

Turkey Red

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The Columbus story shows the intervention of chance in history at its most capricious. The following tale has its own logic, but the confluence of serendipitous events makes it marvelous and uplifting, especially in our current dark times. It was first brought to my attention by my father back in the early 1960s at the height of America's role as wheat breadbasket of the world. America, and especially Kansas, was supplying essential wheat to the recently independent country of India and to the Soviet Union, whose long struggle with collective farming (and other factors), especially in the Ukraine, had led to its dependency on imports.

I will not try to narrate the story O'Henry-like with a surprise ending, but announce the amazing coincidence from the start—America was supplying the USSR its *own wheat*! The Kansas wheat was derived from a special hardy winter variety called Turkey Red that had originated in the Ukraine and was brought to America by Mennonites. So the story is how this all came about. The tale is well-known to Kansans and now it is available in *Wikipedia*, but last century I had to resort to special books and publications to find out the details, such as the works of Cornelius Krahn ([1]) and C. Henry Smith ([2]). I present the account largely through their words (Krahn's more personal and Smith's more detailed).

Prussia and the Vistula (1550s – 1770s)

Dutch Mennonites left The Netherlands during the 16th century and settled along the European frontier of that time—the swampy Vistula Delta near Danzig. As experts in dike building and draining flooded territories they were welcome colonists. Here they had an opportunity to establish their “church without spot and wrinkle” and keep it separate from the “world” which had persecuted them in The Netherlands. For about two centuries they remained “untouched”



Prussia and Vistula River 1713-95 (*The Map Archive*)

by the surrounding civilization. With some exceptions they were privileged under Polish kings and under Prussian dukes and kings to maintain their cultural and religious integrity. They used the Dutch of their forefathers at home and in church. They were thrifty and prosperous. ... Around 1750 Dutch had been completely abandoned and High German had become the language of the pulpit and literature while the Low German of the country became the every day language. This was the beginning of a gradual disintegration of the original Dutch Mennonite brotherhood along the Vistula River. In the assimilation into the surrounding Prussian civilization some of the religious principles were lost. Others were in danger of a like fate.¹

¹ [1] p.2

The End of the Special Privileges in Prussia

It was evident now that both State and Church were determined to stop the further growth of Mennonitism. Hampered by heavy taxes, unable to secure new homes for their growing young people, and fearful of the future, the Prussian Mennonites began to look about for a new home where they might be free to live up to their convictions without governmental restraint. After considering several possibilities, including America, they finally decided to accept the invitation which fortunately had been extended them just a few years before, in 1786, by Catherine of Russia.²

Catherine the Great and the New Russia of Southern Ukraine (The “Edge”)

To the Prussian Mennonites, the attractive invitation sent them by Catherine of Russia just at the time of their greatest need must have seemed like a special act of Providence. Many of them turned their faces toward the proffered asylum. It was not the first time, however, that this hardhearted, though farsighted, ruler had offered liberal inducements to thrifty German farmers for settling on the Crown lands of her Tartar frontier. As early as 1763 soon after her accession to the throne, she had promised most liberal terms to any desirable colonists who might wish to locate upon her newly won lands along the Volga. These promises included free transportation; religious toleration, with the right of establishing and controlling their own churches, schools, and their own forms of local government; loans with which to establish factories and other industries; and military exemption.

As a result of these attractive terms thousands of Germans of every faith found their way into South Russia during the next forty years. ...

It was a little later, in 1786, that the special invitation was sent to the Mennonites along the lower Vistula. This was just a few years after Catherine had wrested additional territory from Turkey bordering the Azov. Much of this became Crown land upon which she wished to settle industrious farmers whose well kept fields might serve as models for the shiftless nomadic tribes about them.³

Migration from the Vistula to the Ukrainian Steppes (1780s – 1820s)

Several thousands of Mennonites left their homes in Danzig and Prussia to escape the “world” and to settle on the steppes of the Ukraine. Here, in an entirely heterogeneous civilization, they brought their German Mennonite culture and economic life to a full development. The *Old Colony* was settled by 228 families in 1789 at the mouth of the Chortitza River on the banks of the Dnieper, hence, referred to as the *Chortitza Colony*. The second, located some 100



New Russia, Ukraine, with Mennonite colonies and seaports, c.1897 (Wikipedia)

