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Cultural Maintenance among the Volga Germans in Western Kansas

One of the more intriguing tasks confronting the student of ethnicity in the United States is to assess the dimension and the characteristics of the ethnic identity of specific immigrant groups. Representatives of ethnic groups invariably point with pride to the numerous activities of ethnic societies as evidence of the strength and vitality of the cultural heritage of their immigrant ancestors. Yet, mere membership in ethnic organizations or attendance figures at ethnic festivals are clearly inadequate to measure the extent to which the cultural heritage of immigrants has been maintained over the years. The following case study attempts to address the issue of cultural maintenance by examining one comparatively well defined group of Volga German Catholics who established a major area of settlement in Ellis and Rush counties in western Kansas.¹

Shortly after their arrival in western Kansas in the 1870s, the Volga German settlers proceeded to re-create, in a fashion, the kinds of communities they had left behind in Russia. Tied together by a "two-fold bond of religion and nationality," the settlers established a number of villages named after their former homes in the Volga region. These closely knit communities, located a comfortable distance from the city of Hays, were a major factor in preserving the cultural heritage of the immigrants.²

Another factor which appears to have contributed to the social isolation of the early settlers can be found in the somewhat mixed reception accorded to the Volga Germans by the established settlers. Even though they were numerically in a majority, the Volga Germans appear to have been plagued by "feelings of mingled superiority and inferiority" towards their German and their American neighbors.³ Established German settlers in the region wanted to have as little to do with these "Rooshians" as did many of the Americans, who generally

viewed them as inferiors even though they were soon impressed with the newcomers' frugality and dedication to hard work.⁴

The comparative social and geographical isolation of the Volga Germans clearly played a significant role in both delaying assimilation and in maintaining their cultural heritage. The various aspects of this cultural heritage have been described at length elsewhere; suffice it to say that its major characteristics were an intense religiosity, the use of German dialects, a fondness for music, an idealization of hard work, and a number of eighteenth-century German customs and traditions which had been modified to some extent by the long Russian experience.⁵

The first serious study of the degree of cultural maintenance among the Volga German settlers was conducted in 1942. This study showed that in the area of education the Volga Germans had fully adjusted to the American system. Native customs pertaining to home life as well as social customs in general had also been considerably modified by the American environment. In the crucial area of language maintenance, the author concluded that up until the period 1910-15 English remained definitely a language to be used only in the classroom. Some thirty years later, however, "the German spoken . . . [was] mixed with English and in some instances the children do not learn to speak the German language fluently, but they can understand it."⁶ This decline in the use of German is also reflected in the fact that a St. Joseph's *Leseverein*—a circulating library with a substantial number of German books—was formally disbanded because of an apparent lack of interest in 1928.⁷

The Germans from Russia as a whole have been characterized as a "singularly silent group, one that has preferred anonymity, because its ethnic character has brought it hostility and discrimination, especially during the two world wars."⁸ The Volga Germans in western Kansas are no exception: ridiculed once as backward and uncivilized Russians and, just a few decades later during the anti-German hysteria of World War I, attacked for being too German, they have until very recently made little or no effort to preserve their language and their cultural heritage.

Yet, the accelerating tendency to assimilate notwithstanding, a measure of ethnic consciousness and cultural maintenance has survived. In a keynote address to the recently founded American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR), the speaker argued that although the dialects and the culture of the Germans from Russia appeared doomed to extinction, the work of the AHSGR "has arrested this trend for the time being."⁹ While there is available a plethora of opinions on whether or not the Volga Germans in western Kansas are in the process of losing their cultural identity, specific data are not available. Those who argue that the demise of the Volga Germans as an identifiable ethnic group is imminent point to the declining population of the original villages, to the growing neglect of customs and traditions, and to the declining number of those who can speak German. Other observers, however, point to the cultural and educational activities of

local and regional Volga German associations, to the support given by such groups to scholarship programs for students of Volga German descent, to the establishment of archival collections on the history and culture of the Volga Germans, and to the numerous efforts of dedicated community leaders to revive and reinvigorate an admittedly declining ethnic consciousness.¹⁰

