

Claas Epp and the Great Trek Reconsidered

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The story of the Great Trek is one of the most fascinating and yet tragic events in Mennonite history since the sixteenth century. It is, in many ways, reminiscent of the darker elements in the story of sixteenth century Anabaptism, in particular the chiliastic elements which came to their most radical expression in the "Kingdom of Münster" (1534-35). Historians of Anabaptist beginnings are aware of the attempts by Mennonite historians to define a normative Anabaptism which is devoid of all eschatological radicalism as well as of all revolutionary tendencies. That attempt has been seriously challenged time and again, especially during the last decade.¹ In a similar way, the Great Trek has been viewed essentially as an aberration from "normative Mennonitism," but such a view may likewise invite serious challenges. Before seeking to assess the character of the movement, however, it may be well to give a brief resumé of the events themselves.

The Great Trek refers to the emigration of approximately 600 Mennonites from European Russia to the region of Turkestan in Central Asia between 1880-84.² The largest number of these came from the Am Trakt settlement, which itself was a relatively new settlement (1854) of immigrants from Prussia. They had left Prussia because of the increasing encroachments of the Prussian government upon the religious principles of the Mennonites, especially upon the issue of nonresistance.³ Already in Prussia these people had imbibed certain chiliastic or millenarian teachings under the influence of Pietism. These eschatological ideas were further nurtured in Russia. One of these convictions was that the appointed place to meet the Lord was in the land of the rising sun, in Central Asia. Dissension quickly developed regarding some elements of this teaching, and personality clashes also made their impact. Finally a group under the leadership of Claas Epp, Jr., and calling itself the "Bride Community," seceded from the main group and made preparations for the long trek to Turkestan.

The first three wagon trains, comprising about 100 families (400

people), left in 1880. Epp himself was not in this group. The trip itself was an incredible ordeal. A number of diaries and other accounts tell the story of almost insurmountable difficulties as the trains made their way across mountain passes and deserts, fighting disease, heat and cold, rain and snow, and many other difficult circumstances. The ten families on the first wagon train buried eleven children on the way. The distance of about 1400 miles to Turkestan usually took three to four months.

In 1881 two additional wagon trains, consisting of about 56 families, departed for Turkestan. Epp joined the final train which left in September of that year.⁴ In the meantime, most of the members of the two groups had already left for Bukhara outside Russian territory where Epp now believed the place of refuge to be located.⁵ The Molotschna group, under the leadership of Abraham Peters, was now already disillusioned with Epp and believed him to be a false prophet. They therefore established a new settlement at Aulie Ata. When Epp arrived in Turkestan with his group he too decided to proceed to Bukhara but had to wait until the following spring because of weather conditions. Those who by now had arrived at the borders of Bukhara experienced many difficulties. Their lives were threatened and their repeated attempts to enter the country failed. Tensions and schisms arose, but the majority, after reuniting with Epp, eventually settled at a place called Lausan. However, their hardships were still not over. They were frequently robbed and assaulted by the natives and in one case a Mennonite father was murdered.⁶ As a result, many of the Mennonites compromised the nonresistant position which had helped inspire their move in the first place and they hired guards to protect the community.

More and more Mennonites became disillusioned with Epp. Some made the difficult decision to make the long trek back to Orenburg and then on to America.⁷ Those who remained fanatically loyal to Epp (initially about 38 families) moved to a community called Ak Metchet where Epp's radicalism came to full fruition. In 1886 he left the community for a short time, claiming the Lord had told him to go and confront the world empires.⁸ In 1889 the date finally arrived when, according to Epp's calculations, the Lord would return for his elect. Epp dressed in white ascension robes for the occasion, but nothing happened. The undaunted Epp, quite predictably, was able to explain the error by indicating that he had failed to take into account the fact that the clock in his vision had been leaning to one side. Thus a new date was set which likewise passed without the Lord's coming.

