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SYMBOLS OF GERMAN-RUSSIAN ETHNIC IDENTITY ON THE NORTHERN PLAINS

TIMOTHY J. KLOBERDANZ

During the past two decades, the subject of ethnicity has provoked popular interest and a proliferation of research. Scholars from a variety of academic backgrounds have described, analyzed, and reassessed the importance of ethnic identity in our modern society. Yet in 1980, following the long-awaited appearance of the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, the basic question "What is ethnicity?" remained a perplexing one. The volume's editors admitted that "there is as yet no consensus about the precise meaning of ethnicity" since the distinguishing characteristics of ethnic groups seldom can be forced into neat conceptual categories.¹ While certain ethnic groups emphasize the retention of an ancestral language or dialect as the chief means of group identification, others opt to focus on quite different aspects of their cultural heri-

tage: art, music, dance, costume, religion, festive celebrations, folk heroes, or foodways.

Although even the most careful delineations of "ethnicity" and "ethnic identity" tend to be problematic, those definitions that take into account the dynamic qualities and flexible nature of ethnic phenomena seem best suited to the needs of contemporary researchers. Anthropologist Anya Peterson Royce, for example, describes "ethnic identity" as "the sum total of feelings on the part of group members about those values, symbols, and common histories that identify them as a distinct group."²

Symbols are particularly important in promoting group cohesiveness, and it is wholly appropriate that Royce mentions them as being a vital part of ethnic identity. As commonly understood, a symbol can be practically anything that suggests something else; yet it is also a tangible sign of the invisible and inexpressible. Abner Cohen, in his insightful study *Two-Dimensional Man*, characterizes symbols as those "objects, acts, concepts, or linguistic formations that stand *ambiguously* for a multiplicity of disparate meanings, evoke sentiments and emotions, and impel men to action."³ For symbols to be effective, they must

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be somewhat ambiguous so as to transcend individual, gender, generational, and other differences. Effective symbols also must have meaning not only for the particular group that displays them but for outsiders as well.⁴ Furthermore, ethnic symbols, because they figure so prominently in relations between groups, often are designed to evoke a positive image.

Ethnic groups throughout the United States have adopted an array of symbols that range from the colorful Dala horse figurines of Swedish-Americans to the somber black clothing of the Old Order Amish.⁵ The adoption of such symbols is not always a deliberate choice, since symbols of ethnic distinctiveness are rarely the result of mere group consensus; they are the products of interaction between different groups.

The focus of this article is on the changing symbols of an important Great Plains ethnic group: the German Russians of North Dakota. During the past century, these people have maintained a distinct identity, just as their forebears did for generations on the wheat-covered steppes of southern Russia.⁶ Yet North Dakota's German-Russian Americans clearly are not the same people that their pioneering forebears were. Except for the communal Hutterites, they do not live in tightly-knit agrarian colonies. With the sole exception of the Hutterites, the German Russians of the northern Plains are no longer readily identifiable by their peculiar dress. And except for the Hutterites, they generally prefer English to German as a means of everyday communication. However, many of North Dakota's German Russians continue to feel that they are different from their Anglo-American or Norwegian-American neighbors. More important, the state's German Russians continue to be seen and treated by others as a group apart. While a few German Russians will lament that they have assimilated and thus become part of the American mainstream, their non-German-Russian neighbors seldom share this perception.

One reason why even German Russians

themselves sometimes feel they have forsaken their heritage is that many tend to equate ethnicity with behavior that is esoteric and rigidly traditional. They fail to recognize that theirs is not a static culture but a dynamic one, the unique product of Old World influences and New World forces as well. A people's heritage, like its language, is ever-changing, and this is especially true of an ethnic group's symbols.

