Approaching the “Lost Swedish Tribe” in Ukraine

PIOTR WAWRZENIUK & JULIA MALITSKA

Tracing the “lost tribe”
– Gammalsvenskby as a research problem

In the spring of 1782 a group of villagers of Swedish origin reached their destination on the right bank of Dnipro River, about fifty kilometers from the centre of Kherson Oblast in Ukraine of today. Tradition has it that they celebrated mass, thanking the Heavens for their arrival at their destination. The Swedes had made their way to Ukraine from the remote island of Dagö (Hiiumaa) on the coast of the Duchy of Estonia. These villagers were in the vanguard of the colonization of the steppes bordering the Black Sea, an area Russia conquered in the 1770s. The village founded on the very spot where their journey ended, became known as “Gammalsvenskby” by its inhabitants (from the Russian “Staroshvedskoe,” literally meaning “Old Swedish Village”). The village remained largely intact until 1929, when a majority of the villagers decided to leave for Sweden. This book covers the developments from the planning of the southbound journey from Dagö in 1781 to the aftermath of the migration to Sweden.

When the research project about Gammalsvenskby was under development, the main question concerned what seemed to be a highly detailed nation-building process within a small group of peasants of Swedish origin. Living in southern Russia, and lacking the elites frequently viewed as crucial for such a process to succeed, the inhabitants of Gammalsvenskby seemed to manage their Swedish ancestry inexplicably well during a century and a half. However, once the project team, consisting of researchers from Södertörn University (Sweden) and Dnipropetrovsk National University (Ukraine), began to study various
aspects of the history of the village, it transpired that the processes that took place in Gammalsvenskby were not as straightforward as previously described. There were institutions and individuals that had a tremendous impact on the course of events. To the members of the team, the history of the village ceased to be that which it had traditionally been depicted as – a history of a handful of people, Swedish patriots, displaced from their original habitat by a cruel destiny, and defending their culture against all odds in hostile surroundings. Therefore, the main intention of the project was to employ new empirical material, put forward new questions, and by that offer new perspectives on the history of Gammalsvenskby.

The abundance of unused source material directed our work towards bringing its contents to the readership rather than contributing with theoretical approaches to the fields of migration studies and social history. The possible future directions of continued research on the subject suggest that theoretical concepts of ethnicity, nation and nationalism, along with comparisons with other groups who have experienced a similar fate, may contribute to the general understanding of the processes that the population of Gammalsvenskby went through from the end of the eighteenth century up to the start of the Second World War.¹

The members of the project thus raised questions as to the character of the migration of the Swedes, their adaptation to the physical milieu of the steppes, and their relationship with the state administration and various groups that populated the area. Finally, the implications of the political context in Russia, Finland, Sweden and the USSR for the development of the village would be studied. Earlier research has shown that such processes and relations alter the group and self-identity, depending on the degree of exposure to the new environment, the cultural distance between the culture of the immigrants and that of their new location, the immigrants’ ability to maintain contact with their original culture, and their sentiments towards the new culture.²

¹ Charlotta Hillerdal, People in Between. Ethnicity and Material Identity, a New Approach to Deconstructed Concepts (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2009). Unfortunately, Hillerdal fails to successfully apply the very concepts she suggests, making her approach both unhistorical and anachronistic, and the final result questionable.

² Tinghög, Petter, Migration, Stress and Mental Ill Health: Postmigration Factors and the Experiences in the Swedish Context (Linköping: Linköping University. Faculty of Arts and Science, 2009), 14.
Although obviously devoid of miracles, the history of Gammalsvenskby contains several interesting turns. From the beginning of the migration in 1781 to the Stalinist repression in the 1930s, this book offers a study of broad-reaching processes and developments by looking into the situation of a small group of people. Conversely, the history of the village sheds considerable light on the developments in Russia, the Soviet Union, Sweden and Finland. Contained is a combination of micro and macro history, where particular features prove helpful in explaining something general, and vice versa. The processes that had great impact on the village’s population can be summarized in two words – migration and modernization.

It has been claimed that “to study the European history is to study migration.” At least on three occasions – in 1781, 1929 and 1931 – the entire population of the village or a considerable portion decided to seek a better life and start over elsewhere. In 1781, the then Dagö islanders migrated to the steppes, and the village that would become Gammalsvenskby was born. In 1929, the majority of the population moved to Sweden following large-scale lobbying by the villagers and their backers in Sweden. Only two years later, a group of former villagers who were dissatisfied with the conditions offered by the Swedish authorities, and who found it difficult adapting to Swedish society, decided to move back to what then was the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, a step stimulated by intense Communist campaigning among the group. As migration studies show, a group’s reluctance to move is usually eased by earlier experiences and memories of having migrated. A group of discontented villagers who did not wish to move back to the USSR migrated to Canada in 1931. Long before that, several families from Gammalsvenskby had migrated to Canada and Siberia in the 1880s and 1890s. Most of the few remaining Dagö Swedes left the island in 1941.

