

Documents on the Volga Germans History in the State Archive of Saratov Oblast Funds

In 2009 it will be 245 years since the time when the first immigrants, mainly from European countries, settled in Saratov Volga Region. Foreign colonists arrived there after Empress Catherine II had signed a manifesto allowing foreigners to settle on available lands which were in abundance and “most convenient for inhabiting and human race dwelling”.

From the history of the Volga German colonies we can learn about their formation, development, their contribution into the local region, and their everyday life. The first five colonies were established in 1764: Dobrinka, Sevastianovka, Sosnovka, Talovka, Ust-Kulalinka. In 1765 -1766 a stream of colonists considerably increased.

Having moved to Russia colonists received certain privileges, but in spite of that they had to endure a lot of hardships developing the land. Hard conditions of the first years in Russia, Yemelyan Pugachev's (a leader of a great Cossack insurrection) Cossacks' and nomads' plundering and numerous fires resulted in the absence of almost all the 18th century documents in colonies' village Management Boards. Until 1871 colonies had been controlled by the Saratov Office of Foreign Settlers which rather strictly regulated their everyday life and work. When in 1851 Samara Province was established, left bank colonies became part of it.

In 1871 colonial management was reformed. All colonies were handed over to Saratov and Samara province and district (uyezd) institutions. Colonists formed a separate peasantry of settlers-owners but at the same time they were deprived of their privileges. In response to that colonists started mass immigration mainly to the countries of the New World – North and South America, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and Peru.

The State Archive of Saratov Oblast (GASO) houses considerable documentary material in various funds reflecting the life of the Volga Germans.

There are 1173 units in the archival fund of the Saratov Office of Foreign Settlers. Active colonization of the Volga area made the Guardianship Chancellery established for foreigners as a ministry board on 22 July 1766 in St. Petersburg set up their executive body in Saratov in 1766, the Saratov Office, which regulated the Volga colonies until 1870. Without its permission a colonist could not move to another colony, go off in search of a living, or marry. The Office provided colonists with land and property, gave permission for building houses, schools, mills, bridges and other constructions. It controlled colonists' behavior, settled conflicts among them and among colonists and the local Russian population. It struggled against epidemics and epizootics, provided colonies with food, promoted developing agriculture, cattle-breeding, and gardening. Maps, plans and schemes of colonists' lands remained intact in the Office funds.

Unfortunately, a great part of the Office documents was lost in August of 1774 when Saratov was captured by Yemelyan Pugachev's army. Another part of the documents sent earlier to Astrakhan by the Volga was sunk by peasants from the village Sinenkie after they had plundered the Office treasury. So in the Office archival funds we can find now only four units covering the time before 1774, but two of them exceed the chronological limits of the Office's existence. These are the copies of foreign colonists' lists sent to Saratov in 1764 and inventories of units and books among which there are instructions and decrees used by the Office beginning from 1723. All this is kept in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA).

In the funds we can find a great number of units with Government Senate decrees and directions of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Ministry of State Property Departments on various problems of colonies' life: on the order of giving land, financing, tax collection, transfer to another rank and confession, state of land, cattle breeding, bee-farming, silk-worm breeding, forestry, prices on lumber, bread, forage, and other goods. There is also material on appointments and transfer of clerks and priests, issuing passports, information on medical examination of colonists, state of fishery, marriages and divorces, and so on.

Saratov Guardianship Office of Foreign Settlers journals of colonists' meetings are a valuable source of studying the early period of the German colonists' life on the Volga. They make it possible to reveal social and economic life of the colonies and forms and methods of controlling them by the Guardianship Office of Foreign Settlers. In 1996 Saratov archivists together with the International Association for the researchers of history and culture of the Russian Germans under the supervision of Professor Igor R. Plehve published the "Journal of General Presence Meetings of Saratov Guardianship Office of Foreign Settlers, October-December 1774" Vol. 1.

Thus, the Office documents are the fullest and most important evidence of the way the foreigners who responded to Catherine II Manifesto were settling in Russia.

