

Letters from an American Farmer: The Eastern European and Russian Correspondence of Roswell Garst, edited by Richard Lowitt and Harold Lee. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1987. xxxii, 230 pp. Photographs, notes, appendix, index. \$26.00 cloth.

Reading other people's mail often can be fun. Fortunately Roswell Garst's correspondence falls into this category. Even before completing the book, I concluded that the world would be a better place if more Americans were like Coon Rapids, Iowa's most famous resident. In part, Garst was simply a superior salesman. However, he also was part of that strain of Iowa progressivism that generated individuals like Henry Wallace: people who hoped that new production techniques would improve the quality of life for everyone throughout the world, and who realized that the Cold War could destroy civilization. Roswell Garst devoted much of the last twenty-two years of his life (he died in 1977) to trying to improve relations with the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies largely by helping them learn how to increase their agricultural output.

Letters from an American Farmer deals with this aspect of Garst's life. He wanted to contribute to the betterment of living conditions by improving people's diets. The best way to do this, he believed, was to increase the quality of livestock by improving its food supply. He recommended (at great length and frequently—the letters are a little repetitive) the following steps: (1) the use of high quality hybrid seeds (especially corn); (2) the extensive use of chemicals for fertilizer, herbicides, and insecticides; (3) the mechanization of agriculture; (4) the adoption of modern irrigation techniques; and (5) the construction of all-weather rural roads.

Garst's devotion to increased productivity probably differed little from that of many farmers. What set him apart was his eagerness to assist Soviet-bloc countries to adopt these techniques. At a time when most Americans were gripped by a rigid anticommunist mentality, Garst held stunningly different (though substantially correct) views. He did not think that the Russians were out to conquer the world. Rather he believed that their experiences in World War II made them hate war in ways that Americans did not. Garst also thought that Communist leaders were motivated by a desire to improve the living conditions of ordinary people, people the old ruling classes had exploited ruthlessly. Furthermore, Garst understood why the American economy was so much more productive than those of Communist societies. The difference was due neither to the brilliance of Americans nor to the unworkable nature of communism but to concrete historical conditions. Whereas the United States had a two-hundred-year tradition of

relative freedom and had not fought a major war on its own soil since 1865, Soviet-bloc nations had escaped from semifeudalism only recently and had absorbed staggering losses during World War II. Their continued heavy expenditures for armaments, caused by an understandable fear of another war rather than a desire to expand, further slowed economic growth. Moreover, their soil and climate were not as good as those in the United States. With time and an end to the Cold War, Garst was confident that Soviet-bloc production could approximate America's.

Although Garst sometimes seemed a little naive (for example, he ignored the harmful side-effects of chemicals and underestimated the strength of anticommunist elements within the United States), his correspondence makes for interesting reading by the general public. The editors provide a helpful introduction and wisely include a copy of Garst's 1964 letter to the Soviet Union (which was published in *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*) discussing the agricultural opportunities of the USSR. This letter deserves to be widely read in this country.

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Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History, edited by Robert M. Taylor, Jr., and Ralph J. Crandall. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986. xv, 322 pp. Notes, index. \$34.95 cloth.

All of the essays in *Generations and Change* bear upon a common theme, yet they are startling in their variety and differences of method and focus. They move from a recapitulation of the mutual distrust of historians and genealogists for each others' work to specific case studies that offer extreme revisions of both historical and genealogical norms. Any researcher should be delighted at the presentations of new sources of information.

Attention to the matter of genealogy as a research field allied to but separate from "history" predates most of the essays collected here. Mention of some of these efforts can place the assertions and conclusions made within the book in some historiographical context. In 1977 Gerald George commented that views of the past gleaned from local histories really do matter, but that many of these publications give a frighteningly false picture. He cited nostalgia and boosterism as the main villains in this process. Peter R. Jacobsen was more blunt. The problem, as he stated it in 1981, is that, "often, virtual battle lines have been drawn between genealogists and archivists, as each group has seen the other as the major obstacle to accomplishing mutually exclusive goals." He blamed historians more than genealogists for defining

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