

# Modelling Mennonites: Farming the Siberian Kulunda Steppe, 1921 to 1928

Hans Werner, *University of Winnipeg*

In the 1925 inaugural issue of *Der Praktischer Landwirt*, the newsletter of the *Allrussischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschafter Verein*<sup>1</sup> (hereafter AMLV), P.F. Froese, its editor and chair of the association, outlined the intended goals of the organization. Froese recalled for his readers the glory days of Mennonite agriculture in the Russian Empire and held high the successes of the agricultural association founded and led by the dynamic Mennonite leader, Johann Cornies, almost a hundred years earlier. The AMLV was established by Mennonites in 1922 to stimulate reconstruction after the Russian Revolution and Civil War. It was granted legal status by the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee in 1923 and established offices in Moscow. The AMLV served Mennonites in the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic, while its counterpart, the *Verband der Mennoniten Südrusslands*, later the *Verband der Bürger Holländischer Herkunft* dealt with Mennonite settlements in Ukraine. The AMLV was dissolved by the Soviet government in 1928.<sup>2</sup>

Froese's editorial was written in the context of the New Economic Policy (NEP), launched by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s, and

representing a retreat from the harsh measures of war-time communism that had prevailed during the revolution and civil war. Under the NEP some semblance of a market returned to the countryside, offering limited relief from the difficult rural economy and turmoil of the previous years. Froese believed that by organizing themselves and using their ethnic community resources in a joint effort, as the Mennonites in Ukraine had done in times past, they could rebuild their economic and community life, despite the realities of the new context. His editorial suggested the AMLV could “stimulate innovation and the adaptation of new ideas, set aside private capital in the areas of sales and purchases, increase production by developing agricultural industry, and collectively support the work in agriculture to bring it to the point that Mennonite agriculture would gradually become a model for the surrounding areas.”<sup>3</sup>

On the Kulunda Steppe in West Siberia, the efforts of the AMLV leadership to rebuild Mennonite agriculture would be an illusory dream. Although Mennonite farmers on the Kulunda Steppe held on longer to the possibility of reconstruction, like Mennonites in Ukraine, by the end of the NEP period they wanted nothing else but to emigrate. In the end, however, relatively few of them would achieve that goal. Mennonite historiography has tended to focus on how the revolution began a period of tragedy, trauma and the rise of a regime with no respect for Mennonite religion, culture or industry. Emigration has been the theme of the Mennonite story of the post revolution period, with words like exodus and flight describing the overarching theme of leaving the former Russian Empire.<sup>4</sup> James Urry has argued that the NEP period has been collectively forgotten in Mennonite historiography with “the period from 1917 onwards” appearing “as a continuous and inevitable process of the destruction and dissolution of Mennonite life.”<sup>5</sup> The biographies of C.F. Klassen, the Vice President of the AMLV, written much later in Canada, paint a similar image. Klassen’s energy in pursuing the work of the AMLV is portrayed as arising out of devotion to the Mennonite people and the knowledge that “not all of the Mennonite people would be able to leave with him,” when his time to leave came.<sup>6</sup> The activities of the AMLV and particularly its Slavgorod Branch illustrate, however, that for a brief interlude a new generation of Mennonite leaders believed the Mennonite commonwealth could be restored; Mennonite agriculture and community could once again thrive and, in fact, the new regime would need Mennonites to point the way to the rebuilding of the Soviet rural economy.

Any attempt to explain why relatively few Kulunda Steppe farmers left the Soviet Union in the 1923-1926 period must account for the tensions they faced on the question of whether to leave or stay. Compared to their southern coreligionists, Mennonites in West Siberia had not suffered as much during the Civil War. The only example of violence mentioned in accounts of the Revolution and Civil War on the Kulunda Steppe is the bloody suppression of a Bolshevik inspired uprising against the conscription of young men from the villages by the White Army of Admiral Kolchak in 1918. In response to the uprising and its overthrow of the regional White government in Slavgorod, Hetman Annenkov was promptly dispatched to the Kulunda Steppe from Omsk and in the ensuing violence two thousand lives were lost. Most of the victims were German colonists. Peter B. Epp, for one, indicates three Mennonite men were killed, albeit by accident.<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, the relationship of Mennonite farmers on the Kulunda Steppe with the land itself is another explanation for their decision to stay. Unlike many of their Ukrainian Mennonite counterparts, they were granted land tenure after being landless, an indication that most of them came from the lower economic and social strata of Mennonite society. While this meant that owning their land was a relatively new experience for them and may have promoted their desire to hang on to their land, they did not have a long history of generational succession of landholding. Few large landowners settled on the Kulunda steppe, which meant that the redistribution of land that completely upset and reordered Mennonite social structure in Ukraine, largely passed them by. Careful reading of the minutes and correspondence of the AMLV and its publication, *Der Praktischer Landwirt*, suggests the activities of the organization were also important in holding back the emigration of Kulunda Steppe farmers.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the efforts of the AMLV to hold before them the glory days of Mennonite agriculture in an effort to rebuild agriculture in Siberia, and the basic view of its leadership that emigration would be a solution for only a very few, offer a part of the explanation. Most importantly, the belief on the part of its leadership that only a small number of Mennonites would be able to emigrate transferred the initiative to the Ukrainian Mennonite leadership, particularly to B.B. Janz who was unrelenting in his position that rebuilding Ukrainian Mennonite life was a lost cause.<sup>9</sup> The factors that held back Kulunda Steppe farmers from emigration during the 1925-1926 period while their coreligionists were leaving in large numbers contributed to the massive flight to Moscow of these same farmers in the fall of 1929.

