Religion, Politics, and the Mennonite *Privilegium* in Early Nineteenth Century Russia: Reconsidering the Warkentin Affair

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On 31 December 1838 David Epp, a respected minister in the Khortitsa Mennonite settlement in New Russia, described in his diary the disputes that were wracking the Molochna Mennonite settlement. In October 1837 several Molochna congregational Elders, District Mayor Johann Regier and his senior assistant, and Johann Cornies, Chair of the Molochna Mennonite Agricultural Society, had petitioned Tsar Nicholas I for confirmation of the Mennonite *Privilegium*. Nicholas granted this petition in December 1838. But the petitioners had made their request without the approval of Jacob Warkentin, Elder of the Large Flemish Congregation. Warkentin was incensed by this slight and filed a complaint with the Guardianship Committee for Foreign Settlers in New Russia. Epp lamented in his diary that "it's so sad when premature judgement, hate, partisan politics, and ignorance rule."[1]

Epp was recording the initial events of what has become known as the "Warkentin affair," a dispute that would enflame the Molochna for

a decade and ultimately challenge the religious autonomy of Mennonites in Russia. What makes Epp's observations particularly interesting is his focus on the Mennonite *Privilegium*, for virtually all later descriptions of the Warkentin affair cast the dispute as a struggle between religious authority, as championed by Warkentin, and secular authority, as championed by Cornies.[2]

Religious and secular authority were the underlying issues, and the Tsarist state's decision to directly intervene in Mennonite congregational matters to resolve the affair in the 1840s was one of its most significant outcomes. But, as significantly, the Warkentin affair provides a unique and unexploited opportunity to examine the evolution of political practice in Molochna Mennonite society during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Molochna Mennonites regarded their *Privilegium* as the central guarantee of their rights and freedoms, and they fought a pitched political battle over its interpretation during the district mayoral elections of 1838, 1841, and 1842. Johann Cornies and his supporters defended the status quo in this battle, insisting that the *Privilegium* distinguished between Mennonite religious freedom and economic independence, and that the preservation of the former was dependent upon the abnegation of the latter. Warkentin and his supporters insisted that, for Mennonites, economic freedoms were an intrinsic part of religious freedoms. In practice this constituted a significant re-interpretation of the *Privilegium*.

Warkentin lost this battle; from 1842-1848 Cornies directed Molochna Mennonite economic life with complete disregard for congregational authority. But in an important sense Cornies also lost the battle, for religious freedoms, which Cornies had originally argued were protected under the *Privilegium* in exchange for economic service to the Tsarist state, also were a casualty. Cornies also paid a personal price, for the bitterness of the dispute was reflected in his growing alienation from the majority of Molochna Mennonites. He reacted to the Warkentin affair by becoming, in the last years of his life, the "despotic" and widely disliked figure described by David Epp in his diaries.[3]

The Mennonite *Privilegium*

When Mennonites first contemplated emigration from Prussia to New Russia (now southern Ukraine) in 1787, Tsar Catherine II promised them a *Privilegium* to guarantee their rights. In 1800, eleven years after Mennonites began settling in Khortitsa, they finally secured this *Privilegium* from Catherine's successor Paul I.[4] This was

a triumph for Mennonites, and they would come to regard the *Privilegium* as a fundamental guarantee of their rights and privileges in Russia. The rights and responsibilities guaranteed in the *Privilegium* were ambiguous, but the document was symbolically important, because it established that the Mennonites had the right to negotiate with the state.

The privileges that Paul I granted to the Mennonites can be divided into two categories, religious and economic. The *Privilegium* granted Mennonites "the liberty to practise their religion according to their tenets and customs," and—crucially important to their pacifist beliefs—a complete exemption from military service. Economically, besides temporary tax exemptions shared by all settlers in New Russia, the *Privilegium* granted each Mennonite family "incontestable and perpetually inheritable possession" of a sixty-five *desiatini* allotment, the right to build factories, to enter trade guilds, and to engage in commercial activities.[5]

In the *Privilegium*'s concluding clause, Paul ordered "all our military and civil authorities and government offices not only to leave these Mennonites and their descendants in unmolested enjoyment of their houses, lands, and other possessions, not to hinder them in the enjoyment of the privileges granted to them, but also to show them in all cases every assistance and protection." This seemed to guarantee very significant freedoms, but they came at a price. As the *Privilegium* made clear in its opening phrases, the Mennonites received their special status because their "excellent industry and morality may. . .be held up as a model to the foreigners settled [in New Russia]."[6]

There was a critical ambiguity in the *Privilegium*, for it did not take into account the relationship between religion and economics in Mennonite theology. In essence, the state understood itself to be rewarding Mennonites with religious freedoms in payment for economic services. Mennonites, however, traditionally styled themselves the "quiet in the land," alluding to their religious ideal of withdrawal from secular entanglements. They possessed a foundation myth of agricultural life as the ideal expression of this withdrawal, for life in their agricultural villages permitted physical withdrawal to match the ideal of spiritual withdrawal.[7] Clearly the ideal of withdrawal could not sit easily with playing the role of model settlers as promoted in the *Privilegium*. Although the state granted the Mennonites privileges based on the exemplary agricultural skills they brought with them from Prussia, agricultural practices are not static, and in order to continue to serve as a model to other settlers the Mennonites would have to modernise. The unanswered question was whether Mennonites or the state would determine the nature of such modernisation.

