Why German-Russian settlers didn’t run for public office

By William Jahraus

Introduction

People of German-Russian descent number in the millions and make up the largest ethnic minority in the state of North Dakota. Few, however, have held high public office throughout the state’s history. A possible explanation for this phenomenon may be the unique heritage and traditions which they have learned and practiced in Europe for generations. In North Dakota they acted according to these customs, and one result was an unwillingness to become directly involved in government beyond the local level. This thesis will attempt to show that the conservative, long-established attitudes and traditions of the first German-Russians in North Dakota broke down and changed very slowly and played a role in preventing the way these people thought and acted. Old habits die hard, and in the case of the first German-Russians of North Dakota this retentiveness of habits seems to be a major factor in explaining their political behavior. The focus of this study is McIntosh County, North Dakota, because it contained what is believed to be the greatest concentration of German-Russians in the state for the time under consideration, 1880-1919.

Chapter I

The German-Russian Settlers of McIntosh County

German immigrants from Russia began arriving in what is now North Dakota in the 1880s. More settled in North Dakota than in any other state of the Union. They tended to concentrate their settlements in the south-central region of the state because that area was largely uninhabited and therefore a place where these cossack settlers could remain together. The first German immigrants, who had come to the United States from Russia a decade earlier, selected an area of what is now southeastern South Dakota for the same reason. Prior to that they had considered settling further east, but when they discovered that part of the country was populated and land for farming was available only in scattered localities, they decided to move on, and eventually selected an inhospitable region in Dakota Territory north of Yankton.

The second concentration of German-Russian settlement in North Dakota occurred in McIntosh County, located midway across the state on the South Dakota border. The population of McIntosh County in 1890 was 5,248. Of the number, 2,221 were foreign-born. It is likely that most of the foreign-born were German-Russians. The population of the Many German colonists in South Russia prospered, especially when the Russian government encouraged the development of the South Russian frontier along the Black Sea. German agricultural skills were highly appreciated, especially from the Russian official point of view. Later, the government changed that attitude. An indication of one family’s prosperity is shown in the above photo. The luxurious brick home was owned by Mr. and Mrs. August Koth in Postal, located near Oleson. Mrs. Koth’s first husband—a Griswold—was a big farmer. When he died after being kicked in the head by a horse, she later married the farm’s foreman. Koth, later, he successfully operated a clinic in Postal where people went to get hot steam baths. Mr. and Mrs. Koth are shown standing by the fence in the above photo.

Chapter II

Origin Of The German-Russian Settlers of McIntosh County

The German immigrants who settled in McIntosh County were known as “German-Russians” because they were the descendants of Germans who had emigrated to Russia from Germany in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Most had left their homelands in southeastern Germany to escape the disruption and destruction caused by wars of Frederick the Great and Napoleon and to take advantage of the promises contained within the timely manifestos of two rulers of Russia, Catherine II and Alexander I. Both manifestos promised prospective German emigrants free land in Russia, free transportation to Russia, interest-free loans, the right of local self-government, freedom of religion, exemption from military service, and the right to leave Russia. The purposes of the manifestos were: (1) to attract skilled craftsmen and farmers to help develop areas along the Volga River and Black Sea which Russia had recently acquired, and (2) to attract settlers who would serve as a buffer against Russia’s hostile neighbors, the Baltic states in the East and the Turks in the South. Other Germans left for Russia to escape persecution for their Pietistic beliefs. Others were forced out of Poland by native Poles when Napoleon had created an independent Polish state.

Whatever the motivation, nearly 100,000 Germans made their way to the barren steppes of central and southern Russia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Those who survived the long and difficult journey began the task of creating a new life for themselves in an alien environment. These German pioneers were the forerunners of the German-Russians who later emigrated to the United States.

In Russia the German immigrants established hundreds of small, agricultural communities within which they carefully maintained their German language and culture. They did so because they felt superior to the backward Russian peasants who surrounded them and because they wanted to preserve their identity as a German people in a foreign environment. Accordingly, they learned and spoke only German; they established their own churches and schools; they celebrated their own festivals and holidays; and they ran their own communities. They had little to do with the Russians who lived nearby. As a result, the Germans in Russia developed close, tightly-knit communities which were cut
The Dakota Territory offered marvelous possibilities of free land—or at a low price.

off from the outside world. It was within such communities that most of the people who represented the new society acquired the conservative beliefs and values which, to a great extent, shaped their lifestyle in North Dakota.

