

## **The Imperial Order of Muscovites The Rise and Fall of a Fraternal Order**

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In the annals of fraternal organizations, one has group has garnered such a reputation that it has captured the interest of more than one researcher. The Imperial Order of Muscovites, a social organization composed entirely of members of the Odd Fellows, remains one the most interesting and mysterious groups to ever exist.

The Muscovites were founded in October of 1893 near Cincinnati, Ohio (the town of Queen City, to be specific.) Initially, there were 20 members of the group, but by May of 1894, the group had blossomed to about 80 participants. While Arabian themes were all the rage for social groups, the Muscovites went with a decidedly different motif – that of Czarist Russia. Little is known about why they decided on this theme, but that curious choice is what makes them so memorable today. They promptly declared the initial body the “Imperial Kremlin” and decreed that all local bodies would be called Kremfins. The president of the group was to be known as the Czar, while the national president would be styled the Imperial Czar. With the basics of the fraternity down, the members began spreading word of their new club.

It is thought that the Imperial Order was one of the early adopters of the fraternal insurance movement. When a member of the Order died, his widow would be entitled to a death benefit. In a time when insurance was scare or very expensive, this would have been the only way to purchase such protection. Combining the interesting motif and the insurance aspect, the group was ripe for popularity.

However, few records exist from these early days of the Imperial Order. The next mention of them in public records comes in April of 1910, when it’s reported that the Sovereign Grand Lodge (the national ruling body of the Odd Fellows), lead by Grand Sire Kuykendall, criticized the Muscovites, along with several other similar organizations. The Grand Sire went so far as to publicly “ban” Odd Fellows from belonging to the group. This ban was short lived though, as the next Grand Sire, John B. Cockrum, ruled in September of 1911 that any Odd Fellow could belong to the Muscovites.

Now having a bit of legitimacy, the Muscovites convened in July of 1912 in Denver, Colorado. This is the first mention of the Order expanding to the Western United States, where it would become most prevalent. At this convention, the group adopted the “Russian Busby” as their official regalia. The end result of this change was a fez, unique to the Order, of charcoal grey color, with a black band of fur around the brim. Other important pieces of legislation were introduced as well, including barring intoxicating beverages from meetings, and some changes in officer titles. Following the Convention, the Imperial Officers were listed: Imperial Czar, Imperial Regent, Imperial Grand Duke, Imperial Governor, Imperial Counselor, Imperial Minister of Records, Imperial Minister

of Finance, Imperial Custodian, Imperial Inspector, Imperial Inner Guard, Imperial Outer Guard, three Chancellors (who are presumed to have been the trustees of the body.)

It is about this time that internal jargon began to develop for the Muscovites. They started calling their members “Nobles” and the conferring of their degrees as “Great Bear Hunts.” This is a change from earlier records that refer to the ceremonials as “Trodding the Steppes.”

By 1917, the Imperial Order finds itself being urged to merge with other social bodies that restrict their membership only to Odd Fellows. Several such organizations had sprung up all over the country since the turn of the century. In an effort to control these disparate fraternities, the Sovereign Grand Lodge advocated for their consolidation. The first step in this process was taken in 1917 when the Muscovites joined with the Oriental Order of Humility and Perfection (along with their ladies auxiliary, the Ladies of the Orient) to hold a joint national convention. As with any major undertaking, such a merger would take many years to come to fruition. In the case of the Muscovites, it would never actually occur, as the group could never agree with the others on the specifics.

This brings us to March 5, 1923, when the Oriental Order of Humility and Perfection sent representatives to meet with the Imperial Order of Muscovites in Denver, Colorado. A joint committee of six men (three from each group) met and finalized a resolution for the merger of the two bodies. The Muscovites had previously agreed that whatever their committee decided would be binding for the Imperial Order. On the other hand, the OOHP representatives were required to report back to their national body and gain a resolution to complete the process. The merger was to create a new group, with a decidedly “American” theme, leaving no trace of the other two organizations in its ritual or regalia. All the ground work seemed to be in place for the planned consolidation.

The Oriental Order called a special meeting for June 23, 1923, for the express purpose of ratifying the agreement. Ratification was quickly gained and the process moved forward through the planning of a joint convention for the newly united groups.

