

Johann Wieler (1839-1889) Among Russian Evangelicals: A New Source of Mennonites and Evangelicalism in Imperial Russia

Translated, introduced and edited by Lawrence Klippenstein,
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Protestant evangelicalism in Russia and the Soviet Union has always been, and still remains, a fascinating interplay of local, regional or national initiatives, and so-called foreign influences from the West or elsewhere "outside". Sometimes these particular facets of development have been easy to identify; sometimes they have not. Assessing the net impact of the various internal factors is similarly problematic. The study of these questions remains a challenge, and should therefore continue.¹

The formative factors of Soviet evangelicalism include the emergence of the "Stundists" in the middle of the nineteenth century, a movement which is itself not altogether clear. As a religious development, Stundism is now commonly viewed as a Protestant-type revival or spiritual renewal movement among Orthodox and other communities in Ukraine, and somewhat later also in the Caucasus region of south central Russia. It made its appearance in the 1850s and 1860s, and held its thrust in some distinctively separate sense even after the German Baptists came in to give it a more precise structural and doctrinal, that is, denominational, form. Present-day Soviet Baptists trace their official beginnings to the spontaneous renewal activities of those years.²

Analyses of these moments in Russian religious history commonly point to the influence of pietistic Reformed Lutheran colonists (most

immediately the Rohrbach community), the more diffused contributions of Bible colporteurs (usually, but not always, of western origin) and sometimes also to the preparatory roles of native quasi-Protestant religious communities like the Doukhobors and Molokans who had appeared on the scene a hundred or more years earlier.³

Some Mennonites also entered the picture. This fact though remains one of the less well-documented facets of most historical accounts. Apart from brief references to one or more Mennonite Brethren ministers who surreptitiously baptized a few Russian and Ukrainian peasants, there seems to be little else to say.⁴

This situation may change, as new sources become accessible and additional light is shed on this whole field of study. Numerous documents from the uncatalogued personal papers of a former tsarist colonel of the Imperial Guards, Count Vassili Alexandrovich Pashkov (d. 1902), for example, may help to flesh out the record of Mennonite involvement in the evolution of Stundism and evangelical beginnings in Russia. In this collection the file of Johann Wieler, a Mennonite Brethren teacher and minister who joined the movement, is especially pertinent to this story.⁵

Pashkov's conversion to the evangelical faith resulted from the work carried on in St. Petersburg by Lord Radstock, a British itinerant minister with Plymouth Brethren affinities who was active in the Russian capital during the 1870s. Joined by a group of other believers from his aristocratic circle of friends, the count had soon looked for ways to contact Stundist and other fellow-evangelicals in southern Russia. This brought important and much needed aid to the impoverished Stundist congregations which were emerging in various parts of the country by now.⁶

Johann Wieler himself appears to have been a crucial part of the linkage which Pashkov helped to create between north and south, and also with interested sympathetic groups abroad. His file includes a series of letters written to Pashkov in Russian and a 34-page German manuscript which details a much wider involvement in the Stundist movement of the 1860s and 1870s than has been suggested to date.⁷

Born in 1839, Johann Wieler had grown up in the Old Colony village of Neu Chortitza on the Dnieper River. As an excellent student he had acquired a very creditable use of the Ukrainian and Russian languages fairly early — something still quite rare in the Russian Mennonite communities of his day. He joined the Mennonite Brethren church soon after its formation in 1860.

Wieler spent several years as secretary in the office of the Guardians' Committee (*Fuersorgekomitee*) at Odessa before becoming a teacher in Berdiansk in 1865. His ordination to the ministry came in 1872 at which time he began to travel extensively among the nearby Ukrainian and German villages in an effort to spread the Gospel wherever possible.⁸

Soon he found, however, that his Brethren colleagues did not share

his plans not only to evangelize among the region's German people, but to attempt also to preach to the Orthodox non-German communities wherever they could be reached. When two Mennonite Brethren conferences, held in 1882 and 1883, still refused to endorse his vision, Wieler decided to strike out on his own, that is, independently of the church to which he belonged. Although pressed hard to reconsider, Wieler persisted. An offer of support from Pashkov provided him with an annual stipend of 1000 rubles for living expenses and 600 rubles for assistance in travelling. He could now begin a series of missionary journeys which took him to the Samara region along the Volga, and also to the Kuban area of the Caucasus.⁹

The long document in the Johann Wieler file of the Pashkov papers is by all appearances an appeal for foreign assistance to bolster this new mission enterprise after its launching during this time. It was most likely mailed to numerous, probably wealthier, individuals with whom Wieler, and perhaps Pashkov, were acquainted abroad. Pashkov's copy is the only copy of this appeal which has surfaced so far. It is rendered in translation below.

Johann Wieler's Mission Appeal¹⁰

The origin of Stundists dates back to the 1850s and had its modest beginnings in the Odessa, Kherson and Elizabethgrad regions of the Kherson government.¹¹

The first Stundist believer from the Russian Orthodox Church to be converted and renewed was Michael Ratushnii. He had come into contact with German brethren, believers of the Lutheran church, who had told him that a person must be converted in order to find salvation.¹² (These brethren were called *Stundengaenger* because they held special meetings apart from the regular services of the church in order to study the Bible. That is why these Russian believers were given the name *Stundists*).

