

After the rooster crowed:

Some issues concerning the interpretation of Mennonite/Bolshevik relations during the early Soviet period

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The rooster has crowed. Whether the landlord chops off his head or not, the new day will come (Spoken to a Molochnaia Mennonite by a Russian supporter of the Reds as he retreated before the White Army, 1919)¹

Studies of the "Russian" Mennonites are dominated by a concern with particular periods and subjects. In recent years there has been extensive discussion of the prerevolutionary, Imperial period concentrating on social, religious and other cultural issues. Investigations of the Soviet period have not been as extensive or as wide ranging. Accounts published since Soviet Mennonites began emigrating to the West in the 1970s mainly deal with the later Stalinist and post-Stalinist period and are mostly autobiographical. Except for articles written by Walter Sawatsky, there have been few scholarly, contextual studies published of Soviet Mennonite life during and after Stalinism.² The early pre-Stalinist period also has been neglected. The one exception to this has been the work of John B. Toews.³

Toews' accounts of the early Soviet period were developed primarily from his initial encounter with Russian/Soviet Mennonite history through his research into the Mennonite emigration from Russia and Ukraine to Canada during the 1920s, centring particularly on the work of B.B. Janz. Through

detailed examination of archival sources on the emigration which have been preserved in Canada and the United States, combined with contemporary newspaper reports and later memoirs, Toews has reconstructed the background to the emigration movement in the destruction and disruption to Mennonite life caused by the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Civil War. Subsequently Toews expanded his research to include aspects of prerevolutionary religious and cultural life and to look onwards to the impact of collectivization, Stalin's terror and the Second World War on those Mennonites who remained in the USSR. Much of his account of this later period is based on an examination of German surveys drawn up during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine in 1942 and captured by the Allies after the War. These studies culminated in Toews' volume *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, which drew heavily on his earlier research and publications to examine the Mennonite experience from late Imperial Russia through to 1945.⁴

The aim of this article is to reexamine early Mennonite/Soviet relations in the light of recent research, to question many existing Mennonite interpretations and explanations concerning this period and to suggest some directions for future enquiry.⁵

Teleological explanations and the issue of Mennonite emigration from the Soviet Union

One of the major problems of Mennonite accounts is the highly teleological nature of much Mennonite interpretation of the early Soviet period. The most obvious and insidious example of this is the idea that the ultimate fate of the Russian Mennonites and the true nature of the Soviet state and the practice of Communism in its Stalinist form, were implicit from the earliest days. All events Mennonites experienced during the 1920s thus are seen merely as the logical and necessary fulfillment of an inevitable working-out of the logic of Communism. In other words contingency is denied: Stalinism, collectivization and terror were all necessary and inevitable.⁶

The reality was otherwise. While there were certain tendencies implicit in early Bolshevism, these were not necessarily the only or even the most "logical" outcome of its evolution from a radical, minority political party into a ruling elite attempting to build a new society and economic order while claiming the right to monopolize political power. While many Mennonites may have been suspicious and even fearful of the outcome of these tendencies, none could have predicted with any degree of accuracy their exact outcome. Later Mennonite writing on the 1920s, however, often indicates that Mennonites knew that in time the regime would become increasingly oppressive and ultimately seek to destroy them. Of course this assumes that even the Bolsheviks were certain that their new order would succeed and that their regime would survive. In the early 1920s this was not at all certain to the Bolsheviks, their friends or enemies or to Mennonites. Indeed, one of the more subversive features of Mennonite dis-

course in Russia/Ukraine and abroad during the 1920s was the widespread hope that the regime would not actually try to achieve its aims and at best might evolve into a socio-political system more sympathetic to Mennonite ways; secretly most hoped the Bolsheviks would fail and be replaced by a new regime, although not necessarily a restoration of the old Imperial regime.

These issues can be seen to crystallize around the question of whether the Mennonites in Russia/Ukraine in the 1920s had a future in the Soviet Union.⁷ More specifically this can be focussed on the question of whether or not some Mennonites intended to stay in the Soviet Union or whether all were convinced the time had come to emigrate. Did Mennonites following the Civil War aim to reconstruct their economy and develop a new way of life, either in cooperation with the new regime or biding their time until a more favourable government appeared, or were they totally committed to emigration and the abandonment of Russia and Ukraine? If not, why did some choose to stay and others to immigrate?

There appears to be a common belief that all Mennonites during the 1920s were eager and willing to emigrate but were prevented by circumstances, mostly external, from doing so. Mennonite attempts at reconstruction after the Civil War are interpreted merely as a short-term strategy to achieve a breathing space which would allow Mennonites to gain the time and resources to permit such large-scale emigration while deceiving the authorities as to their real long-term intention to leave the Soviet Union. Even the secondary literature, including that by Toews, is peculiarly inconsistent on this issue. In his most extreme moments Toews states that all Mennonite policies and actions involved in economic reconstruction were nothing more than a sham, and that the ultimate aim of the Mennonite organizations and the wish of all Mennonites was to emigrate.⁸ But even when Toews advances such an opinion, he elsewhere states that reconstruction was essential as even in the long-term not all Mennonites would emigrate. He never expands on the latter point; was it because not all would want to emigrate, not all would have the resources to leave or not all would be permitted to emigrate by either the authorities in the USSR and Canada or by the Mennonites themselves?⁹

Toews does, however, recognize that different attitudes and preferences operated at different periods, with the desire for emigration being particularly strong in the early years following the Civil War (1920-23), weakening in the period 1924-26 and strengthening again from 1927 onwards.¹⁰ This certainly is true and reflects shifting hopes and expectations in the changing economic and political contexts of the Soviet Union and Canada. Of particular importance was the impact of the New Economic Policy (NEP) after 1921 and the hopes of economic and cultural reconstruction after 1924. What Toews is less clear on are the changes in Soviet emigration policy in this period, which underwent many changes mostly unconnected with official attitudes to Mennonites.¹¹

The problem is that in most accounts there is almost no reference to, or understanding of, NEP.¹² In Mennonite accounts it is almost as if one period of

disorder and terror (Revolution and Civil War) was soon replaced by another (collectivization, arrests and terror) so that the period from 1917 onwards appears as a continuous and inevitable process of the destruction and dissolution of Mennonite life. What is missing is what those who lived through it and did not emigrate refer to as "NEPzeit." This was the period between 1921 and 1928, when the Bolsheviks attempted to reconstruct the country's shattered economy and society by creating an alliance between society and the state, particularly with the peasantry, which drew on the expertise of members of old order and allowed a free market to operate in certain areas of economic life.¹³ In a word, it was a time of compromise and experiment during which an attempt was made to unite the country, producing a situation in which, to a degree, Mennonites flourished, especially after 1924. The topic of everyday Mennonite life under NEP is too complex to discuss here, although many of the points raised in this article point to the need to reconsider Mennonite social and cultural life in the early 1920s.

In his accounts Toews also gives the clear impression that reconstruction which required new changes in Mennonite life was never a real option.¹⁴ The reason for this is that certain key aspects of Mennonite life were constantly challenged by officialdom, especially their religious principles and practices including nonresistance, organized religious life and continued employment of ministers in key positions in administration and especially the schools. These factors undoubtedly compromised all Mennonite efforts at reconstruction, deeply affected their resolve to change and to accommodate to the new regime and, because of the continued sense of uncertainty as to their future, sustained the interest in emigration in spite of negative reports being received from Canada concerning conditions and opportunities for new settlers. But for many Mennonites living in the Soviet Union during the 1920s emigration remained a last choice of action; emigration involved a major social, economic and emotional upheaval not to be lightly undertaken. And although many would deny it today, the early Mennonite emigrants to Canada in the 1920s were not really escaping an established, oppressive regime, but were economic refugees, victims of the Civil War and subsequent periods. The later emigrants were increasingly motivated by problems with the regime, but again the motivation was largely economic in as much as they could not make a living in their preferred profession because they were excluded from doing so by Bolshevik social policies, or because under Communism they could not follow the economic practices they preferred. Some might also be better considered as exiles who along with other sections of the massive Russian diaspora of the 1920s contemplated returning to Russia, if and when the economic and political situation improved, hopefully when the Bolsheviks had gone.¹⁵

