# Mennonites in Russia and the Soviet Union: An Aspect of the Church History of the Germans in Russia*

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*Mennonites — the "Peace-making" Branch of the Anabaptists*

Mennonites form part of the third branch of the Reformation after Lutherans and Calvinists — the Anabaptist movement.[1] Expelled from Switzerland, South-West Germany and Alsace, many Anabaptists fled to the North where numerous large Anabaptist communities had come into existence, especially in the Netherlands and on the North Sea coast of Germany. It was there that Menno Simons, who gave the movement its name, established its pacifist principles — as a direct reaction to the violent militancy of the Anabaptist leaders of the bloody *"Wiedertäuferreich"*[2] in Münster in 1534-35. In the Habsburg Netherlands the Mennonite movement — as the first large-scale anti-Catholic mass movement — was subjected to particularly strong persecution and between 1530 and 1580 some three thousand people left the Netherlands.[3] As they travelled eastwards to West Prussia, many North German fellow-believers joined the Mennonites.

Since the Treaty of Thorn in 1466, the western part of the area formerly known as Prussia (which had all previously belonged to the Teutonic orders and had been extensively germanicised) had been subject to the Polish crown.[4] With time the environment influenced the language of the immigrants. Most of them had come from the Netherlands, but there were also some from north, west and south Germany. At first the Low German dialect of the Netherlands and the German North Sea coast was the dominant spoken and written language; but as contact with the old homeland gradually diminished, the result was a growing tendency, particularly in the villages, to speak the Low German of West Prussia ("Werder Plat") and to assimilate to the German neighbours. Thus from about 1750 many Mennonites have used German Bibles and hymn

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books, and even sermons are preached in High German.[5]

For the privilege of freedom to practise their religion (from 1642) and in particular for exemption from military service, the Mennonites had to pay considerable sums to the Polish crown. For baptisms, weddings and funerals they also had to pay the local priest of the Protestant or Catholic church the sums normally payable for these ceremonies, since the established churches suffered a considerable loss of income as a result of the colonisation of their territory by non-conformists.

Despite the relatively peaceful life of practising Mennonites in West Prussia, the situation gradually came to a head: on the one hand the special taxes gradually reached a critically high level, and on the other hand the land that had been allocated to them no longer sufficed[6]—and it became almost impossible to acquire new land. Then in 1772, after the First Partition of Poland, West Prussia was ceded to Prussia. Frederick the Great renewed the Mennonites' special rights, including their exemption from military service, but the payment he required for these privileges was even higher than that demanded by the Polish crown. He also increased the payments to the Protestant state church. However, it was not the King's intention to drive the Mennonites from his land. On the contrary, he sought to alleviate their need for more land by colonisation projects, but his death in 1786 put an end to his plans. In 1789 his nephew, Frederick William II, forbade the Mennonites to acquire any more land since as a result of their extensive ownership of land in West Prussia he was able to recruit very few conscripts there.

## *Mennonites in Russia*

High taxes and shortage of land made the poorer Mennonites receptive to Catherine II's offer to establish settlements in the newly-won territory of southern Ukraine (*"Novorossiya"*). Catherine's manifesto of 1763, which had formed the basis for the German colonisation of the Volga after 1763,[7] was also the basis for a special colonisation agreement with the Mennonites in 1787. The manifesto guaranteed self-administration, German language, freedom of religion, control of schools, no military service and economic aid. Between 1789 and 1806 some three thousand Mennonites made their way to southern Ukraine. At first the Mennonites were allocated the region west of the island of Chortitsa in the Dnepr, a settlement which they later called the "Old Colony". Between 1803 and 1835 there was a further influx of Mennonites into Russia,[8] this time to the Black Sea area, north of Berdyansk, along the River Molochnaya.

The Mennonites, like all German "colonists" in Russia, were blessed with so many children that they soon needed more land and founded daughter colonies, as did the other German settlers around the Volga and the Black Sea, in the Caucasus and in Central Asia. By 1875 there were

thought to be fifty-five thousand Mennonites in the Russian Empire.

Progress and prosperity in the Mennonite villages was closely linked with the name of Johann Cornies (1789-1848) who initiated exemplary practices in agriculture, organisation of labour and schooling. In later years Mennonite mills and Mennonite production of agricultural machinery attained great importance for the whole of Russia.

This prosperity on the one hand, and ethnic isolation and religious freedom on the other, obviously resulted in a more or less intense secularisation of life in the Mennonite villages. It has been claimed that "there was no longer any distinction between faith and culture in concept or in practice."[9] The "small band" had become an established community. The generally undisputed and privileged position of Mennonites, public recognition of their outstanding economic achievements and wealth, and also the ban on missionary activities helped to obscure the basic principles of the Mennonites in Russia. The adult's free personal decision to join the community of believers, and believer's baptism as a sign of the renunciation of sin, had narrowed to a decision to belong to an *ethnic-religious community*. A decision to leave this community was scarcely imaginable because of the great disadvantages this would entail — it would mean simultaneously exclusion from the socio-economic community and the loss of all the privileges associated with membership.[10] The principle of "separation from the world" was ostensibly adhered to in that Mennonite, Lutheran, Calvinist and Catholic villages had all been established separately from the start and formed islands, so to speak, in the Orthodox world around them.

As early as the beginning of the 19th century some groups (the "Small Church" (*"Kleine Gemeinde"*) later "Evangelical" Mennonites) were seeking to revive their spiritual vitality. However, the revival that achieved particular significance was that brought about by the preaching of Pastor Edward Wüst, a German Lutheran from Neuhoffnung near Berdyansk. His call for renewal swept through the German settlements, especially in Ukraine. The close proximity to places where revivals had already occurred and also the fact that Pastor Wüst preached directly in Mennonite villages (e.g. Gnadenfeld on the River Molochnaya) resulted in the movement spreading to Mennonite settlements. In the face of considerable hostility, those who had responded to the call for revival (the "Reborn") began to form their own separate brotherhood from 1860. At first their numbers increased only slowly (to some nine thousand people just before the First World War, of whom three thousand had already emigrated by the time the War broke out). After 1896, these "Mennonite Brethren" communities (*"Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinden"*) were able to claim the same legal status as the traditional Mennonite communities. Most people, however, remained in the old communities which came to be referred to, in the 1920s, as "Church Mennonite" communities.[11]

Although the relationship between the two groups was at first very tense, the political situation soon compelled them to cooperate.

In the course of the standardisation of Russian law, the privileges of the German settlers were withdrawn (1870-74). This meant three things above all: russification through the education system; of rights to self-administration; and a call to universal military service. This last point in particular prompted many Mennonites (about seventeen thousand) to emigrate to America in the 1870s. In fact military service for Mennonites was replaced by forestry service soon after the new conscription law came into effect in 1874.

