

# 'I won't take the gun!': A Sketch From the Life of the Red Army

A Story by Ernst Kontschak  
Translated and Introduction by  
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## Introduction

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent Civil War many Russian-Germans, including Mennonites, mourned the destruction and loss of their established social, economic and religious ways of life. As a consequence, between 1923 and 1930 some 24,000 Mennonites left the Soviet Union for Canada, the United States and South America. However, others did not emigrate and for various reasons remained in their homeland and came to terms with the new regime.<sup>1</sup> There were even a few Mennonites who welcomed the Revolution, believing that the old social, economic and religious institutions needed to give way to a new order.<sup>2</sup>

Recent studies have shown that among those who welcomed the Revolution were young Soviet-German and Mennonite intellectuals who turned away from their religious traditions and became committed Communists. These activists promoted new social policies, land distribution, collectivization, even atheism.<sup>3</sup> Soviet-German and Soviet-Mennonite writers in the twenties and thirties wrote and published prose and poetry in which they glorified the new order and propagandized Communist values and ideologies.<sup>4</sup> These authors, active in Ukraine and in the Volga region, formed Soviet writers'

associations, edited German-language journals, and established “godless societies” for the political re-education of the young in their communities. They also collaborated with Socialist writers in Germany, from whom they learned writing skills and how to express their ideas effectively.<sup>5</sup> In the late 1920s and early 1930s some German Communists travelled to the Soviet Union to teach in German-speaking settlements, targeting particularly the religious beliefs of German and Mennonite students.<sup>6</sup>

In the early years of the regime many German-speaking colonists, particularly in the Volga region, enlisted voluntarily in the Red Army, distinguishing themselves as soldiers and commanders. As early as November, 1918 the “Katharinenstadt Communist-German Regiment” had been established at the request of Soviet-German leaders and with the blessing of Trotsky and Lenin.<sup>7</sup> Among the leading commanders of the Soviet military there were even some Mennonites; according to Wladimir Deines, E. I. Quiering, a Communist Party member since 1912, helped found the Communist Party in Ukraine and after 1919 worked in the political department of the 12th Red Army.<sup>8</sup>

While Catholic and Lutheran Germans in the Soviet Union had no tradition of religious nonresistance, thus finding it easier to serve in the military, Mennonites found it generally difficult to abandon their long-standing religious commitment to nonresistance. In its early stages the Soviet government sought the favour and support of ethnic minorities by extending to them individual freedoms and privileges. They were allowed, for example, the use of their own language and religion; and the Volga Germans were granted their own autonomous republic.<sup>9</sup> The Mennonite nonresistance position was also recognized, although under new conditions which proved to be difficult to sustain.<sup>10</sup> As the story below illustrates, conscientious objectors (COs) could apply for exemption from military service, and in some cases CO status was granted by local court judges.

The laws concerning CO status and their varied implementation appear complex.<sup>11</sup> Pacifist groups like the followers of Tolstoy and Mennonites sought to negotiate terms with the central government that would favour exemption from military service for religious reasons. Mennonite leaders, including Peter F. Froese, C.F. Klassen, and especially B.B. Janz, made written submissions to the government in this regard. The result of these efforts was that the new military law of September 1925 included sections that addressed Mennonite concerns. According to this law, as John B. Toews puts it, “all who belonged to religious groups whose teaching already forbade military service prior to 1917 could be freed from military service by the district courts.”<sup>12</sup>

On paper this new law looked fine, but its interpretation and implementation depended on district court officials who in practice generally ruled against the pacifist applicant. Ministers like Klassen in the story were active in encouraging youth to stand by their nonresistance principles and often represented them in courts. They were thus seen by the authorities as acting politically (not strictly religiously), and this led eventually to their arrest and exile.<sup>13</sup>

In the late 1920s, with the onset of the first Five Year Plan and new military legislation, conditions worsened. Pressure on youth was increased and their "duty" as Soviet citizens in serving the state was stressed. By the early 1930s, while alternative non-military service continued in theory, it became virtually impossible to avoid conscription. Youth were enlisted and when they refused to carry arms they were imprisoned. With the passing of Stalin's Constitution in 1936 most opportunities for Mennonites to serve in alternative, non-military roles ended.

