

The Germans from Russia: Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie

This documentary prepared by Prairie Public illustrates the history of the Germans from Russia. Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie presents the Germans from Russia as an ethnic group of “agricultural pioneers on several continents whose quest for land and peace shaped them into a distinctive and enduring ethnic group.”ⁱ As you reflect upon the documentary, examine what makes the Germans from Russia distinctive from other ethnic groups, and identify what distinctions have endured.

Here are some frameworks for your reflections.

1. What religious and ideological mindsets set apart the Germans who moved to Russia from other ethnic groups? Which of those have prevailed today?
2. Describe the vernacular architecture of the Germans from Russia before and after they immigrated to America and Canada. What is “batsa brick”? How did their architecture reflect their adaptations to the landscape? How did the architecture reflect their cultural and ethnic identity?
3. The documentary narrator notes that church in the Homeland and early on in the new country was more important than the schools. The narrator further notes that economy for the Germans from Russia derives from wheat, but the life patterns derive from the church. What does all this mean?
4. When living conditions deteriorated in Russia, one in four Germans from Russia migrated to America, numbering 300,000 between 1872 and 1914. What has been the impact of that massive immigration on generations even today? How is that impact sometimes expressed?
5. If one were to simply take a windshield view of a Germans from Russia vernacular farmstead, one might deduce that these were a simplistic people. How would you describe the people who built and lived in the prairie earth homes?
6. Much is made of the folkways in the documentary, including cooking streudel, healing (remember the *braucher*), and the art found in textiles and iron crosses. What is to be learned by examining these folkways?

7. *Children of the Steppe* provided some examples of popular sayings among the Germans from Russia, including “Praying is of no use; what’s needed is mist [manure],” and “Work makes life sweet.” Reflect on these and on the following quipsⁱⁱ; use them to deduce what makes Germans from Russia distinctive from other ethnic groups and discuss how those distinctions have endured.

He eats like a thresher.

She dips into the lard crock with a knitting needle.

He’s got a mouth like a lawyer.

He’s got a stomach like a mayor.

Many hands soon finish the job.

Lazy horses sweat quickly.

One shouldn’t hand over the reins while one is still sitting on the wagon.

A mother can provide better for seven children than seven children for one mother.

A little woman is also tall when she’s standing on a money bag.

God created little people; big fools grow by themselves.

Little children step on the mother’s lap; big children kick her heart.

The young can die; the old must.

Tomorrow, tomorrow, not today; so all lazy people say.

People make the calendar; God makes the weather.

8. Early in *Children of the Steppe*, Dr. Kloberdanz raises the notion that the Germans from Russia are the most misunderstood of all ethnic groups. He cites their Russian appearance and their use of the German language as examples of what outsiders found confusing. Are *insiders* confused about their identity? As you reflect upon what you have heard and seen, how do YOU describe the Germans from Russia?

ⁱ From documentary cover.

ⁱⁱ Found in Joseph S. Height, *Paradise on the Steppe: A Cultural History of the Kutschurgan, Beresan, and Liebental Colonists, 1804-1944* (Bismarck: ND Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1972), 153-157.