

Mennonite Victims of 'The Great Terror,' 1936–1938

Peter Letkemann, Winnipeg

*"Time, like an ever flowing stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day."*

'The Great Terror' is a phrase used by Western scholars to refer to the period from September, 1936 to December, 1938, during which Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov functioned as head of the Soviet secret police, or NKVD [Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del—People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs]. This tragic era was marked by mass arrests and executions of millions of Soviet citizens, on a hitherto unprecedented scale.

Nikolai Yezhov was appointed to the post of People's Commissar of Internal Affairs on 26 September 1936. Apparently Stalin had grown dissatisfied with the work of the current Commissar, Gennrich Yagoda, in dealing with a variety of suspected plots and conspiracies. As head of the NKVD, Yezhov's task was to put an end not only to all *real* opposition, but also to any *potential* opposition to the party and the government, and especially to Stalin himself. Yezhov seems to have been well-suited to this task, given his "lack of high moral and political

qualities” along with his “cruelty and refusal to compromise in carrying out the...orders of the leader.”¹ In an address to NKVD executives Yezhov is reported to have said: “there will be some innocent victims in this fight against fascist agents... let there be no resentment if we bump someone with an elbow. Better that ten innocent people should suffer than one spy get away. When you chop wood, chips fly.”²

Yezhov was showered with honours “for his excellent successes leading the NKVD in its fulfillment of special government commissions,”³ and *Pravda* hailed him as “the nation’s favourite,” a man who possessed “the greatest vigilance, a will of iron, a fine proletarian sensitivity, enormous organizational talent and exceptional intelligence.”⁴ Yet on 8 December 1938, a mere 26 months after his appointment, a short notice in the back pages of the Moscow newspapers announced that Yezhov had, at his own request, been released from his duties as Commissar of the NKVD. He appeared with Stalin at the Bolshoi Theatre on 21 January 1939, but then disappeared from public view. His name never appeared in print again during Stalin’s life-time. Reports say that he was arrested in 1939, accused of “leftist overreaction” and trying to kill Stalin, and was shot on 4 February 1940.⁵ It was Stalin’s triumph that the blame for the ‘Great Terror’ fell largely on Yezhov, and in the Soviet Union this period is still known as the *Yezhovshchina*—“The Time of Yezhov.”

In the past year I have interviewed, and corresponded with, dozens of Mennonite men and women in Europe and North America about their memories of these Yezhov years in the Soviet Union.⁶ Reading their letters, listening to their stories and looking into ones—snatched out of their midst in the middle of the night, never to be seen or heard from again—*nor* provided answers to the lingering question: WHY?

The purpose of my research has been: a) to record the names of Mennonite victims and the circumstances of their arrest, interrogation, exile or execution; b) to attempt an answer to the question “WHY?”—asked again and again by the victims and their loved ones; and c) to counter the views of scholars who continue to maintain the myth that “the terror of 1936-38 fell heavily on Soviet political, economic and military leaders, especially those in high offices and in positions managing the economy”;⁷ and who also claim that “the non-Russian minorities were *not* [italics mine] more severely hit than the Russians.”⁸

Twenty-five years ago, Alexander Solzhenitsyn sought to dispel the first of these myths in *The Gulag Archipelago* when he wrote: “Every story of 1937 that is printed, every reminiscence that is published, relates without exception the tragedy of the Communist leaders. They have kept on assuring us, and we have unwittingly fallen for it, that the history of 1937 and 1938 consisted chiefly of the arrests of the big Communists—and virtually no one else. But of the millions arrested at that time, important Party and state officials could not possibly have represented more than 10 percent. Most of the relatives standing in line with food parcels outside the Leningrad prisons were lower-class women, the sort

who sold milk....”⁹ The identification, by name, of thousands of Mennonite victims, no more than a handful of whom belonged to the Communist Party, confirms that the tragedy of ‘The Great Terror’ affected not only Communists, but countless numbers of ordinary, innocent Soviet citizens.

How Many Victims?

A definitive answer regarding the number of victims arrested for political reasons during ‘The Great Terror’ is not available. Over the years scholars have offered a wide variety of estimates. In 1971, Roy Medvedev provided a cautious estimate that “four to five million people were subjected to repression for political reasons [in 1936–39]. At least four to five hundred thousand of them were summarily shot.” In 1989 Medvedev stated more emphatically that “a total of no less than five million persons were arrested for political reasons.”¹⁰ Robert Conquest estimated the number of arrests for 1937–1938 at about seven million people, of whom about one million were executed.¹¹

Figures presented more recently by the Russian scholars A.N. Dugin and Viktor N. Zemskov are considerably lower.¹² They cite a letter sent to Khrushchev on 1 February 1954, and based presumably on official KGB statistics, which reported that during the entire Stalin era, from 1921–1953, a total of 3,777,380 persons were convicted of counter-revolutionary, that is political, crimes; only 642,980 were sentenced to death.¹³ Dugin and Zemskov also cite KGB chief W. A. Kriutchkov’s address to the Soviet Parliament early in 1990, in which he claimed that during the years 1937–38 *no more than one million persons were arrested* [my italics], of whom about 600,000 were shot.¹⁴ However, figures provided by Robert Thurston and based on materials found in the Russian State Archives, contradict those given by Kriutchkov. According to these archival sources 1,372,382 persons were arrested for counter-revolutionary crimes in 1937–38; of those arrested 681,692 were executed.¹⁵ Based on their study of archival sources, Getty, Rittersporn and Zemskov conclude that “it seems difficult to arrive at an estimate as high as 2.5 million arrests on all charges in 1937–1938.”¹⁶

Given the “official” KGB source of the figures cited by Dugin, Zemskov and others, some scholars have questioned their reliability. Walter Laqueur, citing reservations expressed by the Russian scholars Roginsky and Okhotin, has noted: “The guardian of the materials on the repression is the direct successor of the organization that inflicted the repressions, and moreover, the files of the victims are examined in the very same building where they were tortured and executed.”¹⁷ René Ahlberg goes so far as to call the “archival” discoveries of Zemskov and Dugin a deliberate KGB “*Fälschung*” [falsification]. He supports his claim with evidence provided by Olga Shatunovskaya, chairperson of the commission appointed by Khrushchev in 1960 to examine both the Kirov murder and the criminal proceedings of the 1930s. The final report of the

commission was never published, and it was not until 1990 that Shatunovskaya revealed a summary of their findings: from January, 1935 to July, 1940 a total of 19,840,000 persons were arrested as "enemies of the people;" of these seven million were shot, many of the others perished in the Gulag camps.¹⁸ The commission's arrest figures, showing an average of approximately 3.6 million arrests per year [thus, approximately seven to eight million for the years 1937–38], are quite close to those provided by Robert Conquest.

It is not the purpose of this essay to attempt a resolution of this debate, but rather to show that whatever arrest figures we do choose to accept for the *Yezhoshchina*, none exceed the ratio of five percent of an estimated 1937 Soviet population of 162 million persons.¹⁹ According to archival KGB statistics the arrest ratio is closer to 1.5 percent of the population. The ratio of arrests for the same period in an estimated Mennonite population of 100,000 persons is much higher.²⁰

For the past year I have been compiling namelists of Mennonite victims arrested and exiled or executed during the 'Great Terror.' Although my investigation of this data is still in progress, I can offer some preliminary findings at this time. Fairly complete lists are available for some 49 Mennonite villages in Ukraine, west of the Dnieper River—including villages in the settlements of Khortitsa, Yazykovo, Zagradovka, Nepluyevka, Borozenko and Shliakhtin-Baratov. These lists show a total of 1,800 arrests (8.2%) in an estimated 1937 population of 22,000 persons. Figures for the Molochnaia villages [east of the Dnieper River], taken from the "Dorfkarte" prepared by the German SS in 1942, also show about 1,800 arrests (9%) in a population of some 20,000 persons. Data for other Mennonite villages east of the Dnieper River (though not yet complete) seem to support the conclusion that arrests among Mennonites in the Ukrainian SSR during the *Yezhovshchina* amounted to approximately eight or nine percent of the Mennonite population.

