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Appendix
Introduction

The alien who comes here from Europe is not the raw material that Americans suppose him to be. He is not a blank sheet to be written on as you see fit. He has not sprung out of nowhere. Quite the contrary. He brings with him a deep-rooted tradition, a system of culture and tastes and habits- a point of view which is as ancient as his national experience and which has been engendered in him by his race and his environment. And it is this thing - this entire old world soul of his - that comes into conflict with America as soon as he has landed. (Daniels 1990, 102)

Marcus Eli Ravage 1884-1965, Romanian Immigrant

The United States was, and for many still is, a land of opportunity and hope. Millions of immigrants from around the globe traveled here in the anticipation of a new start, a new life. Even though each immigrant prepared for a new start in the United States, he brought with him a personal history and culture. This “old world soul”, as Ravage explained, did not immediately change once an immigrant entered the United States. Instead, each immigrant group created a unique subculture in American society. Each group held onto their traditions while intentionally or unintentionally becoming more American.

One distinctive subculture was created when Black Sea German-Russian’s came to North Dakota in the early 1900’s. The thousands of German-Russian immigrants that came to North Dakota and their children created a culture that aimed to maintain their distinctive German heritage while adjusting to American life.

Historians throughout the last century have studied the communities created by these immigrants. Hattie Plum Williams and Fred Koch have researched the Volga Germans, another group of German-Russians. They examined their lives in Russia and discussed briefly their experience here in the United States, mainly in Kansas. This research gave insight into German-Russian history but left out the Black Sea German
population in North Dakota.

Similarly, several other historians have researched and written extensive works discussing German-Russian life in Russia from the 1600’s through World War II. Each historian took a different aspect of German-Russian history to research. Karl Strumpp researched Russian census data, which helps German-Russians today trace their ancestry. Additionally, three books written by Joseph Height give detailed accounts of village life in Russia. However, these books offer very little information on German-Russian life after leaving Southern Russia.

A few of the authors that have attempted to research specifically Black Sea German-Russians in North Dakota are Richard Sallet, George Rath, and Shirley Fischer Arends. Sallet and Rath discussed several different aspects of German-Russian life on the plains, including their history, religion, and culture. Arends on the other hand, took an interesting approach and focused her research on the unique dialects of North Dakota’s German-Russians.

Collectively, these historians have created a picture of who the German-Russian immigrant was. From their research, one would assume that this immigrant group valued hard work, feared their God, disregarded higher education, admired farming, and maintained their German language. The question is whether these conclusions were the norm for all German-Russians in North Dakota.

North Dakota State University’s Germans from Russia Heritage Collection conducted other research on German-Russian immigrants. This institution created an oral history project headed by Michael Miller. Through the 1990’s and into the present, Miller and others have conducted several interviews of the now adult children of German-Russian immigrants. Through this project, interviews were conducted with
many Black Sea Germans to learn about their childhood and life as German-Russians in North Dakota.

These interviews along with the secondary research on the immigrant group gives a personal and intellectual look at the group as whole. In both branches of research it appeared that religion, education, and language were important aspects of German-Russian communities. Historians have researched each of these three areas and the oral interviews frequently discussed these subjects.

However, there were some contradictions between the oral interviews and the secondary literature in respect to these three topics. Although the German-Russian view of religion as explained through secondary literature is generally in agreement with the oral interviews, the other two topics are not. It appears that current research on this German-Russians in the United States, although thorough, is often too broad in its characterizations of this ethnic group.

In examining the oral history interviews of first generation German-Russians it is apparent that the broad assumptions found in current research are inadequate in representing this group. This paper, will aim to further explain German-Russian views of religion, education, and language. Unlike current scholarship, it will attempt to clarify the many factors that affected German-Russian views of religion, language, and education.

**From Germany to Russia**

When studying any group of people, understanding their past is beneficial in understanding their present. When studying Black Sea German-Russians this is especially true. This group of people moved from Germany, to Russia, and then to the
Americas. Their history intertwined with the economy and government of all three of these regions.

German-Russian history begins in Germany during the early 18th century. By this time Germany had suffered through the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1715), the Silesian Wars (1740-1742 and 1744-1745), and the Seven Years War (1756-1763). These years of turmoil created a faltering economy and widespread unrest.

At the same time, Russia was dealing with a problem of its own. Catherine the Great had obtained land near the Volga River in present-day Ukraine. She was in need of qualified farmers to settle the area. Being a former German Princess, she turned to German citizens to complete this task. In 1763, she issued a Manifesto offering free land, exemption from Russian military service, freedom of religion, and local self-government to Germans who would move to Russia. Between the years 1764 to 1768 approximately 20,000 German immigrants established 100 villages in the Volga region.

Other Germans later received a similar invitation to Russia from Alexander I. He issued a manifesto much like his Grandmother's with the goal to populate the Black Sea region of South Russia. This second manifesto in 1804 had similar promises but gave twice as much land to each family. Germans respond to it from Württemberg, Baden, the Rhine Palatinate, and Alsace. These German immigrants are the ancestors of today's Black Sea Germans in North Dakota.

Although Alexander I had planned to only allow 600 families a year to enter the Black Sea region, the following migration was much larger. In actuality, so many people responded to the invitation that the Russian government had a difficult time finding
housing for them during the winter of 1803.

After arriving in Russia, these new immigrants faced the challenge of creating villages out of the Russian steppe. Although the initial settlement was difficult, they eventually were able to prosper. A letter written by a German colonist, Georg Laturnus, in the summer of 1808 to his parents in Oberseebach, Alsace portrays the settler’s success:

My wife often cries because she is now living in such a happy country. We used to think that Oberseebach produced such a lot of wheat, but here the poorest colonist has more than the richest peasant back home... Here the land does not need to be fertilized. Our chickens devour more grain and the horses trample more underfoot on the threshing floor than one would need to feed to an entire family for one year... Do not think dear parents that I am trying to bluff you. I can say in all truth: Back home I often had to beg for my bread, but here I am making a good living. One would be a fool not to be satisfied...(Height 1973, 50)

The German immigrants continued to prosper in Russia for the vast majority of the 19th century. By 1870 there were approximately 450,000 Germans in Russia, generally thriving. Nonetheless, the German people in Russia would soon face difficulty as their distinctive rights slowly dissolved. The beginning of this process began in 1864 when the Zemstvo system was set up in Russia. This system reformed the organization of local government in Russia. Unfortunately, it also revoked the German’s rights to self-government initially promised to them in the previous manifestos.

The next curtailment in privileges was in 1874 when Russia revoked the German’s exemption from military service. This had originally been one of the key factors in their move from Germany to Russia. Next, in 1880, there was an educational mandate that required Russian language instruction in all schools. The Russian government only allowed German language use for religious teaching. These immigrants cherished the German language; therefore, having Russian language education forced
upon their children was a hard blow. The loss of these rights and increasing land shortages combined to create in many Germans a desire to leave Russia.

**From Russia to North Dakota**

Since their good fortune in South Russia was beginning to wane many groups of German-Russians, including the Black Sea Germans, began to look for better opportunities. From 1870 to the beginning of WWI, there would be a large migration of Germans from Russia to North America, South America, and Europe. However, the vast majority of these immigrants would look to the United States for their new life. Of the Black Sea Germans who chose to come to the United States, most would select the Northern part of the Dakota Territory for their new home.

The first large immigration of Black Sea Germans from Russia to the Dakota Territory occurred in 1873. Prior to this migration Johannes Ludwig Bette, a German-Russian who had moved to the United States, returned to Russia for a visit. While in Russia, he talked with many Germans about his success in America. During his visit, Bette created such a stir that Russian officials attempted to arrest him; however, he escaped capture and returned to America. The following spring several families from the Black Sea region followed Bette to his home in Ohio.

In Ohio the group could not find enough farmland. Since they were intent on finding large tracts of land where they could setup their new community, they sent out scouts to find open territory. The scouts traveled much of the Midwest but eventually decided that the group should settle in Yankton, Dakota Territory (later Yankton, South Dakota).

Thanks to letters sent back to Russia discussing life in the American west, many
other Black Sea German families in Russia decided to leave and move to the Dakotas. They first settled the Yankton area and then began to settle the region that would become North Dakota. According to the United States Census, by 1920 there were 303,532 German-Russians in the United States and approximately 68,000 in North Dakota alone.

**Life in North Dakota**

Many Black Sea Germans chose to settle in North Dakota for several reasons. First, and most importantly, there was an ample supply of open land. In the initial years of immigration, many Black Sea Germans were able to homestead 160 acres as long as they were 21 years old, a citizen (or planning to file for citizenship), made improvements on the land, and paid a small filing fee.

Secondly, the Dakota prairie was very similar to the Russian steppe. On the plains, German-Russians were able to continue to grow wheat just as they had in South Russia. The German-Russian population on the Dakotas changed the prairie into a productive agricultural area. Many described Eureka, South Dakota, an early German-Russian settlement, as “the wheat capitol of the world”.

A third reason that this group came to North Dakota was the simple fact that many other German-Russians were living there already. Since most Germans from Russian had a desire to maintain their unique culture and language, they preferred to settle in areas with other German-Russians.

Although North Dakota lured many German-Russians to its prairies, the immigrants did not have an easy transition into their new life. The North Dakota landscape could be harsh and unforgiving. The new immigrants arrived unprepared for long cold winters and the treeless expanse. Personal accounts from German-Russian’s
not only portrayed how much they disliked the climate, but also the thousands of rocks in their fields. It took long days and physical endurance to clear rocks from acres of prairie.

Although this was difficult work, many immigrants could find the humor in it. Large rocks had been scarce on the Russian steppe; but a good “kraut stone” keep the lid on the sauerkraut kettle. This stone was so important that many families brought their rock from Russia all the way to North Dakota. John Henne, a German-Russian who traveled immigrated to North Dakota as child, explained that his mother said, “if she had only known North Dakota had rocks, she would have packed something better to bring to the United States of America.”

An additional hardship on the plains was the laws behind homesteading. Immigrants could not live as close to each other as they had in Russia. In Russia, families all lived in a village together and men went outside of the village to cultivate their crops. In North Dakota, families were required to live on their homestead, not in villages. For many Black Sea Germans the separation from a community was difficult.

The loneliness of this separation was evident in an interview with Sister Reinhart Hecker. When asked if her mother missed Russia, Sister Hecker replied, “Oh, she cried all the time. I thought that's why my dad would take her and go out visiting and the kids would be staying alone...I often think how terrible it is to go to a country when you don't know the language”.

Even with these difficulties, very few German-Russians ever decided to leave North Dakota and return to Russia. Most would find prosperity in the United States and although they may have missed the Russian steppe, they would never return to it. Black Sea Germans would instead start farms and raise their families in North Dakota. In the
initial years, they formed German-Russian communities, maintained their language, and passed on their culture to their children. Over the years, the importance of maintaining tradition continued; however, some aspects of American society were absorbed into their German-Russian culture.