Useful as such observations on the degree of cultural maintenance among the Volga Germans may be, they are at the same time wholly impressionistic and, one suspects, occasionally the result of wishful thinking. In order to obtain a more reliable grasp of this issue, we devised a questionnaire consisting of seventy-one items designed to give some indication of (1) the knowledge of German and of the Volga German dialects, (2) the interest in the practice of folk music, and (3) the degree of awareness and practice of the traditional folk customs in the Volga German community.¹¹

The selection of subjects posed a series of problems and methodological issues. First of all the goal of representativeness was paramount. Above all else we wanted to be able to capture an adequate cross-section of the Volga German population, by age, sex, marital status, etc. Secondly it was hoped that a listing could be found or devised that would produce a random selection process making a generalization to the larger population possible. However, no such lists were readily available. Membership lists for the local AHSGR were available, but proportionately, this group is quite small. Church membership lists are not current (many have moved away and relatively high intermarriage rates make it difficult to track Volga German women, etc.). The best solution was to employ five "judges," i.e., local people with considerable knowledge and involvement with people of Volga German descent. These judges identified several clusters (local AHSGR society, church groups, bingo groups, school and college groups, work groups and community groups) which were then requested to participate in the study. It was explained to all potential respondents that this was a study of Volga Germans only. There was a high degree of consensus among the judges and the respondents polled that the clusters chosen were typical and representative of the local Volga German population. As the profile of respondents will later show, the goals of representativeness and relative proportions were met in terms of religion, gender, age, education, occupation, marital status, and arrival date of their ancestors. Judgment samples are, by definition, non-random; however, the considerable knowledge of the local population, the clusters chosen, and the resulting profile assure the authors that the respondents are typical, and consequently, allow generalization to the larger population with the appropriate precautions.

The questionnaire was administered to 213 self-identified Volga Germans. The respondents ranged from about sixteen to over seventy, with the various age groups reasonably well balanced. Some 60% of the respondents were female, 40% were male. Only in the case of religious affiliation was there a pronounced imbalance with 85% being Roman Catholics and 10% belonging to one of the Protestant denominations.

This apparent imbalance, however, parallels the overwhelming number of Volga Germans in this area who are Catholics.

On the subject of language maintenance the survey confirmed the widely held belief that familiarity with Volga German dialects is comparatively low in the age group under thirty. In this group, less than half could speak or understand one of the dialects whereas, in the age group over fifty, more than 90% of the respondents indicated that they could speak or understand a dialect. In families where both spouses were of Volga German descent, facility with dialects was considerably higher than in "mixed" marriages. The fact that Roman Catholics scored higher in this category seems to reflect the greater degree of community cohesion in the Catholic villages.

Given the relatively high percentage of individuals with some degree of fluency in the dialects—the survey indicated that overall some 70% could speak or understand one of the dialects—it seemed surprising that less than a fourth actually used a dialect more or less regularly when conversing with Volga German friends and neighbors. While dialect usage was more pronounced in the age group over fifty, it was altogether negligible in the age group below forty. One might, therefore, conclude that the demise of the dialects is indeed only a matter of time.

In view of the fact that 96% of the respondents indicated a desire to keep the Volga German heritage alive and that a nearly equal percentage believed that the maintenance of the German language was one important means to that end, one might expect that parents would encourage their children to enroll in German language classes at the high school or college level. However, this expectation turned out to be unfounded. Among parents under the age of forty, only half encouraged their children to study German. In the age group over sixty, by comparison, nearly three fourths of the parents encouraged their children to study German. The educational background of parents, furthermore, appeared to have the opposite effect of what one might expect: Parents with college degrees were less emphatic in encouraging their children to study German than were parents with less education. At the same time college-educated parents felt strongly that the customs and traditions of the Volga Germans ought to be kept alive. Foreign-language enrollment in area high schools is in keeping with the results of the survey. For example, in the largest high school in the two-county area, the enrollment in German language classes is only about one fourth of the enrollment in Spanish.¹²