² [2] p.17

³ [2] p.22

miles to the southeast along the Molotschna River, was founded in 1803 and called the *Molotschna Colony*. ... The founders of the Molotschna Colony were mainly experienced farmers who brought more implements, furniture, money and other possessions with them. These, therefore, became the most successful settlers of the Ukraine. Klaus says, "Soon the Mennonites achieved among us a hitherto unknown prosperity and an excellent organization. On the steppes, where in previous times there had been no water or even one shrub, now rose, as if by magic, one prosperous settlement next to the other. There is plenty of well water, there are groves of orchard, mulberry and shade trees. In the well-kept pastures are herds of sheep, cattle, and horses of all kinds and excellent breeds." What accounts for the beginning of this success? Mennonites had always been, in a way, "other worldly." Because of their separation from the world, based on religious beliefs they became predominantly a rural people. Bible and plow became inseparable for them. Religious tradition and heritage made them good farmers. Thus agriculture became "a religious duty." ... This religious duty found an opportunity in the steppes of the Ukraine as nowhere else.⁴ ...

The Rise of Wheat and the "Granary of Russia"

The crop that caused so sudden and complete a revolution was wheat. Around 1850 approximately one-third of the land was plowed and only one-third of the crops raised on this was wheat, mainly summer wheat. The introduction of summer fallow helped to bring about a change. It assured a better crop. Also implements were improved. The growth of larger cities in the neighborhood, Russia's penetration into the Crimea, and the opening of ports along the Black Sea made wheat a desired commodity for shipment into the interior as well as for export. Thus wheat production increased. Gradually winter wheat became more and more prominent. The Mennonites took the lead in selecting varieties best suited to their climatic conditions and in producing the finest types of flour.⁵ ...

Big estate farming was another outgrowth of the wheat revolution. One-third of all of the land owned by the Mennonites belonged to the three hundred eighty-four families, the largest estate consisting of fifty-four thousand acres. But three-fourths of the Mennonites farmed about two hundred acres each and lived in the traditional villages of thirty to fifty homesteads. They are the pioneers that made the Ukraine the "granary of Russia."⁶

End of a Century of the Special Relationship in the Ukraine (1870s)

It will thus be observed from ... the peculiar local institutions which prevailed among the Mennonites of Russia that they formed a distinct and compact group within the Empire, separated from the natives by social and political as well as religious barriers, and held firmly together as a group by ties of language, religion, racial pride, consciousness of a superior culture, and by special political and civil privileges. Of marriage affiliations with the native Russians there was none whatever. All this made them a veritable state within a state.

It can readily be seen that this was an anomalous situation, and could not last forever. Under the dominion of a Czar, discrimination might be possible. Under an autocracy favored groups might be granted privileges above those of the other subjects of the realm; but democracy being a great leveller would ultimately demand the abolition of all such group distinctions. And so the decision of the Czar in 1870 to put an end to the highly privileged status of his German colonists was both inevitable and logical, thoroughly in keeping with the growing democracy of the times. But it came sooner than the colonists had expected.

⁴ [1] p.2

⁵ JOS: More about the wheat will be discussed below p.6

⁶ [1] pp.4-6

The determination of the Czar to inaugurate a policy of universal military service, abolishing the exemptions enjoyed by his non-Russian subjects heretofore, and to thoroughly Russianize his German as well as other foreigners living within his realm was largely the result of the growing spirit of the militarism of the times and especially the unification of the German Empire in 1871. At any rate the program of Russianization proposed at this time was thorough-going and far reaching. It included not only the abolition of all military exemptions, but complete government control of the school systems in the colonies, the Russian language instead of the German as a medium of instruction, abolition of the special German *Fuersorge-Komitee* at Odessa, in return for direct governmental control of the German colonies in local affairs from St. Petersburg. In short, the days of special privileges were to close; and all Germans were to become full-fledged Russians.⁷

Looking for New Frontiers

The first man to leave Russia to investigate conditions in America was Bernhard Warkentin. Although he was not an official delegate he reported his findings to his friend, David Goerz, in beautifully written, lengthy letters, which were duplicated and circulated in the villages to be read at mass meetings. The reports were received enthusiastically and paved the way for a large migration. ...

Meanwhile the United States and Canadian railroad and government agencies had heard about the possible exodus of successful Mennonite farmers from Russia. A sharp rivalry started. First W. Hespeler was sent to the Ukraine by the Canadian Government and later C. B. Schmidt by the Santa Fe Railroad to induce the immigrants to settle in Manitoba and Kansas, respectively. Warkentin and the above mentioned Mennonite delegates were greatly aided in choosing new homes by these and other agencies, as well as by the Mennonites who had settled in Pennsylvania and other states since the founding of Germantown in 1683.⁸ Warkentin had his headquarters among the Mennonites in Summerfield, Illinois, whence a number of them joined him in settling in Halstead, Kansas. Most prominent among this group was Christian Krehbiel, who helped Warkentin and his countrymen to establish themselves in this country.