Embedded in the history of the village are two grand top-down modernization projects – the Russian one, originating in the times of Catherine II, and the Soviet one, carried out in the early 1920s. The former was driven from a physiocratic standpoint, where access to arable land and its cultivation were seen as the base of wealth and prosperity, and the conviction that an influx of migrants from Central Europe would automatically result in the swift improvement of

---

agricultural methods and yields, and the development of handicrafts and manufacturing. On the most general level, the Soviet project was viewed by its architects as addressing and mending the shortcomings and failures of the imperial colonization and agriculture policy by creating a new peasant class, modernized collective agriculture and finally – the Communist society. Caught in the midst of these two projects were the residents of Gammalsvenskby, who suffered demographic losses on both occasions. Once in place in 1782, the villagers went through a difficult trial-and-error learning process which is closely described in three of the four articles of this volume. The migration to southern Russia also saw the population of the village face and deal with the phenomena of modernization such as improving communications and swift access to regional and international markets.

To a lesser degree, but still very concretely so, the villagers were subjected to Swedish influence after sustainable links with Sweden were established in the 1880s. In frequent contact with Sweden and the Swedophones in Finland, the villagers faced Swedish and Finnish dilemmas of cultural and political differentiation, features that, along with several others, have been described as characteristic of modernization. The visitors from Scandinavia brought with them convictions that were formed by the specific political and cultural context in the home countries. Those convictions constituted the prism through which the village was presented. Naturally, this way of viewing the course of events in Gammalsvenskby did not take into account the historical development of the village, and often proved inaccurate.

Colonization of the Black Sea steppe and imperial policies in the region
Russia’s colonization and incorporation of the steppe reflected and produced a particularly complicated kind of imperialism, one in which empire building, state building, society building, and nation building intertwined. The steppe as a whole was never described as a colony,

4 From a vast amount of literature one finds a good overview in Duran, James A Jr., “Catherine II, Potemkin, and Colonization Policy in Southern Russia,” Russian Review, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Jan., 1969), p. 23. For a detailed account, see the remaining part of the same article and the texts of Bobyleva och Malitska in this volume.
6 Willard Sunderland, Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe. (Cornell University, 2004), 5.
presumably because it was not geographically separated from the rest of the state, although in other respects – most obviously, the name New Russia – the colonial status seemed clear. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the steppe had been so profoundly transformed by Russian imperialism that it was difficult for contemporaries to determine whether it constituted a borderland, a colony, or Russia itself. The view of colonization as a popular, natural, and mostly gentle movement that unfolded within an empire, but was not itself imperialist, was the product of myth, of wishful thinking by the Russian elite. There were no natural barriers between the steppe and “Russia,” the region was rather close to the center of the empire, there seemed to be an abundant supply of “open” land suitable for farming or stock raising, there was no state organization there and the indigenous population was sparse. All this combined to make Russian migration to the south a relatively simple undertaking which could easily be interpreted as an elemental, organic process.

A considerable proportion of those who colonized New Russia were Russian and Ukrainian peasants but foreigners also contributed to shaping the region.

The aims of the Russian government were partly economic. By encouraging foreign settlements the government hoped to be able to develop lands that had so far been uninhabited and thus increase revenues, to improve the balance of trade and to ease rural over-population in central Russia. There were also political goals such as improving border security, strengthening Russian authority, and populating the new territories with loyal peoples. The foreigners were considered to be of superior virtues compared to the autochthonous population. Thus, they were expected to carry out “cultural” and “civilizing” missions and elevate the remaining population by example. These tasks were connected with the economic one – the promotion of new methods of production among other groups of the population in the colonized territories.

In the eighteenth century, serfdom in central Russia deprived the Russian peasantry of free movement, preventing any substantial mobility into the territory that was being colonized. The internal demographic potential of the Russian Empire was, therefore, insufficient.

7 Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 89, 223.
to fulfill the government’s colonization plans. The peasants were legally tied to territories already under cultivation. While not denying the native population the possibility to take part in the mastering and opening up of the new incorporated territories, Russia’s government turned to the Central European population.

The new phase of Russia’s colonization policy on the steppe was introduced as a result of large-scale territorial expansion in the second half of the eighteenth century. The recently annexed, nomadic-populated or scarcely populated lands (Caucasus and Volga regions etc.), were to be absorbed and gradually integrated into the imperial space. The victories in the wars against Turkey in 1768–1774, 1787–1791 and Count Grigorii Potemkin’s activities, directed part of the colonization to the new acquisitions of the so-called Southern Russia or New Russia. As a result of the strengthening of Russian influence in the Black Sea region after the peace treaty with Turkey in 1774 and the gradual advancement of Russia’s borders to the south, the Zaporizhian Sich had lost its main function of being a Russian outpost against the Turks and Tatars. Considering the Sich to be a rebellious centre of aristocratic struggle, Catherine II abolished it in 1775. The lands of the former Zaporizhian Sich and the Cossack Hetmanate, along with the territories between the Pivdennyi Buh and Dnipro rivers, were included in the state fund for land distribution.

The territorial-administrative absorption of the Azov and Black Sea territories went hand in hand with the colonization process. In 1764, the province of New Russia was founded and it existed until 1775. Count Grigorii Potemkin was appointed its governor-general. After the abolition of the Zaporizhian Sich in 1775, its lands were attached to the

---


11 Natalia Shushliannikova, Rozpovidi z istorii Khersonskogo kraiu (Kherson: KhDU, 2003), 6.
New Russia and Azov provinces, which were made up of the former New Russia Province and the lands of the Don Cossacks. In 1784, the next large administrative-territorial changes took place: the New Russia and the Azov provinces formed Ekaterinoslav viceroyalty. Additionally, the Senate proclaimed a nominal decree founding the Tavriia region on the territory of the former Crimean khanate. In 1796 the districts of Kerch, Kinburn and Enikale, Crimea and a considerable area between Pivdennyi Buh and Dniester rivers, together with the lands of the former Zaporizhian Sich, formed the New Russia province which in 1803 was divided into three provinces: Ekaterinoslav, Kherson and Tavriia.

