

Jacob A. Neufeld, *Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule*, ed. Harvey L. Dyck, trans. Harvey L. Dyck and Sara Dyck. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. Pp. x + 444. Softcover, \$37.95.

This collection of Jacob A. Neufeld's writings offers sensitive insight to a difficult and troubled era in Mennonite life beginning with World War I. While the stories of life after the Russian Revolution are not uncommon, Neufeld experienced the Gulag, collectivization, Nazi occupation, the refugee flight, and the transition to a new life in Canada and is a perceptive observer of not only his personal experience but also the broader implications of events that swirled around him. Harvey L. Dyck and Sara Dyck, as editor and translators have rendered a highly readable text that preserves and conveys a sense of the author's intellectual vigour.

The book is organized into three parts. The first is a unpublished memoir of Neufeld's time in the gulag; the second a translation of the previously published *Tiefenwege*, and the third an autobiographical but personal letter written to Neufeld's wife on the occasion of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

Other than the dramatic story of his personal experiences, *Path of Thorns* engages for the reader some of the difficult questions of whether Mennonites were singled out by the Bolsheviks, what their views were of being 'German' and 'Mennonite', and how that related to Nazi ideology, or their Jewish and Ukrainian neighbours.

Harvey L. Dyck's introductory essay argues that the Soviet Mennonites were a special case and that Communist functionaries believed that "Mennonites had become by far one of the toughest groups to integrate into the Soviet order." (26) His essay portrays a generally heroic portrait of Mennonite tenacity in holding on to its religious and ethnocultural heritage in the face of the special efforts expended by the regime to destroy them. While that portrayal certainly rings true, the lasting impressions of Neufeld's writings convey a sense of shared suffering and a sense of loss of Mennonite values that the deprivations of the period after 1929 brought. The recurring trauma of arrest, confiscation, and then war and flight served to break down the Mennonite solidarity that Neufeld cherished. He briefly and sorrowfully mentions the organization of the Mounted Squadron, a largely untold story of a recurrence of the infamous *Selbstschutz* of the Civil War period in Russia (230). Neufeld was also painfully aware of a "spirit of the long-standing Soviets' influence on us" that arose during the trek that resulted in "indifference to the fate of others" (284-5).

More disconcerting, perhaps is the overwhelming sense in Neufeld's writings of how Mennonites identified with and shared the fate of the German people. Although Neufeld's writings are certainly not uncritical of general German complicity in the atrocities committed by its armies and Nazi organizations, the longing for and desperate hope for German victory, and the sense of indignation that the German people, "an elevated culture" now defeated and humiliated.

Path of Thorns is a welcome English language addition to the Mennonite story and a poignant reminder of the brutality that humans are capable of, while also capturing some of the best of Mennonite faith and human kindness.

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