

Book and Article Reviews

These reviews are listed in alphabetical order by author of the book or article. Opinions expressed by the reviewers are their opinions only and are not necessarily the views of the Black Hills Chapter of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society.

We invite reviews of books and articles that may be relevant to teachers or students of German-Russian history. Please contact Bill Bosch at wbosch@spe.midco.net for further information.

The Czar's Germans - With Particular Reference to the Volga Germans by Hattie Plum Williams

Edited by Emma S. Haynes, Phillip B. Legler, and Gerda S. Walker
Copyright 1975, American Historical Society of Germans from Russia
Lincoln, Nebraska
ISBN: 0-914222-01-5, LOC Catalog Card Number: 75-32862, 236 pages
Paperback

According to Editor Emma S. Haynes, Williams wrote the manuscript for this book between 1909 and 1915. In 1972 the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia asked the Editors named above to prepare the manuscript for publication. Chapters two and three were published mostly as originally written by Williams while the Editors rewrote Chapter I and developed Chapter IV based on notes by Williams.

Chapter I. German Immigration in the Eighteenth Century. In this chapter the author describes the poverty and chaos in German territories in the sixteenth and seventeenth hundreds. Those conditions led to sporadic emigration by peasants in those territories to various other areas of Europe including Russia.

Chapter II. German Colonization in Russia. In 1763–64 Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, invited foreigners to Russia and enticed them with special favors. This invitation lured many German people and a few others to the Volga River region in Russia during the years 1764–67. The author gives details on the special favors, on the recruitment policies of the Russians and on the efforts by German nobility to stop the emigration of their people. On page 62, an interesting anecdote points out the guile that was used by some of the recruiting agents to entice people to choose Russia as their destination.

Chapter III. The Volga Germans in Russia. In this chapter the author describes the voyages to Russia, places where the Germans settled and the life of the pioneers until about 1871. She writes about the political and economic life of the colonists and about the conflicts they had with the Russian government, nomadic tribes and outlaws. Williams gives the reader some interesting details. For example, to keep from being robbed, colonists formed wagon trains to take their products to Nizhni-Novgorod (page 116). The straight-line distance from the German

settlements (near Saratov) to Nizhni-Novgorod is about 350 miles. This gives us some idea of the efforts the colonists had to make to survive and prosper. The Pugachev rebellion is also covered in this chapter.

Williams' sympathies are clearly with the German settlers but she is objective and places blame for some of the problems they had on their unwillingness to learn Russian and their chronic inability to organize themselves effectively. However, the fraud and incompetence of the Russian government are the main factors, according to Williams.

Chapter IV. Immigration to the United States. As mentioned before, this chapter is based on notes left behind by Williams. Williams and the Editors concentrate on early immigration (1849–1875). They write about the migration of Germans from the colonies of Johannesthal, Worms and Rohrbach, the Mennonites from South Russia and the Volga River Germans. There are interesting specific details such as the price of land the settlers paid to the railroad companies. Five dollars or so an acre seems to be the average price but two dollars an acre was also mentioned.

The organization and writing in this book are exceptional. High school students should be able to read it. Teachers assigning the book may have to point out to students that Williams was not entirely free of the biases of her time. On page 119, for example, nomadic tribes are referred to as “savages”. But overall, the writing is remarkably objective. Chapter III contains much information that could form the basis for a geography, history or cultural lesson about Russia and the Volga River colonists.

This book is a scholarly book. In the Introduction, Editor Haynes writes “As a result, practically everything which she writes in the second chapter of her manuscript comes from direct primary sources.” Some of those primary sources are extremely rare, according to Editor Haynes, and copies are at the Nebraska State Historical Society. Thus this book is also important for serious students of German-Russian history.

Dr. Williams received her Doctor of Philosophy Degree in 1915 from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. She then served as Chair of the Sociology Department from 1915 until 1945. Dr. Williams passed away in 1963. She wrote several other books, titles of which I found at <http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n84-230082> in May of 2010.

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