Religion was of great importance in the everyday lives of those who settled Dakota Territory. The pioneers conducted prayer services and meetings in their homes before ministers or priests were available to serve them. Believers built churches in most communities, and various denominations established educational institutions. The practice of their faith was especially important to immigrant settlers, for whom it provided a means of identifying with their own ethnic group. Religious organizations had a vital role in preserving cultural unity and handing down the heritage, language, and value system of each ethnic group to later generations. German-speaking settlers were no different from other immigrants in their desire to retain a connection with their past.

Germans form the largest ethnic group in both South Dakota and North Dakota. Some of the first Germans to settle permanently in Dakota Territory were descendants of those who had emigrated to Russia following the invitation in 1763 of Catherine the Great, who wanted an industrious people to cultivate vast areas of untilled land and serve as models for her country's peasant population. In Russia, these Germans had preserved their identity by living in colonies with locally administered governments and German-language schools and churches. When the Russian government in 1871 abolished the colonists' special status, including their exemption from military conscription, a large exodus followed. The Russian-Germans
who came to Dakota Territory starting in 1873 were attracted in part by the efforts of the territorial bureau of immigration, which distributed pamphlets describing the region in glowing terms. Here, in a land much like the steppe they had left behind, the Germans from Russia again settled in groups drawn together by their common history, language, and religion, often occupying entire counties almost to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. Most of the Dakota Germans came from settlements along the Black Sea that were typically all of one religious denomination, be it Lutheran, Catholic, or Mennonite. In the United States as a whole, roughly two-thirds of Russian-German immigrants were Evangelical (the German equivalent of Protestant, most of whom were Lutheran), one-fourth Catholic, and the rest a mixture of several faiths.

Various religious organizations began their work in Dakota as soon as settlers arrived, and the immigrants joined church groups according to their national, linguistic, and religious heritage. Founded in 1854, the Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Iowa, also known as the German Iowa Synod, worked almost exclusively among German settlers in Iowa and then the Dakotas. Its pastors, teachers, and money were at first sent from Germany to Iowa and from there to surrounding states. The Iowa Synod received especially strong support from Dettelsau, Germany. This northern Bavarian town was the seat of a mission society started by Pastor Wilhelm Loehe, an energetic, imaginative, and dedicated Lutheran minister, who, it may be said, was the synod’s actual founder. Until 1900, the demand for German preachers was so strong that the Iowa Synod regularly petitioned Dettelsau for more men. In fact, four-fifths of the candidates who entered the ministry each year before the turn of the century were immigrants. In 1879, the synod’s Conference of Northern Iowa included the northern half of that state as well as Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Dakota Territory. North and South Dakota became a separate district

1. In Germany, too, from the Reformation into the twentieth century, certain denominations tended to dominate specific areas. The Rhineland and southern Germany were mostly Catholic, while northern and eastern Germany were primarily Lutheran. As a result of the religious wars following the Reformation and the Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555, Christian denominations other than Catholic and Evangelical practically did not exist in Germany. Mennonites and Hutterites, for example, had moved to other countries such as Russia. For a summary of the history of Russian-Germans in both Europe and the United States, see Richard Sallet, Russian-German Settlements in the United States, trans. LaVern J. Rippley and Armand Bauer (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974), pp. 3-16. The term “Russian-German” is translated from Sallet’s “Russlanddeutsch” and will be used in place of the more commonly used “German-Russian” throughout this article.
German-language pamphlets promoting the region attracted many immigrants to South Dakota.

in 1889, with twenty-four pastors serving approximately seventy-five congregations.²

Pastor G. August Bischoff, the first Iowa Synod pastor sent to southern Dakota Territory, commented on the importance of religion in the lives of the Russian-German immigrants: "Since the Russian-Germans did not want to be Christians in name only, but were very serious about their Christianity, they soon united in Christian congregations. And even though they didn't have clergymen immediately, they nevertheless came together regularly on Sundays for services,

usually more than once. They let a talented Christian—and they were blessed by God with many of these—read a sermon and deliver a free lecture to them in the afternoon. Sunday was observed scrupulously by everyone, and in their daily lives God’s word was also very important. There were probably few homes in which the day’s work was not begun with God’s word and prayer.”

