

Test of Faith: Religious Mennonite Organizations of Orenburg Region, 1945-1991

Konstantin A. Morgunov, *Orenburg State University*

In Orenburg oblast in pre-war times, the last religious meeting houses were closed by state authorities in the early 1930s. Some changes that took place in connection with the war regarding relations between the state and religious organizations did not affect German Mennonite congregations. Liberalization of the state church policy did not lead to legalization of Mennonite religious organizations in Orenburg region.¹

In the post-war years, Mennonites began efforts to register their religious congregations. In March 1946, the Chkalov Evangelical Christian Baptist (ECB) congregation was officially registered. Mennonites living in Chkalov had joined the Baptists after actively discussing a letter of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists (AUCECB) "On Military Matters" and passed a decision to support all of its provisions. (Baptists, although similar to Mennonites in many of their teachings, officially rejected pacifism and consequently the authorities were more tolerant towards them.) In June 1946 the first petition was submitted in which believers of the villages of Donskoye, Anenskoye, Bogomazovo, Podol'sk and Pleshanovo requested permis-

sion to open a meeting house in Pleshanovo, Luxemburgskiy raion. This was followed by another petition submitted by Mennonites from the villages of Alisovo, Klubnikovo, Dobrovka, Stepanovka and Rodnichnoye of Perevolotskiy raion in October 1946 in which they asked to open a meeting house in the village of Klubnikovo. Aware of the authorities' bias against them because of their pacifist beliefs, Mennonites in both petitions identified themselves as ECB.²

Both petitions to open meeting houses were denied. S. Tsarev, a Representative of the Council of the Affairs of Religious Cults in Chkalov oblast, indicated in his report that the main reason for refusing to register Mennonite religious congregations was his personal conviction that believers continued "to uphold a teaching denying the necessity to defend the Motherland with arms."³ This approach was later approved by the Council for Religious Cult Affairs of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, which noted that "Mennonite congregations generally should not be registered as nowadays there is not any political expediency, nor practical need."⁴

Formally the believers were told that both petitions were denied because a former Mennonite church building in Pleshanovo was to be turned into a grain storage building and the building in the village of Klubnikovo did not conform to prayer house requirements. Representatives of both congregations expressed readiness to look for other premises that would comply with all requirements. By the end of February 1948, new petitions had been submitted by Mennonites requesting permission to open meeting houses in the villages of Klubnikovo and Podol'sk. Both petitions were denied on the grounds that German Mennonites could not call themselves Baptist before they were officially recognized by the All-Russian Council of the ECB. Two joint letters were sent to the Council requesting acceptance of the Chkalov congregations into the ECB but no response followed.

Meanwhile, Mennonite believers continued to look for avenues in which to be religiously active. For example, German Mennonite girls recruited to work at Chkalov Brick Factory actively joined a legally functioning ECB congregation in the city of Chkalov. Between 1946 and 1948, twenty nine new German members joined the congregation (forty seven members were baptized during this period). After the war ended, many German Mennonites stayed in the town of Orsk to continue work at industrial enterprises, having earlier been mobilized for work. The list of people petitioning to open a meeting house in Orsk included twenty three Germans (also thirty five Ukrainian believers and eleven Russians). Many Mennonites were baptized by presbyters of ECB congregations, although not becoming organizational members.⁵

Mennonite congregations suffered a severe blow in 1951 when a number of presbyters living in Luxemburgskiy raion were charged

with anti-Soviet activity and repressed. Afraid of new repressions the majority of congregations temporarily terminated religious meetings.

A significant revival of Mennonite activities began immediately after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953. In that year already, P. R. Umbrecht, a representative of the Mennonite congregation from the village of Lugovsk, Luxemburgskiy raion, visited Moscow. After his return, a group of believers petitioned as a religious Mennonite congregation, but the outcome was the same as with previous petitions.