The colonization of the Black Sea territory was to some extent spontaneous and to some extent organized by the Russian state. Russia had vast territories to the east and south opened to settlement. When these territories were opened to settlers, the Russian government could benefit from the experience of other European countries (particularly Prussia) in controlling, occupying and populating new territories. On 4 December 1762 Catherine II issued a Manifesto inviting foreigners to settle in Russia. The purpose was twofold. The first aim was to encourage cultivation of the vast steppes and develop mining, commerce, and manufacturing. This was the reasoning presented in the manifesto. The second aim was the development of land in a region where minor, but protracted military problems were experienced along the southern frontiers. New settlements would provide a buffer zone between the peasant population of Russia and its nomadic neighbors. However, the number of artisans who came to settle in the region was small, and the manifesto was generally not considered to have achieved its goal.

Therefore, Catherine II issued a new document on 22 July 1763, offering more attractive privileges for newcomers. Travel expenses would
be paid for by the Russian state for those who could not afford the journey; free land was granted for tillage in certain areas, primarily in the Volga River region; and religious freedom would be granted to the incoming Christian population. The colonists were not allowed to convert the Orthodox population, but were free to proselytize among Muslims. The settlers on uncultivated territory would also be granted freedom from taxes and tributes for thirty years. In addition, tradesmen who settled in the towns would be free from taxes for a period of between five and ten years depending on the location. The colonists would be granted free lodging for the initial six months of settlement, and receive interest free loans for the construction of houses and purchasing of farm equipment and cattle. The loans would be repayable only after ten years. The newcomers would receive the right to self-government of separately established colonies and freedom from import duties on all goods they brought with them. They were granted inducements for the manufacturing of goods, and freedom from military service. In fact, the government passed the task of building a social and economic structure in the colonized areas from scratch on to the newcomers.

With these new enticements in hand, Russian representatives and government agents actively began to recruit immigrants abroad. For various reasons, non-German populations did not respond well. Some countries that allowed free publication of the invitation were already enjoying relative prosperity and had their own overseas colonies. For example, an English-speaking colony in America would be more attractive to an Englishman than the strange and remote land of Russia. Muslims from Turkish lands foresaw their enserfment by the Russians. The Habsburg Empire forbade emigration after it reached high levels in 1760s, and because of their own settlement programs in the Hungarian territory. Active recruitment could only take place in free cities and states where there were no laws limiting emigration.

Several German states were unable to control migration, which reached particularly high levels in the Kingdom of Prussia including Silesia and Pomerania; Württemberg; Bohemia; the Grand Duchies of Baden and Hessen; the cities of Lübeck, Danzig and Mainz on the Rhine. The typical reasons for migration – then as now – were war, displacement caused by war, to avoid compulsory military service; dangers

17 Zagorovskii, Inostrannaia kolonizatsiia Novorossii, 3.
posed by climatic and geographical conditions (flooding, drought); political oppression or religious persecution; a friend or relative who was encouraging migration; and possibilities to receive employment or improve one’s economic situation. Among the reasons for migration, one should also mention avoiding being drafted and the high taxes exacted by the German states, long-term lease of men as mercenaries to America; stern management methods; the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763) and the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815), along with foreign occupation and other military conflicts. Political instability, poor harvests and lean years, epidemics of plague and cholera caused a new wave of migration from the European states in the eighteenth century.\(^{18}\)

The scale of migration caused radical changes in the ethnic structure of the settlers and pushed the Russian government to search for new “human capital”. Russian and Ukrainian peasants played a significant role in the colonization and the economic mastering of the Azov and Black Sea territories. New settlers came from the Central Russian provinces, the left bank Ukraine, and Bessarabia.\(^{19}\) Since the second half of the eighteenth century, people from foreign countries began to play a considerable role in the colonization of this territory. The edict of Joseph II from 1768, forbidding migration from the Habsburg lands, did not stop the human flow from Europe; it only changed its source.

All ethnic groups that moved to uncultivated new lands were granted privileges, but the conditions of colonization were unique for each group. They determined not only the differentiation in the normative granting of land, but also civil rights and social liberties. Russians and Ukrainians, and Orthodox peasants in general, were given minimal social and economic privileges compared to the foreign settlers.\(^{20}\) It was only natural that the government should wish to attract people from ethnic groups that lived near the state border: Bulgarians, Poles, Jews, Moldavians, and Germans. However, the settlement of other

---


\(^{20}\) Alexander Klaus, Nashi kolonii. Opyt i materialy po istorii i statistike inostrannoi kolonizatsii v Rossii, vyp. 1 (St Petersburg: Tip. V.V. Nusval’ta, 1869), 21.
foreign groups (such as Italians and Swedes) was a result of unexpected developments that the authorities were quick to realize. This fact considerably determined the impact of each group on the socio-cultural and economic development of the southern provinces of imperial Russia. By offering land and various privileges to the foreign settlers, the Russian government aimed to create faithful and loyal subjects, quite unlike the unruly Zaporizhian Cossacks. Depending on time and place, the colonization process could be hesitant or intense; “popular” or “state-directed”; Russian, foreign, “alien”, or “sectarian.”