NORTH DAKOTA'S BLACK SEA GERMANS

In 1920, North Dakota's total population of 647,000 residents included 70,000 German Russians of the first and second generations.⁷ This number was more than twice as many as that for any other state, including such well-known areas of German-Russian settlement as Kansas, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Colorado. Approximately 97% of all the German Russians in North Dakota were of Black Sea German (*schwarzmeerdeutsche*) descent in 1920. While a majority traced their ancestry to German colonies in the Odessa district of the Ukraine or Bessarabia, smaller numbers of German Russians came to North Dakota via the Crimea, the Berdyansk area, and the South Caucasus. The first German Russians settled in what is now North Dakota in 1884, taking up prairie homesteads in the south-central part of the state.⁸ Within ten years, thousands of Black Sea German settlers had expanded into the western and north-central areas of North Dakota. The establishment of the major German-Russian settlements in North Dakota invariably reflected the old country regional and religious affiliations of the immigrants. Thus, Protestant German Russians from Bessarabia and Catholic German colonists from the Kutschurgan region of South Russia each formed separate enclaves that still are discernible today.⁹

During their first century in North Dakota, the German Russians responded to a variety of symbols, but only a handful were widely accepted and enthusiastically embraced. Those symbols that proved most efficacious were

secular ones, despite the fact that religion played such an important role in the lives of the Germans from Russia. Each of the dominant ethnic symbols occupied the scene for a varying period of time before being replaced by a more appropriate one. In North Dakota, different German-Russian symbols achieved prominence during the following periods: 1884-1954, 1955-1970, and 1971-present. While the three periods discussed are admittedly arbitrary, they are offered in an attempt to understand better the changing symbols and complex nature of German-Russian ethnic identity on the northern Plains.

This article is based primarily on interviews that I conducted in North Dakota with approximately thirty-five German-Russian individuals between 1976 and 1986. I conducted interviews in the twenty North Dakota communities of Alsen, Ashley, Balta, Beulah, Bismarck, Dickinson, Fargo, Fort Yates, Fredonia, Hague, Hettinger, Langdon, Lehr, Linton, Mandan, Napoleon, Orrin, Solen, Wishek, and Zeeland. Besides providing biographical and community history data, informants also answered questions regarding self-perceptions of ethnic identity. Interviewees were asked questions such as "Do you think the German Russians have a common symbol?" and "Are the things that make you feel 'German Russian' the same as those for your parents or children?" A major limitation in doing such field research was the fact that informants often were uncertain of the precise meaning of the term "symbol," or its German-language equivalents, *Sinnbild* and *Symbol*. Another drawback was the fact that most German Russians in North Dakota still tend to view themselves simply as "Germans," despite the fact that they readily perceive differences between themselves and "other Germans." In 1982, I also studied a modern German-Russian high school in south-central North Dakota, focusing on the manner in which the group's ethnic heritage was presented to the students. In the course of this study, I interviewed a teacher of "German-Russian studies," several high school students, and local townspeople.¹⁰

Traditionally, North Dakota's Black Sea Germans have placed considerable emphasis on religious affiliation even though members of this ethnic group belong to a number of different churches: Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, Evangelical Reformed, Assembly of God, and Seventh Day Adventist. In South Russia, the German colonists lived in villages that were organized along strict denominational lines. Protestant and Roman Catholic German colonists seldom lived in the same *Dorf* and thus rarely interacted.¹¹ Nonetheless, the German villagers were symbolically united, despite their religious differences, by the mere fact that they were German colonists—*Nemsky-kolonisty*—in a great sea of Russians, Ukrainians, Moldavians, Jews, and Tatars.

The German language was of singular importance in maintaining a strong Black Sea German ethnic identity in South Russia. This language—whether it took the dialect form of *Schwabisch*, *Rhenish Franconian*, or *Plattdeutsch*—was not only a unifying force but also a practical necessity. German Russians obviously spoke German not to be "ethnic" but simply to be understood by each other. The German language eventually emerged as a group symbol only because it was one of the key differences that stood between German Russians and their non-German-speaking neighbors.

