

The 1929 Emigration of Mennonites from the USSR: An Examination of Documents from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation

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The attempt of mass emigration of “Soviet” Germans from the USSR in the autumn of 1929, in which Mennonites played a significant role, exists as one of the most outstanding efforts of resistance to collectivization. The impetus for it was a decision made by the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) on August 5, 1929, permitting the emigration of twenty five Mennonite families, as an exception. As this news spread, Germans streamed into Moscow throughout the entire autumn in spite of a decree of the VTsIK Presidium of September 16, 1929 that terminated emigration and application requests for emigration. By mid-November, about 13,000 emigrants had gathered near Moscow waiting for permission to emigrate. On November 25, 1929, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (VKP/b/) made a decision

to allow the emigration of several separate groups of “Mennonite kulak elements” from the USSR. Altogether 5,761 people (including 3,885 Mennonites) managed to emigrate. Over 4,000 came from the Russian German settlements of Western Siberia.

The emigration movement of 1929 has drawn the close attention of researchers ever since the onset of the “archival revolution” of the 1990s.¹ Contributing to this was the large number of party and Soviet documents which became available in regional and central archives. This resulted in the publication of a number of monographs in the mid- and second half of the 1990s that provided a detailed description of emigration, supported by documents from Siberian archives. In recent years, additional materials, including documents from archival-investigatory files on Mennonites repressed for their participation in emigration, have been introduced into scholarly circulation. Of note is a monograph by K. Mick who studied the impact of emigration on “Russian politics” as pursued by the government of the Weimar Republic,² as well as a monograph by V. Denninghaus dedicated to, among other issues, studying the role of the Moscow Center in the dissolution of the emigration movement.³

Thus, through the efforts of national and foreign historians the emigration movement of 1929 has been studied in great detail. However, until recently there has been a significant gap since researchers could not access documents of the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (NKID) of the USSR which was directly involved in foreign policy conflicts regarding emigration. More recently this complex of documents has been made available and introduced for scholarly perusal.⁴ This report is dedicated to the analysis of the most significant NKID documents and utilizing them to place the Mennonite emigration movement onto the foreign policy canvas, i.e. into a broader general historical context.

First of all, it should be noted that from the beginning the German government and its foreign policy department, in spite of widely accepted opinion to the contrary, had a very skeptical attitude toward the mass emigration of Germans from the USSR. In his letter of August 1, 1929, dedicated to an analysis of the condition of German colonists in the USSR, von Dirksen, the German ambassador, recommended that the government should be very careful in its approach to the “emigration issue,” as Soviet Germans intended to emigrate not to Germany but to Canada, Paraguay or Chile, in which case emigration support would require significant financing of an ocean transfer on the part of Germany. Secondly, von Dirksen declared that settlement in Canada took place in a “chess board order that endangered the preservation of German-ness.” And thirdly, von Dirksen supposed that support of mass German emigration from the USSR did not meet the fundamental

interests of Germany. Concluding his report, von Dirksen wrote, "In any case, I consider it is necessary to end an old tradition of reassuring colonists, referring to idealistic sympathies that the German Reich had in their regard, and through our consular services explain to them which measures the Reich is actually going to undertake in their respect and accordingly make it clear that under the present state of things their desire to emigrate cannot be realized."⁵

In October 1929, when several thousand emigrants were already staying near Moscow,⁶ and a mass emigration movement had been transformed from speculation to reality, the German government confirmed once again its lack of interest in receiving emigrants. K. Dienstman, a high-ranking officer of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during a meeting with V. L. Lorenz, an NKID officer, on October 10, 1929, in Berlin declared that "Germany is not interested in receiving these people in Germany as it is going to be very difficult to accommodate them here."⁷ On October 15, 1929, during a meeting with B. E. Stein, head of the Second Western NKID Department, Dienstman repeated again that "it does not meet the interests of the German government to allow further emigration as it is impossible to accommodate them in Germany and travel to Canada is very costly. That is why it would be good if the Soviet authorities would take measures to stop such cases in the future."⁸

However, German officers were employees of a democratic republic and had to respond to societal sentiments that were heavily influenced by journalistic information regarding the aggravated situation among the refugees and the public demand that the government interfere in the "colonist swindle." In response Dienstman, referring to the precedent set when the Soviet authorities granted permission to Swedish colonists who were Soviet citizens to emigrate to Sweden as a result of the widespread public pressure, declared on October 15 that given the "special" relations between the USSR and Germany, "whatever was granted to the Swedish government could also be given to the German government."⁹ Having assured the Soviets one more time about its complete lack of interest in further emigration, Dienstman indicated the readiness of the German government to render required material support to emigrants and finance their travel to Canada. B. E. Stein promised cooperation of the NKID with the condition that there would not be an official appeal by the German government because that would result in it being rejected by the Soviets "on formal grounds."