Mennonite-State Relations and the *Privilegium*, 1803-1818

In their first fifteen years in the Molochna, the Mennonites were too busy struggling to survive to play a role as model settlers. This was a period when Mennonites looked to the state to help overcome the daunting challenges of establishing new communities on the steppe frontier.[8] The state honoured its *Privilegium* commitment to allow the Mennonites religious autonomy, and state economic aid to the Mennonites confirmed the *Privilegium*'s implication that Mennonites were not economically autonomous.

The distinction between religious and economic authority in the Molochna Mennonite settlement had been clearly set out even before Mennonites arrived in the region. Mennonites brought with them to New Russia their traditional communities, which were coterminous with church congregations. All members of a congregation were subject to its ethical rules, which were enforced by an elected Elder (*Ältester*), assisted by Ministers (*Lehrer*) and Deacons (*Diakonen*). In Russia this system was superimposed upon the district (*volost*) administration system created by Paul I in 1797, with the Elder functioning as the equivalent of the Russian village representative (*sels'skii vybornyi*) and the Ministers and Deacons functioning as the equivalents of ten-men (*desiatskie*). The Mennonite equivalent of a *volost* was the *Gebietsamt*, and just as Ukrainian and Russian state peasants had an elected *volost* head-man (*volost'naia golova*), the Mennonites had an elected *Gebietsamt* Mayor (*Oberschulz*).[9]

The state charged these local officials with publicising new laws, encouraging church attendance, taking measures against epidemics and fire, ensuring maintenance of roads and bridges, and arbitrating minor disputes. It also gave them authority over important economic functions including agricultural practices and grain reserves.[10] They were, in other words, representative of secular authority over economic affairs in the Mennonite villages.

Opposition to this combination of secular and religious authority was an important contributing factor in the formation of the *Kleine Gemeinde* (Small Congregation) in the Molochna in 1812, but beyond this small splinter group there is no evidence that it provoked serious controversy before the 1820s. The state's agricultural policies were not controversial in these early years of settlement. Mennonites accepted the state's introduction of Merino sheep and its promotion of tree planting in the Molochna as reasonable and desirable economic improvements. At the same time, Mennonites happily accepted state aid in bad years. These first years of settlement were hard, and survival demanded such dependence. In these fifteen years Mennonites established a relationship with the state that accurately reflected the *Privilegium*'s implied formula of religious autonomy and economic co-operation.[11]

New Immigration and the Seeds of Political Dissent

The unity of the Molochna Mennonites in those first years is partially attributable to the immigrants being drawn almost entirely from the same congregation in Prussia. In 1803 the Prussian Mennonites were divided between two congregations, the Flemish and Frisian. The former was more insular, conservative, and strict in its application of congregational discipline, while the latter was more willing to accept outsiders and sanction inter-congregational marriages.[12] The first Molochna settlers came almost exclusively from the Flemish congregation. In Danzig in 1808, the Flemish and Frisian congregations joined to form the United Frisian and Flemish Mennonite Church, and in the following years they became increasingly influenced by pietism, a religious movement that emphasised inner spiritual regeneration and evangelical activities.[13] When the Russian state authorised a new immigration of several thousand Mennonites from Prussia in 1818, it opened the door to religious controversy by bringing into the conservative Molochna community a large group of these Danzig Mennonites, regarded with suspicion by Flemish congregationalists in the Molochna as pietist Frisians.[14]

The newcomers, most of whom settled in villages on the upper Iushanlee River, were led by Elder Franz Görz and Minister Heinrich Balzer. Elder Jacob Fast, leader of the Flemish congregation, and Bernhard Fast, who succeeded him as Elder in 1820, tried to establish good relations with the newcomers. In 1820 Bernhard Fast broke with tradition—and angered many members of his congregation—by being ordained by Görz rather than the senior Flemish clergyman from Khortitsa as was customary.[15]

That same year Fast supported the creation of the Christian School Association, which in 1822 opened a secondary school in Ohrloff.[16] Mennonite villages already had primary schools, but their purpose was limited to little more than providing basic literacy and numeracy. While all Mennonites needed to be able to read the Bible, conservatives feared that any further education would encourage children to question traditional beliefs, which could only lead to unwanted innovations. Moreover, religious education was the prerogative of ministers, and the creation of a Christian school seemed to challenge this prerogative. To make matters worse, the Ohrloff school-master, Tobias Voth, who came from Prussia, held controversial pietistic religious views.[17]

In 1821, when representatives of the Russian Bible Society visited the Molochna, Fast and Flemish Elder Peter Wedel joined Görz in forming a Molochna chapter of the Society, dedicated to the distribution of Bibles in the settlement and surrounding communities. This again angered conservative Flemish congregationalists, who disapproved of any affiliation with non-Mennonite Christian

organisations, and distrusted the administrative system of the Bible Society, which was not under congregational control.[18]

The final straw for conservative Flemish congregationalists came in 1822 when, against all tradition, Fast permitted a visiting non-Mennonite missionary, Johann Moritz, to address a prayer meeting and take communion in Ohrloff. Although Fast quickly acknowledged his mistake and apologised, conservative leaders could not be placated, and in 1824 they formed a new congregation, the Large Flemish Congregation, under the leadership of Altona minister Jacob Warkentin. Roughly three-quarters of the original Flemish congregation joined them.[19] There were now three official congregations in the Molochna, the pietistic United Frisian and Flemish, the Flemish (or Old Flemish, as it now became known), and the Large Flemish, along with the conservative *Kleine Gemeinde*, which had no official status.

