

The Mennonite Congregations in the Tomsk Oblast during “Thaw” and “Stagnation”

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The presence of Mennonites in the Tomsk oblast is connected to the deportation of the German population in 1941 from the European part of the country. By the end of the 1950s, Germans were the second largest ethnic group in the oblast after Russians, (21,152 people, 2.8%).¹ The period of 1954-59 was a time of consolidation and religious revival for Mennonites as well as other groups of German believers though it was very quickly reversed by the state authorities. After the end of the special settlements regime, Germans sought to restore family ties and establish contacts with brothers in the faith. Among them were a number of influential missionaries who, in the 1920s, had attended Bible schools opened at that time by Baptists and Mennonites.² Post-war activities of Mennonites are reflected in the documents of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults established in 1944.

Organization of independent Mennonite congregations and the revival of their activity dates back to 1957-59 when preachers serving terms for “anti-Soviet activity” started returning. The earliest information regarding the revival of Mennonite congregations in Tomsk oblast dates to 1957. Both Kirchliche and Mennonite Brethren congregations

existed. The Tomsk Kirchliche Mennonite congregation was established by thirty five workers and officers of the Ball-Bearing Plant (GPZ-3). I. M. Neufeld, who had recently been released from a labor camp, served as leader. A Mennonite congregation of twenty people in the town of Asino was headed by D. I. Klassen who had also recently returned from imprisonment. Prior to this, Mennonites of Tomsk and Asino attended the religious meetings of Evangelical Christian Baptists (ECB) in Tomsk. After the return of Neufeld and Klassen, Mennonites, in particular Tomsk Mennonites, began holding their illegal meetings in the hostel of the GPZ-3 plant, which housed primarily Germans. After the leaders of the congregations were summoned to the oblast executive committee and raion executive committee, where they were warned that such meetings were not allowed, the meetings ceased but resumed again following a visit to Tomsk from Novosibirsk preachers F. J. Wiebe, F. D. Hildebrandt and Neufeld in 1958.³

In March 1958, T. S. G. Ariskin, a senior presbyter of the ECB in Western Siberia, visited Tomsk. He proposed to unite German Baptists (sixty people), Lutherans (300 people) and Mennonites (140 people) which would allow Mennonites to emerge from the underground. But the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults did not permit German services nor did it allow Baptists to join with other congregations.⁴

In 1959 the Council was aware of several Mennonite groups in Tomsk oblast: two in Tomsk, one with a membership over one hundred and another with two hundred; one in Tomsk raion with a membership of about two hundred people; one in Asinovskiy raion with about 250 members; and in Tuganskiy raion with about 250 members. The Tomsk congregation, consisting mainly of workers at the GPZ-3 plant, was formed in 1958. By this time, Neufeld had already been forced to leave the oblast. In 1958-59 G. [H?] Vogt, one of the leaders of the Kirchliche Mennonites, who resided in Krasnovishersk, Perm' oblast, visited Tomsk several times. He conducted several joint services in Tomsk and Asino and conducted baptisms and other rituals. During his last visit in 1959, congregational leadership was formed. D. I. Klassen was appointed as a senior preacher in the oblast, I. Braun as a senior preacher in Tomsk, G. [H?] Wieler and I. I. Derksen as preachers, G. [H?] G. [H?] Schultz as a deacon and P. Neufeld as a choir conductor. After this organization, Mennonites gathered each Sunday for collective prayers in the home of A. A. Wieler. Up to one hundred people took part, including fifteen to twenty five young people. A church choir was organized consisting of thirty singers. Preachers and the conductor taught young congregation members and prepared them for baptism. In 1959 several baptisms were held in Tomsk, Asino and Tuganskiy raion.⁵

In 1959 after a new anti-religious campaign began, Mennonites ceased their legal activities. On June 7, 1959, the militia dispersed a religious meeting of Mennonites held in the house of A. A. Wieler. Congregational leaders were summoned to the oblast executive committee and were told that their congregation was dissolved. Klassen, Wieler, Neufeld and some lay congregation members were ordered to leave the oblast. Without their leaders, Mennonites stopped gathering for religious meetings. A segment of the Mennonite Brethren (fifty four people) continued to attend a Baptist meeting house.⁶

After the departure of D. I. Klassen, the Asino congregation disintegrated.⁷ Public activities in Tomsk and other raions of the oblast seem to have ceased.⁸ Up until 1964, Mennonites gathered privately in homes despite being repeatedly warned that they would be answerable for violating the law on religious cults.