After his return Hespeler informed his government that the Mennonites were looking for enough land to settle in compact, semi-independent communities consisting of a number of villages with their own schools. They were coming to use the plowshare, but not the sword. The Canadian government was willing to grant these requests. Most of the delegates, however, as well as Warkentin preferred the climatic conditions of the United States, to that of Manitoba.⁹

[The US, however, would not grant full military exemption, but it did have "laws exempting

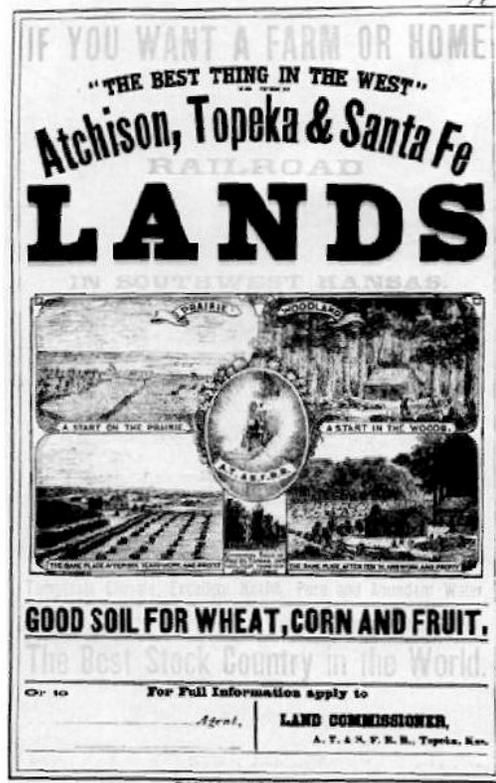
⁷ [2] pp.43-44

⁸ ([3]) "As representatives of a mass migration movement they came at one of the most advantageous moments in American history. This was a time when railroads were being built all across the central and western sections of the United States. To encourage the settlement of the country, the government had granted millions of acres to railroads that successfully completed their lines. In 1872, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe had finished its tracks through Kansas to the Colorado line, thereby earning a grant of three million acres. A map of this area in central and western Kansas resembled a checkerboard, railroad land and government land being located on alternate sections.

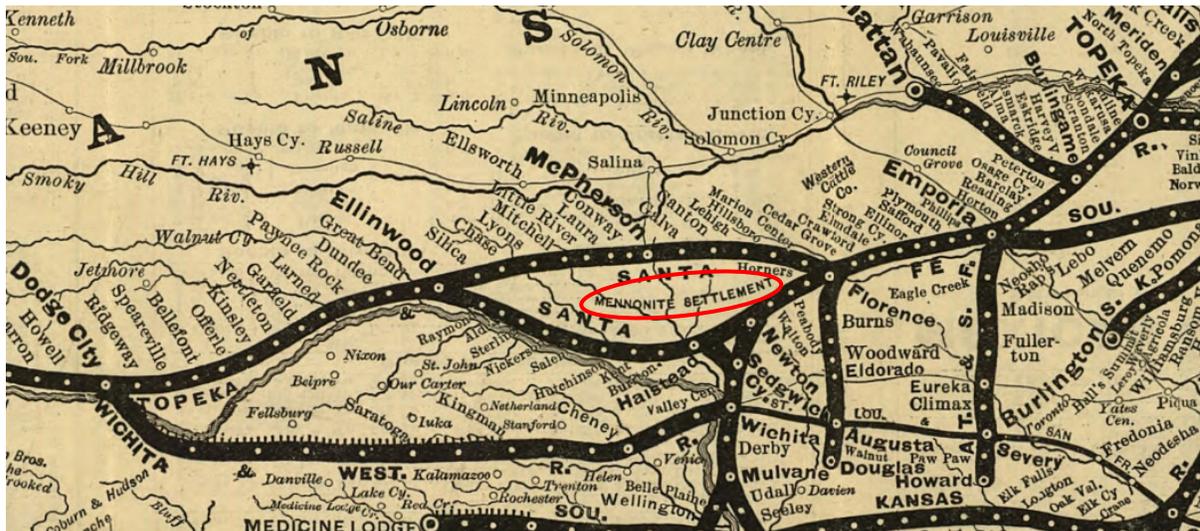
To develop its grants, which extended ten miles on each side of its line and included one of the potentially richest farming regions in Kansas, the Santa Fe exerted every conceivable effort. To its officials the news of a possible mass migration of skilled farmers from Russia seemed like manna straight from heaven. Learning that Schmidt had already corresponded with the Mennonites and that German was his native tongue, the Santa Fe hired him in January of 1873 as its commissioner of immigration. Schmidt met with great success, and it is largely to his credit that the bulk of the Mennonite migration was finally directed to Kansas."

