

The Mennonites before Moscow: The Notes of Dr. Otto Auhagen

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While the skeleton of the crisis-filled story of the Mennonites gathered “before Moscow” in late 1929 is familiar, the details of those events are not. In some cases, the stories that have been told and retold have created a romanticized image of a group that decided to flee religious persecution in Russia. This makes for a rather simplistic understanding of why the Mennonites left their farms and made their way to Moscow. It is only normal for the accounts of events such as the 1929 Moscow refugee crisis to be embellished and to take on the accoutrements of a heroic struggle. Accounts such as those found in the book, *Vor den Toren Moskaus*,¹ have left a lasting image of those brief months, where life and death were negotiated behind the closed doors of Soviet committee rooms and foreign embassies. The reality, however, may have been more mundane, a time of endless waiting; for some, the end of that waiting, even if it meant being loaded into cattle cars bound for Siberia, must have come as a relief.

We are left with two types of accounts of that brief time in Moscow: the eye-witness accounts (primary sources) and academic analysis in subsequent years (secondary sources). Eye-witness accounts, of course, are not just about providing an objective account of the events. For example, in the already mentioned *Vor den Toren Moskaus*, a

passage describes the “diabolical tax system” instituted by the Soviets. While the tone of language is perhaps understandable, a related passage by Dr. Walter Quiring, commenting that a Jew is usually in charge of tax assessment and collection can easily be read as anti-Semitic.² *Vor den Toren Moskaus* also can be read as a pro-German document that not only describes some of the events of the 1929 Moscow refugee crisis, but implicitly justifies German actions during the Second World War against the Soviets; at the time of its publication in 1960, the height of the Cold War, it could also be seen as a call for continued sanctions against the Soviets, for the atrocities they had perpetrated and might still be capable of perpetrating. Other factors, driven by emotions and overriding the Mennonites’ teaching on the need to love rather than hate, may have emphasized the victims’ virtues and the persecutors’ crimes. Perhaps, it was even a peculiar form of humility that called out for attention.

On the other hand, are the accounts by professional historians, sociologists, and political scientists, those who have had access to voluminous government files and possess academic tools of interpretation more helpful? The problem here is that this literature often assumes expert knowledge on the part of the reader. In addition, many of the smaller, more personal stories are lost in the shuffle of statistics and in-depth analysis.

Though good scholarly studies are available on this period in the Soviet Union, few of them actually mention, let alone provide an in-depth analysis of the Moscow refugee crisis. Often scholars skirt these years, dealing with either the early Soviet period from 1921 to 1926 or the later so-called *yezhevshchyna* (Yezhov or Great Terror) of 1936-1938.³ Those who do deal with the period like Detlef Brandes and Andrej Savin, and Colin P. Neufeldt,⁴ tend not to concentrate on the refugees gathered in suburbs of Moscow, focusing rather on the political situation that led to the crisis or the lot of the refugees sent back to their former villages or exiled to the vast spaces of Siberia. Harvey Dyck’s 1966 *Weimar Germany & Soviet Russia, 1926-1933* is perhaps the best work dealing with the period.⁵ The broad scope of the book, however, means that it does not analyze the details of the events as they pertain to the Mennonites at Moscow.⁶ A second good account is found in Frank Epp’s *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940: A People’s Struggle for Survival*.⁷ Its main contribution to the history of the Moscow refugee crisis is the description of Canada’s unwelcoming attitude, helpful background information and the retelling of earlier published accounts.

Despite this academic discourse, the mythologized and popular accounts of the Moscow crisis based on eye-witness accounts remain. They tend to touch, rather than explain. The ideal approach would be

scholarly yet emotional, telling the story in such a way that the reader might also “feel” the situation as it develops.

Dr. Otto Auhagen

This article is based on the notes taken down in the midst of the crisis by the eminent expert in Slavic studies Dr. Otto Auhagen.⁸ They were written for the German Embassy in Moscow and balance the eye-witness accounts with a more objective report of the situation. In order to protect the particular refugee and his family, Auhagen usually does not name his sources, but it can be assumed that many of Auhagen’s stories are those of the non-survivors. It is therefore likely that they have not been heard since he wrote them down in 1929.

Many previously written articles, eye-witness accounts and academic, agree on the following: the refugees were for the most part poor, lived in terrible circumstances, and were unorganized while in Moscow. But there are other important points to be made. While there can be no doubt that at the crisis’s end the refugees were poor, they became impoverished during their long wait in Moscow. The wait was not so much the fault of Canadian policy and a slow governmental process in Germany, as a desire of the Soviet officials to extract as much money from the refugees as possible, usually in the form of exorbitant visa fees. Then, too, the terrible living conditions of the refugees referred to in secondary sources beg further details. Those details are necessary to demonstrate the lengths to which the refugees went just to outlast the Soviet government, hoping that it would eventually capitulate to foreign pressure. Lastly, the question of the refugees’ purposeful “disorganization” must be addressed. Telling the Soviet authorities that they were unorganized served the purpose of protecting the community leaders, but did this ultimately cause many of the refugees to be unsuccessful in their bid to leave the Soviet Union?

