

The Formation and Development of the Mennonite Congregations in Kazakhstan: From the End of the Nineteenth Century to the Early Twenty First Century

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One can delineate four periods in the history of the formation and development of Mennonite congregations in Kazakhstan.

Period I: The Late Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Centuries

Mennonites resettled to Aulieatskiy uezd, Syr-Dar'ia oblast of Turkestan, Akmolinsk and Semipalatinsk oblasts of the Steppe krai where they established agrarian settlements. Mennonite daughter settlements preserved spiritual, educational and financial ties with their mother religious centers which allowed them to organize the religious life in the new settlements quickly and with ease. Thus, for example, the Turkestan Mennonite settlements formed the Nikolaipol

Mennonite community (Talasskaya valley), which consisted of three congregations: Kirchliche (Old Mennonite) and two Mennonite Brethren (New Mennonite) congregations. The meeting house of the Kirchliche congregation was located in the settlement of Nikolaipol and the meeting houses of Mennonite Brethren congregations in the settlement of Romanovskoye.¹

Fourteen Mennonite daughter settlements were established from 1900 to 1910 in Pavlodar uezd, Semipalatinsk oblast. Among the first settlers were Mennonite Brethren and Kirchliche Mennonites from Taurida and Ekaterinoslav gubernias, who established the settlement of Zabarovka in early 1907. On May 31, 1907, the first baptism was conducted by preacher Petkau from the settlement of Nadarovka. On September 5, 1907, A. A. Unruh was ordained by Petkau to the position of a spiritual elder and preacher of the Mennonite Brethren congregation of Voznesenskaya and Bogdanovskaya volosts, Pavlodar uezd, Semipalatinsk oblast.²

Among various religious groups of new settlers, the Mennonite ethno-confessional groups were the most closed. Memory of their Dutch origin, endogamy and confessional barriers resulted in limited communication with other ethnic populations and even with Germans of different faiths. In the period under consideration, one can observe a change of confessions in Mennonite communities (transfer of some Mennonites to Baptist, Adventist and other Protestant groups), which would be characteristic of the history of Mennonites in Kazakhstan during the entire twentieth century.

One of the explanations of this phenomenon might be a fact that Mennonites of the Steppe oblasts as well as Mennonites of Turkestan krai did not carry out active missionary activity like Baptists or Adventists. According to Mennonite missionaries in Central Asia, local Mennonites

shied away from accepting people of other nationalities who adopted the same faith. ... An old Mennonite problem was revealed here as well as in other areas: they were always ready to preach the Gospel to people and their lives could be an example of the love of Christ, but the majority of them did not view people of other nationalities as equals nor did they accept them into their congregations, which seemed absolutely impossible.³

The status of missionary work and proselytism changed with the start of the First World War when Baptist influence increased in Mennonite congregations, especially Mennonite Brethren ones. During this period many Sanitaers (orderlies) from Baptist and Mennonite

Brethren congregations began conducting Bible studies among believers as well as evangelizing soldiers.

Mennonite congregations functioned in the aforementioned areas till the end of the 1920s and into the early 1930s when it became clear that they could not accept the new Soviet regime policies (collectivization, forced military service, anti-religious campaign, etc.). Many sought to emigrate. There were Mennonites who were at the forefront of the emigration movement in Pavlodar uezd. One observer noted that “in Mennonite settlements an inclination for emigration to America was especially noticeable.”⁴ Similar emigration sentiments were shared by Mennonite community members of Southern Kazakhstan, who in the late 1880s had considered Central Asia as a place of refuge but in the late 1920s “were burning with one desire, to emigrate.”⁵ During this initial period, some Mennonites emigrated but those who stayed were no longer able to observe religious practices as meeting houses were closed and presbyters and deacons were repressed. For example, in 1929 A. A. Unruh, spiritual leader of the Mennonite Brethren congregation in the village of Zubarovka, Pavlodar okrug was arrested in Moscow while seeking to emigrate. He was released in 1930 and came back to Zabarovka, but no longer engaged in religious activity.⁶

Period II: From the Early 1930s to the Early 1940s

This period was characterized by the forced, repressive resettlement of Mennonites to Kazakhstan. In the early 1930s dozens of well-to-do Mennonite families from the ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) of Volga Germans, Ukraine and the Caucasus were dekulakized and exiled to special settlements located in the suburbs of Karaganda (Maikuduk, Kompaneisk, Novaia Tikhonovka, Prishakhtinsk, Mikhailovka and Fedorovka). In the early 1940s Mennonites were among the 400,000 Soviet Germans forcefully deported to different areas of Kazakhstan. Researchers indicate that even in prisons, the trudarmee or special settlements, Mennonites held their secret meetings, baptisms and gathered for joint prayers.⁷

Period III: From the Late 1950s to the Late 1980s

During this period, legal restrictions against Soviet Germans were relaxed, and religious congregations of Kirchliche Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren were revived or established anew in such oblasts as Aktyubinsk, Alma-Ata, Dzhabul, Dzheskazgan, Karaganda, Kokchetav, Kustanai, Pavlodar, Turgai and Chimkent.⁸

It should be noted that during the Great Patriotic War relations of the state toward religious associations “became warmer.” The state authorities not only changed their attitude toward them, but permitted a revival of church life albeit under strict state control. The state utilized new forms for influencing the church and used it for its domestic and foreign policy goals. Such changes of state-confessional policy were temporary but seen as advantageous.

