People in between  
– Baltic islanders as colonists on the steppe

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This chapter deals with the acculturation of the Estonian Swedes in New Russia during the period 1805–1871. It is divided into three main parts. The first part highlights the social-economic activity of the Estonian Swedes in New Russia, their role in the colonization of the Black and Azov Sea region. The second part deals with the relations between the Swedes and their neighbors. The final part of the chapter describes the culture of the Swedish colonists, the process of their acculturation and integration into a new cultural and social milieu, and gives an outline of their special identity.

The Estonian Swedes became agents of Russia’s colonization project in the Black and Azov Sea region unintentionally; their migration was not spontaneous, but undertaken as a result of planning by the authorities and with their support. On a propaganda mission among the Dagö Swedes in the summer of 1781, Russian officials, in particular Colonel Ivan Sinelnikov, created an image of New Russia as a prosperous land. When the Swedes arrived at their destination, there was a clash between that image and the reality of the region. In the first few years in the new settlement, nature and climate in combination with various social factors wrought havoc among the settlers, causing a drastic decline in their numbers. Therefore, their adaptation took an extremely long time, about 20–25 years, (1782–1805/1807), compared to the average adaptation period of 8–10 years.1

1 Leonid Rybakovskii, Migratsiia naseleniia. Tri stadii migratsionnogo protsessa (Ocherki teorii i metodov issledovaniia) (Moskva: Nauka, 2001), 91.
During these 20–25 years, the Estonian Swedes adapted to new climatic conditions and overcame the demographic catastrophe which threatened the existence of Gammalsvenskby. Although the birth rate was high, the population grew only slowly because of the high child mortality. Slow but more or less stable population growth started in 1795–1796.²

**Figure 1:** The Size of the Population of Gammalsvenskby 1781–1929.

![Graph showing population growth from 1781 to 1929 with peaks and dips indicating population changes over time.](image)


The building of a church and permanent dwellings, the first attempts in agriculture and, finally, the attainment of the status of colonists signified the end of the accommodation and adaptation period, as well as a certain measure of legal integration. Furthermore, in 1804-1805, the Swedish village became a board centre and an administrative unit of New Russia.

The long accommodation process of the Estonian Swedes in New Russia is explained by the following factors. The government's colonization plans were risky and adventurous; therefore an improved resettlement strategy, efficient support, and guarantees of emigration conditions for Swedes were absent. The Russian government in St Petersburg and its diplomatic agents abroad were not aware of the actual climatic conditions and the geographic specifics of the recently annexed steppe of the Black Sea region. As a result, the Swedes were unintentionally misinformed about the region where they were to settle, which made the cultural and psychological shock when they arrived acute. Their spontaneous decision to move to a new place, the lack of adequate information about the region they had come to meant that they had little opportunity to work out new strategies and find ways to cope with the difficult conditions of the steppe. The distance between their old home on Dagö and the new settlement was huge and so was the difference between the living conditions of the two places. The physical exhaustion of the migrants, the disastrous mortality among them during 1782–1783 and the resulting breakup of families meant that there was little population growth in the ensuing years and that the Swedes had difficulties in adjusting to the new place. Owing to bad timing and misunderstandings between the Russian government and the local colonist administration they reacted too slowly to the housing problems, food shortages and other hardships suffered by Swedes. Finally, the age structure of the Swedish colonist group – many were children – caused problems for their social and economic adjustment and made their community vulnerable to external developments.

Theoretical remarks

One can question whether, or how far, modern theories of adaptation and acculturation are applicable to the migrations and resettlements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Be that as it may, such theories


are stimulating and inspiring, and although this chapter primarily aims at presenting empirical material, some of the theoretical ideas the author had in mind when analyzing her sources will be presented here.

As a result of acculturation, changes occur both on the individual and on the group level. The direct interaction of groups of individuals, who belong to different cultures, leads to changes in the primary cultural codes of one or several groups. On the group level, several changes may occur. To begin with, the newcomers are faced with a new place of residence, with (for them) unusual agricultural and climatic conditions along with different population density. They also face a different biological milieu with new food, unknown diseases etc. In addition, there are usually legal changes, when the non-dominant groups get under the control of the major groups and lose some of their autonomy. To another category of changes one can count the economic ones that cause modifications in the traditional activities and management forms. Finally, there are cultural transformations that influence the traditional language, religious codes within the intergroup, but also interpersonal relations. As will be shown, the Swedes as a group were facing all of the above.

In a multicultural environment, both individuals and groups face two main problems. The first problem is connected with one’s identity and how it is manifested. In this connection, the question arises whether the individual or group at all chooses to emphasize and preserve its ethnic originality or not. The second problem is whether the individuals and groups wish to stress the contrast with other ethnic groups. In this context, it is necessary to define if the relations with major ethnic groups are viewed as desirable.\(^5\) Obviously, in everyday interaction, groups and individuals can either preserve the cultural codes and maintain the cultural originality, or go for contact and participation in the wider society, thus joining other cultural groups.\(^6\)

Following John Berry’s terminology, the four major patterns of interethnic encounters are assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Particularly, interethnic integration covers the preserving of a certain cultural integrity of a group, as well as an intention of becoming an

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integral part of the society (adaptability). Hence, the cultural identity and originality are preserved even though the group chooses to become a part of the dominant society. With a development of this pattern, several different groups cooperate within the major social system. As a result of the integration pattern, selective acceptance of behavior moulds between the interacting groups occurs. According to Berry, interethnic integration demands from the ethnic groups and national minorities the gradual adaptation to the main values of the dominant society, which in turn should adapt its social institutions (education, administration etc.) to the needs of the multicultural society. The non-dominant groups achieve voluntary integration successfully only when the dominant society is open and aspiring to cultural variety. A crucial factor is that both groups recognize the other group’s right to exist as a distinct people.7 There are two main factors of intercultural adaptation: the first one is the width of the cultural distance between the interacting groups; the other contains the peculiarities of the culture of the migrants, and the culture prevalent at the place of their new settlement.