Thus, before the traveling preachers of the Iowa and various other Lutheran synods had arrived in Dakota, settlers regularly held their religious services in private homes. When Pastor Bischoff arrived in 1879, he barely had time to homestead eighty acres for himself and build a house before he had about ten places to preach. A similar situation had existed in Russia, where one clergyman often served more than twenty congregations and the people were satisfied to get a pastor once every eight to ten weeks. At other times, the local teacher would hold Sunday services, perform baptisms, and serve at funerals. People were overjoyed when they finally received a permanent pastor. Pastor Otto Pett tells about his arrival in Leola: “The first Sunday was unforgettable. Wagons came from all directions; some came from 15 miles away. A large crowd settled down in a semi-circle in front of my house, anxious to hear my first sermon.” Pett said that he was never in want of anything in spite of the deep poverty of his congregation.

Most pastors were not at all happy to go to Dakota. According to Pastor C. G. Eisenberg, who spent thirty years working in the Iowa Synod’s Dakota District and later served as its president, conditions were so terrible that people “got goose pimples when they heard the word Dakota.” Drought and hot winds caused frequent crop failures and indescribable poverty on the “arid, treeless steppe.” Hail often destroyed the little that survived the heat and drought. In the winter, the snowfall was so heavy and the blizzards so fierce that it was like being buried alive for months on end. Nevertheless, Eisenberg acknowledged the tremendous progress that had been made in the region, especially the eastern part: “If one travels through these areas at the end of June or the beginning of July, his heart leaps with joy and his eyes see nothing but golden, swaying fields of grain and corn, as well as the most stately buildings and most splendid woodlands.”

5. Quoted ibid., pp. 31-32.
6. Ibid., p. 10.
The church records of the period testify to the accomplishments and endurance of the missionaries of those days. One minister, Andreas Hahn, who witnessed a prairie fire that nearly destroyed the town of Leola in 1889, wrote: "We had watched many prairie fires as magnificent spectacles far away in the dark night when the wind was calm. We had never thought that it could come to such a terrible end. While my dear wife was busy sewing in one of the rooms, I was giving confirmation lessons in another. A hurricane-like wind had raged all day and stirred up clouds of dust. Suddenly black clouds swept past the window and turned day into night. Terror struck us when we opened the door and saw flames come toward us in the black smoke." Hahn and his wife rushed the confirmation class to a piece of plowed land nearby, where they huddled close to the ground until the wave of heat had passed over. The pastor described the sight that met them when they dared to get up again: "Everything around us was as black as coal; the air was filled with a fine ash through which we could see half of the buildings of our town, including our church and house, in flames."

Among the pastors' joys were the conferences that not only renewed their spiritual vigor but also provided much-needed fellowship. Even those experiences were not without hardship, however, according to Pastor Eisenberg. "During a conference the nights are shorter than usual anyhow," he later wrote of a meeting he had attended in the late 1880s, "but this night was a special case. The lady of the house surely meant well when she filled the straw sack for her 'noble guests,' but she had filled it too much. It was so round that it was impossible for the two of us to lie on it. One of us rolled down one side, and the other rolled down the other side. After a lot of pushing and pounding, each of us had finally formed a depression in which we could safely spend the night." Soon after shutting their eyes, Eisenberg and his bunkmate both felt the "tickling and itching" of bedbugs. The pair moved to the floor to sleep, but, Eisenberg recalled, "the crawling and the torture didn't stop. The lights were hardly out when the room came back to life. One side of the low, unplastered attic room was used to store grain. Here mice celebrated their nightly orgies. . . . So we moved again. We were barely half-asleep when a storm with lightning and thunder woke us up, and the whole house began to sway and rock like a cradle. To top it off, hail broke the panes of the only window, and the wind blew out the light." Feeling as though they had experienced the

