



Are We Germans, or Russians, or Americans? The McIntosh County German-Russians During World War I

By Gordon L. Iseminger

Richard Sallet, in his book, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*, wrote that when war broke out among the major European powers in August 1914, German-Russians in the United States agonized over the question: “Which is our country?” Their ancestors had come from Germany, they or their parents had been born in Russia, and they were living in America.¹ This article will suggest how one group of **German-Russians**, those living in McIntosh County, North Dakota, might have answered this seemingly unanswerable question.²

People love the land of their births, and this love does not necessarily cease when they emigrate nor is it necessarily replaced with a love for their adopted country when they become naturalized. War, however, places a premium on loyalty to the nation of one’s residence. “We can have,” thundered former President Theodore Roosevelt, “no ‘fifty-fifty’ allegiance in this country.” Roosevelt believed that a person should love his country, but he was entitled to only one. “If he claims loyalty to two countries,” he wrote in 1918, “he is necessarily a traitor to at least one country.”³

Because **World War I** was perceived, both in the United States and abroad, as a war against Germany, for no group was the loyalty issue

more difficult than for the millions of Germans in the United States. For several months after April 1917, when the United States entered the war on the side of the Allies, there was a degree of sympathy for their plight. By the late summer, however, large segments of the American population abandoned themselves to a hysteria of anti-German sentiment. Before the war ended in 1918, this sentiment was carried to ridiculous extremes. State Councils of Defense, the American Defense Society, and other organizations launched a drive to abolish the teaching of the German language—the “**Kaiser’s tongue**”—in the nation’s schools, because to teach it was to give aid and comfort to the enemy. According to a poll taken by the *Literary Digest*, 149 schools had done so by March 1918. William G. Bek’s German courses at the University of North Dakota were not canceled, but he had few students and he suffered the humiliation of knowing that the study of German was being prohibited in all of the state’s high schools.

The governor of Iowa forbade the speaking of German on streetcars, over the telephone, or anywhere else in public. In South Dakota, concern over the loyalty of the large German population in the state prompted the state Council for Defense to prohibit the use of German in all public conversations. The language could be spoken over the telephone only in cases of extreme emergency.



Figure 1. These North Dakotans are preparing for training and deployment in World War I. Note the sign being held by the two men in the front row which reads “To Hell With The Kaiser.” (SHSND E0071-1)

After much protest, the ban was relaxed to allow a fifteen-minute summary of the sermon in German at the conclusion of a worship service. So many restrictions were placed on foreign-language newspapers under the provisions of the **Trading with the Enemy Act** of October 6, 1917, that by the middle of 1918 practically every German-language newspaper in the country was forced either to adopt a pro-government editorial policy or to maintain a judicious silence on all questions relating to the war.⁴

German books were withdrawn from public libraries, and in Shawnee, Oklahoma, German books were burned as part of the Fourth of July celebration. In South Dakota they were thrown into the Missouri River. Symphony orchestras learned that it was neither safe nor wise to perform works by German composers such as Wagner or Beethoven. The overzealous mayor of Jersey City forbade the brilliant Austrian-born violinist Fritz Kreisler to appear on the concert stage, and Frederick Stock, the distinguished conductor of the Chicago Symphony, was forced to relinquish his baton. Universities revoked degrees they had conferred on outstanding Germans.⁵

It became more ridiculous. In a frenzy of misguided enthusiasm, hamburgers were renamed “liberty sandwiches” and sauerkraut became “**liberty cabbage.**” Children no longer contracted “German” measles, but the more virulent “liberty” strain of the disease. Dachshunds, by an accelerated process of selective breeding, became “liberty pups,” that is for those unpatriotic enough to own one. In North Dakota, some little thought was given to changing the name of the capital city. “Bismarck” was unacceptable to many, because it conjured up images of Teutonism and Blood and Iron.⁶

German-Russians, no less than other German-Americans, were subjected to indignities. With the entry of the United States into the war, wrote Sallet, a period of intense suffering began for them. German-Russians were admonished from childhood, for example, never to forsake the mother



Figure 2. This Liberty Bond poster illustrates the anti-German, anti-Kaiser sentiment across North Dakota and all of America. (SHSND 10935 P004)

tongue and for many it was the only language they knew. The German language united the German-Russians, linked them to their past, and helped them maintain their cultural identity. To forbid German-Russians to use their language was to impose a severe hardship on them.

In some communities, German-Russians were forced to carry the American flag, wrap themselves in it, or kiss it as a sign of their loyalty. In some instances when **Liberty Bonds** were offered for sale, hapless was the German-Russian who for lack of money could not wear a Liberty Bond button in his lapel as testimony that he had subscribed to the war effort. To encourage his change of heart, he and his property might be liberally daubed with yellow paint. Some were forced to borrow money from banks with which to purchase bonds.⁷ In areas where German-Russians were heavily con-

centrated, of course, such as in McIntosh County, North Dakota, they were relatively isolated from outsiders and thus spared from anti-German prejudice.

The strong sentiment against all things German during World War I indicated how very seriously—and unfairly—some people took the loyalty issue. Emigrants to the United States from one of the Allied nations, particularly from England, could be passionately devoted to their homeland and still be accepted as patriotic Americans. Not so for people with German blood in their veins.

Many Yankees were convinced that people with German blood could never completely break their ties with the Fatherland. How, then, did German-Russians feel about the issue of where their loyalty lay? A study of the German-Russians of McIntosh County may provide an answer.

McIntosh County lies on the border between North and South Dakota, the second county east of the Missouri River. Dickey, McIntosh, Emmons, Sioux, Grant, and Hettinger counties along the southern boundary of North Dakota form the base of the **“German-Russian triangle,”** a triangle of German-Russian-populated counties having its apex in Pierce and McHenry counties.