Warkentin, leader of the Large Flemish Congregation, represented a conservative Mennonite world view closely linked to the eighteenth-century rural Prussian communities from which most of the first Molochna settlers had come. He promoted a quietist theology of strict withdrawal from the secular world, and by the 1830s he would encourage his followers to extend the religious autonomy that they already enjoyed in the Tsarist empire to include economic autonomy. But at first his movement was primarily a reaction against the pietistic religious innovations of the newcomers.[20] Almost from the outset, Johann Cornies became a focus of his opposition to innovation.

Because Cornies supervised the founding of the new Frisian villages, many conservative congregationalists associated him with the pietistic views of the newcomers. As a strong believer in the value of education, Cornies was a founding member of the Christian School Association in 1820, and in 1822 he accepted the role of supervisor of the Bible Society's distribution depot. These endeavours reinforced conservative impressions that Cornies was sympathetic to pietism, and consequently placed Cornies at the heart of the religious disputes that troubled the Molochna settlement in the 1820s.

Cornies was probably strongly influenced by pietism. Certainly his support for the new school and the Bible Society are consistent with this. In the 1820s Cornies formed fast friendships with a number of leading pietist Mennonites. He corresponded regularly with David Epp, the leading pietist Mennonite minister in Heubuden, Prussia, and when he travelled to Saxony in 1827 to buy sheep he made a special side trip to visit with Jacob van der Smissen, the leading pietist Mennonite minister in Danzig.[21] Daniel Schlatter, a missionary and member of a noted Swiss pietist family, who made two long visits to the Molochna in the 1820s, stayed for months at Cornies' home and the two formed a lasting friendship.[22] These friendships, along with his

involvement in the Bible Society and the School Association, reveal that Cornies was at very least strongly sympathetic to pietism. This was an important cause of the hostility that developed between him and Warkentin.

After 1827 Cornies grew impatient with the pietist emphasis on inward-looking spirituality rather than action. As Cornies' desire to change the world around him grew, his religious views moderated and he ultimately remained a member of the original Old Flemish Congregation led by Bernhard Fast. By the late 1820s he was irritated with the Frisian leaders, referring to them dismissively in his private correspondence as the troublesome folk "up there on the Iushanlee."[23] He became particularly unhappy with Voth, the Ohrloff schoolmaster. Cornies had at first strongly supported Voth, but he eventually concluded that the schoolmaster's involvement in religious affairs was interfering with the practical demands of teaching.[24] In 1829, under pressure from Cornies and the School Association, Voth resigned and was replaced by the more moderate Old Flemish congregationalist Heinrich Heese.[25]

The cooling of Cornies' relationship to the pietists in the late 1820s did nothing to heal the rift between him and Warkentin. Indeed, two incidents in the 1820s worsened the relationship. The first came in March 1826, when Nogai thieves stole cattle from a Molochna Mennonite herd. Jacob Klassen, Isbrand Thiessen, and Isaac Hilbrand, all members of the Large Flemish Congregation, spread a rumour that Cornies was responsible for the theft, and Warkentin demanded that the *Gebietsamt* conduct an official investigate of the allegations. In April an infuriated Cornies resigned from all his official duties with the *Gebietsamt* and the Guardianship Committee, advising the *Gebietsamt* that he would take no more part in public life in the Molochna until his name was cleared. By resigning from Guardianship Committee duties, Cornies brought the matter to the attention of higher authorities, and this put pressure on Molochna Mennonite authorities to act. In May the *Gebietsamt* officials met with the two most powerful congregational Elders, Warkentin and Bernhard Fast, cleared Cornies of any wrongdoing, and forced his accusers to publicly recant. As Cornies' letters of the period show, this public investigation of his integrity deeply offended him.[26]

A second incident widened the rift, and emphasized to Cornies the potential power of the *Gebietsamt*. In 1825 the Guardianship Committee asked Cornies to travel to Saxony to buy Merino sheep as breeding stock for the Molochna settlement's community sheep herd. Cornies was at first reluctant to go, protesting to the Guardianship Committee that the Molochna was in the grip of a two-year drought and his duty lay at home, where he could help with community relief efforts.[27] In 1826 Samuel Contenius, the leading figure in the

Guardianship Committee, pressed the Molochna Mennonite *Gebietsamt* to dispatch Cornies to Saxony on the community's behalf, but Cornies, who was angry at the handling of the horse theft accusations earlier in the year, refused the request of the *Gebietsamt*. In a letter to Contenius's secretary Wilhelm Franke he justified this refusal on the grounds that the *Gebietsamt* had made the request to him in such an insultingly "half-hearted tone" that he had no choice but to refuse.[28]

The *Gebietsamt* now officially reported to the Guardianship Committee that, despite repeated requests to Cornies, he had refused to accept the commission to go to Saxony. Cornies was furious to learn that the *Gebietsamt* had portrayed him to the Guardianship Committee as obstructing community interests, and, through the unofficial channel of secretary Franke, Cornies fought back, denouncing the *Gebietsamt* officials for their "roguery."[29] Franke let Cornies know that the Guardianship Committee knew who its friends in the Molochna were, and Contenius himself wrote to Cornies to reassure him. In his letter, Contenius complained that among the Mennonites, "hostile strife and a spirit of dissension rules and hardens dispositions, so that implementation of the positive finds no proponents."[30] While Contenius seemed to be commiserating with Cornies, there was no doubt that he was also pressuring Cornies to find a way to carry out the proposed trip.