Three elements of German-Russian societies that embody this balance between maintaining tradition but also show American influence on German-Russian society are German-Russian education, language, and religion. Each of these elements represent an important part of German-Russian culture in North Dakota and all have been the topic of study for many historians. However, historians have repeatedly made wide-ranging statements about German-Russians in relation to these areas of their culture.

By examining oral history interviews of the children of German-Russian immigrants, one can see that often times the assumptions made by historians are far too broad while in other instances current scholarship is in alignment with oral histories. The remembered past of oral history interviews can bring insight into the downfalls of current scholarship in this field and explain the struggle between maintaining tradition and becoming an American.

**Religion**

Historians who studied German-Russian immigrant communities often spoke of the immense impact religion had on German-Russian people. George Rath said that “by their nature” German-Russians were very religious. Shirley Fischer Arends also maintains that German-Russians held religion in high regard. The interviews done by North Dakota State University also maintained these ideas.

Overall, most historians agreed that German-Russians not only practiced their
religion on Sunday but that God and the church were important parts of everyday life. Moreover, the church was not just the center for religious instruction but also the main mechanism for social interaction in a German-Russian community. These descriptions of the German-Russian immigrant population in North Dakota were in direct agreement with the oral history interviews.

When reading oral history interviews it is obvious to see that religion was at the center of most German-Russian families whether these families were Catholic or Evangelical Christians. Through reading these interviews, it is easy to see German-Russian dedication to religion, the importance of Sundays, and religious education. However, one area in which the secondary literature and the oral interviews did not totally agree was in the opinions on social interaction between religious groups. Nonetheless, through examining each of these areas one can learn how religion impacted the lives of German-Russians.

Dedication to Religion

German-Russian families viewed religion and God as a central part of their life in Russia and in the United States. A common inference by historians is that German-Russian religious convictions gained strength because of their difficult lives on the Great Plains. Whatever their reason for dependence on religion, German-Russians in North Dakota were on the whole devout Christians and they aimed to mold their children into good Christians also.

Richard Haring, a German-Russian born to immigrant parents in 1909, described religion as "...a part of life. You went to church and participated and that was part of it". His view of religion as an integral, unquestioned part of life appeared similar to other
German-Russians interviewed. Ralph Dressler, born in 1918 in Raleigh, N.D., explained how his family practiced religion:

"we had dinner and you would always have to say your prayer. You never went to eat dinner without prayers and after you were done too. Well, the first thing then, you had to go on the Bible and you would always have to learn a verse before you could go to bed. Well, we couldn’t go to bed until after mother came out and we had to read it to them until we knew it. If we didn’t know it, we had to stay there again another half hour." (Ralph Dressler Interview)

He later explained that he had to do all of this before homework. These examples show that religion truly was part of everyday life and it was more important than other school work.

Teaching children the importance of being a good Christian was also a goal of German-Russian parents and grandparents. Additionally, German-Russian children often looked to their parents or grandparents as role models in religion. When describing their parent’s attitude toward religion most interviewees said their parents were good Christians. Throughout the interviews there were many stories of parents and grandparents reading the bible to children and teaching them to pray.

Many German-Russian children had parents who were very involved in the church. Some spoke of fathers who helped build the church, served as deacons, or as trustees. They also had mothers who cooked for church dinners and enforced prayer in the home. With daily examples in their family German-Russian children grew up with a strong adherence to religion.

Andrew Johs, born in 1909 in Logan Co. N.D., shared a story about his Grandparents relationship to religion and how their dedication affected him. He said:

“They went to church pretty near every day with the buggy. And I and my sister Helen, one had to go along every day. And when they start driving, they prayed the Rosary. That’s where I learned to pray the Rosary. Going down and going back and that was 5 miles one way.” (Andrew Johs Interview)
This short story that Mr. Johs shared portrayed just how far some German-Russians would go to worship their God.

Through all of the interviews it seemed that there was a profound respect for religion in most German-Russian homes. This respect was deeply instilled in the hearts of parents and children alike. However, religion for German-Russians was more than church and prayer. It permeated many aspects of their lives.

The Importance of Sundays

One area of life that was greatly impacted by German-Russian religious dedication was leisure time. Sunday was the one day during the week that farm work was put aside and relaxation was encouraged. Sundays were a time for religious worship, friends, and fun.

For German-Russian families in North Dakota, Sundays began with church. There were few reasons one could skip church on the Sabbath. However, one possible reason that some German-Russian families could not go to church weekly was that they lived to far away. Kathryn O’Neill, a German-Russian born in Leola S.D., explained that her family was Lutheran but “never got to go to church because [they] lived so far from there except on Christmas”. This was rare exception because most families would go to church weekly even if the church was miles away.

Kathryn Ternes, born in 1920 in St. Anthony N.D., explained that one of the only times she remembered people skipping church was during the 1918 flu epidemic. She explained, “...the flu was terrible. In 1918 so many people died.” She said that most people did not go to church because “people were afraid of getting the flu”. During this period, the flu was a real threat as approximately 600,000 people died during the
epidemic. This shows that it took a large barrier to stop many German-Russians from going to church on Sunday.

When people were able to go to church the day was filled with religious instruction and social interaction. Sister Magdalen Schaan, who grew up in Rugby, N.D., discussed what Sunday’s were like for her growing up. She said “We had two sermons every Sunday” and church started at “8 o’clock or 9 o’clock and we couldn’t eat before communion. Well, to get home it would be so late so [we] took lunch along... We were in the church until almost 2 o’clock every Sunday”.

After church was finished, and because religious rules forbid farm work on the Sabbath, German-Russians families got together for a little relaxation. Herbert Huber, who was born in Ashley N.D. in 1927, shared that “on Sunday, even in the middle of harvest, we were either at an uncle and aunts place or they were at our place.” Even with loads of work to do this day was for family, friends, and God. Often large meals were cooked, children had time to play outside, and adults played cards and talked.

Overall, the church and religion dictated when social interaction would take place. Sundays were the days that family and friends were able to get together and set aside farm work.

**Religious Education**

Since religious piety was valued in most German-Russian communities, parents often encouraged or required their children to get religious education. In both Evangelical and Catholic communities, children spent either part of their summer vacation or a few years getting religious instruction. These schools taught children the
foundations of their religion and often taught children how to read and write in the German language.

Theresa Kuntz Bachmeier, who grew up in Blumenfeld, North Dakota, went to a Catholic religious school. She said her siblings and herself: “had to stay home from school and had to go to the religious school, in April it started. We always had two months of religious school.” She later explained that they learned “prayers and went to Holy Communion and everything, confirmation and everything.”

Alma Herman, who was born near Kulm N.D, had a similar experience growing up. When she was asked about religious school she said,

“We [she and her siblings] were confirmed. We had to board in town because the roads weren’t suitable and we didn’t have transportation. So we would board and room in town for three weeks. In that time, we memorized all the special passages of the Bible, we learned to write in German, and we knew all the books of the Bible.

Alma’s experience is a good example of how religious schools combined religion and the German language.

The experiences of German-Russian children show that religious education was something most children had. Many went to school for a few weeks to learn prayers, German, and to get confirmed. Although not all children were sent to religious schools many were. Those how were not often received a basic religious education from their parents. In either case, this education was used to teach children the importance of prayer, the bible, and instill in them a deep reverence for God.

This education appeared to have worked as even today many German-Russian communities still hold a deep respect and love for their God. Msgr. Joseph Senger, who was born in Orrin, N.D., explained in his interview that German-Russians today are losing some of their old dedication to religion. However, he also says:
"As the German-Russians are being spread throughout the world, I somehow look upon them as having a special mission from God to spread the love for God, to spread the depth of their convictions wherever they live...I think there is something deep in the religious convictions that Germans from Russia have that they can, as it were, share with other peoples.” (Msgr. Joseph Senger Interview)

This statement shows that although German-Russians today are not living in close-knit German-Russian communities, many still hold strong religious convictions. This strength can be accredited to the fact the German-Russians held onto their religion throughout their migrations across the world.

**Catholics and Evangelical German-Russians**

Although historians and the interviews seemed to agree the Christian German-Russians had the same dedication, respected the Sabbath, and gave their children religious education, they did disagree in one area. Historians have explained that Catholic and Evangelical German-Russian groups were “intensely religious people and clannish in their loyalty to the church of their choice.” They created settlements in North Dakota completely apart from each other and did not interact with each other.

However, through reading oral interviews it becomes apparent that even though German-Russian immigrants may have aimed to create entirely Evangelical or entirely Catholic communities this was not always the case. Additionally, although German-Russians often clustered with individuals who shared their same religious backgrounds there were exceptions to this rule. These exceptions were seen in several oral interviews, which showed that this idea was far too broad.

In many cases, German-Russians did settle in areas of North Dakota which had large numbers of people already there who practiced their same religion. An example of this pattern did appear in McIntosh County, which was predominantly Evangelical while
Emmons County was mainly Catholic. However, in most of the interviews it appeared that there was more than one religious denomination found in each community. Due to this situation, the interesting point that came up in interviews was how the different denominations dealt with each other.

When discussing his family’s religious affiliation Walt Zimmerman, a German-Russian born in 1924, stated, “We were Baptist. We were strictly Baptist.” Later he added, “You know, it used to be that the Protestants and the Catholics they just didn’t inter-mix. You just didn’t!! They wouldn’t allow it.” From these statements, it can be assume that in his community of Lehr N. D., there were different denominations in the community; but, these different groups did not socialize together. This example seems to agree with the ideas set forth my historians.

However, other interviewees had the opposite experience growing up. Paul Welder explained that the community around his family’s farm included Baptists, Reformed, Congregational, Lutherans, and Seventh Day Adventists. He went on to say:

“We didn’t know there was a difference between Catholics and Protestants. No way. My dad did carpenter work for all of them; and we were neighbors; and we were together. We played ball on Sundays in the summer, and the wintertime we went together, and we had popcorn and apples.” (Welder Interview)

Although there may have been defined differences between denominations in Mr. Welder’s childhood, he could not remember distinctions between the religious groups.

Richard Haring had similar opinions of relationships between denominations as he grew up. Mr. Haring explained that in his community, there were different denominations and each group lived in their own neighborhoods. Nonetheless, when asked if there was hard feelings between different denominations Mr. Haring replied, “No, during certain times of the year, for instance, harvest time or threshing time, you’d
get together with quite a few of the others.” He later explained that a group of farmers from different denominations combined their savings to buy a threshing machine and equipment together. Like Paul Welders community, Mr. Haring’s community was diverse but there were few hard feelings between religious groups.

With this information, it can be seen that the interviews and secondary literature did not always agree when discussing interaction between denominations. However, the interviews and literature were in alignment when discussing other aspects of religious life.

**Education**

Like religion, education had a huge influence on German-Russian immigrants, especially children. Throughout their time in Russia and in North Dakota, German-Russian communities were able to educate their children. However, the content and impact of education would be very different depending on the location of the German-Russian community.