In April 1957, due to the significant interest of foreign Mennonites in the condition of their co-religionists in the USSR, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults sent letters to areas in which there were large Mennonite populations requesting to study the condition of Mennonite religious organizations. The purpose of this research was to find Mennonite believers who could meet foreigners and give "correct" patriotic responses to them.⁶

After visiting some raions of the oblast that were predominately German in population, V. Opitin, a representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, noted active religious activities in Pokrovskiy, Perevolotskiy and Sol'-Iletskiy raions. According to him, Mennonites regularly gathered in winter on Wednesday and Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings and evenings. During the summer season they gathered on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings and evenings. Religious meetings were accompanied by a harmonium or accordion and choir singing. During religious meetings, villages became quiet. Sometimes one hundred people gathered in one house. All funerals and weddings were conducted according to religious practices. Baptisms were carried out regularly. In 1956 preachers Engbrecht and Loewen baptized about one hundred people in the Tok River. In May 1957, according to Opitin, Engbrecht "was withdrawn" from the settlement. That same year preachers A. Suderman and J. Klassen organized the baptism of twenty nine people in Sol'-Iletsk.

On May 21, 1957, at the session of the Chkalov oblast committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union a question was raised about conditions and measures for improvement of mass-political work among the German population. Noting significant obstacles to political work among the German population, the Bureau identified the increased activities of "Mennonite sectarians" who "organized gatherings, and carried out anti-Soviet activity among the population. [They] called upon Germans not to attend clubs, movies, lectures, meetings or to take part in public and political life."⁷ In early 1964, according to official data, there were twenty two illegally functioning religious groups of Baptists, Mennonites and Catholics with a total number of 5,889 believers. Mennonite congregations numbered 4,410, 12.5 percent of the total number of Germans living in the region. Unlike

some other confessions the majority of Mennonite congregations were made up of young and middle-age people.

The struggle against religious vestiges during the period of the Khrushchev onslaught against religion and religious organizations led to an increase of administrative control over the activity of illegally functioning Mennonite organizations. The local press took an active part in the anti-religious campaign. Thus, in April 1963, several oblast newspapers published accounts of the public trial of preacher Jacob Pankratz which took place at a meeting of residents of Zhdanovka village. He was sentenced to five years of exile and hard labour.⁸ In 1961-64 alone, fourteen ministers were sentenced to exile outside their raions at public meetings of villages with predominant Mennonite populations.⁹ Some preachers like Dyck, Klippenstein, Neufeld and Kliever were forced to publicly repent and in the press appeal to all believers to break with religious organizations. Religious meetings were often dispersed by activists of voluntary public militias, illegal meetings held in private homes were reported on and believers were threatened with criminal punishment and exile. Everywhere religious literature was confiscated. On February 12, 1966, a group of Mennonite believers was invited to a session of the Zhdanovskiy village soviet. In his speech A. M. Emel'ianov, village school principal, said that "believers are not worthy to eat Soviet bread." He suggested creating "...unbearable living conditions" for them.¹⁰ Three believers were laid off from their work.

The anti-religious campaign subsided only after the removal of N. S. Krushchev. On January 27, 1965, the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR passed a decree "On some facts of legal violation in respect to believers." The only way for believers to avoid persecution was by officially registering their religious organizations. Following the ECB Congress in Moscow at which Mennonites and Pentecostals were admitted into the Baptist Union, believers again became more active regarding registration.¹¹ A visit by V. A. Kreger, representative of the All-Russian Council of ECB on work among Mennonites and A. E. Klimenko, a senior presbyter of the ECB in Kuibyshevo oblast, significantly improved the climate. They delivered "a brother's message" to presbyters of Baptists congregations that included Mennonites allowing services in German in congregations. Immediately a petition was submitted on behalf of the German members of the Orenburg ECB congregation to P. N. Lepilin, representative of the Council, requesting permission for minister G. [H?] Loewen to use German during a five to ten minute communion service once a month.¹²

