

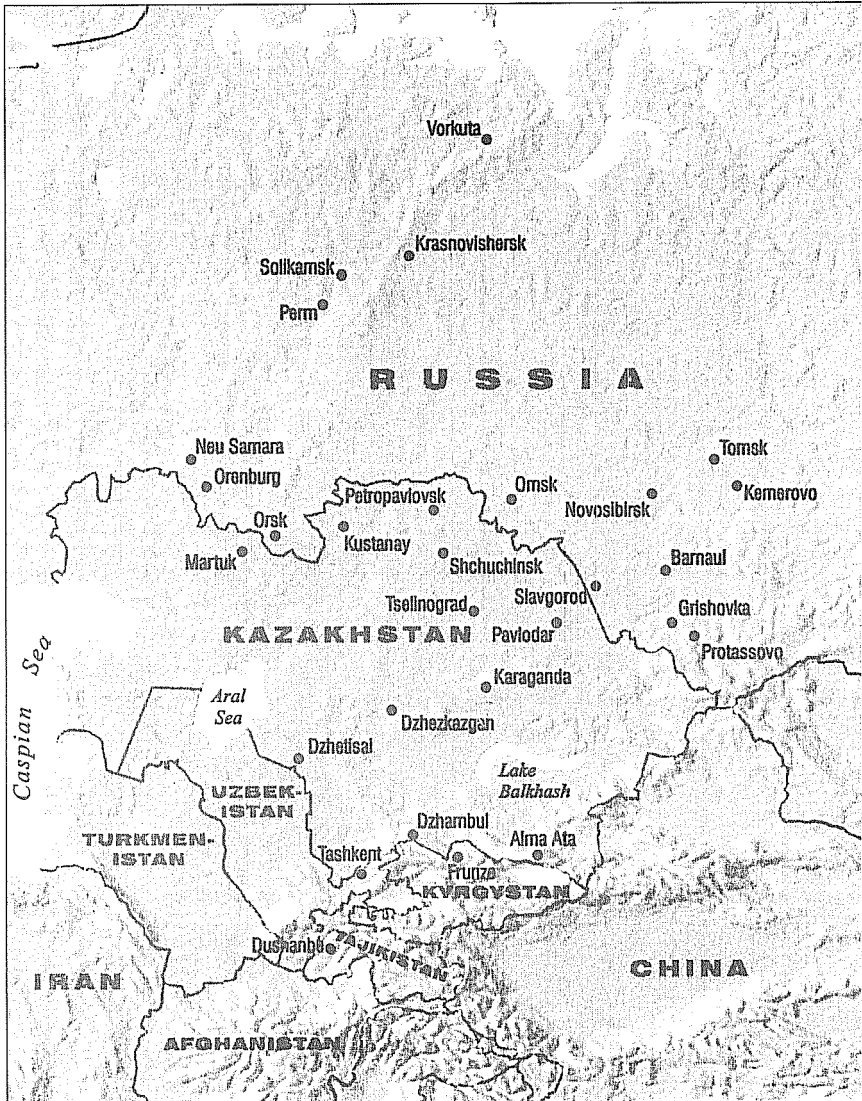
# The Mennonite Schools in Siberia from the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1920s

**Irina Cherkazianova**, *The Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg*  
*Translated by Victor Doerksen*

The modern study of the history and culture of the Russian Germans became possible at the end of the 1980s. At present political and socio-economic questions are given special attention. Cultural and educational problems have not received as much notice. Until recently there was an almost complete lack of publications by Russian authors on Mennonite schools in Russia and, more specifically, in Siberia, with the exception of several articles and my own monograph on the history of German schools in Siberia.<sup>1</sup> Several articles by North American scholars have also been published in the past and recently in Germany Detlef Brandes and Andrej Savin have published a book on Germans in Siberia during Soviet times and it has a chapter dedicated to the topic of education.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, in most of the works that have been published on this topic, old stereotypes of the Mennonites, oversimplified schematic treatments, are still with us, even among the new authors who honestly attempt to reinterpret Russia's past. Thus we find, in an article by Adam and Kurt Wilgelm, the following on the Mennonites of the nineteenth century: "Their education, especially among the Mennonites, was not on a high level: apart from Bible study there was nothing; but they were without exception able to read and write"<sup>3</sup> It is not necessary to contradict

this statement. It is enough to mention the fact that the first Mennonite secondary school, *Zentralschule*, was founded in Orlov (Ohrloff), Molochnaia Colony, in 1822. There Geometry, Geography, and Russian were taught. In 1835 the second Mennonite *Zentralschule* was begun in Halbstadt, Molochnaia Colony. One of the tasks of such schools was the training of their own elementary school teachers, and the Mennonites in the south of Russia were the first among the Germans to have such institutions.



Another scholar, G.K. Krongardt, believes that the reason for a lack of Mennonites with university education in Kirgistan (Kirghizstan) before the Revolution, that is, at the turn of the century, was their strong religious orientation, since they believed that an education beyond the elementary level would awaken free thought and undermine religion.<sup>4</sup> Such conclusions result either from an ignorance of the topic or are drawn by breaking the principle of historicism, without taking account of the conditions which caused the phenomenon. According to Krongardt's logic one should assume that the rest of the rural population (the Mennonites were in the main peasants) was moving toward university education. But in order to attend university one had to have at least a secondary school education, which could be gotten in *gymnasia* (classical high schools) or other urban schools.

We must also consider the problem from within, that is, from the standpoint of the popular mentality of that time. Education is not an end in itself. Its causes lie deep within the socio-economic development of the society, in the demands of the time, and in the mentality of the people. The peasant ethic of the Mennonites was closely connected with their religious worldview; thus it is obvious that the Mennonites were a culturally self-sufficient people. They were able to establish their level of literacy in their own situation. That part of the Mennonite community most practised in word and writing, the teachers, remained faithful to their religious beliefs even with professional training; indeed, they were the best preachers.