The countermove of Dienstman was successful. On October 18, 1929, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the VKP/b/ passed a decision signed by Stalin which read, "Do not object to emigration of Mennonites gathered near Moscow."¹⁰ This decision, in fact, canceled the previous decision made by the Secretariat of the Central Committee

of the VKP/b/ on October 16, 1929, which demanded that Germans be sent “back to their places of permanent residence and commissioned the Central Executive Committee (TsIK) of the USSR to provide the means required for this operation.”¹¹

On October 19, 1929, N. J. Raivid, deputy head of the Second Western Department of NKID, explained the decision of the Politburo regarding Mennonite emigration to N. N. Krestinskiy, a plenipotentiary representative of the USSR in Germany, in the following way: “Yesterday it was decided to let all of them emigrate on the grounds that we don’t need to keep kulak elements who desire to emigrate from the USSR.”¹² It is obvious that by this decision the Politburo hoped, on the one hand, to strengthen “special” relations with Germany that had been seriously undermined a year earlier by the arrest of German specialists who were tried in connection with the Shakhty case, and on the other hand, to quickly liquidate an emigrant camp near Moscow. It could also be possible that a tradition of repeatedly allowing some Mennonites to emigrate abroad in the 1920s played a role in this decision.¹³

It is interesting that Soviet authorities considered the *Bund der Auslandsdeutsche* (which since 1920 had been mentioned in many Soviet secret police documents as an organization that actually replaced the German secret police), along with foreign Mennonite organizations, as chiefly responsible for the organization of the emigration movement.¹⁴ In this connection, Raivid requested Krestinskiy to find out “which organizations in Germany were involved in this matter and in what order.”¹⁵

Meanwhile, the growing emigration movement spurred on by the bread procurement campaign, and the reluctance of the Canadian province of Saskatchewan to accept new immigrants, threatened to destroy the achieved compromise. The Soviet government was negatively affected by the accumulation of emigrants near Moscow in that it attracted foreign diplomats and journalists like a magnet, catalyzed further interest in emigration and exposed the negative attitude of some peasants toward collectivization. Nevertheless up to a certain point, probably influenced by the NKID and guided by interests of preserving “special relations” with Germany, the authorities were ready to turn a blind eye to the crowd of emigrant-seekers near Moscow and rejected persistent requests of the Unified State Political Administration (OGPU) leaders to solve the problem by arresting and sending refugees back to the places of their former residence.

However, the option to resolve the problem through force had another very powerful ally, i.e. the acute time constraint that the German government was under. At this point the fate of the emigrants staying at the “gates of Moscow” depended on how quickly Germany was able to solve the problem of receiving emigrants. After a short

pause, the Soviets, on their part, started pressuring the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On October 26, 1929, B. E. Stein wrote to N. N. Krestinskiy, "We have already informed you that we are letting Mennonites out. Today we have applied to the German Embassy with a request for a group visa."¹⁶ On October 30, 1929, V. I. Levin, an NKID officer, invited M. Shlip, a secretary of the German Embassy, to discuss details of the emigrants' departure. In addition to the 325 Mennonites abroad the steamship, *Dzerzhinskiy*, heading from Leningrad to Holtenau, the main group of Mennonites, about 5,000, had to be sent by train to the Sebez station¹⁷ on the Latvian border. Raivid wrote to Krestinskiy that by doing this they saved precious hard currency for Mennonite travel by foreign railway to the port of departure for Canada. On November 1, Stein confirmed with von Twardowski, a Councilor of the Embassy, that departure certificates¹⁸ had been submitted to the Embassy for obtaining visas and responded coldly to a remark by von Twardowski about the "difficulties of obtaining Canadian visas."¹⁹

From this point on until November 25, 1929, the Germans appeared to be in the unenviable position of trying to catch up with a moving train, whereas the Soviets could dictate conditions and hand all responsibility for the fate of Mennonites over to the Weimar Republic government. One should give proper due to the latter. As hopes for a positive decision by Canada to accept the refugees became ever less likely, German politicians worked even more energetically to solve the problem of the "colonist swindle." On November 6, 1929, J. Kurtius, Minister of Foreign Affairs, sent a letter to the state elite demanding that visas for 6,500 emigrants be issued, that they be accommodated in refugees camps, that their stay in Germany be secured and that ocean transfer be provided through a credit of three million Reich marks, irrespective of Canada's position.²⁰

