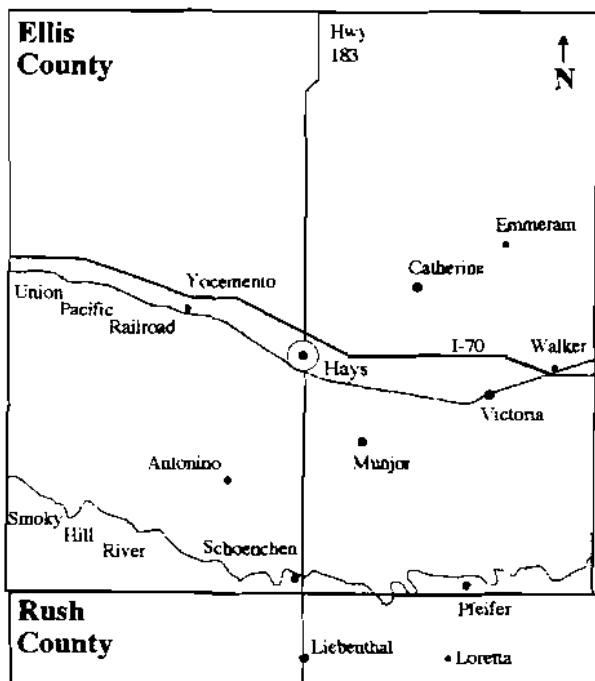


## RUSSIAN LOAN WORDS IN ELLIS COUNTY VOLGA GERMAN DIALECTS<sup>1</sup>

by  
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The Roman Catholic Volga German communities in Ellis County, Kansas were founded by German speaking immigrants from Russia who were attracted to the high plains of Kansas by the low cost of the land and the similarity of the landscape and soil to that of the great Russian steppes.<sup>2</sup> The first village established by the immigrants was Liebenthal, which actually lies just south of the Ellis County border in Rush County. The town was founded in February 1876. That same year the founding of Catherine, Herzog, Munjor and Pfeifer, in that order, followed. In April and May of 1877, the last of the original Ellis County villages, Schoenchen, was founded.



The Catholic Volga German  
Settlement Area

Prior to their arrival on the Great Plains of Kansas beginning in 1875, the Volga Germans lived along the southern Volga River in the Samara and Saratov

provinces of Russia. This region was first settled by Germans in the second half of the eighteenth century at the invitation of Catherine the Great of Russia, who sought to colonize the area and transform a once wild territory into a productive agricultural region.<sup>3</sup> This invitation came at an opportune time to many people in Germany, who sought to escape religious strife, hardship and hunger exacerbated by the Seven Years' War. Large numbers of willing emigrants from throughout Germany made the move to the southern Volga River region.

The first generation of settlers in Russia endured many hardships establishing a presence on the Russian steppes. Many of the original immigrants to Russia had come from areas in central Germany which were nothing like the Russian plains. Many had no agricultural background and had to learn farming through trial and error.<sup>4</sup> These people were unprepared and ill-equipped for the harsh life of dryland farmers. They had to learn to tolerate extremes in heat and cold, as well as periods of drought and flooding. Their housing was primitive and settlers at first had to live in earthen dugouts or crude wood-framed structures. Harvests were small while the settlers learned how and what to raise in the newly plowed-under grasslands. The settlers lived constantly under the threat of attack from nomadic Kirghiz horsemen, who roamed the grasslands with their herds of grazing cattle.

However, living conditions improved for following generations as immigrants developed farming techniques for the region. The Volga German communities survived and expanded in the century following the original settlement and establishing of colonies on the *Wiesenseite*, or eastern meadow side of the Volga and the *Bergseite*, or hilly west side. In all, some 104 colonies were established along the southern Volga.