Naturally, the elementary schools offered only a basic education, and most were satisfied with this level. But that does not mean that the Mennonites did not strive for further education. At the beginning of the twentieth century they preferred agricultural or business schools, which was related to their particular economic development.<sup>5</sup> There are also known instances in which Mennonites did obtain post-secondary education, including university training. In 1911 at least thirteen Mennonites studied at universities in Petersburg, a number that either declined to six in 1914 or rose to 70 in that year, depending which source one uses.<sup>6</sup> The most well-to-do were able to send their children to European universities.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is not convincing to explain the lack of Mennonites with university education only in terms of religious considerations. But G.K. Krongardt did address a very interesting question, concerning the attitude of the Mennonites to higher levels of education, a question which calls for thorough research.

Today we are faced with an urgent necessity, not only to fill the existing lacunae in the study of Mennonite education with facts, but also to examine the role of the Mennonite school in this community and its effect on the development of the German colonies. The time has come to give up the condemnation of the Germans' religious faith, and to recognize the role of the church and religion in the founding and development of their schools. In crisis situations the Mennonites sacrificed much, but as a rule remained faithful to their religious convictions. Sometimes such sacrifices entailed emigration, as occurred after the changes in military service laws, and the rise of the Soviet power. But it was a great mistake to imagine that the Mennonites were obscurantists, who were afraid of the idea of enlightenment.

The history of the traditional Mennonite school in Siberia is a little more than thirty years old, and that is why the study of this subject is more difficult. Sources used were the materials from the Central and Local State Archives of St. Petersburg, Alma Ata, Novosibirsk, Omsk, Tomsk and Barnaul. In addition documents concerning criminalized teachers and preachers from the archive of the FSB (formerly the domestic branch of the KGB) office in the Omsk region were used. During the period of field research in the German settlements of the Omsk area, we gathered materials concerning particular Mennonite teachers, like D.D. Tissen (Thiessen) and I.I. Wilmsen, for the Omsk State Local History Museum.

The first Mennonites appeared in the Omsk and Tjukalinsk areas at the end of the nineteenth century. In accordance with their faith they were organized in two communions, the Old Mennonites, that is, the Church or Kirchliche Mennonites, and the New Mennonites, that is, the Mennonite Brethren. Among the first settlements was Tschunaevka, which was settled by colonists from the religious community of Molochansk-Rikkenusk, Berdiansk Region, Tauria district, in 1900. It became the center for the Mennonite Brethren the Omsk region, of Tjukalinsk and Petropavlovsk (the settlements Tschunaevka, Kremlevka, Borodinka, Devaterikovka, Friesenhof and Michaelovka).

The second of the oldest communities was the Siberian Churchly (Old) Mennonite Church, which came into being in 1907 in the following settlements: Novoalexandrovka, Mirolubovka, Ekaterinovka, Nikolai-Pol, Lusino and Scharapovka in the Omsk Region, Skvorzovo in the Petropavlovsk area of the Akmolinsker Region, and Neudatschino in the Tomsk government district. The founding document was created under the patronage of the Elder of the Halbstadt and Schenselsker communities. The center was the settlement Novoalexandrovka, and the Elder was Peter Bergen. In 1909 the community built a large school building in Novoalexandrovka, which also served as the central church building.

Between 1910 and 1914 there was a rapid growth of both Mennonite church communities, in the Altai and in Pavlodar. The Pavlodar church community included the Mennonite Brethren living in the Woznesensk and Bodanovsk regions. By December, 1913, the following communities of the Churchly Mennonites had established themselves in the Altai region: Schumanov, Orlov (Ohrloff), Reinfeld and Gruenfeld. On February 19, 1914, the Slavgorod Mennonite church was established. The Mennonite Brethren of the areas Orlov (Ohrloff) and Lenkov joined to form the Kuludinsk Mennonite Brethren Church.

Religious and moral instruction in the schools was under the direct supervision of the religious community (*Gemeinde*). The church elder was the chairman of the school board. This council oversaw the teaching of Religion and German, and kept an eye on the moral attitude of the teachers as well as on the attendance of the students. The teachers combined the activities of teaching and preaching, and the school building also served as the house of worship in Siberia.

The developmental level of the Mennonite schools was substantially higher in all the regions of the Russian empire in comparison with other colonial schools. This pedagogical success had causes deep within the economic and spiritual

developments of that society. The way in which these schools developed was no independent process; there is no point in studying this development with respect to their rules of order. For this reason we have to consider the high level common to the economic and cultural developments in the Mennonite colonies, and not only of the mother colonies, but also of the daughter colonies in Siberia. This accomplishment was conceded by both scholars and officials, pre-revolutionary as well as Soviet.

The Mennonites in Siberia received traditional financial support from the mother colonies; that is, they were better supplied than the Lutherans there, who had come from the region of Povolzje. But the material factor was not always dominant in the life of the settlers. Their traditions and common culture played an important role. The demands on the Mennonite schools were significantly stricter than they were in the Lutheran schools. This followed from the strict lifestyle of these sectarian communities, which entailed stringent demands for ethical behaviour.

The question pursued in this paper may be formulated as follows: to what degree could the Mennonites keep their traditional schools in the new circumstances, and to what degree did the authorities allow this? We will consider one group of facts which is concerned with the attempts of the colonists to organize the education of their children, and another which deals with the position taken by the Tsarist and later the Soviet government in these questions.<sup>8</sup>

The Mennonites from the southern areas of Russia brought their firmly entrenched school tradition with them to Siberia. In a very short time they created an elementary school system. There was a school in every large settlement, while small settlements and single estates combined their efforts in building schools. According to the testimony of P. Rahn, the common teaching of children in the Mennonite settlements around Omsk usually began in the second or third year of the settlement's founding. So, for example, instruction in Tschunoevka (founded in 1900) began in 1902 in the house of the former landowner, Tschunaev. The first teacher was a Mr. Hammer. In Margenau (founded in 1903) David Huebert taught since 1905.<sup>9</sup> According to the memories of the settlers of Novoalexandrovka, schooling began in private homes in 1906, the year of the settlement's founding.<sup>10</sup> Because of the small numbers of students, the lack of a trained teacher, or of a school building, the official registration of a school would be delayed, and that is why we do not find sufficient information about the real state of affairs in the earliest stages. Here the memories of eye witnesses, as they are found in P. Rahn's book, *Mennoniten in der Umgebung von Omsk* published in Winnipeg in 1975, do a valuable service. These tell us that the first instruction of children was private, carried out by colonists who could read and write, or by the parents themselves.