Auhagen was the agricultural attaché for the German Embassy in Moscow from 1928-1930. He had written his dissertation at the Kaiser Wilhelm University in Strassburg on the topic of agricultural practices in marshlands,⁹ a topic that in some way would inevitably tie him to the Mennonite communities who had farmed lowlands in the Netherlands and Prussia in the past. From 1902 to 1942 he wrote numerous studies of the agricultural situation in Russia and then the Soviet Union with a particular emphasis on the situation of the German agricultural “colonists” and their plight. What is often not appreciated is the fact that he was one of the world’s leading scholars on Russia.¹⁰ Unfortunately, he later lent his expertise to the Nazi regime as they

began to work out how they were going to deal with their newly acquired lands in the east.¹¹ In 1945, as the Soviets took over the eastern portion of Germany, Auhagen's work was banned by the Soviets and he was publicly blacklisted in the *Liste der auszusondernden Literatur*.¹² Shortly thereafter he committed suicide.¹³

During Auhagen's time with the Embassy in Moscow he developed a particularly close relationship with the Mennonites. In his travels through Russia he met with leaders of numerous ethnic German communities,¹⁴ including Mennonites. Starting in October 1929, in the space of just over two months, Auhagen wrote five reports for the German Embassy in Moscow. In these five reports, he became the defender of the ethnic Germans wishing to emigrate from the Soviet Union. He is the one who had the most intimate contact with the families that had traveled from their outlying communities.

Auhagen showed a high degree of affection and concern toward the Mennonites and the feeling appears to have been mutual, at least among the 5,000 or so Mennonites who emigrated from the Soviet Union during that winter of 1929/1930. Usually the Mennonites are fairly conservative in naming their communities and tend to use village names from old homelands, Chortiza and Grünfeld among many others. However, when looking through the various place names found in the Mennonite colonies in Brazil, south of Curitiba,¹⁵ and in Paraguay, at Fernheim Colony, one finds an exception; Auhagen was used as the name for two settlements. This is a monument using few words that speaks to the regard in which this unlikely individual was held by those who settled there.

“Notations” October 11, 1929:

Auhagen's notes, other than the final report of December 18, may be best described as edited field notes. His first notations, written on 11 October 1929, run 11 pages and outline the concerns of many of the would-be emigrants. As a means of introducing the diplomatic staff in Moscow to the problems faced by the ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union, he provides a background briefing of how these ethnic German farmers have been systematically discriminated against by the new Soviet government. In his report he cites three reasons for the situation in 1929: the current collectivization politics in the Soviet Union, a poor harvest for 1927-1928, and finally the independent nature of the German farmers themselves. By this time Auhagen reports that thousands of these ethnic Germans were already waiting in the suburbs of Moscow, determined to leave Russia or starve to death. The description that

Auhagen provides suggests that this assembly of farmers resembled a protest aimed at shaming the Soviets into letting them leave.

In his report Auhagen also lists some of the primary areas from which the refugees came. Slavgorod, which had a population of some 30,512 German-speaking people, was particularly well represented, but there were also families from Omsk, Novosibirsk, Pavlodar, Crimea, Stavropol, and Armavir. While the refugees were a mixture of German-speaking religious groups, he notes that this migration seems to have been started by the Mennonites. They had faced particular pressure as their religious beliefs had not easily meshed with the requirements of the Soviet government. Though he does not explicitly say so, the Lutheran and Catholic refugees are portrayed as economic refugees; the Mennonites, however, are painted by him as true religious refugees, with their pacifism being a stumbling block towards full integration into the Soviet system.

As Auhagen had occasion to travel out to visit the refugees on a number of occasions he also described their living conditions in Moscow. He noted that they had settled into rented accommodations along the rail lines that ran from Siberia to Moscow, specifically into the communities that lay between Perlovka and Pushkino. There were approximately 800 Mennonite families, in total, approximately 4500 "souls." To this he added 60 families of Lutheran origin and 40 of Catholic. On the day of his visit he also noted that a further 18 Mennonite and 9 Lutheran families had just arrived via the postal train service.

Auhagen was not content with simply being an observer and reporter and was very interested in motivations that led to such drastic actions. He began asking individuals why they had left their farms, hoping to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of the situation. He concluded that it had been brewing for over a year following the 1928 effort of the Soviet government to dictate farm production and the subsequent "kulakization" of the wealthier farmers.¹⁶ Fortunately, it had been a superficial designation as it still allowed these larger farmers to continue on the land with a reduced landholding. This changed in 1929, when the meaning *kulak* took a sinister turn and far more brutal methods were employed against those with such a designation.¹⁷ The real problem was with the so-called "voluntary" high grain production quotas that the villages had agreed to. The communities and the individual farmers were being driven to desperate measures. Many had to sell off their livestock and buy grain in order to meet their quotas. Auhagen reports that some of these farmers were buying grain at between five and seven rubles per pud,¹⁸ at the same time they had to sell the same grain to the government for 1.10 rubles in order to meet their quotas. Those who could not meet their quota were fined at a rate of five times the monetary value of their shortfall. If it was not possible

for the farmer to meet his quota, and he was unable to pay his fine, his property was seized and auctioned off.

In his interviews, Auhagen was able to determine details of what was happening in the colonies. It was reported that in the Crimean a horse had been sold for as little as 60 kopeks, but the situation in Siberia, which affected mainly the Ob-Irtysh basin, was even worse due to a crop failure.¹⁹ In the German region around Slavgorod a shortage of seed grain existed due to the previous year's crop failure. There the harvest was barely 15 pud per hectare, approximately 2.4 tonnes per farm, and farmers had barely seeded 10 hectare per farm. If one combines this yield with the dictated price of 1.10 rubles per pud, it means that the average farmer only received a gross income of 144 rubles for his entire crop, barely equal to 2 1/2 months of salary of a Soviet labourer.²⁰ Penalties for not meeting the grain quota, however, could exceed 700 rubles per farm.

