
Russian Patriotism Among the Nineteenth-Century Russian Mennonites

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Mennonites have not been known as a people with strong attachment to any country. Until very recently, they have considered themselves as "pilgrims," wanderers whose attachment to a "Heimat" (homeland) was never strong enough to prevent them from moving on to another country whenever there was a real or perceived threat to their identity. This is especially characteristic of the Prussian-Russian Mennonite group which has been on the move again and again for more than four centuries. It would seem that whenever they began to feel comfortable in a country, external forces put them on the road again. Even in the twentieth century small groups of the Prussian-Russian Mennonites are still on the move. Canadian Mennonites who are descendents of this group have settled in Mexico, Bolivia, Paraguay, Honduras, and in other South- and Central American countries, and in the 1970's more than 10,000 Mennonites have resettled from the Soviet Union to West Germany.

Such frequent mass migrations do not create a fertile soil for patriotism, and from the point of view of many Mennonites, patriotism is not desirable, because disciples of Christ should not be too attached to any earthly "Heimat." Therefore, it is quite surprising to find in nineteenth-century Russian-Mennonite literature strong elements of Russian patriotism. This is even more puzzling when we consider the fact that in 1874 some 18,000 Mennonites from that Russian-Mennonite community emigrated to the United States and Canada. How do we explain the phenomenon of Russian patriotism in this context? Were writers like Heinrich Heese (1786-1868) and Bernhard Harder (1832-1884), whose writings we will consider in this context, eccentrics in their community? Heese was a teacher whose gift for writing is apparent, but very few of his poems have survived. Fortunately, two manuscripts survived and have been made available to us by Miss Alice Schmidt, Vineland: his auto-

biography, "Die Biographie und Erlebnisse von Heinrich Heese" (1867), and an apocalyptic essay, "Ein Blick in die naechste Zukunft" (1849). Of Bernhard Harder's poems more than 1000 were published in a volume — *Geistliche Lieder und Gelegenheits-Gedichte* (Hamburg, 1888) — thanks to the effort of Harder's friend, Heinrich Franz. Franz was not trained as a literary critic and so he published everything Harder had written. Today we are grateful to him for allowing us to gain some insight into the Mennonite thinking of Harder's time.

Heinrich Heese was born in Pomehrendorf, Prussia, in 1786. His Lutheran family had contacts with the Mennonites, as is obvious from Heese's correspondence. The young Heese was quite impressed by the Mennonites of his neighbourhood and as a result, when Napoleon's recruiters were after him (and almost caught him twice), he decided to find refuge with the Mennonites in Russia. After a most adventurous journey he arrived in Ekaterinoslav in the fall of 1808, making contact with the Mennonites in that city. From the account of his journey it is quite clear that he was determined from the outset to reach Ekaterinoslav and finally Khortitsa. At Pentecost of 1809 Heese was baptized into the Mennonite Church in Khortitsa and in the same year found employment as a "Hauslehrer" (private tutor) with a Russian noble family and began to learn Russian. In February 1810 he married Katherina Penner, who had just arrived from Prussia. He also continued his Russian studies while tutoring.

In 1812 he was hired as "Gebietsschreiber," a kind of executive secretary who in fact administered the colony, although subordinate to the "Oberschulze" and the "Aeltester," who were powerful in their own right. Heese set out to reform the administration of the Old Colony, an impossible task under the circumstances and he had to resign. Heese then became chief administrator of the large estate of Countess Sievers. He was a very successful estate administrator, but when the Colony asked him to come back, his "Pflichtgefuehl" triumphed and he went to Khortitsa for another try. In 1829 Johann Cornies called him to Ohrloff to replace Thobias Voth as teacher of the "Vereinsschule." Here he taught with much success until 1842, when Khortitsa called him to start a school for teacher training, the so-called "Centralschule," a centre from which the rays of enlightenment would spread all over the Mennonite colonies. However, five years later in 1847 Cornies, who supervised all Mennonite schools, fired him because Heese was too independent. He then opened a private school in Einlage for well-to-do Mennonites and Russian noble youth, and in spite of all opposition and difficulties he operated this school until he died in 1868.

