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***Colonial Dreams, Ambiguous Outcomes:
German Settlers in the Balkans and the Volga River Basin*** *

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys the phenomenon of German colonization in Eastern Europe from a comparative perspective. On examination of the origins and outcomes of German settlement in the northern Balkans and southern Russia, a number of shared characteristics and circumstances appear. From beginnings in multinational empires to dissolution under the combined pressure of nationalism and communism, the German settler communities represent an interesting case study in the shift from an imperial to a national perspective in Eastern Europe. The Germans were successful in fulfilling the goals of the Russian and Habsburg imperial governments; they increased agricultural production and helped integrate the regions into the European sphere of influence. Despite appearing initially promising, the rise of nationalism and communism following World War I threatened the traditions of both communities. The rise of Nazism and the outbreak of World War II led to the persecution and eventual dispersal of most of the Germans of the northern Balkans and the Volga River basin. By the early twenty-first century, most of the Germans of the Balkans and former Soviet Union had migrated to Germany.

KEY WORDS Balkans; Russia; Germany; Colonialism

Historians do not generally count the Houses of Romanov and Habsburg among the European colonial powers. This is a mistake. In Europe, both the Habsburgs (in the Banat of Temeswar in the northern Balkans) and the Romanovs (in the Volga River basin and Black Sea regions) engaged in explicitly colonial projects guided by the tenets of the cameralism, an early Modern theory of economic and social relations in vogue across central and eastern Europe throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These colonial dreams inspired thousands of Europeans, particularly German speakers from the Holy Roman Empire, to pull up stakes and move to the frontiers of the continent. Despite early difficulties, these colonies flourished throughout the nineteenth century and helped

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transform the Banat and the Volga from sparsely settled pastureland to densely populated agricultural centers. Although these efforts can be judged a success in pulling these borderlands into the European sphere of influence, the rise of virulent nationalism beginning in the mid-nineteenth century turned the colonial dream into a nightmare for the progeny of the original German settlers. The fall of Adolf Hitler's regime in the East heralded the end of the German settler presence there as the Red Army and the new nationalist-communist governments engaged in mass ethnic cleansing. Many of these Eastern European Germans ended up back in Germany, returning "home" after more than 150 years. Others became colonists once again, this time involuntarily in Soviet Central Asia. The two colonial projects—Habsburg and Romanov—share a remarkable affinity in both origins and outcomes. A comparison of the German migrations to the Banat and the Volga as well as of the colonists' subsequent lives in and expulsion from these two regions highlights the underlying similarities of the German colonial experience in Eastern Europe.

CAMERALISM AND THE ORIGINS OF THE COLONIAL PROJECTS

The Habsburg colonial project began in the wake of the conquest of vast tracts of territory from the Ottomans. After the successful defense of Vienna in 1683, the Austrians took the initiative and began pushing the Ottoman Turks out of the traditional Hungarian domains. The Treaty of Passarowitz, signed in 1718, gave the Habsburgs control of the Eyalet of Temesvar, a region that today is split between Romania, Serbia, and Hungary. Renaming it the Banat of Temeswar, the Habsburgs declared it a *neo acquisitsia*, to be run directly from Vienna. Ignoring Hungarian protests that the region was historically part of the Kingdom of Hungary, Charles VI placed the Hofkammer (civilian) in charge of administering those parts of this newly acquired territory not under Hofkriegsrat (military) control. The first settlers to the region followed shortly after in the 1720s. Active settlement continued throughout the eighteenth century, finally ending in the 1820s.

The Russian project had a slightly later origin. In 1763, Catherine II of Russia issued a manifesto inviting immigrants into Russia to populate and cultivate "empty" lands. These lands in South Russia, and later around the Black Sea, had for centuries been the domain of nomadic peoples. Catherine had two main goals in mind when she inaugurated her colonial project. First, she wanted to push settled agriculture further south to create a stronger buffer between the Russian heartland and the nomadic, and mostly Muslim, steppe. Second, she wanted to further Europeanize and thus strengthen Russia, following in the footsteps of Peter the Great. Russian colonization lasted for roughly the same length of time as the Habsburg project, ending in the 1820s as well. In both cases, the dispossession of mostly Turkic Muslims of both sovereignty and land led to the introduction of European settlers.