### *Mennonites after the Revolutions of 1917*

The Revolution and the Civil War affected the Mennonites (and indeed all German settlers) in the Soviet republic most severely of all. Time and again the Mennonite villages were in the thick of the fighting and had to endure the requisitioning imposed by the "Reds" or the "Whites", as circumstances dictated, until even the seedcorn had been plundered and the last horse led away. The devastation and violence wreaked by Makhno's[12] troops, who were sometimes collaborating with the Red Army, eventually led to the so-called Mennonite "self-defence" (*"Selbstschutz"*) episode: young Mennonites took up arms to protect their families, farms and villages.

As was also the case in other German settlements, the prosperity of many Mennonites was their undoing. The breathing space provided between 1921 and 1928 by the New Economic Policy, during which time approximately twenty thousand Mennonites emigrated, ended with the measures taken against *kulaks*[13] which came into force almost simultaneously with the Law on Religious Associations. On the basis of this Law,[14] almost all institutional religious life in the Soviet Union was stifled in the 1930s — not only for Mennonites and Baptists but also Lutherans and, above all, Orthodox. Until the mid-1930s nearly all elders, preachers, deacons, pastors and priests were arrested, exiled or sometimes even shot.[15] Many lay people (particularly men) shared the same fate if the authorities suspected them of trying to maintain their spiritual life.

In 1941 Hitler's armies invaded the Soviet Union. With his decree of 28 August, Stalin declared that all Germans in the USSR were actual or potential fifth-columnists of the Fascists, and deported them *en masse* from the European part of the Soviet Union. The men, and some women, were sent to labour camps, mostly in the Arctic zone; the rest were sent into exile in Central Asia or the far north. This action did not at first affect the Germans on the left bank of the Dnepr in Ukraine because the German advance reached their settlements unexpectedly quickly and even facilitated a short revival of their religious life. For Germans in other parts of the Soviet Union it meant an end to the last vestiges of organised

church life. Women, children and old men were placed under *"Spetsial'naya komendantura"* — i.e. they had to report at regular intervals (weekly at first) to the local NKVD commander in their places of exile. The Russian Germans living in the areas occupied by German units retreated with the Germans as the Soviet army won back Ukraine. After the unimaginable hardships of a two thousand-mile journey they settled in the *Warthegau* (the Poznań region, now in Poland), from where they tried to flee into the Reich and where they were overtaken by the Soviet troops and immediately sent into exile with the other Germans. Even many of those who had successfully evaded the direct clutches of the Soviet army ended up sharing the same fate: on the basis of agreed treaties, the Allies handed them over to the Soviet Union as "Soviet citizens".

In the early post-war years, all the energy of the deported Germans was spent on simply surviving. In many cases, short fervent prayers to God for help were the only form of "divine service". After a few years, when everything had normalised somewhat, and above all the food situation had improved, people began to discover afresh what many of them had learned earlier in Soviet prisons or exile. In times of need, one did not ask about a fellow-believer's denomination: one was glad to be able to pray together in German; and if someone had a portion of a hymn book or a few pages of the Bible these were a blessing for all. For the Mennonites, as well as the Lutherans and other exiled Germans, it was the women above all who kept the faith alive. The survival of the faith was also helped by the fact that between 1955 and 1959 a revival took place among the deported Germans and a great number were converted.[16]

In 1955, after Chancellor Dr Konrad Adenauer's visit to Moscow, the *"komendantura"* system and the exile were ended by a general amnesty. Most Germans were gradually able to leave the barren lands beyond the Arctic Circle and many went to Kazakhstan, Kirghizia or Tadzhikistan, areas to which many German old people, women and children had been deported in 1941. They were, however, not permitted to return to their old settlements in the European part of the USSR, and so today there are nearly a million Germans living in Kazakhstan, the second-largest Soviet republic, and another million in the other Asian republics and the Russian Republic. In the course of the 1955 amnesty, preachers — in many cases sentenced to twenty-five years — were also released. They immediately began their sacrificial and dangerous service as itinerant preachers: preaching, baptising, organising meetings of the scattered believers, while also training and ordaining new preachers as they went.

### *Mennonite Brethren in the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists*

In 1944 the two large Russian evangelical bodies — the Baptists and the

Evangelical Christians — received permission to create a new organisation on condition that they would unite and base their headquarters in Moscow. In a remarkably short time (1945-48) the state-recognised ("registered") All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists was able to register congregations throughout the Soviet Union, with great strength in Ukraine and the European part of the Soviet Union.

This fact acquired great significance for Evangelical Germans in the Soviet Union after the end of the war and especially after the 1955 amnesty.[17] For many, the churches of the registered Evangelical Christians and Baptists (ECB) were the only places where, for the first time in many years, they could hear God's Word without fear of being discovered, and where they could experience evangelical preaching (albeit in Russian). They attended the meetings of the Russian ECB congregations, sometimes becoming members of them, which would have meant being rebaptised. According to the strength of the individual groups (German Baptists, Church Mennonites, Mennonite Brethren, Lutherans), they also met either together or separately in German housegroups served by preachers who were mostly, of course, not ordained. These preachers turned funerals in particular into nothing short of public worship, where the denominational membership of the individual was of little significance.

There was a change in this interdenominational phase after 1955 when an extraordinary revival swept through the German camps and settlements. So many people were converted that it was no longer practicable to address the believers in the ways that had been possible before. Furthermore, many believers wished to receive communion; marriages were also taking place and there was a desire to bring these to God for his blessing; the Lutherans wanted infant baptism; the baptism of "reborn" Church Mennonites was another problem. So the old distinctions between evangelical Germans in the USSR came to life again. Denominational groups formed, ranging from housegroups to smaller or larger congregations. The Mennonites elected preachers who were later ordained by ordained itinerant preachers.

Developments among the Mennonite Brethren differed from those among Church Mennonites and Lutherans. Unlike Church Mennonites, who practise baptism by pouring or sprinkling, Mennonite Brethren receive believer's baptism by immersion after their spiritual "rebirth" This practice unites the Evangelical Christians and Baptists with the Mennonite Brethren. It is therefore not particularly surprising that the Mennonite Brethren drew close to the official ECB churches. After various temporary arrangements, it eventually came about that from 1955 many registered Russian ECB churches formed German-speaking sections with German preachers, consisting of Mennonite Brethren, German Baptists, rebaptised Church Mennonites and rebaptised Lutherans. In

addition to the Mennonite Brethren who belonged to the German sections of registered ECB churches, there continued to be numerous groups and housegroups of Mennonite Brethren who did not wish to join a "registered", i.e. state-controlled, ECB church.