7. Quoted ibid., p. 35.
"plagues of Egypt," they were relieved when the night was finally over.\(^8\)

The observations of other clergymen likewise varied from humorous to despairing. They were engaged in difficult work, often serving several congregations spread over huge areas, and they had to endure numerous hardships. Yet Pastor Bischoff, on his deathbed, said that the years of his ministry in Dakota had been the best of his life in spite of the extremely difficult conditions.\(^9\) These devout men, who served with self-denial and devotion, drove themselves in the belief that the Lutheran church and, specifically, their synod, should take possession of areas as they were first settled, thus preventing the establishment of congregations of other denominations.

House blessings, like this one reminding family members to serve God, hung on the walls of many German-Lutheran homes.

Perhaps the Iowa Synod's greatest problem was that it never had enough men and money to serve the huge area it had claimed. Eisenberg wrote that he always had more places to fill than he had people. The mission committee on which he served for a time occasionally had to decide whether a small congregation could be maintained. On a 1913 inspection trip west of the Missouri River, where repeated crop failures had left the people in dire financial straits, Eisenberg found an especially desolate picture. He wrote, 'I cannot forget the tears of an old man who said to me with trembling lips, 'Our hope for worldly things is gone, and now you want

\(^{8}\) Ibid., pp. 48-49.
\(^{9}\) Ibid., p. 42.
to take from us our hope for the next life by taking our pastor away?' 
... We kept this mission for another two years. Then our missionary 
resigned, and we could not find a replacement right away.' While 
pastors believed in their work and believed that God would see them 
through, some could not get used to the harsh conditions. Never-
theless, the Dakota District of the Iowa Synod grew, and in 1914 there 
were about eighty pastors who had more than one hundred fifty 
congregations.11

Among the pioneers, topics of religion were of great importance. 
Eisenberg relates that "wherever you saw two or three people get 
together in those days, you could be sure they were arguing about 
church teachings."12 Competition and friction with other synods as 
well as other denominations seems to have been a special problem 
among the Protestants. The small town of Tolstoy, South Dakota, for 
example, had five Protestant German congregations: Lutheran, Cong-
gregational, Methodist, Baptist, and Adventist. The Lutheran church, 
which the immigrants had known in their homeland as a single en-
tity, was splintered into twenty-one synods and conferences in the 
United States. Competition between the Iowa Synod and the Mis-
souri Synod, most of whose members were also of German descent, 
was especially strong. The Iowa Synod was also known as the Ger-
man Iowa Synod, and before 1917 the Missouri Synod was officially 
called the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, 
and Other States.13

German Lutherans had long believed that, in the area of religion, 
only the language of Luther should be used. Every family had 
brought from the homeland their beloved prayer books and books 
of sermons and devotions. In every home, there hung at least one 
German Haussegen ("house blessing") reminding family members 
of their spiritual obligations. As late as 1900, only one congregation 
in the entire Dakota District of the Iowa Synod used English for 
church services. Even those pastors born in the United States pre-
ferred to use German rather than English in their sermons.14

Pastor Eisenberg illustrated the persistence with which the im-
migrants clung to their native language with an anecdote about two

10. Ibid., pp. 81-82.
11. Ibid., p. 87.
12. Ibid., p. 117.
13. Sallet, Russian-German Settlements in the United States, pp. 89, 91; Neil M.
Johnson, "The Patriotism and Anti-Prussianism of the Lutheran Church—Missouri 
preachers who met a farmer working in his field on Ascension Thursday. Believing they were obliged to remind him that this was a holy day and that it was his Christian duty to abstain from work, the preachers spoke to the farmer when he approached the road with his plow. He was an Irishman who understood no German, however, so they were forced to use English, asking, "Do you not know that it is Sunday today?" The farmer answered, "My friends, you are mistaken. I am perfectly sure that it is Thursday today." Of course, he was right. Ascension is a church holiday that falls on a Thursday. Knowing only the German word for holiday—Feiertag—the preachers asked, "Do you not know that it is 'fireday' today?" "What?" said the Irishman, "Where is a fire? I don't see any." Finally, they tried translating the German word for ascension, Himmelfahrt (literally, "trip to heaven"), and asked, "Do you not know that it is heaven-ride today?" Speechless, the farmer stared at them for a while and then said to his horses, "Get up, them fellows must be a little off!" The incident may have caused the two ministers to learn better English in order to keep from making fools of themselves.15