The gap between the rhetoric and the reality in the area of language maintenance is equally pronounced in other areas, such as interest in the history and culture of the Volga Germans. Thus 57% of the respondents claimed to make efforts to keep themselves informed about the history and the traditions of the Volga Germans. Yet 78% attend none or only a few of the activities sponsored by the local chapter of the AHSGR which, in the past, have included presentations of folk music, folk dancing, slide shows, and other programs of cultural and historical interest. In fact, only 18% of the respondents in this survey were members of the AHSGR and 70% admitted to never reading any of the

features or articles in the *Journal* of that organization, nearly all of which are written in a popular vein and are readily available at a number of locations. In fact, the survey showed that the higher the prestige of the respondents' occupation, the less likely they are to read the *Journal*.

General interest in the history and culture of other groups of Germans from Russia, such as the Black Sea Germans, appeared to be fairly low, especially in the age group under fifty. Curiously though, interest in the history of other German-Americans—the Texas Germans and the Pennsylvania Germans were offered as examples in the survey—appeared comparatively high, especially with the younger respondents. Even in the age group over fifty, the level of interest in these German-Americans was nearly twice that of the interest displayed in other groups of Germans from Russia.

Throughout their history, the Volga Germans have taken great pride in their many folk songs and in their musical ability. There is still an active *Liederbund* in Hays, and one of the local newspapers as well as the *AHSGR Journal* frequently feature articles on folk music, complete with texts and musical notations. Indeed, 93% of the respondents considered the maintenance of the folk songs as important to the survival of their cultural heritage, while three fourths indicated that they were familiar with the songs. Even in the age group under thirty, interest appeared to be relatively high although only about half of that age group claimed to be familiar with a number of songs. But "being familiar" also meant—in the age group under thirty—that less than 20% actually knew the words and the melody. By comparison in the age group over sixty, nearly 90% knew the words and the melody of a number of popular songs. The number of songs known, familiarity with the words and the melodies, and singing Volga German songs are most closely associated with being female, being older, and having a moderate level of education. The higher-status occupational groups tended to know the fewest number of songs.

The discrepancy between the belief in the importance of folk songs and in their actual usage should be noted: Less than a fourth of the respondents in the age group under fifty actually sing them at home, apparently largely on festive occasions. Again, individuals with a college education overwhelmingly agreed that the folk songs were crucial to the survival of their cultural heritage, yet only 16% knew the words and the melodies. Given the obvious connection between some degree of familiarity with the language and the ability to sing or understand at least some of the songs, it seems odd that even in the college-educated group only some 30% agreed to watch German language lessons if they were to be offered on the local PBS television station.

As to the maintenance of customs and traditions, the general picture by now is a familiar one. An overwhelming majority want to maintain the traditions, but 62% also think that with the disappearance of the present older generation of Volga Germans the customs will die out altogether. Here again, age appears as the crucial factor. While over 90% in the age group under thirty feel that traditional folkways ought to be

