

Mennonite Immigration to Canada after World War II

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Mennonite immigrants have come to Canada in three major waves: 1874–1880 (7,000); 1923–1930 (21,000); and 1947–1960 (8,000). Faith and tradition were always factors contributing to such major group migrations, but there were other, sometimes overwhelming forces at play, and any attempt at interpretation has to be made in the context of national and international developments.

When in the 1870s more than 17,000 Russian Mennonites decided to leave Russia, the overriding issues appeared to be education and non-resistance. However, when we consider the fact that two-thirds of the Mennonite immigrants from Bergthal, and those joining Aeltester Gerhard Wiebe from the Khortitza colony and from Fuerstenland were landless, quite clearly another factor comes to the surface. Furthermore, the fact that the strongest promoters of that emigration, the Berdiansk and the Alexanderwohl churches, eventually chose Kansas and Nebraska, where they did not even get the assurance of an alternative service, would make a purist interpretation appear ludicrous. Faith and tradition were important factors in the ongoing discussion before the emigration from Russia, but the psychological preparation for the move must also be seen in the plight of the landless, in the uncertainty of the future in Russia, and the deep sense of frustration, distrust, and anger against the Russian government.

The second and largest wave of Mennonite immigrants from Russia to reach Canada had very different motives for the move. Again there is not the slightest doubt that faith and tradition were important factors in the decision-making of the 25,000 Mennonites who left Russia in the 1920s, 21,000 of whom landed in Canada. However, the psychological preparation of this group was very different.

Since 1890 the Russian press had carried on a "hate the Germans" campaign which intensified as World War I approached. Mennonites had largely ignored this change of climate, but they could not ignore

Stolypin's legislation of 1909, which barred Russian citizens of German descent from buying land in the western provinces of Russia. This was the first of a series of legislative moves which transformed the once wanted foreigners into second-class citizens. In 1912 Stolypin's successor, Makarov, brought in legislation to disappropriate those citizens of German descent "who were not sufficiently Russianized," and the power to do so was to be in the hands of the provincial governors (Lindemann 6).

In December of 1914, shortly after the outbreak of World War I, Makarov brought in legislation for the disappropriation of all land property belonging to Russian citizens of German descent. This legislation was not presented to the Duma, because Makarov was not sure he could get approval and thus Tsar Nicholas signed it and it became known as the "Decree of February 1915" (Lindemann 7). The struggle concerning this decree is well known. Suffice it to say, the Mennonites, like the rest of the German minority in Russia, now knew that their future hung in the balance. Public statements by Khvostov, minister of the interior, who let it be known that his goal was "the destruction of all Germans in Russia," had to be taken seriously. Then came the March Revolution of 1917, followed by a brief period of hope which ended with the events that followed: civil war, anarchy, looting, murder, raping, typhoid, acts of desperation, the *Selbstschutz*, forced recruitment of young Mennonites into the White and Red armies, and utter impoverishment. And when a semblance of peace returned (although death continued to reign), it was clear to every Mennonite that the best they could do was emigrate, because they had lost their schools and their churches were in danger.

The Mennonite dream had been utterly crushed. There was no longer any hope in Russia, and for the first time there was a government announcing, as one of its goals, the extermination of religion. When the last serious attempt to negotiate with the government failed (1925), the cry "Get out before it is too late" became the motto — but only for those who had the means. It is not surprising that the 25,000 who succeeded in their bid to emigrate, included at least 60% of the Mennonite intelligentsia (university graduates and better educated people) of approximately 130,000 Mennonites in Russia (1930). The 25,000 who managed to get out, left because they had lost all hope for a future in Russia.