Chapter III

Reasons For
German-Russian Emigration
To the United States

Thousands of German-Russians emigrated to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917, the majority of Russian emigrants were Christian of German origin. These people, known as German Russians, had a strong desire to escape the unrest and political upheaval in Russia.

Chapter IV

The German-Russians who came to the United States brought with them distinct beliefs, values, and traditions which they had practiced in Russia for many years. After they arrived they continued to live according to these values, and that was a result was a reluctance to become involved in government beyond their own communities. Individuals of German-Russian descent make up the second largest ethnic group in North Dakota, but few of them have ever held high public office. According to Fr. William Sherman, only five of the state's 186 major officeholders up to 1960 had been of German-Russian origin. This infinitesimal degree of direct participation at the state level of government seems unusual for such a large ethnic group. (German-Russians made up 18 percent of the state's population in 1930.) Persons of Norwegian descent, who make up the largest ethnic group in the state, (Norwegians made up 21 percent of North Dakota's population in 1910), have shown a greater willingness to participate directly in state-level politics. For example, nearly

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When the Russian press began to encourage anti-German attitudes, more than one German living in Russia said, "Now it is time to go to America!"

15 percent of the members of the North Dakota State Legislature between 1891-1915 were of unknown origin. Of these, 64 percent of the members for the same time period were born in Russia. In an effort to explore the issue of state officeholding by the German-Russian, the focus in this study is on McIntosh County because it contained the greatest concentration of German-Russians in the state. The degree of officeholding by the German-Russians in the county was determined by consulting available state, county, town, and school district records. The ethnicity of these people was determined by examining available government records, court records, and by interviewing some of the inhabitants of the county. Thus an effort was made to explain German-Russian officeholding—by relating it to the unusual background of the German-Russian people.

The first German-Russians of McIntosh County showed a clear willingness to participate in local government. They held many school district, town, and county offices between 1869 and 1915. That nine of them originated from the state between 1869 and 1915. It is probable that at least 23 of the officeholders had unknown origin were German-Russians because their names are Germanic and, at that time, only a small percentage of the population of McIntosh County's population had been born in Germany. Adding the 23 unknown to the German-Russian category would increase the German-Russian percentage from 64 percent to 76 percent, thereby indicating significant participation.

The first German-Russians of McIntosh County were nearly as active in officeholding at the town level of government. For example, there were 45 elected officeholders in McIntosh County between 1869 and 1915. Of those 45, 22 (49 percent) were of unknown origin, nine (20 percent) were native-born Americans, and one (or one percent) was of Norwegian ancestry. The ethnicity of these people was determined by examining available government records, court records, and by interviewing some of the inhabitants of the county. Thus an effort was made to explain German-Russian officeholding—by relating it to the unusual background of the German-Russian people.

The first German-Russians of McIntosh County held a greater percentage of local government offices than all other ethnic groups combined. Their degree of officeholding is comparable to that of members of the largest ethnic group in North Dakota, the Norwegians. The Norwegian settlers of Tract County, North Dakota (where they made up 34 percent of the population in 1910) held 84 percent of the school district offices in the Mayville-Porter area between 1869-1915; they held 70 percent of the town offices in Mayville between 1868-1915, and they held 76 percent of the 53 county offices between 1869-1915. The first Germa-Russians of McIntosh County showed a definite unwillingness to participate directly in government by the local level. They held few offices between 1869-1915. During those years McIntosh County was served by 44 state senators and representatives. Of these 44, only six (or 14 percent) were German-Russians, 23 (or 53 percent) were Americans, three (or seven percent) were Germans, and the remaining two (or four percent) were of unknown origin. This small degree of state officeholding by the first Germa-Russians of McIntosh County seems unusual for a county which was so densely populated by German-Russians. Tract County, North Dakota (a county of heavy Norwegian concentration), provides a vivid contrast. Between 1869 and 1915 Tract County was served by 60 state senators and representatives. Of the 60 officeholders, 59 (or 98 percent) were Norwegians. The qualifications for a state representative were the same with the exception that the minimal age was 25. In
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The German-Russian colonists had a basic mistrust of high officials—a sentiment that was based on their attitudes toward officials in Russia.