The Word of God was not yet available in the Russian language in those days.¹³ The first Russian New Testament (Synod edition) appeared in those areas only in 1862 through the work of the British and Foreign Bible Society agent, Melville.¹⁴ To be sure, English people had distributed many Russian New Testaments and tracts among Russian prisoners after the Crimean War. Although these testaments and tracts would be confiscated in massive quantities when the prisoners returned home, some copies were overlooked and read among the people. Such a copy reached the serf peasant Michael Ratushnii from the village of Osnova.¹⁵ Michael came to understand the message clearly as he read and prayed, and began to share what he found among his neighbours. This was not without results.

During the 1860s Ivan Riaboshapka bought a Russian New Testa-

ment in the market place of Liubomirka near the city of Elizabethgrad.¹⁶ Through much reading and meditation he came to understand the way of salvation, as did many of his fellow-farmers. A sixteen-year-old Russian boy by the name of Grigorii Kushnerenko from the market place Poltavka (Bashtanka), began to study God's Word about this same time. He was gripped so deeply by what he read that he challenged his priest not only to show the Word of God to the people on his head, but to read it so that they might find the way of redemption there.¹⁷

These three men may be seen as the real apostles and martyrs of the Russian Stundist movement. It was they who carried the light of the Gospel to their communities in a time of dark superstition. It was they who led the awakening despite all kinds of suffering including beatings, imprisonments and other persecution, and who have continued ably to present the truths which they discovered, even to the present day.

It is important also to mention how the Stundist movement spread throughout the Kiev gouvernement. A determined soldier from the Kiev gouvernement named Gerassim Balaban, came under the influence of Michael Ratushnii, after coming to the village of Osnova from the Kiev gouvernement. After his conversation he began to spread the message of the Gospel with enthusiasm, so that he was sent back to his home area without his family. He continued to read the Word to others in the region round about Kiev, and in the city itself, where the Russian Orthodox Church had its headquarters.

A [spiritual] fire began to sweep through the district, causing many hundreds to be converted. Whole communities deserted the Orthodox Church so that they might nurture themselves in the Gospel. The authorities were glad therefore to see him join his family again.

In the meantime, a young Persian named Jakob Deliakov had come to Odessa.¹⁸ Also an enthusiastic believer, Jakob began to travel through the countryside as a peddler so that he might make his living. He began also to sell Bibles and New Testaments when they became available. This gave him an opportunity to explain the Scriptures in the awakened circles of Russian believers.

In drawing to himself the attention of the police, he would not have escaped persecution if he had not decided to move into the Taurian gouvernement to sell his wares among the Molokans (Russian Quakers) who had left the Orthodox Church fifty years before.¹⁹ They were now living unmolested in four villages of the Taurian gouvernement to which they had been exiled. In one of these communities Jakob had rejected the baptism of infants and communion service of the Orthodox Church. He managed to preach the Gospel, and told two brothers, Charitan and Sinovei Sakharov that they must be converted. They too were persuaded that it was not enough to reject the worship of ikons and must give much attention to God's Word, as well as the singing of hymns and prayers.

In 1859 a young Mennonite from the Ekaterinoslav gouvernement arrived in Odessa to work as secretary of the Guardians' Committee (*Fuersorgekomitee*) serving foreign colonists in South Russia. His name was Johann Wieler. In 1860 he began to proclaim the Gospel to Russians in Odessa. Although no Bibles could be bought there, he did own a London edition of the New Testament. Lovingly he brought the Gospel to the Russians in his free time.

These efforts were not in vain. The first fruits of labours were unforgettable for him as he recalled how, late one night in a shoemaker's shop, six Russians were converted after an intensive study of the 15th chapter of Luke — apprentices, assistants and a sixty-year-old man who, after much prayer, found the joy of God. Till morning they sang hymns and prayed together, thanking Him for His love. The group grew to about twenty before the police discovered the movement meeting in homes to study the Scriptures and continue in prayer.

When Wieler was able to purchase the first Russian New Testament he pressed it to his lips and chest in exaltation. It was a Synodal edition in large format with a golden cross on its cover, bound in red satin, and it cost one ruble. The hour had come at last for the emancipation of Russians who had been enslaved in both body and spirit for centuries. He set out now to distribute the New Testament wherever possible.

A great awakening took place during 1860 among the Mennonite colonists of the Taurian and Ekaterinoslav governments.²⁰ Those rescued from sin through reading of the Word concluded that it was not enough to propagate Mennonitism biologically. One needed to enter the Kingdom of God through a new birth, and that only such persons had the right to be baptized and to receive the Lord's Supper, to become members of the Church. For this reason they separated themselves from the other Mennonites who were only nominally believers like other so-called Christians of the world. The Mennonites had also obligated themselves not to propagandize among the Russians at the time of their coming to Russia at the end of the previous century. They received special privileges from Tsarina Catharine and Tsar Paul at that time.

The new Mennonite congregations could have been called Baptist,²¹ except for non-resistance, inasmuch as they were baptized by immersion in a stream. It was one of their principles to baptize every new-born believer in order to receive such a person into the church, whether the person was Lutheran, Catholic, Jewish or Russian. The result was that Russians too were baptized, something which brought severe persecution both from the Mennonites and the Russian Orthodox Church. Heading this movement was Gerhard Wieler, the brother of Johann Wieler. Since he had baptized a newly-converted Russian, he was arrested and imprisoned for a long time at Ekaterinoslav.²²

As the persecution spread, Johann Wieler was invited to

Ekaterinoslav to undertake negotiations with the authorities to help free the imprisoned brethren, and more than that, to ensure freedom of religion for the new Mennonite church which Wieler had joined by this time. This could be accomplished through the offices of Brunn, the Procurator of the General Consistory in St. Petersburg. The brethren were released from prison, and the hostile accusations of the other Mennonites were contained.