In the late 1950s and into the 1980s, the state leadership renewed hopes for the formation of a religious-free society. Various methods of active anti-religious propaganda and increased atheistic education were again utilized. The religious views of citizens were proclaimed to be relics of the past, superstitions in the conscience of Soviet citizens. The ideal of the communist future was the elimination of religious views. It is important to remember that ideologists of atheistic propaganda proclaimed Mennonite “sects” alongside other religious movements as “remains of reactionary ideology ... and a harmful phenomenon of public life.”⁹

The anti-religious atheistic course of the Soviet government in respect to religious organizations was characterized by arbitrary administrative rule (including denying registration) and strict control over activities of religious groups by utilizing accounting and registration offices. During the post war period, and until the second half of the 1960s, Mennonite groups and congregations of Kazakhstan were not legal. In 1967 the first Mennonite Brethren congregation was registered in Karaganda. This congregation was the first and only one in Kazakhstan before 1974 that managed to legalize its activity. Other Mennonite religious groups, (their number in 1973 was eleven Kirchliche Mennonite congregations and eight Mennonite Brethren ones with a total of 1,133 believers) either did not petition for registration or were denied registration.¹⁰ In order to legitimize activities of their religious groups some Mennonite Brethren congregations of Kazakhstan joined the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) in 1963. Others joined the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (CCECB).

Thus, in the early 1960s, some Mennonite religious associations underwent confessional change. Remaining congregations (both Kirchliche and Mennonite Brethren) continued to function illegally into the mid-1970s and early 1980s when the majority of them were officially registered or disintegrated. One example of the latter was the Mennonite Brethren congregation in Karaganda established in 1965, with leaders R. D. Grauberger and J. J. Bikkert. Congregational leaders were negatively disposed toward registration so the congregation functioned illegally until 1989. The size of the congregation increased from fifty five members in 1965 to seventy five in 1983.¹¹

Table 1. Registered religious congregations of Kazakhstan in the 1970s and 80s.¹²

Type of religious organization	Name of settlement	Registration date	Number of believers at the time of registration	Name of preachers
Kirchliche Mennonite	Aktyubinsk oblast Martukskiy raion Village: Martuk	1974	115	G.[H?] A. Peters, A. J. Pfeifer, G.[H?] J. Gossen
Kirchliche Mennonite	Alma-Ata oblast Kaskelenskiy raion Village: Politotdel	1980	40	P. A. Klassen I. A. Penner
Kirchliche Mennonite	Alma-Ata oblast City: Alma-Ata	1977	150	P. I. Toews
Kirchliche Mennonite	Dzhambul oblast City: Dzhambul	1980	-	-
Kirchliche Mennonite	Karaganda oblast City: Karaganda	1975	400	J. J. Zibret I. J. Bergman
Kirchliche Mennonite	Turgai oblast	1979	21	V. P. Loewen
Kirchliche Mennonite	Chimkent oblast Dzhetyysai raion Village: Dzhetyysai	1983	50	J. Wiens, D. D. Neufeld
Mennonite Brethren	Dzhambul oblast St. Merke	1977	30	-
Mennonite Brethren	Dzhambul oblast City: Dzhambul	1983	75	-
Mennonite Brethren	Dzheshkazgan oblast Shetskiy raion Village: Nurataldy	1984	25	-
Mennonite Brethren	City: Karaganda	1967	600	I. P. Warkentin, G.[H?] Goertzen

Analyzing data of Table 1 it should be noted that in the 1970s and 80s, Mennonite congregations of Kazakhstan were situated in central Kazakhstan (Karaganda and Dzheskazgan oblasts), the southern oblasts (Alma-Ata, Dzhambul, Chimkent) as well as in the western region (Aktyubinsk and Turgai oblasts). Kirchliche and Mennonite Brethren groups were also established in the early twentieth century and in the 1950s in the northeastern region of Kazakhstan. But by the 1970s and 80s, these independent Mennonite congregations ceased functioning.