In December Cornies finally resolved to go to Saxony on his own, without the support of the *Gebietsamt*. He paid for the trip out of his own pocket. Although Cornies at first intended only to buy sheep for his own herds, Contenius persuaded him to buy sheep for community herds as well. The *Gebietsamt* agreed to repay Cornies for these sheep, but in the end it would take it several years to produce the money.[31]

The 1820s disputes, over both religious and secular matters, made Warkentin and Cornies deeply hostile to one another. It also made Cornies aware of the potential difficulties the *Gebietsamt* posed for his own reform projects. When Warkentin's brother-in-law Johann Klassen was elected as Mayor in October 1826, Cornies wrote to Franke: "Cold, ice cold, shudders travel down from the nape of my neck, when I think about the general situation and weigh the character of this man against it."[32] Cornies had learned an important lesson about Molochna politics, and in future he would make strong relations with the *Gebietsamt* an important priority.

The period of 1827-1832 was one of economic prosperity and relative harmony in the Molochna Mennonite settlement, and Cornies dared to hope that the hostilities of the 1820s had been put behind him.[33] Instead, as events in the 1830s would prove, the moderation of Cornies' religious views did nothing to relieve the animosity that had already developed between him and Warkentin. The two men would

be the leading combatants in the bitter political battles of the late 1830s and early 1840s.

The Warkentin Affair

The Warkentin affair began in earnest in 1837, when Cornies, *Gebietsamt* Mayor Johann Regier, his assistant Abraham Toews, and the leaders of the Frisian and Old Flemish congregations appealed to Tsar Nicholas I to reconfirm the Mennonite *Privilegium*. Placed in the context of Nicholas's major campaign of the 1830s to reform the Russian economy, this appeal should be seen as defensive, intended to prevent Nicholas's economic reforms from impinging on Mennonite religious freedoms. However, Warkentin and his supporters viewed the renewal of the *Privilegium* as an effort to gain support for Cornies' own program of economic reform, and an extension of what they saw as unacceptable encroachments upon their religious freedoms. They now became determined to fight Cornies' economic reforms, and they chose the arena of Molochna *Gebietsamt* politics to make their stand.

In the 1830s Cornies had increasingly devoted himself to a complete transformation of the Molochna Mennonite economy. His efforts began in 1830 when he was appointed as Chair of the newly created Forestry Society, and they accelerated in 1836 when the Agricultural Society, with its expanded authority, succeeded the Forestry Society.[34] Cornies' arbitrary and harsh policies as Chair of the Agricultural Society in the 1840s are well known, but it is important to recognize that when the Warkentin affair began in 1837, Cornies was still operating within the congregational system, relying on the authority of congregational leaders to implement Agricultural Society policies.[35]

Cornies was unique among Mennonites in his sophisticated understanding of the evolution of Tsarist economic policy in the 1820s and 1830s. His role in the Forestry and Agricultural Societies and his involvement in the settlement of new groups of Mennonite immigrants beginning in 1818 made him keenly aware of the increasing economic and demographic pressures that Russia faced. He understood that these pressures threatened Mennonites, because access to additional land for new settlers was rapidly being exhausted.[36] He knew, too, that Nicholas had created the new Ministry of State Domains in 1836 as part of a major project to resolve his peasant problem by modernizing the Russian peasant economy.[37] Mennonites, who were formally designated as state peasants, fell within the new Ministry's purvey, and from 1836 onward they faced increased scrutiny and higher expectations from the state. This was an important element provoking the Warkentin affair.

Cornies' many administrative entanglements with the Tsarist state had convinced him that, in order to preserve the Mennonites' *Privilegium* rights, it was vital that Mennonites live up to their *Privilegium*-defined role as model settlers. This belief coalesced in 1823 when he visited the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs in St. Petersburg during a Ministry-sponsored trip to purchase sheep for Mennonite community sheep herds. Cornies later recalled: "In St. Petersburg I was told in the Ministry 'If you will not be industrious in that for which you have made yourself responsible to the state, on which basis you have received the *Privilegium*, you will be in danger of losing your special privileges. The law changes in the short term and in the long term, and what have you accomplished?'"[38] In 1826 the Mennonite community as a whole showed the importance they attached to the *Privilegium* when they appealed to the new Tsar, Nicholas I, to reconfirm it.[39] When Cornies, with his supporters, again appealed to Nicholas for confirmation of the *Privilegium* in 1837, he was seeking not only a seal of approval for his own economic reforms, but also a further confirmation of the concomitant religious freedoms. He was, in other words, seeking to confirm the *Privilegium* status quo as he understood it, of religious freedom in exchange for economic co-operation.

