

Russian or Volga Germans

Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 597,212 Russian or Volga Germans in the Russian Federation. Volga Germans are primarily Lutheran and Mennonite in religion. Their number has fallen by almost half since 1989, as many have taken advantage of naturalization opportunities in Germany.

Historical context

Large-scale German settlement in Russia first occurred in the sixteenth century following Catherine the Great's decree of 1763 granting steppe land along the Volga River to Germans. In 1924 the Soviet regime created the Volga German ASSR with German as its official language. The republic was disbanded during the war and its German population (895,637) deported to Siberia and Central Asia. The Germans were not allowed to resettle in the region despite being rehabilitated in 1965. They settled instead in Siberia, the Ural mountains and the republics of Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan.

From the late 1980s, a number of German organizations were established: Revival (Wiedergeburt, Vozrozhdenie); Freedom (Freiheit, Svoboda); and the Interstate Organization of Russian Germans (Zwischenstaathischer Verein der Russlanddeutschen). These organizations have campaigned for the restoration of their homeland but have faced strong opposition from the local populations of the Saratov and Volgograd oblasts. The German Government has allocated significant funds for the creation of German cultural centres and schools in Central Asia and Russia. This has not, however, deterred hundreds of thousands of Germans from emigrating to Germany. Ethnic Germans, their spouses and their descendants have been able to naturalize as German citizens through the Law of Return, in spite of often lacking even rudimentary knowledge of the German language. Some restrictions were placed in immigration of Volga Germans into Germany in the late 1990s. There are also substantial Volga German diaspora groups in north and south America.

In 2003 the Association of Germans in the Volga Region held a congress in Saratov. The congress called for the promotion of the idea of the restoration of a Volga German autonomous republic and for a law to rehabilitate the German population. These calls elicited no response from official circles.

Current issues

In 2005 the German Government introduced tougher regulations for Germans from ex-Soviet states - known as *Aussiedler* in German - to naturalize as German citizens. Dwindling numbers of German-speakers amongst those from ex-Soviet states seeking German nationality was cited as the reason. According to reports in 1993 74 per cent of arrivals knew some German; in 2005 the corresponding figure was only 22 per cent.

Immigrant Germans from Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union confront racist prejudice and violence in Germany as 'Russians', particularly those settled in the economically depressed eastern parts of Germany. In 2003 skinhead groups killed a German repatriated from Kazakhstan, initiating a cycle of local clan warfare.