The problem lies not just in the teleological assumptions involved in explanations of the 1920s, but also in the sources available for study. Many Mennonite accounts are coloured by later memoir literature, mostly by emigrants of the 1920s, and the primary source material that is available is often highly selective in nature. The surviving archival sources in the United States

and Canada which contain reports on the Russian/Ukrainian situation are mainly from the early period (1920-23), and deal predominantly with emigration issues. Moreover, these sources are mainly from the central organizations and do not deal with local conditions or the implementation of policies and initiatives in specific local communities. Thus for the two major secular Mennonite organizations created in the Soviet Union in the 1920s—for Ukraine the Kharkov-based *Verband der Mennoniten Südrusslands* later renamed the *Verband der Bürger Holländischer Herkunft* (from now on referred to as the *Verband*) and the Moscow-based *Allrussischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verein* (from now on referred to as the *Verein*) which served Mennonite communities in the Russian Republic—we have masses of detail on their central emigration work, but almost nothing about the implementation or effect of their work and their agencies, in local level reconstruction. Some material on this is available (although even more is needed) but what has long been available is often disregarded. These include the reports of the local sections to the central conferences of the *Verband* and the *Verein*, 16 articles published by the *Verein* in *Praktische Landwirt*, reports in contemporary newspapers (Russian/Soviet and North American) and statistical reports from Russian and Ukrainian officials during the 1920s (government reports from this period are reasonably trustworthy.) A few memoir accounts, especially those written by Mennonites who did not emigrate in the 1920s but who came to North America only after 1945, are also useful.¹⁷

What these sources on activities at the local level indicate is that some Mennonites threw themselves enthusiastically into the work of economic reconstruction, that many were attracted by the promise of a new social order, and that some were also influenced by the rhetoric of the time which promised a utopian future. Through working with rather than against the Bolsheviks, especially in economic matters, they hoped that life would change for the better and permit them to fulfil their lives in Russia/Ukraine without having to face the perils and uncertainty of emigration. The development of an extensive cooperative system in trade, industry and agriculture which had its origins in Imperial Russia, has hardly been investigated. At the same time agricultural practices were altered greatly from pre-revolutionary times with an increased emphasis in many places on dairying and livestock management rather than extensive grain production for export. But it is also obvious from the reports that Mennonites faced considerable difficulty in their relations with the new government and the social and political language and agendas of the Bolsheviks with a degree of distrust being exhibited by both Mennonites and Bolshevik officials. The fact that Soviet policy concerning their economic and social programs remained unclear throughout this period, with endless changes in policies and support, did not help the situation. As such, Mennonite attempts at economic and even social cooperation eventually foundered and irreconcilable differences over religion, education and the calling of young men to military service lead to their increasing alienation from the regime.

**Mennonites and Bolsheviks:
class, ethnicity and identity in the new Soviet order**

In his studies Toews mentions three major reasons for Bolshevik lack of support for Mennonite aspirations and suspicion of Mennonite plans: the Mennonites' continued commitment to religion (including their nonresistant principles), their ethnic identity (especially their "Germanness" and their opposition to assimilation and Russification) and finally their actions during the Civil War, especially their involvement in the *Selbstschutz*, which had compromised their religious principles and made them seem a potential source of counterrevolutionary activity.¹⁸ While Toews mentions another factor, mainly Mennonite support for market capitalism as opposed to socialism, this is the closest he comes to discussing socio-political issues.¹⁹ In fact, issues relating to "class", as a reflection of past Mennonite life and their relationship with the prerevolutionary social and political order, and the connection between Bolshevik rhetorical discourse involving the ascription of class as a socio-political weapon, emerged as central to the negotiations and discussions between Mennonites and representatives of the new regime during the 1920s.²⁰

One of the problems in assessing the impact of the new regime on Mennonite life is the rather rosy picture often presented in Mennonite writings of prerevolutionary Mennonite life. It is often suggested that prior to the Revolution Mennonites formed cohesive, separate, self-contained egalitarian communities committed to the religious faith of their ancestors including the peace principle. Mennonites are portrayed predominantly as small-scale, prosperous farmers, and in spite of being capitalists more concerned with their own domestic and communal survival than with the ruthless exploitation of others and the maximization of profit. Mennonite institutions were founded to resist government attempts at Russification and to fulfil Christian virtues.²¹ That Mennonite life had been fundamentally transformed before 1914, that the social system was highly dynamic and involved differences in social status, within Mennonite society and between Mennonites and their neighbors, or that Mennonite farmers were extremely active in the marketplace, maximizing profits and exploiting peasant labour, is rarely discussed. Neither is the involvement of wealthy landowners, industrialists and businessmen in political processes of the community, local government and national party politics and the dominance these minority social groups had over Mennonite life. The fact that Mennonite institution-building also involved a political attempt to maintain and reinforce Mennonite privileges and to sustain their dominance and control over their own affairs while enjoying the economic advantages of the larger society has not been widely investigated.²²

All these ideas concerning prerevolutionary Mennonite life: Mennonite noninvolvement in politics, if not the apolitical nature of Mennonite life, their marginal status as a minority people persecuted by the state on account of their faith and ethnicity and the fact that they were just small-scale, humble farmers, caught up in the turmoil of events as innocent bystanders, became part of the

Mennonite "vision" of themselves in the 1920s, promoted by Mennonites in the USSR and later after emigration to Canada. Such views of prerevolutionary Mennonite life therefore reflect the construction of a particular vision of that life which has its roots in their experience of loss and suffering in the Revolution and Civil War and in their attempts to come to terms with the Bolsheviks and a new country during the early 1920s. During this period the Mennonite leadership argued that prior to the Revolution Mennonites had been neither exploiters nor political actors, but instead had been persecuted by the Imperial regime because of their ethnicity and faith. Hopefully this would move Mennonites more easily into the category of victims rather than victimizers.²³

The problem for those who remained in the Soviet Union was that all those who had been involved in the commercial and political life of the old regime were seen by the Bolshevik and by many of the poorer peasants in rural areas now empowered by Bolshevik rhetoric, as previous members of the bourgeoisie. In Bolshevik eyes Mennonites, as landowners, prosperous farmers who employed labour, professionals, businessmen, millers and industrialists, clearly had been members of the exploiting classes. As such they were expected to have been supporters of the established, privileged orders of Tsarist society, class enemies of the proletariat and peasantry and naturally opposed to the Bolshevik vision of a new order.²⁴ This negative classification could and often was extended to their children and relation.

The sympathies and actions of many Mennonites, especially those in leadership positions during the period between February 1917 and the final defeat of the Whites in 1920, merely confirmed Bolshevik suspicions of their class origins. These included Mennonite support for liberal bourgeois political ideas, attempts to form political groupings based on ethnicity and class, opposition to socialist ideas and forces, intimidation of Ukrainian and Russian peasants and workers, the general lack of support of peasant aspirations for land redistribution, the sanctuary and protection afforded to former Mennonite estate owners and industrialists by colonists, close cooperation and support for the imperialist German and Austrian occupying forces in 1918 and finally involvement and at times apparent sympathy with the Whites supported even by involvement in military action. After 1920 their involvement in promoting emigration, their continued attempts to dominate Mennonite social and political life and their association with foreigners in capitalist countries, merely sustained Bolshevik doubts.²⁵ It is not at all surprising that Bolshevik officials remained suspicious of Mennonites, their leaders and of their claims for recognition of special rights and privileges based on religion or ethnic distinctiveness. What is surprising is that while such Mennonite activities and sympathies are well recorded in the literature, they rarely are discussed in terms of how they might have influenced Bolshevik attitudes to Mennonites after 1920.

That Mennonites prior to the Revolution, and in the 1920s, considered themselves ethnically and socially distinct from the majority of their neighbours is, however, apparent in contemporary accounts. In prerevolutionary rural

Russia, especially in areas with mixed ethnic populations, social identity was defined primarily by ethnic rather than by socio-economic factors. It should not be forgotten that in prerevolutionary times and during the 1920s Mennonites still lived in a largely agrarian society. In fact during the revolution and Civil War most urban areas became depopulated as people fled for safety and food to the countryside. Rural society became re-agrarianized. With the loss of factories and many businesses, and with the redistribution of estate land beyond the colonies, Mennonite society also retreated to the rural colony villages where once prosperous commercial farming at first was reduced to subsistence agriculture. But this was a pattern common to much of the Soviet Union following the Civil War. As such, rural society changed both within and outside the Mennonite world and Mennonite relations with their peasant neighbours also altered.