Warkentin's objections focused on the Agricultural Society's attempt to assert authority over the agricultural practices of individual Mennonite landowners. He regarded the Agricultural Society's efforts to modernize Molochna agricultural practices as an unwarranted intrusion of secular authority into Mennonite life, and claimed that Mennonite religious autonomy entailed freedom from such secular authority.

Unlike Cornies, Warkentin had never been directly involved with the state administrative system, and his understanding of the state's view of the obligations the *Privilegium* imposed on Mennonites was not informed by experiences such as Cornies' 1823 visit to St. Petersburg. Still, although he did not explicitly place his objections to Agricultural Society policies in terms of the *Privilegium*, it is notable that it was the renewal of the *Privilegium* that first provoked him to openly oppose Cornies and the Agricultural Society.[40] Indeed, as political hostilities broke into the open in early 1837, Warkentin made a special trip to Ekaterinoslav to personally examine the *Privilegium*.[41] Warkentin, like Cornies, understood that basic issues regarding Mennonite relations with the state were in question. In real terms, Warkentin was arguing that Mennonite religious autonomy entailed economic autonomy. This was a direct challenge to the *Privilegium* status quo, although Warkentin probably did not recognize it as such.

Warkentin launched his challenge to Cornies in 1837 by appealing to the Elders of the other Molochna congregations to support a request

to the Guardianship Committee to remove Mayor Regier and his assistant Toews from their positions. Warkentin based his request on Regier's alcoholism, but whatever the Mayor's personal problems he was widely regarded by Molochna Mennonites as an effective administrator; as a result the other Elders refused Warkentin's request.[42]

The Regier case provides an important clue to the distinction between politics and religion that had developed in the Molochna by the 1830s. Regier was a member of Warkentin's Large Flemish Congregation, but despite this he was a staunch supporter of Cornies' Agricultural Society. This was not mere coincidence. Cornies had learned from the events of the 1820s, and in the 1830s he actively courted the *Gebietsamt* Mayor, inviting Regier to attend Agricultural Society meetings and advise on important decisions.[43] Regier's support for Cornies, and the community's support for Regier in elections, show that it was possible in the Molochna to share Warkentin's religious conservatism without sharing his opposition to Cornies' economic reforms. This helps to explain the success of Cornies' candidates in the 1838 and 1841 *Gebietsamt* Mayoral elections, despite the opposition of Warkentin, the Elder of the congregation to which the majority of Molochna residents belonged. There was a distinction in the minds of Molochna Mennonites between economic and religious autonomy—and implicitly between politics and religion—and it should not be assumed that, in the 1830s, membership in the Large Flemish Congregation automatically equated to opposition to Cornies' economic reforms.

The Regier story has a second important implication; clearly the office of Mayor was far more powerful than is usually recognized. If the Mayor, who by Tsar Paul's 1797 decree had always held the formal authority to enforce state policy, had simply been a congregational mouthpiece, then there would have been no point in disputing elections to the office. Warkentin and Cornies both recognized the office of Mayor as a seat of significant power *independent* of the Mennonite congregational system and the Agricultural Society. The existence of this powerful elected position made electoral politics a real and significant thing in the Molochna.

Regier's second term of office ended in 1838, and Warkentin, who recognized that Regier would easily win a third term of office, appealed directly to I. N. Inzov, head of the Guardianship Committee, to disbar Regier from standing for re-election.[44] Cornies meanwhile wrote to his friend Aleksandr Fadeev, who until 1836 had been head of the Guardianship Committee's regional office in Ekaterinoslav, and who remained one of Cornies' most important allies in the Tsarist administration. Cornies told Fadeev that, although "the current Mayor Regier and his Assistant Toews act and work to the community's best

advantage in co-operation with the Society purely out of conscientious conviction, . . .[Warkentin] wishes to put an end to this fruitful situation and is already making incognito preparations."[45] Cornies appealed to Fadeev to "make efforts so that Mayor Regier and his Assistant Toews keep their positions for another term."[46] Cornies prevailed, and in 1838, Regier was re-elected.

It is important to note that it was Warkentin who first stepped outside of the usual bounds of the Molochna political system and appealed to a higher authority in this conflict. Warkentin claimed to be championing religious over secular authority in the Molochna, but his readiness to appeal to Inzov to obtain the dismissal of a Mayor elected by the community at large and supported by the other Elders shows that he was quite prepared to call upon external, secular authority when it suited his political objectives.[47] Clearly the era of independent congregational rule was over.

Warkentin's appeal to Inzov marked a pivotal point in Mennonite relations with the state. Warkentin's decision to invite Inzov to interfere in the election of the Mayor was an attempt to place this powerful political position back in the hands of congregational authority; but by inviting outside interference, Warkentin raised the danger that the position might become little more than that of a Tsarist appointee, and that secular authority might be exercised far more directly from outside of the community than had previously been the case.

Cornies, who saw the success of his economic policies as critical to the retention of Mennonite religious freedoms, was infuriated by Warkentin's efforts to derail the election of Regier and block Agricultural Society initiatives. Warkentin was equally incensed by what he regarded as Cornies' increasingly intrusive economic policies. The two leaders were now openly hostile to one another, and while the 1838 election was settled, their dispute was not.