The earliest Germans from Russia who took up homesteads in North Dakota were "conservative" immigrants as opposed to "innovating" ones.¹² They came in search of free land and a place to transplant their old country lifestyle and values. They did not come in search of political freedom or with the fervent desire to become full-fledged Americans. They were searching for a special place like the one they had left behind where they could raise wheat and children and be left relatively alone by the outside world. Despite their desire to remain isolated, contact with other cultures on the Dakota prairies was inevitable. Anglo-Americans quickly dubbed the Black Sea Germans "Rooshuns," and these

sons and daughters of the steppe retaliated by calling all non-German neighbors "Englische," regardless if they were from the British Isles or Scandinavia. The early German-Russian immigrants repeatedly explained to their wide-eyed neighbors that they were indeed from Russia but their culture and language were "rein deutsch" (pure German). There was confusion in the earliest stage of culture contact because non-German Russians naturally responded to the visible symbols that the Black Sea Germans presented to the outside world: astrakhan caps, knee-high boots, embroidered blouses, fringed babushkas, brightly flowered shawls, huge sheepskin coats, and apron pockets bulging with sunflower seeds.¹³ To the outsider, these were the symbols of peasant Russia, not the Kaiser's Germany.

The early Black Sea Germans did not realize it was their very appearance that created so much confusion and misunderstanding. In South Russia, there seldom was a problem in determining who was German, Russian, or Ukrainian. All one had to do was listen to a stranger's speech before deciding to what group that individual belonged. The situation on the northern Great Plains was complicated by the fact that most Americans already had preconceived notions as to how "Germans" were supposed to look and act—based on the many *reichsdeutsche* settlers who had already emigrated from Germany. Relations between the Germans and German Russians were not always pleasant. Indeed, some of the *Reichsdeutsche* felt their Teutonic brethren from the tsar's empire were more "Russian" than "German." For this reason, the German Russians in North Dakota were sometimes dubbed "Russen" or "Pruskies" by their *reichsdeutsche* neighbors.

A GERMAN LANGUAGE SYMBOL

The German language was clearly an important ethnic marker among the German Russians in South Russia, but it was not an effective symbol on the northern Plains. The fact that the German language was shared by

so many other German immigrants who did not come from the Black Sea region meant that it was by no means distinctly German-Russian. Nonetheless, in the early years of settlement a unifying German language symbol that was thoroughly German-Russian did emerge: a newspaper known as the *Dakota Freie Presse*. This newspaper, founded in Yankton, Dakota Territory, in 1874, nurtured among German Russians an intense emotional bond that spanned generations and continents (fig. 1). It truly was, as many politicians claimed, the "bible of the German Russians." According to LaVern J. Rippley, the *Dakota Freie Presse* "functioned like a 'central nervous system'" for the Germans from Russia. Because it was nondenominational and politically neutral, it transcended even the effect of the church and school in a typical ethnic community.¹⁴

Nearly thirty German language newspapers were published in various parts of North Dakota between 1882 and 1955, but none of these functioned as the unifying symbol for all German Russians as did the *Dakota Freie Presse*.¹⁵ Like the ever-wandering Germans from Russia themselves, the newspaper had several homes during its long existence, but from 1932-1954 it was edited in Bismarck and Kulm, North Dakota. The paper symbolized many things to its German-Russian readers: a sense of cultural continuity and international community, an appreciation for their pioneering accomplishments, and pride in the German language. Like the German Russians, the *Dakota Freie Presse* was attacked and harassed during the First World War. Yet like its German-Russian readers, the paper weathered the great storm of 1918 and persisted despite stinging accusations of disloyalty.¹⁶

The fact that the *Dakota Freie Presse* had only three German Russians among its many editors and publishers during its long history never deterred the Germans from Russia from claiming the paper as their own. The paper focused on the unusual background, migrations, and varied experiences of the Germans from Russia. It also carried vital information



FIG. 1. The masthead of the *Dakota Freie Presse* proudly noted that it was the oldest, most widely circulated German-Russian newspaper "in the entire world" (see upper lefthand corner). Photo courtesy North Dakota State Historical Society.

about job opportunities, farm sales, traveling medical specialists, and missing relatives.¹⁷

More important, the *Dakota Freie Presse* served the German Russians, particularly those living on the northern Plains, as a visible expression of ethnic solidarity. Through its selective use of German-Russian poetry, humor, historical sketches, and news reports, it self-consciously created a sense of *russland-deutsche* peoplehood despite the realities of fierce religious and regional loyalties. Perhaps the *Dakota Freie Presse* did not mirror German-Russian life perfectly, but it helped project a positive image of ethnic unity and strength that few foreign-language newspapers of similar size could match.