In 1989 in Kazakh SSR there were eleven registered religious associations (sixteen presbyters and deacons) and one non-registered Mennonite congregation (three presbyters and one deacon). These congregations had a membership of 1,246 people. Altogether in this year, thirty seven baptisms, four weddings and thirty five funerals took place. The peak of Mennonite congregational membership in Kazakhstan was in the 1980s. From 1984 to 1986 the number of members within registered and non-registered Mennonite groups of both Kirchliche and Mennonite Brethren churches consisted of 2,246 and 2,360 people respectively.¹³

As seen in Table 1, the largest Mennonite congregations were situated in Karaganda. This may be explained by the fact that in the territory of Kazakhstan several different Mennonite groups met; dekulakized Mennonites, Mennonites repressed in the 1930s, Mennonites deported in the early 1940s as well as repatriated Mennonites were settled in Karaganda in 1944-45. Some researchers believe that the sharp growth in the number of believers in German congregations, including Mennonite congregations in Karaganda, may be explained by the "common and natural phenomenon of searching for brotherly contacts and mutual prayer" by members from other churches of Mennonite communities.¹⁴

Period IV: From the End of the Twentieth to the Beginning of the Twenty First Century

During this period the majority of Mennonite congregations of Kazakhstan disintegrated as a result of the emigration of believers to Germany. At present there is only one registered Mennonite Brethren congregation in Karaganda with several branches in Karaganda oblast. The total number of members is 200. Congregational leaders note similarities with Baptist groups in such areas as dogma, missionary activity and proselytism but also existing differences in rituals and congregational structure (the special role of the local congregation and meeting of its members). People of other nationalities attend meetings.

A current leader of the congregation observed that “previously the congregation grew through enlarging families, at present people join the congregation who have no spiritual education or training. People are searching for God. ...”¹⁵ Since 1996 the services have been held in Russian.

Thus we marked four different periods in the origin and development of Mennonite congregations in Kazakhstan from the late nineteenth to the early twenty first century. Special attention was paid to the period from the late 1950s to the late 1980s, when on the one hand, Mennonite congregations in Kazakhstan expanded geographically and their number grew, and on the other, they showed a tendency to change confession because it was not possible to legalize their activity. Through emigration in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, an overwhelming number of Mennonites moved from Kazakhstan. The only remaining Mennonite Brethren congregation in Kazakhstan is a confessional entity with a multi-national composition of believers.

Translated by Olga Shmakina

Notes

- ¹ J. Reimer, *Evangel'skie pervoprophodtsy v Kyrgyzstane. Iz zhizni i deiatel'nosti Martyna Til'mana* (Lage: 1998), 61.
- ² J. V. Adam, “Iz istorii sem'i Unru” in *Nemtsy Sibiri: istoriia i kul'tura: materialy IV mezhdunarodnoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii g. Omsk, May 29-31, 2002* (Novosibirsk: 2003), 6; V. Dik, *Svet Evangel'iiia v Kazakhstane. Istoriia vozveshcheniia Evangel'iiia i rasprostraneniia obshchin baptistov i mennonitov v Kazakhstane (pervaia polovina XX veka)* (Steinhagen: 2003), 244; *Nemtsy v Sibiri: sbornik dokumentov i materialov po istorii nemtsev v Sibiri: 1895-1917* (Omsk: 2000), 169-70.
- ³ J. Reimer, *Evangel'skie pervoprophodizy*, 112.
- ⁴ Pavlodar Affiliate of State Archive of Pavlodar oblast, F. 7, O. 1, D. 354, pp. 92-93.
- ⁵ J. Reimer, *Evangel'skie peryoprophodizy*, 110.
- ⁶ J. V. Adam, *Iz istorii sem'i Unru*, 6.
- ⁷ V. Dik, *Svet Evangel'iiia v Kazakhstane; Stranniki my na zemle. Istoriia Petropavlovskoi obshchiny Evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov, 1908-1988* (Petropavlovsk-Steinhagen,: 2008); I. Shnaider, *Evangel'skie obshchiny v Aktiubinskoi stepi. K stoletiiu pervoi obshchiny baptistov v Aktiubinske* (Karaganda-Steinhagen: 2001), Book 1: *Tiazhelye vremena goneniia I repressii, 1931-1946*.
- ⁸ Materials in author's personal possession.
- ⁹ V. F. Krest'ianinov, *Mennonity* (Moscow: 1967), 218.
- ¹⁰ V. A. Ivanov, Ia. F. Trofimov, *Religii v Kazakhstane; spravochnik, vtoroe izdanie, pererabotannoe i dopolnennoe* (Almaaty: 2003), 238. Materials in author's personal possession.
- ¹¹ Materials in author's personal possession.
- ¹² Materials in author's personal possession.
- ¹³ Materials in author's personal possession.

- ¹⁴ V. A. Ivanov, "Traditsionnye konfessii nemtsev v Kazakhstane: istoriia i sovremenost," in *Rol' religioznykh konfessii v zhizni nemtsev Tsentral'noi Azii* (Almaaty: 2002), 202.
- ¹⁵ Interview with G. I. Warkentin, leader of the Mennonite Brethren congregation of Karaganda, January 24, 2008. Materials in author's personal possession.