

RUSSIA

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K.C.I.E., K.C.V.O.

IN TWO VOLUMES

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AND IN GREAT PART RE-WRITTEN**

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*WITH PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR AND MAP SHOWING
THE DENSITY OF POPULATION*

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CHAPTER XVI.

FOREIGN COLONISTS ON THE STEPPE.

The Steppe—Variety of Races, Languages, and Religions—The German Colonists—In what sense the Russians are an Imitative People—The Mennonites—Climate and Arboriculture—Bulgarian Colonists—Tartar-speaking Greeks—Jewish Agriculturists—Russification—A Circassian Scotchman—Numerical Strength of the Foreign Element.

IN European Russia the struggle between agriculture and nomadic barbarism is now a thing of the past, and the fertile Steppe, which was for centuries a battle-ground of the Aryan and Turanian races, has been incorporated into the dominions of the Tsar. The nomadic tribes have been partly driven out and partly pacified and parked in "reserves," and the territory which they so long and so stubbornly defended is now studded with peaceful villages and tilled by laborious agriculturists.

In traversing this region the ordinary tourist will find little to interest him. He will see nothing which he can possibly dignify by the name of scenery, and he may journey on for many days without having any occasion to make an entry in his note-book. If he should happen, however, to be an ethnologist and linguist, he may find occupation, for he will here meet with fragments of many different races and a variety of foreign tongues.

This ethnological variety is the result of a policy inaugurated by Catherine II. So long as the southern frontier was pushed forward slowly, the acquired territory was regularly filled up by Russian peasants from the central provinces who were anxious to obtain more land and more liberty than they enjoyed

in their native villages ; but during “the glorious age of Catherine” the frontier was pushed forward so rapidly that the old method of spontaneous emigration no longer sufficed to people the annexed territory. The Empress had recourse, therefore, to organised emigration from foreign countries. Her diplomatic representatives in Western Europe tried to induce artisans and peasants to emigrate to Russia, and special agents were sent to various countries to supplement the efforts of the diplomatists. Thousands accepted the invitation, and were for the most part settled on the land which had been recently the pasture-ground of the nomadic hordes.

This policy was adopted by succeeding sovereigns, and the consequence of it has been that Southern Russia now contains a variety of races such as is to be found, perhaps, nowhere else in Europe. The official statistics of New Russia alone—that is to say, the provinces of Ekaterinosläf, Tauride, Kherson, and Bessarabia—enumerate the following nationalities: Great Russians, Little Russians, Poles, Servians, Montenegrins, Bulgarians, Moldavians, Germans, English, Swedes, Swiss, French, Italians, Greeks, Armenians, Tartars, Mordwä, Jews, and Gypsies. The religions are almost equally numerous. The statistics speak of Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Gregorians, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Mennonites, Separatists, Pietists, Karaim Jews, Talmudists, Mahometans, and numerous Russian sects, such as the Molokänye and the Skoptsi or Eunuchs. America herself could scarcely show a more motley list in her statistics of population.

It is but fair to state that the above list, though literally correct, does not give a true idea of the actual population. The great body of the inhabitants

are Russian and Orthodox, whilst several of the nationalities named are represented by a small number of souls—some of them, such as the French, being found exclusively in the towns. Still, the variety even in the rural population is very great. Once, in the space of three days, and using only the most primitive means of conveyance, I visited colonies of Greeks, Germans, Servians, Bulgarians, Montenegrins, and Jews.

Of all the foreign colonists the Germans are by far the most numerous. The object of the Government in inviting them to settle in the country was that they should till the unoccupied land and thereby increase the national wealth, and that they should at the same time exercise a civilising influence on the Russian peasantry in their vicinity. In this latter respect they have totally failed to fulfil their mission. A Russian village, situated in the midst of German colonies, shows generally, so far as I could observe, no signs of German influence. Each nationality lives *more majorum*, and holds as little communication as possible with the other. The muzhik observes carefully—for he is very curious—the mode of life of his more advanced neighbours, but he never thinks of adopting it. He looks upon Germans almost as beings of a different world—as a wonderfully cunning and ingenious people, who have been endowed by Providence with peculiar qualities not possessed by ordinary Orthodox humanity. To him it seems in the nature of things that Germans should live in large, clean, well-built houses, in the same way as it is in the nature of things that birds should build nests; and as it has probably never occurred to a human being to build a nest for himself and his family, so it never occurs to a Russian peasant to build a house on the German model. Germans are Germans, and Russians

are Russians—and there is nothing more to be said on the subject.