The migrants might suffer “cultural shock” in their new country or place of residence. The culture of a new country or region of settlement compels the migrants to partly or completely give up their former way of life, which requires socio-cultural adaptation. Thus, there are three main factors involved in successful socio-cultural adaptation: establishing positive contacts with the new neighbors, solving everyday issues, and participating in the socio-cultural life of a new society. The main factor that determines the socio-cultural adaptation process is the distance between the migrant’s native culture and the culture of the new place of settlement (including language, religion, climatic and diet differences).8

Due to the official origin of sources used in this study, the author focuses on the adaptation and acculturation of the Swedes on the group level.

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8 Tatiana Stefanenko, Etnopsikhologiia (Moskva: Institut psikhologii RAN,” Akademicheskii proekt,” 1999), 164–165.
The Swedish colonists’ economy: anglers or farmers?

According to the Russian imperial vision, the annexed Black and Azov Sea territories were to be developed as part of the agricultural infrastructure. Therefore, the encouragement of farming among the colonists and peasants was one of the main tasks of the government of the region. Among several top-down agricultural projects was the breeding of cattle. The colonist administration was particularly encouraged by the report of the Minister of the Interior, which was approved by the Senate in 1806, on the need to promote cattle and horse breeding on the lands between Buh and Dnister rivers. Thus, despite a certain measure of skepticism among the Swedish colonists, they became a part of grand “agricultural projects” of the colonist administration in the region.

Farming among the Swedes was of course heavily influenced by the natural geographic and climatic conditions, the availability of water and by the special background of the settlers and the skills they brought with them. Another important factor was the colonist administration. The relations of the Swedish colonists with the colonist administration were wide-ranging. The sources used here do not support the idea that the Russian government was hostile to the Swedish colonists and deceived them. They reveal a considerable degree of irresponsibility, and unsatisfactory coordination between the central power and the colonist administration, rather than a prejudiced attitude towards the Swedish colonists. However, the Swedes merely constituted one group among many. Recent scholarship on Russian imperial history has described Russia’s bureaucracy and “differentiated governance” as a way of ruling heterogeneous imperial space.

9 Here, the term encompasses the Guardianship Office of New Russian Foreign Settlers of Southern Russia, later on – the Trustees Committee for Foreign Settlers in Southern Russia.
10 Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii. Tom 29 (1806–1807) (St Petersburg, 1830), 785–787.
Document 3: The fragment of Emmanuel Richelieu’s letter to Samuel Contenius, 9 April 1806.

…/ The settlers of the Swedish colony ask for some assistance in finishing their houses. I consider this request quite reasonable, as there was only one carpenter among them, which is insufficient to teach others. Therefore they had to hire a Russian carpenter for 12 and 15 Rubles per house. The houses there are only partly built, as they have no money to finish them.


Starting from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the colonist administration took the following steps to improve the situation of the Swedes. It made a financial contribution to the rebuilding of the Gammal-svenskby church and finishing of the Swedish houses. Moreover, the colonist administration introduced sanitary, and quarantine measures against epidemics in the Swedish district. One such case was the isolation from neighboring villages in order to prevent the cholera epidemics (1837). Another case was the routine vaccination of the Swedish children against smallpox etc. The administration often supported the Swedish colonists with food supplies and it also provided the Swedes with seed for sowing, or money to purchase grain and food in times of poor harvests, thus preventing famine and economic decline. Additional financial assistance was provided by the state to the head of each household personally when needed, and particularly in cases of lack of food reserves during unusually severe winters.

Document 4: Samuel Contenius report to governor-general Emmanuel Richelieu about the lack of bread in Molochna, Swedish and Odessa colonies and in this connection paying food money to the colonists. Odessa, 17 November 1806

Your Excellency, Sir Emmanuel Osipovich!

From the reports of the caretaker of colonies I found out, that Molochna colonists and the colonists newly settled down in

14 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 128, arkk. 9, 17-22, 24-26; DADO, f. 134, op. 1, spr. 102, arkk. 10–13.
15 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 195, ark. 167.
17 Samuil Khristianovich Contenius, Eisfeld, 176.
the Swedish colony because of the poor harvest do not have enough bread for livelihood during winter. During the inspection of the colonies settled down nearby Odessa, I have also noticed a considerable lack of bread. For the sake of non-starvation I recognize the need to continue paying 5 kopecks of food money per day to each person as long as necessary. Thereby I ask the permission of Your Excellency.

Note: Richelieu has agreed with Contenius proposition, but with one clause: those who have enough bread for winter, are not paid food money.


Along with other colonists of the region, the Swedes were encouraged to engage in pet “agricultural projects” of the colonist administration such as forestry, cattle breeding, sericulture, tobacco growing, dam building, and digging of the wells.18

The humid tropical heat of the region combined with the long drought in summer was frequently followed by cold winters (even colder than on Dagö, where snow was rather common). The fields of the Swedes were often flooded in spring, then there was drought, and there were hot dry winds from the steppe, people were struck down by epidemics of scurvy, cholera, typhus, and rodents and locusts ate the crops. The extreme weather conditions of the steppe were intensified by severe and snowy winters, extremely hot summers with hurricanes and hail, that often made Swedes and other colonists helpless.19 Being located on a hill, the Swedish colony suffered dearth of water resources. The fields were heavily exposed to the sun, which stimulated the burning-out of the harvests.