With land to be developed, the politico-economic theory of cameralism had a decisive influence on the colonial projects in both Vienna and St. Petersburg. Although the colonization program may have proceeded largely from practical interests, such as

securing the border regions or the demographic displacement of unfriendly populations, cameralists provided both a theoretical basis and practical program for the initial processes and later stages of agricultural and industrial development. In both Russian and Habsburg domains, cameralism enjoyed two main periods of popularity, led by two different cohorts of theorists. In Russia, the first inspired the Europeanizing reforms of Peter the Great (r. 1682–1725) and largely coincided with the early cameralism that influenced the Viennese court of Charles VI (r. 1711–1740). The leading theoreticians of the time, Philip Wilhelm von Hörnigk, Wilhelm Schröder, and Johann Joachim Becher were active from the mid-seventeenth century until the turn of the eighteenth century. All of them spent time living and writing in Vienna and were often intimates of members of the imperial court. (Small 1909; von Hörnigk et al. 1983:17;) Becher, for instance, was an advisor to the Habsburgs on commerce beginning in 1670 (Smith 1994). The second wave in Russia, influenced by the second major group of cameralists including Johann von Justi and Josef Sonnenfels, began with the ascension of Catherine II (r. 1762–1796), a Europeanizer who sought to bring Peter’s reforms to a conclusion. Again, the same cameralists influenced the Habsburg courts of Maria Theresa (r. 1740–1780) and Joseph II (r. 1780–1790, co-ruler with Maria Theresa from 1765) at around the same time. Much like the earlier cameralists, this generation also had extensive Viennese connections. For example, Justi was given a professorship at the recently opened *Collegium Theresianum* in 1750. The Habsburgs intended to use professors such as Justi to help mold bureaucrats capable of running the empire. Although he ran into trouble with the Jesuits and quickly left Vienna in 1753, he is regarded as one of the first professors of economic sciences in the empire (Small 1909:288–89).

Although there were certainly differences in the cameralists’ specific programs, the similarities regarding colonization and population are of more importance when analyzing the Russian and Habsburg colonial projects. All were avid populationists. They believed that the strength of a country could be gauged by the number of inhabitants. The more inhabitants in a country, the more possible productive subjects there were. More subjects meant more tax revenue for the ruler, increasing his ability to wage war, the most pressing need of the state in the eighteenth century, or to institute new public-works projects. There were a number of ways to increase the population, including having better health care so people lived longer or encouraging subjects to have more children, but one of the quickest and surest ways was to encourage immigration and discourage emigration.

In addition to populationist beliefs, the cameralists also promoted aggressive economic development. Many, such as von Hörnigk, advocated outright autarky. He argued that the best way for a state to guarantee its strength was for it to be completely self-sufficient and thus protected from the vicissitudes of the eighteenth-century state system. All promoted the creation and support of native manufacturing. They argued that by developing its industrial capacity, the state lessened its dependence on outside powers for imports and kept wealth within the state. This is very similar to what modern economists call import substitution industrialization. They further promoted the manufacture of luxury goods as a means to not only sate domestic demand but also increase exports and thus increase domestic stocks of gold and other precious metals.

This desire to increase trade also affected their agricultural policies. Because of the export opportunities, sericulture and viticulture became top priorities for cameralist-influenced administrations. Schroeder, for example, emphasized the benefits of silk production, a project that was attempted in the Banat (Small 1909:155). Finally, the cameralists heavily promoted mining. Once again, the accumulation of gold, silver, and other precious metals was crucial to their system, and mining was a way to increase wealth and power without trade.

In the case of Russia in the early 1760s and Austria in the 1710s, each possessed lands they considered “depopulated” and economically backward. These areas were ideal testing grounds for the populationist and economic theories of the cameralists, which promised great returns to the imperial governments. Driving and supporting the government’s cameralist programs of development, commentators and observers in both regions provided remarkably similar descriptions of the land tenure and of the possibilities for expansion and exploitation in the early years of the colonial projects. In both cases, the land is described as uninhabited, unexploited, diseased, or otherwise misused. The manifesto issued by Catherine II in 1763 calling settlers to the empire described southern Russia as a “vast Extent of Lands . . . [with] a great many very advantageous and convenient Places for the settlement and Habitation of Mankind, yet uncultivated . . . [with] unexhaustable Treasures of divers metals hidden in the Bosom of the Earth . . . Woods, Rivers, Lakes, and Seas belonging to commerce” (Bartlett 1979:237–42). Similarly, recalling the state of affairs in the Banat before the Habsburgs took possession, Francecso Grisellini, a prominent traveler, described it as a diseased cesspool, forgotten by the Turks and allowed to slowly die. The region was crisscrossed with fetid swamps that harbored a deadly disease known as Theiss fever, after one of the major rivers that bounded the region. Such descriptions only reinforced the impression that the Banat and Volga must be improved and transformed into wealth-producing areas. Viewed from St. Petersburg and Vienna, both regions desperately needed development to make them productive parts of their respective empires and the European system.