To reeducate Soviet citizens along Party lines, government agencies and institutions introduced both persuasive and coercive measures. While Soviet decrees permitted religious freedom in theory, they also allowed and indeed encouraged the propagation of atheistic ideas. Religion was seen as the "opiate of people," a false consciousness which had long been a means to suppress people. In the modern world it was regarded as a tool of capitalism and opposed to Socialist objectives. The government thus used schools and youth organizations like the Komsomol groups to educate the young and promote atheism. The government considered religious faith opposed to loyalty to the state. Soviet writers in particular were required to promote Party ideology, including atheism, if they hoped to be published and succeed professionally.<sup>14</sup>

One of the more important German-language journals, *Neuland (New Land)*, was published in Kharkov, Ukraine, in the first half of the 1930s by the "Society of the Godless." For a time this paper appeared in two different issues, one for Ukrainian Soviet-German readers and one for Germany. It is still not clear why there were two different issues.<sup>15</sup> In an issue for Soviet readers, for example, *Neuland* (1931, no. 21/22) carried a story in verse, "Die Schöpfungsgeschichte" ("Story of Creation") by A. Merkel of Kharkov. By means of rhyming verses and cartoons the author lampooned religious images and beliefs, something both Christian and Jewish communities would have found most offensive and blasphemous.<sup>16</sup>

The story "Das Gewehr nehme ich nicht!" ("I won't take the gun!") by Ernst Kontschak (d.1979) of Molochansk (Halbstadt), Ukraine, appeared in *Neuland* (1932, no. 5/6) in an edition apparently printed for distribution in Germany. Like the "Story of Creation," this story was in a section titled "Gottlose Belletristik" ("Godless belles lettres"). Subtitled "Skizze aus dem Leben der Roten Armee" ("Sketch from the life of the Red Army"), the story relates how a young Mennonite, Jacob Unger, at first resists his basic military training which involves operating a machine gun, but in the end is persuaded to operate the weapon, thereby fulfilling his duty in serving the state. In choosing a Mennonite hero for his story and contrasting him with his Soviet-German friends Schulz and Maier who serve their country gladly and proudly, the author correctly shows that in the 1920s and early 1930s young Mennonites still found it difficult to participate in military activities.

Kontschak appears to have known Mennonites quite well, having written other stories about Mennonite life in the Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> He was personally well

aquainted with other Soviet-Mennonite writers, including David Schellenberg (1903-1954) and Gerhard Sawatzky (1901-1944). In his memoirs published in 1975, he comments on the life and work of his fellow-writers, but he fails to indicate the true fate of many of them in the 1930s when Stalin's purges killed or imprisoned many.<sup>18</sup>

Ernst Kontschak survived Stalin's purges and died in 1979.<sup>19</sup> Many others of his generation were not so fortunate. Particularly after Hitler's rise to power in 1933, the Soviet government began to "liquidate" Soviet-German citizens who were considered "enemies of the people" or suspected of collaborating with Nazi Germany. Writers like Schellenberg and Sawatzky lost their positions and were exiled to Siberia. Ironically, Soviet-German members of the military suffered a similar fate.<sup>20</sup>

The story "I won't take the gun!" is not great literature. It is a propaganda piece written for a literary journal.<sup>21</sup> Its historical value consists in its expression of official Soviet anti-religious attitudes at the time of its publication. It is not known whether this kind of literature was read widely or whether it was successful in convincing its readers.

I have translated the story quite freely—not literally—for the following reasons: The German grammar and style of the text are poor, it is wordy and repetitive, and it shifts between present and past tenses for no apparent good reasons, making it awkward and annoying reading. Had I been interested in the plot of the story only, I would have merely cited excerpts to illustrate the kind of literature that was written to undermine the religious faith of young Mennonites. But since I wish to give readers an insight into the kind of arguments Soviets used to persuade young people of the rightness of the Communist cause, I have translated the entire story.

### **"I won't take the gun!" (A sketch from the life of the Red Army)**

by Ernst Kontschak

The cool morning air blew through the village as the sun rose in the eastern sky. The exercise field was already alive with activity.

The commander stood in the courtyard of the former residence of a kulak now used as temporary barracks for young recruits.<sup>22</sup> With satisfaction he observed the tanned, healthy, strong bodies of nineteen-year-old men. They had just washed the sleep from their eyes with cold water from the well. They were excited and in a hurry, for on this morning they would go practise shooting on the sunny steppe. They had prepared and waited a long time for this.

The commander looked at his watch. It was six o'clock.

"Line up!" he shouted.

Their heels clicking, the recruits formed a straight line.

"Attention!"