On the Baptist side there was great interest in incorporating as many Mennonite Brethren groups as possible into their congregations. This interest extended beyond the individual who attended meetings occasionally or regularly as a guest. The All-Union Council was clearly interested in the numerous house-groups and unregistered smaller or larger Mennonite Brethren congregations. This was demonstrated by a move at the highest level, which came quite unexpectedly for most Mennonite Brethren. At the 1963 AUCECB Congress the following Mennonites took part as representatives of the German-speaking sections of ECB churches: Jakob Fast (Iakov Fast), Traugott Quiring (Traugott Kviring), Johann Martens (Ivan Martens), Heinrich Alert (Genrikh Alert) and (later) Diedrich Hamm (Didrich Gamm). Most of the delegates were taken by surprise at a declaration made by Heinrich Alert which concluded: "I can see no difference between you and us, and so I ask the Congress to accept Mennonite (Brethren) congregations into the Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists."[18] According to Diedrich Hamm, the Mennonite Brethren named above were more or less forced[19] to sign an identical declaration afterwards. There was no mandate for this declaration from the Mennonite churches. It is thought that Heinrich Alert was persuaded to make this request by leading representatives of the All-Union Council.[20]

At the next Congress of the All-Union Council in 1966 with four hundred delegates, as many as seventy-four Mennonites represented Mennonite-German groups (German-speaking sections of Russian ECB churches). This fact shows that the 1963 initiative had met with a certain resonance, but it gives no indication of how small or large a proportion of the total number of Mennonite Brethren these seventy-four delegates represented. The most important reason for joining the All-Union Council was the legality that could be achieved by so doing. It was hoped that there would be more security for the individual and for the congregation as a whole. The call to join the registered ECB churches received a varied response on a regional level. Mennonite Brethren, individually or in large groups, joined or did not join the registered Baptist congregations according to how lax the authorities were in applying the laws on religion or, on the other hand, how much they interfered in the life of the community.

In this context another factor needs to be borne in mind. Since 1929 it had become more and more difficult to practise Mennonite beliefs and to follow a Mennonite way of life. Determining criteria which had formerly distinguished Mennonites from their environment were from then on

suppressed by the Soviet State — for example, the old principle of pacifism. From the beginning of the 1920s Mennonites liable for military service could perform alternative state duties, but 1936 was the last year a Mennonite's refusal to perform military service was recognised.[21] After the 1955 amnesty, Mennonites were forced by circumstances to accept military service as part of the reality of Soviet life. Clearly, there is also no place in Soviet life for the Mennonite principle of refusing to swear oaths.

This enables us to understand in part why many Mennonites in the Soviet Union would answer the question as to the difference between themselves and the Baptists with the characteristic response that they were *Low German-speaking Baptists*. It was particularly the Mennonite Brethren who in many cases lost their sense of having a separate Mennonite identity. This can perhaps be demonstrated by the following:

As mentioned earlier, 74 Mennonite delegates attended the 1966 Congress of the All-Union Council. In the course of the Congress they read a declaration which culminated in the following:

> We are one with you, brethren! We have one goal, one struggle, the same task. We have one faith, one Lord, one baptism (Eph. 4:5). On this basis we declare to the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists that we fully and wholly recognise its principles, its confession of faith and its constitution.[22]

Four delegates from Karaganda[23] and several from the Omsk region refused to sign this declaration.

However, the All-Union Council made significant concessions to the Mennonite Brethren. They were guaranteed virtually total self-existence — as Mennonite, quasi-autonomous congregations within a registered ECB church with their own preachers, or as independent "Mennonite Brethren churches within the All-Union Council of the ECB".[24] It is not really possible to judge to what extent this generous offer succeeded in persuading many Mennonite Brethren groups to join a registered ECB congregation, but it certainly achieved partial success. By 1980, there were thought to be approximately thirty thousand Mennonite Brethren in the All-Union Council.[25] According to A. E. Klimenko, the Chairman of the All-Union Council, there were fifty-three German-speaking churches (or sections of ECB churches) in the AUCECB in 1976, of which "ten were recently registered" in Kazakhstan alone.[26] Indeed, Mennonite Brethren even appear to be over-represented at various levels in the leadership of the All-Union Council, not only on regional levels, but also at a Union-wide level.[27]

### *Mennonites outside the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists*

After 1960 the All-Union Council split into two directly opposed camps.

A substantial number of believers left the registered churches because they considered that these churches were opening themselves too much to the pernicious influence of the atheist State and that timid submissiveness was undermining the churches from within. They formed the so-called Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (CCECB) — illegal, of course, and with the declared intention of not registering so that the State could not bring their religious life to a standstill.

Unregistered Mennonite Brethren housegroups and congregations often find themselves caught between the AUCECB and the CCECB (also known as *Initsiativniki*). In every specific case the decision of an unregistered Mennonite Brethren congregation to join the *Initsiativniki* or a registered ECB group depends on a number of local factors, many of which are interdependent:

1. Do the local authorities, and particularly the plenipotentiary (*upolnomochenny*) of the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), take harsh measures against religious life? Does the CRA plenipotentiary himself choose to be active, or only if he is compelled to by denunciations or similar measures?
2. What position do the leaders of the local registered Baptist Church take towards the authorities? Do they fearfully comply with the law and stifle the life of the congregation or do they, at their own risk, dare to overstep the boundaries set by the laws on religion in order to safeguard for their church those things that by law it is supposed to be denied?
3. What sort of people belong to the unregistered church of the *Initsiativniki*? Do human rights activists predominate, do they seek confrontation with the authorities (most Mennonites reject both approaches) or is absolute precedence given to spiritual life and preaching?

### *The Independently-Registered Mennonite Brethren*

The 1966 Congress of the AUCECB had shown that there was also a certain, albeit limited, opposition to the decision to join the Union. About ten of the seventy-four representatives of Mennonite-German sections of registered ECB churches rejected the proposed amalgamation. The opponents, from Karaganda and Omsk, regarded their membership of ECB congregations as a temporary arrangement which should not lead to the abandoning of their Mennonite identity, of which the German language was an intrinsic part.

The first Mennonite Brethren church independent from the All-Union Council was registered in Karaganda. Mennonites have always rejected an hierarchical structure, i.e. a "centralised church authority", and have

only tolerated advisory *conferences,* and so in Karaganda they did not wish to be subject to politically-motivated instructions from the ECB Presidium in Moscow, a body that would be totally unfamiliar with local circumstances and was, after all, intent on integrating the Mennonite Brethren into the All-Union Council. The believers in Karaganda had a number of specifically Mennonite concerns which they were afraid would be ignored if they were to unite with the All-Union Council of the ECB: a categorically uncompromised Mennonite upbringing for their children; the active participation of every brother and sister in church life, with the strongest possible application of church discipline; and especially the retention of the German language. Some of these criteria separated the Mennonite Brethren churches from the *Initsiativniki* too. In addition, the Mennonite Brethren reject what is, in their view, the often provocative behaviour of the *Initsiativniki* towards the authorities. They argue that, according to Romans 13: 1-3 and Titus 3: 1, even the atheist Soviet State has been ordained by God and so must be respected as far as possible. The independently registered Mennonite Brethren also reject outright the allegedly arrogant behaviour of the *Initsiativniki* towards the registered All-Union Council (for example, in 1962 the leadership of the Council of Churches anathematised the leadership of the All-Union Council).