Epp made many other bizarre claims. The lack of fulfillment of earlier visions did not temper his spirit. The height of folly was his claim to be the Son of Christ as Christ was the Son of God. At other times he referred to himself as the Elijah of the New Testament, as Melchizedek of the New Earth, formerly Claas Epp.⁹ The group of followers further

diminished in size to some ten to fifteen families. Epp survived until 1913 when he died at 75 years of age, but a small group of radicals continued to live in the area until 1935.¹⁰

Almost a decade has passed since the first detailed English account of the migration was published by Fred Belk.¹¹ Belk's study brought together information from a rich variety of sources, many of which had not been utilized or known before.¹² Although the achievement was lauded by many, the shortcomings of the study were also soon evident. Especially evident were the weaknesses in relation to the theoretical understanding of the movement.¹³ The only major attempt to address this aspect of the movement, insofar as I know, is found in a lengthy review essay by Waldemar Janzen,¹⁴ although James Urry also devotes considerable attention to an analysis of the movement,¹⁵ and other work has been done on Pietist influences.¹⁶ These contributions have not yet adequately informed general studies on the Mennonites in Russia in the nineteenth century.

Janzen quite correctly notes that Belk did not pay adequate attention to the most authoritative treatment of the subject, namely, Franz Bartsch's *Unser Auszug nach Mittelasien*.¹⁷ In seeking to develop his own theses, therefore, Janzen obviously relies extensively on Bartsch's autobiographical account. My own reading of Bartsch led me to a number of similar conclusions. Much of the following study is an attempt to engage in some dialogue with Janzen on the theses he proposes as well as to deal with several other issues which may help us to understand the movement better.

It may be well to begin by stating Janzen's two major theses before proceeding to my own analysis of the movement. In a general sense, Janzen begins by asking whether the Claas Epp event should be bracketed out of Mennonite history as an atypical episode in the same way that the "Kingdom of God at Münster" in the sixteenth century has been bracketed out and excluded from "normative Anabaptism."¹⁸ Janzen states that his reading of Belk's *The Great Trek* and his subsequent study of the subject have greatly tempered his inclination to reject the event as an "isolated and abortive episode." He comments further:

In fact, a growing sense of identification with the people of the Trek surprised me as I turned page after page of Belk's book. It sounds so Mennonite, I felt; these are Mennonite people after all!¹⁹

Janzen's assumption that Mennonites can clearly dissociate themselves from Münster might itself be more debateable today than some years ago, but here our concern is primarily with the later Claas Epp movement. And that movement is placed by Janzen in the mainstream of Mennonite

history and identity. The two major theses which he sets out in support of the movement's "Mennonitism" are:

- A. The movement to central Asia was much less chiliastic, in Epp's sense, at its core than on the surface, and
- B. Its chiliasm presented itself in a form shaped largely by its Mennonite context.²⁰

While I am in general agreement with the main substance of these theses, I believe they need some qualification and that some other elements need to be added to our understanding of the movement.

First of all, it is certainly clear that the essence of the movement has too easily been understood in relation to Claas Epp himself. The tendency to focus on the bizarre and eccentric Epp is particularly evident in general accounts of Russian Mennonite history. In response to this it should be noted that not only were there important distinctions from the outset between Epp and others who joined the trek, but that some of the participants, especially Bartsch, made a very clear distinction between the early and the later Epp.²¹

A careful study of the primary sources, especially of Bartsch, reveals that there was a very significant base of chiliastic thought in the Mennonite colonies which pointed to the east as a place of refuge for the faithful. The influence of Johann Heinrich Jung Stilling (1740-1817) has been noted frequently, especially as mediated through his novel *Heimweh*, which was apparently widely read by Russian Mennonites.²² Bartsch, however, singles out another writer, Samuel Gottfried Christoph Clöter of Bavaria, Germany, as a major source of influence and, indeed, James Urry refers to Clöter as "the principle source of stimulation."²³ Clöter was a Lutheran *Pfarrer* who had developed the ideas of Bengel on the millennium. He believed that the end of the world had already begun and declared that Russia would be the land of refuge for the final days. A group of faithful would be saved after a trek to Central Asia. During the 1870s Clöter even sent emissaries to Russia to investigate possibilities of settlement and by 1879 a number of emigrants from Germany founded villages in the Caucasus region. Clöter also made references to the city of Philadelphia as a place of refuge — a theme subsequently developed by Epp.

