

Georg von Trapp's Request for Reimbursement from the Potemkin Estate 1797

His requests, taken from the St. Petersburg archives (RGIA, Fond 1374 Opis 1 Delo 322).
Translated from French by Jo-Ann (Unruh) Bakker (Geneva, Switzerland).

Letter #1:

Summary of the services that the Undersigned has rendered to Russia

In the month of June 1786 the late Prince Potemkin sent me for the first time out of Russia to procure as many colonists as possible, who must, at all costs, arrive in Riga before winter, to be transported to Kherson, Kremenschuck and in the Crimea, so that they could be seen there by the late Empress and the late Emperor Joseph, the above-mentioned Prince wishing, according to the principles of politics, to make them believe that these desert countries already swarmed with settlers. For this effect, the late Empress had to find these settlers everywhere and sometimes the same peasants, with their wives in foreign costumes twice and three times. I had to send them to the post several times. To the greatest satisfaction of Prince Potemkin I procured up to 2387 of them from different nations and religions.

In the month of May 1787, I was appointed Court Counsellor and afterwards by *Immenoi Ukas*, Director and Curator of the Colonies, and sent out of the country (abroad) for the second time to enlist 270 families of Mennonites who, at my persuasion, had sent Deputies to Russia, taking with me the promise of Prince Potemkin that if I could succeed in procuring these brave people, the elite of good farmers, I would be appointed Councillor of Colleges and decorated with the Order of Wolodimer. (The death of Prince Potemkin prevented the fulfilment of this promise.)

Not only did I send these 270 families of Mennonites to Russia, but also the subscription of 317 other families of Mennonites, who for fear of becoming subjects of the King of Prussia, as they later became, offered to me to come also to settle in New Russia, etc. without asking for advances from Russia, being people of means, and whom Prince Potemkin would have brought without fail if his death had not occurred.

I procured in Danzig and sent to Russia distillers of liqueurs, which succeeded perfectly well.

I procured and sent shipbuilders to Sevastapol in the Crimea, which were badly needed there.

I sent to the merchants Zuckerbecker & Hay in Riga 16 Dutch Colonists with a pastor, all chosen people. Without a counter-order from Prince Potemkin, I could have sent in the same year, that is to say in 1780, at least another 200 families from Holland, who were ready to leave.

I procured and communicated to Prince Potemkin a very considerable submission from wealthy Dutch Patriots who, at my persuasion, had resolved to form two considerable establishments, one on the banks of the Dnieper and the other in the Crimea. Finally, if we would have liked to take advantage of the discontent of the Dutch, of the good French in 1789 and in 1790 during my stay in these countries and follow my plan after my great success, I am proud and I could prove it only at the time as it is, Russia would already have saved on her import a few hundred thousand rubles and would have had a considerable increase in her exports, not to mention the great and invaluable advantage of having cleared a part of these beautiful and fertile deserts which unfortunately still remain fallow.

At Beverley in Yorkshire on 28 April 1797.

(signed) George de Trappe

My Address is: To G. de Trappe Esq.

at

Beverley

Yorkshire.

Note. The current privy councillor Monsieur de Pastuchow, whom I have had the honour to know for 20 years, must be convinced of the truth of all that I have said above having made my report to him at the time and at these places.

Letter#2:

Copy of a Request to His Imperial Majesty the Emperor of all the Russias,

Sire,

Your Imperial Majesty in the short time that You have been in possession of the Throne of the largest and most powerful Empire, have given so many proofs of lofty wisdom, justice, humanity and love for the good order with which It applies to the Government, that it must have naturally excited the admiration of the Universe and especially of this country, and inspired me with the boldness to have recourse to Your Imperial Majesty, to put at his feet the just complaints, which I have to make against the glaring injustices which have been done to me in Russia,