In the 1840s, a new project – the creation of artificial lakes in order to preserve the melting water from the spring floods, and thus to have the water resources required for cattle breeding for a whole year – was launched. At the time, recurring drought in the region gave further impetus to this project. The Swedes and the Khortitsa Mennonites responded positively to the government’s initiative to build a dam between

Gammalsvenskby and the neighboring German village of Klosterdorf. This would make it possible to flood the land in the spring in order to facilitate cattle breeding.  

Military campaigns also affected life in the Swedish colony. For instance, during the Russian-Turkish wars of 1828–1829 and 1836–1837 and the Crimean war 1853–1856, Russian units passed the Swedish settlement, infecting its inhabitants with cholera and typhus.

Before their migration to New Russia, the majority of the Dagö Swedes was engaged in fishing, cattle breeding and livestock production. Since they had now settled in a locality that was not very suitable for agriculture, and since steppe farming was unknown to them, good harvests were not to be expected.

Eventually, the Swedish peasants learned to plough according to local custom, hitching four pairs of oxen to the plough. During their pioneer decades on the steppe, the Swedes ploughed their land with a ralo, the traditional wooden plough of the region. Later, it was replaced with the German colonists’ bukker with iron blades. They grew rye, spring and winter grains (for making bread), barley, flax, millet, watermelon and melon. However, the grains were grown only with great difficulty, even when local farming techniques were used. In order to support the inhabitants in times of poor grain harvests and to prevent famine among them, granaries were built in the colonies of the Swedish district. In 1819, the granary of Gammalsvenskby contained more reserves of grain than the other two in the district: 59 per cent of the rye reserves and 57 per cent of spring bread reserves. Despite the Swedish colonists’ diligence in agriculture, their food needs were hardly satisfied, primarily because of the extreme climate of the region.

In order to improve the economic situation of the Swedes, the Guardianship Office initiated an experiment in 1817. They were encouraged to grow Hungarian tobacco, a cash crop. Eventually, the colonists were successful, and tobacco was continuously cultivated in the village.

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20 Ocherki istorii nemtsev i mennonitov, Bobyleva, 107; Utas, Svenskbyborna, 78.
21 Utas, Svenskbyborna, 72–75; Hedman, Gammalsvenskby – the true story.
22 Ralo is Ukrainian for a type of a plough.
24 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 4935, arkk. 2–13; spr. 269, arkk. 6–26.
25 DADO, f. 134, op. 1, spr. 579, ark. 8.
26 DADO, f. 134, op. 1, spr. 512, arkk. 2–22.
According to the governmental instruction of 26 July 1800, the Guardianship Office should have encouraged the foreign colonists to plant grass to create pastures, to plant mulberry trees, grapevines, sesame seeds and other useful plants. For every sixty to eighty desiatinas of land the Swedish colonists were obliged to plant half a desiatina with trees. The aim was to create more favorable conditions for the development of agriculture, but also to protect the land from the hot dry steppe winds and from drifting snow in the winter. The trees were planted on special plots close to the church and the district centre, and on the land surrounding the colonists’ households.

Every farmer who had received seedlings from the colonist administration was obliged to plant a certain number of trees near his house. The colonists of the Swedish district were successful in the cultivation of acacia, which, beginning in the 1830s, was cultivated on the common land of the villagers. Pussy willow, elderberry, and sedge, which mainly had a decorative function, were planted on the colonists’ homestead lands. The climate in the Kherson province was not favorable for oak, maple, and birch, thus they did not take root. Unfortunately, despite the colonist administration’s support and promotion, viticulture did not develop satisfactorily and the produce did not suffice even for the needs of the colonists.

As to horticulture and vegetable gardening, the Swedish colonists did not believe they could succeed in it because of the location of their village, on a hill with hot summer winds. However, the colonist administration promoted the foundation of communal plantations and nurseries in Gammalsvenskby to cultivate fruit trees. Occasionally, the Guardianship Office supplied the model farmers among the Swedes with fruit tree seedlings from Kursk province. Eventually, gardens with apple-trees, plum-trees, apricot-trees, cherry-trees, pear-trees blossomed

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28 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 5137, arkk. 1-2; Wilhelm Lagus, “Utflygt till Dniepern i April 1852,” Finlands Allmänna Tidning, no.132(1852), 549.
29 DADO, f. 134, op. 1, spr. 868, ark. 5; spr. 579, ark. 13.
30 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 4460, ark. 2.
31 Samuil Khristianovich Contenius, Eisfeld, 261; DAOO, f.6, op. 1, spr. 2437.
32 Lagus, “Utflygt till Dniepern,” 549.
33 Samuil Khristianovich Contenius, Eisfeld, 261.
in Gammalsvenskby. The cherry-trees yielded good harvests, whereas apricot-trees gave small and uncertain harvests.34

Together with neighboring colonists, the Swedish colonists were encouraged by the colonist administration to take up sericulture.35 In summer 1815, a shed for silkworm growing was built in Gammalsvenskby paid by communal money.36 However, the benefits of sericulture could not be reaped immediately. The sober-minded Samuel Contenius recognized that “this agricultural activity needed at least sixty to seventy years of persistent and hard work to get stable results and benefits.”37

The breeding of cattle was an activity where the Swedish colonists had good chances for success. Free pasturelands were available which was important for the development of extensive cattle breeding. Moreover, the Swedes had former experience of cattle breeding from Estland where it dominated the economy.38 With regard to the quantity of livestock, Estland held fourth place among Russia’s European provinces. Sheep farming, pig farming and horse breeding were of secondary importance.39 In this field, the Swedes had a clear advantage over other colonists. They proved able to adapt or rather rearrange their skills to a new climate and the terrain of the region.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a group of dedicated cattle breeders, (Hindrik Christiansson, Hindrik Petersson, and Cristian Christiansson) could be recognized.40 From time to time, this agricultural activity proved vulnerable: 1810–1815, 1820–1825 and 1827 were the most difficult years. During this time, the livestock (horses, cows and sheep) was reduced significantly because of epidemics, diseases and poor harvests.41 However, Gammalsvenskby still retained a leading position

