among them are the clergy and the schoolmasters, and these have not received any salary for years. It is sad to see young children with pale faces and glistering eyes working at the looms like galley slaves. In one cottage that I entered, the owner, a man of sixty-five, was lying in a semi-conscious condition in his bed. He had not tasted food for several days, and his mind was wandering.

"In some villages I saw men, women, and children sitting almost naked, unable to go out

to seek work because they had no clothes, and excluded from the receipt of Government aid because they had a handicraft. This is, indeed, the worst feature in the administration of relief. The Government helps the absolutely destitute, whom it is scarcely worth while to save, and leaves those who are industrious and able-bodied to starve. In the Russian villages this arbitrary arrangement is tempered by the dishonesty of the Mir, but the German colonists retain the sterling qualities which they brought with them from the Fatherland. They are sober, honest, virtuous, and industrious. Much of their present helplessness is due to the fact that they were originally handicraftsmen and tradesmen and knew nothing about agriculture. They consequently adopted the methods common in Russia, and hence, instead of improving the Russians, they are gradually themselves sinking down to the same level."