

Mennonite Associations in Siberia in the 1950s and 1960s

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According to the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults there were about ten thousand Mennonites in the USSR in the mid-1950s. Their religious activity was revitalized after the visit of Harold S. Bender, head of the Mennonite World Conference, to the Soviet Union in 1956.¹ At the same time, N. Struve, a well known researcher of religion, claimed in 1960 in *Vestnik RSKhD*, an emigrant publication, that there were about fifty thousand Mennonites in the Soviet Union among former German colonists. The majority of them resided in Siberia.² Except for a small number, Mennonite associations of Siberia were located in the western region.

It is not an easy task to define the number of congregations, groups and their members in the 1950s and 60s. The difficulty can be explained by the following four reasons. Firstly, Mennonites were not subjected to official registration. Their refusal to serve in the army and participate in social-political life ensured their illegal status. Therefore it was much more difficult to understand Mennonite associations compared to, for example, registered congregations, which submitted all information, including statistical, annually to representatives of the Council for the Affairs of the Religious Cults of the Council of Ministers of the USSR.

Secondly, it is known that Mennonites were divided into old and new Mennonites (Kirchliche and Mennonite Brethren). Theologically Mennonite Brethren were similar to Baptists therefore they frequently united with Russian congregations of Evangelical Christian Baptists, forming joint associations. A single doctrinal standard was not typical for Mennonites. Rather they tended to hold to the conviction that living in accordance with Christian principles was more important than dogma. In her dissertation research, T. B. Smirnova highlighted the disintegration of confessional borders and barriers among Siberian German religious communities during the period under consideration.³ One can assume that officials supervising the activity of religious organizations were not always able to identify precisely the confession of believers.

Thirdly, representatives of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults frequently preferred “not to notice” actively operating associations of “reactionary” Mennonites in their reports, identifying them as Baptists instead. Thus during the enumeration of religious associations undertaken in 1961, representatives of the Council underestimated or obscured the number of associations and believers in Altai krai, Omsk and Novosibirsk oblasts.

According to official data of the Council for The Affairs of Religious Cults of the Council of Ministers of the USSR as well as its local representatives, there were twelve Mennonite congregations and eight groups altogether numbering less than eight hundred people in 1961 in Siberia (see Table 1). This does not correspond to N. Struve’s information.

Table 1. Number of enumerated Mennonite congregations and groups in Siberia as of January 1, 1962⁴

Western Siberia regions	Congregations	Groups	Membership
Altai krai	7	4	480
Kemerovo oblast	3	1	180
Tomsk oblast	2	1	113
Novosibirsk oblast	-	1	8
Tyumen oblast	-	1	17
Total	12	8	798

However, it should be noted that according to data from another representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults,

organizations in Omsk oblast numbering over one thousand people were excluded from the list.⁵ In other words, the numbers regarding Novosibirsk oblast and Altai krai were lowered. Altogether 128 Mennonite associations (seventy four congregations and fifty four groups) were counted in the USSR with a total number of 6,458 believers.⁶

Fourthly, the complexity of correctly identifying the number of Mennonites is also tied in to the appearance of a new movement among the Baptists, the so-called "initsiativniki." This confessionally based network was fiercely resistant to authority and provided many congregations and groups with the opportunity to choose "a new way" by actively opposing state structures and struggling for the right to freedom of conscience. Similar elements existed among Mennonites which contributed to their integration with Baptists. The association was active in missionary activity, the organization of Sunday schools and religious clubs for pre-school and elementary-aged children, music and choir groups, work with youth and active defense of its right to freedom of conscience. (The association was later transformed into an All-Union Council, subsequently known as the "Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists" (CCECB) with a strictly centralized and disciplined organizational structure.)

However, leaders of the CCECB continued to persist in their resistance to state authority as did German congregational activists and consequently they were subject to persecutions. Many Mennonites sympathized with "initsiativniki" and shared its views. So for example, a group of Mennonite Brethren headed by V. K. Freimich, a tailor at a clothing factory, continued to hold illegal meetings under the auspices of the CCECB in spite of the fact that the majority of their co-religionists became members of the registered congregation.⁷ Sometimes there was a German group within a congregation which held its own religious meetings separately at specified times in German, as happened in a Novosibirsk congregation of the CCECB.⁸ (The Russian speaking congregations of the CCECB did not interfere with the biblical and spiritual life of their German brothers.) Many Altai Mennonites also supported the CCECB movement. They created a large CCECB organization consisting of over five hundred people with a very active nucleus of former Mennonites.⁹

It was not uncommon in multi-ethnic religious associations for Mennonites to be leaders and activists. The most notable example was Cornelius Cornelius Krekker, a leader in the CCECB. Krekker, a charismatic leader, enjoyed unquestioned authority among like-minded people. His supporters used to say that "he could turn any atheist into a believer."¹⁰ He was born into a family of Altai Mennonites, graduated from a pedagogical institute in 1944, and chose to be baptized in Kemerovo oblast (town of Osinniki). In 1958 he was ordained as a presbyter.