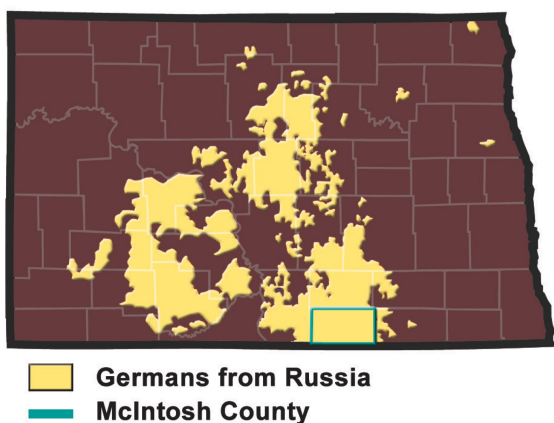


Figure 3. The **“German-Russian triangle.”** Dickey, McIntosh, Emmons, Sioux, Grant, and Hettinger counties along the southern boundary of North Dakota form the base of the German-Russian triangle. (Graphic by Cassie Theurer)

McIntosh County was opened for settlement in 1884, and the first German-Russian settlers probably entered the county towards the latter part of the same year. They settled near present-day Zeeland in the southwest corner of the county. Most of the immigrants were Evangelical Black Sea Germans who traced their origin in Russia to the Black Sea areas of Gluckstal, Liebental, Bessarabia, and the Crimea. By 1886, many families had settled near the present-day towns of Ashley, Wishek, Ventura, and Lehr. Within twenty-five years of its opening, McIntosh County had attracted hundreds of land-seeking German-Russians, many of whom by 1914 had resided in the county for only a short period of time.⁸

Because this study focuses on the question of whether McIntosh County German-Russians considered themselves to be Germans, or Russians, or Americans at the time of World War I, it is helpful, when formulating an answer, to note how rural the county was at the time of the war and also the degree to which it was populated by German-Russians.

To understand German-Russians is to appreciate their land hunger. Promised land, Germans from Baden, Bavaria, Wurtemberg, and the Palatinate had accepted the invitations of **Catherine the Great** and Alexander I to settle in south Russia. When asked by Works Progress Administration interviewers in the late 1930s why they had come to North Dakota, most German-Russians answered: “Land.” Of the 217 German-Russians in McIntosh County old enough to declare an occupation in 1885, all but five—four men and one woman—were farmers who had taken up land. The four men were younger than twenty-one years of age and could not yet file on homesteads. The woman was unmarried and also under age.⁹

In 1890, 2,053 of the county’s 3,248 inhabitants were German-Russians. Twenty years later, in 1910, McIntosh County contained 7,251 people, most of them of foreign stock. Of the total population, 5,745, nearly 80 percent, listed Russia as

the birthplace of themselves or of their parents, that is, they were German-Russians.¹⁰

A common migration route followed by the Black Sea German-Russians who took up residence in McIntosh County was to travel from Odessa on the Black Sea to a German port such as Bremen by rail. Here they took ship passage across the Atlantic to New York and rail passage to Aberdeen, Ipswich, or Eureka in South Dakota. Eureka, a relatively small prairie town, was for many years a terminal for the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway and, despite its size, the world's leading primary wheat market. Eureka was also the main collecting and dispersal point for hundreds of German-Russian immigrants and, as **“the Odessa of the Northern Great Plains,”** it “loomed larger than life in the consciousness of countless German-Russian emigrants.”¹¹

From Aberdeen, Ipswich, or Eureka, German-Russians made their way north to McIntosh County by team and wagon, and it would be logical to assume that they settled first and in large numbers on the more desirable land on the southern edge of the county. The census of 1910 suggests that this indeed is what they did.

Odessa, Berlin, Johnstons, Lowell, Myrtle, Lowell, and Coldwater are the names of the seven townships, west to east, on the southern edge of McIntosh County. The total population of these seven townships in 1910 was 1,607. In every township, with the exception of Johnstons in which the village of Ventura was located, every person lived on a farm. By far the majority, 90 to 100 percent (the exception again being Johnstons), of the male heads of house were farmers.

The census listed a total of 458 parents in the seven townships. Of these, 390, or 85 percent, had been born in Russia. In no township were fewer than 70 percent of the parents born in Russia, and in most townships the figure was 90 percent or over. Even in Johnstons the figure was 82 percent, suggesting that some of the townspeople who had been born in Russia had chosen not to live on farms. Of the



Figure 4. A German-Russian family that farmed in McIntosh County—Johann and Magdalina Aipperspach, with their older sons John and Frederick, and younger children, Magdalina, Adam, and Bertha—photographed about 1914. (Courtesy of Faye Wangen)

total of 458 parents in the seven townships, almost 75 percent listed German as their only language. Clearly, in 1910 the southern tier of townships in McIntosh County was decidedly rural and populated by German-Russians who had only recently arrived in North Dakota and who had not yet learned English.

It would be unfair, of course, to extrapolate from these figures to conclude that all of McIntosh County in 1910 was as distinctly rural and as decidedly German-Russian as the southern tier of townships. In Frieda Township, however, twelve miles north of the state boundary and on the western edge of the county, every one of the 265 persons in the township lived on a farm, 65 of the 70 parents had been born in Russia, and all of the parents gave German as their only language. As might be expected, in Youngstown Township on the northern edge of the county—in which the town of Wishek is located—only half the parents had been born in Russia and about the same percentage claimed German as their only language.

The 1910 census listed only three towns, villages really, in McIntosh County—Ashley (683 population), Wishek (427 population), and Zeeland (196 population). Understandably, fewer of the inhab-

itants in the towns were German-Russians and a higher percentage of them gave English as their language. Nevertheless, in Ashley, the county seat, of the total of 211 parents, 116 had been born in Russia and 73 of them listed German as their only language.¹²

Even by 1920, when the population of McIntosh County had increased to 9,010, the county was still predominantly rural and overwhelmingly German-Russian. Just over 2,800 people lived in towns, most of them in Ashley (1,009) and Wishek (1,003). 90 percent of the county's land was divided into 1,025 farms and the county's 1,633 families lived in 1,604 dwellings.¹³

That McIntosh County was rural and German-Russian at the time of World War I can be established, but determining how members of this ethnic group might have responded to the question of whether they were Germans, or Russians, or Americans is not so easy. An appreciation for the difficulties involved can be gained by contrasting the German-Russians with the Norwegians in North Dakota. The two were among the largest ethnic groups in the state.

Although Norwegian immigrants were primarily of peasant stock—in Norway they had been small farmers, renters, and farm laborers—illiteracy was almost unknown among them. A law of 1736 required everyone to be confirmed, and the state Lutheran church required confirmands to be familiar with Luther's catechism, the hymnbook, and the Bible. Public schools were established in Norway in 1739. Norwegians could and did read.