Johann Wieler spent this time in the Ekaterinoslav gouvernement, serving as teacher during the years 1865–1868 in Berdiansk on the Azov Sea. He hoped in this way to earn enough money for a trip abroad in order to study school systems there, and also to contact Oncken of the Baptists in Germany.²³ After spending a year in Hamburg and Switzerland he returned to St. Petersburg, hoping to obtain greater freedom for the oppressed Russian brethren in the south. By letter he had been led to intercede in this way. In appealing to Christian friends such as Tatafiev, General Lemm(?), whom Wieler had met on his travels in Germany while visiting Pfarrer Blumhardt,²⁴ and also others to solicit aid in gaining greater freedom for preaching the gospel in Russia, he was told it would be dangerous to go public with such a concern. One could certainly expect to spend time in Siberia for that.

Consequently they withheld support, wanting nothing to do with such concerns. Disappointed about his failure to accomplish anything in this regard, Wieler returned to Odessa after leading a young heliographer, Jacobson, to the Lord (Jacobson was a native Estonian), and baptizing him in nearby Lake Koliamago not far from St. Petersburg. This man is important since it was Jacobson who would later assist the Russian brethren in submitting an appeal to Alexander II, and who would give his home to host the representatives of the Russian believers.

In Odessa, Wieler picked up the threads of his earlier activity and was soon able to establish a small congregation of Russian and German believers in the city. The Russian brethren continued to suffer much persecution and to face resistance to their meetings held to study the Bible and pray together in homes.

For a long time already the Russian brethren had accepted the teaching of Wieler on the questions of baptism and establishing congregations. They hesitated nevertheless to withdraw from their own church; indeed, it seemed impossible since it was forbidden by law to do so. Actually, the Lutherans were advising them to stay in their own church since they could find salvation there also. Under no circumstances, these brethren told them, ought they to accept rebaptism because this was a Baptist heresy. The Russian Orthodox Church did everything it could to stamp out every sign of religious activity. At the same time, the brethren Ratushnii, Riabashapka and Kushnerenko and their fellow-believers had to endure much oppression and could not find relief.

In 1870 they once more urged Wieler to give them some assistance if he could. Wieler willingly offered his help and counsel, but insisted that they must form their own congregations since to remain within their own church would be so difficult and create such a contradiction that no church could tolerate this. The Lutherans of Russia could do this with the Stundists among them only because they were a tolerated sect.

Finally, the brethren decided to make a complete break with the Orthodox Church and form a fellowship of their own according to God's Word.²⁵ A number of brethren met in Wieler's home especially to seek guidance on this matter through prayer and the reading of God's Word. From this resulted the drawing up of a confession of faith including ten articles which set out the principal points of the Christian faith. It agreed essentially with the statement used by Baptists in Germany. The brethren then submitted copies of the statement to all their groups for discussion and approval. With few exceptions, all the members agreed to form a Baptist fellowship on the basis of this declaration.

Wieler then wrote a petition to the Tsar, attaching to it the articles of faith. The brethren Michael Ratushnii, Ivan Riabashapka and Alexander Kapustian were then given authority to present the request for freedom of religion to Alexander II in St. Petersburg. It was signed by 103 heads of families, representing the total group of believers.

The above-mentioned Mennonite brethren participated actively in the movement, offering financial support to the brethren and including the coverage of travel costs to St. Petersburg for the three appointees.

Brother Wieler also sent an introduction of the brethren to Brother Jacobson, asking him to assist these men in presenting their petition.

The men were not able themselves to make the presentation to the Tsar. Instead it was accepted by the Commission of Petitions and Requests which directed the men to return to their homes, and promised to acquaint the Tsar with their concern.

All this happened in February, 1870. When the men returned from St. Petersburg preparations began for baptism and organizing of congregations. Wieler was available at all times to assist where he could. Three large congregations were established. The baptism took place in public, attended by many participants. Since it was known that the brethren had been in St. Petersburg, the local authorities, who supposed that they might have received permission to conduct these services from the Tsar, allowed all baptisms, communion services, funerals and weddings to take place without interference.

When they discovered that no such permission had been granted, they oppressed the brethren all the more. The brethren Ratushnii, Riabashapka, Balaban and Kapustian were imprisoned in Odessa, while other members received heavy fines and bodily abuse. The believers were not intimidated, however, as additional persons were added to the Church.

The Tsar was supposed to travel to Odessa that same year. Wieler now wrote another petition to the Tsar, again attaching the articles of faith. It was forwarded to the Tsar via the friendly office of the gendarme chief(?).

About two weeks later the first petition was returned, with accompanying directives to investigate the situation and to punish guilty local authorities. The imprisoned brethren were released, while the *stanovoi pristav*, *starshina*, *starosta* and the local Russian clergy who had taken part in suppressions were removed from office.²⁶

This gave the church a breathing spell for a time. Not long afterwards, however, repressive measures were resumed and the brethren were once more put into prison. Wieler did everything possible to obtain a measure of toleration for the brethren. Petitions were submitted to the governor, the governor-general and the court of oaths. As a final step he wrote to Wurstenberger, a member of the Evangelical Alliance in Switzerland²⁷ and to the Baptist leader, Oncken, asking them to intercede on behalf of the Russian brethren at the court of the Tsar if possible.