Finally, the Mennonite Brethren are recalling a traditional Mennonite principle — the rejection of any form of military service — and they are demanding the retention of this faith tenet even in Soviet society.[28] On this point they are in agreement with the *Initsiativniki* but in total opposition to the state-recognised All-Union Council, which advocates military service as the national duty of all Soviet citizens, including members of a registered church.[29]

The first Mennonite Brethren church independent of the AUCECB, then, was registered in Karaganda in 1967. One can only speculate as to why the Council for Religious Affairs agreed to this. At any rate, it was another ten years before Mennonites were allowed to register another independent congregation. Of course it is not possible to ascertain how many congregations in fact tried to do so. Then between 1977 and 1980 six more churches were registered independently: Novo-Pavlovka near Frunze (Kirghizia); Georgiyevka and Merge in Kazakhstan; and Donskoi with various affiliated groups, Suzannovo and Fedorovka — all in the Orenburg region.

In addition, there are a sizeable number of Mennonite Brethren congregations which have been seeking registration for many years but have clearly not yet been granted it.[30] Naturally, their number and geographical location are not known exactly, much less the number of Mennonite Brethren congregations which do not want official recognition.

### *Old (or Church) Mennonites*

The situation of Old (or Church) Mennonites is in some ways considerably more complex than that of Mennonite Brethren. As mentioned earlier, after the darkest years of the Germans' exile, the old denominational distinctions regained their importance. This was not just a matter of the differing practice with regard to baptism; there are several more fundamental differences. Firstly, Mennonite Brethren have viewed Church Mennonite baptism — given as it has been to the unconverted — for being too often a mere formality; however, nowadays no great weight can be given to this argument because since 1929 every baptism is an act of witness in itself. Baptism among Church Mennonites today is generally a true believer's baptism which has been preceded by conversion and "rebirth". Secondly, the Mennonite Brethren have attempted to approach the ideal of the priesthood of all believers by appointing as many as possible to preach and these also have the right — as long as they have been ordained — to baptise and administer communion. Among the Church Mennonites, on the other hand, a stricter view of ecclesiastical responsibilities developed over the years, with the elder being mainly responsible for baptism, communion and the blessing of marriages and the preacher generally being restricted to preaching.

Among the Mennonite Brethren, the emotional and revivalist element plays a large part in their expression and forms of belief, whereas among Church Mennonites great emphasis is placed on a certain measure of restraint and strong emotionalism is rejected.

All these external expressions of faith which distinguish Mennonite Brethren from Church Mennonites do, on the other hand, unite the Mennonite Brethren with the Baptists. While Mennonite Brethren were "reborn" and had been baptised correctly by immersion, and so were permitted to receive communion in ECB congregations, Church Mennonites — and also Lutherans — had to be "evangelised", led to conversion and rebaptised before they could receive communion in ECB churches and become members of the same. These missionary endeavours were at times pursued with vigour. There are reports of "intense pressure" and of those who were not "reborn" or baptised in the right way being regularly threatened with damnation.[31]

As it was, after the years of persecution and struggling for survival, many Mennonites were no longer able to oppose the wooing of the Evangelical Christians and Baptists with any specific "Mennonite identity" and were rebaptised. The number of believers the Church Mennonites lost to the Mennonite Brethren or the All-Union Council of the ECB seems to be particularly high.

As far as a new start in 1950 was concerned, conditions for Church Mennonites were extremely difficult because of the very small number of ordained "elders" (*Älteste*) who had survived the time of tribulation. Two

elders — Heinrich Voth (Genrikh Fot) and Johann Penner (Ivan Penner) — played a crucial role in the establishment of new Mennonite Church congregations.[32]

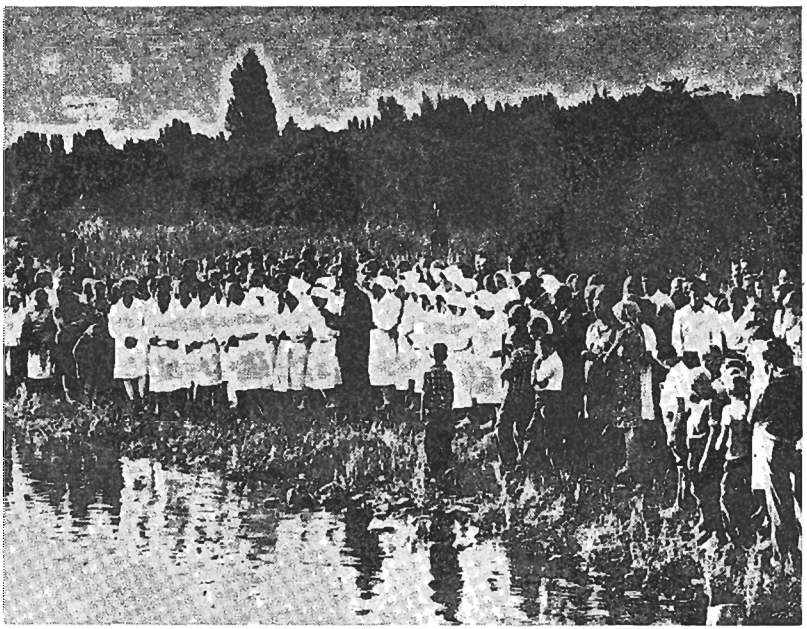
Johann Penner was active in Solikamsk (north of Perm'), the place of exile of many of the two hundred and fifty thousand or so Russian Germans (including twenty-three thousand Mennonites) from Ukraine who had been overtaken by Soviet troops in the "Warthegau" in 1945. The elder Johann Penner and preacher Kornelius Epp (Korneli Epp) served the numerous Church Mennonites among them. In 1950 Johann Penner was sentenced to twenty-five years' camp; Kornelius Epp died before the same fate overtook him. Johann Penner was amnestied after Stalin's death and again devoted his energies to the Mennonite groups around Solikamsk. These had been brought together to form a proper congregation, which even had its own choir, by the preacher Hans Penner (Ivan Penner), who had come to Solikamsk after serving a ten-year camp sentence. Until well into the era of Khrushchev's persecutions, the congregation grew inwardly and outwardly without having to suffer too much disturbance from the authorities.

In nearby Borovsk, the preacher Johann Wölk (Ivan Vel'k) gathered together a congregation which had close connections with the congregation in Solikamsk. The elder Heinrich Voth, who lived nearby, frequently visited both congregations and made his own contribution to their establishment and growth. For many years, however, most groups of Church Mennonites did not have a resident preacher.