In both places, the indigenous peoples were described as inferior and dangerous, unlikely to be of much help in the Europeanization of the region. The Raizen (modern Serbs) and Wallachians (modern Romanians) of the Banat were robbers, brigands, and lazy barbarians (Grisellini 1780:5, 6, 10, 12–13). They “have scarce more religion than their domestic animals” (Born, Raspe, and Ferber 1777:17). Descriptions of nomadic Kyrgyz in the Russian Empire follow much the same pattern. Even into the 1870s, the nomadic peoples were described in disparaging terms, recalling a tradition that had existed since the time of conquest. The Kyrgyz were described as “tall, wild, skin-clad men, and have the dower of an evil reputation. They range the steppes from the Chinese wall to the Don, breed camels, drive flocks, drink fermented mare’s milk, own no law but their own, and are accused of stealing children to sell” (Guthrie [1874] 1970:40–41). These descriptions align very well with new scholarship on settler colonialism that argues that tropes of emptiness, misuse, and barbarity helped attract and justify the European agricultural settlement of regions inhabited primarily by nomads. In this respect, the colonizations of southern Russia and the Banat bear not only a striking similarity to one

another but also an intriguing similarity to the settler-colonialism practiced in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. In the borderlands of all of these continents, settlement and exploitation were justified by denigrating the indigenous people and lauding the colonists as Europeanizing and Westernizing forces. If the local people were unable or unwilling to improve the region, then outsiders were needed.

Both in the Banat and on the Volga, thousands of Reich Germans answered the call to colonize the “empty” and “backwards” East. Although not the only group to migrate, they were the majority of settlers in both regions. Migrating for a variety of reasons—war, taxation, famine, disease, localized overpopulation—their numbers included not only agriculturalists but also tradesmen and professionals (Mai and Reeves-Marquardt 2003). By 1760, there were 24,000 Germans living in the Banat. This number increased to 200,000 by the mid-nineteenth century (Roeder and Forrest 2008:92, 94). From 1763 to 1769, 23,109 German settlers migrated to the Volga region centered on the town of Saratov. By the end of the heaviest periods of colonization, roughly the mid-nineteenth century, approximately 368,000 Germans lived in the Russian Empire. By 1914, this number had ballooned to 1.75 million (Giesinger 1974:13, 54, 79). Both governments had high hopes for what these settlers could accomplish. They represented the vanguard of the West in areas that were to be rationalized and Europeanized. Much like their compatriots in the Americas, these settlers were expected to help literally settle these regions and transform them from nomad pastoralism and subsistence to large-scale, intensive grain farming. Authorities also hoped that these settlers would be exemplars to the local peasants and nomads. They hoped that the almost mythical German “industriousness” and material success would inspire others to achieve the same.

In both cases, most of the settlers did not migrate to be the shock troops of development and European integration; rather, they responded to incentives offered by the imperial governments. Realizing that simply opening a region for colonization was unlikely to attract people in the desired numbers, both the Habsburgs and the Romanovs had offered a package of enticements—both material and spiritual—that they hoped would lure productive settlers to their lands. In Russia, Catherine’s manifesto promised a number of incentives, including free land, freedom of religion, freedom from taxes for a proscribed period of time, and freedom from conscription in the Russian military. These incentives were supposedly guaranteed in perpetuity, but with the rise of Russian nationalism in the later nineteenth century, many of these guarantees were revoked in an attempt to Russify and homogenize the population of the empire. The Habsburgs offered a similar slate of entitlements to their prospective colonists. There, too, settlers received land and temporary tax exemption, although freedom from military service was guaranteed only for the eldest son of the family. They also received farming equipment and draft animals, either completely free or with generous repayment terms. At various times in both cases, transportation to the areas of settlement was either provided for free or subsidized at specific points along the way. Also in both cases, agents—either sanctioned by the government or not—played a crucial role in recruiting and ferrying colonists to their final destinations. Some less scrupulous ones sold their charges to nobles along the way, especially in Hungary, where labor shortages were acute following

reconquest. Although on the surface, this appears have been a completely public enterprise, there was in fact a lot of private initiative from businessmen and local noble landholders.