Warkentin appealed to the members of his congregation, denouncing Cornies' policies and encouraging Molochna Mennonites to ignore Agricultural Society directives.[48] His active campaign to undermine Cornies' authority gained steady support between the 1838 and 1841 elections, as he now demanded that members of the Large Flemish Congregation adhere to congregational discipline in economic as well as religious matters. In response to Warkentin's campaign, Mayor Regier, at Cornies' urging, used the authority of the *Gebietsamt* to support the Agricultural Society.

This battle between congregational and secular authority grew more and more bitter, and Cornies, who believed that Mennonite autonomy was dependent upon the *Privilegium* and therefore upon Mennonite economic co-operation with the state, increasingly treated the authority of the Mayor as an extension of his own authority as Chair of the Agricultural Society. Frustration with Warkentin's

interference in Molochna economic reforms was pushing Cornies to give up on the hope of co-operation with congregational authorities and turn instead to arbitrary, authoritarian secular administrative measures. As a result he was rapidly alienating himself from the majority in Molochna Mennonite society. In December 1840 Khortitsa minister David Epp recorded in his diary: "In the Molochna congregation the impact of the [church] split is being increasingly felt. The [*Gebietsamt*] office and the Agricultural Society rule more through despotism than through gentleness as Jesus taught. The fires of discontent glow under the ashes."[49]

In the 1841 Mayoral election Warkentin again opposed Regier, but this time he tried new tactics, proposing his own candidate, the widely respected Tiege resident Peter Toews.[50] By 1841 Regier's alcoholism and Cornies' increasingly authoritarian manner helped Toews win the election by a narrow margin. Cornies, however, now claimed that there were voting irregularities and refused to accept the results, and Regier continued to act as Mayor. Warkentin travelled to Odessa and protested to Evgenii von Hahn who, as newly appointed deputy to the ageing Chair of the Guardianship Committee, General Inzov, was increasingly the real seat of power in Colonist affairs. In early 1842 Hahn ordered a new election, and, aided by the fact that Regier died in the interim, Toews won a landslide victory.[51]

Warkentin and his supporters believed themselves the clear victors in this struggle for political supremacy in the Molochna Mennonite Settlement, and rumours even circulated that Hahn intended to exile Cornies to Siberia, but their jubilation did not last long.[52] Without the co-operation of the *Gebietsamt*, Cornies' programs quickly stopped functioning, and the state was too reliant on Cornies to allow his authority in the Molochna to collapse. During an inspection tour of the Molochna, Hahn confronted Warkentin, accusing him of meddling in official matters, and dismissed him from his position as congregational Elder. At the same time, following the principle of "divide and conquer," Hahn dissolved the Large Flemish Congregation, in its place creating three smaller congregations.[53]

Some leading adherents to the Large Flemish Congregation would not be fully silenced for several more years. Elder Heinrich Wiens, in particular, took a principled stand against the dissolution of the Congregation, and his 1846 dismissal and banishment from Russia were deeply resented in the Molochna.[54] But the 1842 dissolution of the Congregation had brought its real political power—and the most significant events of the Warkentin affair—to an end. This action was a shocking violation of congregational autonomy, for Warkentin was in no sense a civil official, nor was the Large Flemish Congregation a civil organization. Its dissolution marked a stunning political victory for Cornies; he would rule supreme in the Molochna until his death in

1848, and even extend his authority to the Khortitsa Mennonite Settlement when he was made head of the Khortitsa Agricultural Society in 1846.[55] It also marked a severe blow to the Mennonites' belief in the inviolability of the *Privilegium*.

Conculsion

The Warkentin affair was not just a dispute between religious and secular authorities in the Molochna, as it is usually depicted. Rather it was about the relationship between religious and secular rights, and the degree to which those rights were protected by the Mennonite *Privilegium*. This was the first real test of the *Privilegium*, and it demonstrated how precarious Mennonite rights were. The *Privilegium* was *not* inviolate and its provisions were ultimately subject to the whims of Tsarist policy.

This does not mean that the *Privilegium* was meaningless. In the 1870s, when the Mennonites' exemption from military service was threatened, they successfully negotiated the right to alternative service based on the *Privilegium*. This later challenge to *Privilegium* rights occurred after the Great Reforms of the 1860s, under a Tsar who was trying hard to create at least the appearance of legalism in Russia, but it shows that the *Privilegium* remained important. Even though its specific provisions were not inviolate, the *Privilegium* provided a precedent for negotiating with the Tsar.

Hahn's intervention in Molochna politics in the 1840s confirmed Cornies' understanding of the *Privilegium* and its implications for Molochna Mennonite society. From the state's perspective, the Mennonites' religious autonomy was dependent on their economic co-operation. This definition had been confirmed in practice by Mennonite relations to the state in the first three decades of Mennonite settlement in the Molochna.