In 1956 there was even a "Conference" in Solikamsk (the first since 1934). The elders Henrich Voth and Johann Penner were present, as were the preachers Hans Penner and Johann Wölk, Elder Dück and a preacher named Dörksen attended from Orenburg region. This meeting played a significant part in the revival of Church Mennonite communities in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1950s. It was decided to work systematically through the places of exile and the settlements, to gather believers together, to baptise, to administer communion and to prepare centres of parish life by the ordination of preachers. Elder Johann Penner worked through the northern part of European Russia with great success, while the elder Heinrich Voth was even more successful in Siberia and Central Asia. Many smaller and larger congregations were formed.

Heinrich Voth and Johann Penner also travelled in the south. The latter became the focus of extensive activities in his place of residence, Krasnorechka near Frunze (Kirghizia), while Heinrich Voth created the basis for a flourishing church in nearby Tokmak.

Khrushchev's attempt to eradicate religion did not leave the Church Mennonites unscathed and there were a number of setbacks: the young believers who were not already established in their faith were often not able to withstand the persecution, added difficulties and discrimination,

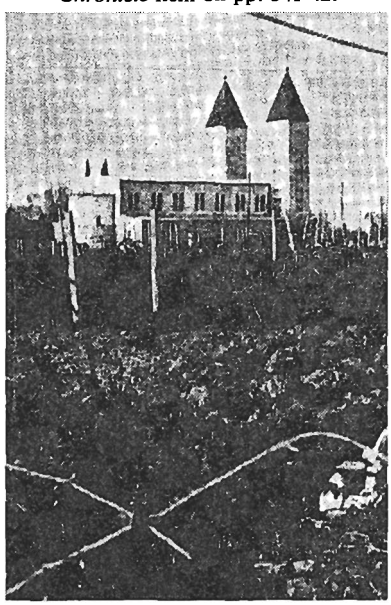


A Mennonite open-air baptismal service at Tokmak, Kirghiz SSR, in 1976. See article on pp. 293-317.

At the consecration of elders in the Mennonite congregation at Alma-Ata, Kazakh SSR, in 1968: front row, seated, left, Johannes Penner, right, Peter Klassen. *(Both photos courtesy Horst Gerlach).*

Colonel Pashkov, converted through Lord Radstock's missions to St Petersburg in the late 19th century. In April 1884 he convened a conference of Russian Evangelicals, but was banished from Russia by the Tsar only two months Later. *(Photo from:* Dr Baedecker and his Apostolic Work in Russia, *by Robert Sloan Latimer.)*

A view of the church in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, site of the reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary since 1981. See *Chronicle* item on pp. 341-42.



The young "seers" in the Medjugorje church, Christmas 1983. *(Both photos courtesy* L'Actualité Religieuse).

and many left their congregation again.

After Khrushchev's fall in 1964, conditions for religious life in the USSR improved. The unregistered churches, including Church Mennonites, were also able gradually to develop more freely. In 1967 Hans Penner succeeded, in Moscow, in autonomously registering several Church Mennonite communities in Kirghizia, as well as the church in Solikamsk; for other congregations he achieved a semi-legal status (i.e. verbal assurances), as was the case in Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan), where the congregation functioned on a semi-legal footing until its registration in 1977.

Church Mennonite communities were also able to register in Karaganda (see Appendix), Novosibirsk, Tokmak, Romanovka near Frunze (Kirghizia) and Suzannovo (Orenburg region — several churches, as with the Mennonite Brethren. On the other hand, other large congregations — as far as is known — have not yet succeeded in registering or may not even have tried to, for example Dzhambul (Kazakhstan), Kant and Krasnorechka (Kirghizia).

*Mennonites and the Council of Churches (Initsiativniki)*

In the Bulletin published by the Council of Relatives of ECB prisoners there are only a few "Mennonite" names in the lists of prisoners from Kirghizia and Tadzhikistan, whereas such names appear relatively often in the lists relating to Central and North Kazakhstan, the Alma-Ata area and Altai region. There do not appear to be any Mennonites, or indeed any other Germans, in the leadership of the Council of Churches[35] since this body is based in the European part of Russia and in Ukraine — areas where there are scarcely any Germans. Estonia and Latvia are something of an exception, and on a local level Germans, perhaps Mennonites, had a voice at least for a while.

There is in fact one group — led by Kornelius Kröker (Kornei Kreker) — which could perhaps be described as "radical Mennonite" and which has found a spiritual home with the *Initsiativniki*. In addition, Mennonites who are disillusioned with the registered ECB churches or who may even have been expelled from a registered church for too much religious activity may try to make contact with the Council of Churches.

As far as conscientious objection is concerned, some *Initsiativniki* appear to be following old Mennonite principles: they clearly expect their members to reject armed service. This is usually done not by refusing military service as such but by refusing to swear the oath of allegiance, which amounts to the same thing in the end. The consequences of such actions vary: without exception, members of autonomous Mennonite Brethren churches who are known to have refused to swear the oath of allegiance have not encountered any difficulties and have been able to continue working in their professions;[34] but it is known from the Council

of Churches that many of their members have been imprisoned for refusing to take the oath.[35] It is not possible to judge to what extent such contradictions reflect gaps in our information or varying local circumstances, or whether they can be interpreted as a differing policy by the authorities towards the "meek" Mennonite Brethren and the "refractory" *Initsiativniki*.

A Mennonite Brethren church in Barnaul has joined the Council of Churches. This is not an isolated instance, as is evident from an *Initsiativniki* publication[36] in which greetings are sent "to several German Mennonite churches who have confirmed that they are one with us in all fundamental matters concerning the work for God's Kingdom." In the Omsk region, after experiencing considerable pressure from the leadership of the local registered ECB church to unite with them, the Mennonites appear instead to have joined the *Initsiativniki* and to have printed a German hymn book with their help.

Despite such cases, one should not lose sight of the fact that the fundamental rejection by both the *Initsiativniki* and the Mennonites of any state interference in church affairs does not automatically create an affinity between the two groups. There are many other factors involved, including tradition, differing interpretations of the function of the State, local circumstances and personalities.

### *Mennonites from the Soviet Perspective*

One might be forgiven for thinking that believing Mennonites[37] in the Soviet Union are such an insignificant group, bound sooner or later to be merged into the ECB churches, that they would not be considered in the state and particularly the atheist press. The reverse is the case, however.[38] This is, moreover, not a purely academic interest, but evidence rather of the fact that at a local level Mennonites are viewed as constituting a problem in various spheres of public life. In some places, for example Orenburg and Omsk regions,[39] Mennonite children and young people simply cannot be drawn into the tightly woven net of state activities — refusal to participate in the Young Pioneers, including refusal to wear their quasi-uniform (the red scarf), may be symbolic of this.[40] Mennonite faith is sometimes so intensive that the official press and especially the atheist press likes to describe it as "fanatical". Or, to quote *Nauka i religiya (Science and Religion)*. the leading atheist monthly:

> "In the Mennonite churches [in Orenburg region] today, the percentage of [believing] young people is still relatively high. The reason for this is active missionary work and the intensive religious education in Mennonite families, who naturally have a lot of children."[41]

The importance attached to leading Mennonites to atheism explains why so many Soviet publications on the theme of Mennonites have

appeared in recent years, with sociologists, historians and ethnologists showing an increasing interest in the subject.