This stubbornly conservative spirit of the peasantry who live in the neighbourhood of Germans seems to give the lie direct to the oft-repeated and universally believed assertion that Russians are an imitative people strongly disposed to adopt the manners and customs of any foreigners with whom they may come in contact. The Russian, it is said, changes his nationality as easily as he changes his coat, and derives great satisfaction from wearing some nationality that does not belong to him; but here we have an important fact which appears to prove the contrary.

The truth is that in this matter we must distinguish between the Noblesse and the peasantry. The nobles are singularly prone to adopt foreign manners, customs, and institutions; the peasants, on the contrary, are as a rule decidedly conservative. It must not, however, be supposed that this proceeds from a difference of race; the difference is to be explained by the past history of the two classes. Like all other peoples, the Russians are strongly conservative so long as they remain in what may be termed their primitive moral habitat—that is to say, so long as external circumstances do not force them out of their accustomed traditional groove. The Noblesse were long ago violently forced out of their old groove by the reforming Tsars, and since that time they have been so constantly driven hither and thither by foreign influences that they have never been able to form a new one. Thus they easily enter upon any new path which seems to them profitable or attractive. The great mass of the people, on the contrary, too heavy to be thus lifted out of the guiding influence of custom and tradition, are still animated with a strongly conservative spirit.

In confirmation of this view I may mention two facts which have often attracted my attention. The first is that the Molokánye—a primitive Evangelical sect of which I shall speak at length in the next chapter—succumb gradually to German influence; by becoming heretics in religion they free themselves from one of the strongest bonds attaching them to the past, and soon become heretics in things secular. The second fact is that even the Orthodox peasant, when placed by circumstances in some new sphere of activity, readily adopts whatever seems profitable. Take, for example, the peasants who abandon agriculture and embark in industrial enterprises; finding themselves, as it were, in a new world, in which their old traditional notions are totally inapplicable, they have no hesitation in adopting foreign ideas and foreign inventions. And when once they have chosen this new path, they are much more “go-ahead” than the Germans. Freed alike from the trammels of hereditary conceptions and from the prudence which experience generates, they often give a loose rein to their impulsive character, and enter freely on the wildest speculations.

The marked contrast presented by a German colony and a Russian village in close proximity with each other is often used to illustrate the superiority of the Teutonic over the Slavonic race, and in order to make the contrast more striking, the Mennonite colonies are generally taken as the representatives of the Germans. Without entering here on the general question, I must say that this method of argumentation is scarcely fair. The Mennonites, who formerly lived in the neighbourhood of Danzig and emigrated from Prussia in order to escape the military conscription, brought with them to their new home a large store of useful technical knowledge and a considerable

amount of capital, and they received a quantity of land very much greater than the Russian peasants possess. Besides this, they enjoyed until very recently several valuable privileges. They were entirely exempted from military service and almost entirely exempted from taxation. Altogether their lines fell in very pleasant places. In material and moral well-being they stand as far above the majority of the ordinary German colonists as these latter do above their Russian neighbours. Even in the richest districts of Germany their prosperity would attract attention. To compare these rich, privileged, well-educated farmers with the poor, heavily taxed, uneducated peasantry, and to draw from the comparison conclusions concerning the capabilities of the two races, is a proceeding so absurd that it requires no further comment.

To the wearied traveller who has been living for some time in Russian villages one of these Mennonite colonies seems an earthly paradise. In a little hollow, perhaps by the side of a watercourse, he suddenly comes on a long row of high-roofed houses half concealed in trees. The trees may be found on closer inspection to be little better than mere saplings; but after a long journey on the bare Steppe, where there is neither tree nor bush of any kind, the foliage, scant as it is, appears singularly inviting. The houses are large, well arranged, and kept in such thoroughly good repair that they always appear to be newly built. The rooms are plainly furnished, without any pretensions to elegance, but scrupulously clean. Adjoining the house are the stable and byre, which would not disgrace a model farm in Germany or England. In front is a spacious courtyard, which has the appearance of being swept several times a day, and behind there is a garden well stocked with

vegetables. Fruit trees and flowers are not very plentiful, for the climate is not favourable to them.