## The Kulunda Steppe

The Kulunda Steppe straddles the border between Kazakhstan and Russia, approximately 400 kilometers south and east of Omsk, in Western Siberia. A vast grassland, the Kulunda Steppe is at the same latitude as Saskatoon and its climate is very similar to the northern Canadian prairies. It is classified as dry continental (Koeppen, Dfb) with January daily average temperatures of -19 (Saskatoon: -18) and July averages of +19 (Saskatoon: +19). The Kulunda steppe is semi-arid, with annual precipitation of about 300 mm (Saskatoon: 347) and with March the driest month and July the wettest. Rainfall is, however, a fickle visitor with droughts occurring once in three years on the average and a severe drought expected once in ten years.<sup>10</sup> The landscape is flat to slightly undulating and is dotted with shallow salt lakes. The Kulunda Steppe soils are primarily classified as Chestnut and Southern Chernozem and due to their sandy loam texture and the characteristically dry winds of the region, they have been heavily eroded since the grasses of the steppe were broken by the plow. The virgin lands initiative of the Khrushchev era in the mid 1950s promoted more intensive cultivation of the fragile soils and resulted in even greater erosion problems.<sup>11</sup> The Steppe continued to be a fragile environment in the post-Soviet era, reflected in a 2016 a joint German-Russian research team's study that made recommendations for how to mitigate desertification of this vast and important agricultural landscape.<sup>12</sup>

Mennonites began migrating to Siberia in the late nineteenth century with a few large landowners from Ukraine purchasing land along the newly constructed Trans-Siberian Railroad between Petropavlovsk and Omsk. A much larger movement of primarily landless Mennonites from the Molotschna, ZagradoVka, Orenburg, and lesser numbers from other colonies, began in 1907, thus establishing what was commonly known as the Slavgorod-Barnaul settlement on the Kulunda Steppe. Landlessness in the established Mennonite colonies of southern Ukraine had become a chronic problem due to a rising population and the increasing difficulties of purchasing more land for daughter colonies. The availability of land in West Siberia and a railway to make it an economically feasible place to settle, prompted land fever among Mennonites in the south and by 1912 some 6,000 Mennonites were living in the vicinity of the newly established town of Slavgorod with 50,000 desiatine (135,000 acres) under cultivation. A virtual block settlement of Mennonite and colonist German settlements was located about 20

kilometers northeast of the town. In 1927 the settlement was organized as a German administrative district (Raion) centred in the Village of Halbstadt with 58 villages, 3,027 farmers and a primarily Mennonite population of 16,220.<sup>13</sup>

### The Downward Spiral

Although the Kulunda Steppe was largely bypassed during the civil war, beginning in June 1920 grain requisitions from Siberia were dramatically increased to compensate for the losses of agricultural production in the rest of the country. Although Lenin had announced the NEP in 1921, its implementation was delayed in Siberia to extract more grain for the cities of the south. In 1922 twenty-seven percent of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic's grain procurements came from Siberia.<sup>14</sup> The high levels of grain procurement coincided with two years of harvest failures that reduced Siberia's grain production to half its normal levels. The draconian grain requisitions contributed to peasant unrest in Western Siberia culminating in the capture of Tobolsk by an army of 30,000 peasants in February 1921. While the peasant unrest seems to have been concentrated along the Trans-Siberian railway, the Mennonites of the Kulunda Steppe did not escape the effects of the grain requisitions. By the spring of 1923 peasants had no seed and with no financial incentive to produce grain for sale, they reverted to subsistence farming. Seeded acreage began declining in the Slavgorod area in 1920 and by 1924 was only 42 percent of what it had been.<sup>15</sup> In April 1923 a delegation of Mennonites from the Kulunda Steppe appeared in Moscow to seek help for their people. They reported that over thirty percent of Mennonites in the Kulunda Steppe had no food of their own and if the remaining shrunken grain supply was consumed there would be nothing left for seed in the upcoming growing season. A report of the American Mennonite Relief (AMR) who was using funds from co-religionists in the United States for relief in Russia notes that although there was widespread hunger in Siberia "the number of starvations cases was relatively small."<sup>16</sup> Representatives of AMR sent to the areas also reported widespread lack of clothing, with the result that "Mennonite children up to approximately fourteen years of age, and some as old as sixteen, boys and girls, were going about stark naked."<sup>17</sup>