In the USSR, adherents to faiths of western origin, such as Lutherans, Baptists and Mennonites, are characterised as representatives of bourgeois ideology and hence *a priori* as enemies of communist society. Though one cannot assume that this axiom will at some stage be abandoned, a clear change of view has become apparent in Soviet research on Mennonites in recent years. Furthermore, Alexei Nikolayevich Ipatov, the leading Soviet expert on Mennonites, has introduced a new tone into Soviet writing on Mennonites, one of benevolence or even sympathy. As far as Ipatov is concerned, one gains the impression that his suggestions as to how Mennonites might be won over to atheism are no more than a pretext for his ethnic and sociological studies.

For a long time no attention was paid in the Soviet Union to the extensive western (mainly English-language) literature on Mennonites in Russia and the USSR, but now notice is increasingly being taken of it. The key place that the concept of *separation of Church and State* has always had among Anabaptists and Baptists is now recognised, and it is understood that this is a matter of theological principle. Likewise, Soviet researchers are only now beginning to appreciate the fundamental significance of the Anabaptist principle of *personal free decision to join the congregation*. The same applies to the principle of *separation from the "world"*.

The episode of "self-defence" during the turmoil of the Civil War, when young Mennonites took up arms to protect their families, homes and farms, shows — so the Soviet argument runs — that Mennonite thinking no longer truly embodies Anabaptist beliefs. From the Marxist side, the "self-defence" episode is used as an argument to prove that Mennonite pacifism does have its limits — and *typically bourgeois* limits at that — and that the Mennonite demand to be exempted from military service should therefore be rejected.

Finally, the picture of Mennonites in the USSR visible to Marxist observers is also coloured by the fact that the spiritual leadership of the Mennonites has been decimated by continuous emigration ever since 1874 (and in the Soviet era particularly as the result of various deliberate forms of persecution). Moreover, compulsory military service has undermined even for Mennonites the awareness of the Mennonite principle of pacifism. Military service in the Soviet Army acts as a means of assimilation into Soviet society. At any rate, Soviet authors maintain that young Mennonites leave the army as good Soviet citizens and convinced communists.[42]

On the other hand, Ipatov noticed a number of years ago that in some Mennonite circles believers seemed to be stressing the principle of pacifism again.[43] In this context one should recall that Mennonites in the

Soviet Union have never basically renounced this principle — on the contrary, the last Mennonite Conference held in Moscow in 1925 described "self-defence" as a disastrous error and re-emphasised the principle of pacifism.[44]

Recently, Soviet sociologists have sought to define the position of Mennonites in Soviet society in relation to other religious communities by means of an evaluation scale based on the loyalty of the various religious groups to the Soviet State.[45] The two opposed Baptist groups form the extremes on this scale: the registered All-Union Council conforms with the system in nothing short of an ideal way, whereas the *Initsiativniki* (i.e. the Council of Churches) are seen as the "sect" most strongly opposed to Soviet society. The Mennonites tend towards conformity — but this is for a specific reason: Mennonites naturally endeavour to put into practice separation from the atheist state by all means available, but they consider the principle of submission and obedience to the authorities (Titus 3: 1 and Romans 13: 1) as still valid. Accordingly their ethics demand of them the most faithful fulfilment of its laws. This distinguishes the Mennonites essentially if not fundamentally from the *Initsiativniki*. Because of their principles, the Mennonites seem to represent a lesser danger to Soviet society.

### *Prospects*

Who are the Mennonites in the Soviet Union today? Are they the Mennonite Brethren or the Church Mennonites? Are they the Mennonites who have joined the registered AUCECB or the unregistered CCECB? Are they the "ethnic" Mennonites who have lost their faith? Is there in fact still a specifically Mennonite identity? The answers are different for the various groups. While Mennonites who have remained separate from the Evangelical Christians and Baptists emphasise Mennonite *specifica* and Mennonite traditions — especially the German language — the Mennonites who have joined the Baptists generally regard the German language as a historical heritage, as a *relict*. So for the latter, the fact that the younger generations can hardly speak German is not as painful as it is for the convinced Mennonites, for whom the German language is the language of Holy Scripture and the sermon.

There are signs that in an antagonistic atheist environment, autonomous Mennonite Brethren and autonomous Church Mennonite congregations could unite again, despite differing baptismal practices; whereas the Mennonite Brethren who have joined the registered or unregistered ECB churches face the prospect of being completely merged with them in time (linguistically too), even though at the moment they still, in many cases, form their own German congregations.

Should the autonomous Mennonite congregations ever form a Mennonite federation its continuance will be dependent in no small measure on a

long-term answer to the pressing issue of language. The russification of the Germans seems to be an established policy in Moscow — after the experiences of the last decades, one can hardly dare to expect any basic concessions on the Soviet side with respect to the protection of a minority. How long will Mennonite congregations which link their identity with the (Low) German language be able to retain their German character? Ipatov advises the atheist officials to pursue their atheist propaganda among Mennonites not in High or Low German, but in Russian. He believes it is not the Mennonites who cling to the German language who could revive Mennonite beliefs and evangelise their environment, but rather those who have adapted to the Russian language. How long will missionary work among Germans continue to be possible in the Soviet Union? Experience has shown that without this, spiritual stagnation occurs in an isolated community. Are the German churches in the USSR — Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Mennonite, Pentecostal — in danger of this? Or will they, forced by adverse circumstances, have to retain and pass on their respective identity and their message to the world in a language they do not cherish?

[1]On the history of the Mennonites, particularly in Russia, see: Heinold Fast, *Linke Flügel der Reformation*, Bremen, 1962; H.-J. Goertz, ed., *Die Täufer: Geschichte und Deutung*, Munich, 1980; *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 4 vols., Scottdale, Pa., USA, 1955-59; *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, 4 vols., Korntal, 1913-67; C. J. Dyck, ed., *Introduction to Mennonite History*, Scottdale, Pa., USA, 1982; C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites*, 5th enlarged ed. by Cornelius Krahn, Newton, Ka., USA, 1981; Dieter G. Lichdi, *Über Zürich und Witmarsum nach Addis Ababa: Die Mennoniten in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Maxdorf, 1983; Horst Gerlach, *Bildband zur Geschichte der Mennoniten*, Ülzen, 1980; J. B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, Newton, Ka., USA, 1982, Gerhard Lohrenz, *Damit es Nicht Vergessen Werde*, Winnipeg, Canada, 1977; P. M. Friesen, *Die Altevangelische Mennonitische Brüderschaft in Russland, 1789-1910*, Halbstadt, Ukraine, 1911.