German-Russian immigrants were also of peasant stock, but with this difference. Their ancestors had gone to south Russia determined to maintain their language, religion, and culture. As a consequence, they were an isolated people, a fact of incalculable significance. They took with them no educated Germans—pastors, priests, teachers, professionals, traders—and they lost virtually all contact with Germany. They were cut off from the remarkable progress that took place in Germany during the

nineteenth century. Germans in south Russia were farmers. Few had the time, ability, money, or inclination to buy and read books and newspapers.

Isolation and the lack of educated people among themselves were responsible for the lack of interest in schools and education in the German colonies in south Russia. Displaying more interest in religion than in education, they lavished far more money on their churches than they did on their schools. Even when German-language elementary schools were established in the colonies, the people continued to be more absorbed in farming than in education. Because the educated people among them—foreign priests and pastors, Russian officials, and traders—tricked and abused them, Germans in south Russia distrusted educated people and had little respect for them. The few German-Russian young people who received an education did so because they were weak and sickly and therefore considered unfit to make a living from the land.

German-Russians in North Dakota exhibited the same characteristics they had in Russia. They clung to their language, shunned contact with other nationalities, neglected schools, and disliked free public education and compulsory-attendance laws. Few German-Russian children completed the eighth grade and it was unusual for a German-Russian young person to attend high school. Many German-Russian parents took it as a compliment when their children chose to help with farm work rather than spend their time reading or studying.¹⁴

Because Norwegians were educated and literate when they emigrated to America, they could stay in touch by letter with friends and family members who had remained behind in Norway. Archives, libraries, and museums in Norway today have extensive collections of these **"America letters,"** as they were called. These letters were important in their time because they conveyed to their recipients reliable information and thereby encouraged further emigration. The letters were also an important channel of communication between family members and between friends. Immigrants kept in touch with events in Norway and those who had remained

behind learned of life in America. Letters also made separation less painful and for many in America it was the only opportunity to communicate their thoughts and feelings in their native language.

These letters are valuable for researchers because by studying them they can in some measure determine how individual immigrants perceived and experienced the process of migration, assimilation, and acculturation. Letter writers may have made only infrequent references to particular historical events, but the letters are a valuable resource for social history. They reflect the character of the person who wrote them and maybe something of the recipient's character as well. The letters provide insights into the daily lives and feelings of individual immigrants and represent their personal responses to events and experiences.¹⁵

There are no extensive collections in Russian archives and libraries of "America letters" written by North Dakota German-Russians to those who remained behind in south Russia. When German-Russians arrived in Dakota, the prairie on which they settled was as untamed as the Russian steppes on which their ancestors from Germany had settled a hundred or more years earlier. They faced the daunting task of providing shelter for themselves; wresting a living from the stubborn native sod; dealing with the fearsome size of the prairie; and contending with insects, wild animals, droughts, and prairie fires. Even if they had had the time, few German-Russians were letter writers. Few kept diaries. Moreover, because of two destructive world wars, a bloody revolution, a terrible civil war, the breaking up of former colonies, and forced migrations, many of the documents that might have existed in Russia have been scattered or destroyed. Oral history can be of little help. Most of the McIntosh County German-Russians who were of mature years during World War I have died.

This far removed from the war, for information on how McIntosh County German-Russians perceived the loyalty issue, one must rely on printed recollections, secondary works, local histories, and jubilee books published when towns observed

the fiftieth and seventy-fifth anniversaries of their founding. And on newspapers.

The county's two newspapers, the *Ashley Tribune* and the *Wishek News*, are a possible means by which one may determine the attitudes of German-Russians towards the issues raised by the war. Using newspapers for this purpose presents problems, however, so it will be best at the outset to anticipate and respond to the criticism that newspapers may not accurately reflect German-Russian opinion in McIntosh County during World War I.

C.C. Lowe was owner, editor, and publisher of both the *Ashley Tribune* and the *Wishek News*. Lowe also owned the movie theaters in Ashley and Wishek. It might be argued, therefore, that because Lowe controlled what today is referred to as "the media," the views expressed in the newspapers did not necessarily reflect those of the county's German-Russian population.

However, professing the credo that a newspaper was "the natural mouthpiece of the community" and insisting that "every resident and taxpayer in the county should be a reader of the official county paper," Lowe dedicated himself to publishing papers that would appeal to the county's residents and at the same time promote the county's best interests.¹⁶ To aid him in reaching his ambitious goal of placing his newspapers in every home in the county and convincing businessmen that advertising paid dividends, Lowe hired an experienced German-speaking staff and printed sections of both his papers in German.

At the time of the *Armistice*, on November 11, 1918, more than half the pages of the *Ashley Tribune* were printed in German—local news, legal notices (the *Tribune* was the official county newspaper), sale bills, political ads, business advertisements, and war news. Lowe wanted German as well as Yankee readers to be informed of what was happening, even though printing in two languages required an added expenditure of money and effort because double the space was required for each item. (Lowe was forced to raise the *Tribune's* sub-

scription price to two dollars per year on January 1, 1918, to cover his costs.)¹⁷

When Lowe purchased the *Ashley Tribune* in September 1915, it was a nondescript, small-town weekly with fewer than four hundred subscribers. By January 1918 he had doubled the number of pages in each issue, tripled the size of the staff, and increased the number of subscriptions to over one thousand. Weekly he listed the names (and often the occupations) of new subscribers—one hundred of them in the issue of September 20, 1917. Most of them were German-Russian farmers. “There must be something about the paper,” he editorialized, “that is worthwhile having.” In March 1918 Lowe exulted: “The *Tribune* now goes into nearly every home in and near Venturia.” In December he noted that almost all of the farmers “tributary to Ashley” subscribed to the *Tribune*. No longer

could businessmen protest that it did not pay to advertise in the *Tribune* because so few farmers took the paper.¹⁸