It is therefore no longer tenable to conclude that chiliasm was brought to Russia by the Mennonite immigrants from Prussia in the 1850s.²⁴ Janzen acknowledges a broader base of "sober chiliasm,"²⁵ but the apparent assumption that sober chiliasm was more indigenous to the Mennonites would appear to be questionable. Also he seems to assume that the pre-Epp chiliasm was generally restricted to the Mennonites who came to Russia from Prussia between 1854-73.

Furthermore, it is clear that there were other very influential leaders

in the movement besides Epp, that there was tension between them from the very beginning, and that Epp perhaps never, or at least not for any lengthy period of time, gained full control of the movement. There was fragmentation from the very beginning,²⁶ and this fragmentation was rooted in fundamental differences in perspective. The trek would probably have occurred even without a Claas Epp, although the results might have been quite different. Even Janzen, while minimizing the significance of Epp, still suggests that Epp's chiliasm performed a "triggering function."²⁷ On the other hand, Janzen asserts that it was not disenchantment with Epp that ended the movement but rather the compromising of the nonresistant position.²⁸ This is only partly true because a large segment of the movement had already disintegrated quite early because of disenchantment with Epp and not on the issue of nonresistance. The trek seems to have become the occasion for Epp to achieve his personal ambitions for power, rather than Epp being the primary stimulus for the trek.

One might, indeed, change the thesis considerably and make a strong case that Epp's presence had a negative effect in terms of the magnitude of the movement. When the governor of Samara province came to the Trakt Settlement to discourage the exodus, he asked why Epp was inciting and misleading so many people. Epp's response was that the governor should judge for himself: the number of signatures for the Trek had decreased from 100 to 80. He had not painted a bright picture, Epp claimed, but had discouraged many.²⁹ Bartsch also indicates that many Lutherans (*Stundenbrüder*) might have joined if it had not been for Epp and the issue of adult baptism.³⁰

Having thus reduced the significance of Epp in the entire episode, it is nonetheless important for us to understand the kind of person he was and the role he played. He was the most influential person for a time, and remained the key person for the most radical segment of the movement. But who was Epp and what distinguished him from the rest of the chiliastic movement which was also looking to the east?

Bartsch gives us the most detailed description of Epp's personality and character, although it must be remembered that this description may have been colored by Bartsch's own deep disappointment later on. First, Bartsch certainly sees Epp as someone who was grasping for personal power. He states that Epp had ambitions to succeed his father as *Oberschulze*, but when that failed he sought to secure an influential role as elder in the church.³¹ When that too failed, Epp's last resort to advance his ambition was to secure an independent spiritual leadership role. This led to the formation of a separate "bride community." Epp's own ambition to be the spiritual leader was challenged by Cornelius Wall, and for a time there was serious rivalry between the two and between their respective followers. According to Bartsch, Epp modified his theology somewhat to

help him gain control of the movement. He suddenly favored an exodus but developed his own theological rationale which would clearly distinguish his leadership from others. Bartsch is nonetheless willing to grant that Epp really believed that he wrote and taught.³¹

Bartsch characterizes Epp as a likeable person and a pleasant conversationalist. His manner could be very convincing, which no doubt explains the kind of influence he wielded. Epp's ability to assess other individuals quickly, to appeal to each person's uniqueness, and sharply to rebuff people who did not fall in line, meant that the people around him were quickly polarized into his supporters and his enemies. Bartsch refers to his own wavering commitment at one point when he heard of Epp's claim to be one of two spiritual witnesses. Upon inquiring, Epp's enigmatic response was, "Brother Bartsch: If the Lord calls on you to witness, would you refuse?"³² Thus, no serious questioning was allowed.