By the end of the century, the leadership of the Iowa Synod had accepted the necessity of bilingual training for its pastors even though some believed that the German language was growing stronger and that the future of Lutheranism in America lay with the German-Americans. In 1909, the synod established Eureka Lutheran College to provide religious instruction and give students the opportunity to become more proficient in both English and German. World War I, however, severely restricted the use of German, with South Dakota and twenty-five other states passing laws and issuing defense council orders forbidding the teaching of that language in both public and private schools as well as in private tutorage. Church services had to be held in English, even if that meant that the congregation could not understand the sermon. Later, authorities allowed a summary of the sermon to be read in German at the end of services. For a time in Eureka, government officials padlocked all churches and denied pastors the privilege of conducting worship, which was then held in private homes with laymen reading the liturgy. Across the border in Minnesota, a vigilance committee caught a pastor praying in German at the bedside of a dying woman who knew only German. They tarred and feathered him. Near Glendive, Montana, a pastor who had taught Bible school in German to children in his home was taken into the country to be hanged.
The noose was already around his neck when the sheriff decided to let him go.\(^6\)

Language was an important issue for German Congregationalists as well, for during the 1880s and 1890s, the denomination lost promising areas because of a lack of German-speaking ministers. The first German Congregational church in Dakota had been organized in 1884 near Scotland, and by 1885 the territory had fourteen churches. As did the Lutheran pastors, the Congregational ministers traveled extensively, often logging over two hundred miles a week. Communities would learn of their coming and prepare houses where eager listeners awaited them. The people would then meet in prayer groups and Bible study groups until these ministers could return. During the early years, almost all of the ministers came directly from Germany or Switzerland, but after 1904, Redfield College took on the task of alleviating the shortage of German-speaking clergy by training ministers and teachers for Congregational churches. This academy, which merged with Yankton College in 1932, is said to have provided some of the best ministers in the field as well as public school teachers who understood the culture of the German people.\(^7\)

Congregationalism attracted some members from among a group of Russian-German immigrants who exhibited a kind of religious zealotry, a tendency toward emotional pietism acquired in so-called brotherhood groups in Europe. There, distressing economic conditions, isolation, a shortage of ministers, and the rigidity of formalized religion had led many to seek spiritual satisfaction through evangelism and revivalism. This type of Christianity emphasized personal piety over doctrine, stressing the necessity of conversion, or “being saved,” and the importance of a Christian lifestyle. Russian-German immigrants transplanted these religious attitudes to their


new home in Dakota, where they formed prayer circles and in 1887
organized a conference that afforded believers the opportunity for
fellowship and consultation. Most of these pious *Betbrüder* ("praying
brothers") also wished to retain their church membership, but
some United States denominations would not accept them. Many
of those brethren who rejected separating from mainstream Prot-
estantism eventually joined the Congregational church, which al-
lowed them to maintain their pietistic religious life through prayer
meetings and worship services held by laymen in private homes.
All of these meetings were conducted exclusively in German, with
many conservatives holding fast to this rule until nearly 1950.