In 1872 Maria Alexandrovna, the Tsar's daughter, married the Duke of Edinburg. In April Wieler received a dispatch from the London secretary of the Evangelical Alliance, Davis by name. Having apparently heard about the persecution of the Russian brethren from Wurstenberger, Davis asked that he be sent a document describing the situation, and having on it the confirmation of the British Consul in Odessa.

Wieler could not do this since the persecution had not been officially acknowledged and so would not have come to the attention of the consul. Hence, he would not be able to confirm the truth of such reports. Wieler wrote to Davis that he could himself confirm these reports and that information about the persecution had been twice submitted to the Tsar. The persecution had not happened in a corner, he added.

It appeared at that time that the Evangelical Alliance might utilize the occasion of the royal wedding to present a petition asking for release of the Russian brethren. Whether this actually happened Wieler never did find out. His petition to the governor general, Kotzebue, who was a true believer, had not been in vain, however. The believers were set free again.

But the Russian clergy did not cease their efforts to suppress the new believers. In 1875 the Kherson consistorium submitted a complaint about the Baptists to the court of oaths in which the above mentioned brethren were charged with deceptively causing people to desert the Orthodox Church. Thirty witnesses had signed the statement.²⁸

These complaints were publicized in the courts of Odessa, Kherson and Alexandria (Kherson gouvernement) in 1876. The believers were greatly overjoyed, and the Russian consistorium equally dismayed, when the decision favoured the Russian brethren. In Odessa the procurator

stated at the conclusion of the court sessions: You are now free from all oppression. Free from now on through all eternity. Amen.

Wieler himself was also imprisoned several times. As a result of court appearances he was placed under police surveillance for two years. But the Lord set him free as well through the good offices of the Minister of the Interior, Timashev, to whom he had sent a personal petition, and by the decision of the Odessa court.

Wieler never ceased his efforts to give all possible support to the beleaguered brethren and to solicit every available kind of assistance from the Mennonite fellow-believers. Through his personal involvement Russian congregations were established in the Ekaterinoslav, Taurian and then later also the Saratov governments.

In the 1870s a Molokan by the name of Nikita Voronin became a believer in Tiflis in the Caucasus. He was baptized by a German Baptist, Karl Kalwait.²⁹ This led to the emergence of a dynamic Baptist congregation in Tiflis. Vasilius Pavlov, a gifted Baptist brother, has been and still is especially active in the evangelizing the Caucasus. Pavlov learned to speak German fluently while receiving his missionary training at the Baptist seminary in Hamburg. He is a travelling evangelist preaching the Gospel in the Caucasus with good results. One should not forget to mention two other very active evangelists of the Caucasus, Bogdanov and Ivanov. The latter lives not far from the Ararat in the village of Ivanovka. These brethren preach the good news of the Gospel all over the Caucasus as far as the Caspian Sea.

Wieler also made an effort to unite and to coordinate the total Russian ministry of the Russian brethren by establishing a *union*. It was to have as its primary task the carrying out of the missionary mandate in a *systematic* way. The union has now been active for three years.³⁰

A conference of representatives from all the Baptist churches elected a mission committee led by a president and having a treasurer. Members of all the congregations committed themselves to make a small weekly contribution and to forward it to the missions committee treasurer. The missionaries are paid from this treasury.

Each year a missionary conference is held to hear reports from the workers and to discuss questions related to unity among the congregations, as well as to encourage a missionary spirit among them.

Of course, the poor Russian peasants can contribute only a little because they must help each other to overcome poverty among themselves. Nevertheless, the very numerous members of the churches still put together a significant sum. Still, the appointment of regularly-supported missionaries would hardly be possible if help would not be forthcoming from the German brethren, and if 400 rubles had not come from America last year.³¹ Three thousand rubles came from St. Petersburg also.³²

With warm hearts of thankfulness to the Lord we stand before Him to see His hand of mercy reaching out to His poor people. We trust that he may reveal himself even further so that we may do even more for Him, send out more workers. The field which must be tended is so large.

There are many missionary societies today which are concerned about the souls of India and China. Spain, France, Italy and Austria as well are not forgotten, but the large and wide-spread ministry among the millions of Russia is almost totally neglected.

If I bring these facts as a beggar kneeling at the doorsteps of wealthy brethren in Germany, France and England, asking for a generous gift to missions, let it be known that it is *for Jesus' sake*. Many Russian brethren are speaking with the voice of the missions committee president.

Help us, beloved brethren and sisters, so that at the upcoming conference to be held at Vladikavkas during the Easter week (the Lord willing) we may have sufficient funds in our missions treasury to send out twenty missionaries to preach the Gospel. The workers will be found.

A total of nine brethren were sent out at the recent conference held in Vasilievka (Taurian government).³³ Thanks to the generous gift of the brethren in St. Petersburg four of these can be on the field for eight months of the year. The others have been appointed for four, two, and one month while continuing to keep their farm operations going. This missionary activity is supervised by the president of the missions committee, who at the present time is Johann Wieler.