The third wave of Mennonite immigrants came to Canada after another fifteen years of traumatic experiences in Russia. The depleted Mennonite leadership tried to regroup in the late 1920s and early 1930s. They had lost their schools and all other institutions except the church. They had learned from the *Selbstschutz* experience and now made a determined effort to save their nonresistance principle. And surprisingly, the government did grant them alternative service, which from 1925–1935 was requested by the great majority of Mennonite men. The conscientious objector (CO) had to make an application, and the church was given

the right to choose "experts" to defend the young men who in general were not prepared for the intimidating experience of court cross examination. It was not made easy and eventually the "experts" (always educated ministers) had to pay the price. However, never in Mennonite history of the last two centuries have individual Mennonites, under most difficult conditions, defended their nonresistance principle in such numbers and with such consistency, as between 1921 and 1935 in the Soviet Union. The conditions were made more and more difficult, and the option of active military service was always held before them as an easy way out of their difficult situation. Many died in the camps of the "Labour Army" (*Trud armia*), but only a small minority broke down and actually chose to serve in the army. As far as we know today, only 10–20% gave in to the constant and severe pressure — as long as there was a church to give them moral support. However, the situation changed drastically with the closing of all churches (1934–35). At the same time, the Stalin Constitution of 1936 declared the defence of the existing government a "sacred duty" of all citizens. There were to be no exceptions. Nonresistance for the over 100,000 Mennonites in Russia came to an abrupt end. Simultaneously the reign of political terror, aimed at the extermination of all leadership which had the potential of any real or perceived opposition, silenced the last spokesmen of the Mennonite community in Russia.

By 1940 close to 50% of Mennonite families in Russia were without the head of the household. Thousands were arrested and exiled. The extermination of the perceived opposition was carried out systematically. People went to bed trembling and woke up with a sigh of relief, because arrests were always made in the dark of the night (with few exceptions). We should note that all of Russia was trembling and Mennonites were only one of the minorities to suffer more than the average Soviet family did.

And then came the war. In 1939 and 1940 for the first time large numbers of young Mennonites were called into the army. These young men had been teenagers when the churches were closed. Many had grown up without fathers. The women had struggled to sustain the family, but the school had become the major influence in the life of most. Those of the older generation who remembered the nonresistance principle would not commit suicide by speaking against the "sacred duty" to serve in the army. And thus the inevitable took its course. Due to their better education, young Mennonites often rose to the ranks of non-commissioned officers. I know only of one Mennonite who became a captain in the Soviet army, but he skillfully hid his Mennonite identity — his name was Vinogradov.

Then in the game of nerves between Hitler and Stalin, Hitler won the first round — he attacked the Soviet Union while Stalin expected him to be busy in England. In the confusion of the first months of the war

(June and July, 1941), many Mennonite young men became prisoners of war with the German army. The majority however, was soon disarmed by the Soviets and sent to the "Trud armia" (Labour Army) which was composed of "untrustworthy minorities." These men would rather have died at the front, where they were at least fed and treated more like equals by their soldier comrades.

By August 1941 the German army approached the Dniepr, and all German-speaking citizens trembled, for they knew Stalin from first-hand experience. What would he do to them now? Would he just eliminate them? The approaching enemy was of no concern to most Soviet citizens, because they hated the system that had been more cruel than Ivan the IV could have been. The famine of 1932-33 which took the lives of six to seven million Ukrainians, the Stalin terror of 1935-38 which eliminated uncounted millions (at least 10 million) were fresh on the minds of Ukrainians, Germans, Mennonites, and some other special target groups (note that the whip was not always directed against all minorities. Divide and rule was applied in a most cruel way).

Thus, the general feeling was that an enemy could not be worse, and the population remembered the German occupation of 1918, which, from the point of view of most people in the Ukraine, had not been so bad. These were — so the population believed — the same Germans. As a result, not only the German-speaking minority, but the population in general received the enemy without resistance and very often with flowers, bread and salt. Unfortunately when the regular army moved on, a different type of German appeared — the party-controlled civil administrator.