The government was eager to involve as many settlers as possible, particularly so after the Habsburg lands were closed for emigration. The first phase of colonization was ambiguous. On the one hand, by mastering the enormous territories of virgin lands, opening new factories and inventing new agricultural tools, colonists had a considerable impact on the economic development of these lands. On the other hand, if the Zaporizhian Cossacks, who were already accustomed to the local conditions, had not been forced to leave their native lands but had been granted the same privileges as the colonists, the results would probably have been even more beneficial. While not denying the positive influence of the colonists, it should be noted that many of them were incapable of physical work, let alone grasp the proportions of their tasks during Catherine II’s and Paul I’s colonization era. Only after 1804, when the new Tsar, Alexander I, extended another invitation to settle in this region, did the structure of the colonists change. However, because of the shortage of available lands his invitation was made more specific and selective than Catherine’s. He sought people who were particularly skilled in agriculture and handicrafts – well-to-do farmers with skills in viticulture, management and the breeding of livestock. While they received some financial and logistic assistance with their relocation, they were also expected to bring with them significant quantities of cash and goods. Since the introduction of explicit rules for the reception and the settling down of colonists in February 1804, colonist status could be attained only by settlers with families, who possessed a certain amount of capital, were well-behaved and could be considered useful to the country such as farmers cattle-breeders, gardeners, wine-makers, and artisans.

21 Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 223.
22 *Nemtsy v istorii Rossii*, Diesendorf, 144–147.
As more and more of the steppe was absorbed, as the ambitions of the government increased, the bureaucratic machinery also grew.\(^\text{23}\) In 1763, the Office for Foreigners’ Guardianship (Kantseliariia opekunstva inostrannykh) was established in St Petersburg under the management of Catherine II’s favorite Grigorii Orlov. It had the same powers as a State Board and an annual budget of 20,000 rubles. In 1782 after the formation of the provinces, that office was abolished and the management of the colonists and state peasants was brought under the supervision of Direktora domovodstva. Despite the large sums spent by the state to attract foreigners and to settle them, there were colonies which suffered extreme decline and many general complaints came from the settlers. For that reason, a new board was set up in 1797 to manage the colonies: the Board of State Economy, Guardianship of Foreigners and Rural Husbandry (Ekspeditsiia gosudarstvennogo khoziaistva opekunstva inostrannykh i selskogo domovodstva, from now on referred to as “the Board.” In 1802 it was attached to the Ministry of Internal Affairs but was abolished shortly after.

The Board introduced auditing inspections in order to get a clear picture of the settlers’ living conditions and the reasons for the unsatisfactory development of the colonies. Officials were sent to the colonies all over the country and obliged to acquaint themselves with the colonists’ lives and agricultural activities. Thus, Court Adviser Samuel Contenius (1749–1830), an official of the Geographical department, was sent to New Russia to inspect the foreign settlements in 1798–1800. He was ordered to personally investigate the settlers’ economic activities in detail, identify their shortcomings, and submit an account of his findings.

Having conducted this inspection, Contenius blamed the government for the deplorable economic situation of the New Russia colonists.\(^\text{24}\) In his report to the Senate, he listed the following obstacles: insufficient development of animal husbandry because of drought, poor harvests, and parasites; shortage of agricultural tools; permanent cattle disease; poor mastering of the crafts, mainly during winter times; the colonists disobeyed the orders of the local government.\(^\text{25}\) To


alleviate this, he suggested the government write off the debts and allot more land to the colonists.\textsuperscript{26}

The establishment in 1800 of the Guardianship Office for New Russia Foreign Settlers of Southern Russia (\textit{Kontora opekunstva Novorossiiskikh inostrannykh poselentsev Iuzhnogo kraia Rossii})\textsuperscript{27} headed by Samuel Contenius and the subsequent restructuring of the management of the colonies was a powerful step towards more efficient governmental support and supervision of the foreign colonists.\textsuperscript{28}

In 1818 the management of the foreign colonies was reorganized again as the number of colonists had increased considerably. An imperial decree introduced the Trustees Committee for Foreign Settlers in Southern Russia (\textit{Popechitelnii komitet inostrannykh poselentsev Iuzhnogo kraia Rossii})\textsuperscript{29} consisting of the Ekaterinoslav, Odessa and Bessarabia Guardianship Offices.\textsuperscript{30} Its abolishment in 1833 marked the end of the period of foreign colonists’ settlement and their migration into the Russian Empire. Consequently, in 1837 the colonists were placed under the supervision of the Ministry of State Property and there was no longer a separate administration for the colonists.\textsuperscript{31} Moreover, starting from the 1830s, government policy took a new turn. A new ideology came into being involving the encouragement of an “official nationality” based on the principles of Orthodoxy, autocracy, Nationality and Slavdom. This ideology itself was a call for “constructing” an identity that would exclude non-Orthodox or culturally non-conformist elements.\textsuperscript{32} Eventually, foreign colonists were perceived as a potential threat to Russian national identity, unless they converted to Orthodox Christianity.