During this century, several dozen Russian words were adopted into the German language of these communities, as speakers were introduced to new types of food, clothing, and technology. Although the Volga Germans purposely lived in closed communities separate from the Russian peasantry, the influence of their Slavic neighbors nevertheless had some impact on the vocabulary.<sup>5</sup>

Since only a few of these Russian words are still in use today in Ellis County, Kansas, evidence for the existence of many of the Russian words in Kansas Volga German comes from the work of Rev. Francis L. Laing and Judge J.C. Ruppenthal. Between 1909 and 1913 both men compiled lists of Russian words in the German language of the Russian immigrants in and around Ellis County.<sup>6</sup>

Based on evidence supplied by these lists, the words borrowed from Russian by the Volga Germans up until the end of the nineteenth century fall to a large extent into three groups, with a number of miscellaneous borrowings. These main classes and the words in each class are:<sup>7</sup>

1) Farm housing and technology:

ambar

'granary'

brosch	'fallow land'
grulitz	'a small closed porch'
messit	'bran and straw mash for feed'
pachshu	'garden'
sarai	'outbuilding'
sedilka	'harness bridge for horses'
simlinka	'dugout'
steppe	'field, prairie'

## 2) Clothing

boltschupke <sup>8</sup>	'short overcoat'
gofta <sup>9</sup>	'short jacket for women'
kardus	'cap'
manishka	'starched man's dress shirt'
nubi	'dress scarf'
paletot, baldo	'cloak, overcoat'
tulup	'great coat'
tuppke	'leggings'

## 3) Food

bierok	'stuffed pastry'
erbus, arbus	'watermelon'
kalatsch	'loaf of white bread'

## 4) Miscellaneous

bantke	'glass jar'
betta!	'awful'
blotnik, plodnik	'carpenter'
gumja	'friend'
jemtschick	'vehicle driver'
kaback	'wages'
kaluntsch	'swing'
klapot	'lawsuit'
knout	'whip'
natschelnik	'court official'
papyrus	'cigarette'
parschol!	'go away!'
plet	'wide whip'
prostoi	'common'
radnik	'recruit'

samovar	'tea steeper'
sotnik	'constable'
stuft	'quart measure'

It is unfortunate that the published lists of Laing and Ruppenthal do not cite the names of places or full names of informants used in compiling the lists. It is also not clear when the informants came to Kansas. They could have come with the original settlers, or may have come anytime as late as 1909.<sup>10</sup> It is also not clear whether first or second generation German speakers provided the words for the lists.

Reverend Laing was based in Victoria, Kansas. It is reasonable to assume that his contacts were mostly with the Catholic Volga Germans. Judge Ruppenthal may have had more contact with the Lutheran Volga Germans, since he lived in Russell, Kansas, although he held court in six counties populated with both Lutheran and Catholic Volga Germans.

Based on the evidence provided by their descendants, it can be claimed with reasonable certainty, however, that many German immigrants into the southern Volga region in the 1760s did not have sufficient background to have a strong German vocabulary in agricultural technology, thus explaining the need to borrow the term for a granary, *ambar*, which served an entirely different purpose than a barn, a more common farm building in Germany, for which the Volga Germans already had an adequate German word, *Stall*. Although the German language has a vocabulary term for fallow land, *Brachfeld* or *-land*, this word was perhaps unknown to the Volga Germans or maybe forgotten after a century in Russia, since it was replaced in some speakers' vocabulary by the Russian borrowing *brosch*. There is still competition today between two words in Ellis County Volga German to express the English word 'pasture', the German word *Feld* and the Russian borrowing *steppe*.

The settlers also were probably not familiar with severe continental winters and the need for a large, heavy overcoat, or *tulup*, and felt leggings or *tupke*<sup>11</sup> in order to survive outdoors on the steppes. The dress of their acclimated Slavic neighbors proved more practical. Thus the Volga Germans borrowed the names of the clothing items as they began to wear them.

As a result of their early encounters with their Slavic neighbors, the Volga Germans were introduced to new types of food. For example, they came to rely heavily on one particular fruit, *erbus*, or 'watermelon', which not only was a treat in the summertime, but also could be cooked down to a syrup to serve as a sweetener for baked goods.<sup>12</sup> In addition, a food item widely associated today with the Russian German settlers on the Great Plains is the *bierok*, a pastry stuffed with meat and cabbage.