Meanwhile it became clear that the issue had to be urgently resolved. In a telegram of November 8, von Twardowski wrote to G. V. Chicherin, "Because of the reference to Germany it is possible to delay transportation of colonists to places of their residence even after November 7. But by now all resources have been exhausted. Immediately after the holidays, the refugee camp must be liquidated if we don't get a positive response from Germany regarding the issue of visas to emigrants."²¹

As in the Shakhty crisis, the German press' treatment of the emigrants' fate greatly heated up the situation. The need to take "the fourth power" into account and act with caution because of its probable reaction angered Soviet authorities. On November 9, Raivid wrote to Krestinskiy, "Taking into account that the German press began a campaign regarding the situation of Mennonites and our Germans in general, we have to publish a counter position in *Internal*

*Presse-Korrespondenz fuer Politik, Wirtschaft und Arbeiterbewegung (Inprekor)*²² to ensure that a truthful presentation of the case be presented.”²³ Another factor that aggravated the situation was that German embassy officials, most specifically Professor Otto Auhagen, an expert on agricultural issues, were in contact with Mennonites.

On November 9, M. Shlip informed the NKID of Canada’s actual refusal to accept emigrants and of his communication with the German government asking it to accept emigrants temporarily and urging further efforts on the part of the Germans. On November 13, E. A. Gnedin, an NKID officer, informed M. Shlip that “because of the lack of certainty regarding the departure of Mennonites, practical considerations make their return to Siberia very urgent.”²⁴

The German Embassy in Moscow understood very well that the emigrants were actually hostages in this affair and tried to do its best to calm down the VKP/b/ leadership and assure it that a quick resolution to the crisis would be sought. With this purpose in mind, G. Hilger, a well-known German diplomat, met with Raivid on November 14. In addition, over the course of a few days, November 14, 15 and 17, von Twardowski justified the actions of Auhagen and German journalists to Stein and Raivid and in turn heard their declaration that “German newspapers published false and slanderous articles that portrayed the policy of the Soviet government in regard to peasants entirely incorrectly.” On the authority of M. M. Litvinov, Raivid then warned von Twardowski that “if the campaign in the press won’t stop immediately we will have to reconsider all our decisions regarding letting emigrants abroad. Besides, it probably won’t be possible to hold our press from printing a polemic against the German press.”²⁵

On November 12, it had become known that Reich President P. von Hindenburg supported an action to raise money for the maintenance of emigrants and on November 14 a decision was made at the meeting of German political party leaders to allot five to six million marks as well as to expedite the final step for the solution of the issue, i.e. a confirmation of money allotment by the Reichstag budget committee. Even so on November 15, OGPU organs began arresting leaders of the emigration movement and forcing the return of refugees to places of their former residence. According to I. Hebgardt, secretary of the German section of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the VKP/b/, on the night of November 15 about five hundred emigrant families were arrested, and a meeting was held with other families that remained free. The result of the meeting was that about one hundred families expressed a desire to “voluntarily” return to Siberia.

The position of the Soviet authorities seemed irreproachable; they had expressed good will by allowing emigration and tolerating

all inconveniences pertaining to the emigrants' stay near Moscow, including the threat of mass epidemics and fires, whereas the Germans, by their thoughtless encouragement of emigration sentiments, had displayed a rare sluggishness. They were unprepared to receive emigrants yet they were intent on shifting all responsibility onto the Soviet government and defame its reputation through the German press. The statement issued by S. I. Bratman-Brodovskiy, chargé d'affaires of the USSR in Germany, on November 13 in Berlin summed up the Soviet position:

The German government should take steps to influence its press as it is known full well that the culpable party in this situation is not the Soviet government but the colonists themselves. Vicious agitation for emigration is suspicious. Shipping companies, people of like-religious mind, etc., are also responsible. The German government itself asked us to make it possible for the colonists to leave, and then Germany did not accept them. We should not be held responsible for anything.²⁶

Meanwhile on November 17, von Twardowski informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the arrests of over a thousand men and the beginning of a "voluntary" return of refugees carried out by the militia and army. Under immense pressure, the German government decided to accept all refugees staying near Moscow. On November 18, von Twardowski urgently informed Raivid of this, requesting a deferral until November 25, the date of the Reichstag budget committee session. The NKID responded positively. Raivid promised to contact the People's Railway Commissariat and request it to begin preparation for the shipment of emigrants on November 26-27. At the conclusion of the meeting, Raivid, on the authority of Litvinov, also delivered an ultimatum regarding the German press. Either it ceased its anti-Soviet campaign or the Soviets would reconsider all decisions about letting emigrants depart.²⁷