### Becoming Models – Again

In the draft of an article for *Der Praktische Landwirt* that reviewed the beginnings of the AMLV, Vice President, C.F. Klassen outlined the motives that had led to the creation of an agricultural umbrella organization. He claimed that at a meeting in the colony of Alt Samara in October 1923, Mennonites had “felt new strength, or more correctly old strength reawakened.” He went on to suggest, “new opportunities for work had appeared that stimulated the courage to work together to lift the depressed state of farms.” He cast the mission of the new organization in terms of a cultural mandate, quoting the German poet Friedrich Schiller’s maxim: “have possession and you are in the right.” Klassen’s use of the quote seems to be to spur his readers on to lay claim to their cultural birthright and rightful place in Russia. The assignment given to the new organization was more specific. Klassen states in strong ethno-cultural language the organization’s aim, which was that “Mennonite agriculture should become a model....” Furthermore, he suggested that “in striving to achieve this goal we will be even more resolute if we hold before us the history of our little nation” (*Voelklein*). According to Klassen the people attending the meeting left with the full knowledge of the challenges of the task that lay ahead, but were also “inspired by an old belief in the inner strength of our people.” After assuring his readers that delegates left with courage and a firm confidence in the successful outcome of the work that lay before them, he ended again with Schiller’s quote.<sup>18</sup>

Klassen’s language reinforced the belief held by Mennonites in Russia that they were a special and separate people, gifted with a particular ability to make an agricultural landscape blossom under their guiding hand. The perceived purpose for their being set in the context of Russia and its people was to model for others the agricultural sophistication demonstrated on their farms and yards. Although the notion of Mennonites as model farmers was initially imposed upon Mennonites by the Tsars in relation to other German colonists, it became deeply ingrained in their self-awareness relative to their Ukrainian and Russian neighbours.<sup>19</sup> Klassen’s language suggests that AMLV leadership believed that with the implementation of NEP, an apparent realization on the part of the new Soviet regime that the rural economy needed to be rebuilt, the task again lay before Mennonites to rise to the challenge of modelling progressive agriculture. James Urry suggests that some Mennonites may have been drawn to the project by the prospect of the

new social order, others may have “been influenced by the rhetoric of the time” that offered a utopian future. During the early NEP period Mennonites on the Kulunda Steppe seem particularly to fit Urry’s suggestion that some Mennonites believed that “through working with rather than against the Bolsheviks, especially in economic matters... life would change for the better.”<sup>20</sup> In his article Klassen is clear that although they saw their prime focus as rebuilding Mennonite agriculture, and “as they had strength they would participate in the larger assignment that Soviet Russia had set for itself: the rebuilding of the Russian agriculture.”<sup>21</sup> In the context of NEP it seemed possible to the leadership to lay claim to their ethnic agricultural heritage and thereby regain their special status in Russia—now not an empire, but a communist nation.

### The Land and the Rain

The natural environment of the Kulunda Steppe meant that the project of cooperating in the rebuilding of Mennonite agriculture faced serious challenges. An important attraction for the settlement of the Kulunda Steppe after 1905 had been the Stolypin land reforms whose aim was to create individual freehold land tenure. The Cabinet Lands of the Kulunda Steppe were opened for settlement by law on 19 September 1906, which coincided with fervent land hunger in the established Mennonite colonies in Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> J.J. Hildebrand offers a detailed account of how the lands were surveyed, mapped, and distributed to the arriving Mennonite settlers from the south.<sup>23</sup> The intent of the Russian authorities was to settle farmers on their own homesteads, much like the dispersed settlement pattern being pursued on the Great Plains and prairies of North America. However, like their counterparts in Manitoba, Siberian Mennonites ignored the homestead surveys, preferring to settle in villages. Mennonites also received a special dispensation to have the prescribed allotment of 15 dessiatine (41 acres) per male household member averaged and distributed as 48 to 50 dessiatine (130-135 ac) per household.<sup>24</sup>

Not unlike the case on the prairies, the land was not empty. J.J. Hildebrand suggests the indigenous nomadic Kirghiz, as they were commonly known by Mennonites, “peacefully moved off the land with their herds and Jurts.”<sup>25</sup> Manfred Klaube is more circumspect. He points out that some of the Kirghiz had been forced off their traditional grassland areas near Semipalatinsk in the second half of the nineteenth century and had migrated to an area east of

the Irtysh River. They came to the Kulunda Steppe in 1904 after having received permission from authorities in Barnaul. The onslaught of Mennonite and other European settlers displaced them again a few years later, forcing them deeper into Kazakhstan, a move that was not without complications and conflict with the settler society that was arriving in large numbers.<sup>26</sup>

Although Mennonite farmers were able, for the most part, to keep their land in the aftermath of revolution, the AMLV challenge to again become model farmers faced grim circumstances and a more unforgiving environment than in many of the other settlement areas. The natural environment, which for the Mennonite farmer meant the weather and the land, was both loved and feared. Recalling his travels through the region, Alvin Miller, the AMR representative noted the “marvellously beautiful” Siberian skies and the “gorgeous colours” of the sunrises and sunsets. On the last day of his stay in Siberia, however, “the hot winds from across hundreds of miles of sunbaked sands swept over the country like the hot breath from a glowing furnace. All vegetation wilted, and by the second morning I was ill from the effects of the heat.” The two days of heat “had cost this Siberia community a large part of its grain” and he knew they would be distributing food again the following winter.<sup>27</sup>