Everything was ready now. Only the machine gun and cartridges were still missing. Inspecting the line once again, the commander said "At ease!" He then turned to the men at the back.

"You-Jacob Unger!" he shouted, "You will get the machine gun and you - Peter Schulz and Karl Maier - the cartridges!"<sup>23</sup>

Jacob Unger, a tall, slender young man with deep-seated, yet bright eyes said in a forced and sullen tone, "I won't take the gun."

Everyone was shocked. Heads turned in Unger's direction. What! Was Unger one of those who would not defend the Soviet Union?

"Why not?" the commander asked.

"My religious convictions won't allow it," Unger answered without hesitation.

"Don't you want to help us protect the Soviet Union?" the commander asked.

A murmur went through the lines. Some men were angry with Unger, but others agreed with him. Why act against your own religious beliefs, some wondered.<sup>24</sup>

The commander attempted to inform Unger of his duty to defend his country. A formal anti-religious discussion took place, but Jacob remained firm in his views: "I won't take the gun. The Gospel tells us that whoever takes the sword will die by the sword."

"Well, Unger, if you will not take the machine gun, you will have nothing to do on the exercise field. You can stay here. Get out!"

With head bowed Jacob went back to the barracks. He did not look back. The commander ordered the men to march forward. Singing, the group marched off for shooting practice.

Back in the barracks, Jacob was left all alone. Everything was so quiet. The serviceman on day-duty sat in the ante-room, with weapon in hand.

Jacob heard the lusty singing of his marching comrades, at first loud and clear, then gradually weakening, and finally fading away across the wide steppe. The silence became oppressive and Jacob soon became bored. Putting his hand into his pocket he pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. He had read it at least ten times before. Whenever he looked at it, he was reminded of his home village, his minister, and his "brothers" and "sisters" in the church. Now he read it again: "The owner of this certificate, Jacob Unger of the village of Kronsdorf, is a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church. We request that he be received as a brother in Christ... Minister Klassen."

Yes, this Klassen was a man who knew everything.<sup>25</sup> Jacob considered him more intelligent than any other person he knew. Minister Klassen knew the Bible particularly well; some chapters he could repeat from memory—and he was also well versed in politics.

Jacob folded the document carefully and put it away in a box among his books. His books consisted of a Bible, a hymnal, *Songs of Zion*, and a notebook in which he had copied all the songs he had sung in the church choir.

Opening his Bible, Jacob retrieved a sheet of paper with biblical passages, given to him by Minister Klassen. Klassen had said to him, "When you are tempted by the enemy, read the following verses from the Bible. They will be words of comfort to you. They will also prove that we may not use the sword to defend ourselves."

Normally Jacob liked his work. But on this day he felt empty and lonely, thinking of his last day in the village. In the neighboring village a Komsomol cell had organized a demonstration to be followed by a political meeting. The Komsomols had invited the young people of Kronsdorf to take part.<sup>26</sup> But Minister Klassen had previously announced a prayer and farewell meeting for those called into military service. At this meeting Klassen gave the young "souls" essential advice about the "godless" in the world from whom they would hear many bad things. He also told them that the devil would set traps to catch those who wavered in their faith. Turning to Jacob Unger, Klassen concluded, "Brother Jacob, stand firm in your faith and may the Lord protect and guide you, Amen."

As the sun set the recruits returned to their barracks singing. Life in the barracks returned to normal and Jacob was glad that the oppressive day was over. However, he felt keenly the rift that now existed between himself and his comrades.

After supper one of the Komsomols announced that there would be a political meeting in the Red Room and that all comrades were encouraged to attend. There would be speeches with discussion to follow. When Jacob arrived for the meeting, most were already there, including the political discussion leader.<sup>27</sup>

The Party man began his speech with comments on Unger's case. He talked about the capitalists who were preparing for war against the Soviet Union and that it was the duty of everyone to defend the Soviet Motherland. "It is only our enemies who are against defending the Soviet government," he concluded.

During the discussion there were many questions and comments about what the political leader had said. Jacob also raised his hand. "Comrade Unger has the floor," the leader said.

Rising to his feet, Jacob said, "I agree with everything the leader has to say. The Soviet government is our government and I'm no enemy of the Soviet state. I too am a proletarian. You can check about that with the people in my village. But I cannot and will not take a weapon because our faith forbids me to do so."

"How much land did your parents own before the Revolution?" Jacob was asked.

"Three and a half hectares," Jacob said.