The Mennonite settlements and accordingly their schools, were smaller than those of the Lutherans or Catholics. The Mennonites bore the costs of their schools themselves. They were distinguished by their good equipment and the provision of a paid teacher. This is shown by the data from the Omsk area in the Akmolinsk region. At the end of the school year 1914-1915 the Mennonite schools had between 10 and 32 students, in comparison with the Lutheran schools, where a teacher had

up to 80 students. The exception was the Mennonite school in Novoomsk, where there were 63 students and two teachers.<sup>11</sup> In 1910 the annual pay for a teacher in the Mennonite school was 400-500 rubles, and in the Lutheran schools 120-300 rubles.<sup>12</sup> On January 1, 1913, there were teachers and libraries in all the Mennonite schools of the Omsk region. In the Lutheran schools there were no libraries because of a lack of money.<sup>13</sup> In 1917 there were 54 German schools in West Siberia; 35 of them were Mennonite schools, although the Mennonites were a smaller group than the Lutherans.<sup>14</sup> These facts testify to the great activity of the Mennonites in school matters, to their school tradition, and their endeavour to keep their education independent. None of the Mennonite schools was financed by the state before the Revolution, although they were no longer completely self-administered.

At the time that the Mennonites were moving into Siberia there were profound changes in the administration of all the German schools in Russia; they became subject to the Ministry of Public Education (MfV). Their autonomy was replaced by a strict state control. Technically the colonists had lost their right to appoint their own teachers in 1891, but the Mennonites, as other German-speaking colonists, often refused to comply with it, compelling authorities to fight these "secret" schools where "illegal" teachers taught in the German language. The collision of state and national interests in the area of pedagogy at the end of the century, difficulties in the settlement of new eastern territories, and the political realities of the First World War, all of these affected the character of the founding and development of German schools in Siberia before the Revolution. After the German schools had been subsumed under the MfV, their status was unclear as they set against the Orthodox Church schools. And, although the schools were supported by the communities as before, the Ministry now determined their educational program and language of instruction.

Furthermore, a set of 1906 laws governing the religious activities of the sectarian groups had a direct effect on the Mennonite schools. The decree of October 17, 1906, AOn the Order of the Founding and Activity of the Old-Believers and Sectarian Communities, which permitted the Orthodox sects and the Old Believers, was understood by the local authorities as a decree which forbade all foreign sects, to which the Mennonites were counted. The formal logic of this decree caused great confusion for the registration of the Mennonite churches, since the independence of their faith had really not been called into question since the time of their settlement in Russia. After 1906 they were seen as a Lutheran (ie. foreign) sect, which was not to be registered. This law brought on a confused situation when independent schools were opened for children of this group. These questions about the opening and existence of such schools were not clarified until 1917. In 1915, for example, a certain Jacob Loewen was not permitted to open a school for Mennonite children in the settlement of Nikolaevka in the Barnaul region. The Mennonites were persistent and appealed directly to the MfV. This resulted in a lengthy correspondence between the curator of the School District of West Siberia, the MfV, and the Ministry of the Interior, about the legality of the opening of Mennonite schools. In a letter of January 2, 1916, the Ministry of the Interior

explained the right of the Mennonites to have their own schools to the MfV. Apparently this contributed to the fact that other Mennonite schools in the Barnaul region were officially registered in 1916.<sup>15</sup>

The authorities also used the law concerning the sectarians to forbid religious services in the churches. The tradition of uniting the church and school in one building had existed since the Mennonites had settled in Russia. Now their religious communities were in a difficult situation, since many church members lived at some distance from the church building, from four to ten kilometres. Their gathering in the school buildings was their only possibility of participating in the rituals of the church. For Siberia this problem was exacerbated by the fact that the Mennonites did not live close together as they had in the Ukraine. This problem became so acute that it had to be dealt with at the General Conference of the Mennonite churches of Russia held in the village of Schoensee, Berdiansk, Tauria, from October 26 to 28, 1910.<sup>16</sup>

This policy of the authorities can be seen in the registration of the constitution of the Omsk Mennonite school society, which began in March 1911.<sup>17</sup> The constitution envisioned a complete school system: elementary, kindergarten, trade schools and middle schools. The Mennonites attempted to staff their schools with their own teachers, since the teachers from the mother colonies only came for short terms. To this end the existing Novoomsk school was to become a central school (Zentralschule) with a pedagogical class. But this proposal was not supported by the authorities. A stumbling block was Paragraph 14 of the constitution concerning the appointment of teachers in the schools. The founders tried to maintain their right to propose teachers to the school board, and wanted also to be heard when a teacher was to be dismissed. When the senate examined the complaint of the Mennonites about unjust dealings by the local authorities, it refused to register the constitution because of Paragraph 14. The real basis of this denial was the fear of the authorities of the growing influence of the sectarians. In the report to the senate by the Governor of Akmolinsk he states: A....a society that is purely confessional will doubtless cause harm to the Orthodox population of the area.<sup>18</sup>

This prohibition was caused by a government policy of persecution of foreign cultural institutions. After the failure of the First Revolution in 1905 this policy was pursued even more rigorously. In January of 1910 the chairman of the council of ministers, P.A. Stolypin in a special circular expressed his dissatisfaction with the growing movement of cultural enlightenment among the Anon-Russian" peoples. He suggested to the governors that they deny the registration of Aany foreign organization, including Ukrainian and Jewish bodies" and that they find a way to close those already in existence.<sup>19</sup>