The ratio of arrests varied considerably from one village to another. For example, in the village of Blumenfeld (Nepluyevka) 37 men (14%) of an estimated 250 inhabitants were arrested during the 'Great Terror'; in Einlage, at least 200 men and women (13%) of an estimated 1500 Mennonites suffered this fate. In the village of Bahndorf (Orlovo) in the Memrik settlement, 26 men (8.6%) from a population of 300 persons were arrested between May, 1937 and February, 1938.²¹ In the village of Kondratyevka (Borissovo Settlement) the ratio was even higher: 75 men (18%), including both fathers and sons, from an estimated population of 400 persons were arrested during the years 1937–38.²² On the other hand, in Alexanderkrone (Zagradovka) only two of its 170 inhabitants were arrested. The village of Rosengart (Khortitsa) also suffered relatively few arrests from 1936–38, only ten men (3.3%) out of a population of over 300 persons were taken. The reason cited in contemporary sources for this "lenient treatment" was that Soviet officials used Rosengart as a model collective farm to display to the many foreign visitors who came to view the nearby Dnieprostroi hydro-electric dam.²³

The ratio of arrests for Mennonite villages in the Russian Federation (RSFSR) also varied from one settlement to another. In Alexandertal [Alt-Samara], for example, 233 persons (20% of the 1926 population of 1,164 persons) were exiled to the region of Arkhangelsk in March, 1930. Eighty-one persons from this group were subsequently arrested and sent to various Gulag camps over the next few years; sixty of these persons were taken in March, 1938 alone!²⁴ Information about arrests among the families that remained in Alexandertal is not available at this time.

The settlement Am Trakt had a Mennonite population in 1926 of 1,358 persons. In the summer of 1931, 41 families (199 persons) were branded as "kulaks" and exiled to Karaganda. Seventy-one (36%) of these persons died within the first five years. Eighteen men (9%) from this group in Karaganda were arrested and sent to the Gulag; only six returned.²⁵ In the village of Zentral (Voronezh Region), 30 men (5%) out of a Mennonite population of 600 persons were arrested during the *Yezhovshchina*.²⁶

In the Western Siberian settlement of Slavgorod, which had a Mennonite population in 1926 of 13,029 persons, some 800 families [representing about 20% of the population] were exiled in 1931 to the northern region of Naryn. In the years 1937–38 an additional 2,000 persons were "taken", arrested, from the villages of the German Rayon, to which the Mennonite villages of Slavgorod belonged. To date I have not been able to establish how many of these persons were Mennonites. However, in the Mennonite villages of Silberfeld and Gljaden (No.2) the entire adult-male population was arrested; in the village of Ananyevka only 16 men were left.²⁷ Based on her research in the archives of the former West Siberian NKVD headquarters, Larissa Belkovec confirms that during 1937–38 practically the entire male population of the German settlements in West Siberia was liquidated.²⁸

These preliminary results allow us to conclude that the ratio of Mennonites arrested during the *Yezhovshchina* was approximately eight to nine 9 percent, considerably higher than that of the general Soviet population: double the ratio put forward by Robert Conquest (7 million arrests = 4.3%), and more than five times the ratio suggested by archival KGB sources (2.5 million arrests = 1.5%).²⁹

An estimated number of eight to nine thousand Mennonite arrests seems small, even insignificant, when compared with the 'millions' of Soviet arrest victims, but when one takes into account that more than half of the Mennonite population was probably made up of children, we can see that an arrest ratio of eight to nine percent affected approximately one out of every five or six adults. Given that most of those arrested were men, this would mean that at least one-third, possibly as many as one-half, of all Mennonite adult males were taken from their families during the *Yezhovshchina*!

“Life is Better, Life is Gayer”

By the year 1936 most Soviet Mennonites felt that the worst years of repression and famine might be behind them. Thousands of their relatives and friends (including entire families) had been branded as “kulaks” and exiled during the collectivization campaign of 1929–1932. Many had died, while others (especially men) had been arrested in exile and sent to labour camps; those who survived lived in isolated settlements scattered across the northern frontiers of the Soviet Union. Comparatively few Mennonites were arrested or exiled during the ensuing years from 1933–1935. In the villages west of the Dnieper, for example, there were, in total, only seventy arrests: 27 arrests in 1933 [ten of these in Einlage], 19 arrests in 1934, and 24 arrests in 1935.³⁰ Since few Mennonites were members of the Communist Party, few were affected by Stalin’s great purge of the Party, which had begun early in 1933 and ended officially on 26 December, 1935.³¹

Compared with Ukrainians, Russians, Kazakhs and other Soviet peoples, Mennonites also suffered relatively few deaths during the devastating famine of 1932–33. Only 22 deaths were reported in the Khortitsa region, and 213 in the Zagradovka villages.³² By 1936 conditions had improved: food rationing was discontinued, collective farmers were allowed to cultivate small plots of land for their own use, and to keep a limited amount of livestock—one cow, two pigs, up to ten sheep or goats and an unlimited number of chickens or geese.³³ The good harvest of 1935 kindled high expectations for the 1936 agricultural year. Although the country as a whole experienced a massive crop failure in 1936, the harvest in Ukraine was good, and annual wages, paid to Mennonite collective farmers both in cash and grain, were better than they had been for many years.³⁴

On 12 December 1936 Stalin proclaimed his new and long-awaited constitution into law. He described it as “the only thoroughly democratic constitution in the world,” and claimed: “What millions of honest people in capitalist countries have dreamed of, and still dream of, has already been realized in the USSR.”³⁵ Far from being a tyrant, Stalin represented himself as the Great Teacher and Leader of the People, a champion of wider basic democratic rights and freedoms, including freedom of religious expression. Article 125 guaranteed “by law”, the freedom of speech, the press, assembly, mass meetings, street processions and demonstrations—“provided these were exercised to strengthen the socialist system”³⁶. Article 127 proclaimed the inviolability of the person—“no person may be placed under arrest except by decision of a court or with the sanction of a procurator”; Article 128 stated that, “the inviolability of the homes of citizens, and privacy of correspondence are protected by law.”³⁷

Like a great magician, Stalin tried to deceive both his own people and the world, proclaiming that in the Soviet Union “life is better, life is gayer.”³⁸ Many foreign observers were duped. The eminent British author George Bernard Shaw, for example, returned from a visit to the Soviet Union impressed by the “splendid illustrated magazines...[in which] crowds of brightly dressed, well-fed, happy looking workers are shown with their palatial dwellings...nobody

who ever sees these publications will ever believe tales of a half-starved population dwelling in camps under the lash of a ruthless tyrant.”³⁹

Foreign tourists who visited the Soviet Union in greater numbers during the Yezhov era than ever before, also came back with glowing reports. They saw everything and yet nothing.⁴⁰ One of these was an unnamed American minister from San Diego, who had been given a copy of Abram A. Kroeker's booklet "Results of Communism in Russia" at a local religious gathering. Kroeker's work focused on religious persecution in the Soviet Union and on the negative results of collectivization. He characterized the Soviet Union as "the land of atheism, terror and poverty," and saw it as a "growing menace to Christianity and civilization." Kroeker was especially worried about the growth of the Communist Party in the USA. The San Diego pastor, who referred to himself as "a searcher for truth," was strongly influenced by Kroeker's anti-communist propaganda, but in order to be "fair" he decided to see Russia for himself. He apparently spent two years learning Russian, and then made three trips to the Soviet Union—in 1934, 1936 and 1937. After the last of these trips, he sent Kroeker a long letter, sharing the 'positive' impressions of what he had seen and heard there. Kroeker, in turn, shared excerpts from this letter with readers of the Canadian Mennonite newspaper, *Der Bote*. The minister was especially impressed by the high moral standards of the young people, even though they did not go to church. He spent two weeks in the vicinity of Khortitsa and encountered many elderly people "who had lost all their possession, and now lived only on their memories. Their children, however, supported with 'body and soul' the new regime, which had given them prosperity." He criticized the "hateful" stance of Kroeker's book and suggested that the real villains were to be found not in the Soviet Union but in Germany and Italy. Finally, he stated his conviction that riches and wealth were the greatest evil of the day, and that the love of money was a hindrance to the love of truth. Such things, he felt, were not possible in the Soviet Union, which is why he supported the Soviet system and was able to forgive any evil which might be present. He concluded by saying, "They are trying to improve the world, and I am certain they will succeed."⁴¹

This pastor's optimistic appraisal was certainly not shared by Kroeker, nor by many other Mennonites. A correspondent from the Caucasus wrote in 1937: "Good things are always promised, but one never receives them. Everyone is dissatisfied and yet they must all proclaim: things are going well for me, I live in joy the whole day."⁴² A correspondent from Einlage lamented that the fear of God, honesty and morality had disappeared among Mennonites, and reported that in Neuendorf alone, twenty young (unmarried) girls were pregnant, eight of them by a local married man.⁴³ Although the people I interviewed were reluctant to give details, they confirmed this state of moral decline.