Bernhard Harder was of the next generation but he knew Heese quite well. He was born in Halbstadt, Molochna, in 1832, into a large family. Losing his father at the age of 12, he studied at the "Vereins-

schule" in Ohrloff as "Gemeindezoegling" (at the expense of the church). At twenty he was a teacher, and at twenty-nine (1861) he was elected to the ministry in the Ohrloff-Halbstaedter Church. An admirer of the "new-life" converts of Eduard Wuest, he even developed a style of preaching reminiscent of the German pietist preachers, but he would not join the newly formed Mennonite Brethren Church. This puzzled both Brethren and Kirchliche, because Harder attacked the weaknesses of the Kirchliche much more effectively than anybody from the outside could have done. However, he also criticized the excesses of the "new-life" followers. In any case, it is a most amazing and often forgotten fact, that the most effective preacher and evangelist of the Mennonites was the "kirchliche" Bernhard Harder. He was admired by many — secretly by the majority — and attacked by the extremists of both sides. His early death may well be attributed to his almost unreasonable taxing of his health. He died three days after he returned from one of his many evangelistic journeys, this last one to Sagradowka, in October 1884. The church was his life, but Harder also became the first Mennonite writer to be recognized by his co-religionists. Until very recently he was the only Mennonite writer whose songs were adopted by other Protestant churches in Europe.

We can now consider the writings of two such very different characters, the Prussian Lutheran turned Mennonite, Heinrich Heese, and the Russian-Mennonite village boy, Bernhard Harder, whose philosophy of life was influenced by the German pietist movement. Heese was a man of unquestioned integrity, unbending willpower and discipline, and therefore not always easy to get along with. On the other hand, the soft-mannered Harder, whose weakness was probably that he could not assert his authority in the classroom nor in the church, but who provided the Mennonite community with that rare combination of strong evangelical preaching, with sound theology and unbiased love for the *undivided* church. P. M. Friesen says that he was the greatest Mennonite preacher, and, as to his intellectual stature, that Harder must be seen right next to our first intellectual giant Johann Cornies.¹

Let us now turn to what one might call the "patriotic writings" of these two Russian Mennonites. P. M. Friesen, himself a Russian patriot, finds Heese's expression of patriotism too unrestrained: "Just as boundless and red-hot as his religious feelings and verdicts, was Heese's patriotism, which, in its genuine civil loyalty, its love for the fatherland and its gratitude inspires us. The exaggerations and extremely pathos-laden forms of expression appear to us, however, as the "excesses."² In other words, Friesen admires his loyalty, but rejects his exaggerated profession of patriotism. Then Friesen quotes from a letter to Peter Isaak in Schoenau, Molochna, written by Heese in November, 1855:

"In the enclosed poems you will discern my views about the Crimean

War. Herein I have faithfully followed the suggestions of the Spirit, according to which our pious Prince (the Russian Tsar) will, for the Glory of God, have the final victory. Our enemies are despisers of Christ; they are slaves of the dragon. Our Prince is serving the Lord, his warriors are believers, God will intervene, and the prayers of the pious will finally have the victory . . . In what ways . . . is Russia less advanced than those countries which boast of their civilization? With all its great liberties, the people in England are oppressed worse than cattle by the high aristocracy; the common people are neglected in education, and justice is involved in shameless intrigues. In France everyone is welded to the chains of the dragon, and religion is an object of mockery."³

Heese is rather well-informed on European developments and thinking, but we are puzzled when he continues in the letter: "Now in Russia, on the contrary, the general welfare is growing constantly! How wise, and how righteous is its law! How it honors religion! How tolerant it is toward all denominations!"⁴ Since Catherine's *Instructions* (1768), Russian law makers had indeed made great progress, but the law is not always the reality of a society, and Heese gives too much credit to government intentions before they had been put into practice by Russian society.

