
Something About the *Selbstschutz* of the Mennonites in South Russia (July, 1918–March, 1919)

Bernhard J. Dick

Translated and Edited by Harry Loewen and Al Reimer
University of Winnipeg

Search into days gone by —
search from one end of heaven
to the other . . . " Deut. 4:32

The Soviet government, weak and inexperienced, was completely unable to maintain law and order in the huge Russian empire. Vicious mobs of anarchists moved through the countryside. Any ex-convict with low, immoral and murderous instincts now had the opportunity to become the leader of a gang. Robbing and killing, such gangs moved about and molested both German and Russian estate owners, factories and mills and then, all too soon, also the Mennonite mother and daughter colonies. For about half a year we were exposed to the despotism of these bandits. Even then the thought of an emergency *Selbstschutz* became strong among many Mennonites. Quite often we heard men saying: "To rob my possessions is one thing — but they won't touch my wife or my daughter. Then I'll grab the axe I keep handy for that purpose." I was also told about revolvers and other protective weapons which were kept ready for such emergencies. One might ask why [these weapons] were not used. Quite simple — it was impossible. The bandits always grabbed the men first. At first the men were severely tortured in order to obtain money, gold, silver and other valuables — if such were still available — and then they were either killed or tied up helplessly. After the bandits had robbed the house, the women were locked up, and victimized. Inconceivably sad but so true! And so the idea of a *Selbstschutz* was nourished and came to fruition. And [was it to be] the axe or the revolver? As mentioned before, in almost all cases defense was made impossible.

Hence, only rarely did our people kill any of the bandits prior to the organization of the *Selbstschutz*. Even then it was not always a matter of lack of trust in God, but neither was it a matter of absolute nonresistance [among our people]. In spite of what happened, we should today still judge the actions of our men and brothers of that time with a great deal of moderation and restraint.

The sympathetic reader of this account will no doubt sense that I very much desire to clarify two things: First, that the temptation to form an emergency *Selbstschutz* did not arise suddenly overnight but grew [in our men] gradually through months of unbearable and catastrophic experiences and unprecedented terror. Secondly, that according to the minutes of the general conference held at Lichtenau [in July, 1918], and according to the [known] position of individual faithful brethren total nonresistance had its representatives in almost every village, even though they often had to suffer scorn and ridicule and, in exceptional cases, mistreatment and beatings [at the hands of fellow Mennonites].

Then came a short respite, during which tears and repentance were turned into expressions of gratitude and joy. Following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, March 3, 1918, signed by Germany and Soviet Russia, the German military occupied the Ukraine and remained there until October, [1918]. This was a most welcome period of peace, a breathing space sent by God. Not always and not in all cases was the conduct of these German soldiers commendable and inoffensive . . . and yet through their courageous, bold actions against the Anarchists, the first flickers of the *Selbstschutz* were fanned among our men into a blazing fire as never before. "These are real men, all right, they aren't afraid, they keep on going, they help us even though they don't know us." Thus people talked, and the idea of a *Selbstschutz*, at first so despised, received a strong impetus.

Because of the revolutionary unrest in Germany itself, the German military was recalled from Russia and we were now exposed to new terrors at the hands of the [Nestor] Makhno bandits. The time had come for the establishment and organization of the *Selbstschutz*.

The die was cast. The robber gangs which now surrounded [our villages] made quick action necessary. The German officers who had remained behind and a few Russian [officers] who had ample weapons (urged us to act). Hastily, a three-day general conference with regard to this issue was convened in the village of Lichtenau (from June 30 till July 2, 1918). It was the view of many that the conference achieved nothing. I too was present, and as a 23-year-old young man suffering great mental anguish [Gewissensnot], I would so much have liked to receive some help. The vague resolutions [passed at this conference] did not call for a condemnation of the man who felt compelled to join the *Selbstschutz*, but at the same time requested that the conscience of the so-called total

nonresister be respected. Thus, the decision was left up to the individual, and many heavy bouts of conscience were fought in those days by both believers and nonbelievers [i.e., in the *Selbstschutz*]. It is deplorable that our leading men at that time could not arrive at a clearer course [of action]. Whether it was the "Cossack," or the "most welcome German occupation force," or the *Selbstschutz*, where was our absolute nonresistance if we allowed ourselves to be protected and defended by others?