Summary Table of Associations among Major Variables¹

Item	Age	Sex	Marital Status	VG Spouse	Religion	Education	Occupation	Date Arrival of Ancestors
1. Ability to speak Volga German dialect	.57**	--	.34**	.40**	--	-.24**	-.39**	.39**
2. Ability to understand the Volga German dialect	.49**	--	.35**	.39**	--	.33**	-.47**	--
3. Ability to understand High German	.37**	--	--	-.28**	--	--	-.37**	--
4. Ability to read High German	.18**	--	--	--	--	--	-.66*	--
5. Ability of children to speak Volga German dialect	.48**	--	--	.62**	--	-.45**	-.67**	--
6. Ability of children to understand High German	.55**	--	--	.57**	--	-.45**	-.66**	--
7. Ability of children to read High German	.35**	--	--	.62**	--	--	-.66**	--
8. I've studied/plan to study German	-.28**	--	--	-.27**	--	.36**	.41*	--
9. Told/plan to tell children to study German	.26**	--	--	.35**	--	--	--	--
10. Have friends who speak the Volga German dialect	.49**	--	--	.42**	--	-.42**	-.41**	--
11. Speak Volga German dialect with my friends	.57**	--	--	.32**	--	-.44**	-.45**	.39*
12. Know history/culture of Volga Germans	.28**	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
13. Know history/culture of German-Americans	.25**	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
14. Know history/culture of other Germans from Russia	.26**	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
15. Member of AHSGR	.37**	--	--	--	.16*	--	--	--
16. Attendance at Sunflower Chapter of AHSGR	.34**	--	--	--	.19*	--	--	--
17. Germ. lang. important for maintaining VG heritage	.12*	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
18. Familiarity with Volga German songs	.40**	--	--	.33**	--	--	-.38**	--
19. Knowledge of words/melodies of VG songs	.52**	--	--	.32**	--	-.37**	-.38**	--
20. Encourage family to sing Volga German songs	.35**	--	--	.26*	--	-.35**	--	--
21. VG songs with religious meaning more important	.28**	--	--	--	--	--	.37*	--
22. VG songs are important for maintaining heritage	.28**	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
23. Number of Volga German songs familiar with	.50**	--	--	.34**	--	--	-.35*	--
24. Frequency of singing Volga German songs	.39**	.24*	--	.25*	--	--	--	--
25. Belief that VG customs should be maintained	.17**	.20*	--	--	--	--	--	--
26. Encourage family members to observe VG customs	.30**	--	--	.32*	--	--	-.44**	--
27. Number of Volga German customs familiar with	.47**	--	--	.32*	--	--	-.38**	--

28. Number of VG customs observed in family	.15**	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.36**
29. Belief in the significance of religious customs	.25**	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.39**
30. Can dance a Volga German <i>Hochzeit</i>	.31**	.23*	--	.38**	--	.24*	--	--	--	-.44**
31. Can dance a Volga German waltz	.25**	.21*	--	.36**	--	.34**	--	--	--	-.42**
32. Number of Volga German food items familiar with	.29**	--	--	.32**	--	.26**	--	.29*	--	-.35**
33. Frequency of preparation of Volga German foods	--	--	--	--	--	.26**	--	--	--	--
34. Taught/plan to teach children to prepare VG foods	.48**	--	--	.47**	--	.23*	--	-.42**	--	-.68**
35. Primary interest in VG activities is genealogy	.21*	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
36. Belief that VG center their lives around the church	.15*	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
37. Belief that Volga German customs will die with the current older generation	.17*	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
38. Willingness to participate in study of VG dialects	.11*	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
39. Type of Volga German literature familiar with	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.36**
40. Frequency of reading the <i>AHSGR Journal</i>	.34**	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.41**

¹Measures of association: Pearson r , Cramer's V , or the contingency coefficient depending on the level of measurement.

*Statistically significant at the .05 level.

**Statistically significant at the .01 level.

maintained, only half in that age group are encouraging their family members to observe them. As to the popular Volga German dances—here the waltz wins with five percentage points over the *Hochzeit*—the age group over thirty appears to be quite adept with over 90% being able to perform that feat. But in the group under age thirty, only about half of the respondents are able to dance a waltz or a *Hochzeit*. The prospects for the survival of Volga German foods appear to be somewhat better; 40% of the respondents still prepare Volga German dishes weekly and, more importantly, some 75% of those above age thirty are teaching their children how to prepare Volga German dishes. Among the better educated and higher-status Volga Germans there was familiarity with fewer kinds of foods and this group was also less likely to teach their children how to prepare the special dishes.

From the variety of data collected in this survey, there emerges a profile of a "typical" Volga German: forty-four years old, Catholic, married to another Volga German, most likely a high school graduate and a farmer, craftsman, or a housewife. Typical Volga Germans are more likely to understand than to speak a dialect and are more likely to understand than to read standard German. Generally they will not have studied German, and their children will not speak a Volga German dialect nor will they read or understand standard German, even though they have allegedly been encouraged to take German lessons. Typical Volga Germans are likely to have friends who speak a local dialect, but they are less likely to use the dialect regularly when speaking with them. Typical Volga Germans have not visited either Germany or Russia and they do not correspond with friends or relatives there. They will probably claim to have some knowledge of the history or culture of Germany. They are not likely to be members of the local chapter of AHSGR, especially if they are young, and they will rarely attend any functions of that organization. While they feel that the German language as well as the folk songs are important in the cultural maintenance process, they are unlikely to study the language. They will hardly ever sing Volga German songs and they will not encourage their family to do so either.