In both cases, imperial authorities eventually rescinded privileges for newly arriving immigrants as the lands became “full.” In fact, by the early nineteenth century, a restrictive means test for migration replaced the incentives in both cases. The means test was also a way to guarantee a certain quality of colonist. One can imagine that many of the most successful and innovative Germans, those who would have made especially good colonists, were already gainfully employed in the Reich and thus had no reason to emigrate. Initially, this had been of little concern to the imperial authorities. Following the tenets of the populationist cameralists, the authorities were more concerned with raw numbers than with the quality of the settlers. This changed once it became clear, especially in Russia, that a number of the early villages were failing and some of the immigrants were abandoning the colonies to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Imperial authorities and local observers often complained that many of the immigrants were ne’er-do-wells at best, criminals or alcoholics at worst. In the eyes of the imperial administration, such people were no more capable of developing and Europeanizing the region than were the indigenous peoples they were intended to replace. In fact, the Banat was, for a time, the destination of many vagabonds and criminals from Vienna. The idea was that hard work in the frontier would reform them of their lawless ways while their labor developed the region. Even French POWs were sent to the Banat during the French Revolutionary Wars. In the Banat, they were far from the front lines and their labor there served the purposes of the imperial government. As labor shortages became less acute, the governments of both countries became more restrictive as to who could become a colonist. By the early nineteenth century, administrators in both regions felt that colonization was no longer necessary and sought to staunch the flow of newcomers.

In addition to creating a reliable agricultural population, the administrators of both regions sought to implement the other second major aspect of the cameralist project: the creation of manufacturing centers to supply the growing population and to produce goods for export. To this end, the administrators of the Banat created an entirely new section of the capital of Temeswar specifically for artisans and their workshops. This early version of an “industrial park” contained spaces for woodworking and oil pressing as well as textile manufacture (Griselini 1780:19). In Russia, Catherine’s manifesto offered would-be manufacturers an exemption from tolls, duties, or customs for 10 years. It also made an allowance for “Foreign Capitalist[s]” to purchase serfs to staff their new factories, a privilege generally held only by the nobility (Bartlett 1979:240). In both the Habsburg and Romanov domains, the development of manufacturing played an important role in the colonial project. The third major aspect, mining, was of central importance in the Banat but was of no major importance on the Volga and thus is a point of little substantive comparison.

THE SETTLEMENTS AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

The early stages of the colonial projects were difficult for the new settlers of both regions. When the first colonists arrived in the Banat in the 1720s, the region was still an active border between two hostile empires, and war broke out again in 1737. The fighting devastated the German immigrants. Depopulation and destruction were again the norm. Ottoman soldiers and Wallachian and Roma irregulars targeted German villages for plunder. When finished, they often burned the villages to the ground. It was not really until the second major wave of colonization, in the 1760s, that the German colonists began to make their mark on the landscape of the Banat, and even then, life was difficult. These colonists, and those of the third wave in the 1780s, truly helped transform the Banat into an “agricultural paradise.” Once they did, many observers quickly recognized the colonists, accurately or not, as the driving force of all development of the region. In fact, once the colonists’ success became manifest by the late eighteenth century, a narrative of their hardiness and industry—part reality, part myth—began to emerge and forms the core of their history to this day.

The first colonists in Russia experienced similar problems. Southern Russia at the time of the first colonists’ arrival in the mid-1760s was a wild and often lawless place prone to violent upheaval. In 1773, Emelian Ivanovich Pugachev, a disaffected Cossack and pretender to the throne, instigated a rebellion that raged up and down the Volga for the next two years. This uprising directly affected the German colonists, as they were viewed by many local inhabitants as interlopers in the region and, as such, were targets for violence. In addition to raiding by Pugachev’s partisans, the local Kalmyk and Kirghiz nomads often attacked German settlements in retaliation for their disruption of normal steppe patterns. Even once the early violence on the frontier was quelled, the colonists still had to contend with the fickle weather of the steppe. Drought was a constant threat. Eyewitness reports tell of villages failing or disappearing because of failed crops, poor soil, or other hardships. Many colonists simply left for Germany or other regions of Russia. Others sought solace in alcohol, and there are a number of reports from travelers bemoaning the sorry state of some German villages and their inhabitants. Once firmly established, the German colonies of Russia, like those of the Banat, became exemplars for the government of how productiveness and intelligence could transform a previously “backward” area. Again, as in the narrative of the Banat Germans, these attributes became a part of the cultural memory that has come down in the histories of the German colonists of Russia.