A new period of anti-religious policy began with the establishment in 1966 of a single Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR headed by V. A. Kuroedov. In order to regulate the

accounting of and control over the activity of some separate groups of believers, it was decided to allow for some large non-registered groups to legalize their activity and to simultaneously take every measure possible to stop the activity of non-registered believers' organizations. On March 18, 1966, the Presidium of the Supreme Council passed a decree "About administrative and criminal responsibility for violation of religious cult legislation." Local authorities considered this decree to be a signal to intensify efforts against illegally functioning religious congregations. Thus, in Krasnogvardeiskiy raion alone, by the decision of the raion administrative commission, seventeen people were called to administrative account, two were warned and the others were fined twenty five to fifty rubles each. Five preachers, M. I. Langemann, E. G. [H?] Goerzen, A. I. Neufeld, I. K. Dyck and P. P. Friesen, were fined for preaching and providing leadership to a non-registered group. E. G. Kliewer, a resident of Kuterlia settlement, was fined twenty five rubles for "...taking her children to a religious gathering in the house of P. P. Friesen, where the Bible was read and for teaching them prayers and religious songs."¹³

Believers were forced to submit complaints to a higher administrative level. On August 11, 1966, the Council for Religious Affairs sent a letter to Orenburg oblast executive committee explaining that before taking administrative action it was necessary to inform the leaders of religious organizations that they needed to legally register. As a result, on September 28, 1966, the Orenburg oblast executive committee cancelled the resolutions of Alexandrovskiy, Novosergeyevskiy, Perevolotskiy and Sorochinskiy administrative raion commissions in respect to twenty five Mennonite believers.

The increase of administrative control over the activity of illegal religious groups forced believers to petition more actively regarding their legalization. In September 1967, Mennonite believers of the village of Podol'skoye petitioned the Krasnogvardeiskiy raion executive committee requesting to register the ECB religious community. After a lengthy deliberation, raion authorities responded negatively. P. Vdovin, representative of the Council, however, did not agree with this. In his report sent to the Council for Religious Affairs of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, together with the case documents, he noted that it would be possible to register this religious community under conditions that would apply to all Mennonite Brethren congregations of the raion.¹⁴ In spite of his opinion, the executive committee of the oblast council did not agree to the request of the believers.

From 1965-67 Mennonite Brethren congregations submitted eleven petitions requesting registration (Perevolotskiy, Alexandrovskiy, Novosergeyevskiy raions and Orsk town) and Kirchliche Mennonites another six petitions (Alexandrovskiy and Perevolotskiy raions). On

November 1, 1967, after a lengthy correspondence and in spite of the decision of the Orenburg oblast executive committee, the Council for Religious Affairs passed a resolution granting registration of an ECB congregation in the village of Kichkas, Perevolotskiy raion, which had a predominant German Mennonite population. Local authorities supposed that a meeting house in Kichkas would unite the believers from the nearby villages of Pretoria, Suvorovka, Kubanka, Rodnichnoye, Stepanovka and Alisovo into one group, and that they would then cease applying for registration of their individual congregations. However, that did not happen and believers continued to hold prayer meetings in their congregations and only occasionally in summer attended the legally functioning meeting house.

Administrative punishments were still used against preachers who admitted to violations of religious legislation. In 1969 preachers of Perevolotskiy raion were called to criminal account. A. J. Loewen was sentenced to one year of correctional work and E. I. Ekkert to correctional work at his place of employment with a deduction of twenty five percent of his salary. Four other preachers were fined twenty five to fifty rubles each.

On the eve of a July 25-26, 1969 All-Union ECB Congress in Kuybyshev, an inter-oblast session of representatives of registered Baptist communities from ten regional oblasts headed by senior presbyter A. E. Klemenko took place. Orenburg organizations sent a delegation of eighteen members including twelve Germans. The total number of delegates was 102. From the delegates present they elected twelve deputies including P. I. Vogt, chairman of the Kichkas church council, to attend the All-Union Congress.¹⁵

The Mennonite Brethren congregation of Kichkas was officially registered in 1970. However, local authorities continued to place obstacles in the path of its development. Thus the executive organ of the Mennonite congregation twice applied to Perevolotskiy raion executive committee, once in December 1971 and again in June 1973, for permission to acquire a house for religious meetings. Both times these requests were ignored. In other raions of the oblast, registration of congregations was delayed. Fifty three Mennonite religious associations continued to function illegally (thirty five Mennonite Brethren and eighteen Kirchliche) with a total of 2,626 believers.