**Education in Russia**

During their time in Russia, German-Russians created autonomous colonies, grew wheat and, after initial settlement was completed, established an educational system for their children. Although the German schools in Russia were by today’s standards second-rate, the majority of the German students became reasonably literate while nearly 75% of the Russian population was illiterate. These schools provided a basic education of reading, writing, and arithmetic. For the community in which they lived this was an adequate education because most children would become farmers or artisans like their
Along with basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, these schools taught religion. Children spent their day reading from the ABC-primer, learning bible history, and reciting bible verses. German-Russians used these schools to promote their religion, whether they were Catholic or Protestant. This was important because a common religious belief was a unifying factor in nearly all German-Russian communities in Russia. Most German towns in Russia were entirely Catholic or Protestant.

Another unifying factor promoted in the schools was the German language. In these rudimentary schools, children learned to read and write in German. Since they lived in German communities surrounded by Russian or Ukrainian speaking neighbors, the continuation of German aided in keeping their group cohesive in Russia. German-Russian schools did not teach the Russian language at all until the educational mandate of 1880.

**Education in North Dakota**

German-Russians also established schools for their children in North Dakota. Although in many cases, churches and barns took priority over school buildings in initial settlement. This created instances in which some German-Russian children were not able to attend a structured school at all or for some until they were in their teens. However, once communities were established the need for education was met.

The schools built were similar to the small one-room schoolhouses that sprung up across rural America in the early 1900's. They had one teacher instructing all grades with limited materials. In many instances in North Dakota, the students in the class had a range of backgrounds including Norwegian, Finnish, and German, to name a few. These
schools taught reading, writing, and math. However, they differed from schools in Russia because English was the language used and religion was not the focus of the education. This was a significant change. It forced German-Russian families and churches to take over teaching children about religion and the German language.

German-Russian students attended these schools but not always regularly. Students often missed days of school to help at home on the farm. Furthermore, many students never attended high school let alone the eighth grade. Not until the 1950's did North Dakota's colleges begin to see this immigrant group enter into their programs in large numbers. For much of the first half of the 20th century most German-Russians did not venture into careers aside from farming or other blue-collar work.

These facts lead many historians to assume that German-Russians as a whole did not value education, especially college education. They concluded that German-Russian parents encouraged and praised only children who chose to help on the farm and looked poorly on the ambitious children who chose to better themselves through learning.

By examining the remembered past of oral history interviews, a reader learns that these assumptions were not always true. In actuality, parental support, family income, and personal preference were the main factors contributing to the education of German-Russian youth. If these three aspects are not first examined the conclusion that an entire immigrant group did not value higher education can lead to misunderstandings.

**Parental Support**

For many children of German-Russian immigrant's, parental support and encouragement was a key factor in how far they would pursue their education. Some children had parents that were highly educated in Russia. One German-Russian
descendant explained that his Grandfather on his mother's side had been a professor in Russia. Understandably, his mother was a highly educated woman and education in general was valued in his family.

In other families, although parents were less educated, learning was still encouraged for children. When asked in interviews if their “parents encouraged education” most responded with a “yes”. For Richard Haring it was his mother's dying wish for her oldest son to be educated. He fulfilled this wish by completing a master's degree in school administration. Mr. Haring was not alone in his desire to go to college several other German-Russian children were able to attend high school and college with the support of their parents.

The fact that some families allowed for the area teacher to board in their home shows further support from parents. Although this could have been done out of simple kindness to the teacher, most German-Russians say they had a teacher on board to help the children learn English. Since the school system in North Dakota was conducted in English, learning the new language was key to a child's education.

When discussing this topic Walt Zimmerman, who was born on the family farmstead in 1924, states, “We always had the teacher staying with us. Not that they [the teachers] stayed there [with us] helped me any.” At the age of 86 Alma Herman recalled that her family also had a teacher on board when she was a child. She said that one night when her siblings and she were eavesdropping on their parent’s conversation, she heard her dad say that he knew how to get his kids to learn English. He said, “We’ll have the teacher board here and he can teach them.” Her mother replied, “Not for very long. I haven’t any room for the kids. I can’t have anybody [else].” This was true since Alma had 11 siblings. However, a teacher came and Alma noted, “he was there for long
enough so that my oldest sister, who was a very smart kid, soon learned the English
language and she taught all the rest of them, right down the line."

With parental support, not only would many German-Russian children complete
eighth grade but also many would go on to high school and some to college. Although
education appeared to be unappreciated by German-Russians as a whole, parental support
was one factor that could help a child overcome this notion.

**Family Income**

Probably the most significant factor in whether or not a child of German-Russian
immigrant parents would become educated was the economic status of the family. This
above all else appeared to be the feature that could promote or damage a child’s
educational future.

During interviews, the now adult children of German Russian immigrants
explained why they had to stop their education, for some, as early as the sixth grade. The
most common reason for this was they had to work. In most cases, children had to leave
school to help on the family farm or in some instances to find jobs outside the family. It
appeared in most of the interviews that they were not bitter about stopping their
education. Most explained that helping with family expenses and ending school was just
what had to be done.

Eve Schatz, who was born in 1905 near Napoleon N.D., explained that her mother
was often sick. Since she was the oldest girl in the family, she had to help at home. As it
happened, she “didn’t get too much in the English school”. However, she made sure that
her own children were all able to attend college.

Alma Herman, also explained that she was the first in her family and township to
complete the eighth grade exams. She desperately wanted to attend high school but her father told her that he could not afford to pay for high school. Additionally, he wanted her to help her mother at home. Therefore, Alma stayed home until she was eighteen and then paid for herself to go to high school. Interestingly, she was the first person in her township to graduate high school also.

Another situation occurred in several families in which parents did support education but still could not afford to educate all their children. In these families, some kids went to college and some ended school early to help with the farm. This was the situation in Richard Haring’s family; he attended college while his siblings did not. Paul Welder, born near Zeeland N.D., explained in a matter of fact way that he wrote his “seventh grade exams and walked home from school, that was the end.” He then goes on to say that his family was very busy on the farm so he “didn’t dare” go back to school. However, some children in his family attended high school and college. This again shows that education was dependent upon the needs at home.

**Personal Preference**

A third factor that is important to take note of when dealing with the educational values of German-Russians is personal preference. After the initial immigration, German-Russians did not enter into higher education and this seemed to mean that the entire ethnic group did not value academics. However, it is arguable that individual’s personal preference was to farm even though they did have respect for higher education.

Anton “Tony” Metz, who was born in 1912 in Dickinson, N.D., explained that he went to school until the seventh grade and then helped with his family’s farm. When asked about school he said he did not learn much and felt he forgot most of the
information he learned in school. Interestingly, when asked about farming he goes on and on about breaking horses and working the field. He said, “I enjoyed farm work. I could milk cows. We had pigs and everything. I always used to run the binder and the header. I enjoyed the horses.” It appears that Mr. Metz, like several other German-Russians interviewed, found farm life pleasurable and satisfying work. One could reason that many German-Russians would have chosen to farm even if they had the opportunity to continue their education.

So, through oral history interviews it can be seen that the assumptions made by historians stating that German-Russians did not value education are far too simplistic. Several extenuating factors contributed to whether or not German-Russian children would be able to pursue their education or not. Similarly, whether German-Russians would learn and use the English language is very broadly explained by historians. The examination of oral interviews can shed light on this topic and explain additional factors that effected language use in German-Russian communities.

Language

Like German-Russian views on education, historians also have made broad assumptions of German-Russian views of language. Historians describe the German-Russian people as individuals who fervently held onto their German language. This is evident when looking at their years in Russia. During that time, German-Russian communities maintained much of their culture and language while surrounded by Russian society.

When many Black Sea German-Russians came to North Dakota, they continued
the effort to maintain their language. Although there were many other German groups in
the United States the German-Russian dialect is much different from the Standard High
German most of these groups spoke. Linguists have studied the North Dakota German
dialect and explained in detail how German-Russian language differs from that of other
German groups.

Not only do North Dakota German-Russians pronounce their words differently
from High German speakers but they also have some entirely different words for things.
For example, the High German word for ‘walk’ is *gehen* while the German-Russian word
is *la/e*. Furthermore, even though Germans in Russia tried to avoid the Russian language
they did adopt some Russian and Ukrainian vocabulary into their language. A good
eexample of this is that the German-Russian word for ‘tomato’ is *baklachana*, which
comes from the Russian word for eggplant.

These examples show that the German-Russian dialect is unique. In reality, no
other German group in the United States had a language that sounded the same as the
German-Russian dialect. Due to this fact and their experience in Russia, North Dakota’s
Germans Russians had good reason to want to maintain their unique language tradition.

Some historians have explained German-Russian’s effort to maintain their
language simply by saying that German-Russians came to America and continued to
refuse to use any other language aside from German. However, like the Black Sea
German opinions on education, their thoughts on language had many elements. Three
main factors that affected the language use of Black Sea Germans in North Dakota were
English language education, family opinions, and the community. By further examining
this topic, it becomes obvious that other conditions effected whether or not German–
Russians immigrants and their children would learn English.
As previously stated, German-Russian children went to English language schools in the United States. These schools had the greatest impact on whether or not German-Russian children would become fluent in English. Since their parents had come here from Russia only speaking German and many now lived in dominantly German-Russian communities, there was sometimes very little contact with the English language. When asked if she spoke German as a child Alma Hennan responded, “Oh, none of us knew English... we couldn’t talk any English at all. Because the folks couldn’t either...” Mrs. Hennan also stated that her older sister was the first to go to school and learn English. In her family and many others, it was not until children began to attend public schools that the English language entered German-Russian homes.

In an interview, Msgr. Joseph Senger explained both the positives and some negative features of the English language school:

“it was very evident when we started school because we could probably speak some words of English, but we normally and automatically spoke German. Of course in school we had to speak English. If we spoke German we were punished, had to write or stay after school. When we were out playing ball we would shout in German, but when we went into the school we would have to speak English. Thank God that the teachers had patience with us and taught us English.”

In this brief statement, Msgr. Senger shows three main features of the English language schools from the view of German-Russian children. The first detail that is evident in this statement is that when entering school very few German-Russian children knew English. This appeared to be a common situation for many German-Russians. Sister Magdalen Schaan explains that she would have gone to school with no English but her siblings helped her. When she was asked, “So as a child, you didn’t speak English?”
she replied “No. But I knew English when I started school because my brothers were older than I. There were 5 older brothers that went to school and they talked English when they came home. So I learned from my brothers.” Her situation was similar to other children. However, many children without siblings or those who were the oldest child went to school sometimes with no English at all.

A second item of importance in Senger’s statement is that German was not allowed in the school and if it was used it was punished. Sister Schaan also discussed this saying that at her school they could not even speak German at recess. She said, “we tried, but we were not allowed to. We had to speak English.” If her teacher did hear them speaking German “she was pretty disgusted.”

Sometimes this suppression of German at school and having parents who only spoke German at home was difficult for students. When Reuben Dammel, a German-Russian born in 1917, discussed this he said, “When we went to school, then we didn’t dare talk German anymore. But at home we had to talk German. We didn’t dare talk English.”