Among those arrested in 1933–36 were the remaining Mennonite religious leaders, including men such as Elder (Aeltester) Heinrich Winter and Aaron P. Toews,⁴⁴ who had somehow escaped arrest during the earlier "dekulakization" campaign of 1929–32. These arrests were part of Stalin's ongoing assault against

traditional religious and moral values. By the end of 1936 most churches had been closed, the buildings confiscated by the state, and turned into clubhouses, theatres or warehouses. George K. Epp comments that "the exile of religious leaders and the destruction of congregational life had particularly detrimental results—without religious leadership, the Mennonite fellowship quickly sank to the level of the masses."⁴⁵

Enemies of the People

In January, 1934 Stalin convened the Seventeenth Communist Party Congress, the so-called "Congress of Victors," to celebrate the successful completion of the first Five-Year Plan. He was quoted as saying: "...at the present Congress there is nothing more to prove and, it seems, nobody to beat."⁴⁶ In spite of this "victory," Stalin had to acknowledge that there were still problems in the economy, including poor harvests, chronic food shortages, and industrial accidents, which were interpreted not as the product of poor state planning and management, but as the work of "wreckers," "saboteurs," or "diversionists"—agents of Trotsky, Japan or Germany working for the destruction of the Soviet Union. Through letters to Party committees, and through the Soviet media, Stalin issued repeated calls for "revolutionary vigilance," which meant "the ability to recognize an enemy of the Party, no matter how well he may be masked."⁴⁷ As it turned out, almost anyone could be accused of being an enemy; in fact, no one could be *certain* that he was *not* an enemy of the people. In the words of the poet Mayakovsky: "And he who sings not with us today/ is against/ us!"⁴⁸

Ordinary citizens, trusting both Stalin and the Party, and guided by the best motives, were drawn into this campaign of vigilance which acquired an almost hysterical mass character. According to one writer, the nation was seemingly turned into a "lynch-mob."⁴⁹ Karl Fast recalls how even school children were encouraged to denounce their parents.⁵⁰

To "unmask" suspected enemies among the Mennonite population, NKVD officials were able to recruit informers—including local Mennonites, Lutheran or Catholic Germans, Ukrainians and Russians—in most villages. It was their duty to report on what was said and done in the village. Some men were forced into the role of informer by threats against them or their families, others informed for personal gain or for revenge, still others did so for money. Numerous accounts indicate that informants received cash for their services. In Schönau (Zagradovka) the rate was 25 to 100 rubles per head.⁵¹ In Khortitsa, a man named Vilichko, the Ukrainian neighbour of the Neustaedter family, received 50 rubles for denouncing Johann Neustaedter.⁵²

The Terror destroyed personal confidence between private citizens everywhere. The writer Isaak Babel summed up the mood in these words: "Today a man only talks freely with his wife—at night, with the blankets pulled over his

head.”⁵³ George K. Epp recalls his own experience as a young teenager wanting to share confidences with his best friend, who covered his ears and said: “I don’t want to hear anything, they may force me to inform. I want to know nothing.”⁵⁴

Incredible as it may seem today, many Soviet citizens actually believed that those who were denounced, arrested and tried *were* real enemies of the people, engaged in what they thought was a genuine conspiracy. Ordinary people had no access to information other than that provided by the Soviet press and radio, and it was not difficult to imagine Stalin’s defeated opponents, German Fascists or Japanese agents, conspiring to overthrow the government of the world’s first “workers’ and peasants’ state.” Even some of those arrested, and convinced of their own innocence, did not blame Stalin for their misfortune, but clung to the belief that if only they could reach him and tell him, he would intervene. Boris Pasternak is reputed to have exclaimed: “If only someone would tell Stalin about it!”⁵⁵ Contemporary Mennonite sources avoid any reference to Stalin, and attribute all blame for the arrests to the NKVD.

During the course of 1936 the number of arrests began to escalate: 107 Mennonites were arrested in villages west of the Dnieper, more than in the three previous years combined. Nine villages alone accounted for almost 80 percent of these arrests. Hardest hit were the urban/industrial centres of Einlage (31 arrests) and Khortitsa (12 arrests—compared with a total of 16 in the previous three years). Other Old Colony villages affected included Schöneberg, where six men were taken during one night in October, and Schönhorst, where seven men were arrested. In Hochfeld, north of Khortitsa, six men were taken; in the Zagradovka settlement Ohrloff registered ten, and Alexanderfeld six, arrests. Steinfeld and Grünfeld (Shliakhtin-Baratov) each suffered five arrests.

Early in 1937 Stalin addressed the February–March Plenum of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party in a speech entitled “Deficiencies of Party Work and Methods for the Liquidation of the Trotskyites and other Two-faced People.” In it he provided the theoretical justification for his policy of mass terror under the pretext that “as we march forward toward Socialism class war must allegedly sharpen.”⁵⁶ He described the situation of a Soviet Union encircled by hostile capitalist and fascist powers, whose agents, hiding behind Bolshevik masks, had penetrated all party, governmental and economic organizations and were engaged in wrecking and espionage. “Thousands of people are required to build a big railway bridge,” he said, “but a few people are enough to blow it up.”⁵⁷ Stalin accused officials of being blind to what was happening: they had allowed the successes of the Five Year Plans to dull them into complacency, and needed to renew their vigilance. With this Plenum Stalin achieved what he had so long sought in vain; in the words of Ronald Hingley, he was granted “the unlimited licence to kill.”⁵⁸

The Terror Begins

According to various sources, the large wave of mass arrests among civilians began in the late summer or fall of 1937.⁵⁹ In July, readers of *Der Bote* in Canada were made aware of rumours that Stalin was planning a new purge, or *chistka* ("housecleaning").⁶⁰ In Ukraine this *chistka* began in August 1937, when a high-powered delegation, including Molotov, Khrushchev and Yezhov arrived in Kiev to undertake the purge of the Ukrainian Communist Party. The shock waves spread throughout Ukraine. In Odessa, hundreds of Germans were arrested and shot.⁶¹

Mennonites did not remain unaffected. In the village of Burwalde, the first two victims were arrested at the end of August; the villagers were dumbfounded, and unable to comprehend why these innocent men had been taken.⁶² On 30 August 1937, six men were arrested in Felsenbach (Borozenko). In the village of Blumengart (Khortitsa) the first arrests came on 5 September 1937. In Blumenfeld (Nepluyevka), the first four men were also arrested in September. In Einlage there were only ten arrests in the first half of the year, and at least 62 from July to December; 29 of these arrests came within the space of one week, from 5–12 September. On 29 October 1937, 18 men from Schöneberg (Khortitsa) were taken in one night.

Mennonites reacted with shock, disbelief and fear to the new wave of arrests. A terrified resident from the Caucasus region wrote in mid-1937: "Everyone is living in fear. One hears constantly of arrests. Because of some insignificant matter a person disappears. No one is spared. I sit at home and go nowhere, so that no one can say anything about me.... People are afraid of one another, they are afraid of their own shadow."⁶³ Writing from Einlage to relatives in Canada on 29 May 1937 an anonymous correspondent reported that seven men had been sentenced to death, and asked: "Why? Yes, if one only knew! Somehow they drew attention to themselves and as the result of severe interrogation they confessed to the most ridiculous charges."⁶⁴

There was no predictable pattern to the arrests. Although most occurred at night, there were cases of men being taken during the day, right from their place of work. In some villages, arrests seemed to have a snowball effect, as the forced confessions of those arrested first were used to implicate other persons within the village. In Blumenfeld, for example, four men were arrested in September, followed by nine men on 2 October and eight on 9 October; another seven were arrested in December.⁶⁵ A similar pattern can be seen in Burwalde: the first two arrests at the end of August were followed in quick succession by two more and then another five. Finally, on 18 February 1938, during a raging snow storm, another 18 men were taken.⁶⁶

This mass arrest in Burwalde may have been in response to a directive from Yezhov himself. In February, 1938 he travelled to Kiev for a special NKVD conference, and ordered 30,000 more executions in Ukraine.⁶⁷ The effects were felt not only in Burwalde. In nearby Nieder Khortitsa, 29 men were arrested to

fill the quota. On 4 February 1938, 15 men from Neu-Khortitsa and neighbouring Rotfeld (Shliakhtin-Baratov) were also arrested.