Helmut Anger a German academic who travelled through the Kulunda Steppe in 1926 was also awestruck by the raw beauty of the landscape. In the village of Grigorevka located 80 kilometers southeast of Slavgorod in the Mennonite settlement known as the Paschnaya villages, Anger notes, however, that the farmers he talked to complained about the poor soils of their area. They claimed wheat yields of 80 to 100 pud per dessiatine (18-22 bushels per acre) were possible on the black earth soils of the Omsk area while under similar conditions they could only expect a yield of 45 pud (10 bushels per acre).<sup>28</sup> In Gerhard Fast’s compilation of village characteristics, most villagers seem to be content with their land and its productivity. In the Paschnaya villages referred to above, the soil was described as sandy and yields were adequate. However, in a group of Mennonite villages known as the Seventies-Eighties villages good harvests were reported. The prevailing attitude towards the vagaries of their land endowments is most adequately captured by one writer. He ruefully commented that for some of the formerly landless arrivals, “being ruled by the soil was entirely foreign.”<sup>29</sup>

The reference to the sandier soils of the Paschnya villages reflected a significant difference not only between the soils of the



Kulunda steppe and the lands near Omsk, but also the differences within the Mennonite settlement area around Slavgorod. As the accompanying map shows, Mennonite farmers (Figure 1) lived on one of two soil types whose boundary cut through the middle of the settlement northeast of Slavgorod.

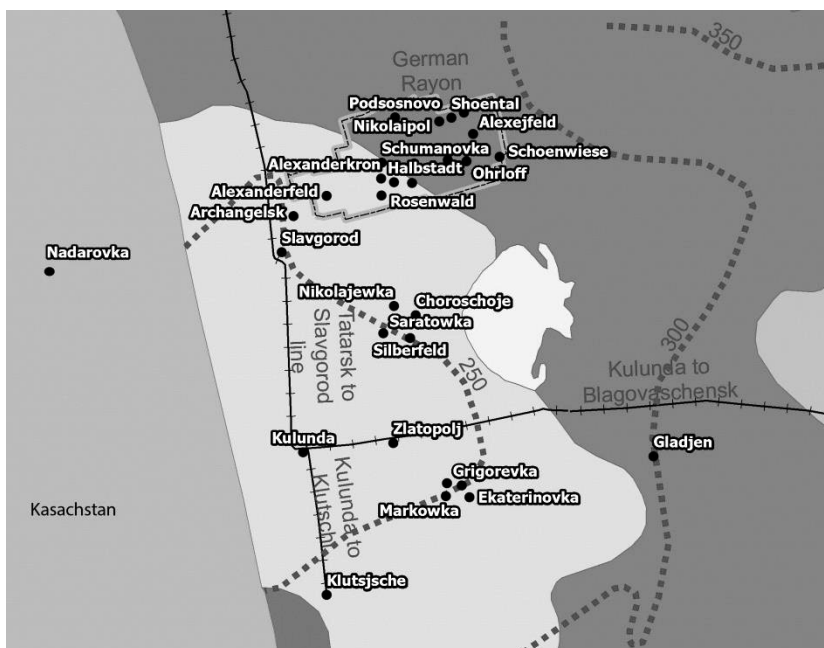


Figure 1: Soil types on the Kulunda Steppe

The chestnut soils characteristic of Paschnaya and the villages in the southwest portion of the main Mennonite settlement were considerably sandier and more susceptible to drought and wind erosion. A 1926 crop report assessed the crop on the sandier chestnut soils near the town of Slavgorod as having yielded 25 to 35 pud of wheat per dessiatine (6-8 bushels per acre), while the Chernozem soils at Gnadenheim and beyond had produced from 70 to 80 pud per dessiatine (15-18). Yields in the Omsk region had been considerably higher at 100 to 180 pud per dessiatine (22-40).<sup>30</sup>

Before the First World War Mennonite agriculture in West Siberia relied heavily on the production of butter. Butter became the largest exported product from Siberia because of the imposition of the Chelyabinsk tariff in the 1890s. At the Chelaybinsk rail junction in the Ural Mountains a rail freight tariff was imposed on

products arriving from Siberia, which effectively lowered the price for bulk commodities such as grains, making their export prohibitive. Butter on the other hand was a high value product relative to its weight and by the First World War there were more than 2000 butter making concerns in Siberia that exported 70,000 tons of butter annually. Not surprisingly, J.J. Hildebrand asserts that “neither the previously established Russian, nor the Muslim indigenous people knew how to produce good butter.”<sup>31</sup>