A November 20 meeting between Stein and von Twardowski was like a cold shower poured on the German diplomats. In response to information from von Twardowski that the German Embassy was ready to issue visas for 4,000 emigrants that day, Stein declared that it was not possible to discuss any technical details of the evacuation as

the respective administrative authorities are not able to wait indefinitely for permission from the German government to issue visas, and taking into account that the stay of emigrants near Moscow serves as a stimulus for the further increase of

emigrant numbers, we had to raise the possibility with the government that we would reconsider the whole issue. The decision of the government was expected not earlier than [November] 25, and at present it is not possible for him to say anything positive.²⁸

Reporting on this meeting, von Twardowski insisted that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs make a counter move in light of the ongoing forced return of emigrants. J. Kurtius met with Krestinskiy on November 22 and stated that “denying the emigration of colonists of German origin would be considered as an unfriendly act” and a personal insult of the Minister of Foreign Affairs.²⁹ In a decision taken on November 25 not to intensify the situation, the Politburo of the Central Committee passed a decision “to let Mennonite kulak elements from the USSR emigrate in separate groups.”³⁰ Meeting on the same day with Ambassador von Dirksen, M. M. Litvinov informed him that a decision had allegedly been passed by the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR to allow the emigration of 3,000 to 4,000 remaining colonists as well as of the readiness of the Soviets to reduce passport fees from 220 to fifty rubles. Von Dirksen in his turn, recommended that his government exert influence upon its press to stop attacking the USSR while waiting for the transportation of emigrants.³¹

Permission for emigration given by the Politburo of the Central Committee of the VKP/b/ on November 25 became the last and final concession of the Soviets. When on November 26, during a meeting with E. A. Gnedin, M. Shlip asked permission to contact refugees, and that arrested men whose families were emigrating be freed as well those who had been sent back to Siberia be returned, his request was flatly denied. On November 27, the Administrative Department of the Moscow City Council issued emigration certificates for five hundred people and plans were put in place to transport the first Mennonite group in two days.

The Soviets strictly dictated all remaining matters pertaining to the emigration process and the emigrants’ departure for Germany. Thus, von Twardowski failed in his efforts to free forty Mennonites who had been arrested and who had already received emigration visas. Attempts to render material assistance to Mennonites sent back to Siberia also failed. Meanwhile by December 7, eight transports had already moved about 4,000 people to Germany and another 2,000 were ready to be evacuated in the near future. At this point, the Soviets became very interested in the accommodation and actual conditions of emigrants in Germany. TASS, along with N. N. Krestinskiy, S. I. Bratman-Brodovskiy, and A. G. Umbliya, Consul of the USSR in Stettin, were instructed to collect information about the living conditions.³²

Later the Soviet press used this information in its campaign against Germany, accusing it of creating intolerable conditions in the refugee camps.

NKID documents dedicated to the “colonist swindle” confirm that during serious diplomatic crises³³ which threatened the “special” relations between Russia and Germany in the 1920s, the Soviets always acted in accordance with a set pattern. Despite obvious set backs brought about by each Soviet-German confrontation, the Politburo’s decision at each turn was always dictated by internal political interests. The Soviet leadership had grounds to assume that Germany, being deeply interested in military-economic cooperation with the USSR, would not sharply aggravate the situation much less break relations. The matter of the emigration of “Soviet” Germans was no exception. As soon as it became obvious that further delay in resolving the emigration issue catalyzed local emigration movements, greatly discredited the Stalin regime and incurred damage to the economy, an urgent decision was made regarding forced returns and arrests. At the same time, these punitive measures only affected a small percentage of the emigrants leaving the remainder to be used as hostages to significantly speed up a positive decision by the Germans and the transfer of refugees on Soviet terms. A flexible policy pursued by the Politburo at the beginning of the crisis also allowed the Soviets to minimize negative consequences for its foreign policy. The interests of big politics traditionally gets priority over the fate of “little” people and yet approximately six thousand people were able to gain freedom in December 1929 albeit at a tremendous cost to them.

