

Assembling an Intervention: The Russian Government and the Mennonite Brethren Schism of the 1860s

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On 6 January 1860 a group of 16 Mennonites from the Molochna colony presented the church council with their intention to secede. The signatories asserted that Mennonites in Russia had deviated from their true spiritual path. The laity's disregard for both Mennonite doctrine and church discipline, along with the absence of responsible church leadership to curb the depravity of Mennonite colonists, made it impossible for them to continue to worship and participate in religious ceremonies in their churches. To justify their decision to secede, the Brethren, as they called themselves, cited the father of the Mennonite faith, Menno Simons, and his support of the principle enunciated in 1 Corinthians 5:11: "But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not eat."¹ Abiding by these words, the Brethren began to celebrate communion in private homes, administered without the guidance of a minister. As the self-proclaimed true followers of

Menno Simons, these men claimed the right to build their own church congregation, form their own church leadership and renounce ties to the established Mennonite churches.

The 1860 Mennonite Brethren schism presented perhaps the most significant religious crisis for Mennonites in their sojourn in the Russian empire. In the late eighteenth century, Mennonites and other western European farm groups immigrated to the Southern Russian borderland at the invitation of Catherine the Great. A relationship of convenience, Catherine envisioned prosperity in her newly annexed territory and sought the help of foreign colonists from Europe to cultivate the land. In exchange for their settlement in the region, Catherine offered freedom of religious belief, military exemption and self-administration to those colonists. Mennonites lobbied for their own agreement with the Russian government to be officially enshrined in a Charter of Privileges, which Paul I granted in 1800. For Mennonites, this document guaranteed the privileges associated with Mennonite colonial status and symbolized the exclusivity of the Mennonite identity. With the 1860 schism, however, entitlement to these privileges became an issue of contention between the Brethren and the established churches as both groups claimed Mennonite status.

Traditionally, Mennonite historiography has presented the schism as an internal religious dispute, significant primarily to Mennonite communities.² This approach fails to place the schism in the broader context of the blossoming economic, social and religious ties between ethno-confessional groups in New Russia and therefore does not capture the difficulties this caused for the state's governance of its borderlands. More importantly, it neglects the significance of the ambiguity of Russia's policy of religious toleration, an ambiguity that actually contributed to further fuelling the dispute.

In 1860 the Guardian Committee became the first Russian governmental body involved in the Mennonite schism. For the next decade, local, regional, and national levels of government struggled to find a standard position on the schism. Each government agency interpreted the significance of the schism differently, leading to a haphazard approach to resolving tensions in the Mennonite community and to normalizing the Brethren's relationship to the state. The social stability of the Mennonite colonies and the surrounding villages topped the list of concerns about the schism for all the government agencies; however, views of what threatened the stability of the area differed. For the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) social stability was synonymous with political loyalty, whereas the Guardian Committee and the Governor General of the region defined social stability as respecting local authorities and not engaging in unregulated, disruptive activities. The reaction of these bodies to the

Brethren's activities illustrates these different definitions of social stability, which affected the interpretation of and implementation of religious policy in the empire. Although the Brethren were not exiled or forcibly relocated, their treatment differed depending on which governmental body was dealing with them.

As the schism had far-reaching consequences for the Mennonite community and its neighbours, it should not have been expected to go unnoticed by the Russian regional government. And it did not. An abundance of correspondence between different levels of the government debated the implication of the schism and the characteristics and beliefs of the sectarians. Although experienced with governing multi-religious territories, the reaction of the Russian government illustrates its persistent struggle to form a cohesive approach to administering and supervising the minority religious groups living in its borderlands. Hindering the establishment of a standard policy was the "bewildering web of overlapping jurisdictions and parallel, unintegrated channels of authority" that was the Russian bureaucracy.³ Particularly in the nineteenth century, as Russia experienced economic and social changes that broke down boundaries between ethnic groups, the government's ad hoc religious policy began to create more problems than it solved.

In the case of the Mennonite schism, there seems to have been little evolution in the government's policies toward the Mennonite Brethren. Instead, positions taken from the beginning of the schism by local, regional and national governmental bodies remained consistent throughout the 1860s. The Guardian Committee and the Governor General attributed to the sectarians a pernicious character and attempted to use their power to at least curb the growth of the sect, if not destroy the movement. In contrast, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of State Domains (MGI) in St. Petersburg took a pragmatic, tolerant approach. They collected information about the activities of the sectarians and judged the character of the secessionists based on the information gathered. They regarded the movement to be primarily religious in nature and the secessionists to be somewhat fanatical, but fundamentally innocuous.⁴ Although concerned with certain activities of the Brethren, these national agencies were interested more in any indication of religious interaction between the Brethren and Orthodox believers than in becoming embroiled in an ostensibly internal Mennonite dispute.

The different interpretations of the nature of the schism and its impact on the region affected the approaches proposed by these agencies in dealing with this issue. The absence of a consensus on how to proceed produced ambiguity in Russia's religious policy. Since the substance of the policy depended on the level of the bureaucracy involved, the Mennonites received contradictory directives as to how

they should address their schism. These contradictory measures created more divisions for Mennonites as each side managed to find a sympathetic hearing from the bureaucracy.