The work of mainstream Protestant pastors among these immi-
grants was successful only for those familiar with their pietistic
disposition. Pastor J. Koeppel arrived in Eureka in 1893 and discov-
ered that the people there were "capable of hearing a sermon every
day and still attend one or more meetings." Koeppel wrote that in
their meetings "they used the *Short Hiller, Prayer Book for All Days
of the Year*, and they used it in the way books were used to cast
lots. The man conducting the meeting opened the book at random
and then used one of the verses on each page as the basis of his
interpretation. Then the entire chapter or psalm from which the
verse had been taken was read. Then the leader talked about the
words he had read, and when he felt he had talked enough or did
not know what else to say, he called on someone else to continue
talking." Following these interpretations, in which only the men were
allowed to participate, came singing and "loud, extemporaneous

18. George J. Eisenach, *Das religiöse leben unter den Russlanddeutschen in Russ-
land und Amerika* (Marburg, Germany: Hermann Rathmann, 1950), pp. 48, 111, 143,
172-78, and *Pietism and the Russian Germans in the United States* (Berne, Ind.: Berne
Publishers, 1948), pp. 71, 178-79, 187. Russian-Germans who have emigrated from Russia
to West Germany within the last several years show a faith similar to those who settled
in Dakota a century ago. In 1988, the German magazine *Stern* reported them con-
ducting worship services in private homes. Elderly people whose lives in Siberia
were lives of severe hardship in particular exhibit such devout and prayerful char-
acteristics that they are not readily accepted in their new homeland. *Stern* told of
a woman who took her Bible along to a senior citizens’ meeting where she began
to pray and sing religious songs. After half an hour, she was the only one left. In
her prayers, the woman asked God not to make her so rich that she would forget
him, echoing the common fear parents have of their children being enticed by the
temptations of the wealthy and hedonistic society around them. They believe that
the danger is greater than it was in Russia because in Germany they live in freedom.
*Stern*, 22 Dec. 1988, pp. 62-70. This same problem faced the settlers in Dakota a cen-
tury ago, prompting a Lutheran minister to remark that in America the immigrants
were free to join any church or no church at all.
praying.’ Koeppel continued: ‘It must be said to their credit that these people knew all the songs by heart; they were mostly songs out of the hymn-books and collections of songs they brought with them from Russia. After the singing got them into the right mood, individual women too began to pray in a loud and unrestrained way. The whole prayer meeting usually lasted about two hours.’

Among Roman Catholics, as among Protestants, people wanted to be ministered to in their mother tongue. While it was not unusual to have German Lutheran and Norwegian Lutheran churches—each with relatively few members—on the same street, the cohesiveness

19. Quoted in Eisenberg, History of the First Dakota-District, p. 139.
of the Catholic church prevented such dramatic divisions. Typically, a priest who spoke both English and the language of most of the parishioners was assigned to a parish. He then preached in both languages. In some mixed parishes, quarrels developed among German, Russian-German, Irish, and Bohemian members, and priests sometimes had difficulties with their congregations. Martin Marty, a Benedictine from the German-speaking part of Switzerland who served as the first bishop of South Dakota, had to use great tact in dealing with his priests, who had come from nine foreign countries as well as the United States. Following Bishop Marty’s transfer to Saint Cloud, Minnesota, in 1895, a considerable effort was made to have another German-speaking bishop appointed. Fourteen German priests of the diocese met to formulate a petition to the pope in this regard. A Yankton newspaper predicted that Father James M. Cleary, one of the candidates for the bishopric, would not be chosen because “the Sioux Falls diocese is largely a German one, and the people do not relish interference by the priesthood with their beliefs and practices as to beer drinking.” According to the writer, Father Cleary was a strong temperance advocate whose “principles in that regard would be a severe handicap to his success.” Although the newspaper used an unusual line of reasoning, its prediction was partly accurate; church officials ultimately chose Thomas O’Gorman, the son of Irish immigrants, to head the diocese.

The Catholic population of Dakota Territory grew demonstrably during the mid-1880s. In 1884, the territory had forty-five priests serving eighty-two churches and sixty-seven missions. Three years later, eighty-four priests were ministering to approximately fifty thousand people. As among the German Protestants, common faith and language united German Catholics, and they often settled as a group. Pioneers began building churches immediately after constructing their own homes, and the 1880s saw the founding of many predominantly German Catholic parishes. In 1883, fifty Austrian families settled ten miles from Redfield, naming their community “Maria Zell” after the famous Austrian pilgrimage town. The town of Kranzburg was laid out in October of 1878, and its new settlers erected the first Catholic church within a one-hundred-mile radius the next spring. Established in 1883 by families from Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Nebraska, the town of Hoven provides another example of the