From 1966-69 Mennonites of Alexandrovskiy raion (the villages of Petrovka, Fedorovka, Kantserovka, Zhdanovka, Nikolayevka, Chortitza and Kamenka) submitted petitions requesting registration. None of them were considered. In 1968 the Kirchliche Mennonite congregation of Stepanovka village, Perevolotskiy raion and the Mennonite Brethren congregation of Podol'skoye village, Krasnogvardeiskiy raion, were denied registration. Only a petition of a religious ECB congregation of

Orsk uniting Baptists and Mennonites was accepted. They submitted their first petition in April 1965. It was denied on the grounds that there was no building that might be used for a meeting house. In 1967 they submitted a new petition and again it rejected. Their next petition, submitted in 1970, again was not received favorably by the oblast executive committee, but the Council for Religious Affairs requested a reconsideration of this petition. It was only on January 25, 1971 that the oblast executive committee decided to grant this request. A month later the Council for Religious Affairs finally approved the decision to register the ECB congregation in Orsk, comprised at that time of 175 people.

The number of petitions decreased as believers lost faith in the possibility of legalizing their activity. In 1973 Mennonites of the oblast did not submit a single petition. In 1974 forty four Mennonite associations were illegally functioning in raions of the Orenburg oblast that had a predominantly German population. Eighteen of them had fifty one to a hundred members and four had over a hundred members. Believers continued to gather in houses of their fellow believers and in forests or fields in the summer. They sang religious hymns accompanied by stringed instruments and accordions.

On June 26, 1974, a decree was passed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party "On measures to improve work among citizens of German nationality." On August 12, 1974, the Presidium of the Council of Ministers of RSFSR received a report entitled, "About work of executive committees of local councils in Orenburg oblast on the control of observing religious cults legislation." The report recognized that there were illegally functioning Mennonite organizations and the Council carefully recommended a change of tactics toward Mennonites.¹⁶ In September 1974, Orenburg oblast executive committee passed a decision to support petitions and register Mennonite Brethren congregations in the settlements of Podol'sk (seventy believers) and Donskoi (150 believers). It was decided to further study the nature of activities and sentiments of believers of Mennonite Brethren congregations of the villages of Kaltan and Ishalovka and Kirchliche Mennonites in the village of Tokskoye.

A decree issued by the Council of Ministers on August 28, 1975, "On measures to regulate a network of religious associations consisting of citizens of German nationality and increasing control over their activity" encouraged legalization of Mennonite organizations. This resulted in a gradual increase of registered Mennonite organizations. In 1976-77 eleven congregations were registered in villages with German populations: Kirchliche Mennonite congregations in the villages of Stepanovka (Perevolotskiy raion), Podol'sk (Krasnogvardeiskiy raion), Petrovka and Zhdanovka (Alexandrovskiy raion); a joint congregation with Lutherans in the town of Sol'-Ilets and ECB congregations in

Pretoria and Kubanka (Perevolotskiy raion) and Donskoi settlement (Krasnogvardeiskiy raion).

Authorities became very anxious in connection with activity of the so-called Council of Churches that opposed registration of believers' congregations. According to its members, legalization of religious activity resulted in subordination to state power and was intended to restrict the free exercise of religious practices. In order to spread the ideas of the Council, N. N. Krekker, leader of the Mennonite Brethren congregation of Otradnoye, Kuibyshev oblast frequently visited the Orenburg oblast. On May 14, 1978, on his initiative, "a youth rally" was planned near the village of Kuterlia. About two hundred people participated. Local authorities knew the details of the event—the time and place—and intervened, dispersing the participants. A document was drawn against N. N. Krekker and sent to the city council of Otradnoye.