Another quota was set in July, 1938 by Aleksandr Ivanovich Uspenskii, who worked as NKVD chief for Ukraine from March, 1938 until December, 1938. On 12 July he was in Zaporozhye and ordered one thousand arrests.⁶⁸ As a result, another forty men were taken from Nieder Khortitsa, 16 persons on 16 July alone. In Einlage, 46 men and women were taken between 14–29 July, thirty persons on 17 July alone. In other villages, at least 45 men were arrested in the last two weeks of July, including twenty men from Khortitsa, Osterwick, Kronsweide and Neuenburg, and another 25 from the Shliakhtin-Baratov villages of Hochfeld, Steinfeld, Grünfeld and Rotfeld. NKVD files reveal that this last wave of arrests in the Dniepropetrovsk Region in June–July, 1938 produced so many prisoners that the existing cells could no longer hold them; men had to be held outside, in the courtyard of NKVD headquarters. In all, more than 200 were arrested and accused of belonging to an anti-Soviet organization under the leadership of A.A. Koop. Koop was accused of being a long-time German agent, recruited to sabotage industries in Zaporozhye.⁶⁹

The highpoint of arrests in the Dniepropetrovsk region occurred between June, 1937 and April, 1938. The repression focussed especially on industrial enterprises in the German districts (*rayon*) of the region, and Mennonites were singled out for attention. "Of the 32 village soviets in the Zaporozhye district (*rayon*) nine are German. The sectarian-Mennonite movement has established itself in each of them, and in all of them terrorist-nationalist organizations have been formed." During this eleven month period, the NKVD arrested 4,189 Germans, of whom 2,303 were accused of belonging to a total of 171 different espionage or terrorist organizations. Most of these organizations were thought to be linked to Nazi intelligence services.⁷⁰

The precise fate of most Mennonite victims arrested during the Yezhov years remains unknown. Almost all were likely sentenced under Article 58 (Sections 10 and 11) of the Russian Criminal Code, or its equivalent—Article 54 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code. According to Solzhenitsyn, "there was no section which was interpreted as broadly and with so ardent a revolutionary conscience as Section 10."⁷¹ Its definition included "Propaganda or agitation, containing an appeal for the overthrow, subverting, or weakening of Soviet power...and equally, the dissemination or preparation or possession of literary materials of similar content." Active promotion of emigration and criticism of conditions in USSR [see Jakob Reimer story below] could be interpreted as actions which contributed to weakening the authority of the State. The scope of "agitation" could include a conversation between friends, or even between husband and wife.

Section 11 was applied if the alleged "anti-Soviet" action was undertaken by an organization, or even if the accused had allegedly joined such an organization. Receipt of food parcels and money from relatives abroad [see Franz Hamm story below] could be interpreted as support from foreign espionage organiza-

tions. Franz Thiessen, from Neuendorf, was accused under Section 11 of having joined a counter-revolutionary organization led by Johann Friesen, a foreman at the Engels factory in Zaporozhye where Thiessen was employed. Thiessen believed that the interrogators received extra pay if they could secure convictions under this Section, and he, of course, would have extra years added to his sentence. He was subsequently cleared of all charges and released in January, 1939.⁷²

Some men were also charged under Article 58 - Section 7, which applied to "subversion of industry, transport, trade and the circulation of money." For example, Peter Thiessen, the father of Franz Thiessen, was accused of planning to poison all milk products from his dairy destined for the nearby industrial area of Zaporozhye. In Osterwick, the glass-worker Johann Nikolai Harder, was accused by the local party activist Skatchko, of throwing pieces of broken glass into the flour while he was repairing windows at the mill in Osterwick. Harder was arrested on 18 February 1938 and died in prison 26 October 1938.⁷³ How many others died in prison before they could even be sentenced is not known.

Surviving documents and eye witness accounts indicate that many of those arrested were sentenced to hard labour in the Gulag. Solzhenitsyn has written extensively on the economic requirements for cheap and undemanding labour, especially in the northern forests and the mines of Siberia, which led to the system of camps and mass arrests during the 1930s and 1940s.⁷⁴ While sentences during the years 1930-35 usually ranged from three to five years, those during the 'Great Terror' were almost never less than 10 years. A handful of men, including my uncle, David Letkemann, survived these 10 years in the Gulag and returned to their families. The majority perished from disease or starvation. Their fate is vividly described in the writings of Mennonite Gulag survivors such as Peter Epp, Georg Hildebrand and Isaak W. Reimer.⁷⁵

Information from rehabilitation certificates, acquired in recent years by families of the victims, reveals that a large number of men, perhaps the majority (?), never made it to the Gulag. They were sentenced to death and usually executed within days. Hundreds of men were shot in Zaporozhye: they included the four Janzen brothers—Peter, Johann, Franz, and Dietrich—from the neighbouring villages of Pavlovka (Osterwick) and Dolinsk (Kronstal). Peter Janzen was charged with belonging to a counter-revolutionary diversionist espionage organization and executed on 21 August 1937. The other brothers were charged with belonging to an anti-Soviet nationalist organization and also executed—Johann on 17 October 1938 and Franz and Dietrich on 19 October 1938. The Quiring brothers—Heinrich and Peter—from Nikolaifeld (Yazykovo) were both arrested on 8 August 1937, charged with anti-Soviet activities, sentenced to death and shot on 12 August 1937. Franz Sawatzky (originally from Kondratyevka) was arrested in Khortitsa on 4 November 1937, charged with anti-Soviet, nationalist agitation and shot on 9 January 1938. His wife had tried to bring him a food parcel on 9 January, but was told "he has been transferred." Families continued to hope for the return of those "transferred" or

those sentenced to "ten years with no correspondence privileges;" and it was only later that they learned that their loved ones had been shot.⁷⁶

Throughout the period from mid-1937 until the late summer of 1938 denunciations and arrests were seemingly out of control. The Russian sociologist Bestuzhev-Lada describes the mechanism of this campaign as follows: "a directive from above, threatening punishment for non-fulfillment, 'competition' between executants at all levels...with the main task of not falling behind others, and finally personal grudges or material calculations (to get the job, the property or the housing-space of the victim)...The net effect was a lava-like progression of the process, which apparently had at times to be restrained so that everyone would not be included...it is clear that the scale of the Terror exceeded many times the extent necessary to solidify Stalin's position...in other words, was irrational in every respect."⁷⁷

By the Fall of 1938 it was clear that the "inquisition" was getting out of hand, and that the scale of repression was having serious consequences on the economy. On 17 November the Central Committee endorsed a secret decree ordering "regulation" of the punitive organs. Political leaders began looking for a scapegoat in order to distance themselves from crimes committed against their own people, and placed all blame on Yezhov and the organs of the NKVD. Under Yezhov's successor, Lavrentia Beria, arrests declined sharply, at least in the short term. The sentences of some prisoners were reversed, charges were dropped, and beginning in January, 1939 some were even released. NKVD officials, accused of producing false charges and evidence, were convicted and executed.⁷⁸

Personal Stories

The personal experiences of Mennonite men and women during the *Yezhovshchina* have, until recently, remained largely untold. Mennonites wrote and published numerous contemporary accounts during the years from 1917 to about 1934, but, after that, letters, diaries and other written sources become scarce. By 1937 the fear of arrest had all but silenced Mennonite voices from the Soviet Union, and the type of Russian diary material found in a publication such as *Intimacy and Terror* is all but unknown among Mennonites.⁷⁹ It was not until after the German occupation of Ukraine in the late summer of 1941 that Soviet Mennonites began to speak openly and write about their experiences during the 'Terror.' The village reports gathered by the Sonderkommando Dr. Stumpp for the German Ministry of the Occupied Eastern Territories in 1942/43 contain a number of these personal accounts by men such as Franz Hamm, Johann Epp, David Penner, Kornelius Epp, and others who survived the 'Terror.'⁸⁰ Unfortunately these reports lay "lost" in the Library of Congress along with thousands of other 'Captured German War Documents' until they were rediscovered in 1973 by Adam Giesinger. Portions of these documents were translated by J.B. Toews, who also provided the first scholarly treatment of the period for English-speaking Mennonites in *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*.⁸¹

In Canada, after World War II, Aron A. Toews was able to include some accounts from this period in his *Mennonitische Märtyrer*; and a handful of books by Karl Fast, Julius Loewen, Jacob Neufeld, along with scattered articles in the German Mennonite press, also provided sketchy details.⁸² It was not until the 1970s that people began to write, stimulated in part by George K. Epp's renewed appeals calling on survivors to "write!" and record their experiences for succeeding generations. As more and more people began exploring their "family trees," as *Umsiedler* immigrants arrived in Germany in growing numbers from the USSR, and as East-West tensions eased, people were able to overcome their legacy of fear and finally tell their stories—either in personal interviews or in written form.

From the many sources gathered by George K. Epp and myself, I have chosen the representative stories of three men from the village of Schönau. Schönau was one of the 16 Zagradowka villages and in June, 1941 it had a German/Mennonite population of 406 persons (102 families)—57 men, 120 women and 219 children under the age of 18. Thirty-nine of these families were listed as being without an *Oberhaupt* ("head"), i.e. father. Three men had been arrested in the years 1931–1934, several more had died in the famine of 1932–33, another 33, about eight percent, were arrested during the years 1936–38, and one man was arrested as late as 1940. Only a handful of those arrested—five men and one woman [Eva Unger]—survived imprisonment and returned to their families. Two of these survivors were Franz Martin Hamm and Jakob Harms. Together with Jakob Peter Reimer, these three men were arrested on 10 April 1938.⁸³

Franz Hamm (Schönau)—Arrested 10 April 1938

Franz Hamm was born in Schönau in 1902, the son of Martin Hamm—a prosperous farmer and Mennonite minister, who was later butchered by Makhno and his bandits during their attack on the Zagradowka villages on the night of 1 December 1919.⁸⁴ Franz Hamm was married to Maria Warkentin in 1923, had five children [one child died in infancy], and worked as an instructor at a school for truck drivers in the village of Arkhangelskoye, located about 30 km from Schönau. As he recalled later, he had come home on the weekend of 10 April to visit his family. A number of men, including the three Nickel brothers—Gerhard, Heinrich and Peter—had been arrested in Schönau the previous weekend.⁸⁵ Several other people, including the school teacher Eva Unger, had been arrested earlier in February.