In 1920, the *Dakota Freie Presse* had a circulation of 13,800, but by 1950 it dropped to only 1,500. When it ceased publication in 1954, it had fulfilled its eighty-year-old mission

in serving the German-Russian people.¹⁸ Although a significant number of the newspaper's final subscribers were German-Russian North Dakotans, the retention of the German language was clearly on the decline at this time. The older generation of German-Russian pioneers who refused to speak English to their grandchildren were passing from the scene. Young men who returned from the Second World War often brought new brides who were unfamiliar with the German language or local dialect into their home communities on the northern Plains. And for the first time, the region's colleges and universities were attracting significant numbers of German-Russian students. Many older German Russians in North Dakota agree that, in the mid-1950s, most of their young people stopped using German. Indeed, a few individuals mention an "under-thirty rule" that seems strangely opera-

tive on an unconscious level: "If you meet a fellow German Russian who is under the age of thirty, talk English, not German." Today, the use of German continues to function as a local symbol of German-Russian identity in certain parts of North Dakota, but it is no longer as widespread as it once was.

THE MAN WITH THE ACCORDION

From 1955 to 1970, the ethnic identity of the German Russians in North Dakota was symbolized by an individual who never grew weary of reminding his people that the American Dream was possible: Lawrence Welk. His was a message that the German Russians of the northern Great Plains were hungry for, especially since they found themselves torn between changing old country values and American pressures to conform. This was the period of the cold war with the Soviet Union, when the word "Russian" was synonymous in the United States with atheistic Communism and distrust. Welk did not inform audiences that his parents emigrated from Russia; yet neither did the members of his ethnic group in North Dakota publicize any tie to *Russland*. The mid-1950s was not a time when it would have been in the best interest of any American—especially someone with an accent—to claim even a distant connection to the Soviet Union.

Lawrence Welk and his popular musical group made their first appearance on national television 2 July 1955. Few German Russians back in Welk's North Dakota hometown of Strasburg—or elsewhere in the state—owned television sets at that time, but the news of his successful television debut quickly became known. Many German Russians identified with Lawrence Welk, for here was a man who looked and sounded like other German Russians throughout North Dakota. Welk's German accent, along with his unassuming ways and lack of a college education, endeared him to countless German Russians on the northern Plains. He proved to all of them that anyone could achieve fame and fortune, including even the timid son of German-Russian immi-



FIG. 2. *Lawrence Welk as he appeared at the time he played for countless wedding dances on the northern Plains. Photo courtesy Michael M. Miller and the Strasburg Schools Alumni Association.*

grant homesteaders (figs. 2 and 3).

Ironically, Welk's phenomenal success resulted only after he defied the agrarian tradition of his people by refusing to follow in his father's footsteps. In exchange for a four-hundred dollar accordion, the young Welk promised his father that he would work on the family farm until he reached the age of twenty-one. The great maestro never forgot the day of his eventful departure from North Dakota, when his "years of bondage" drew to a close:

On March 11, 1924, I woke up very early in the morning. I was twenty-one years old. I got dressed . . . inspected the contents of my valise one more time, and counted my small hoard of money. I had enough for my train fare plus three one-dollar bills, which I pinned in my inside



FIG. 3. During the Depression, Lawrence Welk and his Chicago-based band, the “Hotsy Totsy Boys,” toured the Midwest. Photo courtesy Michael M. Miller and the Strasburg Schools Alumni Association.

coat pocket, and a little loose change. I smoothed the patchwork quilt, which my mother had made, over my bed for the last time, and then looked around the room where I had spent so many hours with my brothers. I felt no unhappiness, only a great eagerness to begin my great adventure. . . .