According to James Hughes, during the war and revolution, butter production for export almost disappeared in favour of grain production. A good deal of the blame lay with early communist redistribution of cattle, which unlike land redistribution, affected the Mennonite farmers of Siberia by breaking up the largest and most productive dairy herds. Both the AMLV and AMR attempted to stimulate dairy production during the NEP period. Gerhard Fast notes that in villages that established creameries, greater attention was paid to the cow, with green and nutritious feed being provided, rather than chaff and straw.<sup>32</sup> In 1925, the Slavgorod Branch of the AMLV reported that there were fourteen butter producing facilities with a possible production of 15–20,000 pud (270–360 tons) of export butter annually.<sup>33</sup> Stimulating dairy production was, however, swimming upstream as West Siberia was destined to become the grain supplier for the new Soviet nation while the pre-eminence of dairy production would not return.<sup>34</sup>

The land, weather and the distance from both railway and city markets meant that the farmers of the Kulunda Steppe were fixated on grain production to a much larger extent than those of the Omsk region. The redistribution of cattle by the communist regime in the 1920s only helped to push production away from animal agriculture to the production of wheat. Viewed almost as a “calling” was the production of certified seed. According to Gerhard Fast, the wartime agronomist Kuntschenko had advised the new regime that to improve seed it should “place its support behind the Mennonites,” because “with the Russian muzhik nothing was being accomplished.”<sup>35</sup> While Fast offers no source for his assertion, Comrade Kuntschenko, from the agricultural division of the district Communist Party Executive, did appear at the December 1925 meeting of the Slavgorod Branch of the AMLV where he offered advice about seed and purebred cattle production, and assured the members of his support and help.<sup>36</sup> The AMLV took up the challenge. The promotion of local seed associations and the dissemination of technical reports about varieties, land prepara-

tion, rogueing and other production information dominated the *Landwirt's* practical articles.

With the Kulunda Steppe's increasing emphasis on grain production, the production of certified seed most exemplified the Mennonite mission to be model farmers. In a report on the fulfillment of a contract for seed, the AMLV intoned that "with our seed delivery we are growing into the economic life of our country and as a result an important, recognizable benefit is being achieved."<sup>37</sup> Along with the support offered by Comrade Kuntschenko, Soviet agronomist S.T. Sorotkin, after a long technical article on seed production, reminded readers of *Der Praktischer Landwirt* that "Mennonite farms have acquired a rich experience; with respect to the production of valuable cultivars, they are in first place today, and therefore they must be the cells in which the work of seed production must be concentrated." He challenged Mennonites, however, to not "focus only on the deepening and broadening of seed production amongst themselves, but rather they should do everything possible to distribute knowledge of their agricultural methods to the neighbouring population."<sup>38</sup>

It proved difficult, however, to organize seed associations and seed cooperatives among the independent minded Kulunda Steppe Mennonites. As late as 1925, the report from the Slavgorod representative on the ALMV Board acknowledged that seed production was still not underway on any large scale and offered hope that the plans for the next year would bring positive results.<sup>39</sup> A year later, at the meeting of the Slavgorod Branch of the AMLV in December 1926, there were long discussions and debates about the problems of establishing seed associations in the villages and some at the meeting seemed to resist the project all together. The recorder of the minutes of the meeting noted, "it even seemed to be a question of whether it was advantageous to produce clean seed in the future."<sup>40</sup>

The increasing importance of grain production during the NEP period together with the land resource and climate meant that large-scale farming was the only way to be profitable. An ongoing frustration on the Kulunda Steppe was the lack of tractive power on the farm. P.B. Epp, the head of the Slavgorod branch did not blame the soil for the area's difficulties in achieving results during the early NEP period, but rather "the lack of power to work the land as needed."<sup>41</sup> The number of horses available for fieldwork in the Slavgorod area declined to less than half of their former numbers between 1920 and 1924.<sup>42</sup> By 1925, Epp could report that the harvest had turned out well, "at least with respect to the farmer

that had adequate pulling power.” Those who saw their yields falling short of what they saw their neighbours harvesting could blame the working of the land. Epp suggested the “field wants to be worked” and many farmers still lacked the power to work their land properly. By 1925 there was, however, seemingly enough energy, human, horse and mechanical, to achieve the large acreages needed to be economical. That fall 3,550 dessiatine of fallow land and 1,500 dessiatine of stubble (13,635 acres in total) were ploughed in preparation for seeding the next spring.<sup>43</sup> Epp also reported the arrival of the first tractor – “a Fordson, 20 horsepower” with many farmers wondering out loud how to get one.<sup>44</sup> The Slavgorod Mennonite farmers did not participate in the tractor program that the AMR initiated for the Ukraine, however Helmut Anger reported that when he was in West Siberia in 1926, plowing with a tractor was already common. He notes that individual farmers usually could not afford a tractor, but rather relied on cooperative and association resources to share one.<sup>45</sup> Joint ownership may not only have been a function of affordability since in the fall of 1926 the Soviet regime decreed that tractors could only be purchased through collectives and cooperatives.<sup>46</sup>