The point to be served by detailing Lowe’s newspaper activities is this. McIntosh County had 1,633 families occupying 1,604 dwellings in 1920, and the county’s population was overwhelmingly German-Russian. The *Tribune’s* circulation alone in early 1918 was over 1,000. Many German-Russian households, therefore, must have been taking either the *Ashley Tribune* or the *Wishek News*. Some county residents subscribed to both. Because newspapers such as the *News* and the *Tribune* depended almost entirely on subscriptions and ads for their revenue, it may be safe to assume that Lowe and his editors would have taken pains not to have printed anything that would have alienated or offended their German-Russian readers. And because portions of the papers were published in German by German or German-Russian staff, it is likely that the opinions expressed reflected the views of at least a portion of the German-Russian community.¹⁹

In notices prominently placed on the front pages of his newspapers, Lowe advised McIntosh County young men to comply with the law requiring them to register for the draft—738 did so on June 5, 1917, alone. He also warned them of the consequences for failing to do so. Of the hundreds of county residents who were eligible for the draft in 1917 and 1918, only a few neglected to register or refused to heed their draft notices, some of them out of ignorance of the law, others because their fathers prevented them from complying with the law’s provisions. Some draftees, reluctant to leave their families and farms, resigned themselves to the inevitable and heeded the government’s call to service. Most entered military service willingly and not a few volunteered for the draft or enlisted in the navy or army medical corps. Many young women volunteered for training as student nurses.

Providing men and women for military service was not the only way that McIntosh County German-Russians supported the war effort. They economized, collected scrap iron, contributed to the

Figure 5. This benefit auction notice appeared in the *Ashley Tribune*, May 20, 1918. Note that the advertisement is written in both English and German.



Figure 6. These posters, promoting War Savings Stamps and Liberty Bonds, illustrate efforts to support the war effort. McIntosh County German-Russians economized, purchased War Savings Stamps and Liberty Bonds, but did not get caught up in the war hysteria. (SHSND 10935 P470, SHSND 10935 P048, SHSND 10935 P103)

Army YMCA Fund and to the Red Cross, and purchased **War Savings Stamps** and Liberty Bonds. All the while, they refused to get caught up in the war hysteria that was gripping much of the rest of the nation. McIntosh County children contracted German measles, as they had before 1917, and not the “liberty” strain of the disease that so sapped peoples’ energies elsewhere in the country. Nor did county residents eat “liberty cabbage.” Grocers continued to feature sauerkraut, especially at Thanksgiving and during the Christmas holidays. The editor of the *Wishak News* believed that no purpose would be served by changing names, including that of the state’s capital. “Such things,” he pointed out, “will not win the war for us and it is advisable that time be spent doing something else more helpful.” That “something else more helpful” included what German-Russians were best at—farming and raising foodstuffs.²⁰

Providing draftees for military service, “going over the top” in Liberty Bond sales, eating sauerkraut, and coaxing more production from their fields and livestock—all may suggest something of how McIntosh County German-Russians responded to the war. But it remains to answer the question posed

in the title of this article. Possessing German ancestors, having their roots in south Russia, and resident in McIntosh County, were these people Germans, or Russians, or Americans during World War I?

Although McIntosh County German-Russians had German blood in their veins, bore German names, and spoke German, it would be a mistake to confuse them with the *Reichsdeutsche*, or Empire Germans. German-Russians were known variously as “**the Czar’s Germans**,” because they had lived in Russia; or as North Dakota’s “other Germans,” because they had not been born in Germany and had never lived there. Timothy J. Klaberdanz suggested that a fitting designation for the “other Germans” is *Volksdeutsche*, a term that can be rendered not altogether satisfactorily in English as “ethnic Germans.”²¹

When contrasted to the *Reichsdeutsche*, German-Russians may have been akin to “stomach” Germans, Frederick C. Luebke’s somewhat inellegant term for a group of German-Americans. “Stomach” Germans wanted to read the news in their German-language newspapers, drink their beer in the company of other Germans, use the German language in their worship services, and

sing the old songs in their native tongue. Distinct from the stomach Germans, according to Luebke, were the “soul” Germans. Convinced that German ideals and the German spirit were the noblest and loftiest in Western civilization and believing that they should be perpetuated in America, “soul” Germans idealized, articulated, and rationalized what they perceived to be their superior culture.²²

When German-Russians arrived in North Dakota, they suffered what Elwyn B. Robinson described as “a revolution in status.” Signs of this impending revolution became evident as soon as the German-Russians boarded the ships that would take them to America. To their dismay, they discovered that there were very few differences between them and the peasants of other nationalities who were travelling with them. This was a bitter realization for Black Sea Germans who had come to regard themselves as belonging to a privileged class in Russia. In Russia they were leaders and in the upper social stratum. They had been admired by the Russian peasants and envied for their fine houses, productive farms, good horses, and sleek cattle. In North Dakota, they were at the other end of the social and economic scale. Other nationalities looked down on them, and many German-Russians complained that they were treated more condescendingly by the *Reichsdeutsche* than by any non-German-speaking group. Having observed this phenomenon in western North Dakota, a Roman Catholic priest wrote: “To the average German, the German-



Figure 7. Part of the crowd of three thousand people that gathered in Wishek, North Dakota, on May 25, 1918, to bid farewell to the men who were leaving for Camp Lewis, Washington. From the *Wishek News*, May 30, 1918.

Russian was an “*Ausländer*.” A literal translation of the word “*Ausländer*” would be “a person from outside the country,” or, more briefly put, “a foreigner.” Neither definition, however, does justice to the word as a German would use it with reference to a German-Russian. To fully appreciate the term’s implications, one would have to include in the definition what an Englishman means when he uses the word “provincial,” plus an “amused tolerance, veiled contempt, and a plentiful superiority.”²³

Nor did the German-Russians identify with the Germany of the *Reichsdeutsche*. Their allegiance was to the Germany of the turn of the nineteenth century, to the Germany of the time of their “*Auswanderung*,” or emigration. German-Russians had not shared in the remarkable economic, industrial, scientific, and cultural advances that Germans had made in the nineteenth century. They did not identify with Prussian generals named Moltke, and they took no vicarious pleasure in the Prussian victories over Austria and France on the battlefield. They did not swell with pride at mention of the Germany that Bismarck’s policy of Blood and Iron had created in 1871. They had no affinity with William II’s *Weltpolitik*, nor did they appreciate his desire to secure Germany’s “place in the sun.”