An especially pressing problem for the refugees was the lack of seed for the following spring. This being the case, they then needed to purchase seed grains from the government at 1.60 rubles per pud. While the brunt of the difficulties was felt by the individual farmers, it was the village councils that had entered into "agreements" with the Soviet government. The Soviets treated the German villages as a whole. Thus, even if one was able to pay one's own fines, it meant an additional burden of paying the balance of fines owed by those who could not meet their obligations. Auhagen met with some refugees who explained to him how this worked in their region. Four settlements, numbering 200 farms, had come under the control of a single village council. That council had agreed to supply 34,000 pud of "excess" production, but the harvest produced little more than 20,000 pud in total, creating a deficit of some 14,000 pud, or 35 pud per farmer. This shortfall resulted in a fine of 192.50 rubles per farmer. Farmers who were compelled to purchase grain from others faced a shortfall of between 175.00 and 245.00 rubles.

According to Auhagen, the Soviet policies were calculated to drive the independent farmers into the collective. Still, as Auhagen reports, approximately 95% of all German farmers were resisting collectivization. For them, joining the collective was not only giving up their independence as farmers, but their personal freedom as well. A concern expressed by these farmers was that the commune only espoused atheistic viewpoints and diminished parental influence on their children. A further difficulty was the free association of the sexes within the commune, a particular concern for mothers of growing children.

All of this assumed that the farmer was permitted to join the commune. In fact, many of them had been denied admission to the

communes, because they have been declared *kulaks*. This might have been tolerable, if they had been aware of their status from the start. Often an individual would join the commune and then after the fact be declared a *kulak*. The collective then banished him and his family, but kept the property he had brought into the collective. This effectively ruined many farmers financially. From this perspective, Auhagen sees it as quite understandable that these refugees would suddenly turn up in Moscow, since they were facing ruin and destruction anyway.

Though many of them were living in misery, most were satisfied that they had been able to bring weeks, even months, worth of food along and had saved some money to support themselves. In fact the very poor, those unable to pay their taxes and still owing money, had not been allowed to leave. Auhagen does note that, although they were able to sell their grain and animals, rarely had they been able to sell their houses or any of their contents. He estimated that those who had sold their farms early had thousands of rubles, and that the average family possessed approximately 250 rubles. Most of the early refugees seem to have been able to maintain a fairly good standard of living. It was the late arrivals who found themselves in dire straights.

The housing of the refugees in October was of great concern to Auhagen. The cost of a room that measured 3 1/2 meters square was between 25 and 35 rubles a month and it was not unusual to see a family of 10 or more in this space.²¹ In some cases, two families would share such a room. Disease was also starting to take a toll. In Perlovka, a number of children had already died of measles. An even more pressing problem was the coming winter as a cubic meter of wood for heating was selling for 80 rubles. Foodstuffs were also very expensive: milk, if it was to be had, was of poor quality and cost 34 kopeks per liter and eggs were selling at 11 kopeks each.²² Bread was also very difficult to obtain, because, as Auhagen reports, bread ration cards were often not issued to the refugees. The cost of black bread had also become very expensive. The normal ration of 300 grams per day was generally priced at 12 kopeks, although some refugees reported having to pay 40 kopeks for a 300 gram ration. Potatoes alone still seemed affordable at one ruble per pud.

The Moscow refugees may have appealed to the German Embassy, but their goal was not to settle in Germany, but Canada. As of 11 October 1929 it seemed that everything was in order; all that could be done had been done, except for obtaining the actual exit visa. Here the Mennonites were ahead of the Lutherans and Catholics, who did not have anyone outside of Russia willing to sponsor them. They had not only contacted the German Embassy in Moscow, but also had written the Central Executive Committee and the Central Committee itself in hopes of procuring exit visas. In addition, they had written directly

to Piotr Smidovich,²³ who was responsible for national minorities in the Central Committee. They even wrote to Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, and to Maxim Gorky in exile in Sorrento Italy. Some even went so far as to threaten to go to the Red Square and die together as one man in protest.²⁴

Despite having issued six passports to Mennonite families in August of 1929 the Soviets at this point were denying everyone exit visas. Their greatest fear was that the small trickle would turn into a torrent. The last hurdle that the Soviet government put before the refugees was the inflated cost of obtaining an exit visa. At a time when union members could obtain an exit visa for five rubles, it cost "poor" farmers 50 rubles per family member aged 16 or older, mid-sized farmers 110-220 rubles per person, and those designated *kulaks* had to pay 330 rubles for each family member over the age 16.²⁵ In addition, another 10% was added to the cost of the visa for the Red Cross. Considering that a Soviet worker's average monthly salary was 66 rubles, and that the average savings that a refugee family brought with it was 250 rubles, these amounts seemed insurmountable.

At the end of these initial notations, Auhagen wonders whether Canada and the United States might now become interested in a relief effort at least for those around Moscow, if not for those who had not yet left their homes. His analysis of the situation was that the Soviets would most likely not tolerate the misery in which these refugees found themselves if external pressure could be brought to bear. In that event, he felt that the exit visas would be granted and an administrative solution to exorbitant costs found.

"Notations" October 18, 1929

On October 17 Auhagen visited the refugees in Kliaz'ma together with Professor Hoetzsch²⁶ and Professor Zeiss.²⁷ They met with three families, a total of 25 people, who occupied a rented room measuring 2.5 x 3.0 meters, this did not include the kitchen area, which was half as big again. The families had been required to rent the space for seven months total and had to agree to pay 250 rubles, of which 75 rubles were in advance. Their health at this point was still not problematic, but Zeiss anticipated an imminent outbreak of communicable diseases. He already reported a child with fever, the result of typhus. He noted that a number of women were in advanced stages of pregnancy and the rainy cold weather did not bode well for their future. This assessment was supported by an older Mennonite they met, who predicted that the first funerals would start taking place in about two weeks.