In prerevolutionary Russia the assertion by populations of ethnic and local differences tended to disguise the real socio-economic differences that existed within and between groups. Between ethnic groups differences in social status had long been seen as a consequence of "natural" processes of cultural differentiation. Within ethnic groups a sense of unity based upon appeals to common descent, faith and a shared history disguised the real status differences between members of the same ethnic group. Ethnic identity thus overruled real social differences based on economic differences. This probably accounts for the fact that the while internally Mennonite society was highly differentiated by status distinctions, and externally its relations with non-Mennonites were based on socio-economic differentiation, this is rarely discussed in the contemporary literature. Instead, contemporary discourse concerned with differentiation is dominated by highly stereotyped expressions which stress differences in customary practice and morality, rather than socio-economic divisions ("we efficient, cultured, prosperous and honest Mennonites versus those poor, dumb, inefficient, untrustworthy Russians" etc.).

In the post-Civil War period, the agitation by the Mennonite leadership for the recognition of Mennonites as a separate ethnic and religious group, distinct from the rest of society and overriding social differences, undoubtedly caused the Bolsheviks to remain suspicious of their intent. Such Mennonite claims to a distinctive identity were still largely attuned to the language of prerevolutionary Russian society, whereas Bolshevik views of identity were dominated by their active promotion (or invention) of very different languages of social class. These involved a classification and ascription of new social identities which included the identification of disapproved social groups, mainly the bourgeoisie, previous members of the old privileged social elites, and of approved groups, especially workers and peasants.

If the Bolsheviks according to their views of class were busy reclassifying Mennonites, Mennonites in turn were forced to come to terms with the new system of social identities. This coming to terms with the new rhetoric of social identities proved as difficult for many Mennonites as it was for many other Soviet citizens.²⁶ A proletariat ancestry would have given Mennonites a privi-

leged status in Soviet society, but it was difficult for the leadership to claim a proletariat past in spite of increasing Mennonite involvement in industry before 1914. While a few Mennonites had indeed been factory workers before 1917, most involved in industry had been factory or mill owners, entrepreneurs, specialist engineers or clerks, not exactly a good basis for a claim to proletarian status. Their expertise in agriculture aligned Mennonites with rural people but to be successful in the new social order of the countryside most Mennonites really had to discover a peasant identity. This proved difficult, as to most Mennonites the category "peasant" was associated with ideas not just of lowly social status but also of cultural degeneracy. More importantly they had to find a place within the Soviet classification of ranked social peasant groups: upper (kulak), middle and poor peasants. During the 1920s most established Mennonite farmers preferred to see themselves as "middle" peasants, denying their earlier privileged position and disregarding the poorer Mennonites in their midst. The reaction of the poorer Mennonites to the new social classifications and the regime is unknown, as their voices are distinctly absent from the record. Communist writers often spoke of "poor" Mennonites and justified their policies with reference to their social condition,²⁷ but how far these Mennonites adopted the new status which had distinct advantages in the new political situation is unclear. Such classifications reflected the Soviet's desire to divide ethnic groups by identifying social differences and setting groups against each other. For the majority of Mennonite farmers, however, their prowess as commercial farmers during Tsarist times and their success at reestablishing their farms as profitable ventures after 1921, soon resulted in their identification with the more prosperous and economically progressive peasantry. In time the majority were viewed by both Soviet officials and by their poorer peasant neighbours as kulak, ultimately with disastrous consequences when the countryside was dekulakanized in the late 1920s and early 1930s.²⁸

One prerevolutionary sector of Russian society, however, was allowed a degree of freedom: the intelligentsia. During the 1920s it was mainly the nonreligious Russian and Ukrainian professional intelligentsia who were permitted status in Soviet institutions and, as bourgeois specialists, became actively involved in the cultural and technical development of the country. Many professional Mennonites, especially engineers, did take up specialist roles in economic enterprises, but this often weakened their links with the wider Mennonite community. The same is true of those in some of the professions such as lawyers and those who were sympathetic to the regime and developed literary careers during this period.²⁹ Many members of the Mennonite intelligentsia, however, were teachers who were also ordained ministers. This severely compromised their involvement in most aspects of Soviet reconstruction and led to their exclusion from schools, posts in the local administration and other leadership roles on the grounds of their religious adherence.

So Mennonites were faced with a dilemma: socially most found it difficult to identify with the favoured working proletariat and the poorer sections of the

peasantry, and politically it was best to distance themselves from the fact that their ranks had included employers of peasant labour (wealthy landowners and prosperous colony farmers) and exploiters of workers and political supporters of the old regime, businessmen and factory owners. Often such class enemies were disenfranchised; how many Mennonites suffered so is unknown.³⁰ What Mennonites needed to maintain political, ethnic and religious solidarity was a single class identity, but this proved an impossible task given the differences in social status that had existed in prerevolutionary times and the continued appeal by many in the community to their past rights based upon status.

During the early period of Soviet rule new socio-political ethnicities also were established in the form of Soviet nationalities. In Ukraine "Mennonite" was not an identity approved on the grounds of either social origin or nationality as it was based on religion (hence the name of the *Verband*), although the term Mennonite was used by the Moscow-based *Verein*, perhaps indicating the different implementation of the nationalities policies in the two republics.³¹ Religious identities were only recognized when there was proof of previous Tsarist persecution, but most Bolsheviks remained aggressively opposed to religion and members of religious groups were primarily classified by their social and/or national identity rather than by faith.

Bolshevik doubts concerning the class origins and present social identities of many Mennonites and suspicion of their recent actions and sympathies and their continued assertion of a separate ethno-religious identity were undoubtedly as important in Bolshevik dealings with Mennonites as continued Mennonite allegiance to religion itself. Probably of least importance to most high-ranking Bolsheviks was Mennonite ethnic association with Germanness except where this involved direct links with Germany itself, a reactionary capitalist country ripe for revolution. Indeed, throughout the 1920s the Soviets attempted to integrate Mennonite organizations with the German Soviet groups created in accord with their policy of supporting Soviet nationalities. The Mennonites resisted such a unification and this was as much of an issue for Mennonites as fear of continued Russification through land redistribution and social levelling. Also, far from Russifying or even Ukrainianizing Mennonites during the 1920s, the authorities permitted them to assert aspects of their Germanness, for instance through encouraging teaching in the German language in schools and creating "German" administrative areas. But the intention of such policies was to make Mennonites better communists through social and political assimilation, not to establish autonomous socio-political groups and territories outside Communist Party control. This is why during the 1920s German and Austrian communists were sent to Mennonite areas in order to convince them to understand and conform to the new communist order. Often these people were appointed to key local government posts, which deeply disturbed the Mennonites who did not take kindly to being "governed" by outsiders, communist or non-communist, and anyway they had always despised non-Mennonite "Germans".³²

While in historical terms the claim that the Bolsheviks aimed to assimilate

Mennonites through Russification is a red herring, this is not to deny that in the early 1920s many Mennonites interpreted Bolshevik policies as pursuing this aim. Bolshevik agrarian policy was particularly viewed in this way. Mennonites living in the established colonies were deeply concerned with land redistribution and the favouring of poor peasants, especially where this involved settling Ukrainian and Russian peasants on land in the colonies which in pre-revolutionary times had been reserved exclusively for Mennonites.³³ Administrative changes which altered the boundaries of once exclusive Mennonite local government areas and again favoured the appointment of non-Mennonites, foreigners and poor peasants, to positions of power, and in Ukraine the activities of the infamous Committees of Poor Peasants (*Kombedy*), were all seen as further attacks on Mennonite autonomy.³⁴ Finally, Bolshevik control of education to create a new Soviet generation, the enlistment of young men into the Red Army and Communist opposition to religion on ideological grounds (see below), added to the idea that Mennonites, far from being socially levelled, were being subjected to a new form of Russification. Once again "ethnic" issues took precedence over an understanding of the socio-political issues involved in Soviet efforts at reform.³⁵

It must also be recognized, however, that in the eyes of Bolshevik officialdom continued Mennonite concern over religion, claims to special privileges including nonresistance, and their appeals to German culture were interpreted primarily as class-related issues. In the Bolshevik class-dominated view of the world, all Mennonite appeals to distinctiveness could and were ascribed as class-related issues: religion was an opiate which aimed to deceive common people and continued allegiance to religion reflected a lack of proper social-class consciousness; nonresistance revealed a lack of a sense of social class duty and a willingness to defend the socialist state under constant threat by the external bourgeois capitalist world; Mennonite concerns with nineteenth century German literature were essentially bourgeois in nature. If Mennonites insisted on being treated *en masse* as a distinct people, then all Mennonites, irrespective of their real social status, were potential class enemies. As such all Mennonites were potentially dangerous. The only things in their favour were first the supposed "opposition" of Tsarist officialdom to their faith, their claims to earlier persecution as an ethnic minority and, probably most important in the short term, their agricultural expertise essential for economic reconstruction.

