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## Article Title: Famine in the Volga Basin, 1920-1924, and the American Volga Relief Society Records

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Article Summary: Volga Relief Society records, housed at the Nebraska State Historical Society, detail ways that German Russians in Lincoln assisted ethnic Germans in Russia in the 1920s. These American supporters sent clothing, food, and cash to the Volga Germans persecuted by the Bolsheviks and left to starve.

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Photographs / Images: response from the village of Zelinograd to a 1923 AVRS questionnaire about human and animal populations before and after World War I; example of a statistical abstract of responses to the 1923 questionnaire, showing an increase in the number of widows and orphans and a decrease in the number of farm animals; monthly statement of the Central States Volga Relief Society in 1921 listing donations received and allocations of funds to be sent to colonies in the Volga region; letter from a pastor in Hussenbach to an AVRS representative requesting aid for victims of a 1923 fire

# Famine

## in the Volga Basin, 1920–1924

### and the American Volga Relief Society Records

By Samuel Sinner

After hearing reports of mass starvation in the Saratov and Samara provinces of Russia, an area inhabited by a sizeable population of ethnic Germans who had settled there beginning in 1764, George Repp organized the Volga Relief Society (VRS) in Portland, Oregon, in 1921.

Repp, a member of the Volga German (Wolgadeutsche) community of Portland, had been born in Norka, Russia. The VRS solicited funds from the Volga German community of Portland and the surrounding areas for the relief of their relatives and fellow Volga Germans still residing in Russia. A separate

organization with similar goals, the Central States Volga Relief Society (CSVRS), arose at about the same time in Lincoln, Nebraska, where German Russians constituted a third of the city's population. On November 4, 1922, the two organizations merged to form the American Volga Relief Society (AVRS). The first president of the AVRS was Henry P. Wekesser, a Lincoln medical doctor.

The AVRS carried out relief operations in Russia under the official auspices of the American Relief Administration (ARA) headed by future President Herbert Hoover. The CSVRS chose Jacob Volz of York, Nebraska, as its chief representative to coordinate the organization's operations in the Volga area. Volz served the AVRS as an official

member of the ARA. George Repp of Portland and Rev. Jacob Wagner of Lincoln were also sent to Russia to oversee operations in the Volga German villages. Records of the AVRS can be found at the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln.

The main cause of the mass starva-

tion was the low foreign relief operations in Russia, "The issue is not charity, but trade."<sup>4</sup> The government reluctantly allowed the relief effort to begin only after Lenin realized that food shortages affecting the military and urban workers—the main supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution—could lead to mass rebellion.

Pragmatic and willing to improvise, Lenin recognized that political circumstances required saving the Volga population. Largely due to the skills of the German farmers, the Volga region was one of Russia's main bread baskets, and its production was crucial

to feed the domestic population, and for export.

Even after relief efforts began in Russia, the Bolsheviks continued to persecute the Volga Germans, demanding "hidden" grain from peasants obviously suffering the effects of starvation.<sup>5</sup> Although the government claimed to lack the financial resources to cope with the crisis, thus justifying its request for international intervention, Russian archives reveal that even at the height of the mass starvation, the Bolsheviks were channeling large amounts of gold rubles abroad to finance Communist revolutions.<sup>6</sup>

At a time when Russia claimed to be unable to feed its own citizens, the government was exporting more grain than the international community was sending to Russia for relief. This realization caused the ARA, the main provider of aid, to cease operations in Russia in mid-1923. Nevertheless, documents in

***"It is true, no country of the earth has carried out such a large relief effort as America. This relief effort shall be remembered for all time."***

Schoolmaster K. Lehman  
Alexandrovsk, Russia

tion among the Volga Germans from 1920 to 1924 was the Bolshevik policy of grain requisition, whereby the peasantry in the Volga basin was completely stripped of all stored grain.<sup>1</sup> Government troops raided the Volga villages, forcibly seizing food, clothing, and other necessities of life. The confiscations were often accompanied by incidents of mass murder involving hundreds of Volga Germans.<sup>2</sup>

At first the Lenin government denied the mass starvation, and mere talk of famine could lead to the death penalty.<sup>3</sup> In July 1921, however, the government finally broke its silence, admitted that the stories of mass starvation were true, and requested help from the international community

This change in policy was not motivated by charity or concern for the victims. As Josef Stalin wrote in an October 19, 1921, brief regarding whether to al-