The inhabitants are honest, frugal folk, somewhat sluggish of intellect and indifferent to things lying beyond the narrow limits of their own little world, but shrewd enough in all matters which they deem worthy of their attention. If you arrive amongst them as a stranger you may be a little chilled by the welcome you receive, for they are exclusive, reserved, and distrustful, and do not much like to associate with those who do not belong to their own sect; but if you can converse with them in their mother tongue and talk about religious matters in an evangelical tone, you may easily overcome their stiffness and exclusiveness. Altogether such a village cannot be recommended for a lengthened sojourn, for the severe order and symmetry which everywhere prevail would soon prove irksome to anyone having no Dutch blood in his veins;* but as a temporary resting-place during a pilgrimage on the Steppe, when the pilgrim is longing for a little cleanliness and comfort, it is very agreeable.

The fact that these Mennonites and some other German colonies have succeeded in rearing a few sickly trees has suggested to some fertile minds the idea that the prevailing dryness of the climate, which is the chief difficulty with which the agriculturist of that region has to contend, might be to some extent counteracted by arboriculture on a large scale. This scheme, though it has been seriously entertained by one of his Majesty's ministers, must seem hardly practicable to anyone who knows how much labour

* The Mennonites were originally Dutchmen. Persecuted for their religious views in the sixteenth century, a large number of them accepted an invitation to settle in West Prussia, where they helped to drain the great marshes between Danzig, Elbing, and Marienburg. Here in the course of time they forgot their native language. Their emigration to Russia began in 1789.

and money the colonists have expended in creating that agreeable shade which they love to enjoy in their leisure hours. If climate is affected at all by the existence or non-existence of forests—a point on which scientific men do not seem to be entirely agreed—any palpable increase of the rainfall can be produced only by forests of enormous extent, and it is hardly conceivable that these could be artificially produced in Southern Russia. It is quite possible, however, that local ameliorations may be effected. During a visit to the province of Voronezh in 1903 I found that comparatively small plantations diminished the effects of drought in their immediate vicinity by retaining the moisture for a time in the soil and the surrounding atmosphere.

After the Mennonites and other Germans, the Bulgarian colonists deserve a passing notice. They settled in this region much more recently, on the land that was left vacant by the exodus of the Nogai Tartars after the Crimean War. If I may judge of their condition by a mere flying visit, I should say that in agriculture and domestic civilisation they are not very far behind the majority of German colonists. Their houses are indeed small—so small that one of them might almost be put into a single room of a Mennonite's house; but there is an air of cleanliness and comfort about them that would do credit to a German housewife.

In spite of all this, these Bulgarians were, I could easily perceive, by no means delighted with their new home. The cause of their discontent, so far as I could gather from the few laconic remarks which I extracted from them, seemed to be this. Trusting to the highly coloured descriptions furnished by the emigration agents who had induced them to change the rule of the Sultan for the

authority of the Tsar, they came to Russia with the expectation of finding a fertile and beautiful Promised Land. Instead of a land flowing with milk and honey, they received a tract of bare Steppe on which even water could be obtained only with great difficulty—with no shade to protect them from the heat of summer and nothing to shelter them from the keen northern blasts that often sweep over those open plains. As no adequate arrangements had been made for their reception, they were quartered during the first winter on the German colonists, who, being quite innocent of any Slavophil sympathies, were probably not very hospitable to their uninvited guests. To complete their disappointment, they found that they could not cultivate the vine, and that their mild, fragrant tobacco, which is for them a necessary of life, could be obtained only at a very high price. So disconsolate were they under this cruel disenchantment that, at the time of my visit, they talked of returning to their old homes in Turkey.