On 10 April the weather was wet and dreary, and the dirt roads were a sea of mud; Franz felt reasonably certain that NKVD officials would not venture out on such a night. But he was mistaken. Shortly after midnight, Franz was awakened by a knock at the window. Two fellow villagers ordered him to open up, saying they had something to discuss with him. Mrs. Hamm immediately sensed the danger and said, "They have come for you!"

The men showed Franz their arrest warrant and he responded, "Do what you want." He offered no resistance—why resist if you are innocent? As Solzhenitsyn

writes: “how can you resist...you’ll only make your situation worse; you’ll make it more difficult for them to sort out the mistake.”⁸⁶ In fact, there are no known incidences of resistance to arrest among Mennonites. It was only later, in prison, that we hear rare reports of men going on hunger strikes to protest the injustice of their situation; but by then their voices and their actions could no longer be heard or seen.⁸⁷

The two men, working in cooperation with the NKVD, conducted a thorough search of the Hamm residence, looking for suspicious books (like bibles or hymnbooks!), letters from abroad, or any other incriminating evidence. In one case, such evidence consisted of a lamp, with which A.A. Koop allegedly planned to signal German bombers in the event of war.⁸⁸ Although Hamm makes no mention of it, “village activists” conducting these searches sometimes took the opportunity to let “appropriate items slip into their pockets”—Johann Friesen of Osterwick, for example, lost a valuable silver watch during such a search.⁸⁹

After the search, Franz was escorted to the office of the village soviet. Here he was joined by Jakob Harms and Jakob Reimer, who had also been arrested. The trembling wives brought small bundles filled with food and articles of clothing, but were not allowed to see their husbands. A short time later the three men were loaded into transport vehicles and driven to the regional prison in nearby Kronau. Another twenty men from other Zgradovka villages were picked up along the way.

In Kronau, the 23 men were placed into a cramped, unfurnished cell already filled with prisoners, including Jakob Harms’ younger brother Heinrich, who had been apprehended ten days earlier. As night fell on their first day in prison, the men were led away one by one for questioning. The first to return was Johann Wiens from Blumenort. He was extremely pale, unsteady on his feet, stared blankly into the distance and had to lean against the wall for support. “Did they torture you?” everyone asked. “Yes, they are brutal—they beat me until I was unconscious, and then poured cold water over me.”

Article 136 of the Soviet Code of Criminal Procedure stated clearly that: “The interrogator does not have the right to extract testimony or a confession from an accused by means of compulsion and threats.”⁹⁰ But it is doubtful whether the guards, much less the prisoners, had ever seen or read this code. If someone had asked for it, their request would have been greeted with suspicion: “you must either be preparing to commit a crime or be trying to cover your tracks.”⁹¹ Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the Communist Party Central Committee, on Stalin’s orders, secretly authorized “the application of methods of physical pressure” from 1937 on.⁹²

The purpose of the interrogation and torture was not so much to elicit the truth, as to gain a confession of guilt. Since the accused were not guilty and since there was usually no genuine evidence, Soviet prosecutors and judges agreed to accept the confession, however obtained, as “in itself grounds for a conviction.”⁹³ It is estimated that up to 100,000 officials spent months interrogating

suspected “enemies,” preparing elaborate dossiers and accumulating a vast amount of paperwork to provide a “legal” basis for the exile or execution of millions of prisoners who did not, during that time, even provide the State with productive labour.

Millions of such files still exist in regional KGB archives throughout the former Soviet Union. To date, only a small number of Russian and Ukrainian scholars have been granted access to these files. Larissa Belkovec, for example, has examined NKVD files in the Novosibirsk region, home to a large German and Mennonite population, and revealed that a typical prisoner’s file may consist of up to 15 different types of documents. These documents include:⁹⁴ 1) Resolutions regarding choice of liquidation measures; 2) Search warrants and depositions (“Protokolle”)—signed by witnesses preset at the time of the search; 3) a receipt for items confiscated during the search—valuables, and personal documents such as letter, passport, work book; 4) a form listing the full name, social background and present living conditions of the prisoner; 5) a document from the village soviet certifying the financial status of the prisoner; 6) a document from the chairman of the village soviet attesting to the character of the prisoner; 7) written reports from witnesses testifying to the “damages” which the collective had suffered because of the “wrecking” activity of the accused and the counter-revolutionary organizations to which he belonged; 8) Interrogation report, usually signed or initialled on each page by the accused—the signature confirming that this was a sincere confession of guilt on his part.

Hamm was accused of being the son of a kulak and therefore, by definition, a traitor to the Soviet people. His desire to emigrate in the 1920s indicated dissatisfaction with life in the Soviet Union and was interpreted as “agitation against the government.” The fact that he maintained contact with relatives abroad, and received money and food parcels was also suspect; he was accused of receiving support from a “foreign espionage organization” and belonging to an “armed secret society” opposed to the Soviet state. Hamm admitted that he was the son of a prosperous Mennonite minister, that he had applied to emigrate to Canada in 1926–27, that he had relatives abroad and was a member of the Mennonite Church, but he denied all accusations of agitation against the state or espionage. But after three hours of interrogation under torture he was forced to sign a confession that he had not even read.

The other 22 men, he writes, were interrogated in a similar manner, and several days later they were all transported by train to the regional capital of Kherson. Conditions in this prison were even worse than in Kronau, with 127 men squeezed into a small room only 6 x 8 meters in size. It was to be their ‘home’ for the next year. Franz learned that his younger brother Kornelius Hamm, who had been arrested earlier in 1938, had also gone through this prison and been transported to the north—never to be heard from again.

Franz Hamm was more fortunate—his imprisonment lasted for one year, less two weeks. For some reason, unknown to him, his case was reviewed and he was released on 24 March 1939.

Jakob Harms (Schönau)—Arrested 10 April 1938

The story of Jakob Harms also has a happy ending. He was 25 years of age when he was arrested in 1938. Charged with “political crimes” similar to those of Franz Hamm, Harms was one of a small number of men who requested, and were granted, a trial to defend themselves.⁹⁵ It seems that one of Harms’ fellow prisoners in Kherson was a lawyer, who apparently advised Harms not only on how to respond during interrogations, but also on how to proceed with his request for a trial.

Harms was allowed to call two witnesses in his defense: his girl friend (and later wife) Anna Unruh and her friend Maria (Wiebe) Rempel. The two women received notice by mail to appear at the courthouse in Kherson on an appointed date and time in late March, 1939; their return train fare to Kherson, amounting to 24 rubles each, was to be paid by the court. In Kherson, Marie Rempel remembers seeing Nikolai Dyck, one of three “informers” from Schönau who served as “witnesses” for the prosecution. The other two were Jakob Dyck and Jacob A. Franzen.

Anna Unruh was questioned first, while Maria waited outside. When Maria Rempel was led into the large courtroom she noticed Anna and *Herr* May, a policeman from Kronau, sitting off to one side of the room. Apart from the “Troika” of judges, seated on a raised platform, and the accused Jakob Harms, who sat facing them, the courtroom was empty. Maria stood in front of the bench, facing the accused, while questions were directed at her from the judges behind her. She remembers that they admonished her several times to speak loudly and clearly so that they could hear her testimony. She was questioned for about an hour, and related personal incidents to show that the accusations against Harms were motivated by personal revenge and jealousy on the part of Nikolai Dyck.

As Maria was led out of the room, the policeman *Herr* May smiled at her and whispered that her testimony would set Harms free. Indeed, Harms was released the following day and returned to Schönau. Apparently he had been given the opportunity, but had declined, to press counter-charges against Nikolai Dyck.

Jakob Peter Reimer (Schönau)—Arrested 10 April 1938

Jakob Peter Reimer [b. 1904], was not as fortunate as his fellow prisoners Franz Hamm and Jakob Harms. He was one of four sons of Peter Reimer, all of whom were arrested in 1938, and perished. The charges brought against Jakob Reimer are outlined in an “Indictment” from a hearing held in Nikolaiev on 13 August 1939; how this document found its way into the Schönau village reports is unknown.⁹⁶

The charges against Reimer were based on allegations provided by a group of village “informants,” including Heinrich Burghard, Jakob Dyck and Jacob

Franzen. They reported, for example, that in the fall of 1933 [they could no longer remember the exact date!] Reimer had allegedly “expressed himself in an anti-Soviet tone” about a meat-requisition campaign. They alleged that in the fall of 1937 Reimer had again been overheard making “anti-Soviet remarks” about the annual grain-requisition program and about Soviet living conditions in general. These same men testified that during a conversation in the dining hall of their collective farm, named after Molotov, on 8 March 1938, Reimer had allegedly spoken about people’s critical opinions of the USSR and about their country’s eventual defeat at the hands of the German Führer, whom he was reputed to have praised. Furthermore, it was alleged that Reimer had promoted ideas of emigration in the late 1920s [probably during the Moscow episode of 1929], and continued to correspond with relatives who had emigrated; it was claimed that in these letters he criticized living conditions in the USSR.