34 DADO, f.134, op. 1, spr. 579, ark. 13; spr. 868, ark. 5; spr. 202, arkk. 10–27; spr. 4460, ark. 2.
35 DADO, f.134, op. 1, spr. 868, ark. 5; DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 4460, ark. 2.
36 Samuil Khristianovich Contenius, Eifeld, 263.
37 Samuil Khristianovich Contenius, Eifeld, 254.
38 In 1719 the administrative absorption of the Baltic Sea region started: Estland was incorporated into the Russian Empire as a Reval province. It would only finally become known by its historical name, Estland province, in 1783.
40 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 98, ark. 138–139.
41 Elena Druzhynina, Iuzhnaia Ukraina (1800–1825) (Moskva: Nauka, 1970), 213; Ocherki istorii nemtsev i mennonitov, Bobyleva, 74; DADO, f.134, op. 1, d. 784, l. 2; d. 868, l. 2.
among the villages of the Swedish district in large horned livestock (oxen, cows).  

Trade and natural carpentry, smithwork, shoemaking and weaving were the most widespread and popular handicrafts among the Swedish colonists. As a home industry, weaving was the most popular among the Swedes of New Russia due to the availability of animal and plant raw materials, their former Dagö skills and experience. Almost every Swedish household had a spinning wheel for the production of linen. Weaving was mostly based on wool, silk and flax fibers. It was the main handicraft of the Swedes prior to the village fire in 1835, when all spinning wheels brought from Dagö were consumed by the flames.

Fishery and hunting were the salvation of the Swedish colonists in times of poor harvests. They were very skilful anglers and successful at selling what they caught. They had previous experience of fishing, from Dagö, and they learned new fishing methods from the Zaporizhian Cossacks when the old ones did not work on the steppe. Fish was often a staple in their diet as harvests were always uncertain and prices of agricultural products fluctuated. With hoop nets, a long line and fishing-spears they caught carp and sturgeon as well as more common fishes.

Almost every Swede had special equipment for professional fishing like fishing nets, valves and boats. There was a demand which they could meet and thus get an additional income; sometimes fishing was their main source of income. Therefore a Swedish fishing artel was formed which paid tax to the board on its earnings and signed a contract with the colonist administration every sixth year which laid down their rights and obligations. Those who did not join the artel could fish only for the needs of their families. The Swedes usually dried and salted the

42 DADO, f.134, op. 1, spr. 979, ark. 4; DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 4459, ark. 28.
43 DADO, f. 134, op. 1, spr. 139, ark. 80,85, 87,90; spr. 868, ark. 3; DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 99, l. 91; spr. 4459, ark. 28; Anatolii Afanasiev-Chuzhbynyki, Podorozh u Pivdennu Rosiui (Dnipropetrovsk: Sich, 2005), 261.
44 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 98, ark. 135–139; DADO, f. 134, op. 1, spr. 139, ark. 91; spr. 868, ark. 3; spr. 979, ark. 4.
45 Severnyi arkhiv: Zhurnal istorii, statistiki i puteshestvi, no. 8 (1824) 64–67.
47 Artel (Russian: артель, Ukrainian: артіль) is a general term for various cooperative associations in Russia and Ukraine. Historically, artels were semi-formal associa-tions for various enterprises: fishing, mining, commerce etc. Commonly artels were seasonal, worked far from home and lived as a commune. Payment for job done was distributed according to verbal agreements, usually in equal shares.
48 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 1821, ark. 1–12; spr. 8366, ark. 4–31.
fish, and sold it on the markets and fairs of the nearby towns of Kakhovka, Berislav, and Kherson.\(^49\) Obviously, their success was due to the extreme popularity of fish among the Orthodox and Jewish population of the region, especially during Lent. However, in some years the fishing resulted in losses. Thus, for instance in 1812–1813 in Kherson province, all boats and fishing activity was under the strict control of the colonist administration because of the plague that spread from the Pivdennyi Buh River.\(^50\)

From being anglers, tar and lime stock manufacturers on their home island of Dagö, the Estonian Swedes have mastered the basics of challenging steppe agriculture. Alongside with the adjustment of their skills in fishery, weaving and cattle breeding, the Swedes gained new skills in sericulture, tobacco growing and forestry, due to governmental promoting. However, despite being quite hard-working and prepared to adjust to the new economic conditions, the reputation of the Swedes as modernizing agriculturists was not comparable, for instance, to that of the German-speaking and Mennonite colonists who lived in the same region.

Contested among strangers

For newly settled migrants it is essential to establish mutually beneficial contacts with neighbors. From time to time the idea of returning to Dagö was mooted among the Swedes due to despair and physical exhaustion.\(^51\) However, they had lost contact with Dagö Island. Instead, new contacts were established with neighbors in the region where they had settled down.

The Swedes were the first colonists in New Russia, but not the first inhabitants of the steppe. There was a unique ethnic and social milieu formed by Cossacks, Romanis, Nomads, Tatars, and religious dissenters from Central Russia.\(^52\) Like the Estonian Swedes, the religious dissenters were newcomers, but the rest had established themselves there long ago and considered the steppe their home.