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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>American Volga Relief Society</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">AMERICAN RELIEF ADMINISTRATION WILHELM HOOPER, CHAIRMAN</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Executive Office: WILHELM HOOPER, 109 SOUTH 14TH ST. LINCOLN, NEBRASKA.</p>			
<u>Name</u>	<u>Things most needed.</u>	<u>Report of Colonies</u>	<u>After War.</u>
		<u>Before War</u>	
<u>Rosenthal</u> Alexander Siegart	<u>Kleidung.</u> Erntemaschinen Milch Separators.	200 Kuehe 180 Pferde 300 Schafe 180 Schweine	80 Kuehe 60 Pherae 60 Schafe 5 Schweine
		250 Einwohner 3 Witwen	312 Einwohner 16 Witwen
<u>Klein Konstantinow</u> Karl Mueller	<u>Kleidung</u> Bakerbaugeretschaften	194 Einwohner 5 Witwen 5 Waisen 120 Pferde 128 Kuehe 200 Schafe 92 Schweine	211 Einwohner 10 Witwen 36 Waisen 31 Pferde 46 Kuehe 60 Schafe 30 Schweine
<u>Holstein</u> J. Reiser	<u>Kleidung</u> Schuhe		1,300 Einwohner
<u>Frangosen</u> Meier	<u>Kleidung</u>		1,700 Einwohner 88 Witwen 130 Waisen 88 Pferde 245 Ochsen 250 Kuehe 300 Schafe 50 Schweine
<u>Neu Bauer</u> Daniel Stoll	<u>Kleidung</u> Vieh	2000 Einwohner .50 Witwen und Waisen 800 Pferde 100 Ochsen 500 Kuehe 2000 Pferde Schweine 300	1,050 Einwohner 350 Witwen und Waisen 112 Pferde Jetzt keine 138 Kuehe 167 Pferde 36 Schweine

An example of a statistical abstract from responses to the 1923 questionnaire. The increase in the number of widows (witwen) and orphans (waisen) and the decrease in the number of cows, horses, sheep, and hogs (kuehe, pferde, schafe, and schweine) illustrate the extreme changes suffered by the farming communities of the Volga region. NSHS-RG4879.AM

with cash amounts donated; receipts for food, clothing, and cash; religious confirmation lists requesting suits and dresses for confirmands; letters from Volga German professors and pastors; ARA and AVRS office correspondence, including newsletters; correspondence of Jacob Volz; letters of appeal from Germany

requesting donations; CSVRS donation coupons; and other miscellaneous records relating to the Volga German communities of Lincoln and McCook, Nebraska, and Portland, Oregon.<sup>11</sup>

Of special interest to researchers will be the series of letters responding to an AVRS questionnaire seeking population

and agricultural statistics for the Volga German villages. A typical example is a letter dated November 7, 1923, from Schoolmaster K. Vogel of Orlovskai:

Before the war [1914] we had 6,000 souls in our village. Now there are only 2,700. Before the war there were over 2,000 horses, now only 200. There were 10,000 sheep, now 1,000. There were 1,000 swine, now 150. There were 50 widows, now there are 300.<sup>12</sup>

A December 1, 1923, letter from Schoolmaster Carl Johann Schmidt of Klein-Romanov in the Samara-Koshki district, paints a harrowing picture of starvation in the German villages:

The famine was unbelievably horrible among us. Everything was eaten: maggots, dirt, any rotting carcasses, dogs, cats and even human flesh. Many people died from hunger, and are still dying because their bodies suffered so severely from hunger.<sup>13</sup>

Heinrich Hense of Stepanof reported on December 5, 1923;

The need among us is still ever so great and among many the horror of death by starvation still rules. Many have no clothing and no shoes, and the farmers have no livestock as well as no agricultural implements.<sup>14</sup>

The scholarly researcher will also be interested in another series, letters to AVRS headquarters in Lincoln, Nebraska, from several Volga German professors and pastors in the villages and the city of Saratov. Among them are Saratov Professor Peter Sinner, who gives inside information on personality conflicts and political rivalries among relief workers; Pastor Liborius Behning of Saratov; Pastor Friedrich Wacker of Norka; and Pastor Arthur Kluck of Frank. Sinner, Behning, Wacker, and Kluck were all eventually exiled or executed under Stalin. The series containing Jacob Volz's correspondence largely consists of reports he sent from the German villages and from various European countries updating the AVRS headquarters on the progress of the relief efforts.