Auhagen emphasized that a relief effort should start soon, but the "interest" the Soviet authorities did show in the refugees after Auhagen's first visit was not welcomed. On the 12th of October the militia visited the homes of some of the people with whom he had met. Their visits were threatening, taking place at 1 a.m. and involving questions with regard to the identity of the refugees' leaders; their response was that they did not have a leadership structure. The refugees also found disturbing the visits of students from the university in Moscow, who seemed to come to them on a daily basis. Auhagen reports that eight students visited the refugees on the 17th of October, urging them to return to Slavgorod at the expense of the government. But it was more than an encouragement, as the students also reportedly threatened the refugees with further actions if they did not comply.

Even then more refugees were reported coming. Obstacles in Slavgorod had been put in place to discourage further transfers to Moscow: the train stations were watched by the local police and those in arrears on their debts and taxes were arrested by the militia and incarcerated. Still farmers liquidated their operations (in some areas 50% had done so) and families continued leaving for Moscow, often heading out under cover of night's darkness. Because many came with only three to four weeks worth of food for their stay in Moscow, Auhagen feared famine for thousands in the suburbs of Moscow. Still others came, some now from Ekaterinoslav in Ukraine, others from the Volga. Auhagen's concerns turned to administrative matters. If all of those who wanted to leave the Soviet Union turned up at the consulate, the problem of issuing passports would be immense. He estimated that of the 1,238,549 ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union, between 700,000 and 800,000 wished to emigrate. Complicating matters, a number of Russians, who also wished to leave, were starting to fall in with the Germans on the way to Moscow, making it difficult to differentiate between those who had a genuine claim to a German passport and those who did not.

Auhagen's visits to the refugees revealed a desperate situation in the colonies. A German engineer reported to him that in some places things had become so treacherous that many shootings and suicides had occurred as a result of the inability to deliver the requisite quotas of wheat. Auhagen could only hope that this last point was an exaggeration.

"Notations" October 28, 1929

The situation for the refugees around Moscow steadily worsened. It was also at this time that the German Embassy and Auhagen in

particular ran into difficulties with Soviet officials. It seems that they did not appreciate the fact that Auhagen was beginning to bring attention to the plight of the refugees to the world's media. The simple fact is that it was not really Auhagen's doing. Already during his first visit with the refugees he had met with a number of newspaper people who had already been working on the story, including reporters from the *Kölnische Zeitung* (Cologne Newspaper), *Hamburger Nachrichten* (Hamburg News), *The Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Chicago Daily News*. In addition, the International News Service, represented by numerous freelance correspondents, was submitting stories to a variety of newspapers around the world.

On Auhagen's third visit he was accompanied by a Herr Metzger of the *Kölnische Zeitung*, who also represented the famous Ullstein Verlag (Ullstein Publishing House) in Germany. Metzger noted a significant recent increase in the number of refugees, a rise from 941 Mennonite families to 1,030 in the previous four days. The 200 Lutheran and Catholic families brought the total to well over 6000 refugees waiting at the outskirts of Moscow. Then on the 26th of October an entire train carriage of Crimean refugees had arrived. Among their number were families from Orenburg, Ufa, Aulie Ata, and Ust'-Kamenogorsk, all reporting having been driven from their land and their homes for being unable to meet their wheat quotas. Reports from Kazakhstan were that the harvest had been satisfactory, but the quotas were set prohibitively high.

The refugees also reported that the government was taking measures to prevent further emigration. With the quotas raised to new heights, it was now impossible for families to raise the money for the trip and discharge their debts. Even if they raised the necessary money, they could be refused the necessary travel documentation. Some of the Crimean and Ukrainian refugees even reported that they had been threatened with summary execution for hoarding wheat. In Grünfeld, by Krivoy-Rog, a farmer had had the barrel of a revolver placed in his mouth by a Soviet official demanding to know the location of any hidden wheat. Officials were also suspicious of anyone traveling with a great deal of luggage and sometimes denied such travelers boarding privileges. As Auhagen saw it, the efforts used to prevent refugees from traveling to Moscow were mostly non-violent only because officials worried that excessive force would increase the number of refugees and most likely lead to violent confrontations. However, in spite of the efforts of the Soviet government, Auhagen still expected the refugee numbers to increase.

Auhagen feared that at some point the Soviet government would act against those who had made their way to Moscow. He especially anticipated mass arrests. On the 26th of October the militia of the Moscow

region had already begun registering refugees, ostensibly to create lists from which passports could be issued. The German Embassy expressed concern that the lists were being compiled on the basis of oral statements made by the refugees. Some believed it simply a ploy to obtain the names and other information from the refugees with no real intention to issue passports. This new policy also came with the announcement of increased visa and Red Cross costs: passports were to cost a uniform 200 rubles plus another 20 rubles for the Red Cross, no matter that the poorer farmers and workers had normally paid only 50 rubles plus a five ruble fee for the Red Cross. It was a move seen by some simply as an official attempt to strip the Mennonites of the last of their money.

This new policy dealt with individuals rather than groups, as had been the case in the past. This dissuaded the refugees from organizing and helping one another. Auhagen believes that if the refugees had organized, they would have been able to survive without the financial help from the outside; obviously, organizing would have brought its own dangers with a leadership susceptible to arrest. In spite of the stiff restrictions, it seems that many were able to pay the increased fees requested; one Soviet report indicated that over 170,000 rubles had been collected as a result of the new policy, meaning that approximately 770 individual passports and exit visas had been issued.