⁹ [1] p.7

conscientious objectors and granting them non-combatant service as duty in the hospitals.”] ... Thus the Mennonites of Russia had to choose between noncombatant service in the United States and Russia and complete exemption in Canada. The only difference between the United States and Russia was that the latter had peacetime conscription, while the former was to have no conscription except during a war. On this basis the Mennonites of Russia could at that time be classified into three main groups. The more progressive culturally, approximately two-thirds of the total number remained in Russia. The most conservative Mennonites who had lived in the *Old Colony* and its daughter-colonies migrated to Canada because they were promised complete exemption from all compulsory military service by the Canadian Government. After World War I, however, a large number of them moved to Mexico and Paraguay because they felt that the government had not respected the integrity of a promise. The third, a moderately conservative group, came from the *Molotschna Colony* and settled in the United States. ... Altogether about 18,000 Mennonites came to North America during the decade following 1873. Of these; 10,000 came to the United States, settling mostly in Kansas, and the other 8,000 went to Manitoba.¹⁰



An advertising poster of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad in the 1870's telling the world of the good railroad land to be hand "in southwest Kansas." ([5])



Mennonite Settlement in Kansas, including Halstead, Newton, Hillsboro, Canton, McPherson along the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad line. 1884 ([4])

¹⁰ [1] p.8

Turkey Red

One seed transplanted from the steppes to the prairies grew and multiplied far beyond any expectation. This little kernel of wheat that fell into the ground has conquered the prairie and made it the bread basket of the nation. The seed crossed the ocean in the handmade chests along with many other types of seed without anyone being aware that it was *the* one to play so significant a role in the life of millions. It was the hard winter wheat grown natively along the coasts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Here it was raised by Cossacks, Ukrainians, Turks, Greeks, Bulgarians, and Germans. It was used at home and exported to regions around the Mediterranean for macaroni. Around 1850 the London market began to appreciate the peculiar qualities of this wheat because of the strength of the flour it produced. The growing demand, the improvement of machinery, and the opening of ports along the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov made the Ukraine the granary of Europe. According to H. D. Seymour, the ports of Berdiansk and Mariopol, near the *Molotschna Colony*, shipped the best quality of wheat. Cornelius Jansen stated that the Mennonites of the *Molotschna Colony* produced, during the year 1855, about a half million bushels of wheat. Thus it is not surprising that in 1873 the senator from Minnesota spoke to Congress of competition which America met on the London wheat market from Russian shipments and urged that the Mennonites should be given opportunity to settle in the Middle West in order to increase wheat production in this country.¹¹ ...

In 1874 the Mennonites from Russia sowed their first wheat in this country. It was nothing extraordinary. Many people had sowed wheat in Kansas before. At this time T. C. Henry, of Salina, had thousands of acres of wheat. After he had tried many varieties of soft wheat he said: "Finally my attention was directed to the **Turkey** or **Red Russian** variety. It was a hard wheat and at first regarded as much inferior to the Red May, but it proved very hardy and yielded prolifically. I substituted it, I think, in 1877 ... I know nothing as to its origin. The wheat farmers of Kansas should offer a prize for that information." Thus wrote "the Kansas wheat king" some years after the arrival of the Mennonites. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that an editor at Marion, who lived among the Mennonites who raised the red Turkey wheat, urged in vain that his readers report their findings with this variety. A contemporary of that time said: "Day after day, through all the fall and winter, the Mennonites came in with wheat. The native American stands on the corner and complains, but the Mennonites come in with wheat. The Farmers' Alliance holds its secret and noiseless session and nothing breaks the silence save the chuck of the Mennonites' wheat laden wagons . . ." After experimenting with different varieties they realized that the hard Turkey winter wheat was best suited to the soil and climatic conditions of Kansas. Gradually this wheat spread into the neighboring non-Mennonite counties.¹² ...