For the *Reichsdeutsche*, Germany was a distinct place—their historic homeland, their native land, their nation. To the German-Russians, however, Germany was “a deeply sentimental, even mystical, . . . ancient *Vaterland*.” And, despite their affection for the Fatherland, German-Russians had not hesitated to leave in search of better conditions. International borders and governments meant little to them; they knew that both changed frequently and quickly. It seemed, observed Kloberdanz, that the only Germany the German-Russians required was “a personalized one carried deep within.”²⁴

Although German-Russians shared blood, language, narratives, proverbs, folk songs, and religious faith with Germans from Germany, they were different from them. And the *Reichsdeutsche* seemed not to consider German-Russians as with them in being German.

The first of Sallet's three possibilities having been eliminated, were the German-Russians then Russians?

Reading the issues of the *Wishek News* and the *Ashley Tribune* published between 1914 and 1919, one can find no indication that the McIntosh County German-Russians had any sympathy for Russia as a political entity. The Czarist government of course remembered the German-Russians in America, and at the outbreak of the war it demanded that those with military obligations return immediately to Russia at their own expense to serve in the army. Sallet was unable to identify even a single German-Russian young man who had done so.²⁵ In their letters home that were published in the *News* and *Tribune* during the war, not once did a McIntosh County German-Russian serviceman profess to be fighting for either the Czar or for Russia.

German-Russians could easily be identified in any American community as having come from south Russia. Their clothing, foods, architecture, and agricultural practices all revealed varying degrees of Russian influence. Their German dialects were liberally sprinkled with Russian loan words. But, McIntosh County German-Russians were not Russians, even though their Yankee neighbors often referred to them as **"Rooshuns"** and the United States government sometimes mistakenly listed them in the census as Russians.

Only an insignificant number of the Black Sea Germans who settled in North Dakota could converse easily in Russian and they were typically those who had served in the Russian army or those who had attended school for more than the average number of years in Russia. During a century in south Russia, German-Russians had not mingled with the Russians and they had only rarely intermarried with them. "... My father was never a Russian," boasted one Volga German-Russian, and "no Russian blood curses my veins, even though I came into the world in Russia."²⁶

A large number of German-Russians had planned to return to Russia once they had made their

fortunes in Dakota. Others regretted having left Russia and yearned to return. C.C. Becker was among the first German-Russians to settle in McIntosh County. Asked in old age by Nina Farley Wishek whether he regretted having come to the United States, he replied, "Ach, Gott, yes, I wish I was back in Russia." Becker spoke for thousands who would gladly have returned to south Russia, but only if there were a bridge over which they could have walked or ridden. Neither threats, nor promises, nor large sums of money would have induced those who had experienced a difficult voyage across the Atlantic to make the return crossing by ship.²⁷

The Russia for which Becker and other German-Russians yearned, however, was not the Russia of the Czar and his officials, but *Heimat*—a word that is only inadequately rendered in English as "homeland"—the Russia of their hearts. People were homesick for their homeland and for their families. Wishek observed that Becker's statement probably resulted from "the nostalgic memory of those glamorous days of youth, for certainly the few Russians who have returned to their homeland have always come back within the year to America. It is only natural for the foreigner to feel a warm and staunch affection for his Fatherland."²⁸

Not until after World War I did German-Russians begin to change their attitudes towards their south Russian homeland. Through the pages of the *Dakota Freie Presse* and other German-Russian newspapers, they became aware of how those who had remained in south Russia had suffered because of the World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian Civil War, the executions, the mass deportations, and the widespread famine. Relatives of McIntosh County German-Russians told of going into the fields and robbing the mice of their stores of grain in order to avoid starvation. After such reports, German-Russians became aware of how much better off they were in North Dakota than they would be in Russia. Not until then did they come to realize that south Russia was no longer a "paradise on the steppe." The intense homesick-

ness they had once felt for *Russland* gradually gave way to a grudging appreciation for the prairies of North Dakota.²⁹

Proud of the fact that they had lived in south Russia for many generations and had yet remained isolated from the Russians; gratified that their blood had not been mingled with that of Russians through intermarriage; stung by being referred to as “Rooshuns” by their insensitive Yankee neighbors; and relieved that, unlike those who had remained in south Russia, they had been spared the ravages of war, revolution, forced migration, and starvation—McIntosh County German-Russians clearly did not consider themselves to be Russians.

Sallet allowed for only three possibilities. If the McIntosh County German-Russians were neither Germans nor Russians, were they then Americans?

In his detailed study of German-Russians in the United States, Sallet was able to find only two urban settlements of Black Sea Germans, leading him to the conclusion that 95 percent of those from the Black Sea area were wheat farmers. Many of them settled in McIntosh County, on land they acquired under the terms of the Pre-emption, Homestead, and Timber Culture acts. To do so, they were required to take out citizenship papers or file intentions of one day becoming American citizens. During World War I, however, Americans they were not, even though some of them had been in the county for as long as thirty years.³⁰

During the 1920s, the National Illiteracy Commission, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the American Legion, and other national organizations sought to inculcate in United States residents, especially in the foreign-born and their children, the desire “to know America, to understand America, and to love America,” that is, to become Americans. Good Americans were healthy and thrifty; they were good stewards of their personal possessions and of the nation’s resources; they knew the Flag Salute and the Flag

Code; they were responsible voters; and, above all, they knew how to read, write, and speak English.

Large numbers of McIntosh County German-Russians at the time of World War I were illiterate in English. Throughout the war, therefore, Lowe published substantial portions of the *Ashley Tribune* and the *Wishek News* in German, not because he was particularly defiant or courageous, but because German was the only language that many of his subscribers could read. Lowe had taken great pains not to offend his German-Russian readers and he had coaxed, begged, challenged—sometimes shamed—them to support the war. He praised them for their efforts and congratulated them for their accomplishments. He printed “honor lists” containing the names of those who volunteered for the draft, those who did not request exemptions or deferments, those who contributed to the Red Cross, and those who purchased Liberty Bonds.

Once the Armistice had been signed, however, in one strongly worded editorial after another, Lowe reproached the county’s German-Russians for not being Americans. Parents had sent their sons off to service unable to speak, read, or write a word of English. Marked by their inability to communicate in English, the young men had been singled out, discriminated against, and made the butt of ridicule. When they returned home, Lowe warned, made the wiser by their experiences, they would no longer accept anything that reminded them of “Hunism” (slang expression for an enemy German soldier).