Very few Russian words were produced in free conversation or translation exercises with third generation speakers in the Ellis County, Kansas, Volga German communities of Schoenchen, Munjor and Catherine. Therefore the lists

of Russian words in Kansas Volga German published by Laing and Ruppenthal as well as additional selected words from lists of Russian loans in Canadian Mennonite German by John Thiessen and Gerhard Wiens<sup>13</sup> were incorporated into a questionnaire and presented to informants in Schoenchen, Munjor and Catherine. The additional words from Thiessen and Wiens are:

<u>Russian</u>	<u>English</u>
baklazhan	'tomato'
baschtan	'vegetable plot outside of town'
bulka	'white bread'
chabar	'bribe'
chutor	'property'
dulja	'insulting gesture'
gorjko	'crowd yells after kiss'
kipjatok	'boiling water'
kwas	'malted drink'
retschka	'creek'
sutki	'24 hours, day and night'
tabun	'herd of horses'
tschesnok	'garlic'
tschetwertj	'grain measure (2099 hl)'

One other word was added to the questionnaire. The word is *nuschnik*, meaning 'outhouse'. This is arguably the most recognizable Russian borrowing in the Volga German dialects of Ellis County and the mention of the word is sure to bring a smile to any dialect informant. The word was certainly used early in the century when Ruppenthal and Laing were compiling their lists of Russian borrowings in the German dialects. Perhaps they felt it was in bad taste to include the word on their lists.

Dialect informants were asked if they recognized the Russian words on the questionnaire, and if so, if they still actively used them. By comparing the 1909-13 evidence collected by Laing and Ruppenthal with 1992-94 Ellis County Volga German evidence based on the questionnaire, it is apparent that many Russian terms must have been falling out of use by the time the second generation immigrants in Kansas reached adulthood. The third generation Schoenchen speakers who were presented the list recognized 17 of the 51 solicited Russian forms<sup>14</sup> or 33% and in free conversation or translations produced only 6 words or 12%. The fact that the informants recognize more words than they actually use shows that their parents or grandparents rarely used the Russian loanwords. The informants have never felt the need to retain the words in their own active vocabulary.

One clue to this is the fact that one Schoenchen speaker used the English word 'dugout' when describing the crude housing of the early settlers. Even though the Russian borrowing *simlinka* was still common earlier in the century, and appears in the literature about the Volga Germans in Kansas,<sup>15</sup> it was apparently not used enough in his family for him to remember the word.

Although not every informant recalled the same set of words, the words still generally recognized today by Schoenchen, Munjor and Catherine informants are listed below (The forms marked with \* were also collected during other dialect interview exercises without prompting from the questionnaire).<sup>16</sup>

ambar*	'granary'
banka	'glass jar'
birok	'stuffed pastry'
bletch	'riding whip'
blutnik	'carpenter'
erbus*	'watermelon'
goftya	'short jacket for women'
grilits*	'a small closed pore'
gumya*	'friend'
kaftan	'coat'
kalotch	'a loaf of white bread'
kvas	'malted drink'
nushnik*	'outhouse'
brostoi	'arrogant'
rodnik	'recruit'
shtep*	'meadow, prairie'
tupka	'leggings'

The Russian words used in the free conversation, picture description exercises and Wenker translation exercises all exhibit adaptation to the phonological and morphological system of the dialect as the following examples indicate:

guck mal in den nuschnik, ich denk, der ist in den nuschnik.  
'Look in the outhouse, I think he is in the outhouse'.

grose erbuse hun mir gevakse.  
'We grew large watermelons'.

ich sain mit di laid tsurik iver di shtep ins vaisefeld kfaren.  
'I drove with the people back there over the meadow into the grain field'.

des haus nebe drun hir hat se e grilitsya.  
 'The house has a little outbuilding next to it here'.

The first example sentence collected from a Schoenchen speaker relating an anecdote shows the use of a Russian masculine loan in the Schoenchen dialect. The collapse of the accusative and dative case in the definite article system of the dialect is suggested with the use of the loanword in this sentence.