"And how much land do you have now?"

"Twelve hectares."

"Where do you have the twelve hectares from?"

"From the Soviet state."

"So, the land was given you by the Soviet government. But now that the

capitalists are about to come and take it away, you refuse to defend your land? You seem to think as follows: I occupy this land and profit from it, but others will have to defend it, right? Since you know your Bible so well," the leader continued, "let me too tell you something from the Bible. There are many places in this book where your so-called God—who doesn't really exist—himself ordered the killing of people. This God even made the sun stand still so that Joshua would have more time to kill as many of his enemies as possible. How is that for an argument from the Bible!"

Jacob felt uneasy and had no answer.

The political discussion continued until late in the evening. Some Komso-mols and Red Army men tried hard to change Jacob's mind but all to no avail.<sup>28</sup> He repeated time and again, "I won't take the gun; it's against my religious conviction."

The next day the librarian displayed and distributed books. Recruits and Red Army men crowded around the book table, eager to pick up some reading material. There were books with colorful covers, much more attractive than Jacob's shabby leather-bound Bible and hymnal. Jacob walked slowly to the table. The observant librarian noticed Jacob's interest. He smiled at the young man and said, "Well, Jacob, I know what you need." Picking up a brightly-colored book from the shelf behind the table, he handed it to Jacob: "Read this book. It's most interesting. I've read it with great interest myself."

After some hesitation, Jacob took the book. His eyes scanned the pictures on the cover. Then he read the title: "Bible for Believers and Unbelievers." Jacob did not think the book looked like a Bible. "For unbelievers," he repeated in his mind. He put the book down and wanted to leave, but the librarian said, "Jacob, you have forgotten your book. I have already noted down that you have taken it out." As he spoke he pushed the book into Jacob's hand.

Jacob looked nervously around him. There was no one from his home village and his comrades seemed to leave him alone. Nevertheless, perhaps he could ask for a different book to borrow. Why exactly a book for "unbelievers"? But before he could pick another, he felt the book slide under his arm. Laughing, the librarian said, "If there's something you don't understand, feel free to come and ask me any time."

Jacob still hesitated. What would his comrades say, he thought. Yesterday he had defended his religion and today he was borrowing this book. But then he did not really have to read it, did he? Stealthily he slipped the book into his pocket and left. Back in the barracks, Jacob sat down on his bed, paged through the book, looked at the pictures, and then hid it in his box.

During the next few days the commander did not pressure Jacob to take part in the shooting exercises. "If you don't want to participate," he said, "you can stay in your room." Jacob stayed behind, but he never missed the political meetings and continued to participate in discussions.

While his comrades were out practising, Jacob would immerse himself in the library book, reading on and on. Sometimes while reading he would look up

nervously to see whether someone was watching him. "Stupid!" he exclaimed, "Why should I be ashamed reading this book? Aren't they all godless anyway?" He continued reading.

Karl Maier distributed newspapers, including *The Red Army*. All recruits were happy to receive and read newspapers, but Jacob did not subscribe to any paper and he certainly would not read such godless material anyway. But one day Jacob said to Karl, "Give me a paper as well."

Karl was both surprised and delighted, and he handed Jacob the latest issue of *The Red Army*. Jacob immediately sat down and read. As he walked away, Karl muttered, "That boy is certainly making good progress."

One morning the young men lined up again for shooting practice. The commander inspected the lines and then turned to Jacob Unger. "Comrade Unger, how are you? Will you participate fully on the field today?"

"I'll do everything I have to do, except shoot with a machine gun."

"Then leave the line at once and return to your room!"

Jacob went back to the barracks and the oppressive silence of his room. Paging through his New Testament, he wanted to remain true to his faith. He thought of Minister Klassen and his words at the farewell meeting. "I'll resist the devil's temptation," Jacob said to himself, "I'm not going to become an apostate."

More and more images from the past rushed through his mind. Two years ago he and his brother had applied for exemption from active military service. Minister Klassen was also present at the court hearings. The judge had asked Klassen many questions, but Jacob could not remember any of them now. Then the judge had spoken for a long time, stating that the Soviet government needed the Red Army to defend the country. Turning to Jacob's brother, the judge asked, "How is it with you? The Soviet government needs to defend itself and you as a Soviet citizen are against armed defense?"

Jacob's brother had nothing to say. The judge then put the same question to the minister. But Klassen avoided the issue, saying, "We act according to God's teaching, and God's ways are not for us to question. It is sinful to act against God's ways and wisdom."