notwithstanding the real and important services which I have rendered and only by my indefatigable zeal for the true interests of Russia, I could still have returned, always flattering myself, that the happy event that Your Imperial Majesty's august spouse, Her Majesty the Empress, was born at Stettin in my father's house, and spent her first 3 years of her life, would serve me in Russia as protector against the unjust attacks on my property. In the attached Memorandum to which are annexed some supporting papers, I have sufficiently detailed, as during the time that Prince Potemkin according to his passport, registered in Riga, had sent me out of the country for the important acquisition of Mennonites and for other objects, I was deprived cruelly and without notice, of the Pustoschkukowa & Detkowa in the district of Narva, of which I was in possession about 14 years, whose clearing cost me incredible fatigue, trouble and effort, and where, never having had advances from the Crown, I used from my own funds about sixteen thousand rubles, including the expenses of the building, having had 44 buildings and a factory built there, for which the trading house of Pierre Götte of Narva brought me materials from Holland at great expense, and having established there little by little 28 families of German colonists. The last 16 families, which I had chosen myself from abroad, were sent on January 30, 1787, from Riga by Thorley, Merrison & Company. On my return to Russia, I had arrived in Berlin when I received the sad and terrible news that the aforesaid Pustosch had been seized [and given to] to regale General Herman, and had been sold for a miserable price the aforesaid manufacturing materials and all my effects, pushing humanity still so far, to illegally decree the sale of some slaves [serfs], which I had bought in Livonia, notwithstanding that they were never registered in any Russian Court and to whom I had granted freedom for their good services in addressing the letters of emancipation to the late Count of Anhalt. I have been persecuted and ruined because I dared to name Your Imperial Majesty, when he was still Grand Duke, in a prayer, which I had printed for the settlers. "Russland Freude und Hofnung". I dare to implore the generosity and justice of Your Imperial Majesty, so that you may deign to graciously grant me some compensation for the loss of the aforesaid Pustosch in honour of the birth of Her Majesty the Empress and in consideration of my services of which I enclose the summary. I am with the deepest respect,

Sire,

For Your Imperial Majesty,

Beverley in Yorkshire, the very humble, very obedient & very devoted servant

this April 28, 1797

(Signed) George de Trappe

The Reply of the Imperial Senate:

From the St. Peterburg archives (RGIA Fond 1398 Opis 1 Delo 6625).

Translated from Russian to German by Wilhelm Friesen (Detmold, Germany) and translated from German to English by Glenn Penner.

25. April 1798

To the Illustrious Sovereign, Great Emperor and Sole Ruler of all Russia.

A report by the most prestigious Senate.

The nominal supreme decree, promulgated on June 29, 1797, by the Privy Councillor, Attorney General and Cavalier, states: Your Imperial Majesty has offered to submit to the Senate the petition of Councillor von Trappe, in which he claims 16,000 roubles, which he had allegedly used out of his own pocket for the recruitment of the Mennonites. The high monarch proclaimed his will that, if his petition should prove correct in this case, the petitioner's claim should be reclaimed from the heirs of Prince Potemkin.

Trappe reported in his petition that his fallow land near Kunkovo and Djatkovo in Narva district was stolen from him when he was commissioned by Prince Potemkin to recruit Mennonites and other settlers. He had owned the land for about 14 years and had put in a lot of work to improve the land that was unsuitable for agriculture. Without any financial support from the treasury, he spent his own money, a total of about 16000 rubles. He built 44 farms and a factory and settled 28 colonist families. The last 16 families were personally selected by Trappe and cared for by Torley and Co. in Riga. When he returned to Russia via Berlin, he learned that his land had been taken away from him in order to give it to a certain General Hermann. In addition, all his materials and possessions, including those from his factory, were sold at a ridiculous price. Some of his serfs, which he had bought in Livonia, were also sold. In a note attached to his petition, he explained that after receiving the wasteland of Kunkovo and Djatkovo, he began to build a house and other things for himself in the first year. This was very costly for him, as he did not have any serfs at that time. After preparing the meadows and fields, he decided to set up a glass factory. He ordered materials from Holland and hired craftsmen from Germany, who undertook to remain as farmers on his land after six years of work in the factory. When the factory was set up and all the materials were brought in, as well as the houses for the craftsmen were built and they arrived, the governor of St. Petersburg Volkov forbade him to work in this factory. The governor of Narva, Sarychev, was sent to drive away the craftsmen. Despite Trappe's desperate efforts for justice, he had to find more colonists, of whom he had 13 families by 1786. However, they were constantly harassed by Mr. Naryshkin's peasants, as they did not want to tolerate settlers on the said wasteland. This was done with the support of the said bailiff Sarychev and other members of the Zemstvo court in Narva. As a result, Trappe lost several families and the advance payments they had been granted. In the meantime, he tried to fertilize the land for agriculture, and finally, with much effort and high cost, managed to turn a muddy swamp into a large estate with fertile fields. Then, in 1786, Trappe learned that Prince Potemkin was looking for someone to recruit colonists for free lands in Kherson and the Crimea. He offered his services to the prince and