Russia's religious policy towards its minorities was based on an ostensibly simple concept: religious toleration (*veroterpimost'*). In order to incorporate a diverse array of minority ethno-confessional groups into the empire, Russia, an Orthodox state, bestowed freedom of religious organization and worship on recognized minority faiths.⁵ In exchange for this freedom, the state banned proselytizing among Orthodox believers, as conversion from Orthodoxy was illegal in the empire; in many cases, it encouraged loyalty to the tsar by linking the ecclesiastical structure of foreign faiths to the state bureaucracy.

Yet, the government negotiated the specific details of its religious policy on a case-by-case basis as opposed to articulating a standardized policy to address state/religious minority relations across the empire. This contributed to the ambiguity surrounding Russia's conceptualization of 'religious toleration.' As well, the bureaucratization of religious affiliation through the cooption of religious elites or, in others cases, through the overlap between civil and religious jurisdictions, blurred the demarcation between these spheres and, in cases of community disputes, further complicated the articulation of Russia's religious policy. For example, in the case of the Mennonites, the government linked religious and civil rights to the Mennonite colonial status. In fact, exemption from military service, permitted by the government in recognition of the centrality of pacifism to the Mennonite faith, was not included as a subcategory of Mennonite religious rights; instead, the government confirmed this privilege as part of Mennonites' social and economic benefits. Nonetheless, a lack of clarity about what constituted religious toleration did not imply indifference on the part of the tsarist state in addressing religious issues in the empire. The state took seriously its role as the benefactor of religious minorities and protector of Russian Orthodoxy. However, the exact criteria employed by the state to shape its interaction with these groups were not always apparent.

First on the Scene: The Regional Authorities Slowly Respond

In the aftermath of the Mennonite schism, the Guardian Committee was the first government body to assess the situation. Created by Alexander I to supervise Russia's foreign settlements in Southern Russia, the Guardian Committee managed the colonists' social and economic development. Headquartered in Odessa, the Guardian Committee relied on inspectors to keep it informed about the settlements and to supervise the implementation of the Committee's directive

to the colonies.⁶ In early February, a Guardian Committee inspector spoke to local Mennonite officials about the schism. To gather more information about the break, he also approached the dissenting Brethren. During their conversation, the inspector convinced three of the main secessionists that the Russian government supported the free practice of religious beliefs and that he would help them receive official recognition if they agreed to abstain from any more disruptive behaviour. Three brethren, Abraham Cornelissen, Isaak Koop and Johann Claassen, signed a document agreeing to “not secede from the Mennonite Church, not perform any ecclesiastical ceremony... not take any religious action which is forbidden by [the] church elders – without first [having] received the express permission of the higher authorities.”⁷ The signatories quickly realized the folly of this action as the inspector did not lobby on their behalf for recognition. The Brethren continued to worship separately from the established churches, but the three signatories honoured part of their commitment and did not take on leadership roles in the movement.

After the Committee’s first attempt to stop the movement failed, it decided to gather more information on the activities of the secessionists. Later in the same year, the Guardian Committee wrote to the Molochna district office to have the colony’s elders list the main leaders of the group, the types of reprimands attempted by the local authorities to suppress the new sect, and the means that should be used to suppress and totally extinguish the spread of the sect.⁸ The tone of these questions revealed the Guardian Committee’s desire to stop, as opposed to understand, the movement. Instead of asking about the validity of the secessionists’ complaints, the Guardian Committee only wanted to know what had been done in the past and what should be done in the future to arrest the Brethren’s spread.

Unsolicited for their side of the story, the Brethren still wrote to the Guardian Committee to refute the established churches’ characterization of their group. As relations between the established churches and the Brethren continued to deteriorate, the Brethren feared that the government would judge their movement based on gossip and slander instead of impartial information. Signed by five members of the Brethren, the letter challenged the Guardian Committee’s characterization of the group as a “newly arisen sect” by claiming lineage with Menno Simons.⁹ It also took umbrage with the Committee’s third question, arguing that they should not be subjected to persecution for their beliefs. In their letter, the Brethren deftly dealt with the Russian officials. Presenting their disagreement with their fellow Mennonite colonists as spiritual in nature, they emphasized their political and social reliability and their desire to remain loyal colonists in the future:

. . . and we do not believe that the illustrious committee will condemn those to punishment or even consent to having their names removed from the list of colonists who believe and love according to the Scripture, who cannot be accused of any political offence, and who, in contrast, live quiet lives; rather we believe, that as much as lies in its power, it will take us under its protection...¹⁰

They understood that the Guardian Committee could protect them from local retribution for their beliefs, but could also condemn them to hardships if it revoked their Mennonite colonist status.