Lowe deplored the state of public education in the county. Teachers were poorly trained and as poorly paid, school buildings were neglected, compulsory attendance laws were not enforced, and children were given insufficient opportunity to learn English—“the language of America, the language of the country of our choice.” Parents who were denying their children an education in American ways, charged Lowe, were doing them a grave injustice.³¹

The Kurle Brothers in the Great War

When Christian Kurle was inducted into the U.S. Army on June 24, 1918, a popular song was “How ‘Ya Gonna Keep ‘Em Down On the Farm (After They’ve Seen Patee)”

They’ll never want to see a
rake or plow
And who the deuce can
parleyvous a cow?*

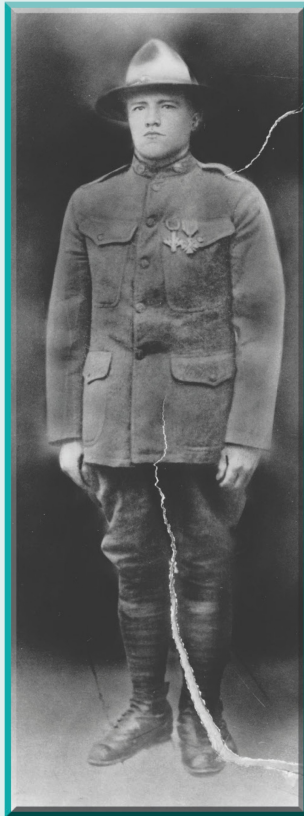
Christian had probably thought that his life, like that of his four brothers and his father would be devoted to farming and family, but, as the song suggests, the war was to change his life completely. Christian, who was twenty-four in 1918, had been born in New York while his parents were emigrating from South Russia to McIntosh County, North Dakota. They were farmers and expected that their children would be as well. However, during his training at Camp Lewis, Washington, Christian began to see his future differently. He wrote to his eight-year-old nephew Ed: “I am a soldier now and don’t know if I ever will be a farmer.”

Christian’s younger brother Edward had also entered the Army. Both saw action in the toughest battles in France; Edward rose from private to sergeant (and back to private) before he was discharged in August 1919. Christian never rose above private, but was awarded two of the most important medals for bravery that a soldier of the Great War could receive. On November 4, 1918, near Oches, Ardennes, Christian Kurle crossed “a broad exposed piece of ground, of at least three hundred yards, which was being heavily swept by machine gun fire, and carried back a man who had advanced ahead of all others of his unit, and had been severely wounded.” For his bravery and “extraordi-

nary heroism” he received the French Croix de Guerre with Gilt Star, and the American Distinguished Service Cross in the spring of 1919.

By the summer of 1919, both Christian and Ed had returned to McIntosh County to live with their father and work the farm. Edward eventually moved to California, but Christian had been psychologically damaged by warfare and returned home in a condition called “shell-shock.” Men who were shell-shocked suffered from a variety of mental disorders. Some recovered in time, but Christian Kurle continued to suffer. His father became his legal guardian, and Christian moved among members of his family, sometimes working as a farm laborer, but unable to manage life on his own. He died, a war hero but a broken man, in February 1937.

* *Lyrics by Joe Young, Sam M. Lewis, and music by Walter Donaldson*



Figures 8 & 9. Christian Kurle (left) and Ed Kurle (right). Ed Kurle, donor of these photos is the nephew of Edward and Christian Kurle. Ed Kurle, the younger, was born to Fred Kurle and his wife, Otille in 1909 on the farm near New Leipzig in Grant County. (SHSND 0370-06, SHSND 0370-01)

FAREWELL TO SOLDIER BOYS

THREE THOUSAND PEOPLE IN WISHEK LAST SATURDAY TO WISH THE BOYS GOOD LUCK AND A SAFE RETURN.

Last Saturday was a big day in Wishek. It was a day that will never be forgotten by the people living in this vicinity.

On that day 94 young men passed through here on their way to Camp Lewis, Washington. 23 men came from Campbell county, South Dakota, 33 from Sargent county, this state, and 38 from McIntosh county.

At 12:45 o'clock, when the train pulled in from the east there were fully 3,000 people at the depot. The men had dinner at the Sob restaurant.

The Wishek Military Band was there and furnished music.

Shortly after dinner H. P. Remington spoke a few words and stated that a collection would be taken for the benefit of the boys. \$121.00 was collected here and \$91.00 at Ashley making a total of \$212.00 which was given to Henry Eisinger, who was captain of the bunch, to be divided equally among the McIntosh county boys.

The boys traveled in three special cars. Sargent, McIntosh and Campbell county each having a car of their own.

This last call has made a big dent in the number of Class I men in this county, there remaining but few men in this class. However, as all men who have reached the age of 21 since June 5th last year are required to register on June 5th and will be placed in Class I, it is thought enough men will be available to fill the ranks for a considerable length of time.

Following are the names of the McIntosh county boys who left:

- John Doerheim Jr., Lehr.
- Carl Wanner, Wishek.
- John C. Walz, Ashley.
- Jacob Debler, Fredonia.

John P. Lacher, Venturia.
Henry Eisinger, Wishek.

WHEN I RODE THE GOAT IN THE I. O. O. F.

(By Jas. H. Wood.)

When I rode the goat in the I. O. O. F. They almost took my pesky breath. The initiatory wasn't so bad.



ALBERT F. STOLLER.

Albert Stoller, oldest son of Mr. and Mrs. John J. Stoller of this city, is one of the McIntosh county boys who did not wait until he was called by the draft but volunteered his services to Uncle Sam. He enlisted in the engineer corps last fall and was sent to camp in New York state where he was in training until he left for France where he landed about a month ago. Wishek is proud of its young men who have left their homes and country to fight and destroy an enemy who, if victorious, would seek to invade our country and seek to deprive us of the freedom which we now enjoy.

Those big round pretzels all covered with salt.