“So you’re going,” [my father] said with that level look of his. “Well, you’ll be back as soon as you get hungry. He’ll be back in six weeks,” he added, turning to the rest of the family, “looking for a good meal!” [The members of my family] all laughed and I did too, but I knew I would never return for help . . . it was up to me to prove that my dreams were more than dreams.¹⁹

Although few Americans realized that the television celebrity Lawrence Welk was a German Russian, his people back in the upper

Midwest did. Welk’s surname and distinctive accent were dead giveaways to German Russians in North Dakota who readily identified him as one of their own. The German Russians of Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado also enjoyed the music that Lawrence Welk played, but they rarely perceived him as an ethnic kinsman. Most German Russians of the central Plains traced their ancestry to the Lower Volga region of Russia, where a distinctively different style of music predominated. Volga German folk music was characterized by a strong reliance on the *Hackbrett* (a hammered dulcimer) and a rigorous foot stomping dance routine that became popularly known in the post-World War II era as the “Dutch Hop.”

While Welk did not publicize his Old World ancestry, he could not hide its influence either, for it was obvious to everyone each

time he greeted his national television audience. At the same time that Lawrence Welk enjoyed unprecedented popularity, the German Russians in North Dakota kept their memories of the early day Welk alive in countless family stories and personal narratives. German Russians on the northern Plains exchanged vivid recollections about their new culture hero and source of pride. Stories were told of how the young Welk had carried his accordion in a gunny sack tied behind his saddle whenever he rode out to the various wedding celebrations that were held near Temvik, Ipswich, and Napoleon. Other stories emphasized the fact that Welk had worked hard and even endured physical suffering to become a successful musician. Many German Russians recalled how Welk often had to tie a handkerchief around his left wrist to stop the bleeding that was caused by playing his heavy accordion at wedding dances that lasted several hours.

One of the things about Lawrence Welk that German Russians most appreciated was the fact that he had become a success by playing the traditional waltzes, polkas, and schottisches that were enjoyed by generations of Black Sea Germans before him. This fondness for the familiar tunes of the old country, however, eventually led to his demise as a unifying ethnic symbol that encompassed both old and young German-Russian Americans. By the late 1960s, Welk had become a symbol to many Americans of old-fashioned values, patriotism, and morality. In 1970, his special Thanksgiving broadcast, "Thank You America," delighted scores of viewers who were tired of hearing about social injustice in the United States and protests against the war in Southeast Asia. Yet this broadcast, and others like it, alienated younger viewers who interpreted Welk's homespun patriotism and fervent optimism as naive and disconcerting.

Partly because Welk became a mainstream American symbol rather than a distinctly German-Russian one, he ceased to unify all the members of his ethnic group. In 1968, when Welk was asked to become a member of the

newly formed American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, he politely declined and commented to one of the society's founders: "My father taught us to forget the old country and become Americans."²⁰

A MODERN SYMBOL EMERGES

By 1971, the German Russians of North Dakota were in need of a new symbol that could effectively unite both old and young. This was a critical time in America, when many spoke of a widening "generation gap" that could not be bridged. On 9 January 1971, the North Dakota Historical Society of Germans from Russia was founded in Bismarck. The intention of the founders of this organization (later known as the Germans from Russia Heritage Society) was not to develop a new symbol, but simply to make known the story of the Germans from Russia and to "document the achievements of these people."²¹

Despite its primary aim of disseminating information, the Germans from Russia Heritage Society made use of a variety of symbols during its existence. In June 1973, during the centennial celebration of Germans from Russia in Dakota Territory, there were many symbols in evidence: wheat, sod houses, windmills, barbed wire fences, and the breaking plow. In fact, all of these symbols, along with the profiles of a German-Russian immigrant couple, were incorporated in a special centennial emblem along with the bold legends "IN AMERIKA DURCH GOTTES GNADE—In America Through God's Grace," and "ARBEIT MACHT DAS LEBEN SUSS—Work Makes Life Sweet" (fig. 4). While these were symbols and sentiments that German Russians readily identified with, none were distinctly German-Russian. For example, all of these symbols were equally meaningful to the descendants of those immigrants who came directly from Germany and settled in Dakota Territory. In retrospect, one wonders why a clay-brick house or wrought-iron cemetery cross or *Rutsch*-style stoneboat was not used in the Dakota Territory symbolism honoring the



FIG. 4. Centennial emblem honoring Germans from Russia in Dakota Territory, 1973. Photo courtesy Germans from Russia Heritage Society.

first Germans from Russia.