By this time real problems for the refugees were beginning to develop. The leadership in Pushkino stopped issuing bread ration cards to new arrivals, though refugees in Mystishchi were still receiving ration cards. Appropriate documents to purchase bread of course were useless if one did not have money. Many of the families by this time had begun subsisting on alms from other refugee families; 40 families living in a former tea business in Perlovka were said to be in a particularly bad state.

One improvement for the situation of the refugees was the arrival of a medical aid station close to Perlovka in Dzhangorsk, meant to stop the spread of contagious disease into Moscow. This deployment at least gave the refugees the hope of medical help, because the threat of contagious diseases spreading within their own community was significant.

While the *Moscow Review* was reporting that most of the refugees were of the landed classes, Auhagen was adamant that most were in fact from the middle or poor classes. One of the village counselors, for example, had given him a list of 80 families of which 34 were from the middle class and 46 were of the poorer classes. He also had a report from another village, which indicated that 8 families were from the middle class, a further 5 from the lower middle classes, 18 from the poorer class of farmers, and only 3 that belong to the so-called landed

class. It seemed that Auhagen was preparing to challenge the official views of the Soviet government.

“Notations” November 14, 1929

Two weeks had passed since Auhagen’s last notations. During this period he was busy defending himself against attacks from the Soviets. The Soviets even called Auhagen’s writing, as well as those of the journalist Otto Schiller, “impudent and undisguised espionage.”²⁸ Furthermore, they accused Auhagen, and indeed the entire German mission in Moscow, of meddling in the internal matters of the Soviet Union. It was during this time that one of his reports was published in Germany, causing a stir. The Soviet officials also began targeting Auhagen as the source of the negative reports appearing in the world’s newspapers. He was accused of having held a public meeting, where he had expressed his views on Soviet agricultural politics. Auhagen responded that he had only traveled with an official escort and that government officials were always present at meetings he had attended, that he had only spoken at one large meeting at the invitation of the local leadership and that he had done everything within the guidelines set by the Soviet leadership. But Soviet officials were looking for a scapegoat and further accused that Auhagen had spoken to large groups of ethnic Germans in the Crimea in May of 1929. He supposedly had instigated the refugee crisis by suggesting that ethnic Germans leave Russia as quickly as possible and that farmers resist collectivization. Again, he denied the allegations, insisting that even at private meetings with groups or individuals he had refrained from giving his opinions on collectivization.

The accusation that he had been speaking with correspondents about the situation in the USSR was more difficult to deny, as he had in fact done so. This is where the real danger for Auhagen lay. Though his diplomatic status protected him from arrest, the Soviet government clearly was trying to intimidate him. Notably, the German Embassy in Moscow supported him only to a point, distancing itself, for example, from his research in Siberia.

“Report” December 18, 1929

In spite of the difficulties Auhagen faced and the pressure that the Soviet government was bringing to bear on him, he undertook one last trip to the Ukraine and the Crimean. During his travels he met with many ethnic Germans who had liquidated everything, believing

that they could escape from Russia. Many of these would-be refugees now slept in haystacks with no hope of relief. Auhagen reports that many became completely dejected when he told them that any hope of leaving their current situation was impossible. Only certain ethnic German assets had been spared by the Soviet officials, for example, a seed company in the Crimean that supplied valuable high quality seed grains. However, even those involved with this business operation thought that their days were numbered.

While the situation was bad for the general population of the colonies, Auhagen found them utterly horrible for the *kulaks*, despite the words of Kalinin and Rykov, who both indicated that no further measures were planned. Not their words, but those of the Moscow German language newspaper editorial of November 13 appeared to be true: the editorial concluded that "There is no room in the collective for the *kulak*. He is sentenced to death."²⁹ According to Auhagen, German colonies were targeted above all because they were especially successful, and of these farms, those belonging to Mennonites were the most prosperous and thus prime targets for the Soviet officials. Evidence suggested that dekulakization was indeed more rigorously enforced among the German farmers than among the Russians. In total, of the 26,000,000 farms in the Soviet Union 3% or 780,000 were targeted for dekulakization. The percentage among the "German" farms, however, was much higher. When Auhagen confirmed these calculations with the Vice-Chairman of the Central Committee for Collectivization, the Vice-Chairman simply said, "that's what revolution is for."³⁰

In this final 25 page report, Auhagen gives numerous examples of what was happening to the German farmers in the Soviet Union. In the area around Kharkov, 5 of 63 farmers had been stripped of their right to vote and a further 26 had been individually taxed. It should be noted that being stripped of one's political rights or being individually taxed was the equivalent of being declared a *kulak*, though the official designation had not yet been made. Five of the operations had been auctioned off and the remaining 21 were in danger of the same fate. Of 65 farm operations in the area of Krivoy-Rog, 7 had been auctioned off. To demonstrate how unevenly the policy was applied, Auhagen notes that of 85 farms in one of the new settlements only 1 had been auctioned off. In many of the settlements around Kherson and Artemovsk up to 50% of the privately owned farms had been taxed under the new discriminatory system. Moreover, around Artemovsk, 30 of the 62 operations had been declared as boycotted, blacklisted with ominous signs that before long they too would fall under the auctioneer's hammer. Of the 30 German farms around Melitopol, only 5 had been taxed individually. In a further settlement around Melitopol, 6 of 92 farms had been taxed individually and 30 of the farmers had lost their

political rights. In the large Mennonite area around Halbstadt on the Molotschna River, 17% of the farmers were taxed individually and then were either driven from their farms or were expecting to be. Of the 100 farms around Kiev, 4 had been individually taxed in the previous year and 16 in the current year.