Figures 10 & 11. Many articles urging the German-Russians of McIntosh County to support the war effort were published in the Wishek News, and the county's residents responded. On May 30, 1918, a front-page story reported the departure of ninety-four young men, including thirty-eight from McIntosh County, for basic training at Camp Lewis, Washington. **INSET:** On May 9, 1918, this photograph of Albert Stoller, a Wishek native who had enlisted in the U.S. Army, appeared. A number of McIntosh County men lost their lives on the Western Front, many more were wounded. Many were cited for meritorious conduct, including Christian Kurle.

On Ashley's streets and in Ashley's stores, Lowe heard people conversing in German. How, he asked, could they expect to improve themselves if they refused to speak English? "Those people who expect to make America their home," he advised, "had better adopt the American language ... and stick to American methods."³²

Among the most difficult cultural adjustments that German-Russians had to make was to switch from using German to using English, particularly in their church services. German-Russians would have fought God Himself had He suggested that worship services could be conducted in a language other than German. "Yes," German-Russian parents might reassure their children, "Our Lord God knows everything—but He cannot understand the heathen babbling that is English." As late as World War II, many McIntosh County churches conducted at least some of their worship services and Bible studies in German. Until the 1930s many children did not learn English until they started school. Portions of the *Wishek News* were printed in German until 1944 and parts of the *Ashley Tribune* in German until 1955. Language was only one means by which German-Russians maintained their identity. They came to America with an established set of minority group defenses that was rare among immigrants. Isolated on the Russian steppes, they had perfected the mechanisms of survival amid alien surroundings. Latecomers to Dakota, they settled on the poorer land, farther from the rivers, railroads, and cities. Distance, bad roads, and a deliberate avoidance of using English separated them from people they considered to be "outsiders." Thus isolated, McIntosh County German-Russians could maintain a way of life largely unaffected by outside influences.³³

American cultural forces had not penetrated their communities sufficiently by 1914 to convince German-Russians of the desirability of becoming assimilated and Americanized. Through intermarriage and retention of their language and mores, they remained as isolated in Dakota as they had been in south Russia. Not until the Great Depres-

sion and then even more quickly in the prosperous years after World War II did German-Russians come to realize how interdependent they were with the rest of America and with the rest of the world. Only then did their clannishness, isolation, backwardness, and neglect of education begin to pass away.³⁴

The *Reichsdeutsche* looked down on the German-Russians. After the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russians disclaimed them. They long had the reputation for resisting **Americanization**. If the McIntosh County German-Russians were neither Germans, nor Russians, nor Americans, what were they?

German-Russians were admirably equipped for living on the prairies of McIntosh County. The land was their life. They were accustomed to hard and tedious work. They were thrifty to an extreme and adamant to the point of being stubborn. They were independent, self-sufficient, and resourceful. They bore and survived adversity. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his *Gulag Archipelago* wrote of the methodical German-Russians that they were good husbandmen and indefatigable (tireless) workers. "Is there any wilderness on earth," he asked, "which [German-Russians] could not turn into a land of plenty?" And wherever the German-Russians went, he noted, they settled in, "not temporarily, ... but forever." "Not for nothing," therefore, "did Russians say in the old days that 'a German is like a willow tree—stick it anywhere and it will take!'"³⁵ And German-Russians "took" in McIntosh County.

Adolph Roschee came with his family to the United States in 1884 from Kassel in south Russia. By rail they made their way to Menno, Dakota Territory, thence to Ipswich. In the spring of 1885 they loaded their belongings onto wagons and started north to McIntosh County, to, as Boschee described it, "our new *Heimat*."³⁶

Heimat meant something to German-Russians that non-German-Russians have difficulty appreciating and understanding. It was *Heimweh*, or

homesickness, but it was more than that. Joseph S. Height, in his book *Homesteaders on the Steppe*, wrote that wherever a German-Russian went he remained deeply attached to the *Heimat* with every fiber of his being. Height's description details the feelings and experiences of German-Russians living on the prairie of McIntosh County as aptly as it recalls their memories of what life had been like on the steppes of south Russia. *Heimat* was:

billowing fields of grain, the long sweep of stubble stirred by the mournful winds of autumn, the white pall over the boundless winter landscape, the blustering snowstorm that turns day into sudden night and dreaded darkness, the fragrant scent of the fresh earth in spring...³⁷

Heimat awakened in German-Russians an ardent longing for eternity, for infinity, and for God. Songs, suffering, sorrow—all were “unforgettably” in the hearts and souls of those who recalled *Heimat*. *Heimat* meant the nearness of parents, relatives, friends, and neighbors. It meant mother tongue and folklore, the wisdom of the old and the pranks of the young. It meant the ringing of church bells and the singing of children. It meant free men walking behind their plows. “*Heimat* meant the wide horizon, the big sky, the snow-bright landscape, and the wind-swept flowers of early spring.” All this and more. Much of what *Heimat* meant to the German-Russians was inexpressible.³⁸

What were the McIntosh County German-Russians during World War I?

The Reverend Salomon Joachim, pastor to a Black Sea German congregation in Beulah, North Dakota, can help answer the question. The German-Russian, he wrote,

made his greatest contribution to society in the form of manual labor. By profession he is a tiller of the soil, a farmer,

a producer of food. It fell to his lot to receive land in the semi-arid regions of Russia, Siberia, the Americas, and Canada. He built a granary out of the steppes and the prairies. He did not shout that fact to the world. A real farmer lives too close to the ground and too close to God to become a braggart. He stays humble. The dust of the earth and the smell of new-mown hay do not blur his vision.³⁹

A thrifty, hard-working, God-fearing people who respected authority, McIntosh County German-Russians were aware of the war—they read about it in the county's newspapers and their sons and daughters were serving in it. They contributed to the Red Cross, bought Liberty Bonds, sold scrap iron, and bent every effort to coax their farms and herds to produce more. But the war was thousands of miles away. They were farmers, and, like rural folk everywhere, their lives were governed by the cycle of seedtime and harvest.

During World War I, McIntosh County German-Russians were people with German ancestors who had come from Russia and who were living in McIntosh County—their “new *Heimat*.” For them, the truth of a Latin adage was particularly appropriate: “*Ubi panis, ibi patria*.” Where there is bread, there is my Fatherland.⁴⁰

About the Author

Gordon L. Iseminger is professor of history at the University of North Dakota. He obtained his undergraduate training at Augustana College and his graduate degrees from the University of South Dakota and the University of Oklahoma. A scholar of European and ethnic history, Iseminger has published articles and reviews in a variety of journals including *North Dakota History*. He is author of *The Quartzite Border: Surveying and Marking the North Dakota-South Dakota Boundary, 1891–92*.