Despite these initial hardships, travelers and government officials eventually came to see the colonies as models of rational planning and German industriousness. In the Banat, the Habsburgs sponsored canal building to ease transportation difficulties and the draining of marshes to lessen the impact of the “Banat” or “Theiss fever” (Griselini 1780:11; Kohl 1843:307; Paton 1862:24). Travelers described the agricultural output of the Banat as tremendous, a “cornucopia” rivaled only by that of Egypt (Kohl 1843:312; Paton 1862:28–29;). By the end of the nineteenth century, “Banat Wheat” was a gold standard on commodities markets in Great Britain. Although some projects, such as the plans to grow rice and indigo, were largely failures, the consensus on the project’s overall

success was overwhelmingly positive. Observers never tired of lauding the Germans for transforming the Banat from a “cesspool” to a “breadbasket.” As for industrial development, the process was ongoing. Throughout the nineteenth century, the area was slowly industrialized, especially the capital of Temeswar. Mining in the Banat was also continually developed and provided many ores, including gold, zinc, lead, coal, and iron.

The development of the Russian steppe proceeded in a similar fashion. Many of the German settlers, especially the Mennonites, became acclaimed farmers. The followers of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist leader Menno Simons, these colonists were pacifists and teetotalers who were almost universally lauded for their diligence, ingenuity, and thrift. Some even became reluctant mentors to the Slavic peasants and recently settled nomads (Sunderland 2004:117–18). Manufacturing also developed from cottage industries into something more substantial. In some towns, German women weaved cloth that was highly prized by Russian Orthodox dissenters who eschewed machine-made textiles. By the 1840s, there were signs of significant industrial development in southern Russia, including a textile mill, a number of brick and tile works, breweries and distilleries, and as oil and fulling mills (Haxthausen [1843] 1972:196). Although this might not strike the modern observer as all that impressive, it is important to remember that until 80 years previous, this area had lacked any substantial settled population.

The construction of towns was further evidence for contemporaries of the rational nature of the colonization projects. In the Banat, the imperial government either built towns shortly before the arrival of the immigrants or subsidized the immigrants’ living expenses while they themselves built their domiciles. In both cases, imperial administrators guided the construction of towns and villages and followed ideals of rationality and symmetry. Most villages were built on a grid pattern with a main road bisecting the town. Some more ambitious designs were radial, with the main square—actually a circle—forming the core and with houses and streets expanding from this core like spokes on a bicycle wheel. Nothing escaped the planners’ designs. They allocated the fields such that the residents closest to the edge of town had the farthest fields while those closer to the town center had the nearer fields. This was done to ensure that all colonists had roughly the same distance to travel to work.

Observers often contrasted the design of these “rational” towns with the more organic design of the indigenous Serbian and Romanian villages. Indigenous villages had grown naturally over years rather than being planned from the outset and thus lacked the organized, symmetrical appearance of the German villages. As one traveler described it, “civilization re-commences” when one enters a German settlement. In a village that was half German, half Daco-Roman (i.e., Wallachian, Romanian), the traveler describes “the German part of [the] village with neat farmyards, clean white-washed walls, green-painted Venetian window-blinds . . . the gables of the houses covered with ornamental plaster of very curious designs, cornucopias, wreaths of flowers, and arabesques; not, to be sure, in the best taste, but denoting industry, order, and easy circumstances.” He described the Wallachian part, in contrast, as simply “filthy and disorganized” (Paton 1862:31–32). Much as this traveler did, many others seemed to equate the orderliness and cleanliness of the German villages with a more orderly character and morality, perhaps

without realizing that this orderliness may have had less to do with some innate German qualities than it did with the involvement of educated government planners in the design of the villages.

Many observers made similar assessments of German villages in the Russian Empire. There, travelers likewise described the towns and villages as places of beauty and order in an otherwise bleak environment. Though not uniform in their praise—some villages were apparently quite run down, the German inhabitants being lazy drunkards who had allowed their homes and possessions to deteriorate—many travelers would have agreed with Mary Holderness ([1823] 1970) when she wrote that “the cottages of the Germans are much better built than those of any other peasantry of the Crimea.” Travelers saw the German colonial towns in Russia, much like in the Banat, as somehow different and better than the dwellings of those around them. Guthrie ([1874] 1970) assumed that some settlements in which she stopped while travelling along the Don River were German because they were “unusually clean and comfortable.” Once again, the material culture of the region informed the traveler of the nature of the inhabitants, and vice versa.