To the Bolsheviks Mennonite involvement in the *Selbstschutz* during the Civil War was clearly a reflection of their membership of and sympathies with class enemies. The *Selbstschutz* had been drawn from and led mainly by members of the reactionary ruling classes of Mennonite society: landowners, industrialists, the intelligentsia and even with the tacit support of some ministers, who were often related to members of these social groups. Such involvement also revealed the falsity of Mennonite appeals to religious nonresistance. The continued existence in Mennonite settlements of those previously involved in the *Selbstschutz* and sympathetic to the Whites, suggested to the Bolsheviks

the existence of potentially dangerous counter-revolutionary forces. For many years after 1920 the Bolsheviks lived in fear of internal and external enemies. Counter-revolutionaries had to be identified and destroyed, whether in urban areas where right and left wing political enemies lurked, or in rural areas where the Bolsheviks had to combat considerable peasant resistance. In the southern Ukraine, for instance, Makhno and other anarchist "bandit" bands continued to operate after the defeat of the Whites forcing the Red Army to remain quartered in the region and terror employed to subdue the population.

The Portrayal of Soviet officialdom and Bolshevik policies

In Mennonite writing on the early Soviet period there is often a widespread negative attitude towards early official policies and Bolshevik officialdom in spite of clear evidence of sympathetic treatment of certain Mennonite requests, the granting of concessions, the numerous occasions that Mennonites received assistance from high-ranking Bolshevik political officials and from technical experts sent to help Mennonites with economic reconstruction. In Mennonite criticism of Soviet officials nowhere is it indicated the problems the Bolsheviks faced in establishing control and authority over the country and its people, least of all implementing their programs to establish a new order.³⁶ There were few committed, skilled and qualified Bolsheviks to control the chaos which had resulted from years of war, disorder and destruction. Often local officials were recent recruits to the party, uneducated and unskilled in administration. So the Bolsheviks were forced to depend on non-party industrial and managerial experts. The employment of such people, who often belonged to the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, directly conflicted with Bolshevik rhetoric concerning power being in the hands of the proletariat or the poorer peasants; while members from such lower socio-economic groups often sought positions of power, they usually proved ill-suited to their tasks.

In contrast Mennonites could draw on deeper reserves of educated leaders, skilled in teaching, administration and bureaucracy to negotiate and interact with Bolshevik officialdom. Many of these were younger men who replaced the prerevolutionary leadership who had grown old during the War or who had been discredited during the period of revolution and civil war by their social origins or their actions.³⁷ There was often a marked difference between the quality and skills of local-level Mennonite leaders and non-Mennonite officials.³⁸ And it is unclear if all the people Mennonites dealt with in the early years at the local level or as bureaucrats at regional offices were even party members. What is clear, however, is that Mennonite leaders, especially those in the *Verein* and the *Verband*, soon established personal patronage networks with important Bolsheviks to obtain approval of their plans or to counter lower level bureaucratic obstruction.³⁹ This "personal" approach was a mark of how things were often done at this period and is an indication of how quickly Mennonites adapted to the new regime and became adept at exploiting the system to their own advantage.

What is currently lacking in the literature is any consideration of how the different Mennonite organizations and their leaders related to each other during the early Soviet period. The exact relationships which developed *within* the Mennonite world between village and district authorities, the churches and the local organs of the *Verband* and *Verein* are still unclear. These must be established before the even more complex external relationships between Mennonites and non-Mennonites involved in local and regional government and other organs of Soviet control can be established. The problem with many Mennonite accounts of this period is their commitment to a portrait of Mennonites as basically apolitical. The general impression is that Mennonites only became involved in politics when circumstances forced them to become involved, and thus critical questions concerning the political aims of Mennonite organizations and their leaders are not discussed. One example of this is that Mennonite attempts to secure Soviet recognition of Mennonites as a distinct group involved an appeal not just to Mennonite *rights*, but also an assertion of their *privileges* with the ultimate aim of securing Mennonite *power* and *control* over their own affairs. Other examples are their constant appeals to be able to control their own local administration, to exclude non-Mennonite settlers from their communities and to manage their own institutions, including schools and other social and cultural bodies.

In terms of policy the indication is often given in Mennonite accounts that Soviet policies were comprehensive, well thought out and at odds with practically everything Mennonites stood for. Also, that some of these policies were formulated merely to frustrate or prevent Mennonites in their just cause. The reality is that the Bolsheviks were forced to formulate policies where previously little thought had been given and to make major ideological compromises for pragmatic reasons. What is more, policies were not at all consistent in either their formulation or in their application. This is not at all surprising given the chaotic political and economic situation during and following the Civil War, the general lack of resources with which to implement policy and the shortage of skilled and sympathetic personnel with which the Bolsheviks were faced. There existed an immense gap between idealism and practice. Areas of responsibility between different sections of the government and its administration remained unclear and political discord between leading Bolsheviks, bureaucrats and local officials was commonplace. In this environment Mennonites had considerable opportunity to reassert their claims to special treatment, to negotiate issues of particular concern, and to propose policy just because little thought had been given to many issues. But even when Mennonites obtained decisions favourable to their desires they were often frustrated by the inadequacy of command structures, by a lack of authority at the local level and the inherent contradictions that emerged between individuals, levels of the bureaucracy and between different regions even at the highest level. For instance, there was confusion throughout the 1920s between authorities in the Ukrainian capital of Kharkov and Moscow the centre of both the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the

Russian Federation. Mennonites were not necessarily being singled out for special treatment or frustration in getting their ideas, needs and policies recognized; all sectors and levels of society experienced similar difficulties during the 1920s.

That some Mennonite desires, requests and demands were clearly unacceptable to the Bolsheviks on ideological or simply policy grounds, is not surprising given the fact that the Mennonites often claimed special rights and privileges not on the basis of class or even nationality, but because of their faith and tradition. Certain Mennonite demands also were patently against Bolshevik principles (eg. maintaining large land parcels exclusively for Mennonites at the expense of the redistribution of land to the needy, irrespective of their ethnic or social background; total control of their welfare and educational institutions with the right to include religion as part of the school curriculum; permission to allow for the free emigration of the skilled farmers etc.)

But it is also apparent that Mennonite views as to what constituted Bolshevik policy and ideology were confused at the time and have continued to be misunderstood by later writers. One area of misunderstanding concerned Bolshevik policy towards land, the redistribution of land and the collectivization of agriculture. Land was certainly "nationalized" by the Bolsheviks in that "ownership" was assumed by the state, but possession and usage remained the initiative of individual households or the responsibility of other approved social units. The majority of Mennonites were not immediately affected except that land could not easily be bought and sold, especially for purposes of speculation. The redistribution of land, often involving the reduction of the area available for individual households, certainly disadvantages previous owners of full farms, but it is often forgotten that the majority of Mennonites in most settlements had not been owners of a full farm and many were thus advantaged by the redistribution of land. Land ownership certainly increased the power of the majority at the expense of the old established landowning cliques and this must have affected political power in local-level politics. What disturbed many Mennonites about land redistribution, however, especially in the established colonies, was that non-Mennonites were incorporated into their settlements, a practice they interpreted as an attempt to force ethnic integration as much as social levelling.

But the claim, often made in the primary and especially the secondary literature, that the ultimate aim of the Bolsheviks during most of the 1920s was the collectivization of agricultural land at the expense of individual households is incorrect. Indeed such communal agricultural ventures as were attempted before collectivization remained few in number and even declined in popularity before 1927/28. Among many Bolsheviks support for the radical nationalization of land and the collectivization of agriculture remained lukewarm before 1928 and was opposed by some in positions of power.⁴⁰

Another feature often stressed in Mennonite accounts is the lawlessness of the times and the arbitrary nature of policy formulation, decision-making and

administrative command. This was certainly true of the early period of Soviet rule when terror tactics were employed to enforce political acquiescence and clumsy methods of taxation were used involving the forced seizure of produce. But this is less true of later periods. During NEP, once the currency was stabilized, the Bolsheviks attempted to stabilize society by imposing monetary instead of produce taxes, initiating the rule of law and establishing rational bureaucratic procedures to administer policies. The fact that, like most other Soviet citizens, Mennonites continued to have their produce requisitioned, that legal principles were often circumvented and that bureaucrats were often obstructive, does not deny the reality that the Bolshevik leadership found this as much of a problem as Mennonites. Mennonite problems with local level officialdom had existed since Tsarist times and throughout the 1920s the Bolsheviks mounted campaigns and purges against bureaucratic obstruction and inefficiency, with varying success. The real problem lay in a lack of competent, committed personnel and continued corruption rather than in central policy.