On August 10, 1923, the first unified meeting was held between all of the organizations, this time in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Representatives from the Oriental Order of Humility and Perfection, the Imperial Order of Muscovites, and several other independent social fraternities, once again met to finalize the outcome. However, the convention ended without a final plan for reorganization. As the Muscovites had voted to disband their national governing bodies, the individual Kremlins were left to fend for themselves. The representatives of these Kremlins chose to elect a national President and national Secretary to facilitate internal communication, but those leaders had no power to enter into any agreement regarding all of the Kremlins still in existence. Thus enters one of the key names in the Muscovite movement, Kelsey G. Lancelot (KG for short) who, at the time, was serving as Czar of the largest Kremlin – Sodak, in South Dakota.

Soon the merger began to fall apart, mostly because of the actions of the OOHP at the end of 1923. The Supreme Clericus (national secretary) of the Oriental Order sent out a

request to all of the Kremlins, demanding they pay per capita taxes and fees to the Supreme Sanctorum (national governing body) of the Oriental Order. This infuriated the Kremlins, who believed they were consolidating to form a new body, rather than being absorbed by the Oriental Order. K.G. Lancelot, acting in his position as Secretary of the interim organization of Kremlins, responded to the Supreme Clericus, demanding equal representation, without the payment of per capita taxes, at a national meeting to be held in Rochester in 1924. It is unknown how the Supreme Clericus responded to this communication. However, it is known that the Oriental Order continued to meet as a national governing body during this interim time.

It appears that in the period of 1924 to 1926, the Muscovites continued to operate as a federation of State level bodies, with the smaller Kremlins looking to the larger ones for leadership. Newspaper accounts substantiate that each Kremlin covered an entire State as its territory. During this time, it has been established that Kremlin Sodak, of South Dakota, was the largest, with nearly 3000 members at the start of 1924. It's no surprise then that the leadership of this Kremlin would be so instrumental in the continuance of the Order over the next several years.

In September of 1924 another joint national convention was held, this time in the aforementioned Rochester, NY. Agreements were made between some of the groups represented and the United Order of Splendor and Perfection was born. While no records have been uncovered of what business was transacted at this convention, it is presumed that the Muscovites were not pleased with the outcome. The UOSP was really a merger of the Pilgrim Knights of Oriental Splendor into the Oriental Order of Humility and Perfection, leaving little trace of the Muscovites, and certainly not meeting the criteria of a new "American" order.

August of 1925 saw the second national meeting of the United Order of Splendor and Perfection, this time being held in Syracuse, NY. Newspaper records show that the constituent organizations, including the Muscovites, saw themselves as more of a confederacy of social groups rather than participants in one national body. It is reasoned that this is what lead to the downfall of the UOSP. By 1926, reports begin circulating of local chapters of the Muscovites, the Oriental Order of Humility and Perfection, the Pilgrim Knights of Oriental Splendor, the Order of Cabiri, and others, transferring their Charters to the newly created Ancient Mystic Order of Samaritans, the successor organization to the UOSP. The local Kremlins would become "Sanctorums" in this process. This was the fate of Kremlin Ufa, of Idaho, which became Ufa Sanctorum by the end of 1925. A similar fate befell Kremlin Kazan, operating in Utah, which transitioned to Kazan Sanctorum in May of 1926. This marks the beginning of the downfall of the Muscovites as an independent group.

However, the wily, bear loving Muscovites wouldn't go down without a fight. The fraternity opened new Kremlins in Iowa and North Dakota at the end of 1926. Of note is a title change within the ranks of the Nobles. By November of 1926, KG Lancelot had assumed the title of Imperial Czar, meaning that some national governance was re-

established over all of the Kremlins, with the South Dakotans leading the way and issuing new Charters.

From the period of 1927 to 1929, the group continues to operate as a social organization, ignoring the advent of the Ancient Mystic Order of Samaritans. The Kremlins hold ceremonials on a regular basis and consolidate their power base in the northern mid-west, especially in the Dakotas and Iowa. Mention is also made of Kremlins operating in Minnesota during this time.

This peace proved to be short lived. In early 1929, Lancelot and several of his officers (specifically one S.S. Judy) were forcibly removed for mismanagement of the Order, with the government of South Dakota placing a receiver in charge. The first receiver, JR Sharp, didn't last long and was removed by the membership. Odean Hareid was appointed receiver of the group immediately following this change. Upon taking over as receiver, Hareid found irregularities in the financial records which he attributed to Judy, who succeeded Lancelot as Czar of Kremlin Sodak (as Lancelot had taken the post of Imperial Czar.) Hareid believed Judy had signed a contract without authorization, costing the fraternity \$19,000 (which is roughly \$250,000 in today's money.) Hareid then began legal proceedings against Judy. Furthermore, Hareid believed that KG Lancelot had misappropriated another \$25,000, which spread the legal battles to the highest levels of the organization.