The lists of Volga German recipients of food and clothing packages often include the actual signatures of the recipients. The benefactor in America is



carried out relief operations in the Samara-Koshki, Siberian Omsk, and Tomsk areas, as well as in the Zelinograd region, where significant numbers of ethnic Germans were also suffering starvation.<sup>15</sup> The AVRS records reveal that in 1924 relief was carried on in Germany, mainly as donations to orphanages and missions.<sup>16</sup> Although the AVRS officially disbanded in 1926, private relief efforts by German Russians in America continued into the 1930s, when the Stalin government forbade all outside communication with Soviet citizens.

The AVRS records at the Nebraska State Historical Society, Collection RG4879.AM, should prove to be an invaluable primary source for historical and genealogical research on Volga Germans in Russia and the United States. More than seventy years after the 1920s starvation crisis in Russia, an exhaustive study has yet to appear.<sup>17</sup> Future research on the topic would certainly be incomplete without reference to the AVRS records. The records will not be open to researchers until some of the more fragile items can be conserved, and the collection can be microfilmed. For more information about the collection and its finding aid, contact the assistant curator of manuscripts at the Nebraska State Historical Society, P.O. Box 82554, Lincoln NE 68501-2554; 401-471-4440.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fred C. Koch, *The Volga Germans: In Russia and the Americas from 1763 to the Present* (State College, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 258–59; Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev: The Story of Russia's Germans* (Battleford, Sask.: Marian Press, 1974), 259–60

<sup>2</sup> For lists of executed victims and accounts of mass murder see "Namenliste der im Aufstande gefallenen Wolga-Deutschen," in *Die Welt-Post* (Omaha), Mar. 16, 1922; and Matthias Hagin, "Die Hungersnot in den wolgadeutschen Kolonien von 1920 bis 1924 und die Hilfsleistungen der wolgadeutschen Vereinigungen und anderer Organisationen in Deutschland und Amerika," in *Heimatbuch der Deutschen aus Rußland 1973/81* (Stuttgart: Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Rußland, 1981), 60–62 (hereafter cited as Hagin, "Hungersnot").

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Schleuning, *In Kampf und Todesnot* (Berlin: Verlag Bernard und Graefe, 1930), 117.

<sup>4</sup> A photocopy of the original document was supplied to the author by Mr. Norman Dudek of Hastings, Nebraska.

<sup>5</sup> See the eyewitness testimony of Jacob Wagner in "Aus Colorado," *Die Welt-Post*, Jan. 19, 1933, and also W. R. Durow-Wasemüller, "Mühlberg," in *Heimatbuch, 1995/96*, 49–50.

<sup>6</sup> See Dimitri Vokogonov, *Lenin* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 345–46.

<sup>7</sup> The figure comes from official Russian government sources and is cited in G. P. Maximoff, *The Guillotine at Work* (Chicago: Globus Printing Corp., 1940), 241.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 185, 241; Richard H. Walth, *Auf der Suche nach Heimat: Die Rußlanddeutschen* (Dülmen: Laumann-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1990), 38, the Volga German figures are quoted in Hagin, "Hungersnot," 94

<sup>9</sup> Hagin, "Hungersnot," 56.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to the 300,000 Soviet Germans who died of enforced starvation from 1920 to 1924, 50,000 Volhynian Germans died as a result of their 1915 deportation ordered by Czar Nicholas II; 350,000 ethnic Germans died from deportation and deliberate starvation in the years 1928 to 1933, and approximately 400,000 to 500,000 died during the deportations of 1941 to 1946 and in the Gulag and Soviet labor camps in the late 1940s. See Friedrich Rink, "Die Woiwiniendeutschen: Ihr Werk und ihr Schicksal," in *Heimatbuch, 1959*, 49; Walth, *Auf der Suche*, 39; and Stephan M. Horack, ed., *Guide to the Study of Soviet Nationalities: Non-Russian Peoples of the USSR* (Littleton, Co.: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1982), 230.

<sup>11</sup> The McCook, Nebraska, AVRS materials in the collections of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia are scheduled to be microfilmed by the Nebraska State Historical Society when the AVRS records in RG 4879.AM are filmed.

<sup>12</sup> B. 1, F. 28:11, RG4879.AM, Records of the American Volga Relief Society, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, B. 1, F. 6C:2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, B. 1, F. 6C:5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, mostly in B. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, B. 3, F. 3C.

<sup>17</sup> The three significant contributions bearing directly on this subject are Emma Schwabenland Haynes, *A History of the Volga Relief Society* (Lincoln: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1982, rpl. of 1941 ed.), Hagin, "Hungersnot," and Arkady German, *Nemetskaya autonomiya na volge I* (Saratov: Izdatelstvo Saratovskogo Universiteta, 1992), 113–47, the latter the most thoroughly documented.