Epp had much of the personal charismatic appeal which many cult leaders manifest. On the night prior to the designated date of departure of the first wagon train, Bartsch's own daughter became seriously ill. When Bartsch went to Epp for counsel, Epp showed patience and understanding, and after prayer and consultation advised a delay of several days. The girl died shortly afterward, was buried, and immediately thereafter the train departed.³⁴ Epp then accompanied the train for four days, going from wagon to wagon, comforting women and children, and taking turns eating with each family. When the day came for Epp's return, the spot where he left the group remained in their memories. Bartsch states that it was like Elisha at Elijah's ascension, and that they were more convinced than ever that Epp was a messenger from God and that the way was the right way.³⁵

The challenges to Epp's leadership nonetheless came repeatedly and were dealt with by Epp in a variety of ways. When Abraham Peters was elected as elder by a group, Epp wrote a letter scolding its members and comparing them to Israel which had rejected God and chosen Saul as king.³⁶ They were not to have any human leaders; God himself would lead them. When Johannes K. Penner emerged as a rival to Epp and preached that no man could know the time and place of the return of Christ, Epp wrote prophesying that brothers would arise in their midst who would trample their beliefs into the dust, that God's Spirit would reveal such to them, and that they were to separate from them.³⁷ When Bartsch himself came to the point of breaking away from Epp, he experienced an intense struggle which also involved a face-to-face confrontation with Epp. His conclusion, however, was that "Claas Epp and not Christ is ruler."³⁸

Of particular interest and closely related to the above are the unique religious practices which developed. There were certain hymns which became especially popular,³⁹ the love feast and footwashing were intro-

duced, and members were to address each other with "Du" rather than "Sie". Epp set down some very strict rules regarding how Sundays were to be observed while on the trek. Discipline was at times very severe. Bartsch states that because of the strong emphasis on rejection of the "Old Church," such rejection was sometimes all that was required to be admitted to the Bride Community, and individuals were not examined regarding their lifestyle. Outwardly, according to Bartsch, there was conformity, but secretly many retained sinful practices such as drinking. When such sins were discovered there was shunning without any formal process.⁴⁰

In a recent essay Victor Doerksen has noted that there is something intriguing about the novel *Heimweh* by Jung-Stilling which suggests that the underlying theology is truly sectarian. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a secret society with special rituals and there are very precise definitions of who is in and who is out.⁴¹ This was certainly also true of the Claas Epp movement. A sociological analysis of the movement would no doubt suggest that factors such as a strong autocratic and charismatic leadership and other phenomena such as forms of worship link the movement closely to modern-day cults.

A final issue that needs to be analyzed more carefully is the issue of non-resistance. Janzen notes what he calls "this fascinating merging of pacifism and millennialism"⁴² and then cites pacifism in arguing that Epp's chiliasm is less of a departure from mainline Mennonite theology than might be assumed. "A truly Mennonite theology of non-resistance, of suffering, and of non-assertion seems evident underneath the cloak of the more eye-catching and bizarre hallmarks of world wide millennialism."⁴³ This conclusion is only partly warranted, and some unique elements should be noted.

Epp, in establishing himself as leader, had already given a peculiar twist to his interpretation of nonresistance. Whereas his rival, Cornelius Wall, had objected to forestry service because he feared it would eventually lead to military service, Epp argued that that was really not the issue. Not nonresistance but the "word of patient endurance" (Rev. 3:10) was the mark of the church of Philadelphia.⁴⁴ This meant that Christians were not to accept the rights and duties of citizenship at all. In Prussia and in Russia (until 1872) the Mennonites had been tolerated and had lived under colony status. All that was now changing in Russia under the new provisions which would be fully implemented in 1880-81. This acceptance of citizenship status was the crucial issue for Epp.