At that time the battle with the so-called Asecret schools" developed. These were schools which either had no official registration or used a different language of instruction than Russian. In light of the mentioned circular of Stolypin the persecution of these schools was a natural consequence. On March 29, 1910 the Governor of Akmolinsk ordered all the German schools existing illegally in the districts of Omsk and Petropavlovsk closed. This order, which was repeated several

times, was sent to the area authorities in April, 1911. As a result the schools on the private property of a certain Friesen family in the vicinity of the settlement Tokuschinskij, in the area of Omsk, along the railway line and in many other places, were closed.<sup>201</sup>

In spite of all the difficulties which were caused by this law on sectarian schooling, the Mennonites in the area of Omsk found ways to open their schools. In 1910 and 1911 Mennonite schools were founded here under the official title: "AEvangelical-Lutheran." But already after a year the settlers started a campaign to rename the schools. The Akmolinsk Director of Public Education and the Curator of the school district allowed them to be renamed as Mennonite schools. From the standpoint of the authorities this was the lesser evil, since the Mennonites would otherwise have had their schools anyway, without access for the authorities.

Behind this formality of the naming of their schools there lay a deeper meaning. The founders and supporters of these schools were exclusively Mennonites. Their children were to have credits for the completion of a Mennonite school; this was important for baptism. Apart from this, Mennonite teachers had a certificate which only entitled them to teach other Mennonites. The "ALutheran" status of the school could invalidate their teaching credentials. The Mennonites also feared the interference of the Lutheran clergy, since the law empowered the church officials to oversee the religious and ethical education of the children. The Mennonites however saw themselves as an independent confession, which had nothing to do with the Lutherans.

With the onset of the First World War the general attack on the German schools in Russia began. In the fall of 1914 students whose parents were German or Austrian nationals were excluded from instruction or not admitted. On December 24, 1914, the general rules concerning the language of instruction in the German schools were changed: all subjects except Religion and the students' Mother tongue, should be taught in Russian. The order of 1907 allowing German as a language of instruction in schools maintained locally (as the Siberian schools were) was revoked. The Circular of the MfV of June 14, 1915, suggested that until July 1, 1915, all German teachers whose Russian was deficient should be replaced by Russian teachers, and where such replacements were not available the school should be closed. On August 18, 1916, the law forbidding German instruction in all schools of the Russian empire as of the beginning of the 1916/17 school year was passed. Instruction in the theological faculty of the University of Jurjev was likewise changed to Russian at the same time.

The War made the relations of the Siberian Mennonites with the authorities even more complicated. The persecution of the illegally existing "secret" schools, the majority of which were Mennonite, increased. Because the people were reluctant to surrender matters like the appointment of teachers and the language of instruction to the officials, they did not register their schools. The Tomsk Director of Schools, for example, reported to the Curator of the School District on the closing of the schools in the eight Mennonite settlements of Altai and on the charges that had been laid against their leaders. In August, 1914, the Curator refused an application



by the teacher P.P. Toews to open a higher level Mennonite school in the village of Slavgorodskoe (Barnaul), saying that “the Mennonites could learn in the governmental schools of the village Slavgorodskoe.”<sup>21</sup>

There was a dramatic development in the story of the Novoomsk School, the only upper level Mennonite school in Siberia. It was practically the central school (*Zentralschule*) and trained its own teachers. Its official opening, approved by the Curator of the region, took place in September of 1910. On October 16, 1911, the new stone structure funded by the colonists, was dedicated. The land had been donated by its owners, I. Isaak, I. Mathis, and P. Friesen. It was a well appointed building with three classrooms, an auditorium, a teacher's room, and apartments for the teachers. The maintenance costs for the school ran to 2000 rubles per year, and the tuition was 25 rubles per student. The school accepted students regardless of their confession. At that time there were some 3000 inhabitants in the village, including 72 Mennonites, 135 Baptists, and 125 Lutherans, while the majority were Orthodox. Children from the outlying German areas also attended there.<sup>22</sup> In 1911 there were, among the 89 students, 50 Mennonites, 6 Orthodox (attending with the permission of their Pastor), 11 Lutherans, 4 Catholics, and 18 Baptists.<sup>23</sup> The teachers were G. Gede (graduate of the *Zentralschule* of Halbstadt on the Molochnaia Colony, and J. Epp (graduate of the *Zentralschule* of Khortitsa).

Already in August, 1911, the Mennonites began to seek the official status of a pedagogical institute for their school, analogous to the existing institutions in the south of Russia, or at least the status of a “higher” or secondary school. The school authorities thought it more practical to found a college for elementary school teachers on the basis of the existing school. Such institutes were opened as of 1912; they were the Russian language government “higher” schools. The Novoomsk school also became one of them in 1914. Johann Mattis was named honorary curator on January 1, 1915.<sup>24</sup>

With the outbreak of the War an anti-German hysteria emerged in Siberia. The Novoomsk school was considered to be an “inner enemy.” The minister of war (*Kriegsgouverneur*), of the area, A.N. Neverov, led the harassment of the school. In a letter of June 13, 1915, to the Minister of Public Education, P.N. Ignatjew, Neverov accused the Mennonites of trying to “germanize” the school.<sup>25</sup> Also, the Russian population could not let their children be educated there because of the high tuition fees. At this time G. Gede was dismissed from his position as principal of the school, and the teacher Kasatkin took his place. Other teachers were likewise replaced by Russian teachers. All that remained was to take the building away from the Germans, and to open a Russian school in its place. It is astonishing to discover a Communist psychology in a Tsarist official: to take the possessions from a well-off neighbour and give them to the poor. Naturally it was much easier to take a finished building, which incidentally had been built without any participation by the state, than to go to the trouble of applying for a government credit for the construction of such a building for the Orthodox population.