received assurances that his ownership rights to his land would be confirmed if he successfully completed the desired enterprise. During his journey through Riga, Prince Potemkin ordered that the arriving colonists should be transported to Kremenchug via the winter route. He also ordered the Vice-Governor of St. Petersburg to cede the said land to Trappe without restriction, for which a deed was to be issued to him. Trappe then sent 16 families of colonists from Riga to his land, but after his departure, as already mentioned, they were expelled, and subsequently stole his land and handed it over to General Hermann, after Potemkin had already died.

The statements, which were made at the request of the Senate on Trappe's allegations, show that:

The provincial administration of St. Petersburg reported that on January 25 and 29, 1776, Trappe had asked for 60 colonist families through the then Guardianship Office for Foreigners to settle them in the Ujezd Narva on three different fields (near Kunkov, near Kuckovo, and on wasteland near Kojlomas). In total, in 1,960 desyatine of it was arable land. According to the 1765 form, the 60 families were to be settled within 10 years, starting in 1776. This period ended in 1786. However, since Trappe had not made this settlement within this period, since he was constantly absent, on January 25, 1787, due to the non-fulfillment of his obligations in the settlement of foreigners, the St. Petersburg treasury ordered the repossession of the land allocated to him and his right of ownership of it was annulled. In addition, the building in the countryside was also confiscated. When Trappe then stated that he intended to settle the first 28 families on his land, this was rejected due to his omissions. Subsequently, his entire estate, including the house with all its accessories, livestock and other objects, as well as four serfs, was sold in a public auction for 831 rubles and 34 kopecks.

From the Novorussia Provincial Administration:

The file of the then Governor Sinelnikov on the recruitment of foreign colonists from Gdansk and their settlement in the Kherson region, as well as in the city of Kherson, along with information about shipbuilders and other craftsmen sent to Sevastopol, is currently in the State Chamber. In the administration there is only the information that on March 9 and September 26, 1787, Major General Peterson, former fortress commander of St. Elizabeth, sent a message to Governor Kachovsky with two lists of names about foreign craftsmen from Danzig. These craftsmen had agreed to settle in the region of Tauria, a total of 106 men and women. Governor Kachovsky directed the colonists to the chief of the navy of the first rank, Captain Count Voynovich, and Colonel Tatovich, who was in Sevastopol at the time. He asked them to house the colonists in state apartments after their arrival in Bakhchisarai (Crimea) until he, as governor, would receive the necessary information about them. On October 12 of the same year, Count Voinovich announced that he had not received any instructions from Major General Peterson and Governor Kachovsky regarding the colonists who wanted to settle in Sevastopol. He also stated that they were not needed for the Admiralty, nor that there was a place to settle them, so on 23 October of the same year the Governor sent a list of names to the local economic director, General Gablitz. He reported to Field Marshal Prince Potemkin of Tauris and inquired about the conditions under which the colonists were to be settled in the Taurian region. They were asked whether they would have to make do with portion money or take care of themselves. As a result, Field Marshal Kachovsky replied on October 10 of the same year that the governor should

decide whether the colonists should be allowed to provide their own food if they are not needed in Sevastopol. Many of these craftsmen could be used for public works to ensure that they are not idle. However, the portion allowance is to be paid to them without interruption until the end of the one-year term. However, they should prepare for the economic conditions in the city or in another suitable place for settlement and business by spring. This will be supervised by the Director of Economic Affairs, Gablitz, as Governor Kachovsky informed him on December 24.