\(^{49}\) Afanasiev-Chuzhbynfskij, Podorozh u Pivdennu Rosiiu, 259; Druzhynina, Iuzhnaia Ukraina, 325.
\(^{50}\) Druzhynina, Iuzhnaia Ukraina, 304.
\(^{51}\) See Jan Utas, Svenskbyborna, 54–55.
The neighbors of the Swedes were Cossacks, Nomads, Spaniards and Greeks; Ukrainian and Russian peasants; German-speaking settlers. The Swedish population formed a specific community, which differed from the rest of the population in religion, language, type of dwellings, clothing, etc. At first, the Cossacks were not pleased with having neighbors on “their lands,” and there even occurred some conflicts between them and the Swedes.53 Nevertheless, the Cossacks were the first to help the Swedes adjust to the new conditions on the steppe. They provided the Swedes with some agricultural tools and instruments that could be used on virgin lands, and taught them practical skills in fishery and how to protect themselves from nomads. The Swedish-Cossack relations were quite ambiguous. On one hand, the Cossacks helped the Swedes to overcome the gravest initial problems, on the other hand, the Swedes from time to time had to protect themselves from being robbed by them.

Nomads caused the first colonists a lot of trouble. According to village oral tradition, Romanis looked for young Swedes to sell on the Crimean slave market. In winter 1787, Nogais attacked the Swedish village in an attempt to rob it. The priest Johan Adolph Europaeus fought back, and was injured when defending his family. Later, in 1788, because of the insecurity there, Europaeus left the village. The Swedes considered the Tatars to be the most honest and reliable people among their neighbors.54 In the years 1783–1784, the Swedes got new neighbors. Groups of Spaniards and Greeks settled on their lands but there were no conflicts between the Swedes and these groups. Naturally, there were many Ukrainians and Russians among the neighbors of the Swedes. Russian religious dissenters from Moscow, Kaluga, Tula and Chernigov provinces were settled in Kherson region between 1752 and 1770, where they built large villages between the two rivers of Pivdennyi Buh and Dnipro.55 The Swedes established commercial relations mainly with the local Ukrainians. The colonists hired local people from the neighboring town of Berislav as builders, carpenters, and shepherds, and they also bought timber from them. The Swedes also signed agreements concerning fishing rents with Ukrainians from the town of Berislav and Kiev province. The Swedish colonists were welcomed at Berislav and Kakhovka markets, since their traditional homemade cheese was very

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53 Utas, Svenskbyborna, 45.
54 Utas, Svenskbyborna, 50–51.
popular among the locals. After the fire in the village in 1835, the local Slavic population helped the Swedes to repair their roofs, having provided them with straw in exchange for fish.\textsuperscript{56} There was also some contact between the Swedes and the Serbs.

Due to the decrease of the Swedish population during the first twenty years or so after their arrival, they were not able to cultivate all of the land granted to them by the Crown. Because of the growing shortage of land for colonization, the government decided to settle German-speaking migrants and Poles on Gammalsvenskby lands. Thus, in 1804, eight families of Danzig Poles were settled on land previously given to Swedes. The Swedes did not establish friendly contacts with the Catholic Poles.\textsuperscript{57} Subsequently, the number of Poles was reduced; in 1830, after Andreas Maskewitsch’s family had left the village, there was only one family left.

Not far from the Swedish village, 25 kilometers to the north of the colony, there was an Orthodox monastery called Grigorevskii Biziukov that gave assistance to the colonists in their agricultural activities. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the shortage of land made life particularly difficult, the Swedes were able to rent fertile land from the monastery on generous terms. Moreover, in the times of poor harvests, they were exempted from paying land rent by the Orthodox abbot.\textsuperscript{58} In general, the relations between the Swedes and the Slavic population were well good. However, according to oral village tradition, the Swedish colonists were offended by “Russians” since they were considered to have installed Germans on the lands given to the Swedes by the Empress Catherine II.

Between 1804 and 1806 migrants from Bohemia, Austria, Württemberg, and Mainz on the Rhine, Baden, Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia and Palatinate established settlements, which were named Mühlhausen, Schlangendorf and Klosterdorf, on the sparsely populated “Swedish” lands. Most of them were Lutherans but there were also Catholic families among them. At the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, after constant, almost experimental, shuffles and reshuffles of the administration in the newly absorbed Azov and Black Sea territories, Gammalsvenskby, Mühl-

\textsuperscript{56} Utas, \textit{Svenskbyborna}, 75.
\textsuperscript{57} DADO, f. 134, op. 1, spr. 8, arkk. 220–232; \textit{Voienno-statisticheskoe obozrenie Rossiiiskoi imperii}, t. 11, ch. 1, 93–94.
\textsuperscript{58} Hedman, \textit{Gammalsvenskby – the true story}. 

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hausendorf, Schlangendorf and Klosterdorf were grouped into a Swedish district with the centre in Gammalsvenskby.\textsuperscript{59}

The Swedish-German relations can be characterized as ambivalent. The two groups were either peaceful neighbors, or irreconcilable rivals, sometimes even enemies. When relations were strained, the tension was usually due to disputes over land or religious differences. When faced with threats like epidemics, fires, nomad raids, or bad harvests, the Swedes and Germans united and helped each other.

**Document 5:** On bad harvest in the Swedish colony, 1899.

According to the Swedish teacher of the colony, Christoffer Hoas, over half of the colonists are affected by real misery. The Germans in Tavriia province have already collected money for the villagers of Gammalsvenskby, who have received 250 Rubles from them.

Source: “Från Ryssland,” Nya Pressen, 1900.01.29, no. 27.

However, when it came to electing the district mayor, the Swedes and the Germans were persistent opponents. The Swedish-German relations could be sketched within the following lines: conflict about the land, discord as to the religious question, but also economic and everyday interaction.