The unique legal status of the colonists in Russian society prevented their rapid assimilation with the rest of the population. Expectations of the Russian government that the colonists not only would colonize the unsettled lands, but also, in a certain way, stimulate a long-lasting develop-

\textsuperscript{26} DADO, f. 134, op.1, spr. 28, 33.
\textsuperscript{27} Abbreviated as: the Guardianship Office.
\textsuperscript{28} Nemtsy v istorii Rossii, Diesendorf, 81–95.
\textsuperscript{29} Abbreviated as: the Trustees Committee.
\textsuperscript{30} Nemtsy v istorii Rossii, Diesendorf, 190–194.
ment of agriculture and modernization of southern Russia were not fully realized. During almost all of the nineteenth century, the effect the colonists had on the economy differed only slightly from that of Russian peasant households. However, the colonists constantly improved agricultural tools and introduced new agricultural machines and crops. Still, foreign settlers did not make a deep impact on their next-door neighbors due to the isolation of the colonist societies, their legal separation from the rest of the rural population, and the cultural, and mental distance between the Russian and Ukrainian peasants and the colonists. Moreover, the improved agricultural tools remained unattainable for the Ukrainian and Russian peasants, because of their relative poverty.33 Owing to their lack of knowledge of Russian, their economic self-sufficiency and self-governance, their religious creed and ethos, the colonists remained separated from their Ukrainian and Russian neighbors.

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of rapid socio-economic development in Russia. A number of so-called “bourgeois” reforms (land, administrative, judicial, educational and military reforms) were introduced and with them came profound changes in the governmental attitude and official discourse towards the foreign colonists. Alexander II’s decree of 4 July 1871 embodied “great changes” for the colonists. The decree abolished the privileges of the colonists, i.e. colonist status and the special management of the colonies. Foreign colonists were put under common Russian governmental rule and received the status of landowner-settler (sobstvennik-poselianin) with rights and duties equivalent to the state peasants after the emancipation in 1861.34 Further foundation of colonies, after 1872 – the settlements of settler-owners, could take place on state lands, but also on other land purchased by colonists. The introduction of general military service in 1874 extended to the colonists as well. This was one of the main reasons for Mennonite emigration to Canada and the USA. In the second half of the nineteenth century, a series of “questions” occupied a prominent place in the Russian political lexicon. While some questions concerned political and social issues across the empire as a whole, others, such as the Jewish question,

the Ukrainian question, and the Baltic question pertained only to non-Russian subjects of the empire.\footnote{Elena Campbell, \textit{Russian Empire: Space, People, Power 1700–1930}, p. 320.} Moreover, by the 1870s the “German element” as a whole had become problematic enough to be labeled a “question” – the so-called “German question”.\footnote{Sunderland, \textit{Taming the Wild Field}, 189.} Purchases of land by German colonist were in turn perceived as a “threat”.\footnote{Nemtsy v istorii Rossii, Diesendorf, 551–552, 555–556; James Urry, “Mennonites, Nationalism and the State in Imperial Russia,” in \textit{Journal of Mennonite Studies}, vol.12 (1994), 65–88.} Gradually, formal Russification and informal Russianisation took place all over the foreign settlements of the Russian Empire.\footnote{Eric Lohr, \textit{Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I} (Harvard University Press, 2003), 90–91.}

The end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century saw a crisis of agriculture throughout the country. Ex-colonists lost land and, as a result, emigration grew. Because of Prime Minister Peter Stolypin’s agrarian reforms 1907–1914, most of the ex-colonists became private owners of their land.\footnote{Nemtsy v istorii Rossii, Diesendorf, 558–560.} However, many landless peasants or peasants who had had insufficient land migrated to Siberia. In October 1914, the Minister for Internal Affairs sent a secret circular in which he urgently recommended that settlements and districts with German names instead be given Russian names.\footnote{Lohr, \textit{Nationalizing the Russian Empire}, 1–9, 109-111,166–173.} It was soon implemented.

A central aspect of Russia’s participation in the First World War was a sweeping campaign against so-called “enemy aliens” in order to mobilize better for war. Not only ethnic Germans but also Jews, Muslims, Czechs, Poles, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Serbs were included among the “enemy subjects.” The popular campaign quickly expanded well beyond enemy subjects to affect large numbers of naturalized immigrants and Russian citizens whose loyalty was questioned because of their ethnicity, religion, or former citizenship.\footnote{See Kotljarchuk’s article in this volume.} A similar campaign, but with a more paranoid touch and hundreds of thousands of victims, was conducted under Stalin in the second half of 1930s. It was directed against several minority groups primarily in the western borderlands. Poles and Germans turned out to be the campaign’s main targets, but it also reached the Swedes in Gammalsvenskby.\footnote{See Kotljarchuk’s article in this volume.}
However, wartime hostility focused predominantly on people of “German origin” as they had grown into a population of over two million by the 1897 census. According to the “liquidation laws” 1914–1917 German meetings, along with the use of, and teaching in, the German language were forbidden. Restrictions on German ownership of land and land tenure were introduced; first in the western borderlands, then all over the country. Germans were moved from the proximity of the war-front territory. Finally, a special committee for the fight against German dominance was established.