This assessment is perhaps only natural when one considers that all of the travelers who made these comparisons were either Western Europeans or, often in the Russian case, Eastern European Westernizers who believed that the adoption of Western modes of living was the path to modernity and power. In both cases, everything Western—from housing and clothing to speech—was modern and progressive and everything indigenous was backward and regressive. As one traveler to the Banat put it in the early 1850s, “In a quarter of a century, Steam and German civilization will entirely alter the aspect of these still semi-barbarous regions” (Paton 1855:22). Industry, “German-ness,” and progress were inextricably linked in the development of the Eastern lands in the minds of many observers.

The rising tides of nationalism after the revolutions of 1848 made life increasingly difficult for the Germans of the Banat and the Volga. In the Banat, the *Ausgleich* of 1867, which made Austria and Hungary separate countries united under the Habsburg crown, intensified the process of Magyarization that had been ongoing since the late eighteenth century. The Hungarians had endeavored to Magyarize or Hungarianize the inhabitants of the Banat since regaining sovereignty over the region in 1778. In Russia, the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the reforms of the 1870s represented the end of imperial favor for the Germans and the beginning of a Russification campaign that sought to assimilate all inhabitants of the empire to a dominant Russian culture. In both regions, the process by which the authorities sought to assimilate the German colonists was broadly the same. The imperial authorities saw schools as fundamental in the creation of a new nationalism and thus co-opted them. Hungarian and Russian became the languages of education, especially and importantly of higher education, and more generally the languages of upward social mobility. In Russia, the government rescinded the privileges enjoyed by the colonists since their arrival more than 100 years previous. The demand that colonists enlist in the Russian army was particularly problematic and led to many of the most prosperous colonists, the pacifist Mennonites, to emigrate largely to the United

States and Canada. Although these efforts did not succeed in their goal of completely destroying a German identity in the regions, they did make the expression of German culture much more difficult. Unfortunately for the Germans of the region, conditions were shortly to get much worse. These trends were merely a prelude to the trauma and dislocation to be experienced by the German minorities when industrialized warfare and nationalism exploded in the East in the first half of the twentieth century.

THE END OF THE IMPERIAL PROJECTS AND THE RISE OF THE NATION-STATE

The end of World War I and the collapse of the major European land empires heralded major changes in the lives of the Banat and Russian Germans. Initially, many of these changes appeared promising. The end of the Habsburg Empire seemed to indicate the beginning of a period of ethnic autonomy, the freedom of oppressed peoples from the “prison of nations.” Even the Germans of the Banat sought to take advantage of the dominant mood of self-determination by declaring an independent “Republic of the Banat” in 1918. Some observers of the peace process questioned the genuineness of this impulse from the start. They saw it as a backroom deal involving Bela Kuhn, leader of the short-lived communist Hungarian republic, and French entrepreneurs who wanted to exploit the Banat’s mineral wealth. The Germans—and the independence of the Banat itself—were merely a means to end, i.e., the continued exploitation of the East by the dominant West (Dillon 1920:157, 239–40). Regardless, this experiment in self-government lasted only until the Yugoslav and Romanian armies entered the region, ended all talk of autonomy, and began bickering over how to carve it up. In 1920, the Treaty of Trianon split the historical Banat between Hungary, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes (Yugoslavia), and Romania, with the latter receiving the lion’s share. Though at times tense, the relationship between the German minority and the newly ascendant ethnic majorities proceeded relatively smoothly. The Germans were generally loyal citizens who asked for some measure of cultural autonomy, though the newly nationalizing states could perceive this as subversive, especially where it meant education in the German language. The Romanians, and to a lesser extent the Yugoslavs, had important economic and political ties with Germany that “encouraged” them to respect the rights of their German minorities (Komjathy and Stockwell 1980:103). This relatively productive and peaceful relationship began to change with the rise of Nazism in Germany and of fascist governments in the region.