Generally, Swedish–German contacts can be described as interactive and important. The Germans and the Swedes shared several characteristics in material culture. They also had the Lutheran religion in common (except for the Catholic Germans from Klosterdorf). Accordingly, the cultural distance between them was comparatively small. In spite of the fact that the Swedes and the Germans had so much in common – much more than with other colonists in the region – marriages between Germans and Swedes were rare.\textsuperscript{60} Having adopted the German style of dressing, the Swedes had to buy linen from the Germans after their spinning wheels had been destroyed in the fire of 1835. Some Germans enjoyed considerable prestige among the Swedes,


\textsuperscript{60} Iakov Shtakh, Ocherki iz istorii i sovremennoi zhizni iuzhnorussikh kolonistov (Moskva: Tip. A. I. Mamontova, 1916), 112.
for example the military medical assistant Johann Glaubberg and the veterinary Fritz at Mühlhausenendorf.61

The arrival of the Germans caused revolutionary changes in the farming methods of the Swedes. As mentioned above, the ralo used by the Swedes, was replaced with the German bukker plough with iron blades that increased agricultural productivity. Functionally a hybrid of the ralo and a multihued plough, the bukker was initially manufactured with three or four shares. This plough enabled a farmer, with no additional labour, to practically double the size of the area he cultivated. The price of these ploughs was not low enough to make them affordable for a poor farmer.62 Among the Germans who influenced the farming methods of the Swedes one could in particular mention the Mennonite Johan Kornis who exercised great influence both as an agriculturist and educationalist,63 and who in New Russia influenced different groups of the colonists including the Swedes.64 The first Swedes that were sent for training to the Mennonite district of Molochna, were Anna Sergis and Cristian Tunis. Both of them became model farmers who passed on the new techniques they had learnt to others in the Swedish colony.65

As a result of cultural interaction with other ethnic groups, the Swedes had selectively acquired new cultural features. The colonist administration, the neighbors of the colonists, and the climatic and geographical milieu were decisive factors for their economic development and determined what fields they would specialize in. When they were hit by natural disasters, the different ethnic groups tended to cooperate more with each other than otherwise.

63 Mennonite Johan Kornis, the most skilled and successful farmer among the Germans and Mennonites in the region, was the head of Molochna agricultural association, the Association of forestation, sericulture and winemaking in Molochna Mennonite district in Tavriia province. He was also authorized to supervise schooling and agricultural education in Molochna Mennonite district.
65 Karlgren, Gammalsvenskby, 76–77.
Preserving distinctiveness and becoming part of a whole

The natural resources of the region determined the shape of the Swedes’ dwellings. The topography of Gammalsvenskby was a synthesis of the traditional dwellings of the Ukrainian villages and the Swedish settlements of north-western Estonia.66 The clay-made houses dominated in the Ukrainian villages in the first half of the nineteenth century. Ordinary Ukrainian houses had no foundations, only an earth floor, and were made of clay and straw. Straw was the main roofing material.67 The houses of the Swedish colonists were built in no particular order, along the main village road. This type of village structure was characteristic of the Swedish settlements in Estonia68 and the Swedes seem to have brought it with them from there to the steppe.

In 1787–1788, an unknown Ukrainian master built a small wooden cruciform church in the centre of Gammalsvenskby. During the first five to ten years, the topography of the Swedish settlement was constantly changing and eventually it had shrunk in size. Due to the population decline, the areas south and north of the village center were abandoned. The inhabited areas consisted of two blocks called Taknegårda69 and Nealinja. The fire in 1835 caused a radical reconstruction of Gammalsvenskby. The chaotic structure of the village was replaced by a geometrically organized one and the new Swedish houses were built along three main streets.70

Timber was used to a lesser extent because of its scarcity on the steppe, which also made it expensive. Clay, straw, vine, natural stone, seashell were the main building materials for the Swedish houses. The Swedes were well acquainted with stone as a building material since Dagö times. It was cheap and durable and could thus compensate for the lack of timber in the region.71 Some of the Swedes built stone walls around their non-framed houses.72 The exterior of the Swedish houses looked like typical Ukrainian buildings. However, the interior had its

67 Ocherki istorii nemtsev i mennonitov, Bobyleva, 168.
68 Troska, “Poselenie pribrezhnykh shvedov,” 175.
69 Literally meant the farms of the people from the Takne village.
70 Lagus, “Utflygt till Dniepern,” 549.
71 Samuil Khristianovich Contenius, Eisfeld, 133; Lagus, “Utflygt till Dniepern,” 549.
72 Samuil Khristianovich Contenius, Eisfeld, 150–158; Ukrainske narodoznawstvo, ed. Stepana Pavliuka etc. (Lviv, 1994), 462–463.
special characteristics. The stove, the walls and the ceiling were whitewashed; the floor was made of clay, and in the winter covered with sand and in the summer with grass. Later, the floor in the houses of prosperous Swedes was made of wood.\textsuperscript{73} The roof was not coated; the ceiling was crossed with thick whitewashed wooden beams. In front of the house, there was a hall and in the middle there was a kitchen, with several bedrooms attached to it. In contemporary sources it is said that the Swedish and German houses had a similar planning.\textsuperscript{74}

Contemporary sources also say that the portraits of the Russian Tsar family appeared on the walls of the Swedish houses. When the colonists established contact with Sweden, portraits of the Swedish Royal family also became common. As the Swedish community was deeply religious, richly decorated pictures with Bible psalms, on the walls were typical of the Swedish houses. According to documented descriptions, in the right corner of the Swedish hall, there was a portrait of Martin Luther but, unlike the Orthodox religious tradition concerning pictures of the saints, there were no lights or candles in front of it.\textsuperscript{75}

The food the Estonian Swedes ate in New Russia was mainly the same as that which they had eaten on Dagö but it was slightly adapted to the conditions of their new surroundings. Bread played an important role. The Swedish colonists preferred wheat bread, which was traditionally baked with yeast. More seldom, they made rye bread. As a rule, breakfast consisted of bread and butter and coffee mixed with chicory and vanilla. What was served for supper depended on the season: river fish and sour milk in the summer, noodle soup, meat with carrots and potatoes, and porridge in the winter. Swedish homemade sour cheese was very popular among the locals at the markets all over Kherson province.