Treatment was not quite so harsh in the Crimean colony. One district of 50 farms in that area saw only 2 farms being taxed individually, but 17 had been partially auctioned off, 4 had been completely liquidated, and 1 had been abandoned. A second colony in the Crimea saw 7 of its 50 farms taxed individually and 3 auctioned off. In a third settlement of 26 farms, 2 were taxed individually and a further 9 had been seized, 2 more farms were partially confiscated and 4 of the farmers had been sentenced to prison terms. In the area of Rostov on the Don 2 of the 40 farms saw their owners stripped of their political rights and 13 of the midsize farmers had been put on the same taxation level as a *kulak*, though without the designation. In the same area, 15 of some 55 farmers were arrested for maliciously not filling their grain quotas. In the district of Petropavlovsk, 30 of the 70 farm operations were seized and a further 15 auctioned off. Ten of these farms had all of their foodstuffs confiscated. In the area of Slavgorod, 11 of 42 farm operations were auctioned off and 7 farmers were stripped of their political rights and in another sector of the same area 32 of 45 operations were individually taxed. Of the 320 farms in the German colony in the area of Krasanyj Kut 9 had been auctioned off and a further 39 were marked for auction with the possibility of another 12 being added to the list.

Auhagen, always careful not to identify individuals in his reports and notations, also provides some detailed examples of what was taking place. In a colony in the area of Balzer, 20 of 400 farmers had been arrested and another 20 had been driven from their land. One of the farmers, who had worked 33 desiatinas³¹ of land, had managed to bring in 2000 pud of grain. He was initially required to deliver 1373 pud, which was later increased by an additional 330, bringing the total to 1703 pud. It seems that the authorities were still not satisfied when he was given 24 hours to produce another 1000 pud of grain. When he could not do this, everything was confiscated the next day and he was driven off of his land.³²

While the refugee numbers seem to indicate that the Germans were free to leave the land whenever they wished, this was not necessarily the case. Very often, if an individual spoke of leaving, he soon found himself in prison with an uncertain future. For example, in the city of Pokrokoje, those who had been arrested for having expressed a desire to leave were now being transported to labor camps on the White Sea. Those in prison were sometimes forced to live up to three weeks on a

ration of 100 grams of bread and a glass of water a day, though Auhagen expressed some skepticism in regard to this last claim.

Auhagen supported his report with reference to another German³³ traveling through the Russian countryside. In the summer of 1929, on the recommendation of Germany's Communist Party leader, Ernst Thälmann,³⁴ an individual named Schippmann had come to the Soviet Union as a teacher. He had hoped to teach in the Caucasus and had most likely hoped to learn something from Soviet methods. However, on meeting with Auhagen, when he presented himself at the German Embassy, Schippmann could only speak in horror of the agricultural politics as they were practiced. Rather than teach he had been told that he needed to help with the so-called "grain politics." When he refused, he was told that as a communist he ought to obey party officials. He promptly resigned from the Communist Party. Auhagen reports that Schippmann had submitted a question in writing at a meeting of communists that caused him some difficulty. He had asked whether it was worth while for German Communists to allow themselves to be shot for a system such as the one he was observing. This statement was an obvious reference to the street fighting currently taking place in Germany, mostly between the National Socialists and Communists in the run-up to the various elections. In the end, it is simply reported that Schippmann was sent home to Germany for psychological treatment.

Auhagen's own analysis was that the situation was critical. While there were some who had joined the collectives early on and some who were willing to throw their lot in with the Soviet regime, many simply hoped to outlive the government, believing that the regime, in its current form, could not last. But the problem of having sufficient supplies to last the year remained with Auhagen estimating that about 5% of the ethnic Germans were in danger of dying over the winter. He cites, for example, the Volga region which had had an average harvest but was expecting starvation among its people by January. In the Ukraine and the Crimean, famine was expected by the end of winter, affecting approximately 10,000 families or 50,000 individuals. Auhagen came to believe that the collectives were actually ripe for internal conflict, exacerbated by the fact that more and more unwilling people were being driven into the collectives. In one case, a Mennonite who owned one of the bigger farms, had indicated to him that the so-called "collectivization fever" was a means of the state committing suicide, worse than had foreign soldiers come into the land and pillaged all that stood in their way.³⁵ Conflict seemed imminent.

The result of all of this was a severe dislocation of the means of producing food in the Soviet Union. Increasingly common was the slaughter of farm animals, killed not only so that farmers would have something to eat, but because the animals simply could no longer be

fed. This caused the price of slaughtered animals to fall precipitously, the price of a cow, for example, from 150 to 30 rubles. In the area around Kamenka, a once thriving German Catholic settlement on the Volga, the number of cows held by farmers fell to a one third of that of the previous year. On the approximately 100 farms around Kiev the number of dairy cows fell from 470 in 1928 to 200 in 1929, the number of calves from an average of 4 or 5 per farm to 10 in the entire colony, the number of pigs from an average of between 10 and 15 per farm, to between 2 and 3 in 1929. Clearly, while some of the regions might have been able to survive the winter of 1930, the years following were already set to be disasters. Those on the land could easily see and read the signs of what was to come; they had absolutely nothing to lose by packing up and trying to leave and taking one's chances on the outskirts of Moscow.

Conclusion

Otto Auhagen's notes and report provide a unique insight into the Moscow refugee crisis of 1929. He fills in many of the blanks that exist in the stories that have been passed down over the decades. His academic training led to detailed reports on the cramped quarters of the refugees, even indicating with some precision the dimensions of the shelters. He was also able report on the precise financial situation of the refugees. Those reports also show how the refugees, when they acted as individuals rather than members of a community, lost their freedom of movement. Because the refugees were made to wait, the inflated prices for lodging, food, heat, and lastly the visa itself, quickly depleted their savings to the point where they could neither leave Russia nor return to their home villages. This situation trapped them in Moscow's suburbs and put them at the mercy of the Soviet government.