Besides the Baptist community, there is another fellowship which has formed itself under the protection of the concessions received by the Baptists. The government paid scant attention to the differences of these groups as far as their confessions of faith are concerned. There were a number of persons who did not accept baptism when the Baptist petition for the right to organize was signed and submitted to the Tsar. Among the leading persons in this group was Balaban. When he was not chosen to join the representation to St. Petersburg, he withdrew from the fellowship along with a number of other persons who were especially distressed by the appeals for supporting missions.

They were rejoicing, they said, that they had been freed from the yoke of the Russian church, and now another yoke was being imposed on them. They neglected to gather for communion services and ceased baptizing new members because, they said, these practices must be interpreted spiritually. They did not observe Sunday as a special day. People went to buy and sell in the market places on Sundays. Drinking alcoholic beverages and smoking were not seen as sinful by this group. There was no church discipline among them as Balaban himself led a disorderly life.

After several years, in 1881, Brother Deliakov introduced baptism and the communion service to these Stundists. He appointed a new

leader and gave them a new constitution as he had done among some of the former Molokan brethren in the Taurian, Astrakhan, Samara, and the Tambov governments, as well as in other places.

Such divisions among the Russian brethren are, of course, regrettable; it would have been better for them to have promoted unity in the Spirit and in Christ, along with orderly congregational life so that such disorder and conflict could have been avoided.

There are still many believers in the Kiev government who reject the practice of baptism and communion services. Till recently, their leader was Jakob Kowal who also submitted to the government a confession of faith by which they have constituted their group.

The brethren in St. Petersburg organized a conference during the Easter week of 1884 in order to discuss the different confessions of faith and to create unity of the Spirit among the brethren.³⁴ Many of them were greatly blessed, even though they could not attempt a common service of communion at that time. It seemed that the ministry of the Lord would be furthered, and that a new era of working in unity would set in. The short hours of that brotherly gathering will be treasured and bring precious fruit of the Spirit for eternity, and also the upholding of brotherly peace.

Johann Wieler was asked at this conference in St. Petersburg if he would attempt to initiate missionary activity among the Stundists who are mostly believers from Molokan communities, and if he would organize a missions committee if possible. This led to the calling of a conference in Astrakhanka at the end of May this year. Five hundred rubles were gathered for missions at this conference. This, and a gift from the St. Petersburg brethren, made it possible to send out six missionaries for periods of four, two and one months. So it was that the "evangelical brethren", as these Stundists called themselves, could begin a more organized programme of missionary activity. May the Lord richly bless them, and sustain their work! The leaders of the evangelical brethren are two active brothers. Chariton and Sinovei Sakharov, and a much-appreciated witness for the Lord, Michael Iatshmenov.

It could be said of the personal activity of Johann Wieler that he has tried ever since his conversion to work among the Russian people, and to support whatever good has been attempted toward that end. This has always been and still is his fervent prayer: Lord, may the hour of Russia's reformation come quickly!

As Wieler saw it, the St. Petersburg revival was a most important event. He was concerned that these brethren might become acquainted with the mass conversions of the South, so that north and south might become mutually supportive in their work.

Such collaboration was already partially accomplished in the beginning of correspondence between Wieler and the believer, Lord Pashkov, in St. Petersburg. As a result of this an invitation was issued to come to

the capital to become personally acquainted with Christian work being done there. It would also provide an opportunity to talk about various questions related to evangelism. Generous donations now flowed into the missions committee treasury, making it possible to send out a number of brethren into the vineyard of the Lord, as it were, to lengthen the ropes and strengthen the stakes.

For the past nine years, Wieler has been able to serve among the Russians only during his holiday time, since he held a regular teaching position in the teacher-training school. Now, however, as a result of a proposal from St. Petersburg brethren, he has been able to terminate his teaching responsibilities and since July 15, 1883, has been working full-time for the Lord in the largest field of service in Russia.

Wieler has set for himself the following objectives: a) to visit the widely-scattered churches and preaching stations; b) to create a sense of mission among the believers; c) to promote unity and love among the congregations; d) to evangelize the lost, wherein one will need only to accept the many invitations, which is very difficult to do.

The first year of involvement has brought many encouraging results among the Russians. In the Saratov government, for example, a significant revival broke out in the market centre of Turki,³⁵ a movement that is now spreading into the surrounding regions. Wieler has also opened another point of outreach among the Mordvinians in northeastern Russia beyond the city of Samara. It has a promising future.

At a conference held last month, he was also able, with the help of God, to establish a missionary organization among the widely-scattered believers of the numerous German colonies on the Volga. At this conference twenty-eight brethren volunteered their time for two months each year so that they might go on preaching-tours to spread the Gospel.

The many invitations to speak and the heavy duties that come with being president of the missions committee, leave Wieler little time to see his family.

The work of evangelism has been going well so far. Many people have heard the Word of salvation proclaimed. Large numbers have been converted at the various preaching meetings, and through baptism have been brought into the congregations.

Of course, one cannot compare all this to the monumental achievements of Spurgeon and Moody. In Russia we are happy if we can meet in small groups without drawing undue attention from the police. But we have the joyous assurance that we are helping to prepare the way for a more glorious work in Russia. Although we are harvesting with a "sickle" at present, we anticipate the day when the "American binder" will be in action everywhere, transforming the broad, barren steppes of Russia into a scene of beauty and joy.

Inasmuch as I trust that many brethren abroad will be reading this

brief report on the evangelizing of Russia, I want also to ask everyone to remember the Slavic people of the vineyard of the Lord. I was informed recently by Lord Pashkov that in England and Germany many are praying for the conversion of Russia. I was greatly encouraged and became more hopeful that many prayers and God's gracious help would turn into a rainbow the dark political clouds that are gathering around us and threatening to disrupt the work of the Lord.