This double standard of having English enforced at school and German used at home seemed common. However, as seen in Senger’s statement, many German-Russian children are now thankful for those schools for their effort in teaching them the English language. Surprisingly this sentiment appeared in other interviews as well. For example, Fern Renner Welk, the wife of the famous bandleader Lawrence Welk, said that she and her siblings all learned English in school. For that reason she said “I’m against bilingual education… I feel you should learn the language of the country and establish yourself in that.” Throughout the interviews, it seemed evident that there was a belief that learning English was a necessity and a privilege.
This belief seemed true in the minds of their parents. Again, German-Russian immigrants strived to preserve their culture and language however, most knew the English language would be beneficial for their children. The fact that several interviewees had teachers boarding in their home as children or knew other families who had teachers living in their homes reinforces this idea.

**Family Attitude on Language**

In most German-Russian families, the language of the home was German. Although most children and several adult German-Russians did learn English, in family settings German dominated conversations. However, opinions of parents appear to have effected how well the children of German-Russian immigrants learned English.

In many oral history interviews, interviewees discussed their parent’s opinions of the English language. Walt Zimmerman explained that his family spoke German in the home but still encouraged him to learn English. When his father was asked about speaking English Walt explained that his dad said, “They lived in America and that’s the way they were going to talk.” The Zimmerman family even had a teacher living in their home for a time to help them learn English.

Quite the opposite was the family of Sister Reinhardt Hecker, who was born in München Russia in 1901. Her family came to North Dakota in 1913 and her mother learned English, but her father refused to learn. Although her father had learned some Russian, he said English was “the worst language he ever heard” and for the remainder of his life, he only spoke German.

These two contrasting opinions of the German language appeared throughout Black Sea German families. If parents learned English themselves, often their children
were also encouraged to learn the new language. In other families, the German language was considered almost sacred so English was discouraged in the home.

In a way, German-Russian parents were playing a balancing act with their children. Many wanted to encourage their children to assimilate into American culture to an extent because they knew it would help them in the future. On the other hand, they wanted their children to remember their culture and traditions. Richard Haring reiterated this when discussing Black Sea Germans. He explained that as a whole Black Sea Germans “were not opposed to the American way of life, speaking the American language, and accepting the American economic situation. But they also wanted to maintain their German language, the German culture-their ways.”

Community

A third factor that affected whether or not German-Russian immigrants would learn the English language was the community in which they lived. When Black Sea Germans came to North Dakota many settled in communities populated mainly by other German-Russians. This allowed them to maintain their unique culture in a new country. Additionally, living in these communities helped German-Russians maintain their language possibly better than German-Russians who settled in communities that were more diverse.

Many interviewees explained that as children their communities were mostly German-Russian. Growing up in Zeeland N.D., Paul Welder remembers that everyone spoke German in the community. Helmuth Huber, a German-Russian born in Ashley N.D. in 1927, admitted that his community contained other ethnic groups but estimated it was 95% German-Russian. In communities such as these, learning English was not
essential. Individuals could complete business transactions and social obligations without a word of English.

It appeared that other communities were not so homogenous. Sister Reinhart Hecker discussed her family’s dilemma with language. She said that neither of her parents knew English when their family first arrived in North Dakota, but the community they lived in was not all German-Russian. She explained a situation when her mother needed to buy a saw from town, however, her mother didn’t know the English word for “saw”. So, her mom asked her to take a catalog picture of the item needed and show it to their non-German neighbors. The neighbors then told her the English word for the item. Other interviewees explained similar guessing games they had to play in order to learn English while living in English speaking communities.

These examples explain that although German-Russians tried to maintain their language the community in which they lived was a factor. If the community was entirely German, the English language was not necessary for daily life. However, if the community was more diverse learning English was encouraged.

It is easy to see in the statements from these oral interviews that the broad statement that German-Russian immigrants aimed to maintain their German language and avoided learning English was not always true. Public education, parents opinions, and the community all had effects on English language acquisition. For many children of German-Russian immigrants even if their family and community shunned the English language they would learn it fluently through public education.

Conclusion

Through this analysis, it can be seen that secondary literature does not always
represent the German-Russian immigrant group in the correct light. Since historians have tried to write books that discussed many characteristics of German-Russian society, they were forced to be very broad in their explanations. Historians had to be broad in their writing in order to be able to encompass all of German-Russian society in the United States.

Due to the shortcomings of the current scholarship, this paper has tried to look at three areas of German-Russian society; religion, education, and language, and aimed to look at these areas more precisely. With this further research, it is obvious that trying to explain the culture of an entire ethnic group with broad assumptions can provide some understanding of the group, but cannot provide the entire story. Through this paper it is clear that German-Russian views on religion, education, and language were dependent upon many different factors and varied greatly from family to family.

Appendix 1: Maps of Russia and North Dakota
Fig. 1. The region inside the black box is the approximate area of the Black Sea German-Russian settlements in South Russia. Original map reprinted from AboutRomainia.com, Black Sea and Surroundings, available at http://www.aboutromania.com/maps72.html.

Fig. 2. Map of North Dakota State showing all counties. Reprinted from University of Texas at Austin, University of Texas Libraries, available online at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/states/north_dakota.gif.

Appendix 2: Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Birth Date</th>
<th>City born</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pius L. Bosch</td>
<td>Nov. 19, 1900</td>
<td>Kandel, Ukraine</td>
<td>Ramsey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reuben Dammel</td>
<td>April 18, 1917</td>
<td>Grew up in Devils Lake, N.D.</td>
<td>Stutsman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph Dressler</td>
<td>June 3, 1918</td>
<td>Medina</td>
<td>Grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn Ehli Ternes</td>
<td>Aug. 18, 1920</td>
<td>Raleigh</td>
<td>Morton</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Richard Haring  June 23, 1909  near Glen Ullin  Grant
Alma Herman  April 20, 1908  Pomona View Township  La Moure
Helmuth Herbert Huber  Dec. 18, 1927  Ashley  McIntosh
Andrew Johns  Dec. 10, 1909  Shell Butte Township  Logan
Theresa Kuntz Bachmeier  April 10, 1909  Blumenfeld  McHenry
Anton "Tony" Metz  Dec. 19, 1912  Near New Hradec  Dunn
Sister Joan Nuss  Nov. 22, 1917  Dickinson  Stark
Kathryn Amelia O'Neill  Aug. 19, 1905  Leola  McIntosh S.D. *
Sister Reinhardt Hecker  March 14, 1901  At age 13 lived in Belfield  Stark
Fern Renner Welk  Aug 26, 1903  Mandan  Morton
Sister Magdalen Schaan  April 16, 1919  Rugby  Pierce
Eva Schatz  Oct. 3, 1905  Napoleon  Logan
Matilda Schlenker Dockter  July 31, 1895  and Kulm  Logan and La Moure
Msgr. Joseph Senger  1929  Orrin  Pierce
Paul P. Welder  Not in interview  Zeeland  McIntosh
Walt Zimmerman  Oct 4, 1924  Lehr  McIntosh

* McPherson Co. S.D. is located directly below McIntosh Co. N.D.

| TABLE 1 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|

**TABLE 2**

GERMAN-RUSSIANS OF THE FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION IN THE UNITED STATES, CENSUS 1920

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>First and Second Generation</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>First and Second Generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>7,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>Not a state in 1920</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>22,421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>11,529</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>3,568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>21,067</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>4,308</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>8,560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>North Dakota</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>5,062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>2,574</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>7,031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>8,755</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>4,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>85</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>1,646</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>31,512</td>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>30,937</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>2,301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>1,018</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>12,857</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>11,875</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>5,005</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>11,714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>1,473</td>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>1,939</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This information was compiled by Dr. Richard Sallet. Sallet used the state censuses from 1920 and identified German-Russians as all Foreign-born White and total foreign white stock from Russian of German mother tongue. Information for this table is from Richard Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1874), 110-111.

**Primary Sources**


Giesinger, Adam. “Interview with Dr. Adam Giesinger.” Interview by Michael Miller


Nitschke L. and S. Nitschke. Early History: Village of Alfred, North Dakota: Beginning


Rempfer, Michael, transl., ed. “Praised, Disdained, Defended: Three Views of the German-Russian Immigrants Published in 1905.”


“Stories about ‘Unsere Leute’ The Germans from Russia Prize-Winning Entries from the 1999 Story Telling Contest.” Journal of the American Historical Society of


**Secondary Sources**


A book that discusses all of German history. Not a lot of detail but gives a good overview.


Rock, Kenneth W. Germans From Russia in America: the First Hundred Years. Fort Collins: Dept. of History, Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project, Colorado State University, 1976.


Stumpp, Karl. *The Emigration from Germany to Russia in the Years 1763 to 1862*. Lincoln, Neb.: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1973


Introduction

The alien who comes here from Europe is not the raw material that Americans suppose him to be. He is not a blank sheet to be written on as you see fit. He has not sprung out of nowhere. Quite the contrary. He brings with him a deep-rooted tradition, a system of culture and tastes and habits - a point of view which is as ancient as his national experience and which has been engendered in him by his race and his environment. And it is this thing - this entire old world soul of his – that comes into conflict with America as soon as he has landed. (Daniels 1990, 102)

Marcus Eli Ravage 1884-1965, Romanian Immigrant

The United States was, and for many still is, a land of opportunity and hope. Millions of immigrants from around the globe traveled here in the anticipation of a new start, a new life. Even though each immigrant prepared for a new start in the United States, he brought with him a personal history and culture. This “old world soul”, as Ravage explained, did not immediately change once an immigrant entered the United States. Instead, each immigrant group created a unique subculture in American society. Each group held onto their traditions while intentionally or unintentionally becoming more American.

One distinctive subculture was created when Black Sea German-Russian’s came to North Dakota in the early 1900’s. The thousands of German-Russian immigrants that came to North Dakota and their children created a culture that aimed to maintain their distinctive German heritage while adjusting to American life. ¹

¹ In this paper, I will refer to the descendants of German-Speaking settlers who previously lived in Russian territory as German-Russians. As seen in David Levinson and Melvin Ember ed., American Immigrant Cultures: Builders of a Nation, (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1997), 325, this ethnic groups has been and is still referred to as Russian-German, Germans from Russia, Russo-Germans, Catherine’s Germans, Czar’s Germans, or as Unser Leit (translated roughly as “our people). The German-Russian ethnic group is diverse. The distinct groups can more easily be identified by region or religion as seen in William C. Sherman and Playford V. Thorson, ed., Plains Folk: North Dakota’s Ethnic History (Fargo, N.D.: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1986). Plains Folk breaks the German-Russian ethnic group into the Black Sea, Mariupol, Dobrudja, Caucasus, Volga,
Historians throughout the last century have studied the communities created by these immigrants. Hattie Plum Williams and Fred Koch have researched the Volga Germans, another group of German-Russians. They examined their lives in Russia and discussed briefly their experience here in the United States, mainly in Kansas. This research gave insight into German-Russian history but left out the Black Sea German population in North Dakota.²

Similarly, several other historians have researched and written extensive works discussing German-Russian life in Russia from the 1600’s through World War II. Each historian took a different aspect of German-Russian history to research. Karl Strumpp researched Russian census data, which helps German-Russians today trace their ancestry. Additionally, three books written by Joseph Height give detailed accounts of village life in Russia. However, these books offer very little information on German-Russian life after leaving Southern Russia.³

A few of the authors that have attempted to research specifically Black Sea German-Russians in North Dakota are Richard Sallet, George Rath, and Shirley Fischer Arends. Sallet and Rath discussed several different aspects of German-Russian life on the plains, including their history, religion, and culture. Arends on the other hand, took


an interesting approach and focused her research on the unique dialects of North Dakota’s German-Russians.  

