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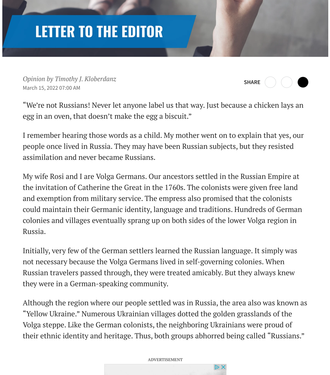
Letter: Why Volga Germans and Ukrainians abhor being called 'Russians'

For more than 30 years, Kloberdanz taught a "Germans from Russia" course at NDSU. He told The Forum, "In nearly every class meeting, we discussed the complexity of Ukrainian/Russian/German relations. Even in a fifteen-week semester course, I was not able to cover everything." His students encouraged him to write an op-ed on the topic for The Forum.



Opinion by Timothy J. Kloberdanz
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"We're not Russians! Never let anyone label us that way. Just because a chicken lays an egg in an oven, that doesn't make the egg a biscuit."

I remember hearing those words as a child. My mother went on to explain that yes, our people once lived in Russia. They may have been Russian subjects, but they resisted assimilation and never became Russians.

My wife Rosi and I are Volga Germans. Our ancestors settled in the Russian Empire at the invitation of Catherine the Great in the 1760s. The colonists were given free land and exemption from military service. The empress also promised that the colonists could maintain their Germanic identity, language and traditions. Hundreds of German colonies and villages eventually sprang up on both sides of the lower Volga region in Russia.

Initially, very few of the German settlers learned the Russian language. It simply was not necessary because the Volga Germans lived in self-governing colonies. When Russian travelers passed through, they were treated amicably. But they always knew they were in a German-speaking community.

Although the region where our people settled was in Russia, the area also was known as "Yellow Ukraine." Numerous Ukrainian villages dotted the golden grasslands of the Volga steppe. Like the German colonists, the neighboring Ukrainians were proud of their ethnic identity and heritage. Thus, both groups abhorred being called "Russians."

The Volga Germans got along well with the Ukrainians. Our people adopted certain Ukrainian foodways and traditions. The Volga Germans even developed a special fondness for the Ukrainian "cymbaly" or hammered dulcimer. It is a musical instrument still heard at many Volga German celebrations today.

In the early 1870s, Tsar Alexander II imposed sweeping Russification measures throughout his empire. All eligible males had to serve in the Russian military. Ethnic towns and villages received Russian names. All schools were required to teach the Russian language.

Thousands of Volga Germans soon immigrated to North and South America. The immigrants were German-speaking but generations of living in Russia had left a visible mark. The men wore knee-high boots and the women wore babushkas. When the colonists settled in the United States, Americans referred to the Volga Germans by the derisive term "Rooshuns." The Volga Germans insisted they were Germans, not "Rooshuns." Shouting matches and fistfights often resulted.

For Ukrainian immigrants in America, the experience was strikingly similar. Agnes Palanuk, co-founder of the Ukrainian Cultural Institute in Dickinson, North Dakota, once told me: "We Ukrainians understand the power of words. For years, we were called 'Russkies' or 'Rooshuns.' And we sometimes hear those hurtful words even today."

While Ukrainians and Volga Germans were struggling for acceptance in this country, the fate of both peoples back in the USSR was similar. In the early 1930s, Stalin targeted the Ukrainians, Volga Germans, Black Sea Germans, and other "problem groups" with a man-made famine. Millions of people died, so many that the exact number remains unknown.

In the fall of 1941, the Volga German Autonomous Republic was dissolved by Stalin. It was wartime and the German-speaking residents were accused of harboring "diversionists and spies." There was no evidence for the charge but in Stalin's Russia, it did not matter. More than 400,000 Volga Germans were herded into sealed boxcars and banished to Siberia and Central Asia. The exiles never were allowed to return to their Volga homeland.

Exactly 50 years after the Volga German deportation, Rosi and I were on the lower Volga in August 1991. We saw where our people's colonies once flourished. In many cases, all traces of the former German villages were gone. And then, amidst the ruins, the unthinkable happened. A hardline Communist coup took place.

For several days, President Gorbachev "disappeared." Phone lines were cut. Tanks raced up and down the streets of Moscow. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and a shaken Gorbachev resumed power. Through it all, we witnessed the "Second Russian Revolution," an event that ultimately led to the collapse of the USSR.

Now, in 2022, there are new rumblings and disturbing developments. A shocked world bears witness to Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The images are hauntingly familiar. Russian tanks. Bombed-out buildings. Family members fleeing. Mass graves. Trainloads of refugees.

Such scenes open wounds in many of us, wounds that never fully healed. When Volga Germans and Ukrainians gather, the mere utterance of certain words triggers a visceral reaction: deportation, gulag, hunger, genocide, Stalin, Putin. Thus, there are tears. There are always tears.

Yet, for the sake of our children and grandchildren, we know there must be optimism, smiles, and laughter. There are even little jokes.

Who is the least likeable character in the world? Winnie the Putin.

How do we know that Putin is a bad leader? The proof is in the Putin.

What's the favorite flower of Germans and Ukrainians? Geraniums!

Fortunately, the focus shifts from "Putin" to "geraniums." We much prefer to hear about beautiful, long-blooming flowers. Words can hurt, but words also have the uncanny power to lighten our spirits and to heal.

Or so we tell ourselves, as we await true healing.

Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, Fargo, is a professor emeritus of anthropology. He taught a "Germans from Russia" course at North Dakota State University for more than 30 years.

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