Unifying symbols of ethnic identity are not as easy to latch onto and cultivate as one might imagine. They usually emerge out of a natural process; members of an ethnic minority do not consciously select and manipulate symbols to their best advantage. The acceptance of truly effective symbols is dependent not so much on what an ethnic group wants to adopt as what emerges as a result of interaction with outsiders.

Two years prior to the founding of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society, an event occurred in North Dakota that affected perceptions of German-Russian ethnicity in the state. In May 1969, approximately 3,000 college students from throughout North Dakota and other areas of the upper Midwest participated in a "Zip to Zap" excursion. What started out as an idea for a modest campus outing turned into an unexpected influx of

college students who inundated the small German-Russian community of Zap, North Dakota, in the western part of the state. This was a time of nationwide student unrest and North Dakota—which had been chosen as the site of the first sentinel anti-ballistic missile system—was not immune to such turmoil.²²

The "Zip to Zap" incident received extensive media coverage, including spots on national television. People throughout the country watched huge crowds of beer-drinking college students romping through the once quiet streets of Zap. However, what sparked added interest on the part of many television viewers was the unusual ethnic food that the students feasted on and obviously took such a liking to during their stay in Zap. Pictures appeared showing the hungry students munching on German-Russian *Fleischkiechla* or "Zap Burgers," as they were called by amused commentators.²³

The students who zipped to Zap in 1969 were not the first non-German Russians to discover *Fleischkiechla* and consider them a delicacy. Don Eddy, a connoisseur of fine cuisine, visited German-Russian kitchens on the northern Great Plains in 1950 and published an article in *The American Magazine* about the strange-looking but tasty foods he found there. "Grandma Straub" (Mrs. Albina Straub) first introduced Eddy to *Fleischkiechla* and the gourmet's elation rivaled that of Custer's upon finding gold in the Black Hills:

If you're looking for something different in the way of a main meat course, look no farther. This is it.

I sat in Grandma Straub's kitchen and watched her make *Fleischkeichla* [sic], trying to write down the recipe by following her flying hands. . . .

She told me about the early days . . . About Mr. Meidinger, who started for a neighbor's home after a heavy snowfall, and had to slide down the chimney to get inside. And all the time [while Grandma Straub talked], the *fleischkeichla* were taking form. Finally she sizzled me some in a Dutch oven

filled with boiling grease. For *fleischkeichla*, my friend, I would even slide down a chimney.

The seasoning of the meat may be one of the secrets; I'm not sure. Another secret, certainly, is the seasoning of the blankets. Fundamentally, they are a roll of meat wrapped up and sealed tightly into a blanket of special dough, and fried in deep fat . . . until golden brown. Grandma Straub put mine on a plate and handed it to me. "Take them in your fingers," she instructed; "always in your fingers, never with a knife and fork."²⁴

The appreciation of *Fleischkiechla* by non-German Russians on the northern Plains is now legendary. Yet one must wonder why this particular dish emerged as a common symbol when there were so many other German-Russian foods from which to choose. Consider, for example, these other gastronomic possibilities: *Borscht* (vegetable soup), *Halupsy* (cabbage-wrapped meat balls), *Halvah* (a crushed sesame seed and honey concoction), and *Platchinta* (spiced pumpkin turnovers). All of these are well-known to Black Sea Germans, but they are not distinctly German-Russian since they are shared by a number of other ethnic groups who trace their ancestry to South Russia and eastern Europe. Or what about these German-Russian favorites: *Bratwurst* (fried pork sausage), *Dampfnudla* (bread dumplings), *Kraut Knepfle* (dumplings and sauerkraut), *Riwelsupp* (dough ball soup), *Schlitzkiechla* (doughnut twists), and *Peffermusse* (spice cookies)? These foods also are common among the Black Sea Germans, but again they are hardly distinctive, as they are shared by countless other German groups. There are still a few other possibilities: *Goladetz* (jellied pork hocks), fried chicken feet, and *Schwartemage* (stomach sausage), but the problem here is that non-German Russians seldom crave such exotic foods.²⁵

Of all the German-Russian ethnic dishes, *Fleischkiechla* remain both the most distinctive and the most appetizing to outsiders. The