Tsar Nicholas's determination to modernize Russia's peasant economy led to the creation of the Ministry of State Domains in 1836, and sharply increased the state's expectations of its Mennonite subjects. As Cornies recognized, this directly called into question the rights defined in the *Privilegium*, and made Mennonite economic co-operation all the more important if religious autonomy was to be retained. The gravity of this threat was confirmed in Khortitsa in August 1841 when Hahn, travelling through the Mennonite settlement, expressed his dissatisfaction with tree planting and threatened that the Mennonites were to "be placed directly under government control."[56]

Reform pressures from the state forced into the open a political battle that had long been brewing in the Molochna. Antagonism

between Cornies and Warkentin dated back to the disputes of the 1820s. Cornies began strongly promoting economic reform in 1830, and from his position as Chair of the Forestry Society, and subsequently Chair of the Agricultural Society, he made ever increasing demands on Molochna Mennonites. Warkentin, as Elder of the Large Flemish Congregation, by the 1830s extended his opposition to religious innovation to encompass economic interference in the affairs of individual Mennonites. In practical terms, this constituted a challenge to the *Privilegium* status quo. In 1837 the decision by Cornies and his supporters to ask Tsar Nicholas to confirm the *Privilegium* provided the issue that brought the larger dispute into the open. Warkentin opposed this action because he viewed it as a bid by Cornies for support of Agricultural Society policies. *Gebietsamt* Mayoral elections provided an arena for the resolution of the dispute.

The 1838, 1841, and 1842 elections reveal an evolving Molochna political system. The position of Molochna Mayor was a powerful one, well worth fighting over. It could not have been so powerful were it simply a mouthpiece for congregational, or Agricultural Society, authority. The very fact that Cornies and Warkentin disputed control of it indicates that it was the seat of significant independent authority.

The fight between Warkentin and Cornies to control the position of Mayor ultimately undermined its power. When Warkentin appealed to the state to intervene in the elections in 1838, and when Cornies ignored election results in 1841, they both were trying to supersede the Mayor's authority with their own. In the end, Cornies won this battle because it was he who represented the state's interests in the Molochna.

From 1842-1848 Cornies, as Chair of the Agricultural Society, governed the Molochna economy with a hand more firm than Nicholas and his bureaucrats in far-off St. Petersburg and Odessa could ever have hoped to achieve. But the *Privilegium* status quo that Cornies had originally sought to defend—economic service in exchange for religious freedom—had gone by the wayside. Warkentin had succeeded in linking Mennonite economic rights to religious rights, but he had failed to understand that the Tsarist state would never allow any of its subjects economic autonomy. Instead, the state had asserted control over both.

Cornies was now the only thing standing between direct state control and Mennonite control. As long as the state trusted Cornies, it had no need to assert more direct control. But the Cornies regime of the 1840s was far from the administrative system envisaged in the *Privilegium* or desired by most Mennonites. As Cornies himself described it, even the election of village Elders was now vetted by the Agricultural Society and, "in cases where they are unfit, the villages are forced to choose new ones."[57]

Cornies' arbitrary and unpopular administrative manner in the 1840s was itself at least partially a consequence of the Warkentin affair.

In 1836, before the affair began, Cornies still operated within the conventions of the traditional Mennonite administrative system, relying on the co-operation of village Elders and the *Gebietsamt* Mayor to enact Agricultural Society policies. The political battle with Warkentin exhausted Cornies' patience (a commodity that had always been in short supply), and convinced him that the only way to modernize the Mennonite economy—and defend Mennonite *Privilegium* freedoms—was to assert his own arbitrary control. The bitterness of the Warkentin affair left Cornies personally alienated from the majority of Molochna Mennonites.

Given the Tsarist state's determination to transform Russia's peasant economy in the 1830s and 1840s, it is possible that the Mennonites' only defence against state intervention in their religious affairs was to transform themselves economically. Under such circumstances, Molochna Mennonites were fortunate to have Johann Cornies to take charge, rather than having an outsider forced upon them. They were equally fortunate that Cornies' death in 1848 coincided with the European revolutions that distracted Tsar Nicholas from domestic affairs in the final years of his life. This provided Mennonites with a few more years of quiet before a new reforming Tsar forced the *Privilegium* back onto centre stage in the 1870s.

Notes

1 David Epp, *The Diaries of David Epp 1837-1843*, John B. Toews, trans. and ed. (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000), 76.
2 The dispute is summarized in James Urry, *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989), 126-137.
3 Epp, *Diaries*, 68.
4 Urry, *None But Saints*, 70. An English-language translation of the *Privilegium* is reproduced in Urry, *None But Saints*, "Appendix I," 282-284.
5 Urry, *None But Saints*.
6 Urry, *None But Saints*.
7 Urry, *None But Saints*, 36-38.
8 See John R. Staples, *Cross-Cultural Encounters on the Ukrainian Steppe: Settling the Molochna Basin, 1783-1861* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 75-76.
9 George Bolotenko, "Administration of the State Peasants in Russia before the Reforms of 1838" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Toronto, 1979), 195-209.
10 Bolotenko, "Administration of the State Peasants," 209.
11 This process is summarized in Staples, *Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 75-76.
12 Urry, *None But Saints*, 99-102.
13 Urry, *None But Saints*, 99-102; Peter J. Klassen, "Faith and Culture in Conflict: Mennonites in the Vistula Delta," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57 (1983), 201; Robert Friedmann, "Anabaptism and Pietism, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 14 (1940), 97.
14 Urry, *None But Saints*, 34-49; 99-100.