The Mennonite Brethren initially had little to fear since the Guardian Committee chose not to act on the information it collected. Yet, as the movement spread to other regions in New Russia, the apathy of the Committee ceased. Directions, sent from the Guardian Committee in late February 1862 to the Khortitsa district office supported the measures proposed by the district office to stop the spread of the sect.¹¹ The Committee declared the teaching of groups such as the Friends of Jerusalem¹² and the Huepfer (literally, “jumpers,” participants in high spirited outdoor worship services where they were encouraged to express inner joy through dance)¹³ to be contrary to the beliefs of the government. Through their disrespectful attitude towards the established Mennonite churches, the teaching of the secessionists opposed the traditions of the colonies and therefore was dangerous.¹⁴ According to the Committee, the Brethren’s use of the term “brothel” (*publichnii dom*) to describe the church and their own claim of being “born again” (*rodilis’ vnov*) challenged the church leadership. The Committee felt that police intervention should be used to keep these “dangerous people” (*opasnye liudi*) in check.¹⁵

Unregulated religious activities and the influence of foreign religious figures, according to the Committee, represented the two main causes of sectarianism in Mennonite villages.¹⁶ The Guardian Committee supported the district office’s request that village mayors tighten control over meetings held at private residences by sectarians, contending that the sectarians used these opportunities to make converts. The measures to control movement in the villages included imposing a ten o’clock curfew in Khortitsa and Einlage, and establishing a night watch to ensure the curfew was respected.¹⁷ Preaching by foreigners was to be banned.¹⁸

The Guardian Committee’s association of foreign itinerant preachers with sectarianism highlights the government’s concern over the influence of foreigners on religious life in the region. Throughout the 1860s, government communiqués revealed a deep fear of foreign religious figures travelling through the western borderland. In 1869,

Baptist leader Johann Oncken journeyed from Hamburg to Russia where he visited Mennonite and Baptist communities. The extensive government correspondence over his visit exemplifies this fear. A letter from the Governor General of New Russia, Pavel Kotsebu, to the Kherson provincial authorities, warned the local officials about Oncken's visit and drew attention to the appearance of an Anabaptist sect supported by foreign emissaries in the village of Alt-Danzig.¹⁹ Kotsebu suggested to the Guardian Committee that the police follow Oncken and his entourage and use the full power of the law if the emissaries tried to proselytize among the population.²⁰ Around the same time, the Khortitsa district office received a similar warning about foreign preachers in the region. The Guardian Committee asked the district office to watch closely the Mennonite village of Einlage, a hotbed of sectarian activity, and check that foreigners were only in the village for valid reasons, such as work.²¹

In addition to its anxiety over foreign influences, the regional government also feared the propagation of sectarian teaching in a number of communities in Russia. The Guardian Committee investigated the expansion of the Huepfer movement into German, Swedish and Jewish colonies in Kherson province. According to the district offices of the Swedish and Neu-Danzig colonies, the Huepfer movement posed a danger to society – specifically to the family unit. Unless the dissenters rejoined the Evangelical Lutheran or Catholic churches, the district office wished to have permission to expel them from the communities.²² In an attempt to contain the movement, the Guardian Committee requested that Kotsebu appoint an investigator to watch the sectarians, and prevent them from disrupting the social order. The document cited the excessively antagonistic attitude of the sectarians towards the established order as justification for this request. The Committee also directed the district offices and colony supervisors to make sure that the movement's leaders did not travel until the government determined the status of the group.²³

In mid-June 1864, the Guardian Committee dispatched a supervisor to the Khortitsa settlement to gather information from the local authorities about the spread of the Huepfer religious sect to Kherson province.²⁴ The supervisor located the origin of the sectarian movement and the cause of its proliferation squarely in the Mennonite colonies of Khortitsa and Molochna, naming the leaders of the movement from both colonies. He communicated the Guardian Committee's concern that through their actions the sectarians were disrupting public order and decency. Most disconcerting, according to the supervisor, was the suspicion that the sectarians were corrupting local Orthodox believers. He indicated that the Ministry of State Domains and the Governor General of New Russia would be informed.

To prevent the further growth of the sect, the supervisor reiterated the Guardian Committee's instructions that the district officials were to monitor the sectarian leaders.

The Guardian Committee received much of its information about the sect from distraught local civil and religious officials who resented the disruption of the normal state of affairs in their communities. For instance, the Guardian Committee, the Khortitsa district office, and the religious leaders of the colony corresponded extensively over the emergence of the Brethren. A report sent to the Guardian Committee in June 1862 from both these groups reiterated their concern that the sectarians had rejected the established Mennonite church by refusing to follow its rituals and by acting disrespectfully towards its elders.²⁵ Instead, the sectarians performed their own perverse rituals such as baptism by immersion, which posed a danger to the religious health of communities in the region. The sectarians believed, according to the report, that they were following the Word of God by converting individuals from different religious denominations to their sect. The report further contended that since the sectarians no longer belonged to the Mennonite religious community (*tserkovnoe obshchestvo*), they should not be entitled to Mennonite civil rights (*grazhdanskie prava*).²⁶ Local officials strongly suggested that to limit the proliferation of the group, the leaders of the movement be removed from the colony. In response to their concerns, the Ekaterinoslav uезд police arrested three leaders of the Brethren for their false doctrine (*lzheuchenie*).²⁷ As direct participants in the conflict, local civil and religious officials were a biased source of information about the Brethren movement. Although the Guardian Committee dispatched its own representative to the colonies to gather evidence, one could postulate that the pre-existing relationship between the Guardian Committee supervisors and local leaders (as representative of the state) made the supervisors sympathetic to the local leaders' opinions.