Collectively, these historians have created a picture of who the German-Russian immigrant was. From their research, one would assume that this immigrant group valued hard work, feared their God, disregarded higher education, admired farming, and maintained their German language. The question is whether these conclusions were the norm for all German-Russians in North Dakota.

North Dakota State University’s Germans from Russia Heritage Collection conducted other research on German-Russian immigrants. This institution created an oral history project headed by Michael Miller. Through the 1990’s and into the present, Miller and others have conducted several interviews of the now adult children of German-Russian immigrants. Through this project, interviews were conducted with many Black Sea Germans to learn about their childhood and life as German-Russians in North Dakota.

These interviews along with the secondary research on the immigrant group gives a personal and intellectual look at the group as whole. In both branches of research it appeared that religion, education, and language were important aspects of German-Russian communities. Historians have researched each of these three areas and the oral interviews frequently discussed these subjects.

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5 Permission for use of the interviews granted from the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, PO Box 5599, Fargo, ND 58105-5599(www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/grhc).
However, there were some contradictions between the oral interviews and the secondary literature in respect to these three topics. Although the German-Russian view of religion as explained through secondary literature is generally in agreement with the oral interviews, the other two topics are not. It appears that current research on this German-Russians in the United States, although thorough, is often too broad in its characterizations of this ethnic group.

In examining the oral history interviews of first generation German-Russians it is apparent that the broad assumptions found in current research are inadequate in representing this group. This paper, will aim to further explain German-Russian views of religion, education, and language. Unlike current scholarship, it will attempt to clarify the many factors that affected German-Russian views of religion, language, and education.

**From Germany to Russia**

When studying any group of people, understanding their past is beneficial in understanding their present. When studying Black Sea German-Russians this is especially true. This group of people moved from Germany, to Russia, and then to the Americas. Their history intertwined with the economy and government of all three of these regions.

German-Russian history begins in Germany during the early 18th century. By this time Germany had suffered through the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), the War of

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6 It is important to note that the Germany of this time was not like the Germany of today. Adam Giesinger explains this in From Catherine to Khrushchev: the story of Russia's Germans (Winnipeg: A. Giesinger, 1974), 6. Germany was a compilation of over 300 states. Each state was in theory under the rule of the Holy Roman Emperor; however, in most cases the ruling prince of the state had complete control. These states often warred with each other, charged high taxes for the courts lavish lifestyle, and had no freedom of religion. This created very little loyalty to one state over the other and made it easier for Germans to want to emigrate elsewhere.
the Spanish Succession (1701-1715), the Silesian Wars (1740-1742 and 1744-1745), and the Seven Years War (1756-1763). These years of turmoil created a faltering economy and widespread unrest.  

At the same time, Russia was dealing with a problem of its own. Catherine the Great had obtained land near the Volga River in present-day Ukraine. She was in need of qualified farmers to settle the area. Being a former German Princess, she turned to German citizens to complete this task. In 1763, she issued a Manifesto offering free land, exemption from Russian military service, freedom of religion, and local self-government to Germans who would move to Russia. Between the years 1764 to 1768 approximately 20,000 German immigrants established 100 villages in the Volga region.

Other Germans later received a similar invitation to Russia from Alexander I. He issued a manifesto much like his Grandmother’s with the goal to populate the Black Sea region of South Russia. This second manifesto in 1804 had similar promises but gave twice as much land to each family. Germans responded to it from Württemberg, Baden, the Rhine Palatinate, and Alsace. These German immigrants are the ancestors of today's Black Sea Germans in North Dakota.

Although Alexander I had planned to only allow 600 families a year to enter the Black Sea region, the following migration was much larger. In actuality, so many

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people responded to the invitation that the Russian government had a difficult time finding housing for them during the winter of 1803.\textsuperscript{12}

After arriving in Russia, these new immigrants faced the challenge of creating villages out of the Russian steppe. Although the initial settlement was difficult, they eventually were able to prosper. A letter written by a German colonist, Georg Laturnus, in the summer of 1808 to his parents in Oberseebach, Alsace portrays the settler’s success:

My wife often cries because she is now living in such a happy country. We used to think that Oberseebach produced such a lot of wheat, but here the poorest colonist has more than the richest peasant back home. . . Here the land does not need to be fertilized. Our chickens devour more grain and the horses trample more underfoot on the threshing floor than one would need to feed to an entire family for one year. . . Do not think dear parents that I am trying to bluff you. I can say in all truth: Back home I often had to beg for my bread, but here I am making a good living. One would be a fool not to be satisfied…(Height 1973, 50)

The German immigrants continued to prosper in Russia for the vast majority of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. By 1870 there were approximately 450,000 Germans in Russia, generally thriving. Nonetheless, The German people in Russia would soon face difficulty as their distinctive rights slowly dissolved.\textsuperscript{13} The beginning of this process began in 1864 when the Zemstvo system was set up in Russia. This system reformed the organization of local government in Russia. Unfortunately, it also revoked the German’s rights to self-government initially promised to them in the previous manifestos.\textsuperscript{14}

The next curtailment in privileges was in 1874 when Russia revoked the German’s exemption from military service. This had originally been one of the key

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\textsuperscript{12} Height, Homesteaders, 6.
\textsuperscript{13} Adam Giesinger, From Catherine to Khrushchev: the story of Russia's Germans (Winnipeg: A. Giesinger, 1974), 372.
\textsuperscript{14} Everett C. Albers and D. Jerome Tweton, ed., The Way It Was: The North Dakota Frontier Experience, Book Four Germans from Russia Settlers (Fessenden, N.D.: 2002), iii.
factors in their move from Germany to Russia. Next, in 1880, there was an educational mandate that required Russian language instruction in all schools. The Russian government only allowed German language use for religious teaching. These immigrants cherished the German language; therefore, having Russian language education forced upon their children was a hard blow. The loss of these rights and increasing land shortages combined to create in many Germans a desire to leave Russia.15

From Russia to North Dakota

Since their good fortune in South Russia was beginning to wane many groups of German-Russians, including the Black Sea Germans, began to look for better opportunities. From 1870 to the beginning of WWI, there would be a large migration of Germans from Russia to North America, South America, and Europe. However, the vast majority of these immigrants would look to the United States for their new life. Of the Black Sea Germans who chose to come to the United States, most would select the Northern part of the Dakota Territory for their new home.16

The first large immigration of Black Sea Germans from Russia to the Dakota Territory occurred in 1873. Prior to this migration Johannes Ludwig Bette, a German-Russian who had moved to the United States, returned to Russia for a visit. While in Russia, he talked with many Germans about his success in America. During his visit, Bette created such a stir that Russian officials attempted to arrest him; however, he escaped capture and returned to America. The following spring several families from the Black Sea region followed Bette to his home in Ohio.17

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In Ohio the group could not find enough farmland. Since they were intent on finding large tracts of land where they could setup their new community, they sent out scouts to find open territory. The scouts traveled much of the Midwest but eventually decided that the group should settle in Yankton, Dakota Territory (later Yankton, South Dakota).18

Thanks to letters sent back to Russia discussing life in the American west, many other Black Sea German families in Russia decided to leave and move to the Dakotas. They first settled the Yankton area and then began to settle the region that would become North Dakota. According to the United States Census, by 1920 there were 303,532 German-Russians in the United States and approximately 68,000 in North Dakota alone.19

Life in North Dakota

Many Black Sea Germans chose to settle in North Dakota for several reasons. First, and most importantly, there was an ample supply of open land. In the initial years of immigration, many Black Sea Germans were able to homestead 160 acres as long as they were 21 years old, a citizen (or planning to file for citizenship), made improvements on the land, and paid a small filing fee.20

Secondly, the Dakota prairie was very similar to the Russian steppe. On the plains, German-Russians were able to continue to grow wheat just as they had in South Russia. The German-Russian population on the Dakotas changed the prairie into a

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18 David Levinson and Melvin Ember, ed., “Germans from Russia,” in American Immigrant Cultures.
productive agricultural area. Many described Eureka, South Dakota, an early German-Russian settlement, as “the wheat capitol of the world”\textsuperscript{21}

A third reason that this group came to North Dakota was the simple fact that many other German-Russians were living there already. Since most Germans from Russian had a desire to maintain their unique culture and language, they preferred to settle in areas with other German-Russians.\textsuperscript{22}

Although North Dakota lured many German-Russians to its prairies, the immigrants did not have an easy transition into their new life. The North Dakota landscape could be harsh and unforgiving. The new immigrants arrived unprepared for long cold winters and the treeless expanse. Personal accounts from German-Russian’s not only portrayed how much they disliked the climate, but also the thousands of rocks in their fields. It took long days and physical endurance to clear rocks from acres of prairie.\textsuperscript{23}

Although this was difficult work, many immigrants could find the humor in it. Large rocks had been scarce on the Russian steppe; but a good “kraut stone” keep the lid on the sauerkraut kettle. This stone was so important that many families brought their rock from Russia all the way to North Dakota. John Henne, a German-Russian who traveled immigrated to North Dakota as child, explained that his mother said, “if she had only known North Dakota had rocks, she would have packed something better to bring to the United States of America.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21} William C. Sherman and Playford V. Thorson, ed., Plains Folk, 132.
\textsuperscript{22} William C. Sherman and Playford V. Thorson, ed., Plains Folk, 133.
\textsuperscript{23} William C. Sherman and Playford V. Thorson, ed., Plains Folk, 138.
An additional hardship on the plains was the laws behind homesteading. Immigrants could not live as close to each other as they had in Russia. In Russia, families all lived in a village together and men went outside of the village to cultivate their crops. In North Dakota, families were required to live on their homestead, not in villages. For many Black Sea Germans the separation from a community was difficult.25

The loneliness of this separation was evident in an interview with Sister Reinhart Hecker. When asked if her mother missed Russia, Sister Hecker replied, “Oh, she cried all the time. I thought that's why my dad would take her and go out visiting and the kids would be staying alone…I often think how terrible it is to go to a country when you don't know the language”.26

Even with these difficulties, very few German-Russians ever decided to leave North Dakota and return to Russia. Most would find prosperity in the United States and although they may have missed the Russian steppe, they would never return to it. Black Sea Germans would instead start farms and raise their families in North Dakota. In the initial years, they formed German-Russian communities, maintained their language, and passed on their culture to their children. Over the years, the importance of maintaining tradition continued; however, some aspects of American society were absorbed into their German-Russian culture.