Jacob knew now that his minister's answer was a cop-out. During the political meetings the leader had asked Jacob similar questions. Jacob had answered evasively, in the same way as Minister Klassen. Some Red Army men at the meetings had exchanged glances and smiled.

Dejected, Jacob looked out the window. Three commanders, unknown to Jacob, approached the barracks. Jacob felt most uncomfortable sitting in his room while his comrades were working out in the field. He felt so useless, eating bread without really earning his keep. He wanted to crawl under his bed and hide.

The commanders entered the barracks. The man on duty reported to them, after which the commanders began to inspect the rooms. Entering Jacob's room, one of the commanders, accompanied by the day-serviceman, found the



young man sitting red-faced on his bed. "What are you doing here all by yourself?" the commander asked. "Are you sick?" The commander looked questioningly at the day-serviceman.

At first Jacob could find no words, expecting to be reprimanded severely. At last he answered, "No, I'm not sick, I'll be off to the field at once." Picking up his coat and gas mask, he left the room in a hurry.

Jacob ran as fast as he could to the exercise field. In the distance he could hear the rattle of the machine gun. As he came closer he saw his comrades at practice, shooting. Should he return at once to his barracks? How could he face the men now? How could he show up now that the day's work was half over?

Again he pushed forward. Running across the field, he hoped he could mingle with his comrades without being noticed by any of them. At a certain distance from the firing line he saw shooting targets: various figures, heads, outlines of humans, lying, running and crouching. At that moment the commander called forward the next line—and Jacob heard him call his name!

"Here I am," Jacob answered.

No one seemed to notice anything unusual. Only the commander knew that Jacob had joined the line.

"Jacob Unger, to the line of fire!"

Jacob hesitated for just a second. It was on the tip of his tongue to say, "What! I'm a nonresistant Mennonite and a Christian brother. I will not shoot."

Again Jacob heard the commander's compelling voice: "Jacob Unger, marksman! Karl Maier, assistant-marksman! Peter Schulz, observer!"

Jacob fell to the ground behind the machine gun, grabbed its handle, and put the cartridge belt in place. All came so naturally. "Ready!" he reported to the commander.

"Fire!"

Behind the target figures Jacob saw the dust rise. He had hit the mark. Jacob's face was flushed. After a few more rounds by other men, the company marched back to the barracks. Jacob was now part of the group. The issue that had separated him from his comrades was now resolved. As the young men marched they sang and Jacob felt the ground firmly under his feet. He sang along with enthusiasm and he felt the healthy voices of his comrades take hold of him and carry him along with them.

Schulz and Maier were Komsomols. Often Schulz, Maier and Unger were seen working on the machine gun. They pulled it apart and then put it together again. Jacob worked with enthusiasm, trying to catch up what he had missed for so long. The friends agreed to a socialist competition in order to thoroughly acquaint themselves with the various parts of the machine gun, to master its workings and mechanism and to fulfill the target quota of 100 percent.<sup>29</sup>

Jacob not only read through the *Bible for Believers and Unbelievers*, but he also studied the book thoroughly. He even asked the librarian for the second volume. In fact, he read all the books the librarian suggested to him.

Before they departed, the recruits came together for one more meeting. The commander, the political leader and some of the recruits spoke. The commander spoke about the achievements and success of his company, expressing particular delight with Jacob's progress.

"The most important of our successes," he said, "is the achievement of one of our comrades, Jacob Unger. He came to us full of prejudice, he was withdrawn and a loner, and he was certainly unenlightened. But now, at the end of the month, he is one of our best marksmen. As a reward we present him with a special commendation and a small calibre rifle to be used in the training cell he has promised to organize in his village."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that although Mennonites who left the Soviet Union in the 1920s left largely for religious reasons, economic and social reasons also played a significant role in the emigration. See James Urry, "After the Rooster Crowed: Some Issues Concerning the Interpretation of Mennonite/Bolshevik Relations During the Early Soviet Period," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* [hereafter *JMS*] 13 (1995), 25-50.