The Soviet government had decided that the population of the German villages was not to see the German invader, and thus on August 16, 1941, orders for the evacuation of all German villages west of the Dniepr River stunned the people. The 70 Mennonite villages on the Crimean peninsula were evacuated by train on August 16. The psychological impact of the experience can hardly be fathomed — in a matter of two to four hours, people had to come to terms with the loss of their homes, their property, their *Heimat*, and with the prospect of a very uncertain future. One of the trains carrying the Crimean Mennonites passed by the Molochnaya colony, when the locomotive received a direct hit from a single German plane in the air. Everybody scrambled for safety, including the guards, and a group of these people risked running for the Mennonite villages nearby, and since they found several deserted villages (people had already been evacuated), they settled in these familiar Mennonite homes, hoping that some day their loved ones on the train would also find their way back.

The villages of the Khortitza colony, and all other colonies on the west bank of the Dniepr, had received orders to prepare for immediate

evacuation at 1 o'clock, on August 16, 1941. At 4 o'clock, in the Yazykovo colony, NKVD soldiers attempted to bring some order into the long trek of the 6 villages, with about 2,500 people. They had been ordered to be on the road an hour earlier, but the majority of men and women between 15 and 60 were digging trenches for the army about three to six kilometres from their villages. The villagers were very cooperative and did not want to create the suspicion of "sabbotage," because death was a very cheap commodity in those days. The trek proceeded slowly, since all livestock had to be taken along — cows, pigs, and sheep.

During the night of August 17th to the 18th, the NKVD "protection" guards suddenly left, after they had made a last threat that they would come back and shoot all the "Fascists." The people knew that "Fascist" was a very bad word, but that was as far as their understanding of Fascism went. Then on the 18th, German troops overtook the refugee treks and sent them home. "For you the war is over — go home," they said.

And thus, most of the Mennonites on the west bank of the Dniepr were safe for the time being. Their first impression of the German troops was very positive. German soldiers behaved rather well, were polite and disciplined. And symbols like the motto on the German army belts, "Gott mit uns," impressed them. This was so contrary to what the Mennonites had experienced over the last two decades. And then on the first Sunday, after their arrival, the German troops had an open-air worship service. Many Mennonites attended that service — their first worship experience in seven or more years. They could identify with these soldiers — they were believers. Could they open their own churches? But of course! And on the following Sunday Mennonite church life began west of the Dniepr.

The German troops paused on the Dniepr, to bring up supplies. Only six weeks later, on October 5, 1941, did German troops occupy the Molochnaya colony. This delay made it possible for Soviet authorities to round up all men between 16 and 65 and to march them away under heavy guard. Then the systematic evacuation of women and children began, and by the time the German troops arrived, 23 villages had been shipped to Siberia or Central Asia. In the remaining 33 villages the men were missing, and only a few of those who had been led away escaped and found their way home. As a result, the Molochnaya did not experience quite the same religious and economic revival which in the villages west of the Dniepr became remarkable. Within six months the Khortitza, Yazykovo, Sagradovka, and other colonies west of the Dniepr had elected ministers and deacons, and church life was thriving again. The two years of occupation were years of grace for the Mennonite church in the fullest sense of that word. This would prove to be a great significance for the experiences that awaited them (the trek, Siberia, prison and Gulag).

Although the "brown administration" which moved in after the army shocked the Mennonites (as well as the population in the occupied

territories in general) into a new reality — these were not the Germans they had welcomed — they had no choice. They were caught between the two dictators. One had oppressed and killed and threatened to kill more of them when the time would come. The other was evil too, as some began to realize, but for the time being he tolerated their churches, and there was no direct persecution as they had known it for decades. He began to recruit their young men, but at first only as interpreters (which they could somehow justify). And in any case, there was no choice, their fate now depended on the German protection.

When two years down the road, on September 12, 1943, the front approached the Molochnaya, and early in October Soviet troops were at the Dniepr, 35,000 Mennonite within a stream of 350,000 *Volksdeutsche* and over a million Ukrainians and other Soviet people fled for the perceived safety of the West. Once more these refugees would be impressed by the German ability to organize. Most refugees, with the help of German troops, safely reached the German borders.