Altogether from 1974-80, eight Mennonite Brethren congregations, five Kirchliche and one Pentecostal congregation that included two dozen Germans living in Orsk were registered. Another sixty Germans—Mennonite Brethren—joined the ECB congregation in Orenburg. By 1980 thirteen officially registered religious Mennonite associations functioned in the Orenburg oblast. The Mennonite Brethren had seven officially functioning meeting houses (Suzanovo, Pretoria, Tokskoye, Podol'sk, Kantserovka, Zhdanovka and Kamenka). In this same period, a Mennonite Brethren congregation was registered in the village of Ishalka, Krasnogvardeiskiy raion and registration was removed from a Mennonite Brethren congregation in Kichkas. There were five meeting houses being used by Kirchliche Mennonite congregations in Zhdanovka, Petrovka, Stepanovka, Kichkas and Sol'-Iletsk. ECB congregations had meeting houses in Kubanka, Pretoria and Donskoi where there were large numbers of Germans. All 184 members of the ECB congregation in Kubanka, for example, were German. Local authorities were also aware of eight non-registered religious organizations of Kirchliche Mennonites (in the villages of Kantserovka, Chortitza, Nikolayevka, Fedorovka, Pretoria, Zelenovka, Rodnichnoye and Kaltan) and fifteen Mennonite Brethren (in the villages of Petrovka, Chortitza, Fedorovka, Suvorovka, Rodnichnoye, Alisovo, Stepanovka, Kuterlia, Kaltan, Krasikovo, Lugovsk, Tokskoye, Pleshanovo, Klinok and Komsomol'skiy settlement). In 1980 only two Mennonite congregations submitted petitions for registration. The petition of the Mennonite Brethren congregation of Stepanovka, Perevolotskiy raion, numbering sixty believers, was denied by the raion executive committee. The Kirchliche Mennonite congregation of Nikolayevka also got a negative response to its petition for registration.

On May 29, 1981, the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR passed a decree "On measures to regulate a

network of religious organizations consisting of citizens of German nationality and increasing control over their activity in Orenburg oblast” which noted some weaknesses in the regulation of believers of German nationality. A representative of the Council personally went to Perevolotskiy raion and talked to leaders of non-registered congregations trying to convince them to prepare documents for registration. That year the Mennonite Brethren congregation in the village of Stepanovka, Perevolotskiy raion was registered.

During 1981-82 eight Mennonite congregations were registered: two congregations of Mennonite Brethren in 1981 (in the villages of Stepanovka, Perevolotskiy raion and Chortitza, Alexandrovskiy raion) and one Kirchliche Mennonite congregation (also in Chortitza). In 1982 three more Mennonite Brethren congregations were registered (in the villages of Fedorovka and Petrovka, Alexandrovskiy raion and Rodnichnoye, Perevolotskiy raion) as well as two Kirchliche congregations (in the villages of Nikolayevka and Fedorovka, Alexandrovskiy raion). In 1983 no congregation was registered.

At the same time, the pressure on illegally functioning believers increased. In 1983-84 fifty fines were imposed and twenty four warnings were issued against leaders and activists of Mennonite religious organizations for holding non-official prayer meetings, special youth meetings and gathering children for religious instruction. A raion prosecutor issued an official reprimand to two ministers. One of the ministers was arrested and held for fifteen days for resisting the militia.

