

# Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University—Portland

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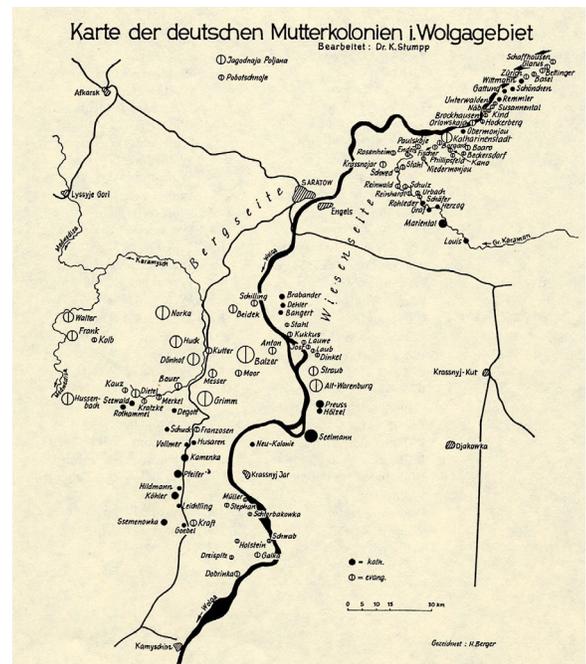
NANCY HOOVER is currently the Acting Dean of Libraries at Concordia University in NE Portland. Previously she was the University Librarian at Marylhurst University from 2003 to 2018. Nancy has a BA from Antioch College in Yellow Springs, OH and an MLS from the School of information at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY. Nancy has taught library science courses for Emporia University cohorts around the west including Portland and for the Portland State University School of Education, Library Media Specialization.

Outside of Concordia, Nancy volunteers as a street librarian for Street Books, a bicycle powered mobile library serving people who live outside, plays and watches competitive tennis, and is actively engaged in national politics.

Volga Germans are ethnic Germans who settled in the Volga River Basin area of Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great in 1763. The opportunity to escape religious persecution, incessant warfare, and economic hardship in Germany made the idea of immigration extremely attractive. Catherine's invitation also included promises of religious freedom, 30 tax-free years, free farming land, the right to retain their home languages, and exemption from serving in the military for the colonists and their descendants.

The Volga River Basin was an area of lawlessness where previous attempts to move settlers into the area were unsuccessful. After Catherine issued her manifesto, more than 30,000 ethnic Germans, along with a smaller number of colonists from other parts of Western Europe, immigrated to Russia despite the arduous one-year journey. Once there, they created 106 colonies along the Volga River.

In 1871, many of the privileges originally offered under Catherine's manifesto were repealed. In 1874, the military exemption was revoked prompting many families to emigrate, rather than have their sons fight in the Russian army. 70,000 Volga Germans fled to Brazil, 1.5 million to Argentina and 1.5 million to the US and Canada. Those who remained suffered greatly during the Russo-Turkish War



Karte der deutschen Mutterkolonien in der Wolgagebiet (map of the German Mother Colonies in the Volga region). Cartographer: Karl Stumpp. Circa 1978.





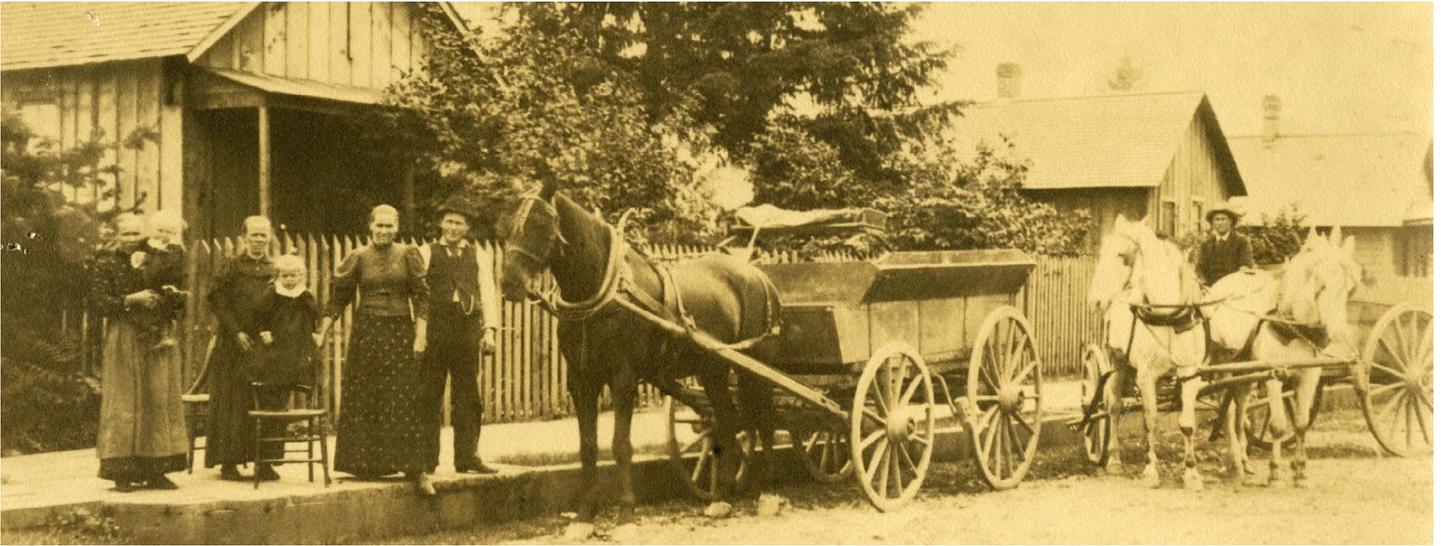
Countries of origin, migration routes, and areas of settlement (1763–1861) of the Volga and Black Sea Germans in the Mother Colonies. Cartographer: Karl Stumpp. Circa 1978.