Auhagen's point of the lack of cohesion and leadership among the Mennonite refugees is significant. While valid concerns regarding the creation of a leadership structure existed, Auhagen concluded that the Mennonites might have been able to survive if they had worked together. One can only assume that he meant that they should have pooled their resources, something that, according to Auhagen, did not happen. This situation may have had a number of different causes. Many of those gathered in Moscow were from colonies spread throughout the Soviet Union and likely unfamiliar with one another. Given the short period of time, they may also have been unable to build sufficient relationships to allow for a communal response to the Soviet officials. It may also have been a tactic calculated to ensure that

the Moscow officials could not have easy access to all of their money, certainly a sensible response given the circumstances.

Another reason, however, for the failure of a cohesive, communal response to the Soviet authority was that those with sufficient money simply did not wish to make their surplus available to others. Some 770 of the refugees had managed to procure exit visas under the existing rules, indicating that they had had the means to meet the financial requirements for visas. Such action would not necessarily have raised an alarm with Auhagen, who might well have expected individuals to act to ensure the survival of their own families without much concern for those around them. It may well be that Auhagen, an outsider, was able to identify the one strategy that could have saved the Moscow refugees, while those who should have been attuned to such an approach were simply too afraid for their own survival to see it.

Notes

- 1 *Vor den Toren Moskaus; oder: Gottes gnädige Durchhilfe in einer schweren Zeit* (Abbotsford, BC: Komitee der Flüchtlinge, 1960).
- 2 "Über dieses diabolische Steuersystem schreibt Dr. W. Quiring: Der Vorgang des Totsteuerns der privaten Landwirtschaft und des Ausscheidens der zur 'physischen Vernichtung' bestimmten Kulaken ist folgender: *Ein fast immer jüdischer Beamter*, der 'Instruktor' der der Steuerabteilung des Rayons, auch Prodagent genannt, erscheint im Bezirksamt (Wollost), um die Steuern einzutreiben." (*Vor den Toren Moskaus; oder: Gottes gnädige Durchhilfe in einer schweren Zeit*, 29: Italics added)
- 3 John B. Toews, "The Mennonites in the Early Soviet Period," *Mennonite Life* 24 (1969): 101-108; John B. Toews "Mennonites and the Siberian Frontier (1907-1930) Some Observations," *Mennonite Quarterly* 47 (1973): 83-101; John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets, and Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982); and James Urry, "After the Rooster Crowed: Some Issues Concerning the Interpretation of Mennonite-Bolshevik Relations during the Early Soviet Period," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995): 26-50; Harry Loewen, "Can the Son Answer for the Father?" Reflections on Stalinist Terror," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998): 76-90 and Peter Letkemann, "Mennonite Victims of the Great Terror," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998): 33-58.
- 4 Detlef Brandes and Andrej Savin, *Die Sibiriendeutschen im Sowjetstaat 1919-1938* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2001); Colin P. Neufeldt, "Through the Fires of Hell: The Dekulakization and Collectivization of the Soviet Mennonite Community, 1928-1933," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998): 9-32.
- 5 Harvey L. Dyck, *Weimar Germany & Soviet Russia, 1926-1933: A Study in Diplomatic Instability* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966). Dyck addresses the topic further in Harvey Leonard Dyck, "Collectivization, Depression, and Immigration, 1929-1930," in *Empire and Nations*, editors H.L. Dyck and H. P. Krosby (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 144-159.
- 6 Dyck focuses especially on the role of Otto Auhagen during the refugee crisis. He uses archival material believed to be linked to Otto Auhagen, stating that "many of the reports to Berlin above the name of Twardowski were actually [Auhagen's]" (Dyck 1966, 176), although he does not indicate how he came to this conclusion.