The second example, collected from another Schoenchen speaker telling a joke, shows a regular German plural adaptation using the suffix *-e* with the singular Russian loanword, pronounced in isolation as *des erbus*.

The third sample sentence was produced by a Munjor speaker and contains a Russian feminine borrowing, while the fourth sentence, collected during a picture description exercise by the same Munjor informant, displays the tendency of the Ellis County German dialects to add diminutive suffixes to nouns frequently, even when the noun itself already implies smallness, as in the case of this loanword.

One other word first attested in the literature<sup>17</sup> and recently collected from one Munjor informant and one Catherine informant deserves mention. The word is *shiefens* 'pasture', an apparent blend of the Russian word *steppe* and the English word *fence*. According to both informants, the English element in the word plays little role in the meaning of the word. The word can encompass both the area within a fence or an unenclosed meadow. It is not necessarily used for a fence itself.

Borrowings from the Russian language ceased with the emigration of the Schoenchen speakers to Kansas. Based on the word lists of Laing and Ruppenthal, the predominant type of Russian borrowings up to that point had been nouns. The lists show only two Russian expressions, for *go away* and *awful*, that might be considered as drawing from the colloquial vocabulary of their Slavic neighbors.

The paucity of Russian borrowings by the immigrants is a reflection of the fact that for the most part, the Volga Germans in Russia lived apart from their Slavic neighbors. By 1909, the total number of commonly used Russian words in Ellis County Volga German was probably around forty words, taking into account that some words might have been missed in the studies of Ruppenthal and Laing. It took the dialect over a century to acquire this small vocabulary of loanwords. This is an interesting fact when compared with the claim by Georg Dinges that he had collected a list of 800 Russian words in the Volga German dialects spoken by those who remained in Russia!<sup>18</sup> Thus, in the nearly fifty years following the beginning of the exodus of Volga Germans to the western hemisphere, the remaining Volga Germans began to deal much more closely with the majority Russian speakers.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

1. The dialect data for this article was collected on several field trips to Ellis County, Kansas from 1992-94. The primary purpose of the trips was to gather dialect material for a dissertation on the Volga German dialect of Schoenchen, Kansas, but speakers from Munjor and Catherine were also interviewed. The basic interview consisted of translation exercises involving the 40 Wenker sentences, created in 1876 by Georg Wenker as the basis for the *Deutscher Sprachatlas*. Items from the 200 word corpus of the *Deutscher Wortatlas* were also collected. In order to get samples of extended conversation, informants were asked to describe drawings depicting rural landscapes and buildings. The informants were also asked to relate jokes and anecdotes in their dialects and to answer some basic questions about their families and life experiences.

2. Agents representing the Kansas Pacific Railroad, now Union Pacific, played a major role in bringing the Volga Germans to Ellis County, Kansas. See Saul (1974).

3. See Giesinger (1974) for a complete history of the Germans in Russian from the time of Catherine the Great until Khrushchev.

4. Laing (1910, 523) writes: "Tradition states that most of those who settled on the Wolga were artisans (weavers, cobblers, tailors, etc.) and but few farmers."

5. Kloberdanz (1975, 212) states that although the Volga Germans "maintained many eighteenth-century German customs and practices, they were nevertheless subjected to the physical and social influences of their new environment. The agricultural methods, architecture, and dress of the Volga Germans were noticeably influenced by Russian peasant culture and their daily vocabulary was sprinkled with Russian words."

6. See Laing (1910, 522-23) and Ruppenthal (1915, 524-25). Other researchers of the Volga Germans in Kansas have also provided examples of Russian loanwords in the dialects, with most words found in the lists of Laing and Ruppenthal. See Denning (1977, 175-77), Werth (1979, 68), Pfeifer (1983, 40), and Keel (1989, 395). Kloberdanz (1975, 212) mentions a common Russian greeting *zdavstvuite* [sic]. This greeting was not collected by Ruppenthal or Laing, nor did any informant in Kansas use the word. Werth (1979, 23) mentions the word *Babushka*, meaning a dark shawl, a term also absent from the Ruppenthal and Laing lists.