One of the aspects of Mennonite dealings with officialdom often stressed in Mennonite accounts is the constant threat of arrest and arbitrary punishment by the security forces: the Cheka and later GPU. While following the Civil War there was a period of official terror, and while gross abuses of power by the security agencies continued through the 1920s, often involving arbitrary and illegal actions by its officers, much of what appears in Mennonite accounts involves a projection of later conditions operating in the 1930s back onto the early Soviet period. Certainly the arbitrary application of such powers declined after 1922 and a degree of freedom and tolerance of different views persisted through to the late 20s. The real terror occurred in the 1930s.

The Struggle for the young: education, military conscription and religion

While it is obvious that some aspects of Communist socio-economic policy were open to negotiation and debate, specific areas were less amenable to negotiation with officialdom and to Mennonite compromise. This was especially true of schooling, military service and religious affairs.

The claim to a monopoly of ideas, especially of those to be presented to school pupils, was of primary importance to the new regime. In schooling, old ideas, methods and curricula must be abandoned if the next generation were to be formed into proper Soviet citizens, loyal to the state and the Communist Party. This implied that those who had been educated and who had matured under Tsarist rule were eventually to be replaced by a new form of person, by Soviet citizens, predominantly proletariat in origin.⁴¹ The problem was what to do with the teachers trained in Tsarist times. Some obviously had to be dismissed, others had to undergo political retraining. Teachers who were ministers were removed from their positions and religious instruction in schools was banned. Although the Mennonites regretted the removal of religious

instruction from schools it was something they could live with as long as anti-religious teachings were also not taught. They even petitioned the government to declare the schools as “neutral ground” where neither religion nor anti-religion would be taught.⁴²

In the long run, however, the Soviets would not compromise their aim to initiate a programme for social and political reform through education. In theory the schools and their curricula were rapidly reorganized, old teachers dismissed and new staff appointed, especially in the crucial “political” area, and the influence of alternative ideologies, political and religious, removed from the classroom. Of course this left rather a large gap in the educational and training system which, when combined with the poor economic state of the country, did little to advance education. Plans formulated at the centre were also frustrated at the local level, not least by the teachers who struggled with the new curricula and sometimes resisted many of the regime’s demands.⁴³

The removal of religious education from the schools and the ban of formal religious instruction to those under 18, forced Mennonites to rethink the importance of socializing and enculturating their young people outside the family home and the schoolhouse, an area largely neglected in Tsarist times. One of the remarkable aspects of NEP was the development of youth groups (*Jugendvereine*) and the expansion of choirs where young people could be exposed to moral ideas⁴⁴ and protected from the Soviet clubs, theatres and movie theatres where youths were entertained and taught communist ideas and encouraged in antireligious agitation. It is also clear, however, that concern over the religious future of their young people and the inroads Communist ideology might make on the young, was a major spur to increased Mennonite emigration as the 1920s advanced.⁴⁵

Another area of concern centered on the young was that of alternative service. While Mennonite statements on non-resistance were couched largely in religious terms, based upon Biblical interpretations and appeals to historical traditions of non-resistance (the *Selbstschutz* notwithstanding), there was also another major concern which later commentators rarely comment upon. This involved Mennonite interest in the continued dominance and control over its young males. This had long been of primary concern to Mennonites in many countries when faced with the emergence of a system of military conscription which aimed not at creating an army of citizens, but also through conscription creating loyal citizens whose allegiance was primarily to the nation and state, not to a faith or a localized community. The fact that conscription also exposed young men to a social and moral order often at odds with Mennonite values, not to mention political indoctrination and antireligious propaganda, heightened Mennonite concerns. Again this had long been an issue with Mennonites in Russia and elsewhere, but experience during and after the Civil War, including the actions and attitudes of young Mennonites swept into military adventures, greatly enforced such opinions. However, Mennonites still felt they should render some kind of “state service” (*Staatsdienst*) and this sense of civil duty was

another continuation of attitudes developed in the Imperial period.

During the early Soviet period the army was seen by many Bolsheviks as an extension of, if not a replacement for, the schoolhouse. It was the institution where young adults such as peasants and workers could gain skills, literacy, administrative knowledge and be indoctrinated with Bolshevik ideology.⁴⁶ These young people were to form the leading cadre of future Soviet society. In terms of Mennonite appeals to non-resistance an interesting parallel of interests thus emerges. Mennonite concern with maintaining non-resistance was not just a matter of faith, but also of losing their influence and control of the young men so essential for the continuity of Mennonite life.⁴⁷

Thus disagreements between the Communists and Mennonites over schooling, religion and military service eventually came to focus on the key theme of gaining control of the young people. For the Soviets this meant gaining control of the young at as early an age as possible to help to create a discontinuity in the social system between those of the old order and those who would establish the new utopia. The Soviets even toyed with the idea of abolishing what they considered to be bourgeois family life and for the state to raise children in the new order; experience with the millions of homeless orphaned children they inherited as a consequence of the Civil War and subsequent famines, undoubtedly contributed to a tempering of such fantasies. They compromised by taking over the schools, while leaving early socialization and enculturation to the family and then seizing control through youth movements such as the Pioneers and the Komsomol.⁴⁸

Given the Communist's concern with rapid social replacement and their suspicion of those raised under the Tsarist system, Mennonite attempts to reestablish social continuity, maintain control of their social order and especially to keep their young separated from the new ideologies being promoted in the schoolhouse, the Soviet youth movements and the army barracks, were ultimately doomed to failure. Eventually the Communist urge to produce a new society resulted in the elimination of not just representatives of the old order and those who stubbornly refused to be reformed, but even members of the Bolshevik Party. Hence it could be argued that there is a continuity in Bolshevik ideology between the policies of social and cultural reform of the 1920s and the arrests, imprisonment and executions of the 1930s: the old elites were to be destroyed and replaced. But the crucial issue during the 1920s was whether or not the process of social and economic transformation would evolve naturally over a long period, or whether the pace of change would have to be forced by direct government intervention. During most of the 1920s the issue remained open, hence the often confusing administration of policies during this period. From 1925 onwards Soviet policies moved increasingly towards gaining control of the young and after 1928/29 the matter was settled: both the social order and the economic order would be remoulded by command through the total restructuring of both society and the economy. Any illusions of continued Mennonite separatism and autonomy and of a say in the control of the new generation were

swept aside.

Conclusions

Mennonites, even their scholars trained in academic scholarship, tend to view the world through distinctive Mennonite eyes which judge events, people and institutions on Mennonite terms. For Mennonites a powerful historical inheritance has been to see the external world as hostile and threatening, somehow bent upon the persecution and even destruction of God's chosen people. While there is no denying that Mennonites have suffered for their faith, they have also suffered for other reasons: for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and sometimes because of their own misdirected actions and understanding of events. This was certainly true of their suffering in the turmoil of the Russian Revolution, the Civil War and most of the subsequent Soviet period.

Mennonites suffered as did millions of other Russian and Soviets. Sometimes they were singled out for special attention on account of their faith and ethnicity, real or imagined; at other times they were just swept into the whirlwind of events which have consumed the lives and hopes of so many during the twentieth century. Such a broader understanding of the Mennonite experience helps place Mennonite suffering in context, but also weakens the import of Mennonite attempts to link their fate to the simple tropes of a suffering, religious people persecuted through the ages on account of their faith.

Between the competing views of Mennonites as a select, persecuted people of the faith, and an understanding of Mennonite suffering in a wider historical context, lies the possibility that Mennonites have not always been innocent victims in troubled times. Where Mennonites have chosen to become active participants in the wider world, to exploit its advantages while demanding special privileges, to claim rights and identities beyond those of freedom of religion, they have exposed themselves to the danger of persecution on grounds other than faith. During the Imperial era Russian Mennonites sought and achieved communal prosperity and particular privilege in a land where these gave them unequal advantages over much of the population. When this way of life was challenged by new forces, the Mennonites discovered that their own social and cultural order, as well as their faith, was put to the test. These forces included the destructive powers unleashed by war, revolution and anarchy, and also the plans of the new Soviet regime committed to a new social and political order which would remove Mennonite privileges and claims to cultural autonomy.

In this paper I have challenged the view that Mennonites in the early Soviet period were entirely innocent victims singled out by an intolerant regime for special treatment. The aims and objectives of the new regime have to be understood on their own terms and the Mennonites responses have to be interpreted in a new light which goes beyond the idea of religious suffering,

simple peoplehood, social innocence and political ignorance. This involves a major revision of established Mennonite views of the Soviet experience without being apologetic for the Soviet system, in terms of early Bolshevik aims and objectives, least of all for horrors of the Stalinist era.⁴⁹ Instead it should be seen as a challenge for future research and interpretation.