Along with repressive measures, extensive atheistic propaganda was carried out. It was intended to achieve the "final disintegration of the Mennonite sect." For this purpose, special parties, conversations, lectures, movies and individual work took place in the hostel of GPZ-3.⁹ The discrediting of believers was given widespread coverage in *Krasnoe znamia*, a regional newspaper. In 1959 an article "Under the guise of saints" was published that purported to uncover "the genuine nature of 'older brothers' of the Tomsk sectarian Mennonites."¹⁰

Following the resignation of N. S. Khrushchev, the anti-religious campaign subsided. In 1966 the Council which supervised the Russian Orthodox Church and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults were united into the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers. From then on the duties of Representatives of the Council for Religious Affairs applied to all functioning religious congregations. In addition commissions to ensure the observance of cult legislation were created by city and raion executive committees of people's deputies.¹¹

By the mid-1960s the policy of the state toward Protestant confessions had changed. This was caused by a split among ECB congregations regarding Kirchliche Mennonites. At the congress that took place in Moscow in 1963, Mennonite Brethren joined ECB thus actually merging with Baptists. In September 1963, an extended plenum of the All-Union Council of ECB passed a decision to admit Kirchliche Mennonites to meetings of ECB congregations, to allow them to sing in choirs and to hold separate communion services in ECB meeting houses "upon condition of the revival of their Christian life."¹²

In this connection, in 1964 the Tomsk ECB congregation again requested permission to hold meetings in German for German Baptists. At that time, religious meetings in German were already being held in Baptist congregations in many cities of the USSR. That is why it was possible for A. Smirnov, Representative of the Council, to agree to the

request. He thought that such permission would result in the unification of German Baptists, Mennonites and Pentecostals of German descent and thus end the activity of non-registered Pentecostal and Mennonite congregations.¹³

The Tomsk oblast executive committee agreed with this rationale evidently thinking that it would be easier to control congregations if they were legalized. In December 1964, I. I. Motorin, a member of the All-Union Council of ECB visited Tomsk. Initially an extended session of the ECB Brethren Council took place on December 11-12 and then a general meeting of Baptist congregations was held at which it was decided to organize combined German religious meetings. Baptist preachers J. J. Regier and A. K. Weiss were recommended as meeting leaders. Regier became a member of the executive body and Weiss a member of the auditing commission.¹⁴ On December 25, 1964, the first combined meeting of German Baptists, Lutherans and Kirchliche Mennonites took place. It was attended by 250 people and the following meeting by three hundred people. According to informants, prayers that were accompanied by the reading of psalms in German with Russian translation did not contain anything anti-Soviet. The believers present were attracted to the possibility of hearing and singing in their mother tongue.¹⁵ In October 1965, the ECB Brethren Council agreed to hold a second service in their church in German on Thursday evenings.¹⁶

Three religious communities joined a combined meeting: Kirchliche Mennonites (twenty five), Mennonite Brethren (sixty) and Lutherans (ninety four). The Mennonite Brethren gradually merged with the Baptists, but held their religious meetings together with Lutherans and Kirchliche Mennonites. A joint leadership unit was recognized made up of the presbyter and the executive of the ECB congregation, but Kirchliche Mennonites and Lutherans¹⁷ preserved their independence by not becoming members of the ECB congregation. For certain rituals, for example baptism twice or three times a year, their own specially ordained ministers came. (Kirchliche Mennonites baptized their adults by pouring. Lutherans baptized infants.)¹⁸ However, not all Lutherans and Mennonites became members of the German religious meetings. Some remained fearful that the union was a trap. Therefore, the issue of legalization was not resolved.¹⁹