Three elements of German-Russian societies that embody this balance between maintaining tradition but also show American influence on German-Russian society are German-Russian education, language, and religion. Each of these elements represent an

important part of German-Russian culture in North Dakota and all have been the topic of study for many historians. However, historians have repeatedly made wide-ranging statements about German-Russians in relation to these areas of their culture.

By examining oral history interviews of the children of German-Russian immigrants, one can see that often times the assumptions made by historians are far too broad while in other instances current scholarship is in alignment with oral histories. The remembered past of oral history interviews can bring insight into the downfalls of current scholarship in this field and explain the struggle between maintaining tradition and becoming an American.

**Religion**

Historians who studied German-Russian immigrant communities often spoke of the immense impact religion had on German-Russian people. George Rath said that “by their nature” German-Russians were very religious.27 Shirley Fischer Arends also maintains that German-Russians held religion in high regard.28 The interviews done by North Dakota State University also maintained these ideas.

Overall, most historians agreed that German-Russians not only practiced their religion on Sunday but that God and the church were important parts of everyday life. Moreover, the church was not just the center for religious instruction but also the main mechanism for social interaction in a German-Russian community.29 These descriptions of the German-Russian immigrant population in North Dakota were in direct agreement with the oral history interviews.

29 Sherman and Thorson, *Plains Folk*, 140.
When reading oral history interviews it is obvious to see that religion was at the center of most German-Russian families whether these families were Catholic or Evangelical Christians. Through reading these interviews, it is easy to see German-Russian dedication to religion, the importance of Sundays, and religious education. However, one area in which the secondary literature and the oral interviews did not totally agree was in the opinions on social interaction between religious groups. Nonetheless, through examining each of these areas one can learn how religion impacted the lives of German-Russians.

**Dedication to Religion**

German-Russian families viewed religion and God as a central part of their life in Russia and in the United States. A common inference by historians is that German-Russian religious convictions gained strength because of their difficult lives on the Great Plains.\(^\text{30}\) Whatever their reason for dependence on religion, German-Russians in North Dakota were on the whole devout Christians and they aimed to mold their children into good Christians also.

Richard Haring, a German-Russian born to immigrant parents in 1909, described religion as “…a part of life. You went to church and participated and that was part of it”. His view of religion as an integral, unquestioned part of life appeared similar to other German-Russians interviewed.\(^\text{31}\) Ralph Dressler, born in 1918 in Raleigh, N.D., explained how his family practiced religion:

“we had dinner and you would always have to say your prayer. You never went to eat dinner without prayers and after you were done too. Well, the first

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\(^{30}\) Sherman and Thorson, *Plains Folk*, 140.
thing then, you had to go on the Bible and you would always have to learn a verse before you could go to bed. Well, we couldn’t go to bed until after mother came out and we had to read it to them until we knew it. If we didn’t know it, we had to stay there again another half hour.”(Ralph Dressler Interview)

He later explained that he had to do all of this before homework. These examples show that religion truly was part of everyday life and it was more important than other school work.32

Teaching children the importance of being a good Christian was also a goal of German-Russian parents and grandparents. Additionally, German-Russian children often looked to their parents or grandparents as role models in religion. When describing their parent’s attitude toward religion most interviewees said their parents were good Christians. Throughout the interviews there were many stories of parents and grandparents reading the bible to children and teaching them to pray.

Many German-Russian children had parents who were very involved in the church. Some spoke of fathers who helped build the church, served as deacons, or as trustees. They also had mothers who cooked for church dinners and enforced prayer in the home. With daily examples in their family German-Russian children grew up with a strong adherence to religion.

Andrew Johs, born in 1909 in Logan Co. N.D., shared a story about his Grandparents relationship to religion and how their dedication affected him. He said:

“They went to church pretty near every day with the buggy. And I and my sister Helen, one had to go along every day. And when they start driving, they prayed the Rosary. That’s where I learned to pray the Rosary. Going down and going back and that was 5 miles one way.” (Andrew Johs Interview)

This short story that Mr. Johs shared portrayed just how far some German-Russians would go to worship their God.

Through all of the interviews it seemed that there was a profound respect for religion in most German-Russian homes. This respect was deeply instilled in the hearts of parents and children alike. However, religion for German-Russians was more than church and prayer. It permeated many aspects of their lives.

**The Importance of Sundays**

One area of life that was greatly impacted by German-Russian religious dedication was leisure time. Sunday was the one day during the week that farm work was put aside and relaxation was encouraged. Sundays were a time for religious worship, friends, and fun.

For German-Russian families in North Dakota, Sundays began with church. There were few reasons one could skip church on the Sabbath. However, one possible reason that some German-Russian families could not go to church weekly was that they lived to far away. Kathryn O’Neill, a German-Russian born in Leola S.D., explained that her family was Lutheran but “never got to go to church because [they] lived so far from there except on Christmas”. This was rare exception because most families would go to church weekly even if the church was miles away.

Kathryn Ternes, born in 1920 in St. Anthony N.D., explained that one of the only times she remembered people skipping church was during the 1918 flu epidemic. She explained, “...the flu was terrible. In 1918 so many people died.” She said that most

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people did not go to church because “people were afraid of getting the flu”\textsuperscript{34}. During this period, the flu was a real threat as approximately 600,000 people died during the epidemic. This shows that it took a large barrier to stop many German-Russians from going to church on Sunday.\textsuperscript{35}

When people were able to go to church the day was filled with religious instruction and social interaction. Sister Magdalen Schaan, who grew up in Rugby, N.D., discussed what Sunday’s were like for her growing up. She said “We had two sermons every Sunday” and church stated at “8 o’clock or 9 o’clock and we couldn’t eat before communion. Well, to get home it would be so late so [we] took lunch along… We were in the church until almost 2 o’clock every Sunday”.\textsuperscript{36}

After church was finished, and because religious rules forbid farm work on the Sabbath, German-Russians families got together for a little relaxation. Herbert Huber, who was born in Ashley N.D. in 1927, shared that “on Sunday, even in the middle of harvest, we were either at an uncle and aunts place or they were at our place.” Even with loads of work to do this day was for family, friends, and God. Often large meals were cooked, children had time to play outside, and adults played cards and talked.

Overall, the church and religion dictated when social interaction would take place. Sundays were the days that family and friends were able to get together and set aside farm work.


Religious Education

Since religious piety was valued in most German-Russian communities, parents often encouraged or required their children to get religious education. In both Evangelical and Catholic communities, children spent either part of their summer vacation or a few years getting religious instruction. These schools taught children the foundations of their religion and often taught children how to read and write in the German language.

Theresa Kuntz Bachmeier, who grew up in Blumenfeld, North Dakota, went to a Catholic religious school. She said her siblings and herself: “had to stay home from school and had to go to the religious school, in April it started. We always had two months of religious school.” She later explained that they learned “prayers and went to Holy Communion and everything, confirmation and everything.”

Alma Herman, who was born near Kulm N.D, had a similar experience growing up. When she was asked about religious school she said, “We [she and her siblings] were confirmed. We had to board in town because the roads weren’t suitable and we didn’t have transportation. So we would board and room in town for three weeks. In that time, we memorized all the special passages of the Bible, we learned to write in German, and we knew all the books of the Bible.

Alma’s experience is a good example of how religious schools combined religion and the German language.


The experiences of German-Russian children show that religious education was something most children had. Many went to school for a few weeks to learn prayers, German, and to get confirmed. Although not all children were sent to religious schools many were. Those who were not often received a basic religious education from their parents. In either case, this education was used to teach children the importance of prayer, the bible, and instill in them a deep reverence for God.

This education appeared to have worked as even today many German-Russian communities still hold a deep respect and love for their God. Msgr. Joseph Senger, who was born in Orrin, N.D., explained in his interview that German-Russians today are losing some of their old dedication to religion. However, he also says:

“As the German-Russians are being spread throughout the world, I somehow look upon them as having a special mission from God to spread the love for God, to spread the depth of their convictions wherever they live…I think there is something deep in the religious convictions that Germans from Russia have that they can, as it were, share with other peoples.” (Msgr. Joseph Senger Interview)

This statement shows that although German-Russians today are not living in close-knit German-Russian communities, many still hold strong religious convictions. This strength can be accredited to the fact the German-Russians held onto their religion throughout their migrations across the world.

**Catholics and Evangelical German-Russians**

Although historians and the interviews seemed to agree the Christian German-Russians had the same dedication, respected the Sabbath, and gave their children religious education, they did disagree in one area. Historians have explained that Catholic and Evangelical German-Russian groups were “intensely religious people and
clannish in their loyalty to the church of their choice.” They created settlements in North Dakota completely apart from each other and did not interact with each other.39

However, through reading oral interviews it becomes apparent that even though German-Russian immigrants may have aimed to create entirely Evangelical or entirely Catholic communities this was not always the case. Additionally, although German-Russians often clustered with individuals who shared their same religious backgrounds there were exceptions to this rule. These exceptions were seen in several oral interviews, which showed that this idea was far too broad.

In many cases, German-Russians did settle in areas of North Dakota which had large numbers of people already there who practiced their same religion. An example of this pattern did appear in McIntosh County, which was predominantly Evangelical while Emmons County was mainly Catholic.40 However, in most of the interviews it appeared that there was more than one religious denomination found in each community. Due to this situation, the interesting point that came up in interviews was how the different denominations dealt with each other.

When discussing his family’s religious affiliation Walt Zimmerman, a German-Russian born in 1924, stated, “We were Baptist. We were strictly Baptist.” Later he added, “You know, it used to be that the Protestants and the Catholics they just didn’t inter-mix. You just didn’t!! They wouldn’t allow it.” From these statements, it can be assume that in his community of Lehr N. D., there were different denominations in the

39 Sallet, Russian-German Settlements, 7.
40 Sherman and Thorson, Plains Folk, 135-136.
community; but, these different groups did not socialize together. This example seems to agree with the ideas set forth my historians.41

However, other interviewees had the opposite experience growing up. Paul Welder explained that the community around his family’s farm included Baptists, Reformed, Congregational, Lutherans, and Seventh Day Adventists. He went on to say:

“We didn’t know there was a difference between Catholics and Protestants. No way. My dad did carpenter work for all of them; and we were neighbors; and we were together. We played ball on Sundays in the summer, and the wintertime we went together, and we had popcorn and apples.” (Welder Interview)

Although there may have been defined differences between denominations in Mr. Welder’s childhood, he could not remember distinctions between the religious groups.

Richard Haring had similar opinions of relationships between denominations as he grew up. Mr. Haring explained that in his community, there were different denominations and each group lived in their own neighborhoods. Nonetheless, when asked if there was hard feelings between different denominations Mr. Haring replied, “No, during certain times of the year, for instance, harvest time or threshing time, you’d get together with quite a few of the others.” He later explained that a group of farmers from different denominations combined their savings to buy a threshing machine and equipment together. Like Paul Welder’s community, Mr. Haring’s community was diverse but there were few hard feelings between religious groups.42

With this information, it can be seen that the interviews and secondary literature did not always agree when discussing interaction between denominations. However, the

42 Richard Haring Interview.
interviews and literature were in alignment when discussing other aspects of religious life.