The indictment records that Reimer declared himself innocent, and refused to assent to these charges. But, the prosecutor ruled, the material evidence and the testimony of many witnesses—with whom Reimer had been personally confronted—proved the contrary. On the basis of these “facts,” Reimer was charged under Article 54, Section 10 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code with carrying on agitation against the state, and under Section 11 with belonging to an anti-Soviet organization. He was remanded to trial at the regional court, but allowed to go home, on condition that he not leave his place of residence. Whether he was actually released is not certain; the people from Schönau whom I interviewed never saw him again after his arrest. A hand-written annotation in the GWD sources states that Reimer was sentenced to five years in the Gulag for his “crimes.” His ultimate fate is not known.

After German forces occupied the Mennonite villages in Ukraine in the late summer of 1941, some former NKVD collaborators were reported to German authorities and executed. Such was the fate of Jakob Reimer’s accusers in Schönau: Jakob Dyck and Jakob Franzen, who had apparently informed not only on Reimer, but also on other fellow villagers, were shot by the *Waffen SS*.⁹⁷ Some collaborators fled to other villages to avoid arrest. For example, the chairman of the Khortitsa village soviet, a man by the name of Wiebe, who had the blood of many Khortitsa residents on his hands, fled to Adelsheim. He was not reported to German authorities.⁹⁸

In fact, most Mennonite villagers seem to have decided not to seek revenge on former informers, believing that “vengeance” was best left to God. Many saw the terrible events of the 1930s—the seemingly irrational and meaningless nature of the ‘Terror’—through the eyes of their faith. Some saw this as a time of testing and purification;⁹⁹ others saw the moral decline and its consequences in Mennonite communities as a sign of God’s judgement for the sins of the Mennonite people,¹⁰⁰ or as a sign of the Last Days.¹⁰¹ Reverend Benjamin Ratzlaff of Gnadenfeld (Molochna) said: “The Lord has brought hardships upon us; He will help us to carry them. Let us continue to trust in Him.”¹⁰² A young

man crying out in despair from exile in Siberia wrote: “what have I done to deserve such a hard punishment? I don’t know, but God knows.”¹⁰³

Peter K. Epp, recalling the tragedies of the 1930s asks: “Did all of that happen merely because the Devil had some perverse desire to play a terrible joke on people? Did God have nothing to say in the matter?” Epp cannot say why God led him on such difficult paths, but he affirms that nothing happens without God.¹⁰⁴ Most of the persons contacted in the course of my research affirmed that it was this faith in God and acceptance of what they saw as His will which helped them to cope and survive the many years of hardship, exile and imprisonment.

Conclusion

Why was the arrest ratio of Mennonites so high? In simple terms, because they were identified as Germans! When calls came to arrest “the usual suspects” in order to fill assigned quotas, Germans—especially in Ukraine, the Volga region and in West Siberia—were usually first on the list. The arrests themselves were not a random operation: they were made on the basis of name lists drawn up by local village officials and “informers.” Not just anyone was taken. For example, when NKVD officials arrived in the Mennonite village of Bahndorf (Memrik) on 14 June 1937 their list of men to be taken apparently included the names of Nikolai Klassen, Jakob Giesbrecht, Gerhard Janzen and Peter Klassen. Peter Klassen was not home at the time, but the NKVD did not arrest just anyone else in order to take his place. Instead, police officials returned two days later and arrested him early on the morning of 16 June.¹⁰⁵

Animosity against Germans in Russia had already surfaced in the 1890s¹⁰⁶ and intensified during World War I, culminating in the notorious Land Liquidation Laws of 1915.¹⁰⁷ Under Bolshevik rule these laws were repealed. Lenin followed a policy of rapprochement with Germany: “both Soviet Russia and Germany were outcasts in the post-Versailles world, and they joined hands naturally for mutual advantage.”¹⁰⁸ Trade agreements were concluded as early as May, 1921 and soon supplemented by secret military negotiations. On 16 April 1922 Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Rapallo, which formed the basis for economic, political and military cooperation over the next decade.¹⁰⁹ This treaty did not apply directly to German Soviet citizens, but the improved political climate contributed to their economic achievements during the 1920s.¹¹⁰

Tensions in German-Soviet relations arose in the years 1929–32, well before Hitler came to power, during Stalin’s dekulakization and collectivization campaign. Germans suffered significant losses during this time, not because they were “Germans” or “Mennonites,” but because for the most part they were prosperous (and therefore branded as kulaks), religious, and anti-Communist. Relatively few Germans joined the Communist Party during the first two decades of Soviet rule. In Ukraine, out of a German population of 393,924 in

1926, only 1,069 were Party members.¹¹¹ The well publicized exodus of Mennonites and other German to Moscow in November, 1929 proved especially embarrassing to Soviet authorities, and the subsequent exile of those families not allowed to emigrate contributed further to poor Soviet-German relations.¹¹²

Relations deteriorated further after the Nazis came to power in January, 1933. Hitler made no secret of his anti-communist stance. Nikita Khrushchev writes: "In his book *Mein Kampf*...Hitler spelled out the aggressive designs he had on the world....He set as his sworn duty the annihilation of Communism and the storming of its citadel, the Soviet Union."¹¹³ Hitler's rise to power provided Stalin with a convenient excuse to spread stories of a vast fascist underground, "a fifth column permeating every pore of Soviet society."¹¹⁴ The result was the arrest of thousands of innocent men and women as alleged fascist agents, spies and saboteurs.

Why were so many shot? Directives from above! Fear that war was imminent! Apparently the NKVD's fear of "fascist" German spies and saboteurs was greater than the need for skilled, hard-working German labourers in the Gulag camps.

Yet the worst was still to come for the Soviet Germans. Within four months after the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 over 640,000 Germans were deported from the European districts of the Soviet Union to Siberia and Central Asia.¹¹⁵ Included were an estimated 8,000 Mennonites from the Molochnaia villages, and thousands more from the Crimea, Caucasus, Arkadak, Zentral, Am Trakt, Alt-Samara and Neu-Samara. Many of those deported—including all men aged 16–60 and women aged 16–45—were subsequently "enlisted" into the Trudarmia, where a large number of Mennonites perished.

Most of the Mennonites in the region west of the Dnieper and about one-half of the Molochnaia villages were spared this fate due to the quick advance of German troops and the occupation of the region by August, 1941. But theirs was only a brief respite. In 1943, as German armies retreated, some 35,000 Mennonites made the Great Trek westward into the Reich. Of these, an estimated 20,000 were later recaptured by the Red Army and "repatriated", that is, forcibly deported, to the Ural region, Siberia and Central Asia.

In many ways, the fate of these deportees was worse than that of the men and women who were taken during the Yezhov years. They were not mercifully shot—theirs was a living hell of cold, disease and starvation which lasted at least until 1956, when most were finally released from internal exile—the *Kommendatura*.

Many aspects of the repression in Mennonite villages require further investigation. Much of the information available now comes from the Mennonite side of the story; more effort needs to be made to learn the other side of the story—to gain access to the files of the former NKVD and other Soviet state organizations in order to determine accurate arrest and death figures, and to try and understand NKVD motives and policies. Above all we must seek to record and remember the names of the victims and to honour their memory.

Notes

This paper is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend and mentor, Dr. George K. Epp.

¹ Boris A. Starkov, "Narkom Ezhov," *Stalinist Terror. New Perspectives*, eds., J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 21–39.

² Roy A. Medvedev, *Let History Judge* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 339.

³ Werner Scharndorff, *Moskaus Permanente Säuberung* (Munich: Günter Olzog Verlag, 1964), 209; citing *Pravda*, 18 July 1937.

⁴ Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, 240.

⁵ Starkov, "Narkom Ezhov," 39; Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, 240ff.

⁶ My research is a continuation of work begun many years ago by George K. Epp. When it became clear last summer that he would not recover from his illness, he entrusted the materials which he had spent a lifetime gathering to my care [including letters, interviews, name lists, personal memoirs, and other documents]. Once they have been organized and catalogued, they will be deposited in the George K. Epp archive at the Mennonitische Forschungstelle, Weierhof, Germany.

⁷ Getty and Manning, *Stalinist Terror. New Perspectives*, 12.

⁸ Walter Laqueur, *Stalin: the Glasnost Revelations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 139.

⁹ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 70; see also, Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror—A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 258.

¹⁰ Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, 239; *Let History Judge*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 455.