Once Kirchliche Mennonites joined a general German meeting the congregation was considered registered although it did not have any official documents. G.[H?] Wieler was the leader of the congregation until his death in 1975 when he was succeeded by I. I. Derksen, a welder at GPZ-5.²⁰ Both men were characterized as exceptionally loyal people who respected Soviet laws on cults.²¹ German religious services were held twice a week on Thursdays and Sundays. Mennonites

who knew Russian better than they knew German attended Russian services. They did not have their own preachers so German Baptists Weiss and Regier preached. In order to conduct communion services, B. I. Sawatsky, presbyter of a Novosibirsk congregation, came to Tomsk twice a year. In all their reports, the Representatives of the Council always stated that there was neither extremist speech nor emigration sentiment among congregational members and they did not violate laws.²² In 1981 the Tomsk congregation of Kirchliche Mennonites was officially registered.²³

The congregation consisted predominantly of elderly people over fifty years of age (82.9%), and over 90% were women.²⁴

Table I. The age of congregation members

Age of Congregation Members	1964	1981
Under 30 years	1	—
31-40 years	1	1
41-50 years	7	6
51-60 years	9	9
over 60 years	7	25
Total	25	41

The educational levels of the members were low. They had completed only elementary school or partially completed a secondary education. From the mid-60s to the mid-70s, the number of congregation members increased significantly from twenty five to forty two members. And after that it started gradually to decline. In 1979 there were forty members, in 1981-82 forty one members, in 1983-84 thirty nine, in 1985, thirty six, in 1986, thirty five and in 1987, thirty three.²⁵ Elderly people died and no new members joined. In 2000 only eleven Kirchliche Mennonites remained in Tomsk²⁶ and by this time the Mennonite Brethren had integrated completely into the Baptists.

Translated by Olga Shmakina

Notes

- ¹ National composition of the population in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic according to data of the All-Union census of January 15, 1959 (Moscow: 1961), 403.
- ² Walter Sawatsky, *Evangelicheskoe dvizhenie v SSSR posle vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: 1995), 70, 73.

- ³ State Archive of Tomsk oblast (GATO), F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 69, pp. 3-4, 34-35; D. 426, pp. 115-16, 190.
- ⁴ E. V. Konev, "Baptisty i mennonity g.Tomska vo vtoroi polovine XX veka," *Lichnost'. Obshchestvo. Istoriiia* (Tomsk: 2002). 142. GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 426, p. 130.
- ⁵ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 69, pp. 26-27, 43, 43 reverse; D. 432, pp. 53-56.
- ⁶ Ibid., D. 69, pp. 26-27, 43, 43 reverse; D. 432, p. 56.
- ⁷ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 436, p. 93.
- ⁸ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 432, p. 167.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ *Krasnoe znamia* (Tomsk: September 6, 1959).
- ¹¹ T. K. Nikol'skaia, "Russkii Protestantism i gosudarstvennaia vlast'," *Istochnik. Istorik. Istoriiia* 1 (St. Petersburg: 2001), 429-30.
- ¹² A. N. Ipatov *Mennonity* (Moscow: 1978), 161-62.
- ¹³ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 78, pp. 14-15.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 18-20.
- ¹⁵ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 138, pp. 2-6.
- ¹⁶ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 78, p. 61; GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 274, p. 12.
- ¹⁷ In 1972 Lutherans established their own congregation.
- ¹⁸ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 198, p. 45; GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 324, pp. 1, 22.
- ¹⁹ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 436, p. 89.
- ²⁰ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 324, p. 22. During the period of his work at GPZ-5, I. I. Derksen's name was placed on the factory board of honor four times, he was awarded two certificates of honor, was twice awarded the badge, "Winner of socialist emulation," and repeatedly granted bonuses for efficiency and innovations.
- ²¹ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 316, p. 28.
- ²² GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 436, p. 459; GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 440, pp. 16-17, 53, 54, 98-99, 116; GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 449, p. 78.
- ²³ GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 324, pp. 20-21.
- ²⁴ The table is drawn in accordance with GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 436, p. 89; GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 324, p. 22.
- ²⁵ Ibid., pp. 28-49; GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 436, pp. 246, 459; GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 440, p. 29; GATO, F. R-1786, O. 1, D. 449, p. 120.
- ²⁶ Konev, *Lichnost'. Obshchestvo. Istoriiia*, 148.