The War allowed the officials to do as they pleased. The school was closed in June, 1915, and in August of the same year a Russian school was opened in the

same building. The long, poisonous relationship of the officials to the Mennonites in that area, fed by the fear of a spread of these "sects," ended with the liquidation of one of the best national schools in Siberia. The Mennonites declined to support the school and many students left.<sup>26</sup> While in the fall of 1914 there had been five classes and 228 students,<sup>27</sup> after the change in the fall of 1916 there were three classes and 104 students.<sup>28</sup> During the Civil War and in the first years of the Soviet era the school was used to quarter the military.

Documents of the FSB allow us to trace the fate of the principal of this school, Gerhard Iwanowitsch Gede. He was born in Liebenau, Berdiansk in 1880. He was a teacher from 1899 to 1924, and a preacher as well. In 1916 he was banished to the Tobolsk region because of a conflict with the Curator of the School System regarding the Novoomsk school. He was imprisoned twice in the Soviet period, in 1929 and 1937. On the first occasion he was sentenced to five years as part of the emigration organization. After his return he was active as a librarian in the Omsk Scientific Institute for Veterinary Research, and taught German for teachers. After his second arrest he was shot on December 10, 1937. In 1989 he was rehabilitated, when the State Prosecutor declared his trials to have been based on false charges (decisions of April 28 and June 20, 1989).<sup>29</sup>

During the First World War the fate of the German schools was decided by the degree of loyalty to the state on the part of the Mennonites. At that time the planned opening of government schools, whose language of instruction was Russian, was continued. Such schools were only opened in Lutheran and Catholic settlements. None of the Mennonite schools was nationalized, but the Mennonites were forced into a compromise with the authorities in order to maintain their schools at all. Some schools were closed while some others were registered. After the fall of 1914 and in 1915 some five new schools were opened in Mennonite settlements in the Omsk area. In Altai this was only possible in the school year 1915/1916. Since the Mennonite schools did not have the privileges of the government schools their teachers had to go to war. In 1917 all ten schools in the Pavlodar area were closed since the teachers had been drafted for war service. Six of sixteen schools in Altai were also closed. Only in the Omsk area could the Mennonite schools continue their work.

The development of the Mennonite schools in Siberia took place in complicated circumstances, which became worse due to the irreparable breach between the population and the officials. The flawed nature of the laws concerning sectarians, and the unclear status of the German schools in the Empire exacerbated the material and financial difficulties accompanying relocation to new areas. In spite of this the Mennonites created a network of elementary schools in Siberia and attempted to complete their system with higher schools and training institutes. They succeeded in maintaining their own higher school for a number of years and beginning to train their own teachers. But they had to compromise with the authorities in allowing the Russian language as the language of instruction. This was done with the goal of keeping their school and with it the religious teaching of their tradition, since the religious education was the key to preparing their children for life. Not until the end

of the Tsarist era and the cancellation of the national and confessional limitations by the provisional government did the Mennonites of Siberia open higher schools in the settlements of Margenau and Slavgorod.

In spite of all the persecution and prohibitions the Mennonite schools of Siberia maintained a higher level than the other German schools. In our opinion the most important indicator is the level of literacy. According to the census of 1897 the Mennonites had literacy rates of 65.9% in European Russia, 69.1% in Middle Asia (72.9% of men and 65.25% of women). After living in Siberia for twenty years these figures had hardly changed. The data of 1920 show a high level of literacy among the settlers in the Mennonite area of Orlov (Ohrloff) in Slavgorod, previously Barnaul. Those who could read and write made up 68.5% (68.8% for the men and 68.2% for the women).<sup>30</sup> The attempts by the Siberian Mennonites to open a higher, pedagogical school to train their own teachers, speak for their level of culture, but also for a growth in quality of the whole school system.

The development of Mennonite and all the German schools in the Soviet period was at least as difficult as it had been before the Revolution. If the question before 1917 had been the language of instruction, it now became the matter of religious instruction. In 1918 two basic laws were passed which determined the further course of events. They were: the order of the Public Education Commissariat "On the Schools of National Minorities," and the decree "On the Separation of Church and State and of School and Church." All national minorities were allowed to use their mother tongue at all levels. The new law settled the main conflict in the national schools before the Revolution, which had been thoroughly russified. The provisional government had made a first step in this direction, with the decree of March 20, 1917,<sup>31</sup> allowing the use of the mother tongue in all national private schools. The Soviet government went a step further: the mother tongue was made equal with the official language and allowed on all levels. At the same time the decree about the separation of school and church was put into force. Its enforcement was carried out without regard for the national characteristics of the Germans, for whom religion had always been an integral part of life, with the church being a place of refuge for language, culture and tradition in difficult times. The speedy and violent application of the decree on the separation of church and state brought the German population into open and lasting confrontation with the new order.

The greatest opposition to this decree was rendered by the Mennonites of the Slavgorod area. Due to their steadfastness the school authorities were forced to allow religious instruction in the sectarian schools until the end of the 1919/20 school year. In spite of this temporary concession, the student enrolments dropped already in March of 1920; their parents did not allow their children to attend a "godless" school. The people no longer asked the school officials for integration into the state system in the hope of preserving their independence. Its financial independence did not protect the school from either the Revolution or incursions of the state in the Soviet period. The director of the German section of the Education department in Slavgorod reported on the difficulties of the work with the German population in October, 1920: "Since the population consists almost entirely of

Mennonites who hold tenaciously to their faith, the work of our department is very hard. To implement Soviet principles in the German schools remains an unfulfilled dream....The German school may without a doubt be called anti-Soviet, although the Germans with their typical tact do not show this."<sup>32</sup>

The most painful question for the Mennonites concerned the position of the teacher. A tradition had been established that teachers combine their work in the schools with preaching. The teacher was a very respected member of the settlement, one of the leading persons in the church. The new [Soviet] power however took aim at the Christian teachers and sought to replace them with atheists. The special decree of the Public Education Commissariat of March 3, 1920 forbade access to the schools for the clergy. A citizen could only teach after agreeing not to teach religion. The German population categorically rejected the atheistic teachers who had been named by the authorities. At the beginning of the school year 1920/21 fifty schools in the Slavgorod district were in danger of being closed because of a lack of suitable teachers. Seeing no possibility of overcoming this Mennonite resistance, the Slavgorod Education Department decided to close all the schools which would not separate themselves from their churches. This meant closing all the German schools. Attempts to plant the Young Pioneer and Komsomol movements in the German schools failed completely. The first Pioneer groups in German schools only appeared in 1924, and then only in the Lutheran settlements.