<sup>2</sup> Some young members of the Mennonite intelligentsia expressed sympathy and understanding for the plight and concerns of Russian peasants and workers and called for agrarian reform. See the minutes of the All-Mennonite Congress in Orloff, August 14-18, 1917, in *Selected Documents-The Mennonites in Russia, 1917-1930*, ed. John B. Toews (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1975), pp. 449-478. It has been shown that some young Mennonites who had served as medical orderlies in World War I came home in 1917 politicized and radicalized, and were more receptive to revolutionary ideas. See Al Reimer, "Sanitätsdienst and Selbstschutz: Russian-Mennonite Nonresistance in World War I and its Aftermath," *JMS* 11 (1993), pp. 135-48; David G. Rempel, "Mennonite Medics in Russia During World War I," *JMS* 11 (1993), pp. 149-61.

<sup>3</sup> See especially the following: Annelore Engel-Braunschmidt, "Sowjetdeutsche Literatur im Aufbruch: Die Zeitschrift *Der Sturm* zwischen kultureller Autonomie und dem Würgegriff Stalins," *Germano-Slavica* 4 (1983), pp. 169-90; Meir Buchsweiler, *Russlanddeutsche im Sowjetsystem bis zum zweiten Weltkrieg: Minderheitenpolitik, nationale Identität, Publizistik* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1995); Harry Loewen, "Anti-Menno: Introduction to Early Soviet-Mennonite Literature (1920-1940)," *JMS* 11 (1993), pp. 23-42.

<sup>4</sup> Among early Soviet-Mennonite writers were David Schellenberg (1903-1954) who wrote the novels *Lechzendes Land* and *Pundmenniste* and edited the journal *Der Sturm* in the 1930s, and Gerhard Sawatzky (1901-1944) who wrote the novel *Wir selbst*, published posthumously in *Heimatliche Weiten*, 1984-1988. For a German tribute to Sawatzky, see Ingmar Brantsch, "Unter Mördern jeder Couleur. Zum 50. Todestag von Gerhard Sawatzky im 'Archipel Gulag,'" *Globus* 26 (1994), p. 24. Another writer, David Penner, wrote *Anti-Menno* in 1930, a scathing attack on Russian-Mennonite religious and cultural institutions and their historical roots.

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between Soviet-German and German socialist writers was a tenuous one. According to V. Baumgärtner, "Unser Weg," *Der Sturm* 1 (1930), p. 6, Soviet-German writers could learn from their fellow German socialists, but they could not follow them ideologically. After all, Baumgärtner argued, German writers worked *toward* a revolution, whereas Soviet-

German writers had their revolution *behind* them and were now establishing a new order according to the Revolution's ideals and objectives.

<sup>6</sup> For this information I am indebted to John B. Toews (telephone conversation, Aug. 20, 1996). It might be added that while many young people fell prey to the anti-religious propaganda, many Soviet citizens (not only Mennonites) found the atheistic assault difficult to bear. As Richard Pipes writes, "Next to economic hardships, no action of Lenin's government inflicted greater suffering on the population at large than the profanation of its religious beliefs, the closing of the houses of worship, and the mistreatment of the clergy." See Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 333.

<sup>7</sup> See the article by Wladimir Deines, "Die Sowjetdeutschen bei der Verteidigung des Vaterlandes," *Heimatliche Weiten*, 2 (1989), pp. 229-39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>9</sup> Loewen, "Anti-Menno," p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> At the All-Mennonite Congress in Orloff, August 14-16, 1917, the principle of nonresistance was discussed at some length. While the delegates affirmed the historic pacifism of Mennonites, several speakers argued that nonresistance could not be upheld in all instances and that at times it could be "criminal." According to K. Wiens, "Wir dürfen auch nicht immer und in allen Fällen wehrlos sein. Es gibt Umstände, wo die Wehrlosigkeit zum Verbrechen wird. Aber es ist schwer, eine Grenze des Erlaubten und Nichterlaubten festzustellen, weil die Entscheidung von der religiösen Stellung und dem Gewissen des Einzelnen abhängig ist. Der Protest gegen den Krieg ist Sache der Gesamtheit der Mennonitenschaft, wie dieser Protest im einzelnen Falle zum Ausdruck kommt, ist Sache der Einzelperson." *Selected Documents*, p. 462. Mennonites had begun to modify their former absolute nonresistance by allowing individuals to make their own decision. Two years later, when armed bands terrorized German and Mennonite communities, Mennonite leaders, while favouring nonresistance as an ideal, allowed young men to form armed self-defence units for the protection of life and property, something which the Soviet authorities later held against them. See John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets & Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982), especially Chapter 6.