However, the point is that the basic tone and message of Heese's poems express an absolute faith in the goodness of the Russian rulers, who are called to oppose the forces of evil in this world. This is evident in his "Weihnachtslied" (Christmas Song):

2. Satan sendet seine Heere,
Zu verderben unser Land;
8. Jetzt treibt Beelzebub mit Hitze
Auf das blut'ge Schlachtenfeld,
Und an seiner Moerderspitze
Steht ein echt verschlagner Held,
Wieder ein Napoleon
Kaempft fuer ihn mit Babylon.
11. Nur ein Fuerst [Kaiser Nikolai I] steht
unerschuettert,
Glaubensfest an heil'ger Staett [Russl.].
Auf ihn sind mit Macht erbittert
Beelzebub und Mohamed . . .⁵

(Satan is sending his armies to destroy Russia, and again a Napoleon is leading them . . . But one prince, Tsar Nicholas I, strong in faith stands to defend sacred Russia. [All translations and paraphrases by G. K. Epp.]

On New Year's Eve, 1855-56, he writes another poem, characterized by the same mixture of historic understanding and blind patriotic fervor. It is entitled "Neujahrslied" (New Year's Song):

Zu brechen Russlands Groesse,
 Zu sichern eig'ne Bloesse.
 4. Der hohe Rat von Albion
 Erhob an seine Spitze
 Den Demokraten Palmerston,
 Voll Trug und Aberwitz;
 Bot seine Hand
 Zum festen Band
 Dem tatendurst'gen Sohne
 Auf Frankreichs blutgem Throne . . .
 8. Auch ruettelt man den Muh'meds Sohn
 Durch Prahlen und durch Laermen . . .
 Zu Taten zu erwaermen . . .
 9. Doch Russlands Zar in Glaubenstreu
 Hat vor des Drachen Wogen
 Ganz ohne Furcht und ohne Scheu
 Sein tapfres Schwert gezogen . . .⁶

(The High Council of Albion [England] has chosen as leader the Democrat Palmerstone and together with the ambitious son [Napoleon III] on the bloody throne of France, they are trying to bring life into Mohamed's son . . . But Russia's Tsar in faith has drawn his sword . . .)

Significant also is the deep conviction expressed by Heese that this war will be won by Russia. In a letter to his son he writes: "I am expecting a happy end of this war for Russia, because I trust in God and in the justice of our monarch, but it will not be without terrible bloodshed and dangers. France and England will get tired if Austria stays out of it. I pray to God unceasingly for support of our army in battle." Then he continues with some caustic remarks about some German residents in Ekaterinoslav whose loyalty to the cause of Russia he seems to question: "I would like to know how your clever democrats in the city respond to my poetry. Naturally they will find it distasteful. Johann could give these poems to his tenant at a suitable time. He is a German, but most likely a democrat."⁷ The poem was probably written to sting those German "democrats," and the author probably succeeded. However, it would be interesting to know how his Mennonite contemporaries felt about such fervent patriotism, which sounds very much like Russian Slavophil Nationalism:

Ja, Russlands Soehne sind wir! Kraftdurchdrungen
 Entspröss dem Ruhm der Sklaven alt Geschlecht.
 Die Herzen haelt das Vaterland umschlungen,
 Des Kaisers Wort ist uns Gesetz und Recht.
 Ruft uns der Zar, wenn Kriegssturm wettet, Wir stehen
 auf! Und sieh: zerschmettert
 Liegt dort der Stolz, den Russlands Feind gear.
 Mit uns ist Gott im Himmel immerdar!
 Verlangt ihr mit Titanen euch zu messen,

Ihr, Christi Feinde! Hier ertoent es laut:
 Herr, unser Hort, du hast uns nie vergessen,
 Ein Herz ist Russland, das dir fest vertraut!
 Wenn wir uns ruesten fuer den Glauben,
 Wer kann den hohen Mut uns rauben?
 Gott steht auf, des Zaren Wort gebeut,
 Und seines Landes Feinde sind zerstreut.⁸

One might paraphrase Heese's sentiments as follows: "Yes, we are sons of Russia! Full of energy/ The old stock of the Slavs was born of glory . . . / You foes of Christ! Listen to this:/ Lord our defender, your help we always knew/ One heart is Russia, trusting only you!" The author identifies himself fully with the Russians.