For the AMLV to achieve its goal of Mennonite agriculture, once again becoming a model for the Russian peasant and their other neighbours, the organization had to be able to mobilize its farm family members. The AMLV faced constant passive resistance from Slavgorod area Mennonites to its rebuilding initiatives. Reports from Slavgorod invariably point to member apathy as a prime reason for failure to achieve the organization’s goals. In his report to what appears to have been a stormy February 1925 delegate meeting of the Slavgorod Branch, P.B. Epp bemoaned the “lack of trust in the Board exhibited by some members.” In outlining the plan for the future, Bernard Fast excused the lack of progress in rebuilding by pointing to the leadership having to constantly deal with the crisis of its finances. According to the minutes “he pointed particularly to the duty of members to help; that every association was responsible for its own affairs.”<sup>47</sup> According to Andrej Savin and Detlef Brandes, the German section of the Communist Party deliberately orchestrated the financial problems of the Slavgorod Branch by seeing to it that the Branch lost its right to market its members’ products. Based on their reading of the German section’s documents, Savin and Brandes conclude the section was torn between the Communist Party’s desire to keep the AMLV because of its economic benefits while viewing its work in the countryside as harmful to the political objectives of the Party.<sup>48</sup>

The problems of the Slavgorod Branch resulted in the office in Moscow appointing P.J. Wiens as its direct representative in the Slavgorod Branch with a mandate to bring order to its financial and organizational state. His appointment reflected the ongoing crisis facing the organization on the Kulunda Steppe. Wiens's appointment touched off a sharp exchange between the Moscow office and the Slavgorod Branch with the Slavgorod representatives objecting to the heavy handedness of the Moscow office.<sup>49</sup>

While the AMLV's stated goal and much of its activity was focussed on improving agriculture the possibility of emigration was always in the background. In his GAMEO entry describing the work of the organization, P.F. Froese, the AMLV's President, suggests its work made it possible "for the surplus Mennonites from the overcrowded villages to leave the country."<sup>50</sup>

While emigration seems to have been less of a desire for Kulunda Steppe Mennonites in the early NEP period, the AMLV communication efforts also worked hard to redirect the desire for emigration toward economic rebuilding. C.F. Klassen's overview of the formation of the AMLV indicates that the question of emigration was raised at the inaugural meeting that gave birth to the organization. The meeting had made the point that Mennonite settlements were over populated due to the high birthrate among Mennonites and the fact that during the years of war and revolution no daughter settlements could be established. The resolution passed by the meeting used strong words against emigration. Delegates declared themselves "fundamentally in favour of energetic rebuilding in our settlements and warn against unnecessary illusions regarding the emigration question." The resolution did, however, temper its opposition to emigration by allowing that where circumstances offered no other solution to survive, the leadership should "seek justice for these circumstances", presumably by assisting emigration.<sup>51</sup>

The question of emigration would come to preoccupy Kulunda farmers, as it did in the other Mennonite colonies. The Moscow office of the AMLV was usually quick to quell these aspirations. In response to an impatient letter from its Slavgorod Branch in January 1925, the office advised they had no news about possible emigration to Mexico on credit. The Moscow office agreed that Siberia should have priority for emigration and assured the Slavgorod writers that they would be fair in pursuing that goal. In the meantime, they advised the Branch to "calm down your people, because only a small number of Russia's Mennonites will have the opportunity to emigrate."<sup>52</sup> Some did not heed the warning. A circular

sent out by the Slavgorod Branch of the AMLV in August 1925 referred to families who, believing they could travel on credit, had travelled to Moscow without the necessary funds. The Moscow office was unable to assist them and the circular warned others not to attempt to leave Siberia with the hope of travelling on credit. The circular closed with ominous warnings that if the directive was not followed there would be "repressive disciplinary measures to keep people back."<sup>53</sup> The reluctance by AMLV officials to pursue emigration for Kulunda Steppe farmers allowed the initiative for emigration to flow to the Ukrainian Mennonite association who unilaterally decided that until 10,000 Mennonites from Ukraine had left, no other Mennonites should be allowed to emigrate. Although the AMLV negotiated a lower number, they still had to agree that for every four emigrants from the rest of Russia, there would be six from Ukraine.<sup>54</sup> The reticence by the AMLV in supporting emigration from the Kulunda Steppe was reflected in the numbers that left during the height of Mennonite emigration. According to Manfred Klaube between 1920 and 1928 160 families left the Kulunda Steppe for the Amur region of Eastern Siberia, while only 37 families left for Canada.<sup>55</sup>

### **Conclusion**

For a brief moment during the NEP period it seemed possible to rebuild Mennonite agriculture in the image of the great Johann Cornies, even in the context of a Soviet regime. Certainly in the minds of AMLV leaders it was both possible and necessary. In the context of the new order of Soviet Communism, the AMLV leadership worked hard to realize what they believed had been essential cultural rights enjoyed by Mennonites in the former Russian Empire. As C.F. Klassen had intimated in his overview of the formation of the AMLV, Mennonites had only to capture the moment to realize their birthright as model farmers. Kulunda Steppe Mennonites proved to be reluctant model farmers and during the years of the NEP they seem to have given up on the land. The Kulunda Steppe environment offered its challenges; however, a lack of confidence in their ability to make the soil productive seems not to have the reason for giving up on the land, and in that sense they were model farmers. The recurring and often draconian grain requisition requirements were more likely the cause for wanting to abandon the land. The position of the AMLV, that most Mennonites would not be able to emigrate and that rebuilding was both neces-