Also sympathetic to the local leaders' negative presentation of the Huepfer movement was the Governor General of New Russia, Pavel Kotsebu.²⁸ Throughout the 1860s, Kotsebu worked to rid the province of the pernicious presence of sectarians. In Kherson province, he requested permission from the MGI to exile those former Lutherans and Catholics who had joined the Huepfer movement, citing the immoral and harmful nature of the sect's teaching.²⁹ According to Kotsebu, the teachings instilled "spiritual resistance to authorities and damaged the local economy."³⁰ Moreover, the Huepfer adherents violated the moral order through their unconventional spiritual practices. The Governor General agreed with the Guardian Committee that the Huepfers' presence posed more than a religious nuisance in the region. Their portrayal of the movement as disruptive to the social

stability of New Russia shows the importance placed by both agencies on the impact of religious values on the functioning of community life and the preference of regional officials for stable religious identities.

Widening the Investigation: National Ministries Enter the Debate

As the central administrative body responsible for the welfare of the state peasantry and colonization of state land, the Ministry of State Domains (MGI) had broader interests and concerns than did the Guardian Committee and the Governor General of New Russia. Created in 1837 to improve the living standards of the state peasantry through the reform of Russia's rural economy, the MGI inherited not only responsibility over ethnic Russian state peasants, but also over "the south's bewildering array of foreign colonists."³¹ Although the MGI's mandate prioritized economic concerns, such as land distribution, resettlement, provision of materials and instructional aid to state peasants,³² because of its position as the Guardian Committee's superior, social and religious issues within state peasant communities also came to its attention – particularly when relocation or exile was proposed.³³ For example, on 20 June 1862, the Guardian Committee apprised the MGI of the appearance of a religious sectarian group in the Khortitsa colony. The Guardian Committee once again expressed concern about the harm this group could cause to the social stability of the colony. As a corrective measure to reestablish social order and to prevent the further spread of the sect, the Committee suggested that the leaders of the group be removed not only from the colony but also from the empire. As for the movement's followers, the Committee recommended that they be relocated to a remote region in the empire, like the Amur or the Caucasus.³⁴

The ministry responded to the Guardian Committee eight days later by questioning it about a note submitted to the Russian government by Gerhard Wieler regarding religious persecution in the Khortitsa colony.³⁵ The ministry summarized Wieler's claims that the local district authorities deprived the Brethren of their religious and civil rights. The Guardian Committee responded to the inquiry by passing on the MGI's request for information about Wieler's complaints to its supervisor of the colony.³⁶ The document repeated much of the same information found in the MGI's report. It reiterated Wieler's accusation that local officials persecuted the Brethren and denied them their civil liberties, which compromised their economic livelihood. The Guardian Committee requested that the Khortitsa district office be asked to provide information about the relationship between Mennonites and the newly formed sect and the validity of Wieler's complaints. The

supervisor complied by issuing an order to the Khortitsa district office to provide the Guardian Committee immediately with an account of the complaint and an explanation from the religious elders about the relationship between the new sect and Mennonite beliefs.³⁷

In September of the same year, the Khortitsa district office and elders responded to Wieler's accusations. Predictably, they rejected Wieler's portrayal of their actions toward the Brethren and they refuted Wieler's claim that he was entitled to form a separate congregation. To allow this formation, argued the Khortitsa colony leadership, would breed division within the church and result in the destruction of Mennonite society.³⁸ Notably, the Khortitsa authorities also denied deepening the rift by initiating the arrests of the Brethren.³⁹ Instead, the Khortitsa office blamed the legal actions taken against the Brethren on the officials from the Ekaterinoslav uezd and the proselytizing activities of the Brethren. This exchange of information, beginning with Wieler's complaint to the central government in St. Petersburg, attests to the problems of appealing to a higher authority in a centralized bureaucratic system. The Brethren were able to inform the central authorities located in St. Petersburg about their situation; however, to substantiate their complaint, the ministries relied on information from regional and local government authorities.

The Ministry for Internal Affairs (MVD) entered last into the fray over the Mennonite schism, but, as one of the most powerful governmental bodies in the empire, it took a leading role in determining the treatment of the Brethren. Responsible for a myriad of tasks including press censorship, policing the state, ensuring social stability and providing postal and telegraph service, the MVD was a mammoth bureaucratic machine.⁴⁰ On the heels of the Polish uprising of 1863-64 in the western borderlands, the MVD faced a much smaller, though nonetheless disconcerting disturbance in the empire's southwestern borderland. Reluctant to risk breeding fanaticism of a non-political movement through repressive measures, the MVD proposed toleration and gentle guidance as the solution to the Mennonite schism.