But I must plead once more: Brothers and sisters! Do not forget our mission fund, so that we can increase the number of workers in the new year. There will always be opportunities to serve, and workers are not lacking. However, we do lack the means to support them. A Russian peasant is normally poor and so far it is usually the poorest who are turning to the Lord. So, we can expect only little material help from these believers.

Young men who have the joy and calling to work for the Lord really should have the opportunity to get an education, if only in the most elemental teachings of the Christian faith. Since conditions in Russia are deteriorating and there is little likelihood that a training centre for travelling evangelists can be established here, I want to propose that one be opened in Bulgaria or Rumania.

It would be a great blessing for these countries whose peoples are really kinfolk of the Russians. The work in Russia itself could then be carried on with greater success. The freedom of religion in Bulgaria and Rumania should be a sign of the grace of God to us, as it opens to all the Slavic peoples a door for the preaching of the Gospel.

Love is creative. Help us by praying, by working for the freedom of God's children in Russia. This is the largest country of the world. Is there not a message of God for us in that?

Would the Evangelical Alliance not be able to petition the Russian Tsar that he extend his fatherly love to the suppressed people of his land so that they could be freed from the despotism of the clergy, that is, the Synod? The laws here are as good and as tolerant as they have ever been since the founding of the royal line. But the Synod and the Ministry of the Interior pervert them totally so that one sees the grossest miscarriage of justice in executing the mandates of the Tsar. These contradictions lead to total chaos in carrying out local police directives.

We are looking for the Lord's compensation in the present suppression of believers. In April Chief Procurator Pobedonostsev ordered the dispersal of the brethren at their meeting in St. Petersburg.³⁶ The representatives were rounded up without recourse and on the first day of the Easter holidays sent back to their homes. In September the same Pobedonostsev planned to convene a conference of the Russian bishops in Kiev in order to discuss how the spread of Stundism might be stopped. This time it was revolutionary students who prevented the gathering

from being held. The Russian bishops could not hold a conference in a main centre of their church, the seat of Russian religion. They had to leave their business unfinished.

God is showing us in this way that He holds everything in His own hands, and that He can do as He pleases. He is on the side of right and on the side of His people. It has not been spoken in vain: In the midst of the righteous victory has brought rejoicing; the Hand of the Lord upholds the victory.

In looking to the Lord to whom belong all the kingdoms of the world, including our great fatherland Russia, I hope to endure till there is a turn of events in our fields of activity. We have experienced this frequently before, in the grace of God. He is Lord and does as He pleases.

Soon the clouds will dissipate and the people of God will shout for joy. Comfort one another with these words.

We can also hope that those dear brethren who have had to leave their homes may be able to return soon and with renewed energies continue to proclaim the glorious Word of God.

So we commend to you the millions of Russians in this country. Remember them in prayer. Intercede for me as well, since I am travelling right now in the Kiev and Taurian governments wherever I am invited.

Sevastopol

November 7, 1884

Johann Wieler

Wieler took up the work of his new task with all the zest he could muster. By 1885, he was already feeling the new pressures of police surveillance and decided to leave the country also. His trip took him through Bucharest, Rumania, to Hamburg in Germany. He was back with his family in Tiege, Molotschna, by February, 1886, but had to go into hiding almost immediately. He decided once more to flee, this time to visit Berlin. His wife joined him there that same year.

But Wieler could find no satisfaction in the jobs available to him here, and in September, 1887, they decided to move to Rumania to pastor a small congregation of Baptists in Tutscha. Many Germans belonged to this group. Here he often preached to large audiences. Not long after his arrival he suffered injuries from an accident at the church building project where he was involved. His health condition deteriorated in 1889 and he decided to seek medical aid in Bucharest. It was a difficult journey which he did not survive for long. He died on July 30, 1889, not yet fifty years of age.³⁷

Notes

¹Important recent studies include the following: Andrew Blane, "The Relations Between the Russian Protestant Sects and the State, 1900-1921," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1964; Paul Steeves, "The Russian Baptist Union, 1917-1935: Evangelical Awakening in Russia," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1976; Samuel Nesdoly, "Evangelical Sectarianism in Russia: A Study of the Stundists, Baptists, Pashkovites, and Evangelical Christians, 1855-1917," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Queens University, 1971; Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II*, (Scottsdale, PA, and Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1981); Wilhelm Kahle, *Evangelische Christen in Russland und der Sowjetunion. Ivan Stepanovich Prochanov (1869-1935) und der Weg der Evangeliumschristen und Baptisten*, (Wuppertal und Kassel: Oncken Verlag, 1978).

²The *Stunden* were periods ("hours") used for Bible study, singing and prayer, held apart from the regular worship services of the church. They became a prominent feature of church life in a number of Reformed Lutheran congregations in Ukraine, e.g. Rohrbach and Worms, during the time of Johannes Bonekaemper who served as minister in these localities from 1824-1848. His successors, including also his son, Karl, continued to promote these activities in the following two decades. Cf. a very readable recent study, Hans Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty. The Emergence of the Evangelical Movement in Russia*, (London and Oxford, UK: Mowbrays, 1976). Another, older but still useful work on the Stundist movement is Hermann Dalton, *Der Stundismus in Russland. Studie und Erinnerungen*, (Guetersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1896).