¹¹ Conquest, *The Great Terror—A Reassessment*, 485ff.

¹² A.N. Dugin, "Stalinizm," *Slovo* 7, 1990; V.N. Zemskov, "Gulag (Istoriko-sotsiologicheskii aspekt)," *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniia* 6 and 7 (1991). Excerpts and statistics from both articles are cited in René Ahlberg, "Stalinistische Vergangenheitsbewältigung - Auseinandersetzung über die Zahl der GULAG-Opfer," *OstEuropa* 42 (1992), 921–37; as well as in Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934–1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹³ Dugin, "Stalinizm," 26—the text of the letter is given in German translation in Ahlberg, "Stalinistische Vergangenheitsbewältigung," 932.

¹⁴ Dugin, "Stalinizm," 24—cited in Ahlberg, "Stalinistische Vergangenheitsbewältigung," 926f. Ahlberg, 927 also cites Alexander Milchakov's passionate and critical response to Kruitchkov's claims. In *Ve erniaia Moskva* 14 April 1990, Milchakov expresses incredulity at these figures and encourages readers to read the works of Solzhenitsyn and western Sovietologists.

¹⁵ Thurston, *Life and Terror*, 63; see also Alec Nove, "Victims of Stalinism: How many?" *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, 261–274, and Laqueur, *Stalin*, 131–146.

¹⁶ J. Arch Getty, Gábor T. Rittersporn and Viktor N. Zemskov, "Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-war Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence," *American Historical Review* 98 (October, 1993), 1023.

¹⁷ Laqueur, *Stalin*, 139.

¹⁸ Ahlberg, "Stalinistische Vergangenheitsbewältigung," 937; Olga Shatunovskaya, "Fal'sifikacija," *Argumenty i fakty*, 22 (1990).

¹⁹ Population data is found in Nove, "Victims of Stalinism: How many?", 263. Conquest, *The Great Terror – A Reassessment*, 290 writes: "Not less than five percent of the population had been arrested by the time of Yezhov's fall...."

²⁰ Adolf Ehrh, *Das Mennonitentum in Russland von seiner Einwanderung bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin–Leipzig: Verlag von Julius Beltz, 1932), 159, estimates the 1929 population as 118,000; Peter Braun, "Einige Zurechtstellungen zu Dr. A. Ehrts 'Das Mennonitentum in Russland,'" *Mennonitische Blätter* (May, 1932), 53, disputes this figure and claims that a figure of 100,000 is more accurate. Official population figures for the Mennonite villages in the 1930s are unavailable; estimates can be made on the basis of data from the official 1926 census, from census data found in captured German War Documents, and from information provided by former residents. Information for villages west of the Dnieper is found in the Captured German War Documents [GWD] of the Stumpp Sonderkommando; Richard H. Walth, *Strandgut der Weltgeschichte: die Russlanddeutschen zwischen Stalin und Hitler* (Essen: Klartext, 1994) offers a comprehensive analysis of these German War Documents. Portions of these village reports have been translated by J.B. Toews, "Documents on Mennonite Life in Russia, 1930–1940, Part I - Collectivization and the Great Terror," *Work Paper No. 19*, American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, December, 1975, 3–12. Information for the Molochnaia villages is found in the "Dorfkarten" prepared by the German SS in 1942. Census data from 1 February 1926 for Mennonite villages in the RSFSR (population – 44,304), can be found in *Praktischer Landwirt* (May, 1926). Mennonite population figures for Ukraine in October, 1926 (population – 46,830) are given in Ehrh, *Das Mennonitentum in Russland*, 152. Further information, together with the complete namelists of victims will be published in my forthcoming book on the Mennonite victims of the Soviet Inferno.

²¹ Johann Klassen, letter to the author, dated 19 October 1997.

²² Information provided by former residents W.D. Loewen, P.J. Froese, and Mr. Frank Sawatzky.

²³ Dorfbericht "Rosengart," p.9—answer to question XI, 5—in German War Documents (Stumpp Kommando).

²⁴ Information supplied through correspondence with former residents Johann Klassen and Wilhelm Classen.

²⁵ Information supplied through correspondence with former residents Johannes Bergmann, Eliese (Dyck) Quiring, Elisabeth Wiens, Gustav Dyck and David Froese.

²⁶ Information taken from Susanne Isaak, *Das Dorf Zentral. Unser plattdeutscher Heimatort im Gebiet Woronjesh/Russland* (Meckenheim, 1996); and from correspondence with Helena Penner.

²⁷ Information provided by Viktor de Veer is found in the collection entitled "Russia Related Documents," Box 5, Folder 4, No. 1 at the Centre for MB Studies, Winnipeg. Veer cites A. Dietz, "Die NKWD—'Sonderlinie,'" *Rote Fahne* no. 101, 8 Sept. 1990. [note: The newspaper *Rote Fahne* is now known as *Zeitung für Dich*] Veer's material was later published in *Mennoblatt*, 16 Feb. 1992, 3.

²⁸ Larissa Belkovec, "GPU-/NKVD-Dokumente über die Verfolgung von Sibiriendeutschen 1937–38," *Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur der Russlanddeutschen* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1995), 83.

²⁹ The ratio of arrests in German villages appears to be comparable to that in Mennonite villages: based on a comparison of data compiled by the "Sonderkommando Stumpp"—see summary of arrests and population data in Richard H. Walth, *Strandgut der Weltgeschichte*, 365ff—Appendix 16. Getty, Ratterborn and Zemskov, "Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-war Years," 1027–28, confirm that "in comparison with their weight in the general population...Germans [along with Poles, Turmen, Belorussians and Russians]...were over-represented in the [Gulag] camps by 1939; Germans and Poles being especially hard-hit."

³⁰ These and all subsequent figures are based on my own collection of names of victims, to be published in late 1998 under the title *Mennonite Victims of the Soviet Inferno*.

³¹ A comprehensive study of these purges is found in J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges, The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). No specific information on Mennonites in Communist Party, but on Germans in KP see Meir Buchsweiler, *Volksdeutsche in der Ukraine am Vorabend und Beginn des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Gerlingen: Bleicherverlag, 1984), 136.

³² Karl Stumpp, *Bericht über das Gebiet Kronau-Orloff* (Berlin, 1943), "Tafel A" and *Bericht über das Gebiet Chortitza* (Berlin, 1943), 7. The most comprehensive study of this famine is Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³³ Julius Loewen, *Jasykowo, Ein mennonitisches Siedlungsschicksal am Dnjepr* (Winnipeg: Regehr's Printing, 1995), 72.

³⁴ Roberta T. Manning, "The Soviet Economic Crisis of 1936–1940 and the Great Purges," *Stalinist Terror. New Perspectives*, 118, 121; on Mennonite wages during the 1930s see the samples given by Toews "Documents on Mennonite Life in Russia," 12.

³⁵ Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin. Parallel Lives*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), 471.

³⁶ Alex de Jonge, *Stalin and the Shaping of the Soviet Union* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 327.

³⁷ Robert Payne, *The Rise and Fall of Stalin* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 526.

³⁸ n.n., "Das Leben ist jetzt schöner, das Leben ist lustiger!" *Der Bote*, 11 August, 1937, 6.

³⁹ de Jonge, *Stalin*, 249.

⁴⁰ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 467.

⁴¹ [Abram A. Kroeker], "Wie man über Russland und Deutschland urteilt," *Der Bote*, 29 June 1938, 1–2.

⁴² [Anonymous], "Aus dem Kaukasus," *Der Bote* 15 September 1937, 5.

⁴³ [Anonymous], "Aus dem neuen Einlage am Dnjeprostroi," *Der Bote* 11 August, 1937, 5.

⁴⁴ Henry H. Winter, *Ein Hirte der Bedrängten* (Wheatly, ON, 1988); Olga Rempel, *Einer von Vielen: Die Lebensgeschichte von Prediger Aaron P. Toews* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1979).

⁴⁵ George K. Epp, "Politischer Terror und Krieg, 1930–1945: Das Schicksal der Mennoniten in der Sowjetunion," 12, unpublished paper presented at a Symposium in Bechterdissen, Germany, September, 1989.

⁴⁶ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁸ Cited in Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 66.

⁴⁹ Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 302.

⁵⁰ Karl Fast, *Gebt der Wahrheit die Ehre* (Winnipeg: Canzona, 1989), 12.

⁵¹ GWD, "Schönau," 9 - Item XI. 5.

⁵² Interview with Lydia Krahn, Winnipeg, 19 August 1997.

⁵³ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 256.

⁵⁴ Epp, "Politischer Terror und Krieg," 28.

⁵⁵ Cited in Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 63.

⁵⁶ Bertram D. Wolfe, *Khrushchev and Stalin's Ghost* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1957),

134; see also Volkogonov, *Stalin*, 280–89.

⁵⁷ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 177.

