

Instructor's Essay

The German-Russian story began more than centuries ago, when thousands of people left the independent German *Länder* (states) for Russia. They headed east at the invitation of Catherine the Great (the Russian tsarina), because she promised free land in an attempt to improve her region's agricultural economy. In her manifestos, Tsarina Catherine (a German-born woman) promised these immigrants autonomy (i.e. the freedom to maintain their own identity). For nearly a century, Germans in Russia lived peacefully and prosperously. Then, Catherine the Great's successors reneged on her promises and implemented a policy of *Russification*. At the same time, boosters in the United States began promoting land opportunities in the West, made possible by the passing of the 1862 Homestead Act. Therefore, in the late 1800s, thousands of Germans in Russia left for the United States.

Once in America, Germans from Russia made their way west, settling throughout the Great Plains (Dakota Territory, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Colorado). Black Sea Germans largely homesteaded the Northern Plains region. According to the migration patterns, most passed through South Dakota (usually Eureka or Yankton), and then migrated north, creating the infamous German-Russian heartland. When the farmland proved to be unsatisfactory, many packed up and migrated again. In the early 1900s, for instance, hundreds of Germans from Russia moved to northwestern North Dakota, north-central North Dakota, and across the 49th-parallel into Saskatchewan.

The Germans from Russia have a complex and remarkable past. Despite their double or triple diaspora, this group has retained much of their cultural heritage. Yet, their new surroundings influenced them, and as a result, Germans from Russia have forever changed after each migration and with the passing of each generation. Thus, the identity of the second- and third-generation Germans from Russia in America is rooted in their ancestral past (the German-Russian story), yet shaped by their new experiences and present conditions. The resilience of the German-Russian ethnic identity is a byproduct of this ethnic group's determination and adaptability. Their ethnic identity is neither static nor simplistic. Rather, it is a malleable and complex identity, making for a truly extraordinary narrative.

Dakota Germans from Russia (HIST/EDUC 600) is an online course devoted to an examination of this remarkable ethnic group. Participants will have the opportunity to explore its history by completing four units: Origins & Migration, Life & Customs, Memory & Identity, and Research & Teaching. Within each unit, participants will read/view one required text. These required texts will serve as the foundation for the suggested material within each corresponding unit. After reading/viewing the required text, participants must select three of the suggested texts from each unit. (To balance the workload in this course, it is recommended that participants read/view/discuss one text per week.) Each week participants should engage with the required and suggested material by posting reflections and responses. The key to success in this course is *discussion participation*. Following the first three units, participants will demonstrate their comprehension via a research paper, historiography paper, or lesson plan. By the end of this semester, participants should be able to discuss the history, heritage, and identity of this ethnic group – Dakota Germans from Russia.