In Germany all *Volksdeutsche* had to go through a naturalization process, which they accepted as protection against deportation or repatriation. What they did not realize was that for the German authorities naturalization was necessary to make the *Volksdeutsche* fully responsible citizens. As soon as they were naturalized, Mennonite men began to receive orders to report to military units. That came as a shock and caused much soul-searching, but some also felt that since they had accepted German protection, there was a moral obligation to contribute to that protection. Those who had the courage to oppose the draft, were usually the first to be sent to front line units. When the war was finally over, practically all Mennonite men were in PW camps. Many were sent to the coal mines in France and Belgium, others to England, and the most unfortunate ones to the Soviet Union. Many had been killed in the last phase of the war and many were missing.

In January 1945, Polish and Prussian Mennonites joined the ranks of refugees. They shared the fate of the Russian Mennonites but did not have to face "repatriation" to the Soviet Union, although a smaller number of the Prussian Mennonites also ended up in Russian forests or mines.

At the end of the war 35,000 Russian Mennonite refugees were concentrated in Saxony and Thuringia, German provinces occupied by American troops. Once more they felt safe. The Americans had to be good. But at Yalta in the Crimea Stalin had demanded that "all who were born in Russia" be returned to the Soviet Union. In those days naive American politicians did not understand why people might not want to go "home." At the request of their Soviet allies, during the hours of curfew for civilians, the Americans quietly withdrew and when the people opened their eyes in the morning, Soviet troops had occupied the

towns. For the 35,000 Mennonites, as for the one to two million refugees from Soviet territories, that morning and the days and weeks that followed cannot be described, it can only be felt by those who went through the experience.

It must be seen as a small miracle that in spite of all efforts of the occupation forces, about 12,000 of the Mennonite refugees still managed to escape into the American and British zones of occupation — 23,000 were deported to the distant and coldest regions of the Soviet Union. However, those who escaped into zones occupied by the Western Allies continued to tremble, because Soviet KGB agents quite openly traveled in these zones and quite frequently with American help rounded up refugees and under heavy guard sent them “home.” Only in 1946 did American attitudes change.

Over a thousand of the 12,000 who eventually did make it to the West, were hiding in remote areas of East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Many of them had been humiliated and abused in indescribable ways, and now they did not dare to move. Families were separated. Mothers and children without parents ended up in government orphanages. Some of these were later found, but others have disappeared from Mennonite records.

But there was still one escape route left, namely Berlin. This city, surrounded by East German territory, was divided into four zones, controlled by Soviet, American, British, and French forces. Between May 1945 and December 1946, 1202 Mennonites found refuge in Berlin. Those who were too afraid to move on their own, were picked up by young Mennonite men, who dared to make trips into East German territory time and again, to lead helpless and hopeless people to safety. These “forgotten heroes” risked their freedom and their lives to save a family, a mother with her children, or old people.

Another groups of 400 Russian Mennonites crossed the Dutch border. They were received by the Dutch Mennonite churches, and as this news spread more attempted to find safety in Holland, but the Soviet authorities put pressure on Holland and the border was closed. As a result many Mennonites ended up in UNRRA (relief agency) camps in Cologne and Munich. But no refugees were safe until a large group of Russian refugees committed suicide to dramatize the plight of those who were being forcibly sent back to the Soviet Union (Tolstoy 173–81; Bethell 224–304). After that, General Patton ordered an immediate end to the “cooperation in matters of Soviet repatriation” (by popular accounts). This happened one year after the war, and from then on refugees from the Soviet Union felt a little safer, but every refugee wanted to get out of “crazy Europe” as fast as possible. And Mennonites, who had learned from the experience in Saxony and Thuringia, that Americans were not always to be trusted, were especially eager to get out. Americans had

handed over 23,000 Mennonites, and there might be a good political reason to bargain away a few more refugees. It was quite clear that the Western Allies did not understand the fear of these refugees. From their point of view, innocent people had nothing to fear, and those who were afraid had to be guilty.

