

# German Lutherans in the Soviet Union

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If you spoke to an Englishman about “the colonies”, the chances are that he would think of what we now less condescendingly call “the Commonwealth”. If you spoke to a Soviet German of “the colonies”, he would certainly think of the villages where he and his ancestors grew up, possibly near Odessa or along the Volga.

Who are the Soviet Germans? How did German people come to be in Russia? Germans in the Soviet Union number at present something like two million. Large numbers of them first appeared in Russia in 1764, after Empress Catherine’s decree promising substantial privileges to Germans who would immigrate to the Volga area. Many did so, often to escape the misery following the Seven Years War in Europe. They settled along the Volga river and became prosperous farmers. A further large-scale immigration followed under Alexander I, who also offered incentives to German immigrants, this time chiefly to the Black Sea area. This began in 1804. Colonies of Germans sprang up around Odessa in particular, and soon after in the newly-acquired Bessarabian area.

The Germans took with them their local dialects, customs, folk-songs and, for many, their faith. Many of the German immigrants to Russia and the Ukraine were Lutherans. Others adhered to the Roman Catholic, Reformed, Mennonite or other groups. Through long years in Russia these characteristics remained, not least the Christian traditions. It was partly through the influence of German pietism that Protestantism came to the Russian people themselves.

After the communists came to power in Russia, the Germans were granted fresh recognition when Lenin gave them an autonomous republic on the Volga (hence the inaccurate application of the term “Volga German” to all Soviet Germans), as well as other smaller national areas. But this new status was not to last long. As Stalin took control in Russia, and as fascism began to establish itself in Europe, the Soviet Germans fell under suspicion. There were arrests and executions. All the German pastors functioning at that time were arrested and few survived. Like the Crimean Tatars and other nationalities, the Germans were deported en masse from their traditional homelands during the Second World War. Most were taken to Central Asia or Siberia, and many died in those years of deportation and subsequent internment. Many families were wilfully separated and countless personal tragedies linger to this day.

Despite the often terrible conditions, many of the Soviet Germans retained their Christian faith. People gathered for fellowship and improvised services in the most difficult circumstances. There were no longer any formally trained pastors to direct religious life, but necessity dictated invention. One woman has described how she acted as pastor to hundreds of scattered German Lutherans.

In 1955 Dr. Adenauer visited the Soviet Union, and his visit brought considerable relief to the Soviet Germans. Internment was ended on condition they signed declarations that they did not wish to return to their former homelands. Centres of German population in the USSR today are north-east Kazakhstan, the Novosibirsk region and the Altai district in Siberia. Germans actually appear fourteenth (earlier they were twelfth) in the 1970 census listing of nationalities, two places below the Jews.

Also as a consequence of Dr. Adenauer's visit, many Soviet Germans erroneously believed that they would be allowed to emigrate. Several hundred thousand of them filled out necessary applications, only to be told that they were still considered Soviet citizens. However, a trickle of Soviet Germans has recently begun to leave thanks to the "family reunion" agreement, whereby those who can obtain an invitation from immediate relatives in Germany may apply for an exit permit. Close observers of this Soviet German emigration estimate the percentage of those wishing to leave at around 70 per cent.

There was thus a partial rehabilitation on the political level. But what of the spiritual? In 1956 exciting news reached those in Germany who still cared about their fellow Lutherans in the Soviet Union: a pastor named Eugen Bachmann had in the previous year established a German church in Tselinograd (formerly Akmolinsk) in Kazakhstan, Central Asia. In 1957 came even more dramatic news: the authorities had granted the church registration, thus making it the only official German Lutheran congregation anywhere in the USSR since the purges of the 1930's.

Eugen Bachmann was born in the colony of Worms, near Odessa. He studied under Bishop Malmgren, the last Lutheran bishop before Stalin's persecutions. Rev. Bachmann himself was arrested in Leningrad in 1934 and sentenced to five years. He was sent to the Komi republic, and was one of the few pastors to survive this period, chiefly due to obtaining lighter work as a chemist. Released in 1939, he was unable to return either to Leningrad or to his native village in the Ukraine. He went instead to Orenburg. In 1942 he was drafted into the "workers' army" —a virtual internment, from which he was released in 1950.

In 1954 relatives found him, and he received permission to move to Tselinograd. It was here that he began to gather people for Lutheran services, first held in private homes. The congregation then collected funds by visiting German homes and purchased two houses. One became the pastorate, the other the church. After the latter had been fitted out as a meeting-place, the first service was held on Whit Sunday, 1955, and thereafter every Sunday. Already in the following year the room became too small and was enlarged to cope with the crowds that came for worship. In July 1957 the authorities granted registration to the new church. It was closed, however, for a brief period before this date.

For more than ten years it was the only recognized German Lutheran church in the USSR, but since 1968 the authorities have registered a further handful, for example in Karaganda, Novosibirsk, Tomsk and Alma-Ata. Unregistered congregations continue to experience severe problems: news was received recently that the congregation meeting in a cemetery in Dushanbe had been forbidden to gather there.

In the early years, the church in Tselinograd received much help from the *Gustav Adolf Werk* in Leipzig. A harmonium was actually delivered to the Soviet Union and dedicated at a special thanksgiving service. Help was also received from the Estonian Lutheran bishop Jan Kiiuit. But soon after, in 1959, Khrushchev unleashed his new campaign against the churches. A vicious personal campaign was launched against Rev. Bachmann in the local press and Party. The congregation responded by sending a petition with over 500 signatures to the Supreme Soviet. A government representative came to Tselinograd, and the campaign against Rev. Bachmann stopped in March 1960, having begun in November. Similar things happened throughout the German areas.

When Rev. Bachmann first formed the church in 1955, he was employed as a road engineer. But after the registration he was able to devote all his time to the ministry. It was a full-time job. When the church first began, there were 600-700 attending. There was standing room only. People came from miles around to receive communion, to have their children baptised, their wedding consecrated. Those who came from long distances would often combine the trip to Tselinograd with a visit to relatives or friends. A degree of control was always exercised against the attendance of children at services. There were always informers present in church services, even among the church workers.

At the beginning, the church held a confirmation service twice yearly, and there were some 180 confirmands. Now it is held once a year and candidates number about 60-80. Confirmation is usually held on Sunday, but sometimes it is celebrated on Saturday for those who have travelled

long distances. Those who have been confirmed then participate in communion the following day. Rev. Bachmann, who has been in West Germany since the spring of 1972, estimates that during his years in Tselinograd he confirmed some 3,000 individuals.

The present scattered state of the Soviet Germans has caused a greater strain on their close traditional life than ever before. In the USSR German children attend schools where only Russian is spoken, and more and more of them are losing their knowledge of German. Among families now returning to West Germany, few of the younger children speak German well and so have to attend special schools before they can be integrated into normal school life.

German Lutherans, returning from the Soviet Union to West Germany, face special problems of readjustment. They find a very different society, one that is freer but more coldly materialistic. They find numerous open churches, but many of them half-empty during services. They find their children exposed to a morality for which they are unprepared. The many difficulties involved in such an emigration of people affect them.

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