Information about the schism arrived at the MVD from numerous sources. At the end of February 1864, the Ministry of Justice informed the MVD that Alexander Brune would be travelling to Southern Russia to engage in a number of activities, including the investigation of a "mystical sect" (*misticheskaiia sekta*) in the Mennonite colonies in Ekaterinoslav province.⁴¹ Information also arrived from the Mennonite colony itself. In early March 1864, the Minister of the MVD, Peter Valuev, wrote to the Procurator of the Evangelical Lutheran General Consistory about the Mennonite schism.⁴² He communicated the concerns expressed to the MVD by Heinrich Hesse from the Mennonite village of Einlage. Hesse informed the MVD that a sect had

emerged in the Khortitsa colony. This sect scolded the other colonists who refused to follow its “deranged” teachings, claiming that they had not received salvation. According to Hesse, the leaders of this group also had Russian and German converts. In response to Hesse’s letter, the MVD requested that Alexander Brune report to the Ministry on the characteristics of this sect, in addition to his other duties of gathering information about the Lutheran colonies in Southern Russia.

The negative characterization of the Brethren movement by the MVD’s initial sources did not persuade the ministry to propose a rash, reactive policy. For the MVD, the label of schismatic did not automatically lead to the condemnation of a group. The initial tolerant attitude of the MVD towards the schism shows that the separation of foreign believers from their confession was not necessarily viewed as an act of sedition. Instead, the MVD waited until it received reliable information about the group’s activities before deciding what its response should be to the dissenting Mennonites.

Notably, the MVD chose an individual outside the Mennonite community to be its source of information. The reliance on a Lutheran minister as a liaison between the Ministry and the Brethren raises a number of intriguing points about the relationship between the Russian government and foreign confessions, and the role of foreign religious institutions and authorities in policing the empire. The issue of language made the use of a German-speaking Lutheran representative an ideal and necessary choice for investigating the Mennonite schism. To delve into village life and interact directly with the sectarians required knowledge of the German language, as few Mennonites could adequately express themselves in Russian. Nonetheless, the MVD could have tapped civil as opposed to religious authorities in the region to gather information. The use of the Lutheran Consistory reveals the importance attributed by the MVD to the religious implications and characteristics of the schism and potential repercussions of the schism in the surrounding Lutheran community.

Alexander Brune submitted multiple reports to the MVD over the period of about a year, beginning in 1864.⁴³ Brune’s reports detailed his interaction with the Huepfer and his thoughts on religious life in the movement and the general religious health of the Mennonite colonies. He raised a number of important issues such as the characteristics of the Huepfer movement and the best approach to re-establishing Mennonite order.

The impact of the Brethren’s religious ceremonies on the social order of the colony emerged as one of the major themes of Brune’s inquiry. According to Brune, the impropriety of the Brethren’s practice of religious rituals included “noisy gaiety, singing hymns to the tune of contemporary secular melodies to the accompaniment of violins,

accordions and wild dancing.”⁴⁴ Brune also described activities by the Brethren such as public baptisms, private communion and frenetically joyous religious gatherings, as “an obvious violation of the existing order.”⁴⁵ Even though the sectarians’ actions concerned Brune, he did not suggest punitive measures as a method for curbing their activities.

According to Brune, attempts by Mennonite religious elders to stop the growth of the sectarian movement through excommunication had failed, and had inflamed the movement towards fanaticism.⁴⁶ As the sectarians believed that they could be purified only through suffering, they reacted with pious disdain towards the admonitions of the established church.⁴⁷ Brune critically wrote of the sectarians that: “They view all church action and offices as depraved. As a result of this exalted view of themselves, they have fallen into a religious delirium, fanaticism and division, and the sinful, evil errors often connected with this mindset.”⁴⁸ Instead of inspiring reform in the church, the approach of the sectarians only created more animosity and led to a deeper division among the groups.

The MVD followed reasoning similar to Brune’s when forming its policy for the region. Overall, the Ministry of Internal Affairs expressed the need for tolerance towards the Brethren. Fearful of fanaticism, the MVD argued that strict measures or persecution would only increase the steadfastness of the Brethren in their beliefs. The Ministry of State Domains agreed with that assessment.⁴⁹ The MVD suggested that the same procedure be followed as in the 1843 imperial ruling on a schism in the Lutheran community:

If the sectarians carry out all of their civil duties, leave them without any persecution. The Lutheran clergy should hold onto their congregation in love and devotion to their teachings not through civil measures, but by moral influence.⁵⁰

The MVD’s emphasis on loyalty to the state rather than fidelity to recognized religious confessions demonstrated the significance attached to political loyalty of foreign communities. For the MVD, membership in a religious sect did not automatically imply political dissidence. The ministry’s suggestion also confirmed its principle that the persecution of religious sectarians for their beliefs would not lead to reconciliation. Only through patient care by religious leaders would these sectarians be convinced of their folly. In the short term, the MVD supported toleration of schisms as long as sectarians fulfilled their civil duties; in the long term, the MVD looked to local religious leaders to reunify their flock. The MVD envisioned for itself a minimal role in regulating internal conflicts of foreign faiths.

