

Foreword

This issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* includes a selection of papers on the Siberian Mennonite story that were delivered in the 'History and Culture of Mennonites' section of the *Germans of Siberia: History and Culture* conference that took place in Omsk, Russia, on June 2-4, 2010. The conference was hosted by F. M. Dostoevsky Omsk State University and jointly sponsored by the Chair in Mennonite Studies (University of Winnipeg) and Fresno Pacific University. A number of other organizations were co-sponsors and facilitated parts of the program, including the Omsk State Museum of Regional History, Omsk Branch of the Archeology and Ethnography Institute of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Ministry of Culture of Omsk Oblast.

The three day Omsk 2010 scholarly exchange aimed to cast light on the obscure story of Mennonites in Siberia. The meeting was inspired by the idea that Siberia has held a profoundly important place in Mennonite global history. It marked a place of frontier hope when the first of many voluntary farm settlements were established around Omsk and on the Kalundasteppe between 1897 and 1912. Then it became a place of great sorrow to which tens of thousands of Mennonites were exiled in the 1930s and 40s. Later it again became a site of hope when it became apparent that even in the face of communist oppression, Mennonites had survived as an Anabaptist people, many of whom have returned to the West, especially as *Aussiedler* to Germany, during the last 25 years.

The *Germans of Siberia* conference was jointly planned by a committee from North America and F. M. Dostoevsky Omsk State University. Members of the North American committee were Aileen

Friesen, Peter Letkemann, Royden Loewen, Peter Penner, Ken Reddig, Olga Shmakina, Paul Toews, and Hans Werner. Special recognition is extended to Prof. Peter Penner who inspired the idea of the conference in the region of his birth, but in the end was unable to attend. The Siberian committee included Anna Blinova, Sulushash Kurmanova, Tatiana Smirnova, and Nikolai Tomilov, all professors of Omsk State University.

The 'History and Culture of Mennonites: Issues in the Study of Ethno-Confessional Groups' was one of four sections at the conference. The 'Mennonite' section brought together scholars from Russia, Kazakhstan, Germany, Canada and the United States. In addition to the academics who presented papers, a number of visitors from North America, Germany and the Mennonite communities of Siberia also attended. Scholarly associations in Russia frequently hold conferences on the history and culture of Germans in Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and its successor independent states, but this was the first with a significant focus on the history of Mennonites in Siberia to include numerous international participants.

The twelve papers published in this issue by scholars in the Russian language (and presented here in translated form) were largely drawn from materials of state archival institutions. Both the Tsarist and Soviet governments kept many records on foreign peoples and differing confessional communities.

The first five papers reflect work on the broader Mennonite story and its Siberian and Asiatic Russian context based on materials located in many regional and central archival depositories in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Tatiana B. Smirnova, examines the 2009 national polling data regarding the persistence of German ethnicity in the Russian Federation. Petr P. Wiebe (also known as Petr P Vibe) provides an overview of the Siberian Mennonite story with emphasis on their role in the economy of Western Siberia. Yulia I. Podoprigora then describes four periods in the development of the Mennonite presence in Kazakhstan. In his paper, Andrey I. Savin revisits the 1929 Mennonite out-migration based on access to previously closed archives of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. Alexy V. Gorbatov, seeking to identify and locate the Mennonite congregations of Western Siberia, notes the difficulty Soviet officials had in compiling accurate lists because of divisions within the Mennonite world, differing affiliations with ecumenical groupings and cross-overs between groups.

The next four papers are community studies based on sources found in local or regional archives and resulting from local interviews. Some of the papers are the first fruits of emerging scholars, others very specific studies by nationally renown scholars. In both instances they will provide the basis for subsequent more synthetic analyses. Sergei V. Sokolovskii examines marriage structures among Mennonites in

the Slavgorod region in the 1980s, establishing a remarkable cultural persistence despite the official loss of identity. Iraida V. Nam chronicles the Mennonite story in Tomsk oblast that began in 1941 in connection with the deportation of Germans and the relations that developed among differing German religious groups – Kirchliche Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, Baptist and Lutheran. Konstantin A. Morgunov reconstructs the harassment and controversies in the Orenburg region, 1945-1991, over questions of registration with the State. Vera P. Klyueve reviews the short history of Mennonites in Tyumen oblast that began in the 1940s as a result of the deportation eastward of German-related peoples.

Three Mennonite churchmen sort out the religious story in three different communities. Johannes Dyck reviews the status of Free Churches in the early Soviet period and their revitalization following the Second World War. Peter Epp chronicles selected parts of the 100 year history of the Omsk Brotherhood (an association of German Baptist, Mennonite and Russian Baptist congregations), 1907-2007. And, Alexander Weiss analyzes why Mennonites in the Slavgorod region affiliated with Baptists during the Soviet era.