It may be added that pacifism and millennialism had already been combined as early as the 1830s in the Plymouth Brethren sect. Peter Brock, one of the authorities on the history of pacifism, has recently documented that John Nelson Darby and other early leaders of the Plymouth Brethren were all convinced pacifists and that their teaching was essentially based on the Sermon on the Mount. He writes: "At the

centre of Brethren nonresistance, as expounded by the movement's early leaders, lay the Law of Love. 'Resist not evil' and 'Blessed are the peacemakers' were the key texts."⁴⁵ Elsewhere he asserts: "The peace testimony of the Plymouth Brethren, as it emerged in the late 1830's, was an almost exact replica of the doctrine of nonresistance among the Anabaptists and Mennonites on the continent."⁴⁶ In the light of such surprising findings it may be necessary to investigate the whole complex set of influences on the Mennonites much more thoroughly than has been accomplished to date.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis we might again seek an answer to Janzen's question: "The Great Trek: Episode or Paradigm?" The answer may best be arrived at by first making some careful distinctions between the movement as a whole and an aberrant minority within the larger movement.

First, the movement in its broadest parameters resulted from the confluence of two streams of influence: 1) the threat to the traditional Mennonite teaching on nonresistance, and 2) the chiliastic ideas stemming from the Pietist movement in Germany. It is difficult to assess which was the stronger factor and hence it is also difficult to assess how "Mennonite" the larger movement was. Such a merger of pacifism with millennialism, as already indicated, was not an isolated instance in the nineteenth century, and therefore not uniquely Mennonite.

Secondly, within the larger movement, there arose a movement that might more clearly be defined as "episode". Epp and his closest followers, although they were nonresistant, arrived at the doctrine in a peculiar manner and it was actually defined by the larger chiliastic framework. Furthermore, the form of charismatic leadership, the appeal to special revelation, the frequency of references to the Old Testament, and a variety of other practices clearly departed drastically from more normative Mennonite practice and understanding. Also, it appears that eschatological motifs were more prominent than Janzen suggests.⁴⁷ Janzen states that "even Claas Epp's goal was 'the place of refuge,'" that is, a place where they might escape from restrictive legislation. It is interesting to note that at least one of Epp's close followers makes a special point on several occasions of correcting precisely this false perception. The group, he states, is looking for a "gathering place" (*Sammlungsort*) not a "place of refuge" (*Bergungsort*).⁴⁸ This certainly suggests a radically different migration theology from that which might otherwise characterize the Mennonite experience. Janzen's case that "Claas Epp stands on good Anabaptist ground" is based too much on the concept of a "place of refuge". Janzen even contrasts the migration of Mormons and their triumphal aim with the "meeker *Bergungsort*-theology of Epp."⁴⁹

My final response to the question as formulated by Janzen is that the Great Trek was both episode and paradigm, that is, there are elements

that are clearly defined and understood within the Mennonite context (paradigm), and other elements that are justifiably "bracketed out" as not having any significant relationship to Mennonite reality and experience (episode). The most visible element represented by Claas Epp, Jr. and his most radical followers, was primarily episode. The trek as a whole is best understood in terms of coincidence of elements which in the course of time were destined to reveal their basic incompatibility.

Notes

¹On varying interpretations of Anabaptism see, for example, the selections in *The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer* tr. and ed. James M. Stayer and Werner O. Packull (Dubuque, Iowa; Toronto, Canada: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1980). See also James M. Stayer, "The Anabaptists" in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), pp. 135-159.

²The complete story is told by Fred Richard Belk in *The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites to Central Asia 1880-84* (Scottsdale and Kitchener: Herald Press, 1976).

³*Ibid.*, pp. 38-40.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁶*Ibid.*, 165f.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 180ff.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 172f.

⁹Franz Bartsch, *Unser Auszug nach Mittelasien*. Historische Schriftenreihe des Echo-Verlags, Buch 5 (North Kildonan, Manitoba: Echo Verlag, 1948, first published Halbstadt, Russia H. J. Braun, 1907), p. 81.

¹⁰Belk, pp. 191ff. Epp's only daughter, Marie, migrated to America. The writer has a copy of a letter from her pen describing the death of her parents and a copy is also located in the archives of the Heritage Centre in Winnipeg. According to the letter, Epp's last words were, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

¹¹See note 2 above.