In Russia, the Bolshevik takeover in 1917 also initially seemed promising. Loudly trumpeting the virtue of national self-determination, the Bolsheviks’ “democratic” ideals seemed to indicate a major shift from the policy of Russification that had defined the twilight years of the empire. The Germans of the new communist state even received the right of limited self-rule. The central government in Moscow established the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (VGASSR) in 1924. The VGASSR was centered on the towns of Saratov and the capital of Pokrovsk (later renamed Engels). It consisted largely of the territory settled by the German colonists 160 years earlier. In

theory, the new autonomous region seemed to promise a continued German community run by local Germans, if not absolute freedom and independence. That was not the reality. In fact, the founders and early leaders of the VGASSR included many Austrian and Reich German POWs who had converted to communism during the war rather than local notables (Fleischhauer, Pinkus, and Frankel 1986:36). The Russian Civil War from 1917 to 1922 and its aftermath had early on exposed the bankruptcy of the Bolshevik leadership to many of the region's Germans. The war led to the deaths of millions in the Ukraine and southern Russia, including tens of thousands of ethnic Germans. Although the republic remained a political reality until the start of Operation Barbarossa in 1941, the indigenous German community largely shunned it. The events of the Civil War and the periodic famines that followed in its wake caused the Germans to distrust the communist government (Fleischhauer et al. 1986:40–43; Walth 1996:55). Rather than work with the authorities, most colonists sought self-sufficiency and generally wanted to be left alone. Moscow, for its part, largely ignored the republic and its inhabitants until the outbreak of World War II, perhaps because the German nationality was considered more advanced, and thus less in need of special attention, than their “less-advanced” neighbors.

The actions of and the reactions to the policies of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich ultimately had dire consequences for the Germans of Eastern Europe. The fear of a powerful and dominant German state, especially a Nazi state, meant that governments all over Europe viewed their German minorities with suspicion, even those who had left their putative “motherland” more than a century before. Already during World War I, administrators in Tsarist Russia had ordered the dispossession and forced resettlement of ethnic Germans from the western provinces of the empire as a potential “fifth column.” This fear reached epic proportions following the Nazi invasion in 1941. The communist government forcibly resettled thousands of Germans from the Ukraine and the Volga in Central Asia as possible enemy agents. Following the war, the resettled Germans were not allowed to return to their previous homes, as this land had already been resettled, generally by Russians and Ukrainians. Furthermore, the government in Moscow now hoped the Germans could do for agriculture in Central Asia what they had previously done in Southern Russia. It was only much later under Khrushchev that the government issued an apology of sorts to the ethnic Germans, although they still did not allow ethnic Germans to return to their “ancestral” lands in South Russia and the Ukraine.

The situation for Germans in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe following the end of the war was similarly horrendous. In light of the Nazi atrocities carried out on the civilian populations, reprisals against ethnic Germans were swift and brutal. The Germans in the Banat were no exception to this general trend. Though most had been loyal to the Yugoslav and Romanian governments, the Nazis succeeded in indoctrinating some of them with their potent ideology. Throughout the 1930s, young men and women returned from studying in Germany, bringing with them National Socialist ideas. These ranks swelled as it became clear that a Nazi defeat would mean terrible consequences for the Eastern Germans. Some men joined the Wehrmacht—the regular German army—or

the 7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division Prinz Eugen, named after the Habsburg general who conquered the territory of the Banat in the eighteenth century. This group participated in the destruction of the Jewish population of the Banat, as well as the persecution of Serbs. As the German army retreated in 1944, these crimes served as the basis for the hatred and retribution meted out on all the German inhabitants of the area (Sevic 2000:143–63; Wagner 2000:135–42). In the immediate aftermath of the war, many Germans were forced into exile, returning to a completely different Germany than their ancestors had left more than 200 years previous.

The Germans of Romania and Yugoslavia faced similar hardships after the war, though in general, those in Yugoslavia faced much worse repression. In Romania, much of the German population fled with the Wehrmacht and during the early postwar period—estimates range from 100,000 to 400,000—while many of those who stayed ended up deported to the USSR. In Yugoslavia, a number of Germans—estimates range from 27,000 to 40,000—were likewise sent to the Soviet Union (Swanson 2008:356–57). These Germans, mostly women, were the victims of a program of “reparations in kind.” Joseph Stalin argued that the Germans would never be able to adequately repay the USSR for the destruction caused by the Nazi invasion. He suggested that a solution for this problem would be the involuntary servitude of Eastern European Germans in parts of the USSR. The other Allies, including the United States, approved of this policy. As the Red Army marched across Europe, they implemented it. Romanian and Yugoslav Germans were sent to Ukraine to work in mines, along with other newly identified “enemies of the state” such as returning Russian POWs. After their term of service, usually three years if death or illness did not render them incapable of work, the Soviets “repatriated” them to East Germany, as they were unwanted in their former home countries. Arriving in East Germany, these women looked to reunite with their husbands and children, but the communist governments of their former homelands prevented them from returning, making such reunions very difficult. In Yugoslavia, the German minority was treated more harshly than in Romania. Josef Broz Tito, the leader of the emerging state whose partisan fighters had ravaged the German settlements of the Yugoslavian Banat in retribution for Nazi occupation, saw the Germans as possible fascists and capitalists. As such, the Soviet and Yugoslav secret police brutally dealt with the Germans, placing many in detention camps. Some had to wait until 1953 to secure their release.