sary and possible, was an important contributor stopping the emigration of the Kulunda-Mennonite farmers. The floodgates would open again in 1929 after another round of grain requisitions. The flight of some 13,000 mostly Mennonite farmers from the Kulunda to Moscow in the autumn of 1929 was leaderless and chaotic. Peter Froese would be imprisoned that fall and by then most of the other leaders of the AMLV had immigrated to Canada.<sup>56</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> "The All Russian Mennonite Agricultural Association."
- <sup>2</sup> "The Association of Mennonites of South Russia," later "The Association of Citizens of Dutch Descent" James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe – Russia – Canada 1525-1980* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 147.
- <sup>3</sup> P.F. Froese, "Arbeitsbericht des Allrussischen Menonitischen Landwirtschaftlichen Vereins," *Der Praktischer Landwirt* [hereafter DPL], 1(1) (May 1925), 6-7.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for instance Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona: Friesens, 1962) and John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982).
- <sup>5</sup> James Urry, "After the Rooster Crowed: Some Issues Concerning the Interpretation of Mennonite/Bolshevik Relations During the Early Soviet Period," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995): 29.
- <sup>6</sup> Maureen S. Klassen, *It Happened in Moscow: A Memoir of Discovery* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 2013), 97 and Herbert and Maureen Klassen, *Ambassador to His People: C.F. Klassen and the Russian Mennonite Refugees* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1990).
- <sup>7</sup> See accounts of the uprising and its suppression in Manfred Klaube, *Die Deutschen Doerfer in der West-Sibirischen Kulunda Steppe: Entwicklung, Strukturen, Probleme* (Marburg: Elwig Verlag, 1991): 42-43 and Gerhard Fast, *In den Steppen Sibiriens* (Rosthern, SK.: J. Heese, 1957), 96-97.
- <sup>8</sup> The original files of the AMLV are in the State Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF) Fond 423. Microfilm copies were acquired by the Mennonite Heritage Centre (hereafter MHC) in 2006. The references used here are from the microfilm copies. For a full description of the collection, see: Peter Letkeman, "The Files of the Allrussischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verein (AMLV)," *Mennonite Historian*, 32(3) (September 2006): 4-5.
- <sup>9</sup> John B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland: The Story of the Mennonite Emigration from Soviet Russia, 1921-27*, (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 87.
- <sup>10</sup> Burghard Christian Meyer, Vera Schreiner, Elena N. Smolentseva and Boris A. Smolentsev, "Indicators of desertification in the Kulunda Steppe in the south of Western Siberia," *Archives of Agronomy and Soil Science* 54, no. 6 (2008): 590. Saskatoon data from: Wikipedia.com. See also: James Hughes, *Stalin, Siberia and the Crisis of the New Economic Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6.

- <sup>11</sup> For an analysis of the virgin lands initiative six years after its inception, see Frank A. Durgin, Jr., "The Virgin Lands Programme 1954-1960," *Soviet Studies* 13, no. 3 (1962): 255-280.
- <sup>12</sup> See the project website: [www.kulunda.eu](http://www.kulunda.eu)
- <sup>13</sup> Klaube, 32, 47.
- <sup>14</sup> Hughes, 22.
- <sup>15</sup> Klaube, 44 and Hughes, 22.
- <sup>16</sup> Alvin J. Miller, "Relief and Reconstruction in Siberia," in P.C. Hiebert and Okie O. Miller, eds., *Feeding the Hungry: Russia Famine 1919-1925* (Scottsdale, PA.: Mennonite Central Committee, 1929), 313-314.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 316-317.
- <sup>18</sup> C.F. Klassen, "Drei Vertreter-Versammlungen des A.M.L.V.," MHC, Fond 423: file 290.
- <sup>19</sup> On the evolution of Mennonite and German colonist self-perception as model farmers, see Dietmar Neutatz, "'Musterwirte': Zum Selbstbild der Schwarzmeerdeutsche, insbesondere die Mennoniten," in El'vira Barbasina (Hrsg.), *Die Russlanddeutschen in Russland und Deutschland: Selbstbilder, Fremdbilder, Aspekte der Wirklichkeit* (Essen: Klartext, 1999), 73-83.
- <sup>20</sup> Urry, "After the Rooster Crowed," 30.
- <sup>21</sup> C.F. Klassen, "Drei Vertreter-Versammlungen des A.M.L.V.," MHC, Fond 423: file 290, and *DPL* 2, no. 12 (December 1926): 1-3. Schiller's quote, which was not included in the published version is from *Wallenstein's Tod II*, 208-218. Klassen misquotes it somewhat, making the notion of a 'cultural right' even stronger: "Sei im Besitze und du wohnst im Recht/Und heilig wird's dir die Menge bewahren."
- <sup>22</sup> Donald Treadgold, *The Great Siberian Migration: Government and Peasant in Resettlement from Emancipation to the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 160.
- <sup>23</sup> J.J. Hildebrand, *Sibirien: Allgemeine Uebersicht ueber Sibirien under der Gruendung der Mennonitensiedlungen in Sibirien* (Winnipeg: by the author, 1952), 30.
- <sup>24</sup> Toews, 86.
- <sup>25</sup> Hildebrand, 40.
- <sup>26</sup> Klaube, 34-35.
- <sup>27</sup> Miller, 322.
- <sup>28</sup> Helmut Anger, *Die Deutschen in Sibirien: Reise durch die deutschen Doerfer Westsibiriens* (Berlin: Ost Europe Verlag, 1930), 39. Wheat yields on the Canadian prairies averaged 26 bushels per acre in 1915, but declined to 15 in 1916 and 1917 and 10 in 1918 and 1919. See Byron Lew and Marvin McInnis, "World War I and the Expansion of Canadian Wheat Supply" Trent University Department of Economics, Working Papers, 7; <https://www.trentu.ca/economics/papers.php>
- <sup>29</sup> J.B. Schmidt in Fast, 22.
- <sup>30</sup> "Ernteergebnisse & Witterung", MHC, Fond 423, file 288.
- <sup>31</sup> Hildebrand, 35.
- <sup>32</sup> Fast, 117.
- <sup>33</sup> "Butterabsatz," letter from the Slavgorod Abteilung to A.M.L.V. Moscow, 15 September 1925, and "Betrifft: Information", Slavgorod Abteilung to A.M.L.V. Moscow, 27 August 1925, MHC, Fond 423, file 95.
- <sup>34</sup> Hughes, 20-23