The campaign resulted in the forced migration of roughly one million civilians, nationalization of a substantial portion of the economy, and the transfer of extensive land holdings and rural properties from the targeted minorities to groups favored by the state. Such a campaign had a direct impact on the multinational society of New Russia as its aim was the creation of a homogenous nation state and the leveling of the legal and cultural differences between the socioeconomic and ethnic groups of the population.

From the second half of the eighteenth century until the First World War, Russia’s colonization policy in the Azov and Black Sea region and official attitudes towards the colonists went through a far-ranging evolution. From the utopian expectations of the modernizing “mission” of the colonists, the attitude changed into deep suspicion with dystopian undertones. The modernizing goals that encompassed the large-scale economic and social reshaping of the southern outskirts of the empire were not realized, not least because of the complexity of the task, shortcomings in planning, and insufficient support from the authorities. In addition, the ideology of Official Nationality and the further advancement of Russian nationalism increasingly alienated large groups of former European subjects, particularly the Germans.

Sudden turn of destiny or forced resettlement?

The first time the Swedes on Dagö appeared in an official document was in 1470 when the Master of the Teutonic Order released them from the duty of daily labor in exchange for an annual fee of twenty Riga marks.

---

42 Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire*, 4.
43 Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire*, 84–120.
44 *Nemtsy v istorii Rossi*, Diesendorf, 555–591.
45 Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire*, 1.
46 *Nemtsy v istorii Rossi*, Diesendorf, 558–562.
per district. These farmers were provided with a charter from the Master of the Order according to which they were allowed to live freely on the island, make a living as anglers, cultivate land and sell the products from their lands and forests. The Swedish settlements were mainly found in two districts on the northern part of the island. Swedes made up about a seventh of the total population of Dagö. The earliest duties of the Estonian Swedes were piloting ships, assisting in the salvaging of shipwrecks and providing the church with fish.

In 1561 when the rule of the Teutonic Order collapsed, the region was taken over by Sweden and new tax rules were introduced. The island remained under Swedish rule until 1710, when Russia invaded the Baltic region. The tax collectors of the Swedish Crown and their clerks made a list of all taxable farmers, Swedish as well as Estonian.

In the beginning, the tax collectors of the Swedish Crown respected the privileges of the Swedish farmers, granted by feudal law. Swedish monarchs issued new charters stipulating protection. The wars against Denmark, Poland and Muscovy, in which Sweden had been victorious, had for the most part been waged with borrowed means. The Swedish Crown was indebted to many military commanders. All that back pay was now to be cashed in and this was done mostly through selling conquered land or through awarding land to noblemen in Swedish service. In contrast to the Estonians, who had been enserfed after 1343, the Estonian Swedes had until that time managed to keep their personal freedom. In the years between 1590 and 1630, the free Swedish farmers living on Dagö came under the rule of feudal landlords who had no interest in respecting their privileges.

Count Jakob De la Gardie was given Dagö as an enfeoffment in 1620. King Gustavus II Adolphus then sold him the island in 1624 to keep in perpetuity as a fief. The situation of the Dagö-Swedes worsened even more when Axel-Julius De la Gardie inherited Dagö from his father. In 1659 the new landlord forbade the Dagö Swedes to trade freely with lime and cattle.

After many quarrels, Karl XI appointed a commission in Reval. The commission was to take a closer look at the complaints of the Swedish farmers in Estonia and ascertain their legal substance. The lawsuit ended with a compromise. Axel-Julius De la Gardie managed to divide the Swedish farmers into two groups. The Charters of the Grand Master of the German Order were deemed to be valid for the Swedes living in the villages of Röicks and Kertells. It is stated in a resolution from 7 October
1685 that the people living in the main villages were covered by the Charters but not the farmers in the neighboring villages. The remainder (approximately a third of the Dagö Swedes) was set on an equal footing with the Estonian serfs, unless they moved to Sweden.

In 1721 after the Nystad peace treaty, the Dagö Swedes requested that Peter I confirm their old privileges. Having received no reply, they repeated their request and the matter was given to the Restitution Commission that was founded by Catherine I. While waiting to hear from a descendant of Axel-Julius De la Gardie, the commission declined to make any decisions. By that time, Dagö belonged to the Russian Crown, which leased the island for shorter periods to officers and noblemen. The new possessors respected the exceptional position of the Swedes regarding their personal freedom, but demanded a workload and taxes equal to that of most Estonians.

In 1740, the Russian Senate made an important statement when the Estonian peasants were declared the personal property of their landlords. In 1755, the Russian Crown returned the estates on Dagö to the family of De La Gardie-Stenbock.

In the summer of 1779, the Swedish peasants on Dagö initiated legal action for their full freedom. On 17 January 1780, a temporary agreement was reached between Count Stenbock and his subjects. Stenbock recognized the freedom of the Swedes and the peasants were given the right to stay on their farms until March 1781, after which the matter would be re-examined – these were the key points of the agreement. Soon the situation was tense again between Count Stenbock and the Swedes. Consequently, Karl Magnus Stenbock sold his properties on Dagö to Baron Otto Reinhold Ludwig von Ungern-Sternberg.

The State Collegium of Justice in St Petersburg demanded that the new landowner should stick to the agreement of 17 January 1780 and give the peasants a six-month notice period. The peasants immediately sent a delegation to Baron Ungern-Sternberg and asked for permission to stay. On 9 March 1780 Baron Ungern-Sternberg agreed to grant this permission.