In 1984 two Mennonite Brethren congregations legalized their activity, (in the village of Suvorovka, Perevolotskiy raion and a joint congregation of the villages of Klinok and Yugovka, Krasnogvardeiskiy raion) as well as three Kirchliche Mennonite congregations (in the villages of Dolinovka and Pretoria, Perevolotskiy raion and Kantserovka, Alexandrovskiy raion). By 1985 there were thirteen officially registered Mennonite Brethren congregations with about 1,360 members and eleven Kirchliche with about 711 members. In 1985 ninety eight people were baptized in these congregations (sixty nine in Mennonite Brethren and twenty nine in Kirchliche). Eight Mennonite Brethren and five Kirchliche congregations remained unregistered. Altogether there were fifty one organizations made up entirely or partially of Germans (this included ECB, Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Catholics and Lutherans) with a total membership of 4,380. Among them twenty eight congregations with 3,232 members were registered. Representatives of the Council identified seven other associations that required registration: six Mennonite Brethren organizations with 715 believers and one Kirchliche Mennonite association with thirty believers.¹⁷ In 1985 a Mennonite Brethren congregation of the village of Alisovo was officially registered.

By the end of 1986 there were twenty five officially registered Mennonite religious associations (fourteen Mennonite Brethren and eleven Kirchliche). In terms of Mennonites, these were the highest numbers of officially registered religious organizations. By 1992 there were only twelve Mennonite Brethren and Kirchliche Mennonite communities and in 1993, because of the mass emigration of the German population, only four Mennonite organizations remained in the oblast.

Translated by Olga Shmakina

Notes

- ¹ From 1938 to 1957 its official name was Chkalov oblast.
- ² State Archive of Orenburg Oblast (GAOO), F. 617, O. 1, D. 172, p. 103.
- ³ GAOO, F. 617, O. 1, D. 173, p. 120.
- ⁴ GAOO, F. 617, O. 1, D. 211, p. 64.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 24, 53, 55.
- ⁶ Archive of the Department for Relations with Public, National and Religious Organizations of the Ministry for Information Policy, Public and External Relations of Orenburg Oblast, D. 2. Secret correspondence with the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults under the Council of Ministers of the USSR and executive committees of city and raion soviets regarding issues of religious holidays and events. 1953-1958, 162.
- ⁷ *Iz istorii orenburgskikh nemtsev: sbornik dokumentov (1817-1974)* (Orenburg, Moscow: 2000), 241.
- ⁸ P. Bezhetskikh, "Imenem naroda," *Novye rubezhi*, April 26, 1963; V. Ovchinnikov, "Lovtsy dush" derzhat otvet," *Yuzhnyi Ural*, April 17, 1963; O. Vasil'ev, "Chernye litsa sektantov," *Komsomol'skoe plemia*, April 17, 1963.
- ⁹ GAOO, F. 617, O. 1, D. 246, pp. 60, 62-66, 79, 81.
- ¹⁰ Information regarding oral complaints of believing citizens January to March, 1966, Archive of the Department for Relations with Public, National and Religious Organizations of the Ministry for Culture, Public and External Relations of Orenburg Oblast, 1966, D. 5, pp. 16-18.
- ¹¹ Centre for Documents on Modern History of Orenburg Oblast (TsDNIOO), F. 7517, O. 1, D. 219, pp. 41-42.
- ¹² TsDNIOO, F. 7517, O. 33, D. 80, p. 6.
- ¹³ GAOO, F. 617, O. 1, D. 268, p. 48.
- ¹⁴ Conclusion on material of Mennonite believers' petition of Podol'skoye village, Krasnogvardeiskiy raion, Archive of the Department for Relations with Public, National and Religious Organizations of the Ministry for Culture, Public and External Relations of Orenburg Oblast, 1967-1968, D. 15, not numbered.
- ¹⁵ GAOO, F. 617, O. 1, D. 274, pp. 102-3.
- ¹⁶ GAOO, F. 1014, O. 4, D. 1635, p. 118 reverse.
- ¹⁷ Information by G. M. Iudin, representative of the Council for Religious Affairs "Regarding the network and number of religious associations consisting fully or partially of German ethnic believers," Archive of the Department for Relations with Public, National and Religious Organizations of the Ministry for Culture, Public and External Relations of Orenburg Oblast, D. of 1980, not numbered.