As mentioned, when the German troops withdrew, all law and order vanished and things became worse than before, as the more or less orderly Bolshevik armies from the north had not as yet moved into the Ukraine. Helpless and defenseless, we were exposed to the horrible reality of an unprecedented, bestial anarchy that expressed the basest human instincts. In our villages and communities there were now two opposing camps. There were hardly any meetings or gatherings in neighborhood communities, in young men's groups, Bible study groups, village administrative offices, and in Mennonite get-togethers, where the issues related to the *Selbstschutz* or nonresistance were not discussed. Our best leading men in the churches, schools, and colonial administrations became more and more divided on account of this burning issue. Also, the three-day-long conference mentioned above had provided little if any clarity in the matter. Yet the officers [of the White Army] in Berdjansk, who were prepared to help us, waited anxiously for more definite answers from the conference and from the Mennonite community generally. The eight Lutheran villages (Prischieb) lying north of the Molochnaya, were wholly united and without any pangs of conscience were prepared to join our *Selbstschutz*, pressing and urging us to make up our minds. Our people, however, vacillated. There were those who with Brother Benjamin [H.] Unruh in the lead considered our nonresistance as a mere tradition and pointed out how Abraham of old rescued Lot militarily, how David had killed the giant Goliath, Samson the Philistines, etc. Then there were also those who with Brother B. B. Janz in the lead advocated a strict nonresistance based on the Word of God of the New Testament, on Jesus' teaching, life, suffering and death as the almighty Son of God.

Then, at special meetings in the villages of Rueckenau, Gnadenfeld, Halbstadt, Alexanderthal and others, the *Selbstschutz* was organized, often with assistance from the German officers. At these meetings the "over-pious" and "cowardly" nonresisters were criticized, and that often in a most uncharitable manner. Those Mennonites who had fled to the villages from their estates outside the colonies also affirmed, as far as I could see, the *Selbstschutz* and thus had a much too one-sided influence on teachers, ministers, and colonial administrators. Many of these refugees had not only lost their possessions, but had also witnessed the most terrible cruelties committed against their loved ones. They were now,

quite frankly, obsessed with thoughts of vengeance. And who could hold this against them? I certainly could not. I could, thank God, also name many others who thought and felt otherwise: "Love your enemies; bless those who curse you; do well to those who, etc." Yet how difficult it was! But then the latter had not experienced what [the victims of terror] had.

It was also characteristic of those days when the individual had to make a decision one way or another that the more prosperous farmers were generally more in favour of the *Selbstschutz* than the landless and the poor [among the Mennonites]. Whether there was a significant difference in attitude between the various church groups, I cannot say. Although the two Benjamins [Unruh and Janz] had different views on the *Selbstschutz* at the Lichtenau conference, they both belonged to the Mennonite Brethren Church. While Minister David Janzen of Rudnerweide and other *Aelteste* of the Mennonite Church warned people against the *Selbstschutz*, B. [H.] Unruh, the teacher of religion in the *Kommerzschule* and an M.B., was together with his students a leader [in the *Selbstschutz* movement] and served later with Jakob H. Janzen of the Mennonite Church as chaplain in the *Selbstschutz*.

So much for individual names. In both camps there were believers and nonbelievers [that is, in the *Selbstschutz*], daredevils and cowards, and of course the weak in faith and the indifferent ones who without much reflection went along with the others. Others again experienced much anguish. There was, for example, a thirty-year-old sincerely devout married man, a certain H. P., who told me that it had become quite clear to him where his duty lay when he saw in Halbstadt the first abused women from Prischieb, who were bleeding and whose breasts had been cut off. His one and only thought was: "I've got to get home and grab a rifle."

It was unfortunate that the initial actions of the *Selbstschutz* — both the skirmishes in the Russian village of Chernigovka [Dec. 6, 1918] as well as the liberation of Blumenfeld — were outright attacks and not mere defensive actions. They have to be condemned. The details of the *Selbstschutz* actions against the bands of Nestor Makhno are well preserved in the historical writings . . . There were also reports in our weeklies in the first years of our settlement in Canada, although these reports were often quite one-sided and expressed [a great deal of] intolerance.

Now a brief account of my own experiences in those days. I shall quote mainly from my memoirs written for my children, hence what I have to say may be somewhat personal.

My refusal to take part in the *Selbstschutz* — here God is my witness — did not spring from cowardice or fear of death but was based on my position of faith with regard to nonresistance and the teachings of Jesus in the ups and downs of life. So we had been taught, and thus we under-

stood Scriptures; because of this [position] our forefathers had suffered bloody persecution, and because of this belief the principle of nonresistance was included in the *Privilegium* granted to us by the [Russian] government. And now?