Cross-influences between the Swedes and the Ukrainian and Russian peasants were common. Travellers and ethnographers noted that some traditional Slavic meals such as \textit{kvas}\textsuperscript{76} gained popularity among the Swedes. Moreover, besides coffee the Swedes enjoyed drinking tea, using


\textsuperscript{75} Utas, \textit{Svenskbyborna}, 85.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Kvas} (Russian: квас, Ukrainian: квас) is a fermented beverage made from black or regular rye bread. It is classified as a non-alcoholic drink, as the alcohol content from fermentation is typically less than 1.2%.
The Swedes used to cook varenyky, a traditional Ukrainian meal, filling it with meat, mushrooms, fish, carrot, and rice.

During the first fifty years of steppe life, the design of the Swedes' clothing was a synthesis of originally Swedish elements of clothing and some northern Estonian features. After the fire of 1835, they had to give up their old-fashioned clothes. Their new clothes borrowed some elements from their German and Slavic neighbors. The Swedish winter clothes were, like those of Ukrainian and Russian peasants, made of fur and leather. The summer clothing was very simple, made of cotton and linen. In the summer, the Swedes used shoes without heels. Men were only dressed in a shirt, trousers and a straw hat, women in linen clothing, slim skirt, and head-scarf.

Thus, the material culture of the Swedish colonists reflected their background, as well influences from other ethnic groups in New Russia and the process of socio-cultural adaptation they were undergoing.

Religiosity is considered to have been the main element of pre-modern peasant identity. It was viewed as a pillar of stability, and therefore supported and promoted by the authorities. The Church had social control over its parishioners and influenced their everyday life. Absolute obedience to the Law of the Church, going to church every Sunday and observing religious holidays was the duty of all colonists in New Russia. A parishioner who neglected this duty was usually fined. Serious cases of neglect were punished more severely; in addition to paying a double fine, the delinquent would be sentenced to communal works, such as bridge repairing, tree planting, trench digging etc.
After the expiry of the grace period, the colonists' communities were expected to support their Lutheran or Catholic pastors and priests by themselves, and the government no longer paid their salaries. The village headman was to make sure that every colonist aged sixteen to sixty paid his due three times a year (in January, May, and September).

After departure of the first Gammalsvenskby priest Adolf Europeus, the German Lutheran priests from the nearby German colony of Jozefstal visited the Swedish village once a year. They stayed in the Swedish colony for a month to perform religious rites and to teach the Swedish children the basics of the Christian faith. The Swedes were not satisfied with this occasional religious service; therefore in 1816 they complained to the caretaker Dalke that they did not have any priest at all. In November 1816, the Guardianship Office decided that a Catholic priest should visit Gammalsvenskby twice a year – in spring and in winter.

In 1832 de jure recognition of its status as a denomination was granted to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia. This meant that all Lutheran parishes in the entire Russian Empire were reorganized. The Lutheran Swedes were incorporated into the St. Petersburg Church district, but still their parish had been without the services of a priest long periods of time. The mere existence of the church organization did not mean it actually functioned in the empire’s periphery.

The Swedish colonists in New Russia used the rune calendar, which signified to the contemporaries – the outsiders but also neighbors – the Swedes’ distinctive origin, as well as original method of numbering years and measuring time. Christmas, Midsummer (end of June) and St Martin’s Day (11 November) were the most important holidays. Christmas was the main holiday of the year for the Swedish colonists, just as Easter was for the Ukrainian and Russian peasants. As a rule

84 As a rule, the grace period, covered the first ten years after the migrants’ resettlement to New Russia, was given by the Russian State in order to stimulate the colonists’ economic development and speed their adaptation in new region.
85 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 777, arkk. 1–16.
86 Nemtsy v istorii Rossii, Diesendorf, 117.
87 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 1672, arkk. 1–11; spr. 56, arkk. 10,34.
88 DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 1025, arkk. 1–5; Olga Litsenberger, Evangelichesko-liuteranskaia tserkov v Rossiiskoi imperii (XVI–XX vv.) (Sankt-Peterburg: “Liuteranskoe kulturnoe nasledie,” 2003), 136–137.
89 Litsenberger, Evangelichesko-liuteranskaia tserkov v Rossiiskoi imperii, 82–84.
Midsummer and St Martin’s Day, being Germanic holidays, were unknown to the Ukrainian and Russian locals.\textsuperscript{91}

The school in Gammalsvenskby played a dominant role in teaching the young members of the community the Lutheran creed. They were taught and brought up under the pastor’s strict control and were protected from interference by the government as long as it was possible. According to the Swedish Church Ordinance of 1686, the priests were to provide the parishioners with knowledge that would strengthen their faith. The Swedish colonist priest combined the functions of organist, teacher, and spiritual leader of the community. There was a close link between the school and the colonist community, which provided financial support to the school.\textsuperscript{92} The compulsory training of all children of school age was not so strictly enforced within the Swedish community as among the Mennonite colonists, who controlled the fulfillment of this obligation consistently.\textsuperscript{93} In the 1850s, only three Swedish farmers out of twenty-seven male grown-ups could write; the level of female literacy is unknown, as it is largely neglected in the sources.\textsuperscript{94} However, most Swedish colonists, both men and women, could read and knew the basics of the Bible.