A second reason for the German-Russians' unwillingness to seek high-level public office in North Dakota was their traditional attitude of distrust toward Russian officials. In 1899 Teod Alexander III, 35, sent "land captains" into the German-Russian villages. These inspectors were notoriously corrupt and were despised by the German colonists. Herberg indicated that his father succeeded in keeping one of the Russian inspectors out of their village, bringing the local land captain. He added that such acts were commonplace. Hoffman mentioned that the Russian inspectors came around to check on his farm once a year. "They acted as big shots!" Ruthke stated that in 1905 Russian inspectors came into her home and took away every man's gun. "My father cried when they seized his gun," said Ruthke, nearly crying herself as she recalled the incident. The German-Russians feared and despised the outside Russian officials. This attitude of apprehension toward outside officials was likely a factor which influenced their unwillingness to participate in state-level politics in North Dakota.

A third factor which prevented the first German-Russians of McIntosh County from seeking high public office was their customary concern for land and farming to the exclusion of almost everything else. Nearly all the German-Russians who lived in Russia were farmers. Many left Russia to acquire land in the United States. When they arrived they bought or rented farms. This land acquisition in the Dakotas was part of an open, denise plan that often included the cost of building a house and the necessary equipment.

German-Russians were not happy in the early years. They were too busy farming. Calford Meyer of Ashley, N.D., son of German-Russian immigrants, stated: "Most of the Germans who came here were basically farmers. They were close to the land. They were land-conscious. The most important thing was to build up an estate—for they had many children."

According to Rose Kurle of Bowdle, S.D., daughter of original German-Russian immigrants:

"Nearly all the German-Russians were farmers. They wanted land. They worked hard to make the land productive. They dug out the rocks. They felt that the "Yankees" were a little bit lazy. The "Yankees" didn't like to work too hard. They came, took up a claim, built a shanty, lived there a short time to "prove up" the claim, then sold it for a quick profit and left.

We were not so lucky as the first German-Russians. We had no such luck to do that. We had to labor for everything."

According to Ruthke:

"My husband was too busy working on the farm to take time to go to school or run for office. He was too interested in farming. He had a lot of rocks to pick out. He had a lot of rocks to pick out. We had to work hard, too. Our neighbors were like him. They were, too, were busy farmers, having little education and speaking only German.

The traditional vocation of the German-Russians was farming. In Russia, most of them had been farmers. A few have been teachers or ministers, but the overwhelming majority were farmers. When they arrived in the United States it is likely that several of the Norwegian immigrants, as a group, were not as preoccupied with farming (as were the German-Russians because among their numbers were members of Norway's professional and business class.

A fourth factor which kept the first Russian-Americans of McIntosh County from state-level politics was their attitude toward education. Most of the German-Russians who had emigrated to the United States had received an elementary education in Russia. Each German village in Russia had a school which was irregularly attended by the children of the village from ages six to 14. At first the schools were primarily German institutions. The major subjects included arithmetic and reading. Later, during the reign of Tsar Alexander II, there was a move to Russianize. As a result, the German children were forced to learn Russian and were given Russian names. However, they continued to learn German and religion as otherwise it was unimportant. Few children went on to high school after confirmation at 14. Only those who intended to become teachers or ministers went on. A vast majority graduates went on to work in the fields. Few went on to high school. Most had no interest in higher education. They had no desire to acquire a college degree. They had no custom of higher education in Russia. Among the German-Russians in North Dakota, education was not important.

When the German-Russians arrived in North Dakota they brought along the customs of minimal education. Therefore, they and many of their children did not obtain the skills and education necessary to participate effectively in high political positions. Max A. WINCHEL of Ashley, N.D., one of the original settlers of the county, recalled:

The German-Russians weren't too keen on education. They didn't think that was necessary. They worked hard. Sometimes their children had to work to make ends meet. Sometimes their children reached eighth grade that was it. In 1909 when I went on to college there were only a few students going on to institutions of higher learning. They didn't need them. They didn't need that kind of education. It was more important for them to work and get ahead. It was more important to buy a quarter of land than to send a child to college.