Public education suffered from serious material shortages in the early 1920s, which led to a marked decline in the public school system. The founding of contract schools supported by the constituents was one solution. But not all German settlements had the possibility of supporting a school. At the beginning of the school year 1924/25 only twelve of seventeen Lutheran settlements offered to support a school and its teacher, and this only in part. Contract schools were mainly opened in the Mennonite settlements, and thus we should consider this as a problem of the Mennonite schools.

In the school year 1924/25 the Mennonites in the Omsk region supported fifteen schools and fifteen teachers, at a cost of 7933 rubles.<sup>33</sup> The Omsk and Slavgorod chapters of the AMLV, the *Allrussischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftsverbands* (All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union), in whose constitution there was a special paragraph on the support of education, supported the schools substantially. It is interesting that the Omsk chapter of the society was first led by the teacher Aron Rempel from Marganau, who was replaced in December, 1925, by the farmer J. A. Epp, who had been a teacher in the Novomsk school.

The relative independence of the Mennonites in the school question bothered the authorities, because it was their belief that the people supported teachers whose ideas and views escaped them. Shortly after their founding the attempt was made to reduce their number by integrating them into the state system. On August 10, 1927, the Public Education Commissariat (NKP) sent a secret letter to the Education Departments of several districts on "the quite abnormal" situation in most of the German contract schools. The NKP was unhappy that the activities of these schools was not being supervised, that these schools were without curricula and using old

textbooks, and that instruction sometimes took on a religious character. In order to correct this it was suggested that part of the expense should be carried by the state. To this end the teachers were subjected to examination and [many] dismissed. In the school year 1927/28 there were only nine such schools left in the Omsk district.<sup>34</sup>

Faced with the impossibility of teaching their children the people spontaneously organized schools for reading and writing. They were supported by the colonists, and the teachers were recruited from among pensioned teachers and preachers. The people gladly accepted such a form of instruction, one not "infected by atheism and Communism." The Mennonites began propagating the advantages of these schools, but the authorities closed down these attempts.

Their dissatisfaction with the condition of the schools in the colonies and with the growing censure of religious instruction, and the persecution of the former teachers, all this combined to lead to a boycott by the Mennonites of the Soviet schools, and later became the grounds for their emigration. In the All-Mennonite Conference of January, 1925, a compromise was suggested, namely, to make their schools neither atheistic nor religious, but neutral. "a neutral territory, where knowledge may be gained without propaganda for or against religion." The Congress demanded freedom for the teacher in his/her private life, and the right to decide whether to participate in the life of the church or not. The Soviet government did not accept this and the atheistic work increased.

After the Congress there were conferences at various places. In March, 1925, three independent conferences with 150 delegates from 65 German colonies took place initiated by the Slavgorod district committee of the All-Russian Communist Party of Bolsheviks. The stormiest discussions concerned education and emigration. Because of the lack of schools only 27% of the children of school age were being instructed. The Germans put the question about appointing their own teachers at their own cost, which would make the schools viable again. They demanded that the local authorities be ordered not to boycott any school or teacher supported by the churches and working with the permission of the school boards, without a precise examination. The ensuing dialogue between the Mennonites and the authorities was broken off and turned into an open persecution.

At the end of 1926 and early in 1927 there were a number of Party and Government decrees, which for all practical purposes prohibited the further existence of Mennonite church communities in the country. In October 1926, the AMLV was liquidated, and in November the mass emigration to Canada was forbidden. The order of the Central Committee of the UKP (B), the All-Russian Communist Party of the Bolsheviks, "On Sectarianism" of April 7, 1927 forbade the churches to maintain any economic or cultural organizations. The activities of the preachers was limited to the church, and the discussion of economic, political and cultural questions was no longer allowed in their meetings. At the same time the persecution of the "secret, religious" schools was increased. After the prohibition of emigration the Sovietization of the German colonies proceeded apace, and the schools lost their uniqueness.

The activity of the Margenau school with its pedagogical character, deserves

special attention. It was opened in the fall of 1917. At the beginning of the school year 1920/21 the fifth pedagogical class was opened, due to the efforts of the Mennonite school union. The teacher, Aron Abramovitch Rempel, was one of five members of the Presidium of the First Siberian Congress of German School Workers, which met in Omsk in June, 1921. One of the matters discussed at the Congress was the creation of centrally based advanced courses for German teachers on the model of the Margenau school.<sup>35</sup> The courses were however not created; the teachers had to travel to Moscow, Leningrad or Saratov. But the school in Margenau became a center for methodology for the teachers in the districts of Omsk and Petropavlovsk, and regular conferences took place there. Since 1925 the school was the only German nine-year institution with a pedagogical class in Siberia. Since such a pedagogical school was needed, this school succeeded in filling the need. Every year up to twenty-five graduates were appointed to village schools in the region.