In March 1856, the Crimean War was over and Russia had a new ruler. The war was lost, although from a Mennonite point of view the result was tolerable — the Turks did not regain the Crimean Peninsula. But Heese had to come to terms with the new situation and he finds consolation in his faith that God makes no mistakes. In a letter written just after the end of the war, on March 28, 1856, he writes: "To them that love God, all things work together for good. Russia is blessed by the Lord with a wise, pious royal family. God is its mighty fortress against all the wiles and power of the enemy of Christ . . . God's hand of blessing was with all Tsars for the salvation of their loyal subjects . . ."⁹ Russia may have lost the war, but God is on its side and those who challenge Russia are "enemies of Christ."

P. M. Friesen says that Heese's interpretation of the Crimean War and his attitude toward that international conflict were shared by the whole Mennonite community.¹⁰ This may well be true and therefore an analysis of this phenomenon in its historical context will be necessary.

But let us first turn to Harder's patriotic rhyming. We have already said that Harder was a churchman, an evangelist, a very honest man and the most gentle soul to be found. He had been to Petersburg, but in the country he never travelled beyond the limits of Mennonite colonies and was not interested in international politics. He was, after all, the author of one of the most popular evangelical songs:

Die Zeit ist kurz, o Mensch sei weise
 Und wuchre mit dem Augenblick.
 Nur einmal machst du diese Reise,
 Lass eine gute Spur zurueck . . .¹¹

But Harder also wrote more than a thousand "Gelegenheitsgedichte" (occasional poems), and among these we find a good number of poems for "Krons-feiertage" (Celebrations of the Crown) and poems celebrating all kinds of state events. He celebrates Russian rulers and the Russian fatherland:

Der Herr macht alles, wohl,
 Wir duerfen's stets verspueren:
 Den Kaiser segnet Er,
 Er segnet sein Regieren,
 Auch lass die Kaiserin,
 Die edelste der Frauen,
 Die Du so hoch begabt,
 Viel Heil und Gnade schauen!
 Dem Throneserben auch —
 Dem ganzen Kaiserhaus
 Und aller Obrigkeit
 Theil' Segensgaben aus!¹²

(The Lord blesses the Emperor and his government . . . Lord, let the Empress, the noblest of all women, see your grace. Grant your blessings also to the Crown Prince and to all government . . .) And on the occasion of the death of the Empress his compassion goes out to the Emperor Alexander II and he identifies with the Russian people:

Unsre Landesmutter schied
 Aus der Kinder weitem Kreise;
 Traure, Russlands Kinderschaar [sic],
 Gott, der Troester und Berather,
 Wolle treu zur Seite stehn
 Unserm theuren Landesvater!¹³

(Our nation's mother passed away. She is no longer among her children. May God comfort our nation's father, the Emperor.) The Mennonites too are in that "Kinderschaar" [sic] (children of the Tsar), mourning the death of their "Landesmutter" (national mother). Very emotionally he responds to the assassination attempts on Alexander II:

Gott, Dir sei Dank gegeben,
 Dass Du des Kaisers Leben
 Gerettet in Gefahr!
 Schon viermal ist's geschehen,
 Dass wir's mit Augen sehen:
 Er steht in Deiner Hut.
 Giess Deinen Gnadenregen
 Zu lauter Heil und Segen
 Auf unsern Kaiser aus! . . .¹⁴

(God we praise You for saving our ruler's life. Four times we have seen with our eyes that You protected him.) The key to this admiration of good rulers, as they were perceived by the Mennonites, which appear strange to us, may be in the following stanza:

Erhalt' mit maecht'ger Hand
 Ihm die verlieh'ne Krone,
 Damit er ungekraenkt
 Dir dien' auf festem Throne,
 Dir diene als Dein Knecht,
 Der Scepter, Kron' und Land
 Als anvertrautes Gut
 Emfing aus Deiner Hand.¹⁵