According to the data of a Representative of the Council for Religious Affairs in Kemerovo oblast, Krekker systematically violated legislation on cults by refusing to submit new lists of believers to the authorities, permitting unlimited preaching by believers during religious meetings, conducting unauthorized baptisms, arranging Friday meetings for German believers and organizing a youth group. In spite of the fact that his church was de-registered, he continued to superintend congregational activity.¹¹ For violating the legislation on cults, Krekker was exiled for five years (1962-67), after which he was elected to the CCECB and later became chairman of the "Siberian Brotherhood." As leader of the Council of Churches movement and a leader of the Novosibirsk Council of Churches congregation, Krekker was persecuted by authorities and in 1968 convicted according to art. 142 (violation of the law on separation of church and state, part II of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic). He was sentenced to a four-year prison term and again in 1985 to a four-and-a-half year term.¹²

In the CCECB congregations of Altai krai during the researched period, Mennonites also occupied leading positions. A Representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Altai krai characterized the problem in the following way: "Being at that time leaders of Baptist organizations, Mennonites through illegal activity saw a convenient form for preserving ethno-religious remnants of the past."¹³

An open defense of faith by congregations was met with opposition from authorities. State security bodies, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and trade unions conducted so-called "preventive and disintegration work" which consisted of one-on-one conversations and publishing defamatory articles in the press. There was a return to the practice of the 1920s and 30s, i.e. public condemnation and criticism of the activities of congregational leaders and activists at their places of work. Thus workers at Construction Elements Plant and First Construction Department of Yurgapromstroi Trust met to discuss the activities of I. I. Wedel and D. D. Thiessen and subsequently passed a motion demanding that the administration dismiss them, which it did. Similar meetings were held elsewhere at which activists and preachers of other confessions, Mitel'shtet, Klassen and Kokhanke, were "fired" and subjected to repressions.¹⁴

In the contestation between congregations defending their legal right to realize the freedom of religion and state institutions challenging this right, the latter usually won. Active "preventive and disintegration work" of state security organs and the Communist Party directed toward German confessional congregations often led to the weakening of their organizational structures and even their dissolution. This is illustrated by the history of a Mennonite congregation in the

town of Yurga whose leaders were dismissed from work and expelled from the town because they did not cease their religious activity. Their expulsion was based on the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR dated May 4, 1951: "On the increased struggle against people who shirk from engaging in socially useful work... (Decree on Parasites)."

The conflict between authorities and Mennonites ended with the mass resettlement of a large group of Germans to Kazakh SSR and the transfer of the remaining congregational members to the "initsiativniki" Baptist association. Similar processes took place in other Siberian regions. In the late 1920s, in Omsk oblast, the increase of state control of unregistered congregations also resulted in some Germans relocating to Kazakhstan. The believers explained the reason for their resettlement thus: "There is more freedom here, nobody cares about us or fines us."¹⁵

Thus, the difficulty in determining the number of Mennonites in the indicated period can be explained by the fact that Mennonite congregations changed confession and by the policy of the Soviet state on religion. As a result of this policy some Mennonites joined registered associations, some joined the CCECB, some migrated, but a large number preserved their identity. Accumulating separate data from different archival sources we believe that the number of Mennonites in the 1950s and 60s was between two and three thousand people with the largest concentrations in Altai krai and Omsk oblast.

Translated by Olga Shmakina

Notes

- ¹ Archival Documents Center of Parties and Public Organizations of the Central State Archive of Tyva Republic (TsADPOO TsGART). F. 2, O. 1, D. 1249, p. 19.
- ² N. A. Struve, "Sovremennoe polozhenie sektanstva v Sovetskoj Rossii," *Vestnik RSKhD*, no. 58-59 (1960) III, IV.
- ³ T. B. Smirnova, *Nemetskoe naselenie Zapadnoi Sibiri v kontse 19-nachale 20 veka: formirovanie i razvitie diaspornoi gruppy: disseration abstract for a Doctorate degree* (Omsk: 2009), pp. 36-37.
- ⁴ Based on the following archives: State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), F. R-6991, O. 4, D. 321, pp. 48-59; D. 344, pp. 89-92; D. 355, p. 94; D. 370, p. 334; State Archive of Omsk Oblast (GATO) F. R. 1786. O. 1, D. 436, p. 42.
- ⁵ State Archive of Omsk Oblast (GAOO), F. 2603, O. 1, D. 74, p. 6.
- ⁶ GARF, F. 6991, O. 4, D. 428, p. 40.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, P. 6, D. 17(b), p. 30.
- ⁸ State Archive of Novosibirsk Oblast (GANO), F. 1418, O. 1, D. 107, p. 22.
- ⁹ Center for the Preservation of Archival Fond of Altai Krai (TsKhAF AK), F. 1692, O. 1, D. 133, p. 146.
- ¹⁰ GANO, F. 1418, O. 1, pp. 5, 242.

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- ¹¹ State Archive of Kemerovo oblast (GAKO), F. R-964, O. 2, D. 10, pp. 138-39.
- ¹² Walter Sawatsky, *Evangelicheskoe dvizhenie v SSSR posle vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: 1995), 279; GANO, F. 4, O. 9, D. 178, p. 100.
- ¹³ TsKhAF AK, F. 1692, O. 1, D. 133, p. 146.
- ¹⁴ GAKO, F. P-123, O. 14, D. 37, p. 211, 220; F. R-964, O. 2, D. 9, p. 131.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 224-25; F. P-75, O. 9, D. 25, pp. 52-53; GAOO, F. 2603, O. 1, D. 74, p. 6.