At the elementary and middle schools instruction was in German, and Russian was taught as well. Only in the upper levels were both languages used. There was also a methods course and a pedagogical practicum at an elementary school. There the school leaders and curators had regular master classes. In the report of the Public Education Department of the district of Omsk on the second half of the school year the activity of the school was given high praise: "The organization of the work in the higher school at Margenau is satisfactory and can play a great role for the schools of the national minorities in the matter of teacher training."<sup>36</sup> This school had experienced teachers, who came from the mother colonies. Among them were the representatives of the teacher family Wilmsen (Maria Ivanovna, Ivan Ivanovitch, Petr Ivanovitch), who had worked in Karasan and Spat (Crimea) before the Revolution.<sup>37</sup>

In the first years the school was supported by the [Mennonite] Society; not until 1923 was it supported by the state. At this it was actively supported by the ALMV. Apart from the school building, there was a residence, three teachers' quarters, and a parcel of land of more than 60 *desiatins* (65 hectares or 162 acres). On January 5, 1924 the school building burned down, destroying the inventory, equipment and the school library. According to the decision of the Society reconstruction was begun the same year. From the financial means of the Omsk chapter of the Mennonite AMLV (6147 rubles) a two-storey wooden building in Omsk was purchased and physically moved to Margenau in 1926.<sup>38</sup> In 1927-28 after reconstruction the school had five classrooms, an auditorium and one room for the teachers.

The growing struggle to liquidate the Mennonite AMLV, the increasing persecution of the believers and, later, the opposition to the German emigration had an unmistakable effect on the history of the school. By December of 1925 the German Department of the Party Committee in Omsk suggested that measures be taken against the contract schools of the Mennonites. The first of these was the demand to close the higher school in Margenau.<sup>39</sup> The district committee misstated the facts when it asserted in its report that the poor would not be able to send their children to Mennonite schools, and that the support of the Society was only for the

well-to-do. The record of the delegate meeting of the Omsk chapter of the Mennonite AMLV of December 16, 1926 witnesses to the contrary. The question about how its proceeds would be divided was answered as follows: 5% were given to the account of the poor fund of the district committee, 3% were used to support needy children of the Margenau school, and 2% went to Society members who had school-age children.<sup>40</sup> At the beginning of 1928 the secretary of the German Department, who belonged to the Siberian Party Committee, Schamberg, advocated "setting the school right with an iron fist" because it "teaches its students to be kulaks." The school was allowed to stay in operation, but it was withdrawn from the support of the Mennonite Society.<sup>41</sup>

After 1928 students were admitted according to class principles, which denied Mennonites entrance. During the year 1928/29 there were 169 students in the school, none of them local. If the school had previously been supported by the more well-to-do in the population, its only hope now was in state stipends for the poorest. The money did not come on time nor in sufficient quantity. The school principal, N. Bartel, reported in his letter to the district Party committee of November 19, 1929: "Until now the higher school of Margenau has not received the stipends. As late as August the District Education Department promised 3000 rubles, but no money has arrived. The school cannot exist without stipends. The fact is that the school has no local students; all the children are strangers. Without help from the state they are in difficulty. The school has a canteen. There the children of small farmers and day labourers used to eat party supported by the more well-to-do. Since many students from the latter category have emigrated, the situation of the poor has become worse. In total we have 14 children of day labourers and 17 children from poor families. The withholding of the stipends will lead to the closing of the school."<sup>42</sup>

The great changes made in the school of Margenau, affecting the material and social conditions of the students, as well as the loss of credit for the pedagogical center and the use of Russian as a language of instruction, all these changed the character of the school. It lost its distinctive place and meaning for the preservation of German culture in Siberia.

Toward the end of the 1920s the German schools of Siberia lost their leading position among the national schools. While they had claimed the first place in student numbers in 1911, by 1927 they had slipped to the sixth place. The main reason for this was the Soviet school policies, which were based on principles of secularity and class-consciousness. This led inescapably to a conflict between the German population and the authorities, and to the destruction of the tried and true pedagogical tradition. This confrontation hindered the development of the national school. Further changes in the national school movement led to the unification of schools of all kinds. If the Mennonites before the Revolution had attempted to develop their schools in terms of quality, then their only goal under the Soviet authority was to preserve their schools, which was their means of preserving their spiritual and cultural heritage.

In 1938 schools of all particular nationalities were prohibited in the entire country. The order of the Organization Office of the Central Committee of the All-

Russian Communist Party of Bolsheviks of January 24 "On the Reorganization of the Schools of National Minorities" allowed only Russian language instruction. Corresponding resolutions were passed by the local bodies. In the Altai region the schools were reorganized by order of the District Party Committee of February 13, 1938. In that document it was emphasized that enemies of the people were artificially creating schools of the national minorities and thereby distorting the nationality policies of the Party.<sup>43</sup> In the region of Altai alone 87 schools were reorganized, most of which had at one time belonged to the Mennonites.<sup>44</sup> And, although the schools were officially closed in 1938, they had in fact been liquidated much earlier; they had lost their unique character at the beginning of that decade.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> L.S.N. Tutik. *Shkolnoie obrazovanie v nemetskikh i mennonitskikh koloniakh Ekaterinoslavskoy gubernii (konets XI<sup>III</sup> – pervaya polovina XIX veka): Voprosy germanskoy istorii. Nemtsi v Ukraine* (Dnepropetrovsk, 1996): 65-76; I. Cherkazianova, *Semya Neufeld-Willmsen-uchiteley mennonitskikh shkol: Problemy arkheologii, istorii i metodiki prepodavaniya* (Omsk, 1996):160-171; I. Cherkazianova, *Nemetskaya natsionalnaya shkola v Sibiri* (Moscow, 2000). Unfortunately in the monograph by N. E. Vashkau (Waschkaus), *Shkola v nemetskikh koloniyakh Povolzhya* (Volgograd, 1998) the Mennonite schools of this region are not mentioned. And yet it is well known that in the 19th century 26 Mennonite colonies were founded in the Samara District.

<sup>2</sup> See: Adolf Ens, "Mennonite Education in Russia," in John J. Friesen, ed., *Mennonites in Russia: Essays in the Honour of Gerhard Lorenz* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989): 75-98; Gerhard Fast, *In den Steppen Sibiriens* (Rosthern, SK: J. Hesse, 1957) (Fast was a teacher in Siberia before World War I). An important book that argues some of the same points as my article is the following: Detlef Brandes and Andrej Savin, *Die Sibiriendeutschen im Sowjetstaat 1919-1938* (Essen: Klartext, 2001). Hans Werner is acknowledged for suggesting these bibliographical entries.