Toepfer and Dreilings' tale of the migration of the Volga Germans to Kansas occasionally contains a Russian word. For example, they write about the Volga Germans' first experiences with Russian food: "Their food consisted of cabbage soup and millet porridge, with a drink called *Kwass*, which is a sort of beer made from fermented rye or barley over which warm water has been poured." (1982, 12) Later they write of a typical village house: "The house was built with the back to the street. It had one door in the rear which entered into the *Kritiz*, a small vestibule or foyer, where the heavy outer garments were removed and hung on pegs in winter." (1982, 46) When describing women's sewing skills, they write: "Another woman sewed on a *Kaftan*, a dress coat for her husband made of dark felt." (1982, 50)

Similarly, Dreiling (1976, 35), mentions that the settlers had to dig "*Semyanka*, i.e., caves," in order to tough out that first winter after immigration to Russia. He also states that many of the Volga German men in Kansas wore a "cap called a carduse". (1976, 47)

7. The spellings of the Russian loanwords come from Ruppenthal. (1915, 524-25).

8. Laing (1910, 523) spells this as *polschupka* and translates it as 'large overcoat'.



9. Laing (1910, 522) spells this as *kafian* and translates it as 'coat'.
10. Although he mentions no dates, Ruppenthal (1915, 524) writes: "Among the first colonists in Kansas but very few were familiar with the Russian language, and fewer still could read or write it. The later comers, however, have shown constantly increasing familiarity with Russian..."
11. Since this word is no longer used by any informant who has been interviewed to date, it is not clear whether the Russian borrowing is singular or plural.
12. See Toepfer and Dreiling (1982, 56).
13. See Wiens (1957) and Thiessen (1963). These selected Russian loanwords from their articles were incorporated into the questionnaire to see if any of the loanwords borrowed by Germans in the Ukraine might be recognized by Volga Germans.
14. Of the lists from Ruppenthal and Laing, the questionnaire omits the words *boltschupke*, *kaback* and *kaluntsch*. It may be that the Canadian Mennonite word *baschtian* is the same word as the Volga German *pachshu*. It may also be that what Laing calls *Kafian* is what Ruppenthal calls *gofia*.
15. See Dreiling (1976, 35).
16. The transcriptions are designed for standard typefaces. The symbol ⟨a⟩ is normally pronounced like the *a* in 'father', while word-final ⟨-a⟩ represents a schwa sound and is pronounced something like the *u* in 'but'.
17. Gerald L. Denning, "A Linguistic Identification for Kansas Volga German", *Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics, Volume 2*. Ed. Laurel Watkins and Ginny Gathercole. (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1977), 176.
18. Dinges deplores the large influx of Russian words into the Volga German dialects by the 1920s. He writes: "Bewunderlich ist (aber selbstverständlich nicht zu sehr), daß russische Wörter auch dann entlehnt werden, wenn eine Sache von jeher bei den Deutschen bekannt war und ein gutes deutsches Wort zu ihrer Benennung vorhanden war, und dann dennoch ein russisches Wort anstatt eines deutschen gebraucht wird" (1923, 68). [It is remarkable, (but really not too remarkable), that Russian words are then borrowed, when a thing all along had been known to the Germans and a good German word had been available for naming it, and yet a Russian word instead of a German is used.] He states a little further on: "Ich glaube, es ist ganz unschön, wenn man russische Wörter in die deutsche Sprache ohne Not hineinmischt." (1923, 68) [I believe it is not very nice when one mixes Russian words into the German language unnecessarily.]
- Ruppenthal (1915, 524) notes that the late comers to Kansas were much more familiar with Russian than the earlier settlers, a sign that the Russian authorities were increasing efforts to teach Russian to the Volga Germans in much the same way that they were being encouraged to learn English in Kansas.
19. For information on the reign of Alexander III and his policies promoting russification see Giesinger (1974, 230-31). By 1892 Russian was the required language for school instruction.

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