The papers, while ranging from the initial beginnings of the Mennonite presence in Siberian and Asiatic Russia to the present, are centered on the long Soviet period. The Siberian Mennonite story begins in the 1890s with the initial movement of Mennonites into the region. The Soviet experience of seventy years thus constitutes the longest chapter of the story.

The papers delivered by the Russian scholars were translated according to the Library of Congress standards. Bibliographic citations are also translated as most readers of the *Journal* are not acquainted with the Russian language. Original papers in the Russian language can be obtained from the editors.

The papers in the 'Presented in English' section are somewhat different from the first section. All of these papers were written by North American scholars and all but two based their findings on materials readily available in the West: German language newspapers, family materials, memoirs and church reports. Then, too, these papers were handled somewhat differently than the papers presented in Russian. Because the language of composition was also the language in which they appear here, English, they were peer reviewed within the North American academic community. Finally, the papers in this section appear not thematically, but chronologically, following their subjects in order of their appearance, from the late nineteenth to the early twenty first centuries.

The first three papers focus on the years before the Russian Revolution when Siberia was seen as a place of promise. Aileen Friesen's

paper is based on original research in Russian archives; it examines the response of the Russian state to the first Mennonites in Siberia and analyzes in particular its ambivalent approach to these 'sectarian' newcomers. Using letters in selected German-language newspapers read by the Mennonites, Hans Werner recounts the time when Siberia marked a new wheat-growing frontier, a place especially attractive to landless Mennonites from the western parent colonies of Molotschna (Molochna) and Chortitza (Khortitsa). Lawrence Klippenstein's paper on the life of Heinrich P. Wieler intersects the dynamics of family and institutional life on the pre-Revolution Siberian frontier.

The next two papers span many decades and focus specifically on the role played by women in the Siberia settlements and in the Siberian Mennonite diaspora in the Americas. Linda Earl and Kathleen Wiens write about the evolving nature of gendered work as the family of Peter J. and Justina (Janzen) Wiens settled in Omsk and then migrated to Slavgorod and eventually to Canada. Marlene Epp analyzes the work of Mennonite midwives, both in helping to establish a stable Mennonite community in Siberia and then in bringing order to uprooted communities in Paraguay and Canada.

The next four papers consider the difficult years of suffering during the Stalin years. Ruth Derksen Siemens conducts a discourse analysis of letters in which messages bypassed a potentially hostile reader in a Soviet prison camp and then remarkably arrived at a safe address in Canada. Sarah Carter and Mary Hildebrandt analyze another artifact of the Gulag, a personal memoir by a former Mennonite who moved to Germany where she reflected back on the difficult Siberian sojourn of the 1930s. Travis Kroeker and Bruce Ward shed light on the nature of Mennonite memoirs by juxtaposing them to the well known writings on prison life in Siberia by Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn. Using a combination of state records and personal memoir Colin Neufeldt completes this section with an intricate and detailed look at the horror of forced dislocation and then subsequent suffering en route to and in Siberian labour camps.

The final three papers take the Siberia account to the present times. Walter Sawatsky presents the historical context necessary in understanding late twentieth century developments in the evangelical (including Mennonite) communities of Siberia. Alexander Freund reports on the memories of Siberia and Kazakhstan immigrants in the rapidly growing *Aussiedler* or *Russlanddeutsche* community in southern Manitoba. Finally, as the co-chairs of the conference, we offer an overview of the way in which North American historians have processed and helped disseminate ideas of the Siberian experience, seeing this vast region sequentially as a place of banishment, frontier promise, unfathomable suffering, and cultural survival.

The twenty four papers in this volume mark a unique moment in the history of Mennonites in Siberia. A bridge of friendship was built in June 2010 when twelve scholars from North America met counterparts with roots in Siberia and nearby eastern regions. This scholarly exchange was informed by earlier conferences – Khortitsa 99 and Molochna 04 – organized by Harvey L. Dyck and, we hope, point to future collaborations and meetings. The Russian sojourn for the very large Dutch-North German Mennonite diaspora – itself an important segment of the current global Mennonite story – remains of immense importance. It has been an honor for us to facilitate this dialogue.

As usual, this volume of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* ends with a review of a selection of the rich discourse on Mennonites for the year, although, given the earlier-than-usual production date, in shortened form. We warmly welcome Rosemarin Heidenreich as the new book review editor for literature and thank Brian Froese for his continued service as book review editor for history and social science. A special thank you is offered Olga Shamkina who diligently and graciously took on the very onerous task of translating 11 of the 12 ‘Russian’ papers into English, and Kerry Fast who served as copy editor for those papers.

Royden Loewen, editor
Paul Toews, guest editor