<sup>3</sup> A. Wilhelm and K. Wilhelm, *Migratsiya nemtsev v Rossiyu // Feniks* (Almaty, 1998), 1 22: 176.

<sup>4</sup> G.K. Krongardt, *Nemtsi v Kirgistanе: 1880 – 1990* (Bishkek, 1997): 83-84.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in 1915 146 students were enrolled in the Land Survey School that had been founded on 1 June 1919 in Omsk: this included 131 Orthodox, 10 Catholic, 3 Lutheran and 2 Mennonites, Central Archives of the Republic of Kasachstan (henceforth ZGARK). F. 393. Ip. 1. D.111. L. 15 – 16.

<sup>6</sup> W. Quiring and H. Bartel H., *Als Ihre Zeit Erfüllt War: 150 Jahre Bewänderung in Russland* (1963): 185, suggests that there were six students in 1914, but Ens, "Mennonite Education in Russia," notes that there were 70 students in 1914 and that by 1917 130 had graduated from various universities.

<sup>7</sup> The grandfather of the author of these articles, W.W. Janzen, born in the village of Silberfeld in the District of Alexandrowskij, Gouvernement Ekaterinoslaw, studied at the beginning of the twentieth century in Leipzig and Vienna.

<sup>8</sup> For another account on this theme see: Brandes and Savin, *Die Sibiriendeutschen im Sowjetstaat*.



- <sup>9</sup> P. Rahn, *Mennoniten in der Umgebung von Omsk* (Winnipeg, 1975): 153 and 190.
- <sup>10</sup> State Archives of the District of Omsk (henceforth GAOO). F. R-318. Íp. 1. D. 491. L. 171.
- <sup>11</sup> State Archives of the District of Tomsk (henceforth GATO). F. 126. Íp. 2. D. 2467. L. 517 íb. – 518.
- <sup>12</sup> GAOO. F. 8. Íp. 1. D. 6á. L. 54 – 98.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* D. 7. L. 81íb.
- <sup>14</sup> Calculated by the author. See: GATO. F. 126. Íp. 2. D. 2467.
- <sup>15</sup> Russian State Historical Archives (henceforth RGIA). F. 733. Íp. 186. D. 2328. L. 12, 20, 29.
- <sup>16</sup> *Wunsch- und Berichtsschreiben der Mennonitengemeinden* (a1910, no place).
- <sup>17</sup> ZGARK. F. 369. Íp. 1. D. 2966.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* L. 41.
- <sup>19</sup> RGIA. F. 1284. Íp. 190. D. 86. L. 43.
- <sup>20</sup> ZGARK. F. 369. Íp. 1. D. 9137. L. 6-7, 16, 23.
- <sup>21</sup> GATO. F. 126. Íp. 2. D. 2467. L. 208.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* L. 132.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* L. 126.
- <sup>24</sup> *Der Zirkular im Schulbezirk Westsibirien*, 5 (1915): 337.
- <sup>25</sup> RGIA. F. 733. Íp. 182. D. 89. L. 33 – 34.
- <sup>26</sup> *Das Notizbuch des Schulbezirks Westsibirien*, (Tomsk, 1916): 482.
- <sup>27</sup> RGIA. f. 733. Íp. 183. D. 196. L. 64 ob.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* D. 221. L.33.
- <sup>29</sup> Archives of the FSB: Aministration of the District of Omsk (henceforth AUFSBOO). D. P-12017 (1929 á.); P-9538 (1937 á.)
- <sup>30</sup> Calculated by the author. Results of the 1920 census in the Omsk District. Edition 2: Omsk, 1923: 94.
- <sup>31</sup> *Das Zirkular im Schulbezirk Odessa*, 4/5, April/May (1917): 154-157.
- <sup>32</sup> GAOO. F. R – 318. Op. 1. D. 101. L.16.
- <sup>33</sup> State Archives of the District of Novosibirsk (henceforth GANO). F. R-61. Op. 1. D. 807. L. 2.
- <sup>34</sup> Document Centre for the Modern History of the District of Omsk (henceforth ZDNIOO). F. 7. Op. 4. D. 298. L. 29 ob.
- <sup>35</sup> GANO. F. P-1. Op. 9. D. 82. L. 62.
- <sup>36</sup> GAOO. F. R-318. Op. 1. D. 225. L. 46.
- <sup>37</sup> The Wilmsen family is linked by direct family relations to Peter Jakowlewitsch Neufeld, the founder of the Mennonite publishing house in Halbstadt, Molochnaia Colony. For more on this family see: I. Cherkazianova, *Senya Neufeld-Wilmsen – uchiteley mennonitskikh shkol: Problemy arkhologii, istorii i metodiki prepodavaniya* (Omsk, 1996): 52-62.
- <sup>38</sup> GANO. F. R-61. Op. 1. D. 846. L. 88; ZDNIOO. F. 7. Op. 1. D. 4. L. 110.
- <sup>39</sup> ZDNIOO. F. 7. Op. 1. D. 4. L. 110 ob.
- <sup>40</sup> AUFSBOO. D. P-7150. T. IV. L. 248.
- <sup>41</sup> A. Savin, *Borba za budushchee. Nemetskiye skoly Sibiri i politika sovetisatsii koloniy v 1920-e gody // Rossiyskiye nemtsy. Problemi istorii, yazyka i sovremennogo polozeniya* (Moscow, 1996): 419

<sup>42</sup> GAOO. F. 28. Op. I. D. 280. L. 322.

<sup>43</sup> Centre for Archival Holdings of the Region of Altai (henceforth ZHAFAK). F. P-1. Op. I. D. 23. L. 175.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* D. 180. L. 7