

A History Overlooked by Academic Historians: Germans from Russia on the Northern Plains

A Review Essay by Jessica Clark

Arends, Shirley Fischer. *The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1989.

Diede, Pauline Neher. *Homesteading on the Knife River Prairies*. Edited by Elizabeth Hampsten. Bismarck: Germans from Russia Heritage Society, 1983.

Luebke, Frederick C. "Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains." *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (1977): 405-430.

Rath, George. *The Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas*. Freeman: Pine Hill Press, 1977.

Sallet, Richard. *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*. Translated by LaVern Rippley and Armand Bauer. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974.

Sherman, William C., and Playford V. Thorson. *Plains Folk: North Dakota's Ethnic History*. North Dakota Centennial Heritage Series. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1988.

Considering that Germans from Russia are a minority group in a sparsely populated region, there is an abundance of historical literature available. German-Russians, however, have primarily researched themselves, writing fascinating, self-affirming accounts of their histories. Only a few academic historians or detached scholars, ones not themselves of German-Russian heritage, have published historical works addressing this ethnic group. Both perspectives, insider and outsider, are important to the historical understanding of Germans from Russia, as neither is flawless. German-Russians continue to document their history for their memory group. People should not assume these accounts lack historical value, since they each add a valuable and new perspective to the history of Germans from Russia on the Northern Plains. Indeed, the insights of insiders are essential. Nevertheless, outsiders can provide more objective

approaches to the group's history.¹ Detached scholars sometimes reveal experiences that insiders may not. Furthermore, outsiders tend to provide explanations that are more detailed.² Mostly, outsiders add new perspectives, not necessarily better ones, but nonetheless new ones.³ The historiography of Germans from Russia on the Northern Plains needs such new perspectives from detached academic historians.

Originally published in 1931, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*, by Richard Sallet, is an insider's perspective on the history of "Russian-Germans." The work was Sallet's 1930 doctoral dissertation from the University of Königsberg. He earned a degree in geography, history, and law.⁴ In 1974 two scholars, LaVern Rippley and Armand Bauer, published an English translation of Sallet's work. They also added some editorial comments in their distinctive footnotes, introduction, and appendices.⁵ Although Sallet, Rippley, and Bauer all had academic backgrounds, they also had close ties to the German-Russian community. Thus, their work does not provide a detached academic perspective of German-Russian history.

As part of the 1974 edition Rippley wrote a short, yet in-depth introduction to Sallet's work, which provided the much-needed historical context. This German-language professor begins his introduction with Germans leaving their fatherland for Russia during the late 1700s. After a brief explanation of their experiences in Russia, Rippley describes the German-Russian

¹ Akemi Kikumura, "Family Histories: A Collaborative Venture," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2004), 140-1.

² Sherna Gluck, "What's so Special about Women?: Women's Oral History," in *Oral History: An Anthology*, eds. David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (New York: AltaMira Press, 1996), 220-1.

³ Gary U. Okihiro, "Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History," in *Oral History: An Anthology*, eds. David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (New York: AltaMira Press, 1996), 200-1.

⁴ Richard Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*, trans. by LaVern Rippley and Armand Bauer (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974), 196.

⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.

migration to the United States. At this point Rippley's introduction contradicts Sallet's closing argument. Rippley argues, "Russian-Germans were slow to assimilate into the amorphous, nondescript American mainstream."⁶ Sallet contends the Russian-Germans were losing their distinct culture as they adapted to the American way of life.⁷ This inconsistency between the translators, editors, and original author creates a disjointed historical account.⁸

Furthermore, Rippley's introduction fails to explain Sallet's use of the term, "Russian-German." Evidently, Sallet prefers "Russian-German" to "German-Russian." In his brief preface he notes that Russian-Germans "are people of German origin whose ancestors ... moved from Germany to Russia and who, then ... emigrated to the United States."⁹ Thus they are Russian-Germans. Sallet's work has received positive reviews for its detailed background information.¹⁰ His work focuses on the geographical distribution of Russian-Germans throughout the United States. He does address their customs and religion, albeit minimally. Members of this memory group are more likely to use his work to trace their family origins than to understand their history.

Three years following the publication of Sallet's *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*, George Rath published *The Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas*. Rath was of German-Russian heritage, as well as a scholar. He grew up in Russia and eventually moved to Germany, where he earned a degree in theology. In 1922 Rath immigrated to the United States

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁸ James C. Juhnke, review of *Russia-German Settlements in the United States*, by Richard Sallet, *The Journal of American History* 62 (December 1975): 718.

⁹ Sallet, 17.