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1. A shorter version of this article was read as a paper at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, September 22–24, 1988.
2. Richard Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements In the United States*, trans. LaVern J. Rippley and Armand Bauer (Fargo, N.D.: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974), p. 100. Frederick C. Luebke observed that Americans of German origin were trapped in what he described as a “crisis of loyalty” in 1917 when the United States declared war on Germany. Many of these Germans had developed a strong allegiance to the United States, but at the same time the bonds of affection for their German culture remained strong. *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), p. 3.
3. Horace C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War 1917–1918* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), p. 81.
4. Peterson and Fite, pp. 194–97; Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 272–73; Louis G. Geiger, *University of the Northern Plains: A History of the University of North Dakota, 1883–1958* (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota Press, 1958), p. 286; Harry N. Scheiber, *The Wilson Administration and Civil Liberties 1917–1921* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 20.
5. Peterson and Fite, p. 196; Schell, pp. 272–73.
6. Peterson and Fite, p. 195.
7. Sallet, pp. 101–103; James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 261–63.
8. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, “Volksdeutsche: The Eastern European Germans,” edited by William C. Sherman and Playford V. Thorson in *Plains Folk: North Dakota’s Ethnic History* (Fargo, N.D.: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1988), pp. 132–34, 137. For the history, culture, and experiences of the Black Sea Germans in south Russia see the trilogy by Joseph S. Height, *Paradise on the Steppe* (Bismarck, N.D.: NDHSGR, 1972); *Homesteaders on the Steppe* (Bismarck, N.D.: NDHSGR, 1975); and *Memories of the Black Sea Germans* (Chelsea, Mich.: Associated German-Russian Sponsors, 1979). Two key sources relating to the general background of the German-Russians by Karl Stumpp are *The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering*, trans. Joseph S. Height (Bonn, W. Germany: Atlantic Forum, 1967) and *The Emigration From Germany to Russia in the Years 1763–1862* (Lincoln, Neb.: AHSGR, 1973). See also William C. Sherman, “Assimilation in a North Dakota German-Russian Community [Pierce County]” (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1965).
9. “The Dakota Territorial Census of 1885,” *Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota*, IV (Fargo, N.D.: Knight Printing Co., 1913), pp. 361–72. Joseph S. Height, the authority on Black Sea Germans, noted that land hunger was the primary reason prompting Germans to leave south Russia. They believed that in America they would find “free land for free people.” Kloberdanz, p. 130.
10. Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 172; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Population*, III, 352.
11. Kloberdanz, pp. 131–32.
12. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910: Population*, III, 233–391.
13. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Agriculture*, IV, Part I, 628; *Manufactures*, IX, 1127; *Population*, I, 552; *Population*, II, 1355; *Population*, III, 759.
14. Robinson, pp. 284–87; Kloberdanz, p. 144.
15. Solveig Zempel, *In Their Own Words: Letters from Norwegian Immigrants* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. ix–xv.
16. *Wishek News*, October 5, 1917; *Ashley Tribune*, August 23, 1917.
17. *Wishek News*, April 6, 1917; April: 13, 1917; *Ashley Tribune*, September 15, 1916, December 6, 1917; January 3, 1918; August 8, 1918; November 7, 1918.
18. *Ashley Tribune*, September 20, 1917; November 15, 1917; November 29, 1917; January 10, 1918; March 28, 1918; December 5, 1918.
19. For a discussion of German-language newspapers in the Dakotas during this period, see Anton H. Richter, “*Gebt ihr den Vorzug: The German-Language Press of North and South Dakota*,” *South Dakota History*, 10 (Summer 1980), pp. 189–209.
20. *Ashley Tribune*, November 29, 1917; March 28, 1918; June 27, 1918; August 1, 1918; October 31, 1918; January 3, 1918; *Wishek News*, January 11, 1918; June 27, 1918. North Dakota had a good record for protecting civil liberties during the war. Edwin F. Ladd, in his first speech in the United States Senate in 1921, boasted that the state had been “an oasis of sanity in a desert of hysteria.” Robinson, p. 367.
21. Kloberdanz, p. 119.
22. Luebke, pp. 27, 50.
23. Robinson, pp. 286–87; Kloberdanz, pp. 120–21, 132–33; Sherman, pp. 12–14. See also Joseph B. Voeller, “The Origin of the German-Russian People and Their Role in North Dakota” (Unpublished M.S. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1940), pp. 55–56.
24. Kloberdanz, p. 121.
25. Sallet, p. 101.
26. Adolph Schock, *In Quest of Free Land* (San Jose, Calif.: San Jose State College, 1964), pp. 90, 134–35; Sallet, p. 100; Kloberdanz, p. 127.
27. Wishek, p. 235; Kloberdanz, p. 133.
28. Wishek, p. 235.
29. Kloberdanz, p. 148. Stumpp estimated that more than one million German-Russians in south Russia were casualties of World War I, the Russian revolution and civil war, starvation, and forced migrations. Schock, pp. 75–76.
30. Kloberdanz, pp. 133–34; Sallet, pp. 26–27.
31. *Ashley Tribune*, November 21, 1918, December 5, 1918; *Wishek News*, May 30, 1918.
32. *Ashley Tribune*, November 21, 1918; December 5, 1918; December 12, 1918.
33. Sherman, pp. 139–40; Robinson, p. 286; Richter, “*Gebt ihr den Vorzug*,” pp. 192–94; Kloberdanz, pp. 120, 134, 140–43.
34. Schock, pp. 170–80; Robinson, pp. 286–88.
35. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 1918–1956 (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), III, p. 400.
36. Height, *Memories of the Black Sea Germans*, p. 261.
37. Height, *Homesteaders on the Steppe*, p. 426.
38. Height, *Homesteaders on the Steppe*, pp. 426–27.
39. Reverend Salomon Joachim, “Toward an Understanding of the Russia Germans,” (Moorhead, Minn.: Committee on Publications, Concordia College, 1939), p. 23.
40. Kloberdanz, p. 121.