German Catholics brought the wrought-iron grave cross, an artistic symbol of faith, to South Dakota.

pioneers' initiative in meeting their own spiritual needs. These Catholic settlers at first obtained the services of a Benedictine priest who traveled from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. After constructing a small church in 1885, the forerunner of the awe-inspiring Romanesque structure built in the 1920s, the parish received its own priest. In keeping with German tradition, parishioners next established a parochial school that served one hundred families in and around the town. In fact, ten of the thirteen church schools in Dakota in 1885 were in communities served by German priests. A majority of the clergy at the Catholic Indian missions was also of German stock.22

Another manifestation of cultural unity among German Catholics was an emphasis upon visual symbols. The wrought-iron grave cross is one example of a religious symbol that has become a folk art and is still readily visible today. Wrought-iron crosses can be found in

numerous cemeteries in North and South Dakota, especially those of the Black Sea Germans, who most likely brought this tradition with them from the Catholic areas of southern Germany. These crosses are striking evidence of the pioneers’ determination to mark the graves of their loved ones with something artistic even though in the early years of settlement they had little material with which to work.23 To the German Catholic pioneers, death was an ever-present aspect of life. Not feared as a cruel or unjust force, death was rather thought of as inevitable and impartial. It was the entryway into heaven; the dead had reached their goal and were at rest. Two German words for cemetery are Gottesacker and Friedhof, meaning “God’s field” and “peace yard.” The official dirge sung at the burials of German Catholics in the prairie cemeteries of Dakota was “Das Schicksal,” which stressed the fragile nature of human existence. After the priest had placed the first shovel of earth on the coffin, the assembled mourners sang the hymn whose message and haunting German lyrics reminded them of both their destiny and their heritage:

Das Schicksal wird keinen verschonen.
Der Tod verfolgt Szepter und Kronen.
Eitel, eitel ist zeitliches Glück.
Alles, alles fällt wieder zurück,
Fällt wieder zurück.

Der Leib, von der Erde genommen,
Kehrt dorthin woher er gekommen,
Reichtum, Schönheit, Witz, glänzende Macht,
Alles decket die ewige Nacht,
Die ewige Nacht.

Was weinet ihr, Freunde und Brüder?
Wir sehen einander ja wieder,
An dem Tage des jüngsten Gerichts.
Fürchtet Gott nur und fürchtet sonst nichts,
Und fürchtet sonst nichts.

(Fate will spare no one.
Death pursues scepter and crown.
Empty, empty is the happiness of this world.
Everything, everything will return again,
Will return to earth again.

The body which was taken from the earth.
Returns to the place from where it came.
Wealth, beauty, wit, glittering power,
All are covered by the eternal night,
The eternal night.

Why are you weeping, friends and brothers?
We will see each other again,
On the day of the Last Judgment.
Fear only God and nothing else,
And nothing else."  

Among the first German-speaking settlers to come to Dakota Territory were the Mennonites, a group that had also composed the first organized German immigration to North America in 1683, when thirteen families from the Rhineland founded Germantown, Pennsylvania. Starting in 1873, Mennonites came to Dakota from Russia to avoid the czar’s program of russianization for German colonists. They objected in particular to the military service requirement, which countered the pacifism of the Mennonite faith. Other religious teachings of this sect, which developed during the Reformation in Friesland and was influenced by the Anabaptist movement in Switzerland, include belief in adult baptism, the separation of church and state, the withdrawal of the Christian from the world, and the refusal to take oaths.  

Several branches of Mennonites reside in South Dakota, but all share the same basic beliefs. The group is most strongly represented in eastern Hutchinson County, particularly the area around Freeman. There, Freeman Junior College, founded in 1900, soon began supplying enough teachers to operate an elementary school system that was virtually entirely Mennonite. Through this junior college, attended by young people of Swiss Volhynian, Low German, and Hutterite background, the various Mennonite groups have learned to work together and better understand one another. Mennonites integrated into the larger society to a much greater extent than did the Hutterites, and they rapidly became conversant in English. Even so, services at the Bethesda Mennonite Church near Freeman were conducted entirely in German until 1938 and then in both German and English until approximately 1950.  