- <sup>35</sup> Fast, 100.
- <sup>36</sup> P.F. Froese, "Zwei Vertreterversammlungen: in Slavgorod und Omsk," *DPL* 8 (January 1926), 9.
- <sup>37</sup> "Die Durchfuehrung des Kontrakts verlauft normal," *DPL*, 4-5 (October 1925), 1.
- <sup>38</sup> Agr. S.T. Sorotkin, "Die naechstliegenden Aufgaben in der Samenzucht der mennonitischen Samengenschaften," *DPL* 6 (Nov 1925), 6-7.
- <sup>39</sup> "Arbeitsbericht der Slawgoroder Abteilung fuer den Zeitraum August und September," *DPL* 6 (Nov 1925), 10-11.
- <sup>40</sup> "Protokoll der VII Vertreterversammlung der Slawgoroder Abteilung des Allrussischen Mennonitischen Landwirtschaftlichen Vereins am 9. 10. Und 11. Dezember in Slawgorod," MHC, Fond 423, file 253.
- <sup>41</sup> P.B. Epp, "Gedanken ueber den Zustand und Aufbau der Landwirtschaft unter den Mennoniten im Slawgoroder Kreis, Omsk=Gouv," *DPL* (3)(August 1923), 2.
- <sup>42</sup> Klaube, 44. Only 48% of the horses were on farms in 1924 compared to 1920.
- <sup>43</sup> P.B. Epp, "Slawgorod, den 16. April, 1926," *DPL* 5, no. 12 (May 1926), 8
- <sup>44</sup> P. Epp, "Slawgorod," *DPL*, 4-5 (October 1925), 12-13.
- <sup>45</sup> Anger, 19.
- <sup>46</sup> Hughes, 14.
- <sup>47</sup> "Protokoll der Jahressitzung der Vertreter der Slawgoroder Abteilung des A.M.L.V abgehalten am 12. February 1925 in Slawgorod," MHC, Fond 423, file 165.
- <sup>48</sup> A detailed discussion of the political activities of the German section in relation to the Slawgorod Branch of the AMLV is in Detlef Brandes and Andrej Savin, *Die Sibiendeutsche in Sowjetstaat, 1918-1939* (Essen: Klartext, 2001), 124-141.
- <sup>49</sup> P.F. Froese to "Die Verwaltung des Slawgoroder Abteilung des AMLV, 22 April 1925" and P.J. Wiens to "Die Verwaltung des A.M.L.V Moskau," Slawgorod, 19 August 1925, MHC, Fond 423, file 165.
- <sup>50</sup> "Allrussischer Mennonitischer Land Verein," GAMEO.
- <sup>51</sup> C.F. Klassen, "Drei Vertreter-Versammlungen des A.M.L.V," *DPL* 12 (December 1926), 2.
- <sup>52</sup> P.B. Epp and J. Driedger to the "Zentralverwaltung in Moskau," 2 January 1925; P.F. Froese and F.K. Thiessen to "Slawgoroder Abteilung des A.M.L.V," MHC, Fond 423, file 165.
- <sup>53</sup> "Zirkular" 11 August 25, MHC, Fond 423, file 165.
- <sup>54</sup> Klassen, *Ambassador to His*, 68.
- <sup>55</sup> Klaube, 45.
- <sup>56</sup> A compilation of accounts by some of the 1929 refugees that made it to Canada was published as H.J. Wilms, George G. Thielman, trans., *At the Gates of Moscow: Or God's Gracious Aid Through a Most Difficult and Trying Period* (Yarrow, BC: Committee of the Mennonite Refugees from the Soviet Union, 1964).