Typical Volga Germans feel that the traditions of their people ought to be kept alive. They tend to be familiar with more customs (an average of eight) than they actually practice (an average of five). They are interested in their family trees, see themselves as hard-working, as victims of discrimination, and as people who center their lives around the church, especially if they are over forty-five years of age. They will most likely not read books or journals on the Volga Germans, and they tend to be primarily familiar with local rather than with nationally or internationally known Volga Germans.

While the respondents in this survey were on the whole most cooperative, there is also a tendency on the part of some Volga Germans to complain that "outsiders" do not know or do not appreciate Volga German culture. At the same time there is some reluctance to share it with "outsiders." One example of this reluctance is the fact that only nineteen percent of the respondents indicated a strong willingness to

participate in a study of Volga German dialects when more than two thirds indicated that they spoke one of the dialects. Another factor contributing to a certain reluctance to open up to "outsiders" may derive from the concerns of self-identified culture bearers that empirical studies may result in "improper" images of the group, a phenomenon which is quite common in the literature on the problems of cultural maintenance of minority groups.¹³

The answer to the question of whether the Volga Germans are in the process of losing their cultural identity involves a small dilemma. On the one hand there is strong evidence that their cultural heritage, especially language, is rapidly eroding. On the other hand, there is equally strong evidence of a pronounced desire to maintain the culture. However, the behavioral changes necessary to counteract the erosion of the cultural identity, are not, or to take an optimistic view, are not yet in evidence. This optimism is further tempered by the data, which clearly reveal that the more highly educated professional groups, which are generally so vital in the leadership and financial sponsorship areas, are the least knowledgeable, practice the fewest number of customs, are not speakers of the local dialects, and tend to believe that the Volga German customs will probably die with the current older generation.

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Notes

¹ Norman E. Saul, "The Migration of the Russian-Germans to Kansas," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* 40 (Spring 1974): 51-52.

² The major settlements were Liebenenthal, Catherine, Herzog (Victoria), Munjor, Pfeifer, and Schoenchen. See also Sister Marie Eloise Johannes, *A Study of the Russian German Settlements in Ellis County, Kansas*, The Catholic University of America Studies in Sociology, vol. 14 (Washington, DC, 1946).

³ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴ Lee Pendergrass, "Journalistic Perceptions of the Volga Germans in Northwest Kansas, 1876-1910," TMs, Ethnic Studies Collection, Forsyth Library, Fort Hays State University, Hays, KS.

⁵ Timothy J. Kloberdanz, "The Volga Germans in Old Russia and in Western North America: Their Changing World View," *Anthropological Quarterly* 48 (October 1975): 214-15.

⁶ Johannes, 101.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev: The Story of Russia's Germans* (Winnepeg, MB: Marian Press, 1974), iv.

⁹ Adam Giesinger, "Keynote Address: Now is the Time!," *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia* 4 (Fall 1981): 6.

The founding of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR) in 1968 appears to have provided the impetus for the formation of numerous local chapters, among them the Sunflower Chapter in Hays, Kansas. The Sunflower Chapter was founded in 1979; its membership has fluctuated considerably from a high of about 250 to a low of about 75 members at present.

¹⁰ Symptomatic of this latter attitude is the appearance of a recent history of the Volga Germans under the title *Wir wollen Deutsche bleiben*. The book is written in English. See

George J. Walters, *Wir wollen Deutsche bleiben: The Story of the Volga Germans* (Kansas City, MO: Halcyon House Publishers, 1982).

¹¹ For a summary of the results of the questionnaire see "Summary Table of Associations among Major Variables."

¹² Enrollment in German language classes at the high school in Victoria where German is the only foreign language offered approximates about 18% of the student body.

¹³ Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); William N. Newman, *American Pluralism: A Study of Minority Groups and Social Theory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).