Translated by Olga Shmakina

Notes

- ¹ For example, L. P. Belkovets, *Bol'shoi terror i sud'by nemetskoj derevni (konets 1920kh – 30kh gg.)* (Moscow: 1995); V. I. Brul', *Nemtsy v Zapadnoi Sibiri: 2 volumes* (Topchikha: 1995); D. Brandes D and A. Savin, *Die Sibirien Deutschen im Sowjetstaat. 1919-1938* (Essen: 2001). It should be noted that long before this time a number of works dedicated to emigration had been published abroad, among which the work by Otto Auhagen, direct participant of the events, should be mentioned in the first turn.
- ² K. Mick, *Sowjetische Propaganda, Fuenfjahrplan and deutsche Russlandpolitik 1928-1932* (Wiesbaden: 1995).
- ³ V. Doenninghaus, *Minderheiten in Bedraengnis. Sowjetische Politik gegenueber Deutschen, Polen und anderen Diaspora-Nationalitaeten 1917-1938* (München: 2009).
- ⁴ A complex of documents from the collection of the secretariat of M. M. Litvinov, Deputy People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, of the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation, published in *Etnokonfessiiia v sovetskom gosu-*

- darstve. *Mennonity Sibiri v 1920-1930-e gg. Emigratsiia i repressii. Dokumenty i materialy*. Compiled by A. I. Savin (Novosibirsk: 2009).
- ⁵ *Akten zur Deutschen Auswaertigen Politik. 1918-1945*. Aus dem Archiv des Auswaertigen Amtes. Serie B: 1925-1933. Band XII. 1. Juni bis 2. September 1929. (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 306-3-8.
- ⁶ NKID used a number of 3,700 people while the German party, about five thousand people.
- ⁷ *Etnokonfessiia v sovetskom gosudarstve. Mennonity Sibiri v 1920-1930-e gg.*, 262.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 261-62.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.
- ¹⁰ The decree text was published: *Etnokonfessiia v sovetskom gosudarstve. Mennonity Sibiri v 1920-1930-e gg. Annotirovannyi sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov i materialov. Izbrannye dokumenty*. Compiled by A. I. Savin (Novosibirsk-Saint Petersburg: 2006), 320-21.
- ¹¹ *Etnokonfessiia v sovetskom gosudarstve. Mennonity Sibiri v 1920-1930-e gg.*, 264.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 260.
- ¹³ According to the data of P. F. Froese, Chairman of the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union, about 15,000 Mennonites emigrated from the USSR to Canada. This was more than ten percent of the total number of Mennonites residing in the USSR.
- ¹⁴ It was actually the "Association for Germans residing abroad" ("Verein fuer das Deutschum im Ausland" (VDA)). Among many organizations involved in issues of German minorities abroad and supported by the government of the Weimar Republic, VDA held a special place. V. Krieger supposes that when ChK officers mentioned "Auslanddeutsche," in addition to the VDA, they had in mind also the Deutsche-Ausland-Institut, established in Stuttgart in 1917, and the magazine *Der Auslanddeutsche* published by the Institute. See *Enzyklopaedie des Nationalsozialismus*. Hrsg. Von W. Benz, H. Graml, H. Weiss. (DTV-Muenchen:1998), 788-89; V. Krieger, "Der erste Geheimprozess gegen wolgadeutsche Intellektuelle," in *Jahrbuch fuer Internationale Germanistik*. Jahrgang XXXVIII-Heft @, Verlag Peter Lang, 2006, 114.
- ¹⁵ *Etnokonfessiia v sovetskom gosudarstve. Mennonity Sibiri v 1920-1930-e gg.*, 260.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ At present a town in the southwest of Pskov oblast, administrative center of Sebezha raion.
- ¹⁸ On November 2, 1929, Raivid explained to Krestinskiy: "None of the emigrants are issued passports for foreign travel, but only certificates for emigration from the USSR. After their departure they will not be considered Soviet citizens any more. In this regard either a special government act will be passed or a special resolution will be issued by the Special Session of the OGPU Colloquium. In this case there will be total grounds to deny protection of their interests and issue benefits in case they will apply for such." See: *Etnokonfessiia v sovetskom gosudarstve. Mennonity Sibiri v 1920-1930-e gg.*, 273.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 272.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 280-81.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 281.
- ²² *Internationale Presse-Korrespondenz fuer Politik, Wirtschaft und Arbeiterbewegung*, bulletin published by Komintern in German (the largest part of the circulation), French and English in 1921-1933. Published twice a week in Berlin, Vienna and later again in Berlin.
- ²³ *Etnokonfessiia v sovetskom gosudarstve. Mennonity Sibiri v 1920-1930-e gg.*, 282.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 286.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 294-95.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 293-94.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 294-95.

²⁸ Ibid., 315.

²⁹ Ibid., 316.

³⁰ *Etnokonfessiiia v sovetskom gosudarstve. Mennonity Sibiri v 1920-1980-e gg.*, 321-22.

³¹ Ibid., 318-19.

³² Ibid., 344-45.

³³ In the first turn, one should mention the crises provoked by a 1925 trial of German students charged with the preparation of an attempt to kill Stalin, the arrest of German specialists in the Shakhty case and the attempt of mass emigration of Germans in 1929.