Similar in faith to the Mennonites are the Hutterische Brüder, or Hutterites, who originated in Moravia in 1528 and for the most part live on communal farms. To Jacob Huter, the founder of this sect who was burned at the stake in 1536, giving up private possessions was a Christian necessity. In 1874, a group of forty Hutterite families
immigrated to Dakota from Russia and established a *Bruderhof* in Bon Homme County. In the same year, a second group established the Wolf Creek Colony in Hutchinson County, and three years later a third community was organized at Elm Spring. All of the Hutterite colonies in South Dakota grew from these three original communities. To this day, Hutterites retain their German language, using an archaic Carinthian dialect (from Kärnten, Austria) for everyday purposes and endeavoring to use High German in religious services and in German school. In addition to owning property in common, they have tried to retain the dress, customs, and simple life of their ancestors and continue to refuse to take part in war activities.\(^{27}\)

Hutterites and Mennonites have for centuries resisted the demands of the state to take up arms. In America, Mennonites and others exempted themselves from military service during the Revolutionary and Civil wars through the payment of money. They appear to have impressed Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, who said in 1789, "Perhaps those German sects of Christians among us who refuse to bear arms for the shedding of human blood may be preserved by divine providence as the center of a circle, which shall gradually embrace all nations in

a perpetual treaty of friendship and peace. With the entrance of the United States into World War I, however, the Mennonites and especially the Hutterites in South Dakota found themselves in a difficult position because of their beliefs, which prevented them from supporting any war activities, including the purchase of war bonds. The public attitude toward their stance quickly became one of hostile intolerance. In one instance, a mob rounded up over a thousand sheep and a hundred cattle belonging to a Hutterite colony near Yankton and sold them at auction to buy liberty bonds with the proceeds.

The Hutterite doctrine of nonresistance prohibited even the appearance of support for the war effort. The Selective Service Act in effect during World War I required conscientious objectors who accepted noncombatant service such as work in reconstruction hospitals to become members of the armed forces, which meant wearing uniforms. Two young Hutterites from the Freeman area received prison sentences because they refused to comply. The men were first sentenced to twenty-five years, but reviewing authority later reduced their terms to fifteen years. What may be the most grievous example of the mistreatment of conscientious objectors in the United States happened to four Hutterite men from Hutchinson County. When these men refused to put on uniforms, maintaining that their religious beliefs and church laws took precedence over the laws of the government, they were sentenced to twenty years in Alcatraz. In November of 1918, the four were transferred to Fort Leavenworth, where they received such brutal treatment that two of them died. As a final insult, the body of one of the men was presented to his wife dressed in the uniform he had refused to wear.

Only forty years earlier, the Hutterites had left Russia because they were persecuted for being German and for being unwilling to serve in the military. For the same reason, they left the United States during and after World War I, when all but one South Dakota colony, Bon Homme, moved to Canada. They sold their land at bargain prices and then were forced to use a part of the proceeds to buy war bonds and contribute to the Red Cross. In 1919, South Dakota

had also banned the incorporation of communal societies, a law that was relaxed during the drought- and depression-ridden 1930s. Although most Hutterites remained in Canada, seven colonies had returned to the state by 1950.^^

Thus, as the Hutterites demonstrate, those Russian-Germans who immigrated to Dakota for economic, political, or religious reasons did not always find life easy here. The hardships the region's German settlers encountered were so great that only their shared heritage and their religious faith saw them through. Wells went dry, rivers flooded, prairie fires destroyed homes, illness claimed lives, and people were persecuted for their beliefs. Through it all, the common traditions and beliefs the immigrants had brought from their former homelands furnished them with the courage and hope that allowed them to endure and become a vital part of the Dakota mosaic.