³Among somewhat earlier works could be mentioned: Michael Klimenko, *Die Anfänge des Baptismus in Suedrussland nach offiziellen Dokumenten*, (Erlangen, 1957); Waldemar Gutsche, *Westliche Quellen des russischen Stundismus. Anfänge der evangelischen Bewegung in Russland*, (Kassel: J. G. Oncken Verlag, 1956); Erik Amburger, *Geschichte des Protestantismus in Russland*, (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1961), and before any of these, Serge Bolshakoff, *Russian Non-conformity. The Story of "Unofficial Religion" in Russia*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950).

⁴Mennonite historians in the past have sometimes tended to play down the role of Mennonites in the Ukrainian evangelical movement. One reason was that there was hardly an "official" programme of evangelizing non-Germans in Russia during the nineteenth century. More details are found in Gerhard Lohrenz, "The Mennonites of Russia and the Great Commission" in *A Legacy of Faith*, edited by C. J. Dyck (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1962), pp. 178 ff. and J. A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, (Fresno, CA: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), pp. 76-77, etc. Cf. also scattered references in P. M. Friesen, *Geschichte der Alt-Evangelischen Mennonitischen Bruderschaft in Russland 1789-1910* (Halbstadt, Taurien: Verlagsgesellschaft "Raduga", 1911).

⁵All rights to the Pashkov papers are held by the University of Birmingham in Birmingham, UK. Special thanks goes to the archivist, Dr. B. S. Benedikz, for giving access to the papers, and written permission to publish selected documents from the collection. The Wieler file in this collection is marked "Viller ot 1881 g do 1886 g" (Wieler from 1881-1886). A copy of the original longer manuscript is in the author's file.

⁶On Pashkov and the St. Petersburg evangelical movement see Edmund Heier, *Religious Schism in the Russian Aristocracy, 1860-1900. Radstockism and Pashkovism*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), along with the studies of Steeves and Nesdoly noted above.

⁷Cf. Dr. K. Kostiv, "Vid Shkundyzmu do Novozapovitnoyi Tserkvy v Ukrayini," *Christianski Vistnik*, Vol. 43, Nos. 1-2 (Jan.-Feb., 1985), pp. 12-13.

⁸A(bram) K(roeker), "Prediger Johann Wieler", *Christlicher Familienkalender*, (1908), pp. 1-2.

⁹The Mennonite Brethren conferences of this period did consider questions of evangelism and itinerant ministries. Representations of non-Mennonite evangelical groups also attended these meetings. Toews, p. 66; Lohrenz, p. 180.

¹⁰The original title of the appeal was *Some Brief Comments on the Origin of the Stundists and the Baptist Movement Among the Russian People of South Russia*.

¹¹Gouvernements were administrative regions, introduced by Peter I. They were headed by a governor. These regions were eventually displaced by guberniias, roughly equivalent to provinces or states, but probably with less independence from the central government of the country.

¹²Michael Ratushnii (1830–1911) was also influenced by a wandering peasant, Ivan Onishtchenko, who bought a Bible from the Germans, and brought it home to his native village of Osnova. Ratushnyi had become a village elder not long before his conversion. He began to invite people to attend a *Stunde* at his own home after he became a believer. Steeves, pp. 7–8.

"German brethren" refers quite possibly to the Reformed Lutherans of the nearby community of Rohrbach located some miles north of Osnova. Heinrich Roemmich, "Der Ursprung des ukrainischen Stundismus," *Heimatsbuch der Deutschen aus Russland*, (1967/68), pp. 65–80.

¹³Wieler appears to mean "not readily available to the common people." On the development of Bible translations in nineteenth century Russia cf. Judith Cohen Zacek, "The Russian Bible Society and the Russian Orthodox Church," *Church History*, XXXV (December, 1966), pp. 411–437 and W. Krause, "Die Bibel in Russland," *Kirche im Osten*, Band 1/1958, pp. 11ff.

¹⁴The Synodal issue of the Russian New Testament was published in 1862. The Holy Synod also approved the formation of a distribution organization called "The Society for the Distribution of Holy Scriptures," in 1863. Steeves, p. 2. On the work of Melville see Brandenburg, pp. 99 ff, and James Urry, "John Melville and the Mennonites: A British Evangelist in South Russia, 1837–c. 1875," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, LIV (October, 1980), pp. 305–322.

¹⁵Osnova was a Ukrainian village located near the German Lutheran colony of Rohrbach somewhat north and east of Odessa.

¹⁶Ivan Grigorievich Riaboshapka (1832–1902) had been in touch with a believing German blacksmith, Martin Huebner. He wanted to be baptized by the Germans, but they refused because of the laws against converting Orthodox believers. Riaboshapka managed a mill in his home village, and was known as a person who wanted to get ahead. Steeves, p. 8. Cf. also Klimenko, pp. 37–38.

¹⁷Kushnerenko is seldom, if ever, mentioned in the published discussions of Stundist beginnings. "Showing people the Bible on his head" probably refers to the practice of holding up the Bible at certain points in the worship liturgy of the Orthodox Church.