From the Chamber of State:

1. In August 1788, the former governor of Ekaterinoslav, Kakhovsky, submitted to the State Chamber a file prepared by his predecessor, Major General Sinelnikov, on the colonists who had come from Danzig to the province of Ekaterinoslav. In this file it is reported that Kornett Hirschfeld of the Riga-Carabinieri regiment stated in his report of January 2, 1787 to Sinelnikov (including a copy of the order given to him by Marshal General Prince Potemkin): In accordance with Potemkin's order, Hirschfeld was instructed to travel to Riga, and if the said colonists, whose number according to the communication is 141 persons, have not yet arrived there, after waiting for them, to rent as many cheap cars as possible to take them to Kremenchug. He should divide the group into two or three parties for better convenience and count on two people per car. In accordance with the instructions, he went to Riga to receive the colonists sent by Assessor Trappe from Danzig and to accompany them to the Ekaterinoslav Governorate. In total, there were 160 men and 132 women. Having concluded a contract for 110 horse-drawn carriages for 4537 rubles 50 kopecks to Kremenchug with a resident of this place and receiving an advance payment of 1400 rubles, the governor of Riga set out for Kremenchug. He arrived there on January 1 of the same year with the aforementioned colonists. However, since he did not have enough money to pay the carriage drivers and also to pay the prescribed remuneration of 20 kopecks per day per head for the food of the colonists, he asked for the release of the required amount of money.

Governor Sinelnikov, in his report to Prince Potemkin, asked further questions: how much money he should instruct to hand over to the cornet Hirschfeld, and from what treasury he should take it to pay the coachmen's wages and the colonists portion money. He then received three instructions:

I. For the wages of the carriage drivers and the travel money for the colonists, he was to hand over 3,000 roubles to Hirschfeld, according to the conditions laid down by Assessor Trappe. Hirschfeld was supposed to note his expenses in a cord book given to him.

II. On January 8, 1787, Sinelnikov intended to settle the colonists in Uyezd Elizabethgrad, if there were already houses for them there. If accommodation was not possible, they were to be taken to the Swedish colony and settled there. The money for transport to Kremenchug, as well as for other travel expenses and food, was to be taken from the provincial taxes, from the amounts earmarked for foreign colonists. Some of the colonists were to be given the opportunity to visit the lands for later settlement.

III. Assessor Trappe was summoned to come to Governor Sinelnikov. Since the colonists who had arrived from Danzig were recruited by Trappe for this resettlement, it was necessary for

Sinelnikov and Trappe to make an informed decision together about where and how best to settle them. Among the colonists were some carpenters and joiners, whom Trappe was supposed to persuade to travel to Taurida (Crimea). There was a special need for craftsmen due to many construction sites.

3. On April 19, 1787, an order was issued to send various craftsmen from the ranks of the Gdańsk colonists who were in Elizabethgrad to Kherson. They should be convinced of the advantages they could enjoy there through their craftsmanship and arts. The innkeeper among them was to be told that when he arrived in Kherson, he would receive adequate facilities for his estate from Lieutenant General Samoilov. Governor Sinelnikov also informed that in the summer of 1787, more than 200 families of colonists would arrive in the Ekaterinoslav region for settlement. These colonists have already arrived in Riga. Therefore, it is important to take appropriate measures in good time so that when they arrive they find houses in which to live and everything necessary for their first settlement is provided. The departure of these colonists from Riga has been entrusted to the Field Marshal of Riga, Governor Beckleschow, who will make sure that they have enough money for the trip. According to a letter from the former governor Sinelnikov to the former fortress commander of Elisabethgrad Peterson dated February 22, 1787, Assessor Trappe was sent by Sinelnikov to Major General Peterson. His task was to persuade the colonists, who had arrived with Trappe's help, to settle in the places designated by Prince Potemkin. In the files there are nine treaties that were concluded with the colonists in 1786 by Assessor Trappe. These treaties were signed on the basis of the authority granted to him by Prince Potemkin of Tauria to recruit free settlers to Russia. The contracts are as follows: 1. Upon their arrival, according to Her Imperial Majesty's Manifesto, the colonists will receive free quarters for half a year, in addition to the food allowance for the journey. 2. After the expiration of a period of 10 years, the colonists must repay the 100 rubles in advance, travel expenses and other public expenses that they received from the state in three installments. Once they have returned their funds to the Treasury in three installments, they will be allowed to leave Russia. However, they will have to leave behind a tenth of the wealth they acquired in Russia.