Beginning from the early nineteenth century, Swedish children aged from seven to fifteen (up to their confirmation) were taught at the teacher’s house, where they studied German, the basics of Geography, handwriting, Bible history, Arithmetic, singing, and read the Scripture.\textsuperscript{95} The school year usually lasted from 1 October until 1 May, sometimes from 1 November until 1 April, as the children had to work on the farms.\textsuperscript{96}

Radical changes in imperial policy towards the non-Russian and non-Orthodox population of the empire, and the following campaign of Russification had a profound impact on all foreign colonists in New Russia.\textsuperscript{97} In the 1860s the Trustees Committee officially introduced the Russian language into the colonist schools’ curriculum as a compulsory


\textsuperscript{92} DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 3717, ark. 44; spr. 4415, arkk. 17, 19; spr. 4450, arkk. 94, 97.

\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Ocherki istorii nemtsev i mennonitov}, Bobyleva, 145-147,149-150.

\textsuperscript{94} DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 19678, ark. 24.

\textsuperscript{95} DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 4415, ark. 17; spr. 4450, ark. 97.

\textsuperscript{96} DAOO, f. 6, op. 1, spr. 4415, ark. 17; spr. 4450, ark. 97.

subject. Henceforth Russian-German bilingualism was to be discouraged and suppressed, and instead Russian became the only language of administration in the colonies. As they were the first foreign colonists in New Russia and were not German native speakers, the Swedes had, in order to facilitate communication with the colonial administration and their neighbors, started to learn Russian long before they were required to do so by the government.

The Swedish colonist community was a typical patriarchal peasant society with its characteristic forms of socialization and transmission of cultural roles, knowledge, experience, gender order, and the unquestioned authority of elders. The colonists’ understanding of their identity was that which predominated in early modern society; it was based on religion, language and medieval privileges. The status granted to them by Swedish law and the privileges they had enjoyed on Dagö, and the colonist status they had in New Russia helped them maintain their identity in both Estonia and Russia.

Eventually the Swedish ethnic identity, which had long remained based on religion, origin and language, was transformed into a new colonist identity based on their membership of a colony and their place of residence. The pastors who arrived from remote parts of the Russian Empire’s Northwest (Adolf Europeus, Alexander Nordgren) were not only the carriers of the religious knowledge and background common to the Swedes, but also symbolically linked colonists with their former native island. Regarding the Swedes’ self-identification, they did not initially identify themselves with Swedes from mainland Sweden, as had been suggested by Russian travelers, contemporaries and imperial officials from the middle of the nineteenth century.

Separation and inclusion, uniformity and diversity, which became permanent features of the Russian imperial policy, along with the missions of Finish and Swedish visitors to the village, promoted the creation of a particular “Gammalsvensk” tradition and culture. The tendency towards cultural conservatism and continuation of traditions intertwined with borrowing and adaptation of new cultural codes in the new milieu and emergence of a new “synthesized” tradition and dialect characteristic of Gammalsvenskby.

98 Ocherki istorii nemtsev i mennonitov, Bobyleva, 151.
According to ethnographer Alexander Afanasiev-Chuzhbynskyi who visited the colony in the late 1850s, the inhabitants of the Swedish colony were noted for their law-obedience and respect for legal procedures, their honesty, diligence and loyalty to the state and other authorities. Religious intolerance as well as conversions to other faiths were rare among them. As a rule they endeavored to solve socio-economic and everyday problems by sending complaints, petitions and requests to the authorities of the state. There was no unrest or agitation in Gammalsvenskby, and crimes were rare. The low delinquency among the relatively few Swedes contrasted to nearby numerous German colonists’, who were occasionally condemned for various misdemeanors, sexual crimes, appropriation of property and disobedience towards authorities. The Swedish colonists were regarded as loyal subjects of the Russian Tsar and were not as opposed to Russification and other crucial changes in official policy towards the colonists as the Germans and Mennonites in the region.

Conclusions

As a result of acculturation, and in exchange for privileges connected to the colonist status, the Baltic islanders became loyal colonists and empire-builders. Empire-builders came in many forms – settlers, missionaries, officials, prisoners, as well as governor-generals and generals. The Swedish colonists contributed to the imperial project of transformation and reinventing of the steppe by pursuing different economic activities promoted by the government. To abstain from taking part in them was hardly possible, no matter what the Swedes thought about the prospects of the experiments.
As Willard Sunderland emphasizes, 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. It seemed hard to believe that the plains could ever have belonged to anyone else except Russia.105

Along with transforming the steppe, the Swedish community itself experienced a number of radical transformations: physical (migration and then residence in new geographical and social milieu); juridical (the status changes: the loss of medieval privileges and obtaining of the colonist status that guaranteed the rights and privileges in Russia, required some obligations); economical (the changes in economic specialization of the Swedes, managing certain economic activities unknown before). The indigenous population, other foreign colonists, and the authorities were the key actors that influenced and predetermined the specifics and the extent of the Swedes’ integration and acculturation in southern Russia. Apart from preserving some cultural elements as their traditional food and their rune calendar, the Swedish colonists borrowed the trends of garment, furnishings from their German and Slavic neighbors that proved the intercultural dialogue. Unlike such non-numerous groups as Serbs, Montenegrins, Hungarians, Italians, French speaking Swiss, the inhabitants of Gammalsvenskby managed to avoid assimilation in the nineteenth century.

105 Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, 89, 223, 228.
Illustration 1: The first page of Herman Vendell’s travel account from his fieldtrip in 1881 to Gammal-svenskby and Nargö, an island in the Tallinn Bay. After returning to Finland, he published several articles influential in shaping the public imagination about the village in Finland and Sweden. SLS FS, SLS 182c.
Illustration 2: Beyond pure linguistics. Although a linguist himself, Vendell’s wide field of interest turned him into a scientific omnivore. Here is a sketch of the farmstead where Vendell stayed during his work in Gammalsvenskby. SLS FS, SLS 182c.