¹⁸Deliakov was the Russian surname of Kasha Yagub (Jakov), a Nestorian Christian who had been converted by American Presbyterian missionaries in Persia. They supported him during his travels in Russia for a time; later Deliakov got help from the Christians in St. Petersburg. Cf. Brandenburg, pp. 61 ff; Blane, pp. 15 ff. Many of Deliakov's converts continued to think of themselves as Molokans but also called themselves "Evangelical Christians." The Sakharov brothers from Astrakhanka were among his converts also.

¹⁹On the Molokans see James Billington, *The Ikon and the Axe. An Interpretive History of Russian Culture*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp. 178 ff., and A. I. Klibanov, *History of Religious Sectarianism in Russia (1860s–1917)*, translated by Ethel Dunn and edited by Stephen Dunn (Oxford, New York, Toronto, Sydney, Paris, Frankfurt: Pergamon Press, 1982), pp. 151 ff.

²⁰The awakening should really be dated 1850–1860 and refers of course to the emergence of the group that became the Mennonite Brethren in Russian after 1860. Cf. J. A. Toews, pp. 26 ff.

²¹Just how "Baptist" the MBs of this period were needs to be studied further. Soviet Baptists seem to want to minimize differences while Mennonite Brethren authors tend to maximize them. Cf. for example, Heinrich Woelk and Gerhard Woelk, *A Wilderness Journey. Glimpses of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia, 1925–1980* (Fresno, CA: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1982) and Johann P. Dyck, "Mennonity", *Bratskii Vestnik*, No. 2 (1985), pp. 45–49.

²²Gerhard Wieler's imprisonment is dated 1865 by one source. See also the references to Johann himself baptizing Russians in 1863–64. Brandenburg, p. 93, and Kostiv, p. 12.

²³Johann Gerhard Oncken (1800–1884) was the leader of German Baptists for a time. He came from a Lutheran family in Germany. He encountered Baptist ideas in England as a youth and eventually settled in Hamburg. His leadership made this city a major centre of German Baptist activity for many years. Oncken also prepared a Baptist confession of faith which was used in Russia later on. Cf. Kahle, pp. 66 f, and H. Luckey, *Johann Gerhard Oncken und die Anfänge des deutschen Baptismus* (Kassel, 1958).

²⁴These were evangelicals with influence in the political world.

²⁵On the difficulties of making the break see Klimenko, p. 59 and Gutsche, pp. 39–40.

²⁶These titles refer to the district police chief, master-sergeant and the village elder, i.e. local authorities who were responsible for order in the community.

²⁷The Evangelical Alliance was an international organization of Protestant cooperation set up in London, England, in 1846. It was an organization of individuals rather than churches and from the beginning enrolled persons from various countries. Cf. Josef L. Altholz, *The Churches in the Nineteenth Century*, (Indianapolis, NY: The Bobbs Merrill Co., Ltd., 1967), p. 184.

²⁸Accounts of opposition to the movement are found in the sources published in Bishop Alexeiv (Dorodnicyn), ed., *Materialy dlia istorii religiozno-relationalisticheskogo dvizheniia na iuge Rossii vo vtoroi polovine 19 veka* (Kasan', 1908), and Arsenii Rozhdestvienskii *Iuzhnorusskii Shtundizm* (St. Petersburg, 1889), both cited extensively by Klimenko in his study.

²⁹Martin Kalwait is erroneously called Karl here and the date is approximate. Historians, especially from the Baptist community, usually consider the baptism of Nikita Isaevich Voronin (1840–1905) to be the beginning of the Baptist movement in Russia. His baptism took place on August 20 (O.S.), 1867. Steeves, pp. 2–3.

³⁰It would appear that Wieler dated the beginning of the union back to the conference of 1882 in Rueckenau, Molotschna. This conference was called together specifically to coordinate mission work being done by Stundists, Baptists and other evangelicals of Russia. It was attended by 55 Germans (one source says Mennonite Brethren) and 17 Stundobaptists, including leaders like Ratushnyi, Riaboshapka, Kapustian, etc. Kostiv, p. 13; Gutsche, p. 65.

³¹The help cited here probably came from Baptist groups in the United States. American Baptist periodicals carried reports of the progress of Baptist work in Russia. See, for example, *Baptist Missionary Magazine* (July, 1879), p. 277.

³²This refers most likely to aid continuing to come from the Pashkovites in St. Petersburg.

³³This would mean the conference of Novo-Vasilievka held on April 30–May 1, 1884. It was here that what became the Russian Baptist Union was formally organized with Johann Wieler as chairman.

³⁴An eye-witness described this gathering as having "representatives from all parts of the South as far as Tiflis in the east, and Bulgaria in the West, including German brethren from Odessa and an American missionary," a total of 70 persons or more (25 of them Russian and the rest foreigners). Another report mentions a response of about 100 persons altogether. The meeting was dispersed by Russian police before it could end as planned. W. T. Stead, *Truth About Russia* (London: Cassell and Co., Ltd., 1888), p. 364, and M. M. Korff, *Am Zarenhof* (Giessen and Basel: Brunnen Verlag, 1956, 4th ed.), pp. 56–62.

³⁵Turki was a small town northeast of Arkadak. A Mennonite settlement was established at Arkadak later on.

³⁶F. M. Dostoevsky had discounted the Stundists as a movement having "no future," but the new Chief Procurator, K. P. Pobedonostsev, appointed in 1880, drew attention to the "danger" of Pashkov's activity, seeing it as a movement that "threatened" to merge with the Stundists of south Russia. He recommended that Pashkov be exiled from Russia. F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1949).

³⁷Kroecker, p. 2.