Fortunately, after General Patton's order to stop forced repatriation, American authorities became the most compassionate and helpful of the four occupation powers, and in this process C. F. Klassen of Canada played a very significant role. He became the convincing Mennonite diplomat, whose credibility was established in American circles. For the Mennonite refugees, C. F. Klassen, Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, personified the caring community, the people of a common faith, and hope for safety (Note: Refugees think of safety, not of future).

Slowly, over many months, most of the 12,000 Mennonite refugees came out of hiding. Some of them had to be found through real detective work, because they denied their identity to German authorities, fearing betrayal to the Soviets. By the summer of 1946, large groups of Mennonite refugees concentrated in Munich, Cologne, Berlin, as well as several other centres in western Germany. Mennonites from Prussia and Danzig had found refuge in Denmark, and 400 Russian Mennonites were in Holland. Now a way for resettlement had to be found. Canada and the United States refused to consider any refugee immigrants before the homecoming soldiers were demobilized and reestablished in the workforce. But the situation in economically, physically, and morally crushed Germany, where millions of refugees were added to the already dense German population, was intolerable. The Russian Mennonites had to be resettled in the New World, and most of them hoped to find a new home in Canada.

The Mennonite Board of Colonization tried to obtain the acceptance of at least close relatives, but the Canadian government refused to open the door and thus in the summer of 1946 MCC representatives began to prepare the refugees for resettlement in Paraguay. Those who had relatives in Canada were advised to wait for a change of government policy in Canada, but when friends began to prepare for Paraguay, and when even a date for the departure of the first group was given, many who had been determined to go only to Canada, changed their mind and joined those who were promised to leave for Paraguay with the first refugees to leave Europe after World War II. (They were willing to go anywhere, just to get away from the Soviet threat.) On January 29, 1947, over 1000 of the Munich group and 329 of the group in Holland were boarding the Dutch liner *Volendam*, to be joined later by the Berlin group. But the departure was delayed until February 1, because the Russians were not willing to let the Mennonites go — they demanded that these people be handed over for "repatriation." Much credit must be given to Colonel Stinson, an

American officer serving under General Clay in Berlin, to C. F. Klassen, who was in charge of this operation, and to Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, who were the MCC directors responsible for the Berlin group. At 2 o'clock in the morning, January 31, 1947, the train with 1202 Mennonite refugees left Berlin. The train was heavily guarded by American soldiers until it crossed the West German border. On February 1, 1947, the *Volendam* left for Paraguay with 2,303 Mennonite refugees.

These refugees founded in Paraguay the colonies Volendam and Neuland. The colonies eventually prospered, but more than 60% of all refugees arriving in Paraguay after World War II (*Volendam I*, February, 1947; *Gen. Heintzelmann*, February, 1948; *Charlton Monarch*, March, 1948; *Volendam II*, October, 1948) eventually, with the help of relatives, found their way to Canada.

Just as the *Volendam* was preparing to leave Bremerhaven, early in 1947, several Orders of Council (December 1946, January and February 1947) opened the Canadian doors for Mennonite immigrants. On April 10, 1947, the first five Mennonite immigrants of the post-World War II period arrived in Canada. By the end of the year close to 500 immigrants had been received by relatives in five provinces. It is interesting to note that in 1947 more than half of the immigrants went to relatives in Manitoba (279), while in 1948 the trend changed in favour of British Columbia, with Manitoba and Ontario following with significantly lower numbers, and Saskatchewan and Alberta receiving a relatively low number of the 3,000 immigrants that arrived.