(1877–78) and the subsequent famine of 1891–92. The Russian Revolution of 1917 brought on collectivization and more famine. Many Volga Germans died during this period. When Hitler invaded Russia in 1941, Volga Germans were falsely declared enemies of the Russian state and the entire population was sent to Siberia. After a history of 177 years the Volga German colonies were gone. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990, the Volga Germans who were deported to Asiatic Russia were allowed to emigrate; most of the four million went to Germany.

Many of the Volga Germans who left Russia for the United States first settled in Nebraska and Kansas. After the Grasshopper Plague in Kansas in 1874 that destroyed crops and farms, the Volga Germans migrated to Oregon. Volga German families started arriving in Portland in the 1880s with most arriving between 1890–1905. Some settled in the Albina neighborhood in NE Portland hoping to farm but, finding the area unsuitable, worked instead in the railroad, mills and factories in the area. Some moved to central Washington to continue farming.

Concordia University was founded in 1905 in the Albina neighborhood by German pioneers. The college first held classes at the Trinity Lutheran Church where many families who had immigrated from the Volga German colonies worshipped. A second wave of Volga Germans emigrated directly from Russia to the Portland area in the early 20th century. By 1920, about 7,000 German Russians lived in Oregon and many of those lived in Portland.

The Center for Volga German Studies (CVGS) was founded in 2004 at Concordia University by then Dean of Libraries and Volga German Scholar, Brent Mai, with assistance from descendants of Volga German immigrants. The Center is unique from other organiza-



Unknown Volga German family in the Albina district of Portland with horses and wagons. Circa 1900. Courtesy of Stacy Hahn.

tions and groups that focus on Volga Germans—it was founded as an academic entity with a focus on scholarly pursuits. The Center supports the preservation and education of the heritage, history, and accomplishments of the Volga Germans. In 2009, the Center moved into a large dedicated space in the newly built George R. White Library and Learning Center and was able to make all materials previously in storage available to the public. Holdings were cataloged in the library ILS and many images are stored electronically in the library’s digital repository; the CU Commons [https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup\\_cvgs/](https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/cup_cvgs/).

The CVGS actively collects the history, folklore, songs, literature, objects of art and craft, and information on linguistics as well as worship and governance. The Center is a clearinghouse for locating original manuscripts and also sponsors workshops and conferences. The CVGS contains a collection of over 2,000 books and documents as well as archival materials. In addition, the Center maintains genealogy resource materials to assist with family history research. A libguide was created to help users navigate the resources: <https://libguides.cu-portland.edu/volga>.

Although there have been fluctuations in the amount and type of usage since 2004, the Center, which is currently staffed by volunteers, is experiencing a high level of activity from scholars, descendants of Volga Germans, volunteers, translators, and genealogists. Volunteers provide assistance in using the CVGS collection for genealogy research. The Center is open 3 to 4 days per week and by appointment. Volunteers, many of whom are fluent in reading and writing German and Russian, respond to emails, phone calls and in-person visits.

The newly revised website <https://www.volgagermans.org/> contains over 2,400 pages of information on the history, culture and traditions of the Volga Germans. The website averages about 3,000 active users per month (based on Google Analytics) and users are primarily located in the United States, Germany, Canada, Brazil, and Argentina.

Scholarly material on the Volga Germans, written by academics based in the United States, Canada, Germany, Russia, and Argentina, is solicited for the collection. Research results are made available by publishing papers, pamphlets, books, and articles in print or electronically. The Center has acquired digital copies of Russian census lists and church



Concordia University Portland closed its doors as of spring 2020. They have announced that the Center for Volga German Studies (CVGS) will be transferred to the Family History Library (FHL) in Salt Lake City, Utah. The new URL for the CVGS website is:  
<https://www.volgagermans.org/>

records for the former colonies. These documents are translated by experts in both the Russian and German languages and the resulting English translations are made available to the public. Research into the pre-colonial origin of families in Western Europe is posted on the CVGS website.

There is an active CVGS Facebook page with about 3,300 followers from around the world. There are frequent posts on events, new materials and research regarding the origins of families

in Western Europe. Articles on the CVGS Facebook page are frequently shared on other Volga German Facebook pages which increases the outreach of the Center. The CVGS serves as the home and meeting place for the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR) Oregon Chapter. Information of common interest is shared between the Friends of the CVGS Facebook page and the AHSGR Oregon Chapter's Facebook page.

CVGS builds alliances and collaborates with similar organizations like North Dakota State University's (NDSU) Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, which focuses on Black Sea Germans. The bibliographer who manages the NDSU collection was on the CVGS advisory board. There are outreach and collaboration with other libraries like the Oregon Historical Society Library that asked the Center to write an article about the Volga Germans in Oregon for the Oregon Encyclopedia: <https://tinyurl.com/y6j3ysj4>.

CVGS sponsors conferences and workshops held in Portland and other locations. Local conferences and workshops engage the area's community of Volga German settlers and their descendants. Local members are Volga Germans, many of whom donated materials to Concordia to start this collection. In 2012, Concordia hosted the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia annual convention with an attendance of 600 people. To keep apprised of upcoming workshops and events, please visit the Friends of CVGS Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/volgagermans/>. 

## References

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