[2]"The Kingdom of the Saints" or "New Jerusalem" 1534-35, was established in Münster under the leadership of the "prophet" Jan Matthys (d. 1534), later of the "king" Jan Bockelson van Leiden (1509-36) — both Anabaptist refugees from the Netherlands — and the Münster burgesses Bernd Knipperdolling (1490-1536) and Bernd Krechting (d. 1536). The "kingdom" was characterised by polygamy and bloody excesses in the name of religion. The fanaticism in evidence brought the whole Anabaptist wing of the Reformation into disrepute. It should, however, be noted that the theology of the earliest Anabaptists contains strong pacifist elements. See James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, Lawrence, Kansas, 1972.

[3]Lichdi, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

[4]The *western* part of Prussia, belonging to the Kingdom of Poland, was called "King's Prussia". After 1701 the *eastern* part, the Duchy of Prussia, belonged to the new Kingdom of Prussia; however, before 1701 these lands were held as fief by the Elector of Brandenburg from the King of Poland.

[5]To this day Mennonites from Russia and West Prussia speak "*Mennonitisches Platt*" — a mixture of different Low German elements. Influences from Flemish, West Frisian and East Frisian Low German and the Low German of West Prussia can easily be detected. The written language, and the language in which services are conducted, is however High German ("*Hochdeutsch*").

[6]Around 1600 there were approximately 3,000 Mennonites in West Prussia; in 1780 there were as many as 13,000.

[7]In the Saratov area, between Vol'sk in the north and Kamyshin in the south.

[8]1,200 families, i.e. about 6,000 people.

[9]H. and G. Wölk, *Die Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde in Russland 1925-1980,* Fresno, Ca., USA, 1981, p. 4. (Published in English as Heinrich and Gerhard Woelk, *A Wilderness Journey: Glimpses of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia 1925-1980* (Vol. 4 of Perspectives on Mennonite Life and Thought), Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, Ca., USA, 1982.)

[10]J. B. Toews, *op. cit.,* pp. 17-62.

[11]Nowadays one is more likely to come across the term "Church Mennonites", which has obviously come to us from Soviet officialese (*tserkovnyye mennonity*) and distinguishes the members of Church Mennonite communities from the Mennonite Brethren.

[12]"Nestor Ivanovich Makhno was the son of a Russian peasant in the village of Gulai-Polye, some forty miles north-east of the Molochnaya. As a boy he had worked as a shepherd for German landowners in the region. During the 1905-6 unrest he was involved in revolutionary activity, and by 1918 headed a private army, popular with the Ukrainian peasantry and ostensibly fighting against the wealthy classes. Makhno's activities must be viewed against the background of the Civil War engulfing most of Russia. Pro-Bolshevik forces, fighting under the red flag of the new revolutionary government, became collectively known as the "Reds". The counter-revolutionaries who established fronts in Samara, the valley of the Don River, South Russia, North West and Far Northern Russia were the "Whites". As the conflicts progressed, it became evident that the decisive battles would be fought on the South Russian plains. In the resulting confusion anarchists and bandits, often parading under an opportune political banner, had free rein. From the Mennonite standpoint, the worst excesses were perpetrated by Nestor Makhno". (Quoted from J. B. Toews, *op. cit.,* pp. 86-87).

[13]*Kulak* ("fist" in Russian). A term which meant at first the rich farmers and feudals who had dependent people working for them in the late 1920s, but which was eventually applied to all farmers who had some property left.

[14]This Law is fundamentally still valid today — all later "new laws on religion" (including those of 1975 in the RSFSR) are really no more than amendments or definitions tightening up existing legislation. Compare G. Stricker, "Aus der Russisch-Orthodoxen Kirche", *Kirche im Osten,* No. 23, 1980, pp. 138-42.

[15]Between 1934 and 1938 nearly 90% of Mennonite elders were arrested or "disappeared" without trace. See J. Schnurr (ed.), *Die Kirchen und das religiöse Leben der Russlanddeutschen,* Evangelischer Teil, Stuttgart, 1978, p. 118.

[16]W. Sawatsky, "Mennonite Congregations in the Soviet Union Today", *Mennonite Life,* No. 1, March 1978, p. 13 (hereafter: Sawatsky, "Congregations").

[17]The following comments are based on information from Prediger Peter Epp, Bielefeld (in the Federal Republic of Germany).

[18]*Bratsky vestnik,* No. 3, 1967, p. 69.

[19]W. Sawatsky, "What makes Russian Mennonites Mennonite?", in *Mennonite Quarterly Review,* January 1979, p. 12f. (hereafter: Sawatsky, "Russian Mennonites").

[20]Wölk, *op. cit.,* p. 134f.; Sawatsky, "Russian Mennonites", p. 12; *Bratsky vestnik,* No. 2, 1983; pp. 51-9.

[21]Sawatsky, "Russian Mennonites", p. 7.

[22]*Bratsky vestnik,* No. 3, 1976, p. 70.

[23]David Klassen, Wilhelm Matthies, Heinrich Wölk and Jakob Siebert. They were to become the initiators of the first autonomously-registered Mennonite Brethren congregation, in Karaganda.

[24]At the meeting of the extended Presidium of the All-Union Council in July 1964 the following decisions were taken: (1) to establish as quickly as possible how many Mennonites there were in the USSR and where they lived; (2) to accept Mennonite Brethren into ECB churches without imposing any conditions since they followed the Baptist practice of baptism by immersion; (3) to ensure that Mennonite Brethren who came to ECB churches could hold a service with a sermon and singing in their own language; (4) to make every effort to register those Mennonite groups in places where there was no local ECB church.

[25]W. Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II,* Scottdale, Pa., USA, 1981 (hereafter: Sawatsky, *Evangelicals*), p. 281; Sawatsky, "Russian Mennonites", p. 13. According to Soviet estimates there are a further 20,000 Mennonite Brethren outside the

AUCECB, in either autonomous or unregistered churches.

[26] *Bratsky vestnik,* No. 5, 1976, p. 66; No. 2, 1977, p. 61.

[27] Sawatsky, "Russian Mennonites", p. 15.

[28] Wölk, *op. cit.,* p. 214f. Naturally this concern cannot be formulated in any statute in the USSR. Mennonite Brethren either reject military service itself or refuse to take the oath of allegiance. The *Initsiativniki* also do the latter.

[29] See *Bratsky vestnik,* No. 1, 1983, p. 39.

[30] See Wölk, *op. cit.,* p. 172f., who names nine Mennonite Brethren congregations not yet registered as autonomous congregations in 1980.

[31] Information from Prediger Peter Epp.

[32] The following six paragraphs are based on information from Prediger Peter Epp.

[33] Georgi Vins (Georg Wiens), General Secretary of the Council of Churches, who was expelled to the West in 1979, is of Mennonite background. His grandfather was a Mennonite Brethren preacher, but his father already held a position of leadership among the Baptists.

[34] Wölk, *op. cit.,* p. 214f.