15 Urry, *None But Saints*, 101.
16 Urry, *None But Saints*, 105.
17 Urry, *None But Saints*, 105-106.
18 Urry, *None But Saints*, 101.
19 Urry, *None But Saints*, 102.
20 Historian John B. Toews summarizes the religious position of the conservative Flemish congregation in the Molochna as quietist, formalistic, and liturgically rigid. See *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 18-21.
21 John Friesen, "Education, Pietism and Change among Mennonites in Nineteenth-Century Prussia," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (1982), 158.
22 James Urry, "'Servants from Far': Mennonites and the Pan-Evangelical Impulse in Early Nineteenth-Century Russia," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61 (1987), 217-218.
23 Cornies to Daniel Schlatter, 12 March 1830, *Peter J. Braun Russian Mennonite Archive* (hereafter *PJBRMA*), file 169.
24 Cornies to Schlatter, 22 December 1828, *PJBRMA*, file 129.
25 Cornies to Schlatter, 12 March 1830, *PJBRMA*, file 169.
26 For the resolution of the affair, see *Gebietsamt* to Cornies, 15 May 1826, *PJBRMA*, file 21, and a copy of the *Gebietsamt* circular to all Molochna village mayors that cleared Cornies' name, 15 May 1826, *PJBRMA*, file 21. Cornies' anger and embarrassment about the issue are reflected in many of his personal letters of the period. See particularly Cornies to Schlatter, 5 August 1826, *PJBRMA*, file 82.
27 For the initial proposal, see Aleksandr Fadeev to Cornies, 16 January 1825, *PJBRMA*, file 77. For Cornies' response, see Cornies to Samuel Contenius, 30 January 1825, *PJBRMA*, file 63.
28 Cornies to Wilhelm Franke, 31 October 1826, *PJBRMA*, file 82. Contenius had formally retired from his position of Chair of the Guardianship Committee in 1818, but he remained the guiding force in its activities until his death in 1830.
29 Cornies to Franke, 31 October 1826, *PJBRMA*, file 82.
30 Contenius to Cornies, 11 November 1826, *PJBRMA*, file 88.
31 Cornies to Contenius, 28 December 1826, *PJBRMA*, file 82.
32 Cornies to Franke, 31 October 1826, *PJBRMA*, file 82.
33 Staples, *Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 107-142.
34 Staples, *Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 107-142.
35 Staples, *Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 107-142. On Cornies' authoritarian manner in the 1840s, see, e.g., Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 1789-1910*, trans. John B. Toews, *et. al.* (Fresno: CMBC, 1980), 196-199; Heinrich Goerz, *The Molotschna Settlement*, trans. Al Reimer and John B. Toews (Winnipeg: CMBC, 1993), 36-37.
36 See his many letters to David Epp, Heubuden, regarding the immigration from Prussia, in the *PJBRMA*. In particular, see the letter of 14 August 1826, *PJBRMA*, file 82.
37 Staples, *Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 91-92.
38 Letter from Cornies to David Epp, Heubuden, 31 December 1826, *PJBRMA*, File 82. Cornies' extensive correspondence with Aleksandr Fadeev, head of the Guardianship Committee Office in Ekatrinoslav, constantly reemphasized this priority. See, e.g., Fadeev to Cornies, 28 August 1835, *PJBRMA*, file 352.
39 John B. Toews, "Once Again – The *Privilegium* – A Letter from 1826," *Mennonite Historian* 23:4 (December 1997), 1-2.
40 During the 1820s, during the initial religious controversy, Warkentin had shown a clear understanding of the importance of the *Privilegium* when he argued that the creation of the Bible Society threatened the Mennonite exemption from military service by tying the Mennonites to other religious groups that did not enjoy such a privilege. See Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, 237.

41 Epp, *Diaries*, 33.
42 Urry, *None But Saints*, 99-102.
43 Cornies to Fadeev, 15 January 1835, *PJBRMA*, file 315.
44 Urry, *None But Saints*, 99-103.
45 Cornies to Fadeev, 26 April 1838, *PJBRMA*, file 496. Fadeev had by this time already left the Guardianship Committee to take up a new post as Chief Guardian of the Kalmyk Horde, but he remained highly influential with Guardianship Committee members.
46 Cornies to Fadeev, 26 April 1838, *PJBRMA*, file 496.
47 As Urry points out, other Molochna elders, though outraged by Warkentin's dismissal, were not necessarily surprised that his political entanglements had ended badly for him (Urry, *None But Saints*, 134).
48 Cornies' description of Warkentin's resistance to Agricultural Society policies can be found in *PJBRMA*, file 813.
49 Epp, *Diaries of David Epp*, 29 December 1840, 138.
50 Urry, *None But Saints*, 128.
51 Urry, *None But Saints*, 128.
52 Urry, *None But Saints*, 128.
53 Urry, *None But Saints*, 129.
54 Urry, *None But Saints*, 133-134.
55 Urry, *None But Saints*, 135.
56 Epp, *Diaries*, 7 August 1841, 155.
57 "Po otnosheniiu Departamenta Sel'skago Khoziaistva o vvedenii u Russkikh pereselentsev khoziaistva i poriadka upravleniia menonistov," 1845, *Russian State Historical Archive, fond* 383, *opis* 10, *delo* 7164.