In 1929, two petitions were filed against Odean Hareid, of Souix Falls, SD. The first petition was filed by Don E. Lewis, the Commissioner of Insurance, while the second was filed by Max Rohyl, attorney for S.S. Judy, who had served as an officer for the Muscovites alongside Lancelot.

Lewis, acting in his post as Commissioner, asserted that the Muscovites were essentially an insurance agency and needed regulation as such. Hareid refuted such claims on the grounds that Lewis waived any oversight abilities when he agreed to have the financials of the group placed in receivership. Lewis also asked that Hareid be removed as receiver because of internal squabbles within the organization, leaving him unable to perform his duties. Hareid also denied this claim.

It appears that the dissention was the key point of the second petition as well. Hareid upheld his position, stating that the only problems arose from followers loyal to the previous receiver, JR Sharp, who Hareid claims was ousted due to "disloyalty and inefficiency." These supporters included Judy, the originator of the second petition.

While a final outcome of these legal battles has yet to be uncovered, it is certain that they destroyed the last vestiges of the "golden age" of the Imperial Order. The leadership of the organization seems to split between the remains of Kremlin Sodak in South Dakota and several small groups operating out of Minnesota.

Beginning in the fall of 1929, and continuing to 1931, authority within the organization was reestablished, this time in the hands of J.E. Stiles, a Past Grand Master of Odd

Fellows in Minnesota, C.E. McNaught, Imperial Czar, and W.J. Ellwood, an attorney by trade and the Imperial Minister of Records. Ellwood secured funding and plans to erect a new national headquarters for the group in the town of Spirit Lake, Iowa, where he regularly vacationed. At the time of the announcement of the construction of the new building, the Muscovites claimed their territory covered Iowa, northern Missouri, western Illinois, Wisconsin, and South Dakota (but curiously not Minnesota.) The construction project was predicted to cost \$100,000 (more than \$1.5 million dollars today.) The plans included a main building, to be three stories tall, with a full basement, as well as several offices and cottages for employees of the Imperial Order.

The compound was completed in 1932 with much rejoicing by the residents of Spirit Lake. The newspaper spread that accompanied the opening displayed portraits of the key leaders of the Muscovites movement. Interestingly, the Imperial Czar at the time, R.C. Franklin of Minnesota, is relegated to a smaller picture on the side of the page, while Ellwood, acting as Imperial Minister of Records, is placed in the center with a large portrait. This would support the idea that Ellwood was really the one running the organization from his post as Imperial Minister of Records.

While many had worked to establish this new national headquarters, their efforts would prove to be in vain. In September of 1933, knee deep in the throws of the Great Depression, the organization found itself in an untenable situation. They couldn't pay out the insurance benefits that had been promised to their members, forcing the Muscovites to auction off their property. Everything the group owned was sold on September 25, 1933 at 10 a.m. at the Spirit Lake Courthouse. The list of items provides great insight into the final years of the Imperial Order. Everything from benign office supplies, to vehicles, to furniture, was sold to the highest bidder.

A few items are of note to fraternal historians. First and foremost is the sale of the mascot of the Imperial Order, a live bear, approximately five years old in 1933. Previous records indicate the bear was known as "Babe" and played a part in the initiation ceremonies for new Muscovites. Also sold were nearly 200 fezzes, 4 altars, several band uniforms, and degree robes. These physical artifacts were the last remains of the Imperial Order.

The group tried to reorganize once again, holding dinners and fundraisers well into 1934, but sadly they never managed to regain the foothold they once had. Any mention of the Muscovites ceases by 1935. The once mighty social club, composed of Odd Fellows from close to a dozen states, had finally fallen dark. The "Steppes" that so many had trod became overgrown and the Muscovites were forgotten, relegated to history.

## Appendix I: Known Kremlins

While a complete list of Kremlins is unavailable, the following groups are to have existed thanks to physical artifacts (fezzes and documents) or newspaper coverage. According to the June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1921, issues of the North Platte Semi-Weekly Tribune, only one Kremlin existed per state.

- Sodak – South Dakota
- Rada – Oregon
- Azov – Wyoming
- Black Hills – Unknown
- Kolo - Nebraska
- Kazan – Utah
- Tulsok – Oklahoma
- Normin – Minnesota
- Unknown – North Dakota
- Moscow – Ohio\*
- Ufa – Idaho
- Sodin – Iowa / Nebraska
- Solak – South Dakota / Iowa (thought to be late in the history)

\* The Muscovites originated in Ohio, but by the early nineteen teens, they appear to be exclusively a Mid-western body.