**Education**

Like religion, education had a huge influence on German-Russian immigrants, especially children. Throughout their time in Russia and in North Dakota, German-Russian communities were able to educate their children. However, the content and impact of education would be very different depending on the location of the German-Russian community.

**Education in Russia**

During their time in Russia, German-Russians created autonomous colonies, grew wheat and, after initial settlement was completed, established an educational system for their children. Although the German schools in Russia were by today’s standards second-rate, the majority of the German students became reasonably literate while nearly 75% of the Russian population was illiterate. These schools provided a basic education of reading, writing, and arithmetic. For the community in which they lived this was an adequate education because most children would become farmers or artisans like their parents. 43

Along with basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, these schools taught religion. Children spent their day reading from the ABC-primer, learning bible history, and reciting bible verses. German-Russians used these schools to promote their religion, whether they were Catholic or Protestant. This was important because a common

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43 Height, *Homesteaders*, 259.
religious belief was a unifying factor in nearly all German-Russian communities in Russia. Most German towns in Russia were entirely Catholic or Protestant.44

Another unifying factor promoted in the schools was the German language. In these rudimentary schools, children learned to read and write in German. Since they lived in German communities surrounded by Russian or Ukrainian speaking neighbors, the continuation of German aided in keeping their group cohesive in Russia. German-Russian schools did not teach the Russian language at all until the educational mandate of 1880. 45

**Education in North Dakota**

German-Russians also established schools for their children in North Dakota. Although in many cases, churches and barns took priority over school buildings in initial settlement. This created instances in which some German-Russian children were not able to attend a structured school at all or for some until they were in their teens. However, once communities were established the need for education was met.46

The schools built were similar to the small one-room schoolhouses that sprung up across rural America in the early 1900’s. They had one teacher instructing all grades with limited materials. In many instances in North Dakota, the students in the class had a range of backgrounds including Norwegian, Finnish, and German, to name a few. These schools taught reading, writing, and math. However, they differed from schools in Russia because English was the language used and religion was not the focus of the

44 Height, *Homesteaders*, 254.
46 Kathryn Amelia O’Neill Interview.
education. This was a significant change. It forced German-Russian families and churches to take over teaching children about religion and the German language.

German-Russian students attended these schools but not always regularly. Students often missed days of school to help at home on the farm. Furthermore, many students never attended high school let alone the eighth grade. Not until the 1950’s did North Dakota's colleges begin to see this immigrant group enter into their programs in large numbers. For much of the first half of the 20th century most German-Russians did not venture into careers aside from farming or other blue-collar work.

These facts lead many historians to assume that German-Russians as a whole did not value education, especially college education. They concluded that German-Russian parents encouraged and praised only children who chose to help on the farm and looked poorly on the ambitious children who chose to better themselves through learning.

By examining the remembered past of oral history interviews, a reader learns that these assumptions were not always true. In actuality, parental support, family income, and personal preference were the main factors contributing to the education of German-Russian youth. If these three aspects are not first examined the conclusion that an entire immigrant group did not value higher education can lead to misunderstandings.

**Parental Support**

For many children of German-Russian immigrant’s, parental support and encouragement was a key factor in how far they would pursue their education. Some children had parents that were highly educated in Russia. One German-Russian

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47 Ralph Dressler Interview.
48 Sherman, *Plains Folk*, 144.
51 Arends, *Central Dakota Germans*, 42.
descendant explained that his Grandfather on his mother’s side had been a professor in Russia. Understandably, his mother was a highly educated woman and education in general was valued in his family.52

In other families, although parents were less educated, learning was still encouraged for children. When asked in interviews if their “parents encouraged education” most responded with a “yes”. For Richard Haring it was his mother’s dying wish for her oldest son to be educated. He fulfilled this wish by completing a master’s degree in school administration. Mr. Haring was not alone in his desire to go to college several other German-Russian children were able to attend high school and college with the support of their parents.53

The fact that some families allowed for the area teacher to board in their home shows further support from parents. Although this could have been done out of simple kindness to the teacher, most German-Russians say they had a teacher on board to help the children learn English. Since the school system in North Dakota was conducted in English, learning the new language was key to a child’s education.

When discussing this topic Walt Zimmerman, who was born on the family farmstead in 1924, states, “We always had the teacher staying with us. Not that they [the teachers] stayed there [with us] helped me any.”54 At the age of 86 Alma Herman recalled that her family also had a teacher on board when she was a child. She said that one night when her siblings and she were eavesdropping on their parent’s conversation, she heard her dad say that he knew how to get his kids to learn English. He said, “We’ll have the teacher board here and he can teach them.” Her mother replied, “Not for very

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52 Ralph Dressler Interview.
53 Richard Haring Interview.
54 Walt Zimmerman Interview.
long. I haven’t any room for the kids. I can’t have anybody [else].” This was true since Alma had 11 siblings. However, a teacher came and Alma noted, “he was there for long enough so that my oldest sister, who was a very smart kid, soon learned the English language and she taught all the rest of them, right down the line.”

With parental support, not only would many German-Russian children complete eighth grade but also many would go on to high school and some to college. Although education appeared to be unappreciated by German-Russians as a whole, parental support was one factor that could help a child overcome this notion.

**Family Income**

Probably the most significant factor in whether or not a child of German-Russian immigrant parents would become educated was the economic status of the family. This above all else appeared to be the feature that could promote or damage a child’s educational future.

During interviews, the now adult children of German Russian immigrants explained why they had to stop their education, for some, as early as the sixth grade. The most common reason for this was they had to work. In most cases, children had to leave school to help on the family farm or in some instances to find jobs outside the family. It appeared in most of the interviews that they were not bitter about stopping their education. Most explained that helping with family expenses and ending school was just what had to be done.

Eve Schatz, who was born in 1905 near Napoleon N.D., explained that her mother was often sick. Since she was the oldest girl in the family, she had to help at home. As it

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55 Alma Herman Interview.
happened, she “didn’t get too much in the English school”. However, she made sure that her own children were all able to attend college.\textsuperscript{56}

Alma Herman, also explained that she was the first in her family and township to complete the eighth grade exams. She desperately wanted to attend high school but her father told her that he could not afford to pay for high school. Additionally, he wanted her to help her mother at home. Therefore, Alma stayed home until she was eighteen and then paid for herself to go to high school. Interestingly, she was the first person in her township to graduate high school also.\textsuperscript{57}

Another situation occurred in several families in which parents did support education but still could not afford to educate all their children. In these families, some kids went to college and some ended school early to help with the farm. This was the situation in Richard Haring’s family; he attended college while his siblings did not. Paul Welder, born near Zeeland N.D., explained in a matter of fact way that he wrote his “seventh grade exams and walked home from school, that was the end.” He then goes on to say that his family was very busy on the farm so he “didn’t dare” go back to school. However, some children in his family attended high school and college. This again shows that education was dependent upon the needs at home.\textsuperscript{58}

**Personal Preference**

A third factor that is important to take note of when dealing with the educational values of German-Russians is personal preference. After the initial immigration,

\textsuperscript{57} Alma Herman Interview.  
German-Russians did not enter into higher education and this seemed to mean that the entire ethnic group did not value academics. However, it is arguable that individual’s personal preference was to farm even though they did have respect for higher education.

Anton “Tony” Metz, who was born in 1912 in Dickinson, N.D., explained that he went to school until the seventh grade and then helped with his family’s farm. When asked about school he said he did not learn much and felt he forgot most of the information he learned in school. Interestingly, when asked about farming he goes on and on about breaking horses and working the field. He said, “I enjoyed farm work. I could milk cows. We had pigs and everything. I always used to run the binder and the header. I enjoyed the horses.” It appears that Mr. Metz, like several other German-Russians interviewed, found farm life pleasurable and satisfying work. One could reason that many German-Russians would have chosen to farm even if they had the opportunity to continue their education.59

So, through oral history interviews it can be seen that the assumptions made by historians stating that German-Russians did not value education are far too simplistic. Several extenuating factors contributed to whether or not German-Russian children would be able to pursue their education or not. Similarly, whether German-Russians would learn and use the English language is very broadly explained by historians. The examination of oral interviews can shed light on this topic and explain additional factors that effected language use in German-Russian communities.

Language

Like German-Russian views on education, historians also have made broad assumptions of German-Russian views of language. Historians describe the German-Russian people as individuals who fervently held onto their German language. This is evident when looking at their years in Russia. During that time, German-Russian communities maintained much of their culture and language while surrounded by Russian society.

When many Black Sea German-Russians came to North Dakota, they continued the effort to maintain their language. Although there were many other German groups in the United States the German-Russian dialect is much different from the Standard High German most of these groups spoke. Linguists have studied the North Dakota German dialect and explained in detail how German-Russian language differs from that of other German groups.60

Not only do North Dakota German-Russians pronounce their words differently from High German speakers but they also have some entirely different words for things. For example, the High German word for ‘walk’ is *gehen* while the German-Russian word is *lafe*.61 Furthermore, even though Germans in Russia tried to avoid the Russian language they did adopt some Russian and Ukrainian vocabulary into their language. A good example of this is that the German-Russian word for ‘tomato’ is *baklachana*, which comes from the Russian word for eggplant.62

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60 Arends, *Central Dakota Germans*, 65.
61 Arends, *Central Dakota Germans*, 71.
These examples show that the German-Russian dialect is unique. In reality, no other German group in the United States had a language that sounded the same as the German-Russian dialect. Due to this fact and their experience in Russia, North Dakota’s Germans Russians had good reason to want to maintain their unique language tradition.

Some historians have explained German-Russian’s effort to maintain their language simply by saying that German-Russians came to America and continued to refuse to use any other language aside from German. However, like the Black Sea German opinions on education, their thoughts on language had many elements. Three main factors that affected the language use of Black Sea Germans in North Dakota were English language education, family opinions, and the community. By further examining this topic, it becomes obvious that other conditions effected whether or not German–Russians immigrants and their children would learn English.

School

As previously stated, German-Russian children went to English language schools in the United States. These schools had the greatest impact on whether or not German-Russian children would become fluent in English. Since their parents had come here from Russia only speaking German and many now lived in dominantly German-Russian communities, there was sometimes very little contact with the English language. When asked if she spoke German as a child Alma Herman responded, “Oh, none of us knew English… we couldn’t talk any English at all. Because the folks couldn’t either…” Mrs. Herman also stated that her older sister was the first to go to school and learn English. In her family and many others, it was not until children began to attend public schools that the English language entered German-Russian homes.