A total of 510 men and 400 women were brought from Riga to Kremenchug. Of them, 61 men and 52 women were sent to settle in Sevastopol, 122 men and 78 women were sent to the city of Kherson, 166 men and 169 women were sent to the Swedish colony, 46 men and 41 women were sent to the Lelekovo estate in Uyezd Elisabethgrad, and 9 men and 11 women remained in Elisabethgrad. A total of 343 male and 299 female colonists were settled in the province of Ekaterinoslav. In addition, 49 males and 24 females were called up for military service. There were also casualties, including 8 male and 1 female person who died, as well as 49 male and 24 female colonists who fled. Prince Potemkin's report to the State Chancellery dated April 11, 1788, states that 104 males and 81 females fled. In addition, 97 males and 60 females have died. In the Swedish colony, 67 males and 88 females have settled, in the city of Kherson there are 35 males and 29 females, in Elisabethgrad there are 4 males and 6 females, and in the Lelekovo manor there are 36 males and 35 females. In total, the number amounts to 142 males and 158 females. According to the present revision list of 1795, there were 28 men and 28 women in the Swedish colony, 32 men and 33 women in the Lelekovo estate, 19 men and 19 women in the city of Kherson, and 3 men and 2 women in Elisabethgrad.

In 1789 and 1790, in addition to those already mentioned, two other foreign groups, Mennonites and Lutheran colonists, came to Ekaterinoslav from the Belarusian town of Dubrovna. The Mennonites consisted of 228 families, while the Lutheran colonists comprised 90 families. They were picked up from Gdansk by order of Prince Potemkin of Tauria von Trappe, the director and curator of the colonies, and brought to Dubrovna via Riga. The Mennonites were settled in Ujesd Novorussia in Chortitza on land allocated to them in eight villages. According to the current revision of 1795, there are 228 families there, consisting of a total of 515 males and 521 females. The colonists were settled in the former city of Novomoskovsk, which is now called the Josefstal colony. A total of 165 male and 170 female colonists live there. The copies of the privileges, drawn up by the late Prince Potemkin and approved by Empress Catherine II, and presented by the Mennonites to the Novorussia treasury in 1791, state the following in point 17 above bustard: It is ordered that bustard should travel to them again with appropriate instructions. He had recruited her to come to Russia, knew all the circumstances perfectly and was able to overcome any obstacles that might arise when she left Gdansk. He was able to reliably cater to their needs. Once they arrive in Tauria, Bustard is to be appointed director and curator of the colonies, according to Potemkin's instructions. His job should be to supervise their facilities and ensure their safety and peace. In the above-mentioned files, the Board has no further information about bustards.

Revered Emperor! After careful consideration of all the above-mentioned circumstances, the Senate has made the following finding:

1. In 1776, the Guardianship Office in Narva gave the fallow land of Dyatkovo and Kunkovo to the aforementioned bustard for a period of 10 years in order to settle 60 foreign families there. Unfortunately, he did not fulfill his obligation during these years. For this reason, in 1787, the local treasury took these wastelands away from him and handed them over to the Ministry of Finance. The latter sold his property, which consisted of a manor house he had built with accessories, livestock and other objects, as well as his serfs, three maids, at a public auction. The proceeds were converted into a sum that was reclaimed from him. In 1792, the said property was handed over to Major General Hermann by order of the colonel and remained in his permanent possession from then on.

2. In 1787, Trappe received an order from the late Field Marshal Prince Potemkin to bring colonists and Mennonites from abroad to Kremenchug and other places in the region, which he successfully implemented. Although there is no record of it, apparently he was not promised any reward for this task.

In view of these circumstances, the Senate sees no reason to satisfy Trappe's claim for reimbursement of the 16,000 rubles allegedly spent out of his own pocket for the settlement of the above-mentioned wastelands. Therefore, Trappe's request is rejected by the Senate. This report is in response to Her Imperial Majesty's request.

Note that 3 additional requests by Trappe have been translated and published in the [Journal of Mennonite Studies](#) by Roger Bartlett.