The GASO work for the last 18 years has shown that Saratov Guardianship Office of Foreign Settlers documents arouse a great interest both in foreign researchers studying history of the Volga Germans and foreign tourists – descendants of the former Russian Germans who live now mainly in the USA and the FRG. To facilitate the work of researchers at the Office funds' materials the GASO employees in collaboration with Germany issued an annotated inventory in 2000 and in 2002.

The lists of the first settlers-colonists are also housed in the funds of Saratov Scientific Archival Commission. It was founded in 1886 by amateur students of local history and its aim was to collect historical documents from estates, lovers of the antique, and various institutions. Among its members there were colonists' descendants. Thanks to the Commission's activity we can see records of old songs, ceremonies, and legends of peoples of the Volga region, including ethnic Germans.

Over 2000 units are kept in the archival funds of Kherson and Tiraspol Roman-Catholic consistories. Registers of birth, christening, marriages and deaths

are of special value. They allow us to restore the history of a family and to conduct genealogical search. Besides, consistories also got extracts from similar registers on South Ukraine and the Caucasus colonies. So, if we take into consideration that almost all original registers of Roman-Catholic as well as of other Ukrainian churches were lost during the fascist occupation, we may say that extracts kept in the Saratov archive are, in fact, the only sources for genealogical research.

Documents of consistories' archival funds are interesting not only for descendants of the Volga Germans but for ethnic German descendants of South Ukraine and the Caucasus as well, so in 2008 the State Archive of Saratov Oblast issued an annotated inventory of the units of Kherson Roman-Catholic consistory of 1801-1864. At present the archive is working at the annotated inventory of units of Tiraspol Roman-Catholic consistory of 1853-1918. It is to be published in 2010.

Consistory documents (besides genealogy) give the idea of the way Roman-Catholic colonies lived in the Volga region, the Caucasus, and the south of Ukraine. In these documents we can find information about opening new parishes, building colonial churches, chapels, and schools, appointing new priests and teachers. Confessionary registers specify colonists' family members and their age. The same type of documents and Registers of birth are housed in the archival Church Board funds of St. Mary Evangelical Lutheran Church. The Church used to be located in Saratov but ceremonies of christening, nuptials, and obsequies were performed there not only by the city Lutherans but also by the Lutherans of the neighboring colonies. Documents of this fund are used for the restoration of Lutheran families' history.

We should also mention that a considerable number (more than 500) of Registers of birth of Roman-Catholic and Lutheran churches and official papers of dwelling places inhabited by ethnic Germans are kept in special collections established by the GASO, such as, for example, a collection of registers of birth of Saratov and Samara Province churches and a collection of Saratov Province Registry Office departments.

Availability of the whole package of registers of birth attracts attention of foreigners-descendants of the Russian Germans. The number of letters sent to the archive and requests of individual foreign travelers are constantly growing.

Enumeration lists – material on the colonies' population census of 1834, 1850, and 1858 – which are kept in the archival fund of Saratov government chamber, help to restore family membership and ties of blood. These voluminous, up to 1500 pages, units always arouse interest in foreign visitors of the GASO not only by its content but also visually. Enumeration lists of agricultural census of 1914-1916 also have information on family membership of Saratov Province ethnic German settlements. This material is kept in the archival fund of Saratov Province Statistic Committee.

Documents of such archival funds as “Chancellery of Saratov Governor” and “Saratov Province Governing” are also important for the search of lost ties of relationship. They have information about foreigners' entry into Russia and exit from the country. These are passports, extracts from enumeration lists, correspondence, payment of fee receipts, and so on.

Thanks to these documents it is possible to search for information about entry and settling in Saratov Province of foreigners who arrived not only in the period of mass colonization of the Volga region (the 60s-90s of the 18th century), but in the later years as well. We can also analyze the data about colonists' leaving Russia which especially increased since the 70s of the 19th century and continued until 1916.