[35] Sawatsky, "Russian Mennonites", p. 11: "At the moment nine young men are serving prison sentences for refusing to swear their military oath."

[36] *Bratsky listok,* No. 2, 1974.

[37] There are thought to be about 100,000 "ethnic" Mennonites in the USSR today, about half of whom are practising Mennonites.

[38] For a selecton of the most important works on Mennonites, see A. N. Ipatov, *Kto takiye mennonity?*, Alma-Ata, 1977; *Mennonity*, Moscow, 1978; "Mennonitstvo kak etnokonfessional'naya obshchnost'", *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma,* No. 24, 1979, pp. 151-68; "Mennonity: proshloye i nastoyashcheye", *Nauka i religiya,* No. 5, 1974, pp. 40-43; V. F. Krest'yaninov, *Mennonity*, Moscow, 1967; A. I. Klibanov, *Iz mira religioznogo sektantstva*, Moscow, 1974.

[39] Germans living in settlements in the Asian part of the Soviet Union, for example the Orenburg and Omsk regions, were often not deported after 1941.

[40] See A. N. Ipatov, "Die Mennoniten", in *Adventisten des Siebenten Tages und Mennoniten in der Sowjetunion* (Osteuropa Dokumentation, No. 9), 1979, pp. 41-45; here, p. 42. Ipatov, *Kto takiye mennonity?* p. 87, notes with regard to Karaganda that 81.5% of children from Mennonite families are brought up in the faith.

[41] Ipatov, "Mennonity: proshloye i nastoyashcheye", p. 41.

[42] Klibanov, *op. cit.,* p. 110f.

[43] Ipatov, *Mennonity,* p. 3f.

[44] See the broader Mennonite developments traced in Lawrence Klippenstein, *Mennonite Pacifism and State Service in Russia: A Case Study in Church-State Relations, 1789-1936,* unpublished PhD dissertation, Univ. of Minnesota, USA, 1984.

[45] Ipatov, *Kto takiye mennonity?*, p. 39ff.

# Appendix

## Review of the Formation of the Registered Church Mennonite Congregation in Karaganda, Kazakhstan

The following is a report by an émigrée from the Soviet Union.

On the first day of Advent in 1957, a small group of Mennonite believers gathered together for the first time in a certain town (Karaganda — *Ed.*). Before this they had earnestly entreated the Lord to grant them the op-

portunity of gathering in His name again and serving Him after their lengthy dispersion and captivity.

Some of the Mennonites in this town had joined the Evangelical Baptist group (probably unregistered — *Ed.*), which met on Sundays in people's homes for services, Bible study and prayer.

The (registered) Baptists had their own meeting house in one district of this town, and services were held in Russian, but many Mennonites — including Church Mennonites — attended these services and meetings. Time and again, however, they felt the need to form an independent Church Mennonite community. This eventually happened when they met in someone's home on the first day of Advent in 1957.

At first they met every other week, in different homes of the members of the congregation. One of the older preachers was responsible for the services. Several of the brethren shared in preaching the Word. There were no hymn books so the words of the hymns had to be spoken first. There was just one copy of the *Dreiband*[1], or perhaps a copy of the *Reichslieder*[2] as well.

The community grew. Before long there were more brethren who helped in preaching the Word. Then services were held every Sunday. In March 1958 the first baptismal ceremony was celebrated, at which fifty-two believers were accepted into the congregation. In June of the following year a further forty-one people were baptised and added to the community. Towards the end of 1958 there was an election for preachers. The four brethren who were chosen were ordained in April 1959.

The congregation continued to grow. New members came from different areas, from all parts of the region. Different customs and traditions and differing tunes to hymns gave rise to some difficulties and tensions. But these were gradually resolved in the spirit of Christian charity and by mutual cooperation in the Spirit of Christ. Time and again, because there was a common goal, agreement was reached on all these matters. Two choirs were formed and took it in turns to sing at all church services. In 1964 the choirs combined.

The community did not escape difficult and troubled times of anxiety and opposition. Between 1962 and 1965 the opportunity of meeting undisturbed in people's homes was taken from the community. But here, too, need taught prayer, and the congregation discovered this. They experienced the fact that there is a promise contained in the words "Call upon me in your need, and I will save you". At first they attended the meetings of the Mennonite Brethren that were held in a different district of the town. Preachers from the Church Mennonite community also helped with the preaching. But they were not allowed to take communion. They were guests there. This naturally marred the times of fellowship. Three preachers died shortly one after another, and this was a serious loss for the church.

The external pressures gradually diminished and the brethren found the courage to begin meeting again in homes, very discreetly at first, until they were free to meet undisturbed again. The years between 1966 and 1969 were a time of growth. Many new members joined the congregation. The services were enhanced by the choir. In November 1965 three brothers were ordained as preachers and one as a deacon. At the same time one of the brothers was ordained as an elder.

There was good attendance at the Bible study and prayer meetings held on Saturdays. Five younger brethren were also called upon to help with preaching.

The question of a meeting place became ever more urgent. The believers' homes were too small to hold all those attending church services. Efforts were made to register the congregation and to get permission to erect a building, but sadly without success.

Meanwhile the Mennonite Brethren congregation had been registered and received permission to erect a meeting house, which was dedicated in December 1967.

The authorities advised the brethren of the Church Mennonite congregation to hold their meetings in the rooms of the Mennonite Brethren prayer house. There were serious misgivings about this. The Mennonite Brethren would be cramped, and the Church Mennonites would become dependent to a certain extent. Eventually, however, the decision had to be taken to do just this. So the services were held there, and as a result each side came to know the other better and the bond of Christian brotherly love was strengthened. In July 1968 the Church Mennonite community held its first service, and thereafter every Sunday afternoon between 1 and 3 p.m.

The question of a meeting place had thus been solved, albeit in a different way than might have been wished. The result, however, was that the number of members increased to four hundred. Then in June 1975 this congregation was also registered.

In March 1970 there was another election of preachers. Six brothers were chosen, and they were ordained by the elder in May 1972. Between 1964 and 1978 eight brothers, either elders or preachers, died, and this was a great loss for the congregation. A further four preachers left the community and emigrated to West Germany. At present the congregation has one elder and seven preachers, several choirmasters, a choir of younger church members, a choir of older members and an instrumental choir.

Ever since the congregation came into being, there has been a particular concern for young people and children. Children and young people took part in the meetings and in the special sessions arranged for them, so that many meetings turned into festive occasions with songs, music and poetry. On Sundays the children go to Sunday school in several

groups, usually in the homes of their Sunday school teachers or of their parents. There are now more than four hundred baptised members in the congregation.

[1] *Dreiband:* A volume containing three revivalist songbooks, *Glaubensstimme* (Voice of Faith), *Zionslieder* (Songs of Zion) and *Frohe Botschaft* (Good News) — *Ed.*
[2] *Reichslieder* (Songs of the Kingdom): another songbook — *Ed.*