German name literally translates as "little meat cakes" or "meat cookies," yet this food is hardly German in origin. In South Russia, *Fleischkiechla* were popular primarily among the German colonists who settled in the Crimea. The Crimean Germans were influenced in many ways by the native Tatar inhabitants and *Fleischkiechla* were one result of Tatar diffusion. According to German-Russian scholar Armand Bauer, who traces his ancestry to North Dakota's early Crimean German settlers, *Fleischkiechla* originally were made with mutton (instead of beef or pork) since the Crimean Tatars raised sheep.²⁶

Fleischkiechla have become so popular in modern German-Russian communities throughout North Dakota that one would assume this dish has been part of their traditional foodways for many generations. Actually, *Fleischkiechla* were common only among the Crimean German settlers. Not surprisingly, one finds a marked emphasis on the making of *Fleischkiechla* in those areas of the state that were settled originally by German Russians from the Crimean Peninsula: portions of McIntosh and Emmons counties in south-central North Dakota, and Mercer County in the western part of the state. For many years, *Fleischkiechla* were featured at community celebrations and could be found on the menus of cafes throughout Mercer County. The town of Zap, where huge quantities of *Fleischkiechla* were consumed by famished college students, also lies in Mercer County.

Since 1971, the symbolic value of *Fleischkiechla* as an expression of German-Russian ethnic identity has steadily grown. Not only is this particular dish appreciated by many outsiders on the northern Plains, but also by German-Russian Americans of all ages (fig. 5). *Fleischkiechla* are the closest Black Sea German counterpart to American-style hamburgers, which may partly explain their acceptance by non-German Russians. Among Volga Germans in the central plains states, the popularity of *Bierocks* or *Ranzas* (dough-wrapped ground beef and cabbage pockets that are



FIG. 5. A German-Russian student in south-central North Dakota helps prepare Fleischkiechla for an ethnic dinner at her high school, spring 1982. Photo courtesy Timothy J. Kloberdanz and the American Folklife Center.

baked) represents a similar phenomenon. At the present time, drive-in restaurants that serve this ethnic food dot the prairies of southeastern Nebraska and are expanding westward into Colorado and other areas. Although *Bierocks* are the current Volga German symbol par excellence, their origin is unquestionably Russian. The Volga German name, *Bierock*, for example, appears to be a corruption of *pirog*, the Russian term for a meat-filled turnover.

With the rise and continuing expansion of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society, local chapters of the organization—especially those in the more densely populated areas of North Dakota—invariably feature *Fleischkiechla* as a prime example of German-Russian “soul food.”²⁷ In the not too distant future, North

Dakota’s German Russians will forget that *Fleischkiechla* were shared at one time only by those German immigrants who came from the Crimean Peninsula. In the Crimea, the adoption of the Tatars’ “little meat cakes” mirrored the true extent of outside influence on the xenophobic German colonists. Ironically, on the northern Great Plains, the ethnic glorification of *Fleischkiechla* symbolically expresses how true to their *rein deutsch* traditions modern German Russians remain.

CONCLUSION

Symbols of group identification abound in ethnic settings and, as demonstrated in this paper, they sometimes assume new and unexpected forms within the context of dynamic,

intercultural relations. For the German Russians of the northern Great Plains, such seemingly disparate phenomena as a foreign-language newspaper, a famous musician, and even ethnic food emerged as unifying symbols during different periods of ethnic adjustment, acculturation, and Americanization. There are numerous other symbols that the German Russians of the upper Midwest have responded to, but only a few key symbols succeeded in transcending individual, regional, and religious differences. By delineating an ethnic group's dominant symbols and explaining how these symbols emerged as they did, one is perhaps better able to understand the enigmatic forces that shape and sustain ethnic identity.

NOTES

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1. Stephan Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, and Oscar Handlin, eds., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. v-vi. Although the editors admit that a comprehensive definition of "ethnicity" remains elusive, several of the essays in the encyclopedia provide unusually rich insights. See especially Philip Gleason's "American Identity and Americanization," pp. 31-58, and William Petersen's "Concepts of Ethnicity," pp. 232-42. Of particular relevance to this article is LaVern J. Rippley's entry, "Germans from Russia," pp. 425-30.