In my anguish of mind I drove to my former teacher of religion, Abram Klassen, in Halbstadt, some 25 *versts* away. Brother Klassen, a generally respected and intelligent man, was an elder of the Mennonite Church. He had received his religious training in advanced schools in Germany and was later, if I remember correctly, elected to the Committee for Ecclesiastical Affairs (KfK). He had given us, his pedagogical students, much good instruction for our lives and our future professions. He did not agree fully, however, with the Mennonite Brethren Church. He also shocked us [students] with his interpretation of the biblical passage which refers to the "bowing" of every knee [in the name of Jesus]. He believed that Jesus' victory would be complete and that even Satan and his followers would in the end be saved. A certain Peter Huebert, a fellow student and a good friend of mine, had the courage to protest publicly [against this view].

Be that as it may, when this distinguished man invited me to step into his office, I put before him the questions that weighed heavily on my heart. After he had lectured me at considerable length, his last words to me were approximately as follows: "Young man, you should not try to jump over a church steeple with your piety. Why don't you begin humbly at home [with your beliefs] and in your own surroundings? Wanting to know better than everyone else is not becoming to you, don't you agree?" Feeling humiliated, discouraged and very miserable, I drove home. Teacher Klassen is supposed to have died later because of his faith (after we had left for Canada) in a prison in Melitopol.

When I got home that day, I hitched two fresh horses to the wagon and drove to Gnadenfeld (about 18 *versts* away) to see [Sergeant] Sonntag, one of the men at the headquarters of the *Selbstschutz*, about the same matter. I told him also about my mental distress. But this German military man showed absolutely no understanding for my attitude toward nonresistance. In the end I requested of him something in writing which would allow me to become a medical orderly, but my request was not granted. The last words we exchanged went something like this. He: "Young man, you've shot a rabbit, haven't you?" I: "Yes, of course — so?" He: "Well, so what's the difference?" I: "But a man has a soul!" Leaning far back in his armchair, the man facing me laughed and laughed, repeating my words over and over again: "Man a soul! Man a soul!"

With that our conversation ended and I drove home even more discouraged than before. There was great excitement in the village. Even before I got to our yard, I was told that Brother Jakob Reimer from

Rueckenau had been invited to speak in our meetinghouse that evening in order to give us a definitive, clarifying answer concerning the problem of the *Selbstschutz*. Men from several other villages came with eager expectations to the Lichtfeld meetinghouse. I was certain that this highly respected man of God, considered to be an especially accomplished leader in the Mennonite Brethren Church, would support us believers. However, exactly the opposite happened. Referring to many biblical passages from the Old Testament, where Jehovah God commanded the Israelites and Joshua to destroy all seven pagan nations of Canaan, including men, women and children, Brother Jakob Reimer supported the organization of a *Selbstschutz*.

On that evening I knelt beside my bed, praying and weeping. And the Lord was gracious to me, stood by me, and I remained firm in my offer to serve as a medical orderly and no more. People in the village recognized my sincerity and sympathized with me. My brother Johann, who also remained nonresistant, was punished by being appointed as a night watchman in our village for a considerable period of time. This was a miserable contradiction in itself, to send a nonresistant Mennonite without a weapon to stand guard in those dangerous times!

Three river valleys ran from east to west through the Molochnaya colony. Along these three rivers were located the 58 villages established in the course of almost sixty years (1804–1863). In the north there was the Molochnaya River, flowing from east to west and then eventually turning in a south-westerly direction. In the middle [of the colony] there flowed the Kuruschan River and in the south the Juschanlee River. The latter two, also flowing from east to west, were tributaries of the Molochnaya River which farther south emptied into the Sea of Azov. The north-eastern villages such as Sparau, Konteniusfeld [and others] and those farther west along the Molochnaya River . . . bordered along the land area belonging to the poor but large Russian villages of Chernigovka, Petropavlovka, Gross Tokmak, Orechov and others. It was here [outside the borders of the Molchnaya] that most of the fighting between the *Selbstschutz* and the Makhno forces took place, as well as the battles of the so-called White army commanded by General Denikin and later by General Wrangel.

Even though they were of superior strength, the bandits were kept at bay by our *Selbstschutz* for three months. [December, 1918–March 6, 1919]. Since these gangs, however, had of late allied themselves with the Bolshevik troops from the north — which our people did not know at the time — the *Selbstschutz* had to fight in the end against a vastly superior force and was consequently forced to abandon everything and to fall back in a slow retreat in the next two days [March 5–6, 1919].