According to Meyer:

"My father's education was limited to the third grade. Very few of the German boys in his time got beyond the eighth grade. Most of the young people stayed home and helped on the farm. They didn't consider higher education that important. It was through English-speaking people who were concerned with higher education that the German-Russians who came here were basically farmers. They were near the land. They were not well-educated. As a result of this handicap, they never entered high-level politics."

Concerning education, Herberg recalled, "Few went beyond the eighth grade in McIntosh County because they were not accustomed to doing so in Russia. They brought with them no tradition of higher education. They had no custom of higher education. They established only here. The Norwegian immigrants, in contrast, had established many colleges in the United States.

When questioned about the reluctance to participate in state-level politics, many first-generation inhabitants of McIntosh County expressed as reasons their lack of a good education and the inability to understand English. For example, John A. Shick, who came to the Dakotas in 1899 from Russia, stated: "I don't think too much of the office because of a lack of education, the inability to speak English well enough, and because I've never had any education."

They didn't even send their children to elementary school. Ruthke recalled: "Many of the German-Russians didn't see where they would go, weren't sent to school.

In some cases, parents stated: "My father believed that the girls didn't need much of an education. They should learn to cook, wash, and iron and..."
In the 1850s in Russia, marriages between Germans and Russians were discouraged.

needed no school for that." And Dorothea Herberg of Ashley, N.D., daughter of German-Russian immigrants, recalled: "My father didn't think education was important. My brothers, sisters, and I attended school no more than a month." The low regard for education among the first German-Russians prevented them and their children from obtaining the skills and knowledge necessary for high-level political involvement.

Finally, the first German-Russians in McIntosh County, North Dakota, were reluctant to participate in state-level politics because they were accustomed to keeping to themselves in Russia. In Russia they were fully aware of their minority status. They regarded their communities as entirely separate entities and the alien environment. They did all they could to preserve their German customs and traditions within their communities. Schools and churches were erected to nurture and preserve the culture that they had brought with them from Germany. As a result, the German-Russians kept to themselves, seldom intermingling with the general Russian populace which encircled them. According to Rathke, the Germans in Russia regarded their Russian neighbors as "dirty, lazy, and loathsome." A friend of hers married a Russian laborer and afterwards was forced to leave the village in disgrace. Herberg recollected the Germans' prejudice toward the Russians.

The Germans in Russia were concerned with preserving their German ways. I can't remember a case in my community in which a German married a Russian. The Germans felt superior to the Russians. Often the Russians passed through our village on their way to market. When they returned they were usually drunk. At times we were afraid of the Russians. Sometimes they would steal from us or destroy our property.

Hoffman recalled German feelings of superiority towards the Russians:

We felt we were better than the Russians. They were slower than us. They worked, harvested, and threshed by hand. Many had no horses. Oh, they lived cheap! We had horses and machinery, such as reapers, separators, and threshers. We were against mixing with the Russians because, if a German married one, their children had to go to the Russian church.

In the process of trying to maintain their identity by discouraging social intercourse with the Russian population the German-Russians developed a "colonial-consciousness," a sense of exclusivity which not only kept them apart from developments in 19th century Russia, but which ultimately contributed to keeping them out of the mainstream of North Dakota politics during the first decades—if not longer—after their arrival. This "colonial-consciousness" prevented many potential German-Russian politicians from seeking public office in North Dakota beyond the local level. For here, as in Russia, the only world for the German-Russians was their community. Everything else, including state-level political positions, was regarded as part of an alien, foreign, and even threatening world, and therefore to be avoided.

The article above is part of a thesis written by William Jahraus for a master of arts degree at the University of North Dakota. Jahraus was born in Eureka, South Dakota. He is a descendant of German-Russian immigrants who settled in the Dakotas in the late 19th century. After graduating from Heredit South Dakota High School in 1905, he attended Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, where he earned a bachelor of arts degree in history-political science in 1910. For the past eight years he has been an instructor of American and European history at the Grafton, North Dakota, Public High School. Jahraus resides a farmstead near Ardoch, North Dakota, with his wife, Sheryl Rae (Thothenson), and their son, Max Christian.

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