As an example of the less prosperous colonists, I may mention the Tartar-speaking Greeks in the neighbourhood of Mariupol, on the northern shore of the Sea of Azof. Their ancestors lived in the Crimea, under the rule of the Tartar Khans, and emigrated to Russia in the time of Catherine II., before Crim Tartary was annexed to the Russian Empire. They have almost entirely forgotten their old language, but have preserved their old faith. In adopting the Tartar language they have adopted something of Tartar indolence and apathy, and the natural consequence is that they are poor and ignorant.

But of all the colonists of this region the least prosperous are the Jews. The Chosen People are certainly a most intelligent, industrious, frugal race, and

in all matters of buying, selling, and bartering they are unrivalled among the nations of the earth, but they have been too long accustomed to town life to be good tillers of the soil. These Jewish colonies were founded as an experiment to see whether the Israelite could be weaned from his traditionary pursuits and transferred to what some economists call the productive section of society. The experiment has failed, and the cause of the failure is not difficult to find. One has merely to look at these men of gaunt visage and shambling gait, with their loop-holed slippers, and black, threadbare coats reaching down to their ankles, to understand that they are not in their proper sphere. Their houses are in a most dilapidated condition, and their villages remind one of the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the Prophet. A great part of their land is left uncultivated or let to colonists of a different race. What little revenue they have is derived chiefly from trade of a more or less clandestine nature.*

As Scandinavia was formerly called *officina gentium*—a workshop in which new nations were made—so we may regard Southern Russia as a workshop in which fragments of old nations are being melted down to form a new, composite whole. It must be confessed, however, that the melting process has as yet scarcely begun.

National peculiarities are not obliterated so rapidly in Russia as in America or in British colonies. Among the German colonists in Russia the process of assimilation is hardly perceptible. Though their fathers and grandfathers may have been born in the new country, they would consider it an insult to be called Russians. They look down upon the Russian peasantry as poor,

* Mr. Arnold White, who subsequently visited some of these Jewish colonies in connection with Baron Hirsch's colonisation scheme, assured me that he found them in a much more prosperous condition.

ignorant, lazy, and dishonest, fear the officials on account of their tyranny and extortion, preserve jealously their own language and customs, rarely speak Russian well—sometimes not at all—and never intermarry with those from whom they are separated by nationality and religion. The Russian influence acts, however, more rapidly on the Slavonic colonists—Servians, Bulgarians, Montenegrins—who profess the Greek Orthodox faith, learn more easily the Russian language, which is closely allied to their own, have no consciousness of belonging to a *Culturvolk*, and in general possess a nature much more pliable than the Teutonic.

The Government has recently attempted to accelerate the fusing process by retracting the privileges granted to the colonists and abolishing the peculiar administration under which they were placed. These measures—especially the universal military service—may eventually diminish the extreme exclusiveness of the Germans; the youths, whilst serving in the army, will at least learn the Russian language, and may possibly imbibe something of the Russian spirit. But for the present this new policy has aroused a strong feeling of hostility and greatly intensified the spirit of exclusiveness. In the German colonies I have often overheard complaints about Russian tyranny and uncomplimentary remarks about the Russian national character.

The Mennonites consider themselves specially aggrieved by the so-called reforms. They came to Russia in order to escape military service and with the distinct understanding that they should be exempted from it, and now they are forced to act contrary to the religious tenets of their sect. This is the ground of complaint which they put forward in the petitions addressed to the Government, but they have at the same time another, and perhaps more important,

objection to the proposed changes. They feel, as several of them admitted to me, that if the barrier which separates them from the rest of the population were in any way broken down, they could no longer preserve that stern Puritanical discipline which at present constitutes their force. Hence, though the Government was disposed to make important concessions, hundreds of families sold their property and emigrated to America. The movement, however, did not become general. At present the Russian Mennonites number, male and female, about 50,000, divided into 160 colonies and possessing over 800,000 acres of land.

It is quite possible that under the new system of administration the colonists who profess, in common with the Russians, the Greek Orthodox faith may be rapidly Russianised; but I am convinced that the others will long resist all assimilation. Greek orthodoxy and Protestant sectarianism are so radically different in spirit that their respective votaries are not likely to intermarry; and without intermarriage it is impossible that the two nationalities should blend together.