<sup>11</sup> See the following studies: John B. Toews, "The Russian Mennonites and the Military Question (1921-1927)," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 43 (1969), p. 2; pp. 153-68; Lawrence Klippenstein, "Mennonite Pacifism and State Service in Russia: A Case Study in Church-State relations, 1789-1936." Ph.D. Diss., University of Minnesota, 1984; John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, Chapter 7.

<sup>12</sup> Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, p. 101.

<sup>13</sup> See J.K., "Die mennonitische Jugend in Russland bekennt sich zur Roten Armee," *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* (14 November 1928), p. 3. It might be noted that the story "Das Gewehr nehm ich nicht" was aimed primarily at Mennonite clergy.

<sup>14</sup> See Marc Slonin, *Soviet Russian Literature. Writers and Problems 1917-1967*, 1969, (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 5-10. On the difficulties of Soviet writers in the twenties and thirties, see Roberta Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova—Poet and Prophet* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Buchsweiler, *Russlanddeutsche im Sowjetsystem*, pp. 108-16, discusses the issue of why the journal *Neuland* and other Soviet publications published two versions of the same issue, but does not come to a conclusive answer.

<sup>16</sup> One can only guess about why this story was not included in the edition for Germany. Were German readers considered too sophisticated for a silly story like this? Conversely, the story "I won't take the gun!" appeared in the edition for Germany but not in the Soviet-German paper. Why not? Did the Soviets try to impress German readers with their "liberal" laws with regard to exemption from active military service and with the impression that they used suasion and not force?

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Kotschak's longer story about a Mennonite community, "Sie suchte Frieden," published in several installments in *Der Sturmschritt*, 1931.

<sup>18</sup> Kotschak recalls Schellenberg, Sawatzky and other Soviet-Mennonite writers in his memoirs *Unvergessliche Begegnungen* (Alma-Ata, 1975)

<sup>19</sup> Engel-Braunschmidt, "Sowjetdeutsche Literatur im Aufbruch," p. 170. Concerning his survival during Stalin's purges, Kotschak writes in his *Unvergessliche Begegnungen*, p. 7: "Ja, bin ich denn von all meinen Jugendfreunden der einzige Überlebende?" Kotschak, together with Konstantin Ehrlich and Woldemar Ekkert, later contributed to the publication of *Anthologie der sowjetdeutschen Literatur: in 3 Bänden* of which Volume One appeared in 1981 (Alma-Ata), two years after Kotschak's death.

<sup>20</sup> Deines, "Die Sowjetdeutschen," pp. 237-38.

<sup>21</sup> This is a "good-news-story," similar to evangelical conversion stories in which the convert in the end sees the light or experiences the rightness of the evangelical cause.

<sup>22</sup> The German uses "Voreinzuberufene," which I have translated as "recruits." These were young men who received basic military training before joining the Red Army.

<sup>23</sup> From the names of the three friends it is clear that Unger is a Mennonite, whereas Schulz and Maier probably came from Catholic or Lutheran Russian-German colonies. While Catherine the Great's immigration manifesto of 1763 included exemption from military service and applied to all newcomers to Russia, the non-Mennonite settlers did not have religious objections to military service and were included in the 1874 military reforms as groups who would serve.

<sup>24</sup> The different opinions expressed here indicate correctly that in the 1920s the Soviet position toward COs was still open. See Toews, *Czars, Soviets & Mennonites*, pp. 102 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Although the statement about Klassen knowing everything is meant to be sarcastic, Mennonite ministers and teachers were the religious, political and cultural leaders in their communities. This is why the Soviets under Stalin exiled German and Mennonite religious leaders first.

<sup>26</sup> Komsomol was a Communist association of young people between ages 14 and 26, first organized in 1918 and finally dissolved in 1991. Komsomols established cells in communities for the purpose of political education of Soviet youth to produce the future cadre of Party leaders. Their daily paper, *Komsomols-kaya Pravda*, began publishing in Moscow in 1925.

<sup>27</sup> The German uses "Politleiter" (political leader). Political leaders were committed Party men who came to Komsomol or other community meetings to instruct people in Communist ideology. Among their targets were traditional religion and religious leaders.

<sup>28</sup> It is not clear in the original whether the "Red Army men" were fellow-recruits or senior army personnel who had come to this political meeting.

<sup>29</sup> "Sozialistischer Wettbewerb" (socialist competition) might evoke smiles in some readers today. Capitalist competition presumably leads to oppression and exploitation of the workers, whereas socialist competition leads to the improvement of the individual and the Communist system!