2. Anya Peterson Royce, *Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 18.

3. Abner Cohen, *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. ix.

4. Royce, *Ethnic Identity*, p. 148.

5. Comparable symbols of ethnicity are discussed in Larry Danielson, ed., *Studies in Folklore and Ethnicity* (Los Angeles: California Folklore Society, 1977). See particularly the essay by Yvonne R. Lockwood, "The Sauna: An Expression of Finnish-American Identity," pp. 71-84.

6. For background information on the Germans from Russia, see Karl Stumpp, *The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering*, trans. Joseph S. Height (Bonn: Atlantic Forum, 1967), and Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev: The Story of Russia's Germans* (Battleford, Saskatchewan: Marian Press, 1974).

7. Richard Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*, trans. LaVern J. Rippley and Armand Bauer (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974), p. 112. The history and experiences of North Dakota's German Russians are discussed in George Rath, *The Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas* (Freeman, South Dakota: Pine Hill Press, 1977).

8. Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements*, pp. 112, 26.

9. William C. Sherman, *Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of Rural North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1983), pp. 48-51.

10. My study of a German-Russian high school in North Dakota was made possible by a special ethnic heritage schools grant from the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

11. Stumpp, *The German-Russians*, p. 15.

12. The distinction between these two groups of immigrants was first made by William Petersen. See Charles Price, "The Study of Assimilation," in J. A. Jackson, ed., *Migration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 194-95.

13. See, for example, photographs of newly arrived Black Sea German immigrants in Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements*, illustrated section between pp. 20-21.

14. LaVern J. Rippley, "A History of the *Dakota Freie Presse*," *Heritage Review* 7 (Dec. 1973): 9.

15. Anton H. Richter, "'Gebt ihr den Vorzug': The German-Language Press of North and South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 10 (Summer 1980): 189-209.

16. LaVern J. Rippley, "The *Dakota Freie Presse*: Its Brightest and Its Darkest Hour," *Heritage Review* 9 (1974): 15-20.

17. Rippley, "A History of the *Dakota Freie Presse*," p. 16.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

19. Lawrence Welk and Bernice McGeehan, *Wunnerful, Wunnerful!: The Autobiography of Lawrence Welk* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1971), pp. 43-44.

20. David J. Miller, "One of Many," *American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Work Paper* 21 (Fall 1976), p. 17.

21. See the *North Dakota Historical Society of Germans from Russia Work Paper* 1 (April 1971), p. 7.

The organization's first president, Ray R. Friedrich, indicated in a public letter to members (21 April 1971) that the North Dakota group had "affiliated" with its "parent organization," the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia. Eventually, however, the two German-Russian societies diverged and remain separate entities today.

22. *North Dakota State University Spectrum*, 15 May 1969, pp. 1, 4.

23. Beata Mertz, comp., *Food 'N Folklore* (Bismarck: North Dakota Historical Society of Germans from Russia, n.d.), p. 47.

24. Don Eddy, "Hot Off the Stove," *The American Magazine* (October 1950): 114-15.

25. For a list of German-Russian dishes, as well as their Russian and American variations, see Paul Reeb, "Cultural Dynamics in German-Russian Cookery," *Heritage Review* 14 (September 1984): 25-29.

26. Mertz, *Food 'N Folklore*, p. 47. Also see the translation by Armand and Elaine Bauer of Theodore Eisenbraun's "Deutsche Bauern in der Krim im Zeitraum 1806-1941," *Heritage Review* 17 (April 1977): 16; and Placid Gross, "Schislik and Chubaracka," *Heritage Review* 14 (Feb. 1984): 10-11.

27. For comparative studies that treat food as symbols of identity, see Roger L. Welsch, "'We Are What We Eat': Omaha Food as Symbol," *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* 16 (1971): 165-70; "Foodways and Eating Habits," *Western Folklore* 40 (1981): vii-137; Robert A. Georges, "You Often Eat What Others Think You Are: Food as an Index of Others' Conceptions of Who One Is," *Western Folklore* 43 (1984): 249-56; and Linda Keller Braun and Kay Mussell, eds., *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).