A report by Peter Valuev, the Minister of the MVD in 1867, elucidated the MVD's method of maintaining stability in Russia's foreign colonies. Valuev once again stated the ministry's position that the Huepfer should be tolerated and not subjected to persecution for their religious beliefs, as persecution only breeds fanaticism. However, Valuev readily supported civil officials persecuting those who converted Orthodox believers. While he agreed with Brune that the movement had already been weakened by internal struggles, Valuev also expressed a concern over the treatment of sectarians by local officials, particularly in the Kherson province. Criticizing the use of punitive measures against the sectarians by the Governor General of New Russia, Valuev argued that the activities of the sectarians should not be labelled as destabilizing to the public order.⁵¹

The MVD did not entirely disagree with the position of the Guardian Committee and the Governor General. It too feared the religious influence in the colonies from sources outside of Russia. To combat this influence, the MVD suggested that only government-approved foreign preachers be allowed to travel in Russia and that efforts be made to train religious teachers inside the empire instead of bringing foreign-trained pastors into minority communities. Concern that dangerous political ideas disguised as religious rhetoric might be flowing into Russia, the MVD tried to limit the contact between Russian minority groups and their ethnic counterparts in Western Europe.⁵² Therefore, for the MVD sectarians were not necessarily a problem, unless, of course, they originated from a source outside of the Russian empire.

Government Bodies Collide: Conflict in the Interpretation of Rituals

From the beginning of the movement, the local and regional authorities expressed concern over the location of the Brethren's religious ceremonies. In the absence of available church buildings as meeting places for worship with fellow believers, combined with the movement's exploration of non-traditional sacred spaces (such as the outdoors), the Brethren cultivated their fellowship in a mixture of private and public spaces. This not only challenged local civil and religious leadership in Mennonite villages but also irked Russian authorities. For instance, initially, they worshipped in homes where they also took communion without the involvement of local church leaders. After the Mennonite civil authorities informed the Guardian Committee of this practice, the Committee requested that the village mayors tighten control over meetings held at private residences by Brethren, claiming that the Brethren used these meetings to make converts. The Brethrens' choice of outdoor immersion baptism in

rivers also caused consternation for the larger Mennonite community and the Russian government.

The lengthy trail of correspondence over three years involving five governmental bodies over a baptism performed by Jakob Reimer illustrates the varying perceptions of such religious activities. There was considerable disagreement over their threat to social instability and the proper use of public spaces in religious ceremonies. In the spring of 1867, the Mennonite Brethren organized a foreign missions festival in the Molochna village of Neu-Halbstadt.⁵³ Abram Unger and Jakob Reimer, two Mennonite Brethren religious leaders, attended the event. Inspired by the festival, Johann Friesen, a Mennonite youth from Tiege asked to be baptized. Reimer baptized Friesen by immersion in the Molochnaia River just outside of the Mennonite village of Alt-Halbstadt in front of a large mixed crowd of fellow Brethren and Lutherans from a local village.⁵⁴

The early twentieth century Mennonite historian, P.M. Friesen, provides an explanation of how the controversy started. The Lutherans, indignant at what they had witnessed, notified the inspector of the colonies of the event. According to Friesen, this newly appointed inspector of the Guardian Committee, unaware of the Mennonite schism and its uneasy settlement, decided to pursue the complaints of the Lutheran bystanders and Johann Friesen's father who expressed his consternation with his son's baptism into the Mennonite Brethren movement.⁵⁵

P.M. Friesen's description of the humble origins of the controversy might be simplistic, considering the issue climbed the bureaucratic ladder to the desk of the Minister of Internal Affairs. In reality, the baptism created a stir among regional authorities and nearly cost Jakob Reimer his Mennonite colonial status. Shortly after the event, in June 1867, Pavel Kotsebu, the Governor General of New Russia, wrote a brief message to the Guardian Committee, which simply stated that Friesen's baptism in public (*publichno*) was against public morality (*protivnym obshchestvennoi npravstvennosti*) and encouraged the Committee to petition the MGI for Reimer's removal from the colony.⁵⁶ Also supportive of exile was the Governor of Taurida, the province where the "offence" took place.⁵⁷ The Guardian Committee complied and after receiving this request, the MGI apprised the MVD of the situation by reiterating the most emphasized detail of the governmental correspondence – the public nature of the baptism – and asked the MVD to decide what should be done about the situation.⁵⁸

Tolerance, according to the MVD's Department of Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Confessions, was the best course of action. Almost a year after the incident, the Department reminded the Governor General that deviating from the established religious practice was not a criminal

offence in the empire; only civil disobedience by sectarians could be cause for prosecution.⁵⁹ In the specific case of Reimer, the Department found it difficult to understand what act Reimer had committed to justify charging him with opposing the established order. It did, however, raise the issue of the legality of the baptism, and pressed for further information on whether the baptism had been properly recorded by local officials and asked the Governor General to specify which civil laws Reimer had broken during his performance of this baptism.