Notes

I would like to thank Harry Loewen, Terry Martin and Al Reimer for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper; the opinions expressed are, however, my own.

¹ Recorded by Anna Baerg in her diary, entry of July 31st 1919: *Diary of Anna Baerg 1916-1924* (transl and ed. Gerald Peters). Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1985, 45.

² Walter Sawatsky, "From Russian to Soviet Mennonites 1941-1988." In John Friesen ed. *Mennonites in Russia 1788-1988: essays in honour of Gerhard Lohrenz*. Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989, 299-337.

³ Toews' major works on the early Soviet period include *Lost Fatherland: the story of the Mennonite emigration from Soviet Russia, 1921-1927*. Scottdale, PA, Herald Press, 1967; "The Russian Mennonites and the military question (1921-1927)." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (from now on *MQR*), 43 (1969), 153-68; "The Mennonites in the early Soviet period." *Mennonite Life*, 24 (1969), 101-08; "The origins and activities of the Mennonite Selbstschutz in the Ukraine (1918-1919)," *MQR*, 44 (1972), 5-40; "The Mennonites and the Siberian frontier (1907-1930): some observations." *MQR*, 47 (1973), 83-101; "The Halbstadt volost 1918-1922: a case study of the Mennonite encounter with early Bolshevism." *MQR*, 48 (1974), 489-514; *With courage to spare: the life of B.B. Janz (1877-1964)*. Winnipeg: The Christian Press for the Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America, 1978; *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*. Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1982; "Early Communism and Russian Mennonite peoplehood." In John Friesen ed. *Mennonites in Russia 1788-1988: essays in honour of Gerhard Lohrenz*. Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989, 265-87 and various other works noted below. Toews has also edited a collection of important contemporary and later documents, many covering this period: *The Mennonites in Russia from 1917 to 1930: selected documents*. Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1975.

⁴ Although Toews provides many useful insights, his account of the Mennonite experience from the late Imperial period onwards is uneven. He rarely provides an explanation of the wider context in which Mennonites lived: late Imperial Russian society and politics, the early Soviet period including the social and political aims and objectives of the new Bolshevik regime, as well as the very different situation of the Stalinist period. Almost a decade ago, Walter Sawatsky drew attention to many of these issues in his review of Toews' book, see Walter Sawatsky, "Review of John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*." *MQR*, 59(1), 1985, 94-98; see also John B. Toews, "A reply to Walter Sawatsky" and Walter Sawatsky, "Sawatsky reply to John B. Toews" in "Comments on Russian Mennonite historiography." *MQR*, 59 (3), 1985, 287-89.

⁵ Research on this article was stimulated by an attempt to understand the social and political contexts of Russian Mennonite emigration to Canada in the 1930s and also is informed by my earlier research on the late Imperial period, especially the social, political and other cultural aspects of the formation of the Mennonite Commonwealth.

⁶ The criticism also has been levelled at some western interpretation of Soviet history, most elegantly by Stephen F. Cohen, in his *Rethinking the Soviet experience: politics and history since 1917*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

⁷ For an interesting lengthy discussion on this question which, given that it was written by an

emigrant to Canada, ultimately comes down with a negative answer see Auch ein Emigrant, "Können die Mennoniten in Russland noch eine freundliche Zukunft erwarten?" *Der Bote*, 2(7-11), 18 February - 18 March 1925.

⁸ Toews writes for instance that the sections of the charter of the *Verband für Holländischer Herkunft* which dealt with economic reconstruction were merely part of a "strategy," — "a bid for time during which emigration and reconstruction possibilities might be more fully explored" (*Lost fatherland*, 78) and that in 1921 its predecessor organization had only "posed as an agency of economic reconstruction... since emigration was still out of the question" (*ibid*, 124); that B.B. Janz believed "the concessions granted the Mennonites [to reconstruct their economy on Mennonite terms] were at best temporary and should be used to facilitate the exodus of as many colonists as possible. A basis for economic recovery nevertheless had to be erected for those who remained behind... At no point in his career as leader of the *VBHH*, however, did he believe that economic reconstruction was really possible in Soviet Russia" (*ibid*, 87); that for "the Russian Mennonites [economic] reconstruction meant the plotting of survival tactics, not the initiation of a large-scale business operation" (*ibid*, 125); and finally that for "the Kharkov authorities [ie, officials of the Ukrainian Soviet Government] emigration meant only the elimination of nonproductive elements in the colonies and so played an essential part in its plans for economic reconstruction. The reverse was true of the *VBHH* operational philosophy. Its interest in the buildup of the south [ie. of the Ukrainian Mennonite settlements] was a means to an end. *VBHH* support of economic reconstruction was primarily intended to promote a more tolerant attitude towards the Mennonites, and a more lenient migration policy. The activities of the *AMLV* [*Allrussischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verein*] in the RSFSR [Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic] followed an identical pattern after the agency had been officially approved on May 16, 1923", *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, 105 reproduced from his "Russian Mennonites and the military question", 166-67.

⁹ See final quotation above and Toews (*Lost fatherland*, 78) "Regardless of what proportion of the Mennonite population chose to leave, there were those who preferred to stay behind". It would appear that when Mennonites emigrated on group passports in 1923/24 emigrants were voted by the Mennonite leaders and local communities to remove undesirables, but in later periods, when Mennonites emigrated on individual passports, this became more difficult. On the vetting of potential emigrants by a local community in Molochnaia in 1924 see the comments of Anna Berg in her *Diary*, 112; the late David G. Rempel (a 1923 emigrant) also pointed this out to me in private discussions, although it is discussed neither by Toews in his *Lost fatherland*, nor by Frank H. Epp in his *Mennonite exodus: the rescue and resettlement of the Russian Mennonites since the communist Revolution*. Altona: D. W. Friesen, 1962.

¹⁰ Toews, however, is inconsistent in his use of sources and discussion of the causes of emigration. For instance, he writes that the "Mennonite exodus to Canada which began in 1923 symbolized a massive protest against prevailing Soviet economic and religious policies." (*Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, 106 and earlier in his "Russian Mennonites and the military question", 168); but then he notes that the military question was "one of the central forces which sustained on a consistently high level the sentiment favoring emigration" (*ibid*, 168). Earlier he states that with "the gradual restoration of stable government and public safety, ...emigration became more and more a question of religious freedom rather than economics" (*ibid*, 167). Finally Toews states that by "1925 and 1926 the majority of the settlers desired to emigrate" (*Lost Fatherland*, 90) although this statement, which disregards the prevailing NEP situation, is supported with reference to a Soviet Mennonite's letter of 1930, written only after collectivization was underway (used again in *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, 116).

¹¹ See Yuri Felshtinsky "The legal foundations of the immigration and emigration policy of the USSR, 1917-27". *Soviet Studies*, 24 (1982), 327-48.

¹² It is perhaps significant that in his *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites* Toews only mentions NEP once, (103), and then only in passing. While in his *Lost Fatherland* Toews makes passing

reference to NEP, his comments are perfunctory; Epp is more informative on this period and on its importance for influencing the desire for emigration, *Mennonite exodus*, 140-41, 157, 221-22 although he too suffers from teleological arguments.

¹³ On this period see the classic study by Edward Hallett Carr, *Socialism in one country 1924-1926*. London: Macmillan, Vol. 1, 1958; Vol. 2, 1959; Vol. 3 (1) and the more recent works including the special edition of *Soviet Studies in History* (28 (2), Fall 1989) containing a roundtable discussion by Soviet historians on "The Soviet Union in the 1920s," Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch and Richard Stites eds, *Russia in the era of NEP: explorations in Soviet society and culture*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991 and Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Soviet state and society between revolutions, 1918-1929*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

¹⁴ "For the Russian Mennonites [economic] reconstruction meant the plotting of survival tactics, not the initiation of a large-scale business operation" (Toews, *Lost fatherland*, 125). C.F. Klassen, one of the leaders of the Moscow Verein, clearly gives a very different account of the economic achievements of the organizations in his "The Mennonites of Russia, 1917-1928," *MQR*, 6 (1932), 74-76. Mennonite businessmen also operated outside the Mennonite economic organizations, as independent Nepmen, see the account of the miller Klassen's activities in Alan Ball's *Russia's last capitalists: the Nepmen, 1921-1929*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 120-21. Adolf Ehrt (*Das Mennonitentum in Russland von seiner Einwanderung bis zur Gegenwart*. Langensalza: Julius Belz, 1932, 110-33) provides a useful overview of economic developments in the colonies under the influence of the *Verein* and the *Verband* during the period of reconstruction between 1923-1926.