⁵⁸ Ronald Hingley, *Joseph Stalin: Man and Legend* (London: Hutchinson, 1974), 254.

⁵⁹ Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934–1941*, 59; Franz Thiessen, *Neuendorf in Bild und Wort* (self published, 1984), 129.

⁶⁰ [Anonymous], “Die Zersetzung in der sowjetrussischen Kommunisten-Partei;” *Der Bote* 21 July 1937, 4.

⁶¹ On the delegation, see Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 230ff.; Lists of Germans shot in Odessa are found in successive issues of *Neues Leben* October, 1991 to March, 1992. [Location: Centre for MB Studies, Box 5, Folder 9, No. 1]

⁶² GWD - Dorfbericht “Burwalde,” 9.

⁶³ [Anonymous] “Aus dem Kaukasus,” *Der Bote*, 15 September 1937, 5.

⁶⁴ [Anonymous], “Aus dem neuen Einlage am Dnjeprostroi,” *Der Bote*, 11 August, 1937, 5.

⁶⁵ GWD - Dorfbericht, “Blumenfeld,” 9.

⁶⁶ GWD - Dorfbericht, “Burwalde,” 9.

⁶⁷ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 287.

⁶⁸ Viktor „encov,” “Die deutsche Bevölkerung am Dnepr im Zeichen des stalinistischen Terrors,” *Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur der Russlanddeutschen* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1995), 15ff. When NKVD officials were tried in 1939 on charges of falsifying evidence against Germans, they admitted under cross-examination that the Ukrainian NKVD Chief Uspenskii had issued directives to arrest *all* Germans—regardless of whether there was any supporting evidence—in order to eliminate any potential support for Nazi German intelligence operations in the region.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷¹ The discussion of this Article is based on Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 60–67; and Franz Thiessen, “1937 war ein besonderes Jahr,” *Der Bote* 15 March, 1995, 5; 22 March, 1995, 5; 29 March, 1995, 5.

⁷² Franz Thiessen, “1937 war ein besonderes Jahr. Mein Weg durch die Gefängnisse und Straflager in der UdSSR,” *Der Bote*—8 part series running weekly from 8 March, 1995 to 26 April, 1995.

⁷³ GWD - Dorfbericht “Osterwick,” 9.

⁷⁴ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, especially Volume Two, Part III, “The Destructive-Labour Camps.” See also Manning, “The Soviet economic crisis, 116–141.

⁷⁵ Peter Epp, *Ob tausend fallen....Mein Leben im Archipel Gulag* (Weichs: Memra Verlag, 1988); Georg Hildebrandt, *Wieso lebst du noch? Ein Deutscher im Gulag* (Frankfurt: Ullstein Verlag, 1993). Isaak W. Reimer’s unpublished memoirs, “Unter dem Schutz des Höchsten: 11 Jahre in der Verbannung,” are located at the Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, Vol. 1160. All three of these men were arrested and sent to the GULag in the 1940s after World War II, but the circumstances they describe are not unlike those of men arrested earlier.

⁷⁶ Information provided by the families of the victims is found in the G.K. Epp files. All of the men executed were later declared innocent of any crime against the state, and rehabilitated: Peter Janzen was rehabilitated on 5 May 1976, the Quiring brothers on 14 June 1989, and Franz Sawatzky on 20 April 1994.

⁷⁷ Bestuzhev-Lada, *Nedelya*, No. 15, 1988; cited in Alec Nove, *Glasnost' in Action. Cultural Renaissance in Russia*. Revised Edition (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 84. See also Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, 340ff. In personal interviews, various people have expressed to me their suspicions

that some denunciations and arrests were indeed motivated by feelings of greed or revenge.

⁷⁸ Čencov, "Die deutsche Bevölkerung," 18.

⁷⁹ Véronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, eds., *Intimacy and Terror: the Soviet Diaries of the 1930s* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

⁸⁰ Franz Hamm, "Ein Jahr Gefängnis," GWD—Dorfbericht "Schönau;" Johann Epp, GWD—Dorfbericht "Chortitza;" Kornelius Epp [father of George K. Epp I], GWD—Dorfbericht "Franzfeld;" David Penner, "Bericht über Adelsheim," GWD - Dorfbericht "Adelsheim." Later accounts are found in Franz Thiessen, "1937 war ein besonderes Jahr," *Der Bote*, 8 March 1995, 5; and Jakob Sawatzky, "Mennist-NKWDist, Eine Kurzgeschichte zum 60. Jahrestag der Verhaftung meines Vaters und fünf anderen Männer am 30. August 1937," *Der Bote*, 2 July 1997, 7 and 7 July 1997, 7.

⁸¹ John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets & Mennonites* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1982).

⁸² Aron A. Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer der jüngsten Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart* (Selbstverlag, 1949, 1954). Karl Fast, *Gebt der Wahrheit die Ehre*; Julius Loewen, *Jasykowo*; Jacob A. Neufeld, *Tiefenwege, Erfahrungen und Erlebnisse von Russland-Mennoniten in zwei Jahrzehnten bis 1949* (Virgil: Niagara Press, n.d.).

⁸³ GWD - Dorfbericht "Schönau," together with personal interviews and correspondence.

⁸⁴ Gerhard Lorenz, *Fire over Zagradočka*, 46, 52.

⁸⁵ Obituary of Heinrich Nickel, *Der Bote*, 12 February 1986, 6.

⁸⁶ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 12ff.

⁸⁷ See references to hunger strikes in GWD - Dorfbericht "Grünfeld" and Dorfbericht "Blumengart." In Germany and Canada there were attempts by Walter Quiring, Adolf Eht and Fritz Senn to establish an "Antibolschewistischer Kampfbund," see *Der Bote* 30 June 1937, 2; 28 April 1937, 4.

⁸⁸ Čencov, "Die deutsche Bevölkerung am Dnepr," 17.

⁸⁹ GWD - Dorfbericht "Osterwick," 9. This report was written by Johann's brother Heinrich Friesen, who served for many years as school teacher in Osterwick.

⁹⁰ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 122.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁹² Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 122.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹⁴ Larissa Belkovec, "GPU-/NKVD-Dokumente über die Verfolgung von Sibiriendeutschen, 1937–38," *Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur der Russlanddeutschen* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1995), 81–84.

⁹⁵ Interview with Maria Rempel, Winnipeg, 9 December 1997.

⁹⁶ GWD - "Schönau." I am grateful to Mr. Karl Fast for his assistance in translating and interpreting this document. I am also grateful to Mrs. Agathe Reimer of Winnipeg for sharing personal information about the Reimer family and her brother-in-law Jakob Peter Reimer.

⁹⁷ GWD - Dorfbericht "Schönau," 9 does not specify the names, these were verified by personal interviews with Mrs. Agathe Reimer and Mrs. Maria Rempel.

⁹⁸ Interview with Lydia Krahn, 19 August 1997.

⁹⁹ [Anonymous], "Aus der Verbannung," *Der Bote*, 10 March 1937, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Jakob Peters, "Autobiographie aus meinem Leben," 7. Unpublished manuscript memoir in the George K. Epp collection.

¹⁰¹ [Anonymous], "Aus dem neuen Einlage am Dnjeprostroj," *Der Bote*, 11 August 1937, 6.

¹⁰² Aron A. Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer* vol. 1, 268.

¹⁰³ [Anonymous], "Briefe aus der Verbannung in Sibirien," *Der Bote*, 14 July 1937, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Epp, "Zu *Der Bote*, Nummer 41 von Heinrich Peters," *Der Bote*, 3 December 1997, 4.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from Johann Klassen (brother to Peter Klassen), 19 October 1997.

¹⁰⁶ Harvey Dyck, "Russian Mennonitism and the Challenge of Russian Nationalism, 1889," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 56 (1982), 307–341.

¹⁰⁷ David G. Rempel, "The Expropriation of the German Colonists in South Russia During the Great War," *The Journal of Modern History* 4 (March, 1932), 49–67.

¹⁰⁸ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 567.

¹⁰⁹ Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *The Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1960), 77.

¹¹⁰ Benjamin Pinkus/Ingeborg Fleischhauer, *Die deutschen in der Sowjetunion* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1987), 163.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹¹² Benjamin Pinkus, *Die deutschen in der Sowjetunion*, 179–86; Gerhard Hildebrandt, "Russlandmennoniten such die Freiheit. Der Aufbruch nach Moskau: Ursachen und Folgenm (1929/1930)," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 52 (1995), 135–150; H.J. Willms, *Vor den Toren Moskaus* (n.p., 1958).

¹¹³ *Khrushchev Remembers*, translated and edited by Strobe Talboit (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1970), 126.

¹¹⁴ Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge* (1973), 340. Buchsweiler, *Volksdeutsche in der Ukraine*, 95–101; 337–341 concludes that there is no evidence to suport claims of such a "fifth column."

¹¹⁵ Pinkus, *Die deutschen in der Sowjetunion*, 311.