Governor General Kotsebu responded quickly, defending his position by detailing the sexually perverse and subversive nature of the Brethren's actions. He answered the Ministry by arguing that Reimer deliberately intended to provoke a reaction from local officials by conducting the ceremony publicly.⁶⁰ Also, he claimed that Reimer's performance threatened social stability as there had been similar incidents in other provinces after the event, in which half-naked men and women were baptized in rivers. To discourage others from performing similar ceremonies, Kotsebu deemed it necessary to exile Reimer. The regional government had exiled a number of sectarians from Kherson province in 1864. Because these were persons who had committed similar offenses to public morality, Kotsebu felt justified in this action. Hinting at the looming threat posed by Reimer and others like him, Kotsebu ended his letter ominously by reminding the MVD that, if the Brethren began to proselytize among Orthodox believers, they should be prosecuted by the civil authorities.⁶¹

Still searching for reasonable cause to have Reimer exiled, the Governor General asked whether Mennonite ministers regarded the baptism to be in accordance with their spiritual teachings and whether the baptism had been properly entered in the parish register.⁶² To ascertain the validity of the baptism, the Committee broached the issue with the Mennonite community. Predictably, considering the tensions that continued to exist within the Mennonite religious community over the schism, the established church leadership disagreed over what constituted a legitimate baptism. Church leaders from Blumstein argued in favor of the validity of the baptism, pointing out that baptism constituted a sacrament involving the congregation, the baptismal candidate, and God, and that nothing contrary to scripture had taken place in the Molochnaia River.⁶³ Voicing the opposite opinion, church elders from Aleksandrov argued that the baptism did not follow scriptural requirements and was therefore invalid. The elders took issue not with the form of baptism (immersion versus sprinkling), but rather with its performance by an unordained elder.⁶⁴ The Governor General, confused by these differing views, requested in September 1868 that the Guardian Committee establish which Mennonite leaders had the legal right to determine whether the baptism was correct and

for the Committee to provide its own opinion of which view it found more accurate.⁶⁵

With Reimer's fate still unresolved by the spring of 1869, the Ministry of State Domains asked the MVD if a final decision had been reached.⁶⁶ For the MVD, tolerance toward Reimer remained the most prudent course of action and the Minister of the MVD, A.E. Timashev communicated this view to the Governor General of New Russia. He maintained that Reimer's public baptism of Friesen in the river did not merit civil prosecution and, notably, he referred to the Baptists' practice of immersion baptism at a time when Baptists were not legally recognized to support his argument that the method of baptism should not be considered immoral. Crossed out in the document is a reference to the baptism of Kievan Rus' in 988 (the beginnings of the Orthodox Church in Kievan Rus') as justifying the acceptability of public baptisms in rivers.⁶⁷ As Russian law required that all baptisms be recorded in the church register, Reimer could only be reprimanded if he failed to notify local church authorities of the baptism; he could not, however, be punished for performing a public baptism.⁶⁸ Timashev ended the note by inquiring if the Governor General could reconsider his request. In light of the MVD's position, Kotsebu agreed to withdraw his petition for Reimer's exile.⁶⁹

If we analyze the government's involvement, a new understanding of the schism emerges. Instead of an isolated, internal religious dispute, significant only to Mennonite communities, the schism had broader implications for the entire region of New Russia. The vast correspondence among governmental bodies and between the government and the Mennonites about the schism confirms the government's deep participation in the crisis. The Brethren's transgression of ethnic, spatial and gender boundaries, which made the schism into a regional phenomenon, along with the Mennonites' constant petitioning of the government with accusations and complaints against each other, forced the involvement of multiple governmental agencies.

The Mennonite schism offers an opportunity to investigate how Russia's policy of religious toleration worked in practice. The reaction of the government to these events reveals underlying tensions between governmental bodies over how to resolve religious disagreements in religious communities. As each government agency based its course of action on a different interpretation of the schism, this led to conflicting policies which exacerbated instead of resolved religious tensions in the Mennonite colonies. Regional governmental authorities such as the Guardian Committee and the Governor General viewed the sectarians as disruptive to the social order and an inherently dangerous force in the region. They supported the harsh treatment of the Brethren by the established Mennonite authorities and proposed punitive measures to

be used throughout New Russia for dealing with the Huepfer movement. In contrast, central government ministries, such as the MVD and the MGI, approached religious schism from a different perspective. By prioritizing political loyalty to the state, these ministries were willing to overlook unorthodox religious practices, as long as the performance of these ceremonies did not corrupt large segments of the Orthodox population. The different approaches of these governmental bodies to the schism reveals an underlying tension in the Russian government over how to handle the growing complexity of regulating its multi-confessional borderlands.

Notes

- ¹ John B. Toews, ed., *The Story of the Early Mennonite Brethren: Reflections of a Lutheran Churchman* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2002), 20.
- ² For example, see James Urry, *None but Saints: Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hypersion Press Limited, 1989); John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Board of Christian Literature, 1975); A.H. Unruh, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Brudergemeinde, 1860-1954* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Im Auftrage des Fürsorgekomitees der Generalkonferenz von Nord-Amerika, 1954); John B. Toews, "The Russian Origins of the Mennonite Brethren: Some Observations" in *Pilgrims and Strangers: Essays in Mennonite Brethren History*. ed., Paul Toews (Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1977); John B. Toews, *Perilous Journey: The Mennonite Brethren in Russia 1860-1910* (Winnipeg, Kindred Press, 1988).
- ³ John Staples, *Cross- Cultural Encounters on the Ukrainian Steppes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 22.
- ⁴ John B. Toews, ed., *The Story of the Early Mennonite Brethren: Reflections of a Lutheran Churchman* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2002), 165.
- ⁵ Robert P. Geraci & Michael Khodarkovsky, *Of Religion and Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 7.
- ⁶ Staples, 22.
- ⁷ Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, trans. J.B. Toews, A. Friesen, et. al. (Fresno, CA, 1978), 236.
- ⁸ Franz Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* (Halbstadt: H.J Braun, 1908), 185.
- ⁹ Friesen, 245.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.
- ¹¹ Aleksii (Dorodnitsyn) *Materialy dlia istorii religiozno-ratsionalisticheskogo dvizheniia na iuge Rossii vo vtoroi polovine 19-go st.* (Kazan': Tsentral'naia tipografia, 1908), 1.
- ¹² The Friends of Jerusalem was a religious movement originating from Prussia out of the Pietest movement. Christoph Hoffmann, the leader of the Friends of Jerusalem or Templer movement, aspired to form a community of like-minded believers in the Christian holy land of Jerusalem. A small group of Mennonites, including Johannes Lange, formed relationships with Templers in Prussia and brought the movement to Russian Mennonite colonies in the 1860s. The movement appeared at the same time as the Mennonite Brethren, but the movements were separate, although little research has been done on cooperation between the groups. For more information see Heinrich Sawatzky, *Templer Mennonitischer Herkunft* (Winnipeg, 1955).