¹⁰ George J. Prpic, review of *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*, by Richard Sallet, *American Historical Review* 82 (April 1977): 448-449.

and worked as a minister for a number of years, serving many German-Russian communities. While preaching throughout the Midwest, Rath earned a bachelors of arts, a master of arts, and a doctorate in modern languages.¹¹ After the tragic death of his son, Rath felt obligated to publish this overview of the German-Russian migration throughout the Dakotas.¹²

The Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas begins with a limited description of Germans migrating to Russia. Instead of describing their life experiences, Rath catalogs the creation of Russian villages and their churches.¹³ Before turning to the immigration of German-Russians to the United States, Rath also provides a sketchy description of German-Russian culture. He points out their unwavering religious devotion, whether it was Evangelical or Catholic. He also notes their resilient nature, as they held onto many German traditions.¹⁴

Once Rath begins explaining the core of his research it quickly becomes apparent that he is not writing for the sake of historical analysis. Instead, Rath focuses on the settlement patterns throughout North and South Dakota. This trained theologian also points out a number of Protestant churches within each German-Russian town. Comparable to Sallet's work, Rath writes from a geographical standpoint. The work is nothing more than a population study. It appears that Rath wrote the book to help people within his memory group trace their family roots, not their cultural history.

The same year Rath's book was published, in 1977, the *Western Historical Quarterly* published an article by Frederick C. Luebke. "Ethnic Group Settlements on the Great Plains"

¹¹ George Rath, *The Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas* (Freeman: Pine Hill Press, 1977), 436.

¹² Edna Boardman, review of *The Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas*, by George Rath, http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/grhc/info/book_reviews/rath_review.html.

¹³ Rath, 1-21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22-29.

provides a refreshing analysis of German-Russian history. Luebke, a professor of history from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, was of German, not German-Russian, heritage, and so he was able to provide something of an outsider's perspective. Whether his viewpoint was that of an insider or an outsider, he did provide a glimpse into the social and cultural history of Germans from Russia. This work, however, examines a much larger picture—European immigration.¹⁵

According to Luebke, “the importance of foreign-born immigrants and their children for the settlement of the Great Plains has been largely overlooked by historians of the frontier and the trans-Mississippi West.”¹⁶ He insists that academic historians have published an enormous amount of literature on Native Americans, yet they have failed to research European immigrants. He believes that most historians assume these immigrants constitute a homogeneous group. Luebke uses Walter Prescott Webb as an example, stating that Webb scarcely mentions “ethnic groups of European origin” throughout his regional histories.¹⁷ He finds this especially disturbing because past censuses have shown that European immigrants constitute a large portion of the Great Plains' population.¹⁸

Owing largely to his German background, Luebke provides an in-depth historical explanation for the German migrations. He does briefly touch upon the history of the French, Spanish, Irish, English, and many other European immigrants. Yet, with the concentration of German-Russians in the Great Plains region, Luebke centered his research on their experiences. He explains the division of Germans by acknowledging Germany's history as heterogeneous

¹⁵ Frederick C. Luebke, “Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (1977): 405.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

provinces. Comparable to most German-Russians, Luebke describes this ethnic group as “unusually thrifty, hard-working, and persistent.”¹⁹ Unlike Sallet and Rath’s books, Luebke explores less of the geographical settlement patterns and more of their cultural traditions. Moreover, he explores the methods of adaptation and assimilation. Luebke concludes that German-Russian communities were able to maintain their cultural traditions because they were accustomed to preserving their culture in a foreign land.²⁰

Six years following the publications of Luebke’s article and Rath’s book, the Germans from Russia Heritage Society in Bismarck, North Dakota, published Pauline Neher Diede’s memoir. *Homesteading on the Knife River Prairies* is a short, but intriguing read. William C. Sherman, a sociologist, wrote an enticing introduction to Diede’s memoir. Sherman is of English, Irish, and German background; thus he adds an outsider’s perspective to an insider’s account.²¹ According to him, the lack of information regarding German-Russian history is a direct result of their settlement patterns. Sherman notes that most Germans from Russia settled in the “Great Plains’ most rural regions.” These people were “hard-workers” in small towns and “simple farms.”²² Furthermore, they were preoccupied with their survival in a foreign land, and did not have time to reflect on their lives.

Diede’s account is the story of her immigrant parents. As a young girl, Diede wanted to record her family’s history in order to document their story. In 1983 Diede finally fulfilled one of her childhood aspirations by publishing this work. Untrained in scholarship, Diede did not

¹⁹ Ibid., 414.

²⁰ Ibid., 427.

²¹ William C. Sherman and Playford V. Thorson, *Plains Folk: North Dakota’s Ethnic History* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1988), 457.

²² Pauline Neher Diede, *Homesteading on the Knife River Prairies*, ed. by Elizabeth Hampsten (Bismarck: Germans from Russia Heritage Society, 1983), 1.

attempt to write an objective historical account. Rather, she simply wanted to document her family's trials and tribulations as German-Russians in the Great Plains region. She began her research by interviewing her father and uncle. In the forward, Diede reflects on her research process, noting that it was both alarming and enlightening. She not only learned of the sufferings her family experienced when they first arrived in Ashley, North Dakota, but she also discovered a number of interesting family secrets. For instance, she learned that the marriages of both her parents and her aunt and uncle had been arranged back in Russia.²³ This work demonstrates the importance of an insider telling the memory group's history.