It is well-known that many former colonists moved to Saratov where they formed a German street. They practiced trade and handicraft and were involved into Saratov merchant class, craftsmen, and petty bourgeois. So information about them can be found in such archival funds as "Management of Merchants' and Petty Bourgeois Estates", "Saratov Handicraft Board" and "Saratov Petty Bourgeois Board". Besides, there are data about colonists as Saratov citizens in the funds "Saratov City Duma" and "Saratov City Board". Here we should, first of all, mention "tax books" – lists of real estate owners, according to which taxes were levied. These books which are almost about one meter high impress excursionists not only by its content but also by its size.

In the archive there are funds of trade houses, enterprises and educational institutions belonging to the families of the Berings, Borels, Gantkes, Gennings, Schmidts, Shtockfishes, Erts, and others. Information about ethnic German entrepreneurs is in the funds of "Saratov Province Presence on Factory and Mining Affairs" and "Senior Factory Inspector". The funds of a sanitary society, credit, sports and charity societies, councils and trusteeships hold information about public and charitable activities of Saratov Germans.

Archival funds also contain facts about participation of the Volga Germans in the work of the local Russian political parties. This is diverse material from the organizations of political investigation – Saratov Gendarme Department, Saratov Gendarme Department assistant chiefs, Saratov Security Department, Saratov City Police Department of Presence, Saratov City Police Department, Saratov Chief of Police, Saratov Judicial Chamber and so on. For example, in the Gendarme funds there are photographs of political opponents (including the Germans) to the official power and special charts with certain information about them.

The GASO also has drawings and photographs of colonists' churches in Saratov and the Volga region and photographs showing famine of 1921 in German settlements.

The documents of the later period contain personal data of former colonists. Among them there are documents about the beginning of the 1930s when ethnic Germans along with the others underwent dispossession, repressions and deportation. In the archival funds there are lists of the dispossessed and deported, for example, from Yagodno-Polyanskii district. These documents help archivists in search of relatives especially for those who know very little about them. Sometimes it is possible to find an inventory of the confiscated property and get an idea of the property status of a former colonist.

Documents of the Saratov Province Soviet of Workers', Peasants' and Red Army Soldiers' Deputies Executive Committee hold protocols of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Soviet of People's Commissars of the

Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the Volga Germans (ASSRVG) covering 1924-1928 (part of them in Engels has not survived). In these documents there is a lot of material concerning the history of establishing the German autonomy and mode of life of former colonists in the first years of Soviet Power (1918-1928).

Information about economic and cultural life of the ASSRVG can be also found in the funds of the Executive Committees of the Low-Volga district Soviet of workers, peasants and Red Army soldiers' deputies, Saratov district and oblast Soviets of working people's deputies, Saratov district and oblast institutions of planning and statistics, agricultural and industrial departments.

In the GASO scientific and reference library there are a lot of books and technical journals (around 2500 copies) in the German language published in Berlin, Leipzig, Gottingen, Kassel, Munich, Hamburg, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Saratov, etc. in the 19th – beginning of the 20th century. These are books in different fields of knowledge, fiction by European authors, the Gospel, guide books. The GASO plans to make an index to the mentioned editions.

Newspapers (about 90 names) for 1921-1940 in German and in Russian can also be found in the archive's library. Mainly they are odd issues published by political departments of canton's Machine and Tractor Stations (MTS).

Newspaper files of the "Nachrichten" (a newspaper of the Regional Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party Central Executive Committee (ARCP CEC) and the ASSRVG Trade Unions' Soviet), the "Bolshevik" (a daily newspaper of the Regional Committee of the ARCP CEC, of the Engels ARCP City Committee, and the City Soviet), and the "Trudovaya Pravda" (a daily newspaper of the Regional Committee of the ARCP CEC and the ASSRVG Trade Unions' Soviet) can give a more integral picture. These newspapers may cover several months or several years.

These are the documents offered by the GASO which can be of interest for foreign descendants of the former Russian Germans and foreign researchers who study the history and culture of these people. The archive employees are experienced enough in helping foreign scholars, writers, and journalists with their work in the archive. The GASO is ready and willing to participate in the further development of international relations of Saratov Oblast.