According to one version the Count Karl Magnus Stenbock, who knew Grigorii Potemkin personally, was the one who suggested that the

47 For more about this development, see Jörgen Hedman, “När och varifrån kom den svenska befolkningen till Dagö?” in Svenskbyborna 60 år i Sverige 1929–1989 (Visby: Bokförlaget Hanseproduktion, 1989) 20–34; Jörgen Hedman, Lars Åhlander, Historien om Gammalsvenskby och svenskarna i Ukraina (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2003); Jörgen
Swedish peasants could become a part of Russia’s colonization policy. He, by chance, made an offer to Potemkin to resettle hard-working and capable Swedish peasants of Dagö Island in return for the liquidation of his debts. Stenbock intended to settle Estonian peasants in place of the Swedes who had brought him so much trouble. Potemkin, who was responsible for the colonization of the Azov and Black Sea territories, was having problems recruiting migrants and was very much interested in potential colonists. He encouraged Catherine II to proclaim a decree which would give the Dagö Swedes the chance to move to New Russia. A decree was issued on 8 March 1781, on the eve of the agreement between Baron Ungern-Sternberg and the Swedes.

**Document 1:** The Imperial Decree of Catherine II to the Estonia general-governor Board about the resettlement of the peasants of the manor of Körgessaare (Hohenholm) to New Russia province. 8 March 1781.

Deigning the resettlement of the Swedish peasants of the manor of Hohenholm to New Russia province, who received the freedom from the former Master of the Teutonic Order and privileges and resolutions from the Swedish monarchs, confirmed by their present landowner Count Steinbock. He adds that the term of his engagement of the peasants lapsed after February of the present year. Thus, they must leave his lands. We are ruling to resettle these Swedish peasants, in total around 1000 persons female and male, to New Russia province in order accept them as state peasants**48 of the local establishment.**49 Therefore, the Reval general-gubernatorskaia kantseliariia is obliged to announce this will to all peasants, to compile their census and support them in the resettlement. Prince Potemkin, the governor-general of New Russia, Azov and Astrakhan, will be responsible for the fulfillment of the resettlement, for setting and allotting favorable state lands, for settling them and for their supplying.

Catherine

---


*State peasants were considered free, but their movement was restricted. They were also bound to the land.

**The Kazykermen district of the New Russia province.
A small group of Estonian Swedes was hardly central to the colonization of New Russia. However, having become accidentally involved with the colonization project in the recently expanded southern fringes of Russia, the Dagö Swedes were facing the possibility of ending their centuries-long judicial dispute with the landowners.

Such a solution to the conflict was also favorable for Potemkin. He was obliged to colonize the Azov and Black Sea territories and have them populated as soon as possible. Consequently, the decision satisfied Potemkin and Ungern-Sternberg, but it signified the beginning of a new ordeal for the Swedes. Potemkin persuaded Catherine II to issue a Decree on 8 March 1781 regarding the resettlement of approximately one thousand Swedish peasants from Hohenholm manor on the island of Dagö to the Kherson district near to the town of Kazikermen in the New Russia province.

Potemkin believed that the peasants would agree to move, if they were granted favorable conditions and some special privileges. He sent his representative, Colonel Ivan Sinelnikov, to Dagö, where he arrived on 10 July 1781. Sinelnikov gathered the Swedish peasants and explained the conditions for the settlement in the Black Sea territory. After some debate, the Swedes agreed to move. On 20 August 1781, a group of Swedes left their native island of Dagö forever.

Unlike German colonists, for instance, the Estonian Swedes were involved in the colonization of the recently acquired territory only by accident. Russia’s government had never planned to set up large Swedish colonies in the Black Sea territory, as it had for Germans. Therefore, it is impossible to compare the place and role of Swedes and Germans in the mastering of the region. Potemkin’s personal initiative to resettle the Swedes definitely influenced their destiny beyond this. Although actually being Russian subjects, the Swedes were granted the privileged status of colonists – just as foreign subjects from German states had been.50

The migration of the Estonian Swedes from Dagö to the South seems to have been due to two main factors: the failed struggle to maintain their free judicial states and their old customs, and the concurrent promotion of large-scale colonization in the annexed Azov and Black Sea regions. While there was a general feeling of fatigue and hopelessness concerning the former, the latter opened a window of opportunity that a majority of the Swedish population of Dagö decided to take advantage of.

The contributions

By compiling the material from several archives and authors, Svitlana Bobyleva pursues the myth of the Gammalsvenskby Swedes’ supposed bad treatment by the Russian state authorities. She argues that the trauma and massive loss of life during the migration and the initial years in southern Russia has cast a blurring shadow over the course of events. The Swedes were not forced to migrate, but accepted an offer that at the time seemed very generous given their distressed and unclear legal situation in Estonia. The inability of the authorities to support the Swedes, during the initial years of the settlement in southern Russia, was due to the lack of knowledge of the territory where the settlement was taking place and the fragmentary character of the regional administration. Once efficient administrators who were aware of the local conditions began to act, conditions for the Swedes improved greatly; they were even officially granted the colonist status they had so far enjoyed de facto. Bobyleva also punctuates the myth about the broken promises concerning the acreage of land provided to the Swedes, showing that the land was redistributed in 1804 due to the significantly reduced number of Swedish families as compared to 1781. The 34 families that had survived required much less land than the 200 families that originally left Dagö, according to the authorities’ calculations. The redistribution also took place at a time when the abundance of land available in the late eighteenth century had turned into a growing scarcity of land for distribution among the colonists who were arriving in droves.