(Protect the Emperor with Your mighty arm so that he can serve You as a servant who received his crown from You.) The ruler is a servant of God who receives his crown from God, not from a democratic assembly. Like Heese, Harder has only scorn for the "democrats" who are attempting to upset a God-ordained order. But then comes the shock. On March 13, 1881, a few hours after he had signed Loris-Melikov's proposals for continuing liberalization of Russia which ultimately was to lead to a constitutional monarchy, Alexander II was assassinated in St. Petersburg. Harder responded with an emotionally charged poem:

"Warum", so toenen weit und breit die Klagen,
 "Hat man den Besten, Edelsten erschlagen?
 Warum gab Gott dem finstern Hoellenbunde
 Jetzt Macht und Stunde?"¹⁶

(Why was the noblest and best man killed? Why did God let the dark powers of hell prevail?). Harder expresses the genuine feeling of the majority of Russians.

The last poem chosen for our purpose was written during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877, and dedicated to General von Tottleben, a very good friend of the Mennonites.

"Plewna's Feste ist gefallen,
 Ob sie auch wie Felsen stand!"
 Diesen Ruf hoert man erschallen
 Freudig durch das ganze Land;
 Wir sehn unsern Kaiser als Held; — in dem Kreise
 Der Treuen, der Helden, dem Hoechsten zum Preise
 Beugt er nun mit ihnen anbetend die Knie; —
 Schaut's, Voelker der Erde, und betet, wie sie!
 Auch wir armen Mennoniten
 Ziehn im Geiste mit hinaus
 Dorthin, wo die Stuerme wuethen
 Und verbreiten Furcht und Graus.
 Wir sehen und fuehlen die Schrecken und Noethen
 Mit Zittern und Beben, das furchtbare Toedten;

Wir ringen die Haende, wir beten und flehn:

“Herr, lass doch den Unsern kein Unglueck geschehn!”¹⁷

This is probably the most amazing patriotic poem in Mennonite literature, especially since it is coming from the Russian-Mennonites' greatest preacher, evangelist and writer of serious religious poetry. Where do we look for an explanation for this unusual Mennonite-Russian patriotism? And especially the last stanza demands some soul-searching: “We poor Mennonites too/ In spirit go out to the fields/ Where the fury of the storm is felt/ Spreading fear and horror./ We see and feel the horror and suffering/ And we tremble and shake, seeing the terrible killing/ We wring our hands, we pray and plead:/ “Lord, let no misfortune fall on those who are ours!” Again, as in Heese's poetry, we are puzzled by a total identification with Russia and its cause. Mennonites share the fear of the Russians, and Harder says they pray for protection for those who are “ours,” that is, for the Russian soldiers — the enemies are not included in this prayer. Harder certainly creates problems for twentieth century pacifists and we will have to come back to this problem.

Heese's poetry was not as widely read or as influential as Harder's, although it did not lack the religious element which Mennonites would have appreciated; but the Prussian flavour was probably too strong for many of the simple Mennonite people. However, Heese's greatest obstacle was the limited distribution of his poems. Most of them are lost, and were in any case known only to a few people with whom he corresponded. Harder had a great advantage over Heese in this respect. As surprising as it may seem, all of Harder's patriotic poems were introduced to the Mennonite community on Sunday morning as prayers. They were sung by the congregations as prayers, “nach der Melodie,” after known melodies such as: “Nun danket alle Gott,” “Nun ruhen alle Waelder,” “Ich singe dir mit Herz und Mund,” etc. It was thanks to this fact that they were preserved while Heese's letters were not.