Thus the prairies of the Middle West gradually became the granary of the nation and one of the major bread baskets of the world. ...

The share of the Mennonites in transforming the prairies into wheat fields is due mainly to the following factors. The prairies were similar to the steppes from which they had come. Therefore the hard winter wheat seed they had brought with them was well adapted to the soil and climatic conditions of their new home. They were born farmers with "plow and Bible" as the symbol of their religious, social, and economic life. Settling in compact and homogeneous communities made the very rapid spread of the hard winter wheat possible. Thus by tilling the soil in quietness and following the way of life set by them for generations they made their contribution without being aware of its vast consequences.¹³

¹¹ [1] p.10

¹² [1] p.11

¹³ [1] p.12

Epilogue

This is the quintessential American tale of refuge, tolerance, and immigrant contributions that built the country. In addition it portrays the irony of history and its unexpected coincidences.

I was curious to see what the current situation was regarding America and wheat production. Ah, the whirligig of history. Surely the Greeks had it right that human events are the result of bored gods toying with humanity.

Commentary: Russian Influence Key In U.S. Wheat Area Decline

Josh Sosland, 2 January 2019 ([6])

In a Dec. 6 posting, Kansas Wheat indicated wheat acreage in the state will likely be down from 2018; in fact, planted area may be the smallest in 100 years. Wet weather during planting season has been identified as a culprit in keeping growers from their fields. But 2018 is hardly the first year rainy or snowy weather has interfered with wheat growers during planting season — many more influences have brought about wheat area atrophy in Kansas and across the United States.

One factor gaining attention has been the sluggish improvement in wheat yields versus those for corn and soybeans. The compounding effects of this deficit have been amplified by the introduction of drought-resistant varieties of corn, giving growers in states like Kansas more economically attractive alternatives to wheat. Rising domestic demand for corn, especially for biofuel, and for soybeans, principally for export, have further contributed to the erosion of wheat plantings.

A wild card factoring into prospective U.S. wheat production has been the emergence of Russia and Ukraine as major grain exporters. While the nations have been gaining prominence as exporters for many years, the transformative heights achieved over the past few bear note.

In 2016-17, Russia became the world's top wheat exporter for the first time since before the Russian Revolution, shipping 28 million tonnes abroad. That total was blown out of the water a year later with Russia's exports reaching 41 million tonnes. Russia and Ukraine combined in 2017-18 to export 59 million tonnes of wheat. For perspective, consider that this export total was significantly greater than the entire production of the United States, which totaled 47 million tonnes that year. U.S. wheat exports in 2017-18 were only 25 million tonnes.

In recent years the United States has lost market share with many leading traditional customers, including Egypt and Nigeria. Russia has a freight advantage to these markets estimated recently at about \$12 per tonne (33¢ a bushel) and has benefited in 2018 from a sharp currency devaluation. Additionally, U.S. exporters have failed to participate much in business with emerging wheat import markets, including Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and Bangladesh, where consumers have increasingly shifted to wheat consumption from rice.

By way of background, the demise of the Soviet Union and Russia's shift from a planned to a market economy resulted in a steep decline in agricultural production in the 1990s. Production began to expand again in the late 1990s as the country became more integrated in the world agricultural economy. Producers benefited from the import of better western machinery, seeds and animal stock, and, in the 2000s, Russia began exporting wheat with its world export share of wheat averaging 12% in 2011-14.

Even in 2011-14, though, area planted to grains in Russia was about half the peak of 80 million hectares planted during the Soviet era. The surge in production and exports prompted questions about the potential upside in the years ahead, particularly if additional land is returned to production.

The recovery in planted area in Russia has been centered in one significant region — the south. The area has benefited from advantages in soil, climate, infrastructure and geography, notably its proximity to major ports on the Black Sea. Other key agricultural districts have not yet recovered from the transition to a market economy.

U.S. Department of Agriculture analysis casts doubt on whether area planted to grains is likely to rise meaningfully in the years ahead, barring a rally in prices sustained over several years. Grain plantings for harvest in 2018-19 are not much different from the 2011-14 average, and the cost of production is indicated to be considerably higher in areas still idled. In fact, growers have shown an inclination to shift grain acreage to oilseeds in recent years. Still, Russia's meteoric emergence as the world's leading wheat exporter suggests this former top importer will remain a potent force helping shape the profile of the U.S. wheat economy in ways demanding close attention.

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