¹⁵ On the diaspora and the hopes, sentiments and activities of its members see Marc Raeff, *Russia abroad: a cultural history of the Russian emigration 1919-1939*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990; see also Robert C. Williams, *Culture in exile: Russian émigrés in Germany, 1881-1941*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972.

¹⁶ Reprinted by Toews in *The Mennonites in Russia from 1917 to 1930: selected documents*, Section III. See also the accounts of the *Verein* and the *Verband* written soon after their closure: "Zur Geschichte des Verbandes der Bürger holl. Herkunft in der Ukraine." *Der Bote*, 3 (19-21) 12-26 May 1926; Klassen, "The Mennonites of Russia, 1917-1928" and later P.J. Fröse, "Wie entstand der Allrussische Mennonitische Landwirtschaftliche Verein?" *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 76 (17) 29 April 1953, 2-3. Terry Martin has recently discovered the papers of the *Verein* in Moscow and these could be the basis for a major reconsideration of this period: *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv rossiiskoi federatsii (GARF)*, fond 423, "Vse-rossiiskoe mennonitskoe sel'skokhoziastvennoe obshchestvo "AMLV".

¹⁷ The most interesting of these are the memoirs (written c. 1954) of Jacob A. Neufeld of the activities and subsequent fate of the Gnadenfeld cooperative in Molochnaia: "Memories of the former activities of the Verband by a participant in the Union of the Citizens of Dutch Origin in the Ukraine" (translated by Lena Unger). Manuscript, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas (Small archives N394 ea). In his published account of his life under the Soviets, Neufeld hardly mentions this period moving quickly from the Revolution into a detailed account of Collectivization, see Jacob A. Neufeld, *Tiefenwege: Erfahrungen und Erlebnisse von Russland-Mennoniten in zwei Jahrzehnten bis 1949*. Virgil, Ontario, Niagra Press, nd. . . Cornelius C. Funk, a miller, provides an interesting account, written long after the event, of the problems a Mennonite entrepreneur faced in doing business during the 1920s (*Escape to freedom*. Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1982, 55-61, 63-70).

¹⁸ See Toews, *Lost fatherland*, 42-43

¹⁹ "Economically, their commitment to a capitalism based on private initiative clashed with socialism", Toews, *Lost fatherland*, 43. Here Toews overlooks in fact the considerable Mennonite interest in the cooperative movement which began in the 1890s and flourished in the Soviet period. More research is needed on the nature and support of different cooperative movements in

the Mennonite world both before and after the revolution.

²⁰ This issue of social identities and the emergence of "class" in pre-revolutionary and post revolutionary Russian/Soviet society has been the subject of considerable discussion and debate in western studies in recent years. For pioneering studies of this issue see Moshe Lewin's *Russian peasants and Soviet power: a study of collectivization*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968 and the essays in his *The making of the soviet system*. London: Methuen, 1985. For an excellent recent reanalysis which refers to the debate see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The problem of class identity in NEP society." In Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch and Richard Stites eds, *Russia in the era of NEP*, 12-33, the essays in her *The cultural front: power and culture in revolutionary Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992 and most recently her "Ascribing class: the construction of social identity in Soviet Russia." *Journal of Modern History*, 65 (1993), 745-770.

²¹ "The events of 1918-22... [c]onceptually marked the collapse of a world which had endured for more than a century... Culturally and socially the only world the Halbstadt colonist understood was a self-contained, self-sufficient Mennonite one... [after 1880s] the Mennonites resisted assimilation by resorting to a strong institutionalism. Until 1918 they retained their local administrative autonomy and remained linguistically and culturally separate from their host society. The average Halbstadt Mennonite still found himself in an isolated, essentially homogeneous society, even though a sizable Mennonite intelligentsia with strong interests in Russian culture existed... His being poor or rich did not separate him from his fellow villagers. He simply regarded them as 'his people' and communicated directly with them" (Toews, "The Halbstadt volost," 513). Toews in his later writing (for instance in his *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, 13-14 etc.) qualifies this rather simple view of prerevolutionary Mennonite society, but traces of it remain in his writings.

²² For a different view of Mennonite society during the pre-war period see my "Prolegomena to the study of Mennonite society in Russia 1880-1914." *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 8 (1990), 52-75.

²³ For those in emigration, Communist persecution became the leitmotif of their claim to be victims and the Imperial period was seen as a Golden Age under the rule of the Tsar.

²⁴ As Viola has recently pointed out concerning the victims of rural repression known collectively as *byvshie liudi* (outsiders/marginal people within a village), these "included noble landowners, clergy, church elders, members of religious sects (especially Baptists and Evangelists), large landholders, genuine 'kulaks' (in the sense of very wealthy farmers), Stolypin *otrubniki* (peasants who split from the commune during the Stolypin land reform and owned their land privately), factory and rural enterprise owners, merchants, traders, certain categories of rural homeowners, tsarist officers, cossack atamans, prerevolutionary policemen, estate stewards, and village and *volost* elders." It also included "not only ancien regime *byvshie liudi*, but [also] post-1917 groupings that, loosely defined, had opposed the Bolsheviks in the Revolution or Civil War, like White Army officers and sometimes rank-and-file soldiers, repatriated cossacks, and members of other political parties (Socialist Revolutionaries, SRs, in particular)," Lynne Viola "The second coming: class enemies in the Soviet countryside, 1927-1935." In J. Arch Getty & Roberta T. Mannin eds, *Stalinist terror: new perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 70. It should be noted that this categorization thus included a large proportion of the Mennonite population in the 1920s, probably as high as 60-70%.

²⁵ See the article, originally published in *Die Arbeit*, the organ of the German section of the Party in Moscow by the then head of the Ukrainian section, J. Gebhardt, "Zur Auswanderungsbewegung unter den Mennoniten." *Der Mennonitische Immigranten Bote*, 1 (39), 8 October 1924, 5; this class analysis was later incorporated into the marxist/materialist analysis of Mennonite history by the Mennonite communist David Penner writing as Reinmarus in his *Anti-Menno: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Mennoniten in Russland*. Moscow: Zentral Völker Verlag, 1930, 131 ff.

²⁶ As early as 1921 a Mennonite in Molochnaia recorded in his diary that: "In the evening we

decided on who fitted into which category—Bednajakii (poor), Srednjakii (middle income) and Kulakii (Faustbrauchende (rich), J. Boldt and Gerh. Klassen, because they owned almost 100 dessj., [of land] were erroneously ranked in the last category. In the true sense of the word, we certainly haven't any Kulaks (the rich) [entry for 26th February 1921]... We signed a document stating that we haven't any Kulaks here. It's better this way [2nd March 1921]." *In Troubles and triumphs 1914-1924: excerpts from the diary of Peter J. Dyck, Ladekopp, Molotschna Colony, Ukraine* (ed. John P. Dyck). Springstein, Manitoba: the Editor, 1981, 138.

²⁷ See the article by H. Unger originally published in the Communist paper *Die Arbeit* reprinted in *Der Mennonitischen Immigranten Bote*, 1 (3-4, 10), 30 January, 6 February, 19 March 1924.

²⁸ For sources on social identities see note 20; as Moshe Lewin (*The making of the Soviet system*. London: Methuen, 1985) points out the term *kulak* should be seen a political category open to considerable manipulation and change during the Soviet period; later scholars have built upon this insight.

²⁹ See Harry Loewen, "Anti-Menno: introduction to early Soviet-Mennonite literature," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 11 (1993), 23-42.

³⁰ On the disenfranchised see Elsie Kimerling, "Civil rights and social policy in Soviet Russia 1918-1936." *Russian Review*, 41 (1982), 24-46.

³¹ For a contemplative discussion of the issues involved in ethnic versus religious identification, undoubtedly stimulated by thinking about these problems, see the article by Ph. D. Cornies of the *Verband* "Konfessionell oder national?" *Der Bote*, 2(3-4), 21-28 January 1925. Cornies was one of the leaders of the *Verband*.

³² This is commented upon in a number of reports from Soviet Russia and Ukraine to *Der Bote*. See for instance the report from Halbstadt in *Der Bote*, 1 (42) 29 October 1924, 5 and from Rosental in 2(38) 23 September 1925, 6; see also Klassen, "The Mennonites of Russia, 1917-1928," 76.