As an instance of the ethnological curiosities which the traveller may stumble upon unawares in this curious region, I may mention a strange acquaintance I made when travelling on the great plain which stretches from the Sea of Azof to the Caspian. One day I accidentally noticed on my travelling-map the name "Shotlandskaya Koloniya" (Scottish Colony) near the celebrated baths of Piatigorsk. I was at that moment in Stävropol, a town about eighty miles to the north, and could not gain any satisfactory information as to what this colony was. Some well-informed people assured me that it really was what its name implied, whilst others asserted as confidently

that it was simply a small German settlement. To decide the matter I determined to visit the place myself, though it did not lie near my intended route, and I accordingly found myself one morning in the village in question. The first inhabitants whom I encountered were unmistakably German, and they professed to know nothing about the existence of Scotsmen in the locality either at the present or in former times. This was disappointing, and I was about to turn away and drive off, when a young man, who proved to be the schoolmaster, came up, and on hearing what I desired, advised me to consult an old Circassian who lived at the end of the village and was well acquainted with local antiquities. On proceeding to the house indicated, I found a venerable old man, with fine regular features of the Circassian type, coal-black sparkling eyes, and a long grey beard that would have done honour to a patriarch. To him I explained briefly, in Russian, the object of my visit, and asked whether he knew of any Scotsmen in the district.

“And why do you wish to know?” he replied, in the same language, fixing me with his keen, sparkling eyes.

“Because I am myself a Scotsman, and hoped to find fellow-countrymen here.”

Let the reader imagine my astonishment when, in reply to this, he answered, in genuine broad Scotch, “Od, man, I’m a Scotsman tae! My name is John Abercrombie. Did ye never hear tell o’ John Abercrombie, the famous Edinburgh doctor?”

I was fairly puzzled by this extraordinary declaration. Dr. Abercrombie’s name was familiar to me as that of a medical practitioner and writer on psychology, but I knew that he was long since dead. When I had recovered a little from my surprise, I ventured

to remark to the enigmatical personage before me that, though his tongue was certainly Scotch, his face was as certainly Circassian.

“Weel, weel,” he replied, evidently enjoying my look of mystification, “you’re no’ far wrang. I’m a Circassian Scotsman !”

This extraordinary admission did not diminish my perplexity, so I begged my new acquaintance to be a little more explicit, and he at once complied with my request. His long story may be told in a few words:—

In the first years of the present century a band of Scotch missionaries came to Russia for the purpose of converting the Circassian tribes, and received from the Emperor Alexander I. a large grant of land in this place, which was then on the frontier of the Empire. Here they founded a mission, and began the work; but they soon discovered that the surrounding population were not idolaters, but Mussulmans, and consequently impervious to Christianity. In this difficulty they fell on the happy idea of buying Circassian children from their parents, and bringing them up as Christians. One of these children, purchased about the year 1806, was a little boy called Teona. As he had been purchased with money subscribed by Dr. Abercrombie, he had received in baptism that gentleman’s name, and he considered himself the foster-son of his benefactor. Here was the explanation of the mystery.

Teona, *alias* Mr. Abercrombie, was a man of more than average intelligence. Besides his native tongue, he spoke English, German, and Russian perfectly; and he assured me that he knew several other languages equally well. His life had been devoted to missionary work, and especially to translating and printing the Scriptures. He had laboured first in

Astrakhan, then for four years and a half in Persia—in the service of the Bale mission—and afterwards for six years in Siberia.

The Scottish mission was suppressed by the Emperor Nicholas about the year 1835, and all the missionaries except two returned home. The son of one of these two (Galloway) was the only genuine Scotsman remaining at the time of my visit. Of the “Circassian Scotsmen” there were several, most of whom had married Germans. The other inhabitants were German colonists from the province of Sarätöf, and German was the language commonly spoken in the village.

After hearing so much about foreign colonists, Tartar invaders, and Finnish aborigines, the reader may naturally desire to know the numerical strength of this foreign element. Unfortunately we have no accurate data on this subject, but from a careful examination of the available statistics I am inclined to conclude that it constitutes about one-sixth of the population of European Russia, excluding Poland, Finland, and the Caucasus, and nearly a third of the population of the Empire as a whole.