63 Alma Herman Interview.
In an interview, Msgr. Joseph Senger explained both the positives and some negative features of the English language school:

“It was very evident when we started school because we could probably speak some words of English, but we normally and automatically spoke German. Of course in school we had to speak English. If we spoke German we were punished, had to write or stay after school. When we were out playing ball we would shout in German, but when we went into the school we would have to speak English. Thank God that the teachers had patience with us and taught us English.” 64

In this brief statement, Msgr. Senger shows three main features of the English language schools from the view of German-Russian children. The first detail that is evident in this statement is that when entering school very few German-Russian children knew English. This appeared to be a common situation for many German-Russians. Sister Magdalen Schaan explains that she would have gone to school with no English but her siblings helped her. When she was asked, “So as a child, you didn’t speak English?” she replied “No. But I knew English when I started school because my brothers were older than I. There were 5 older brothers that went to school and they talked English when they came home. So I learned from my brothers.” Her situation was similar to other children. However, many children without siblings or those who were the oldest child went to school sometimes with no English at all. 65

A second item of importance in Senger’s statement is that German was not allowed in the school and if it was used it was punished. Sister Schaan also discussed this saying that at her school they could not even speak German at recess. She said, “we

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65 Magdalen Schaan Interview.
tried, but we were not allowed to. We had to speak English.” If her teacher did hear
them speaking German “she was pretty disgusted.”

Sometimes this suppression of German at school and having parents who only
spoke German at home was difficult for students. When Reuben Dammel, a German-
Russian born in 1917, discussed this he said, “When we went to school, then we didn’t
dare talk German anymore. But at home we had to talk German. We didn’t dare talk
English.”

This double standard of having English enforced at school and German used at
home seemed common. However, as seen in Senger’s statement, many German-Russian
children are now thankful for those schools for their effort in teaching them the English
language. Surprisingly this sentiment appeared in other interviews as well. For example,
Fern Renner Welk, the wife of the famous bandleader Lawrence Welk, said that she and
her siblings all learned English in school. For that reason she said “I’m against bilingual
education…I feel you should learn the language of the country and establish yourself in
that.” Throughout the interviews, it seemed evident that there was a belief that learning
English was a necessity and a privilege.

This belief seemed true in the children’s minds and in the minds of their parents.
Again, German-Russian immigrants strived to preserve their culture and language
however, most knew the English language would be beneficial for their children. The fact

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66 Magdalen Schaan Interview.
67 Rueben Dammel, “Interview with Reuben Dammel,” interview by Brother Placid Gross,
Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, available from http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/grhc/history_
68 Fern Renner Welk, Interview with Fern Renner Welk,” interview by Michael M. Miller,
Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, available from http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/grhc/history_
that several interviewees had teachers boarding in their home as children or knew other families who had teachers living in their homes reinforces this idea.

**Family Attitude on Language**

In most German-Russian families, the language of the home was German. Although most children and several adult German-Russians did learn English, in family settings German dominated conversations. However, opinions of parents appear to have effected how well the children of German-Russian immigrants learned English.

In many oral history interviews, interviewees discussed their parent’s opinions of the English language. Walt Zimmerman explained that his family spoke German in the home but still encouraged him to learn English. When his father was asked about speaking English Walt explained that his dad said, “They lived in America and that’s the way they were going to talk.” The Zimmerman family even had a teacher living in their home for a time to help them learn English. 69

Quite the opposite was the family of Sister Reinhardt Hecker, who was born in München Russia in 1901. Her family came to North Dakota in 1913 and her mother learned English, but her father refused to learn. Although her father had learned some Russian, he said English was “the worst language he ever heard” and for the remainder of his life, he only spoke German. 70

These two contrasting opinions of the German language appeared throughout Black Sea German families. If parents learned English themselves, often their children were also encouraged to learn the new language. In other families, the German language was considered almost sacred so English was discouraged in the home.

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69 Walt Zimmerman interview.
70 Sister Reinhardt Hecker Interview.
In a way, German-Russian parents were playing a balancing act with their children. Many wanted to encourage their children to assimilate into American culture to an extent because they knew it would help them in the future. On the other hand, they wanted their children to remember their culture and traditions. Richard Haring reiterated this when discussing Black Sea Germans. He explained that as a whole Black Sea Germans “were not opposed to the American way of life, speaking the American language, and accepting the American economic situation. But they also wanted to maintain their German language, the German culture-their ways.”

Community

A third factor that affected whether or not German-Russian immigrants would learn the English language was the community in which they lived. When Black Sea Germans came to North Dakota many settled in communities populated mainly by other German-Russians. This allowed them to maintain their unique culture in a new country. Additionally, living in these communities helped German-Russians maintain their language possibly better than German-Russians who settled in communities that were more diverse.

Many interviewees explained that as children their communities were mostly German-Russian. Growing up in Zeeland N.D., Paul Welder remembers that everyone spoke German in the community. Helmuth Huber, a German-Russian born in Ashley N.D. in 1927, admitted that his community contained other ethnic groups but estimated it

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71 Richard Haring Interview.
72 Paul Welder Interview.
was 95% German-Russian. In communities such as these, learning English was not essential. Individuals could complete business transactions and social obligations without a word of English.

It appeared that other communities were not so homogenous. Sister Reinhart Hecker discussed her family’s dilemma with language. She said that neither of her parents knew English when their family first arrived in North Dakota, but the community they lived in was not all German-Russian. She explained a situation when her mother needed to buy a saw from town, however, her mother didn’t know the English word for “saw”. So, her mom asked her to take a catalog picture of the item needed and show it to their non-German neighbors. The neighbors then told her the English word for the item. Other interviewees explained similar guessing games they had to play in order to learn English while living in English speaking communities.

These examples explain that although German-Russians tried to maintain their language the community in which they lived was a factor. If the community was entirely German, the English language was not necessary for daily life. However, if the community was more diverse learning English was encouraged.

It is easy to see in the statements from these oral interviews that the broad statement that German-Russian immigrants aimed to maintain their German language and avoided learning English was not always true. Public education, parents opinions, and the community all had effects on English language acquisition. For many children of

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74 Sister Reinhardt Hecker Interview.
German-Russian immigrants even if their family and community shunned the English language they would learn it fluently through public education.

**Conclusion**

Through this analysis, it can be seen that secondary literature does not always represent the German-Russian immigrant group in the correct light. Since historians have tried to write books that discussed many characteristic of German-Russian society, they were forced to be very broad in their explanations. Historians had to be broad in their writing in order to be able to encompass all of German-Russian society in the United States.

Due to the shortcomings of the current scholarship, this paper has tried to look at three areas of German-Russian society; religion, education, and language, and aimed to look at these areas more precisely. With this further research, it is obvious that trying to explain the culture of an entire ethnic group with broad assumptions can provide some understanding of the group, but cannot provide the entire story. Through this paper it is clear that German-Russian views on religion, education, and language were dependent upon many different factors and varied greatly from family to family.
Appendix 1: Maps of Russia and North Dakota

Fig. 1. The region inside the black box is the approximate area of the Black Sea German-Russian settlements in South Russia. Original map reprinted from AboutRomainia.com, Black Sea and Surroundings, available at http://www.aboutromania.com/maps72.html.
Fig. 2. Map of North Dakota State showing all counties. Reprinted from University of Texas at Austin, University of Texas Libraries, available online at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/states/north_dakota.gif.
## Appendix 2: Tables

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Birth Date</th>
<th>City born</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pius L. Bosch</td>
<td>Nov. 19, 1900</td>
<td>Kandel, Ukraine</td>
<td>Ramsey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grew up in Devils Lake,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reuben Dammel</td>
<td>April 18, 1917</td>
<td>Medina</td>
<td>Stutsman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph Dressler</td>
<td>June 3, 1918</td>
<td>Raleigh</td>
<td>Grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn Ehli Ternes</td>
<td>Aug. 18, 1920</td>
<td>St. Anthony</td>
<td>Morton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Haring</td>
<td>June 23, 1909</td>
<td>near Glen Ullin</td>
<td>Grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma Herman</td>
<td>April 20, 1908</td>
<td>Pomona View Township</td>
<td>La Moure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helmuth Herbert Huber</td>
<td>Dec. 18, 1927</td>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>McIntosh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Johns</td>
<td>Dec. 10, 1909</td>
<td>Shell Butte Township</td>
<td>Logan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theresa Kuntz Bachmeier</td>
<td>April 10, 1909</td>
<td>Blumenfeld</td>
<td>McHenry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anton “Tony” Metz</td>
<td>Dec. 19, 1912</td>
<td>Near New Hradec</td>
<td>Dunn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister Joan Nuss</td>
<td>Nov. 22, 1917</td>
<td>Dickenson</td>
<td>Stark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn Amelia O’Neill</td>
<td>Aug. 19, 1905</td>
<td>Leola</td>
<td>McPherson S.D. *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>München, Russia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister Reinhardt Hecker</td>
<td>March 14, 1901</td>
<td>At age 13 lived in Belfield</td>
<td>Stark</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fern Renner Welk</td>
<td>Aug 26, 1903</td>
<td>Mandan</td>
<td>Morton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister Magdalen Schaan</td>
<td>April 16, 1919</td>
<td>Rugby</td>
<td>Pierce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva Schatz</td>
<td>Oct. 3, 1905</td>
<td>Napoleon</td>
<td>Logan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Klößitz, Russia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>At age 7 lived in Gackle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matilda Schlenker Dockter</td>
<td>July 31, 1895</td>
<td>and Kulm</td>
<td>Logan and La Moure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Msgr. Joseph Senger</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Orrin</td>
<td>Pierce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul P. Welder</td>
<td>Not in interview</td>
<td>Zeeland</td>
<td>McIntosh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walt Zimmerman</td>
<td>Oct 4, 1924</td>
<td>Lehr</td>
<td>McIntosh</td>
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*McPherson Co. S.D. is located directly below McIntosh Co. N.D.*
TABLE 2
GERMAN-RUSSIANS OF THE FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION IN THE
UNITED STATES, CENSUS 1920

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>First and Second Generation</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>First and Second Generation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>7,666</td>
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<td>Alaska</td>
<td>Not a state in 1920</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>22,421</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>California</td>
<td>11,529</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>3,568</td>
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<td>Colorado</td>
<td>21,067</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>4,308</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>8,560</td>
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<td>Delaware</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>Florida</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>69,985</td>
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<td>Georgia</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>5,962</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>Not a state in 1920</td>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>10,067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>2,574</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>7,031</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>8,755</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>4,683</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>1,646</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>31,512</td>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>30,937</td>
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<td>Kentucky</td>
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<td>Tennessee</td>
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<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>99</td>
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<td>2,301</td>
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<td>Maine</td>
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<td>606</td>
<td>Vermont</td>
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<td>Massachusetts</td>
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<td>Michigan</td>
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<td>Minnesota</td>
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<td>Missouri</td>
<td>1,473</td>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>1,939</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This information was compiled by Dr. Richard Sallet. Sallet used the state censuses from 1920 and identified German-Russians as all Foreign-born White and total foreign white stock from Russian of German mother tongue. Information for this table is from Richard Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1874), 110-111.
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A book that discusses all of German history. Not a lot of detail but gives a good overview.


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