¹²It is also true that there are a number of additional primary sources, including diaries of the Trek, which Belk did not utilize. Some of these are in the archives of the Mennonite Heritage Centre, but, unfortunately, they contribute little to a theoretical understanding of the movement.

¹³In his review of the book Walter Sawatzky states, "Belk proposes to show the 'unique significance' of the trek for Mennonite history and for Central Asian frontier history. But this more theoretical aspect is not Belk's strong point." *Church History* 46 (June 1977), p. 257.

¹⁴Waldemar Janzen, "The Great Trek: Episode or Paradigm?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 51 (April 1977), 127-139.

¹⁵James Urry, "The Closed and the Open: Social and Religious Change Amongst the Mennonites in Russia (1789-1889)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1975), pp. 776-805.

¹⁶See e.g., Victor G. Doerksen's essay, "From Jung Stilling to Rudy Wiebe: 'Christian Fiction' and the Mennonite Imagination" in *Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural, and Literary Essays Dealing with Mennonite Issues*, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg, Canada: Hyperion Press, 1980), pp. 197-208.

¹⁷Janzen, 128, note 1.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 129. The first thesis is carefully qualified by the phrase "in Epp's sense," by which Janzen means it "remained soundly biblical and constructive, refraining from precise determinations of times and places" (p. 131).

²¹In the chapter entitled "Los von Epp", Bartsch concludes: "Wir kamen dahin überein: 'Epps Auszug ist ein eigener Weg, den er gegangen ist, ohne Gottes Winke abzuwarten, wie Jonas Flucht auf das Meer, deshalb hat Gottes Geist ihn verlassen, und was

er jetzt schreibt ist seinen frühern Briefen nicht gleich zu stellen, ist apokryph'. Somit sagten wir uns los von dem Epp der Gegenwart, hielten aber fest an dem Epp der Vergangenheit" (p. 62).

²²Doerksen, p. 200.

²³Urry, pp. 783-793; Bartsch, p. 7. It is surprising that Belk doesn't even mention Clöter. The references to "Philidelphia" perhaps need to be explored with regard to possible specific influences from a German Pietist movement known as "Philadelphianism." See F. Ernest Stoeffler, *German Pietism During the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 208-216.

²⁴Walter Klaassen, for example, still accepted this view in 1975. "A Belated Review: Martin Klaassen's 'Geschichte der Wehrlosen Taufgesinnten Gemeinden.' Published in 1873," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 49 (January, 1975), 50. The review article otherwise gives a good background for a study of the migration from Prussia to the Trakt settlement as well as for the migration to Central Asia. Martin Klaassen was a participant in the Trek and died before the group reached its destination.

²⁵Janzen, p. 131.

²⁶Bartsch; p. 59: "Mit Trennung fing unser Weg an, so gabs immer auf's neue Trennung."

²⁷Janzen, p. 133.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 132. It is somewhat ironical to note that at least three times Bartsch refers to the fact that Epp had not been expected to join the trek to the East but rather to go to the West as a "witness." It was when Epp appeared that some began to doubt him. Bartsch, pp. 26, 59, 62.

²⁹Bartsch, p. 22.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*, p. 17.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 59; Belk, p. 124.

³⁸Bartsch, p. 71.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴¹Doerksen, p. 202.

⁴²Janzen, p. 129.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴⁴Bartsch, p. 19. There was a movement within Germany called Philadelphianism.

⁴⁵Peter Brock, "The Peace Testimony of the Early Plymouth Brethren," *Church History*, 53 (March, 1984): 37.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴⁷Janzen, p. 137.

⁴⁸Unsigned letters, August 8 and August 19, 1882, published in *Christlicher Bundesbote*, (December 1, 1882) pp. 181ff. It appears that the same terminology was used by Martin Klaassen. See Klaassen, p. 51.

⁴⁹Janzen, pp. 134-35.

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