- He also uses Otto Auhagen, *Die agrarische Umwälzung in Sowjetrußland und ihre wirtschaftliche Bedeutung*, Frankfurt am Main: Die deutsche Nationalbibliothek, 1931, and his notes concerning Moscow refugee crisis as published in *Die Schicksalswende des Russland-Deutschen Bauerntums in den Jahren 1927-1930*
- 7 Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982).
 - 8 The Auhagen notes and reports used in this article may be found in "Russland Politik. Mennoniten—Deutschstämmige. Deutsche in Russland," GFM 33/4538: L192230-L192479. The National Archives, Kew, England. Specific references are as follows: "Aufzeichnung," October 11, 1929. GFM 33/4538: L192465-L192475; "Aufzeichnung," October 18, 1929. GFM 33/4538: L192460-L192463; "Aufzeichnung," October 28, 1929. GFM 33/4538: L192453-L192456; "Aufzeichnung," November 14, 1929. GFM 33/4538: L192366-L192371; "Die Situation der deutschen Kolonisten und der Landwirtschaft in der UdSSR," December 18, 1929. GFM 33/4538: L192270-L192294. There is a reference to a microfilm serial number L609 in the bibliography, a number also noted on the cover of this file, but it is not used in conjunction with Auhagen's activities in the Soviet Union.
 - 9 Otto Auhagen, *Zur Kenntnis der Marschwirtschaft* (Berlin: Parey, 1896).
 - 10 Manfred Sapper, Volker Weichsel and Agathe Gebert, "Editorial," *Osteuropa* 12 (2004): 3-4.
 - 11 Klaus Mehnert, "Survey of Slavic and East European Studies in Germany since 1945," *American Slavic and East European Review* 9.3 (1950): 192. See also Otto Auhagen, "Wirtschaftslage der Sowjetunion im Sommer 1932," *Osteuropa* 7 (1932): 644-655; Otto Auhagen *Die heutige Lage der deutschen Bauern in der Sowjetunion*, Berlin: Evangelischer Verein für deutsche Ansiedler und Auswanderer, 1936; Otto Auhagen, *Über die Entwicklung der Agrarverfassung der deutschen Bauern im heutigen Gebiet der sozialistischen Sowjet-Republiken*, Berlin: F. Vahlen, 1939; Otto Auhagen, *Die Ansiedlung deutscher Bauern in den eingegliederten Ostgebieten : Vorträge*, Berlin: Vereinigung für deutsche Siedlung und Wanderung, 1942 and Otto Auhagen, *Die Schicksalswende des Russland-Deutschen Bauerntums in den Jahren 1927-1930*, Quellen und Materialien zur Erforschung des Deutschtums in Osteuropa. Ed. Ernst Meynen, Vol. 6, Leipzig: Hirzel, 1942.
 - 12 Deutsche Verwaltung für Volksbildung in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone, *Liste der auszusondernden Literatur* (Berlin: Zentralverlag, 1946)
 - 13 Mehnert, 192.
 - 14 Auhagen consistently refers to the Mennonites in Russia as Germans or ethnic Germans. He uses Mennonite when he distinguishes between the religious groups within the German community.
 - 15 The Brazilian "Auhagen" settlement managed to survive for only three years before the colonists dispersed into the surrounding communities, due to the poor soil conditions in the immediate area.
 - 16 According to Auhagen's later report of December 18, 1929, the term *kulak* was relative and not particularly well defined in practice. There was a pragmatic elasticity to its meaning, which allowed the authorities to target almost anyone.
 - 17 The term was already in use prior to the Soviet government in Russia and tended to mean anyone who used hired labour. In May of 1929 the "Council of People's Commissars" (Sovnarkom) decreed that any of the following conditions could lead to an individual or family being declared a *kulak*: regular usage of hired labour; ownership of a mill, a creamery or other complex equipment, or a complex machine with mechanical motor; systematic letting of agricultural equipment or facilities for rent; involvement in commerce, money-lending, commercial brokerage, or other non-labour occupation. This also meant that any peasant who sold his surpluses to anyone other than the government could be declared a *kulak*.
 - 18 One Russian pud equals approximately 36 pounds or 16.4 kg.

- 19 The source of the Ob-Irtysh River is in the Altai Mountains and flows past Barnaul and Novosibirsk.
- 20 William Henry Chamberlin, *Soviet Russia: A Living Record and a History* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1930). Chamberlin (169) reports that the average worker in the Soviet Union earned approximately 66 rubles per month, with those living Moscow earning a little more.
- 21 Chamberlin (169) notes that the average housing allotted to workers was 4.75 square metres per person for an industrial worker, 4.15 for textile workers, and 3.7 for miners.
- 22 This is confirmed by Chamberlin. He reports that *Izvestia* as saying that milk and eggs had become especially dear in the year between 1928 and 1929.
- 23 Smidowich is an interesting if shadowy figure, who may have exercised a great deal of influence on how the refugees were treated in Moscow. Prior to the Russian Revolution he, like most members of his family, was active in the revolutionary movement for which he was exiled to Tula. He continued his studies and became closely involved in Bolshevik conspiratorial activities abroad and returned to Russia in 1903. Smidowich held various positions of authority in the Bolshevik government and participated in the suppression of anti-Soviet uprisings in Kronstadt, Tambovsk and on the southern front. He was chairman of the Committee for Matters concerning Sects (1922), and a member of the Antireligious Committee (1922-29), attached to the Central Committee and chairman of the Secretariat concerning Religious Cults (1924-29). For his loyalty and service he was awarded the Order of Lenin (1931). His political zeal to enforce Soviet theomachist values was complemented by such refined interests as piano music and horticulture, a hobby that was common to many of the leading Communists including Stalin himself.
- 24 *Vor den Toren Moskaus; oder: Gottes gnädige Durchhilfe in einer schweren Zeit* 51-60.
- 25 These designations had pre-revolution origins and were introduced by Nicolas II's Prime Minister Piotr Stolypin in 1906. Peasants were given one of three designations: *bednyaks*, or poor peasants, *seredniaks*, or middle-class peasants, and *kulaks*, the rich farmers. Additionally, there was the designation of *batraks*, or landless agriculture worker.
- 26 Otto Hoetzsch was a recognized expert in eastern European studies and helped edit *Osteuropa* together with Auhagen.
- 27 Heinz Zeiss, director of the biological laboratories for the German Red Cross in Moscow, participated in a number of medical projects that linked Germany and the Soviet Union between 1922 and 1932. He later participated in racial research in the National Socialist Germany.
- 28 David Engermann, "Modernization from the Other Shore: American Observers and the Costs of Soviet Economic Development," *American Historical Review*, 105 (2000), 71, endnote 22.
- 29 Auhagen, L192272.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 33 desiatinas equals approximately 36.3 ha.
- 32 It is interesting to note that the Volga Republic Germans were largely unrepresented in the initial group of refugees. They had been spared the initial wave of actions taken against the German ethnic farmers in Russia. They, however, would begin to flee from their lands as a "campaign" was organized against them in the middle of October.
- 33 In this case Auhagen uses the common term *Reichsdeutscher*, which denotes a German who has come directly from Germany and is not what was normally referred to as *Volksdeutsch* that is an ethnic German who was born and was living in a country other than Germany.

- 34 Ernst Thälmann, had been born in Hamburg and had visited Soviet Union numerous times since the end of the First World War.
- 35 Auhagen, L192289.