

Peter Letkemann, *A Book of Remembrance: Mennonites in Arkadak and Zentral, 1908–1941*.  
Winnipeg: Old Oak Publishing, 2016. Pp.462.  
Softcover, \$30.00.

Histories written about Mennonites in Imperial Russia/Soviet Union have focused disproportionately on the story of Ukraine, thereby neglecting the many Mennonite settlements across the empire. Peter Letkemann offers a welcomed reconsideration of Mennonite experience in imperial Russia and the Soviet Union by illuminating the lives of Mennonites in the settlements of Arkadak (province of Saratov) and Zentral (province of Voronezh). By digging into the histories of these long-neglected settlements, Letkemann revives the voices of their inhabitants, providing readers with a dramatic portrayal of the human costs during this first half of the tumultuous twentieth century.

Organized chronologically, this book follows the story of Mennonites from the establishment of these settlements in the early

twentieth century to the destruction of those communities during the Second World War. In part one, Letkemann shows how instability in the empire provided Mennonites with opportunities to purchase land for their landless, but also hinted at the unrest that was on the horizon. He addresses the early controversies in the Arkadak settlement, as Mennonites attempted to untangle who had the right to settle on land purchased by the Khortitsa colony. The legal mess of this situation was soon overshadowed by the First World War, and then the Russian Revolution, as Mennonites navigated social, economic, and political change. The experiences of Mennonites during the early years of Bolshevik power outside of the vortex of Ukraine are especially intriguing. Letkemann describes how Mennonites attempted to use changes in the legal structure to their advantage (briefly creating a Mennonite Judicial Court), as well as tensions over the growth of the black market.

Part two explores Mennonite life under the New Economic Policy established by the Soviet regime. During this period, Mennonites adapted to the redistribution of land and the establishment of local Soviet institutions. Letkemann shows that in the early years of the regime, Mennonites in Arkadak and Zentral still had some control over their local lives as non-Communist Mennonites could still serve on the village council. Institutions such as the local branches of AMLV (All Mennonite Agricultural Union), also offered Mennonites a way to strengthen cooperative initiatives in agriculture. In the case of Zentral, a thriving dairy operation was the result, which convinced many families not to leave during the 1920s exodus to Canada. In contrast, over a third of Arkadak joined the migration.

In part three, Letkemann addresses the topics of collectivization, terror, deportation, and forced labour during the 1930s and 1940s. This section, which forms close to half of the book, leads the reader through a detailed portrait into the Sovietization of these Mennonite settlements. As Letkemann presents his findings, the specificity of each location is illuminated. Although collectivization and dekulakization in villages across the Soviet Union shared many features, Letkemann shows that the way these processes unfolded often depended on local dynamics. Letkemann's ability to tease out the details of these differences is possible because of his wealth of personal sources, including correspondence and interviews with people from these places. These types of sources also enhance Letkemann's treatment of the Great Terror, offering specifics on how arrests unfolded. While both settlements experienced arrests, executions, and exile, Arkadak suffered more than Zentral during this period, raising questions about the factors influencing these

differences. Ultimately, both settlements ended in the fall of 1941 as the remaining Mennonite population was deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan.

A strength of Letkemann's book is its voluminous source base. Archival documents from collections in the United States, Canada, Russia, Ukraine, and Germany, along with a host of published sources provide a solid foundation for uncovering the experiences of these settlements. The addition of interviews with former inhabitants of the settlements add a much-appreciated humanizing element to official state sources. They also offer a glimpse into how people still found joy in their lives, through interaction with the land and with each other, despite the challenges that shaped their daily existence. These stories are enhanced by a collection of photographs that provide a visual journey through the establishment and demise of the settlements of Arkadak and Zentral.

Aileen Friesen  
University of Winnipeg