In both Romania and Serbia, the newly installed communist governments used the Germans’ predicament to their own benefit. The seizure of the Germans’ holdings opened up some of the best agricultural land in the region for renewed colonization. Both governments used this land to buy the allegiance of large segments of their populations. This was especially true in Yugoslavia, where Tito used the confiscated German land to repay partisan fighters and to buy some measure of legitimacy from the formerly dispossessed. In Romania, dispossessed and unemployed Germans became day laborers for the Romanian population in an inversion of the prewar situation. Some Germans were able to capitalize on this situation to an extent, moving to cities and taking advantage of the rapidly industrializing state. Despite this glimmer of hope, the quality of life for the

majority of Germans left in Romania and Yugoslavia experienced a major and irreversible decline.

The expulsion of the majority of Germans from southeastern Europe and from European Russia began a migration to Germany that has continued sporadically until today. The onset of the Cold War in 1946 locked most Soviet Germans in place until the fall of the USSR in 1991. In Romania, the Germans were used as political and economic pawns, especially by President Nicolae Ceausescu. Romania established diplomatic ties with West Germany in 1967, the first country in Eastern Europe to do so (Shafir 1985:166–67). In 1978, the Romanian government made a deal with the West German government allowing ethnic Germans to leave if the West German government paid DM 10,000 each (Gallagher 2005:81). Ceausescu saw this as a means of getting much-needed hard currency into the country. He justified the payments by arguing that the money was merely repayment for the cost of educating and supporting these Germans who would now be of no use to the Romanian state. The West Germans paid the cost for those ethnic Germans who wanted to leave Romania. This led to around 12,000 Germans per year—both Transylvanian Saxons and Banat Germans—abandoning Romania for the West. In addition to payments, the German government helped the process along by guaranteeing a right of return to Germany for the Germans of the East.

The collapse of the USSR heralded a new mass migration of Germans out of southeastern Europe and Central Asia, where the Volga Germans had been living since their expulsion from Ukraine and southern Russia during World War II. In Central Asia, the emerging independent states of the region were constructing their societies around various Turkic and Persian ethnicities and languages, not around universal ideas of freedom, human rights, or multiethnicity. This led to outbursts of ethnic violence, such as the Osh riots between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan. In Tajikistan, ethnic, religious, and political differences exploded into a violent civil war that lasted until 1997. Events such as these, as well as the collapsing regional economy and the declining standard of living, convinced the majority of the Germans in the region to leave. They had no place in the emerging nationalist societies. In fact, as minorities, they were likely to be targets of violence as the new states sought to cement their national ideologies. Similar considerations led to mass emigration of the remaining Germans out of Romania and war-torn Yugoslavia. These migrations represented the end of a 50-year process of dispossession of the German population in the East. By the early 2000s, the effects of this process were starkly visible, as there were very few German communities remaining in Eastern Europe or Central Asia, and they decrease every year.

The colonial projects in both the Romanov and Habsburg domains were intellectually part of the larger European colonial projects that sought to absorb the rest of the world politically, culturally, and economically into Europe. For 220 years in the Banat of Temeswar and 170 years in the Volga River region, these settler communities were visible markers of the transformation of the regions into “little Germanies,” effectively integrating them into the larger European economic and cultural system. Initially very successful, the Germans were lauded, rightly or not, for their ability to transform regions from “backwaters” to “breadbaskets.” This success did not last forever.

What had begun as promising experiments in government-led colonial development ended in the death and displacement of hundreds of thousands. The rise of nationalism, and particularly the rise of Nazism, heralded the destruction of the multiethnic frontier communities of which the Germans had been an integral part. Following World War II, the strange synergy of communism and nationalism, an ideological conundrum that plagued the Soviet Union from its inception and influenced the newly communist states of Eastern Europe following the war, proved an effective force in combating Nazism and in cleansing Eastern Europe of a now-hated ethnic minority. Despite living in geographically diverse regions, the German communities of the East shared many of the same successes and problems. Poignantly, despite nearly two hundred years of separation, most of these communities were reunited in Germany in the twentieth century, immigrants in their ostensible “homeland.”

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