Julia Malitska’s chapter illuminates the process of acculturation of the villagers of Gammalsvenskby from the migration from Dagö to the withdrawal of their colonist status in 1871. The term “acculturation” allows the studying of the processes of adaptation to the new milieu as in-making and partial, rather than as a straightforward way towards assimilation. Malitska finds that after the initial shocks caused by the hardships of the migration, and different climatic and geographical conditions of the new settlement that resulted in drastic initial demographic losses, the village began to successfully integrate into the ever changeable milieu of the southern fringes of the Russian Empire. New methods of agricultural production were adopted and new complementary sources of income were found. The Swedes did this in interaction with the authorities, and their Russian, Ukrainian and German neighbors, but without giving up the basic features of their native culture. It may be argued that their knowledge of German and Russian made it easier for them to keep their old customs and hold on to their traditional religion. The mastering of both languages gave fruitful neighborly interaction, good commercial relationships and allowed good contacts with the colonist authorities, something that the Swedes’ German neighbors frequently lacked. Due to their ability to communicate with basically everyone, the villagers of Gammalsvenskby were more or less free to safeguard their customs. Nevertheless, not merely the material, but the spiritual culture of the villagers was slowly changing, becoming vulnerable to stronger assimilation currents in the decades after 1871.

Piotr Wawrzeniuk studies the creation of the village as it was understood in Sweden and Finland during the three decades preceding the First World War. The author suggests that the villagers preserved their Swedish identity due to their relative isolation from the surrounding society and to the fact that they could therefore retain characteristics which are usually considered typical of peasants in the early modern period. The visit by Finnish-Swedophone linguist Herman Vendell to the village marked the start of a period when Gammalsvenskby was integrated into an all-Swedish context, where nationalistic and romantic views of common ancestry as a tool of identification and unification were dominant. Although several visitors to the village noticed that the villagers had been affected by a century of living in southern Russia, a way of reasoning prevailed where the population was automatically included in the Swedish nation. The visitors to the village
from Sweden and Finland mirrored the advent of modernity in these countries. The cultural differentiation within both countries proved influential for the future development of Gammalsvenskby. The author brings forward the examples of Herman Vendell and the Swedish missionary Emma Skarstedt. They were influenced by the very specific cultural and political contexts of Finland and Sweden respectively. Their beliefs, shaped in the home countries, functioned as a prism through which the situation in the village was seen. The romantic and nationalistic view presented by Vendell would dominate the image of the village prior to the migration of most of the villagers to Sweden in 1929. Following that, it became obvious that the Gammalsvenskby inhabitants were influenced as much by their Swedish roots as by living for 147 years in the specific milieu of southern Russia.

Andrej Kotljarchuk’s chapter explores virtually unknown aspects of the development during the 1930s. The author shows how a disillusioned group of 265 former Gammalsvenskby villagers who returned to the USSR in 1930–31 became a piece in a propaganda game orchestrated from the USSR. After the split within the Swedish Communist Party (SKP), the branch loyal to the Comintern took the opportunity to flex its muscles politically in Sweden on the one hand, and prove it to be an efficient part of the Comintern, on the other. The Comintern considered that SKP had neglected the rural question; now the time was ripe to correct this mistake in great style by bringing about the re-migration of the dissenting group of villagers. Kotljarchuk uses the concept of techniques of forced normalization, and proceeds with a closer study of the configuration of new boundaries, one of the aspects of forced normalization. He unveils the creation of a new vision of history and future. This included a new image of the oppressed and the oppressors, the introduction of a collective farm (kolkhoz) as a way of proceeding towards the bright Communist future, new administrative boundaries and new linguistic practices (the name Gammalsvenskby was changed to “Röda Svenskby,” Red Swedish Village), along with a number of other novelties. A new hierarchy was also created for Swedish and Finno-Swedish Communists, and new cadres were drilled in the local Komsomol, replacing the (absent) traditional elite of successful farmers and the moral authority of the (absent) local priest. However, the project was abruptly ended by the Holodomor, the man-made famine that raged across Soviet Ukraine 1932–33 reaching Röda Svenskby in the fall of 1932. Faced with new problems and abandoned by the Swedish
Communists, the farmers petitioned the authorities just as their fore-
fathers sent supplications to lords and royalties. There were also calls for
Sweden to help. The author finds these acts to be ones of fading collec-
tive resistance that ceased due to the Stalinist terror in 1937–38, when
twenty-three villagers were taken away and secretly executed.
Previous pages: **Map 4:** Probably the first appearance of Gammalsvenskby ("Schwedszkaja Kolonija") on a map. Kezikermen, the nearest hamlet, was renamed Berislav ("Beriszlaw") circa 1789–1805, Krigsarkivet 0403/31/A/037 18a.

**Map 5:** Swedes and their neighbours. "Old Swedish" [colony] is now accompanied by the villages of Mühlhausendorf and Klosterdorf to the south, and along the road Berislav. *Special map of the western part of the Russian Empire* ("Spets. Karta Zap. Chasti Rossiiskoi Imperii G.L. Schuberta"), 1826–1840, Krigsarkivet, 0403/31/32/LI