- 13 The document does not use the term Huepfer, but it does list the main leaders of the Huepfer movement as the fanatics who threaten the established order. To facilitate a broader role for the laity in spiritual life, the Brethren reconfigured their religious ceremonies to encourage individuals to express publicly their inner joy inspired by their faith. The Brethren held outdoor ceremonies, where they would sing, dance and praise God. Their actions earned them the name of Huepfer, translated from German as the 'jumpers.' It is not entirely clear if the name originated from inside the Mennonite community or from the surrounding German colonies, but the Russian government adopted the word to refer to the schismatic group in official correspondence. It should be stressed that in the majority of documents, the government transliterated as opposed to translated the term. Notably, the Russian government used the term 'Huepfer' indiscriminately, to refer not only to Mennonites, but also Lutherans who practised high-spirited worship services.
- 14 Aleksii, 2.
- 15 Ibid., 2.
- 16 "Eine Sekte" *Odessaer Zeitung*, March 18, 1864, 254-5
- 17 Aleksii, 2.
- 18 Ibid., 1.
- 19 Ibid., 72.
- 20 Amusingly, Oncken mentions the circular sent by the Governor General to government officials: "Hitherto the Lord has helped me marvelously, for although Kotzebue, the Governor General, sent an order to all the colonies to keep a sharp watch on the movements of the "Baptist emissaries," I have nevertheless passed unharmed through the enemy's lines." "Letters from Mr. Oncken in Russia" *Quarterly Reporter* 48 (1870), 802.
- 21 Aleksii, 73.
- 22 Toews, 48.
- 23 The leaders of the movement in Neu-Danzig were exiled from the colony. See Toews, 134.
- 24 Aleksii, 44.
- 25 Ibid., 3-4.
- 26 Ibid., 5.
- 27 Ibid., 6.
- 28 Pavel Kotsebu was the Governor General of New Russia from 1862 to 1874.
- 29 Toews, 134.
- 30 Ibid., 153.
- 31 Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 143.
- 32 Ibid., 138.
- 33 The Russian government commonly used exile as a way to manage its population. For example, Nicholas I tried to keep Orthodox peasants away from Russian sectarian groups such as the Dukhobors and the Molokans by exiling the latter groups to the periphery of the empire. See Nicholas Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).
- 34 Toews, 46.
- 35 Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Odesskoi Oblasti (hereafter GAOO) f.6, op.5, d.278, l. 105
- 36 Aleskii, 35-36.
- 37 Ibid., 37.
- 38 Aleskii, 16.
- 39 Ibid., 14-15.
- 40 Daniel T. Orlovsky, *The Limits of Reform: The Ministry of Internal Affairs in Imperial Russia, 1802-1881* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 39.

- ⁴¹ Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (hereafter RGIA) f. 821, op.5, d. 976, l.1.
- ⁴² RGIA f.821, op.5, d. 976, l.4.
- ⁴³ Toews, 18.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 20.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 22.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 20.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 21.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.,106.
- ⁴⁹ S.D Bondar, *Sekta mennonitov v' rossii; v' sviazi s' istorii niemetskoii kolonizatsii na iuge rossii: ocherk'*. (Petrograd Tipografia V.D Smirnova, 1916), 132.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Toews, 173.
- ⁵² Ibid., 167.
- ⁵³ Friesen, 469.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 470.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l.551. Some government documents on the Johann Friesen case are available in translation in Toews, *The Story of the Early Mennonite Brethren*.
- ⁵⁷ GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l.590.
- ⁵⁸ RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l.168.
- ⁵⁹ RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l.169.
- ⁶⁰ RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l.173.
- ⁶¹ RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l.174.
- ⁶² GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l.598.
- ⁶³ GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l. 604.
- ⁶⁴ Friesen, 470.
- ⁶⁵ GAOO f.6, op.5, d. 278, l. 604.
- ⁶⁶ RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l 189.
- ⁶⁷ RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975 l.186.
- ⁶⁸ RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975 l.186.
- ⁶⁹ RGIA f.821,op.5, d.975, l. 191.