Where I was located our people held positions in three lines. In the front line they operated with machine guns. Suddenly, [one day] a

lieutenant or [other] officer came running from the rear line very excited and shouted: "I need a volunteer! This cartridge belt has to be taken to the front line right now!" No one volunteered, not even after the second order. It was only hours before the final collapse and the enemy was beginning to attack front and centre. Suddenly something came over me. After a fast and fervent prayer I volunteered: "Give it to me, please!" God only knows how many rifle barrels were levelled at me. In fear of death I ran as fast as I possibly could. Bullets whistled all around me and hit the ground left and right. My heart pounded with exertion and excitement as never before. At least three times I threw myself to the ground, only to jump up after a few minutes and continue running. I got there and back again without mishap. To this day I believe that it was God who protected me.

My action was of course wrong and contrary to my nonresistant position. This is why I refused several times to respond to Brother B. B. Janz's request to write something about the *Selbstschutz*. With that cartridge belt there were perhaps more persons killed in half an hour than with all the rifle shots of the individual self-defenders. I would like to state in my own defense, however, that anyone who has not been in a similar situation should be cautious in passing judgement.

The retreat that night is difficult to describe. Entire villages left everything behind and fled in wagons just to save their lives. Many of these refugees were hacked to pieces by the bandits on the way. Noble, courageous, and selfless leaders among our people — B. H. Unruh, A. P. Willms, Dr. Tavonius, and perhaps a few others — walked directly into the lion's den, that is, the headquarters of the Reds in Gross Tokmak, and pleaded for mercy. They solemnly declared that we had founded the *Selbstschutz* [for protection] against the bandits only and that we did not know that in the end we were fighting against government troops. This explanation lessened the punishment.

The bandits, rough, gruesome fellows, now flooded our villages and furiously robbed, killed, and raped, for their leaders had given them three days' leave for that purpose. The northern, so-called upper villages, which were located close to the Russian settlements were affected more than others. Hostages were taken according to the size of the villages and confined with threats of execution if within a specified period of time the villages failed to deliver a certain number of rifles, sabres, hand grenades and other weapons. My father, who had been the mayor of our village, was arrested first and with him three others as well. Difficult weeks followed! Many of the (former) self-defenders fled together with the Russian White generals to the Crimea and took their rifles with them. This is why it was difficult to deliver the required quota of weapons. How feverishly we searched at that time for rifles and munition! To save the captured hostages, people combed through wells,

cellars, streams, and chaff bins (in search of weapons). Periodically, some of the hostages were shot, especially in the upper villages.

As the civil war continued and the fronts between the Whites and the Reds swayed back and forth, our villages suffered greatly. Some villages changed hands from seven to ten times — and because of our former *Selbstschutz* activities the Reds now considered us their enemies.

There are those who claim to this day that without the *Selbstschutz* things would have been much worse for us because later during the Civil War both sides used more regular troops and not the anarchic bands that were active during the time of the *Selbstschutz*. I refrain from expressing an opinion [on this matter]. One thing is clear, however: for the individual reader of this account, one who was perhaps born decades after those terrible events, it is no doubt impossible to understand fully our situation at that time, to empathize with the anguish of the believers [in nonresistance], and to judge this matter fairly.

May God Almighty be gracious to all of us and preserve us and all other countries from similar tragedies! May the Lord's reign of peace begin soon, in which according to Isaiah 2:4 swords shall be beat into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Then delight and joy shall fill our hearts forever and ever. May God grant us this!

Written in September, 1978

For further reading on the *Selbstschutz*:

Harvey L. Dyck, Editor and Translator, "Russian Mennonitism and the Challenge of Russian Nationalism, 1889," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, LVI (Oct. 1982), 4, pp. 307-341. Provides insight into anti-German feeling towards the end of the 19th century.

Dietrich Neufeld, *A Russian Dance of Death. Revolution and Civil War in the Ukraine*, translated from the German and edited by Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1977).

Victor Peters, *Nestor Makhno. The Life of an Anarchist* (Winnipeg: Echo Books, 1970).

Gerhard P. Schroeder, *Miracles of Grace and Judgment*. A brief account of the personal contacts and experiences with some of the leaders and followers of the notorious Makhnovshchina during the civil war in the Ukraine 1914-1923 (Lodi, California, 1974).

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

John B. Toews, "The Origins and Activities of the Mennonite *Selbstschutz* in the Ukraine (1918-19)," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XLVI (Jan. 1972), 1. This is the most complete account of the *Selbstschutz*, its motives, actions and military composition, yet written.