³³ Although Mennonites sometimes received generous parcels of land, up to 32 desiatini, the reduction of holdings from the previous "full-farms" and the settlement of outsiders in previously "exclusive" Mennonite areas was deeply resented by many. In the Halbstadt/Gnadenfeld area of Molochnaia for instance 16 new settlements mainly inhabited by Ukrainians were established by 1924, see Peter Braun, "Zur Auswanderung der Mennoniten aus Russland." *Der Bote*, 2(5), 4 February 1925.

³⁴ There were a number of reorganizations of the old Tsarist administrative units and the establishment of new administrative district (*raions*) in local areas, sometimes with the aim of producing ethnic districts such as "German Raions". Although Soviet officials went out of their way to accommodate Mennonite desires for "national" areas, the reorganization was described by the Mennonites as not so much a "deutsche Rayonierung" as a "deutsche Ruinierung," see Braun, "Zur Auswanderung," 5. This constant tinkering with the system of local government, as well as constant shifts in economy policy, contributed to the sense of uncertainty in the Mennonite world during the 1920s.

³⁵ Mennonite emigres in Canada and Germany in the 1930s, imbued with Nazi racial rhetoric, interpreted Bolshevik (and earlier Tsarist) attempts to mobilize Mennonites as subjects and citizens through the distorted prism of an imagined Germanic peoplehood, seeing all attempts at social and cultural integration as an vicious attack on their rightful racial inheritance. Unfortunately, such views have continued to inform some Mennonite interpretations of their past even into more recent times where it is often stated that they destroyed their true identity. Interestingly, C.F. Klassen, one of the central organizers of the *Verein*, by the early 1930s, having emigrated to Canada, interpreted Bolshevik actions in this way and suggested that the history of Mennonites in Russia should be seen as their struggle against russification, "The Mennonites of Russia, 1917-1928", 69, 77.

³⁶ On problems of building administration and government bodies after the seizure of power in 1917 see essays in section III of Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny eds, *Party, state, and society in the Russian Civil War*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989 and Robert Service, *The Bolshevik party in revolution: a study in organizational change 1917-1923*. London: Macmillan, 1979.

³⁷ For an account of a Mennonite involvement with Soviet administration see Gerhard Lohrenz, *Storm tossed: the personal story of a Canadian Mennonite from Russia*. [Winnipeg: The Author], 1976, 137-51 on his role as a government official in Zagradovka. A great deal more research is needed on this topic as hundreds of Mennonites must have served in Soviet administrative office without being members of the Communist Party.

³⁸ As Merle Fainsod has pointed out after a careful study of Soviet government offices in the Smolensk area: "The quality of the state apparatus could hardly be described as high, and its standards deteriorated markedly as one approached the grass roots" (*Smolensk under Soviet rule*. London: Macmillan, 1958, 450).

³⁹ Future research needs to identify more closely these officials and their own aims and contacts. For instance, one important figure involved with Mennonite officials was A.P. Smironov, a Social Democratic before he became a Bolshevik who was extremely active during the 1920s in the government concerned particularly with agriculture and peasant affairs, see "Aleksandr Petrovich Smirnov (1877-1938)." *Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History*, 36, 31-32.

⁴⁰ On the collectives prior to collectivization see Lewin, *Russian peasants and Soviet power*. 107-116 and Siegelbaum *Soviet state and society between revolutions*, 195-96; Lewin also discusses the disagreements concerning land distribution and the pace of collectivization. On the low numbers of such ventures see Table 1.2 in D.J. Male *Russian peasant organization before collectivization: a study of commune and gathering 1925-1930*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 24 which records that in 1926 only 1.1% of peasant land in New Russia consisted of collective farms and only 6.8% had been formed into State Farms.

⁴¹ The richer peasants and the privileged members of Tsarist society were to be "replaced". How long this would take was unclear to the leaders of the Communist Party in the 1920s and was a subject of considerable discussion and debate.

⁴² See the memorandum sent to government in 1923 and signed by Jacob A. Rempel, the elder from Grünfeld, and others which included this idea along with eight other points, see *Der Mennonitischen Imigranten Bote*, 1(2), 23 January 1924, 3-4. The idea must have remained popular as in 1929 a similar proposal was forwarded to the Soviets by an initiative group of senior Khortitsa teachers suggesting that schools should be "apolitical" and "areligious", see "Von der Konferenz deutscher Lehrer des Chortitzer Rayons." *Der Bote*, 6(22), 7 August 1929, 3. The Soviet response this time was extremely negative.

⁴³ On Soviet schools and the broader struggle with the older teachers and their confrontation with the new curricula, especially the infamous "Complex" method see Larry F. Holmes, *The Kremlin and the schoolhouse: reforming education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991. One of the few Mennonite accounts to deal with this issue, along with the use of German in the classrooms, is T.D. Regehr (with the assistance of J.I. Regehr) in his *For everything a season: a history of the Alexanderkrone Zentralschule*. Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1988.

⁴⁴ The Mennonite religious journal *Unser Blatt*, published between 1925 and 1927, although heavily constrained by censorship, clearly reveals this concern. Contemporary reports from Russia and Ukraine also indicate the emphasis on youth and the fears concerning Soviet youth institutions, see for instance a letter from Nieder Khortitsa in *Der Bote*, 21 January 1925, 5. Terry Martin informs me that a related issue was the attempt by the Bolsheviks to establish women's organizations and empower women as part of their desire for a new social order. This would have

been seen as a threat to the structure of authority in Mennonite domestic groups.

⁴⁵ For a critical analysis of the lack of authority in the classroom and the chaos of the educational system see "Etwas über den 'neuen Schule' in der alten Heimat." *Der Bote*, 2(43-44), 28 October - 4 November 1925 and a letter from Einlage in 1926 which makes similar criticisms and concludes: "Der Gegensatz zwischen der häuslichen Erziehung und dem, was den Kindern in der Schule und im öffentlichen Leben geboten wird, ist die Haupttriebfeder der Auswanderung." *Der Bote*, 3(42), 20 October 1926, 6.

⁴⁶ See Mark von Hagen, "Soldiers in the Proletarian dictatorship: from defending the Revolution to building socialism." In Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch and Richard Stites eds, *Russia in the era of NEP: explorations in Soviet society and culture*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991, 156-73.

⁴⁷ Not that the Mennonites were not concerned about militarism. Since 1914 Mennonites had lived in a world constantly dominated by military concerns and the rhetoric of war. The end of the Civil War did not suddenly alter this situation. Bolshevik understanding of the class struggle had been reinforced by the violence of revolution and civil war. The struggle against counter-revolution and class enemies now became imbued with the language of militarism quite at odds with any Mennonite claims to non-resistance, religious principles and or even a secular, social pacifism. Throughout the 1920s and the 1930s the Soviet Union and its core Communist Party members were engaged in "warfare" with counter-revolutionary forces at home and abroad, forces which threatened to surround and destroy their state by subversion, sabotage and even open invasion. This military rhetoric was to continue into later periods with the struggles of "labour-units" active on a variety of "fronts", "labour brigades" marching in unison as if to war and people seeking out "enemies" of the Revolution and the Party.

⁴⁸ Once again the Mennonites were not alone in their opposition to these new youth groups; peasants also resisted them and their antireligious emphasis, see Isabel A. Tirado. "The revolution, young peasants and the Komsomol's antireligious campaigns (1920-1928)." *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 26(1-3) (1992), 97-117 and Isabel A. Tirado. "The Komsomol and young peasants: the dilemma of rural expansion, 1921-1925." *Slavic Review*, 52(2) (1993), 460-76.

⁴⁹ Chris Ward in a recent book on the Stalinist period makes much the same point. He appeals to historians "to see all round a problem... to suspend disbelief and enter into the world of men and women for whom we now have no particular sympathy" As he points out while it is "comparatively easy to respond to the dispossessed... [u]nderstanding the oppressors... is an unattractive proposition, even though we are not required to share their view of the world. We are obliged, however, to realize that it was *their* view of *their* world—whether held sincerely, from fear, in the hope of advancement, or out of weakness or insouciance... And once we have made that imaginative leap we are no longer free to talk easily of the crimes and follies of this or that epoch, or to engage in the glib luxury of allotting praise or blame... To the everlasting chagrin of moralists, politicians and pundits, the world becomes stranger, more complicated and less amenable to manipulation when we recognize the singularities of the past, see things otherwise, begin to think for ourselves, and falter before judging," Ward, *Stalin's Russia*. London: Arnold, 1993, 228-29.