In 1988, five years after the publication of Diede's memoir, the North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University published one of the most influential books regarding North Dakota's ethnic history. *Plains Folk: North Dakota's Ethnic History* is a compilation of seven essays, each of which pertains to a different ethnic group. William C. Sherman and Playford Thorson edited this work. As stated earlier, Sherman was sociologist at North Dakota State University, and Thorson was a historian at the University of North Dakota. They did not write the essay pertaining to the Germans from Russia. Sherman provided an informative introduction, which established the harsh environmental realities that immigrants faced once they settled in North Dakota. He also wrote a brief description of North Dakota's smaller minority groups. Thorson, on the other hand, wrote an in-depth account of Scandinavians in North Dakota.²⁴

Timothy J. Kloberdanz wrote the essay titled, "Volksdeutsche: The Eastern European Germans – Hungry for Land, Hungry for a Home: North Dakota's 'Other Germans'."

²³ Ibid., 1-5.

²⁴ Sherman, 457.

Kloberdanz is not only a folklorist at North Dakota State University but also German-Russian. Evidently, “his *volksdeutsche* forebears came to Colorado from the Volga Region of Russia.”²⁵ Kloberdanz’s research interests center on German-Russian folklore, and as a result, he has published a number of books and articles pertaining to his memory group.²⁶ Despite providing one of the most informative and well-written accounts about Germans from Russia, Kloberdanz is unable to write a detached historical account.

Kloberdanz argues that experiences in foreign countries forced German-Russians to treasure their cultural traditions. He also believes that all decedents of German-Russians also have a deep-rooted pride in their heritage. According to him, all Eastern Germans have “a preference for village life and agricultural tasks; a pioneering past; land hunger; strong religious beliefs; a marked distrust for outsiders; and strained relations with immigrants direct from Germany.”²⁷ Kloberdanz provides a detailed account of the German migration to Russia and life in this foreign land. Then he follows migration patterns to the United States. He provides vivid details of the journey west. Before going into a more thorough description of the Eastern German groups, Kloberdanz provides an in-depth look into the social life of Germans from Russia on the Northern Plains. This essay was truly informative and refreshing.

Within months of the publication of *Plains Folk*, Shirley Fischer Arends published her 1988 Georgetown University dissertation. Like the other authors, Arends has a German-Russian background, and therefore, she provides another insider perspective. She does not attempt to remain objective in *The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture*.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 120.

Despite her ties with the German-Russian community, reviewers have labeled this work as landmark and fresh.²⁸

Nonetheless, Arends is not a trained historian. Rather she is a linguist, whose research depends on her ethnic group's cultural background. While her book begins with an explanation of the German-Russian diaspora, she only dedicates one chapter to the group's history. Within this chapter, Arends provides an immense amount of information regarding life in Russia. Yet she rushes through an explanation of German-Russians in the Dakotas. At the heart of this linguist's research is an analysis of German-Russian dialect. One reviewer stated it eloquently by claiming her objective was to "contribute to the self-understanding and even pride of the German inheritance."²⁹ She did not attempt to document her memory group's historical past.

The lack of material by detached scholars in the Germans from Russia specialized collections, demonstrates the extent to which outsiders have overlooked this memory group's history. The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia in Lincoln, Nebraska, the Germans from Russia Heritage Society in Bismarck, North Dakota, and North Dakota State University Libraries' Germans from Russia Heritage Collection in Fargo, North Dakota are three larger collections working to preserve German-Russian heritage in the Great Plains region.³⁰ According to Michael M. Miller, the bibliographer for the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, his collection has approximately 3,000 books. He estimates that those written by outsiders constitute only five percent of the collection. In other words, only 150 out of 3,000

²⁸ Kurt Rein, review of *The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture*, by Shirley Fischer Arends, http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/grhc/info/book_reviews/fischer.html.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, www.ahsgr.org; The Germans from Russia Heritage Society, www.grhs.org; North Dakota State University Libraries Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, <http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/grhc/index.html>.

books are from an outsider's perspective. He points out that even fewer are by academic historians.³¹

Considering that the Great Plains region is sparsely populated, and the Germans from Russia are a large minority group within the region, the lack of historical accounts by detached scholars is understandable. Germans from Russia have traditionally recorded their own history for their own memory group. There have only been a few academic historians or detached scholars documenting the ethnic group's history. Despite the lack of detached scholarly accounts, Shirley Fischer Arends, Pauline Neher Diede, George Rath, Richard Sallet, Timothy J. Kloberdanz, and many others have provided informative works regarding German-Russian heritage from an insider's viewpoint. Their works, however, only provide one side of the story. Without this detached academic perspective, the historical treatment of Germans from Russia remains incomplete. According to Frederick C. Luebke, historians have overlooked this ethnic group's history because they view European immigrants as homogeneous.³² William C. Sherman argues that historians have dismissed German-Russian history because most of them settled in rural areas.³³ Kloberdanz subtly points out that many German-Russians have "a marked distrust for outsiders."³⁴ Whether due to ignorance, historical locale and population, or distrust, the fact remains that German-Russian history is in need of an outsider perspective by academic historians.

³¹ Michael M. Miller, interview by author, Fargo, ND, 13 April 2005.

³² Luebke, 405.

³³ Diede, 1.

³⁴ Kloberdanz, 120.