By the end of 1949 another 900 immigrants had arrived and the post-World War II immigration from Europe was basically completed. At the same time Canadian relatives were beginning to bring over immigrants who originally had settled in Volendam and Neuland, Paraguay. Again the three provinces, Manitoba, British Columbia, and Ontario received the bulk of the new arrivals, and Winnipeg in Manitoba, Vancouver, and the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, and St. Catharines and Leamington in Ontario, became centres of concentration of new Mennonite immigrants. In Saskatchewan, Saskatoon eventually attracted many newcomers, and in Alberta many found employment in Calgary; the resettlement of these immigrants was completed by 1961. (The next wave of South American Mennonite immigrants to Canada would actually be mostly returning Canadian Mennonites, who had settled in Paraguay between 1928 and 1948.)

Profile of the New Immigrants

It seemed to be impossible to find a representative immigrant group in Canada — a group that would not already be affected by choice of working place, residence, social preferences, etc. I have chosen therefore for my purpose one of the original villages established in Paraguay in

1947. The sample village was to be of an average composition of households (e.g., villages where the overwhelming majority of households had no male provider, would have been impressive samples but would not have given a true profile of the larger group). Furthermore, the size of the sample was important, and thus the village of Tiefenbrunn, Volendam, was chosen which had the additional advantage that I knew every household personally.

A Sample of Fifty-two (Families) Units in the Colony of Volendam, 1949

The composition of these families after the war experience. The losses include the casualties of the political terror of the 1930s as well as those of World War II.

Unit — can be a family, or an independent single man or woman.

Total Test Units	52
Intact	10
Lost Spouse (Provider)	13
Lost Spouse (mother only)	—
Lost Spouse and the whole family	8
Lost Parents (single men/women)	10
Lost Brothers	9
Lost Sisters	3

Not even 20% of the units were intact.

Every unit was affected if immediate relatives (brothers, sisters and parents) were included.

(Sample: village of Tiefenbrunn, Volendam)

From this sample it becomes obvious that we are no longer dealing with a normal immigrant category. These people had been through every aspect of persecution, degradation, and humiliation of the most painful kind. Women and even children had been raped (hundreds, perhaps even thousands; we do not know. It is a subject too painful to talk about). Men and children were forced to watch as their mothers and sisters were abused. (For relevant information read Lev Kopelev, well-known Russian writer and officer in the Red Army, *No Jail for Thought*.) It was a miracle if a woman that fell into the hands of Soviet soldiers was not raped. Two weeks after the occupation, troops were free to take revenge on the population. (Credit must be given to Russian officers who attempted to oppose the officially tolerated terror. Kopelev, and Solzhenitsyn were two of these courageous men.)

After the war the waiting for husbands, sons, and sweethearts began. Had they survived the war? Many had not. These Mennonite men and boys had been put into uniform and sent to units all over Europe.

Nonresistance, as I have noted, was not an issue for dictators. Some of these men ended up in units which at the end of the war were seen as "political" rather than military units. Only in late 1946 did the Western Allies begin to understand the facts a little better and thus many young Mennonites were freed from the PW camps. When these men found their loved ones, they often found a battered, crushed, abused, and depressed family that still found it difficult to cope with the humiliation.

Conclusion

When we compare the three groups of Mennonite immigrants, it is very obvious that the psychological preparation for the decision to move to a strange new country was very different for each group, and that the psychological preparation was most intense for the third wave of Mennonite immigrants.

In the 1870s, frustration and anger over the government's actions were strong factors leading to the decision to look for a better place. In the 1920s the traumatic experience of the civil war and the loss of hope for a future in Russia were the strongest factors. The third wave of Mennonite immigrants had only one motivation when they left everything behind in 1943, namely fear. This fear was based on two decades of experience of an abused minority, and it was so deep-seated that many of these former refugees have never been able to free themselves from the trauma of their experience. However, it would be wrong to conclude that faith and tradition were simply insignificant factors in the history of this group of Mennonite immigrants. Had there not been a strong element of faith in their experiences, the community would have fallen apart under the incredible pressures of the times. Even when fear became the "moving factor" for the last wave of immigrants, the glue which preserved the community was the faith of the large majority of these immigrants.

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