It has been said that Mennonite writers were eventually influenced by the Russification policy of the Russian government, but this would hardly apply to Heese and Harder. Heese died before that policy became effective, and Harder, in spite of his patriotic songs, was in reality apolitical. The patriotic poetry of these men was the product of their understanding of God's order in this world. Harder and Heese were very religious men, and the Bible was the absolute and final authority of both of them. Therefore we should not be surprised that they accepted the commonly held convictions of that age: 1. The government is God's servant for the good of the people (Romans 13:4). 2. Christians must pray for all governments, and that for their own good (1 Tim. 2:2). 3. The church and its members must be obedient to the government and be ready to do any honest work, and never speak evil of anyone (Titus 3:1-2). 4. The rulers have the obligation to use the sword to protect the innocent

(Romans 13:3–4). Mennonites would refuse to bear arms, but they accepted Caesar's privilege to demand what rightfully belonged to him, and that included their support in wartime.

Harder and Heese would not have seen any contradiction in their actions and neither would the Mennonite community. Nobody challenged the patriotic writings of these two best-known writers of their time. Heese took part in the political debate of his time, but Harder was basically apolitical and concentrated on changing people, on reforming the church from within with powerful messages and the call to repentance. However, he did appreciate the good reforms of Tsar Alexander II, who made the Russian system of justice the most liberal in Europe, and who also liberated the serfs. From Harder's point of view these honest efforts of a ruler deserved prayerful support of the church.

Then there were international events which had a profound impact on Mennonite thinking. The settlement of the Mennonites in southern Russia coincided with disturbing events in Europe: The French Revolution (1789–99); Louis XVI, an anointed king executed (1793); The bloody reign of terror in France (1793–94); Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power, and the two ensuing decades of devastating wars (1796–1815). These upheavals were followed by two revolutionary storms which swept across Europe in the 1830's and again in 1848–49.

Throughout these unsettling European upheavals, Russia appeared to the Mennonites as a solid rock, and that fact influenced Mennonite immigration from 1804 on considerably. In 1789, with a few exceptions, the poor and destitute simply sought land in the far East, but in 1804 well-to-do farmers were eager to move as far away from Napoleon as possible. Heinrich Heese escaped Napoleon's recruiters early in 1808, and just prior to that the Mennonites of Prussia, with other Prussians, had witnessed a most spectacular political demonstration. Napoleon, after defeating the Russo-Prussian Alliance, humiliated Prussia in 1806, but in 1807 he had to come to terms with Alexander I of Russia temporarily. And so the "Yalta" of the nineteenth century was staged by Napoleon. The two great rulers, Napoleon and Alexander, met on a raft, in the middle of the River Niemen, to divide Europe into spheres of influence, East and West, in the Treaty of Tilsit. Alexander I had little choice at that meeting, but as a gentleman he resisted the total dismemberment of Prussia, which had been his ally. This Russian gesture the Prussians would not forget down to 1914. In 1807 it was a signal to Prussian nobles who did not want to serve Napoleon to escape to Russia, offering their services to Alexander I. Among outstanding Prussian leaders entering Russian service at that time were men like the statesman Baron von Stein and General York. It must be remembered that not only Prussia but all of Western Europe looked to Russia as the last hope against Napoleon.

However, many Europeans, and especially the British statesman Castlereagh and the King of England, looked with suspicion at the pietistic leanings of Alexander I. The Mennonites, on the other hand, were attracted by this ruler's genuine pietism, seeing in Alexander I a ruler who had to be in God's favour. This fact should not be ignored when we are dealing with Heese's patriotic writings and Mennonite Russian patriotism in general. Mennonites felt that they had escaped the "anti-Christ" Napoleon, and that they had found a Russian government which was interested in them — a government run by a pious ruling dynasty. Catherine II had received their delegates and offered them generous terms, General von Tottleben appreciated them as model farmers, and Russian princes visited them frequently. Alexander I visited the Molochna colony in 1818 and again in 1825, addressing the villagers in flawless German, staying overnight in one of their homes, and eating their "Tweeback." In 1804, Alexander I had honoured a revered Mennonite churchman, Cornelius Warkentin, by awarding him with a medal for his services to the Khortitsa Mennonite colonists. Mennonites were used to being exploited and oppressed by rulers, and here in Russia they were being admired and supported in their efforts to turn their colonies into breadbaskets, because the government hoped that their example would have an impact on Russian agriculture in general.

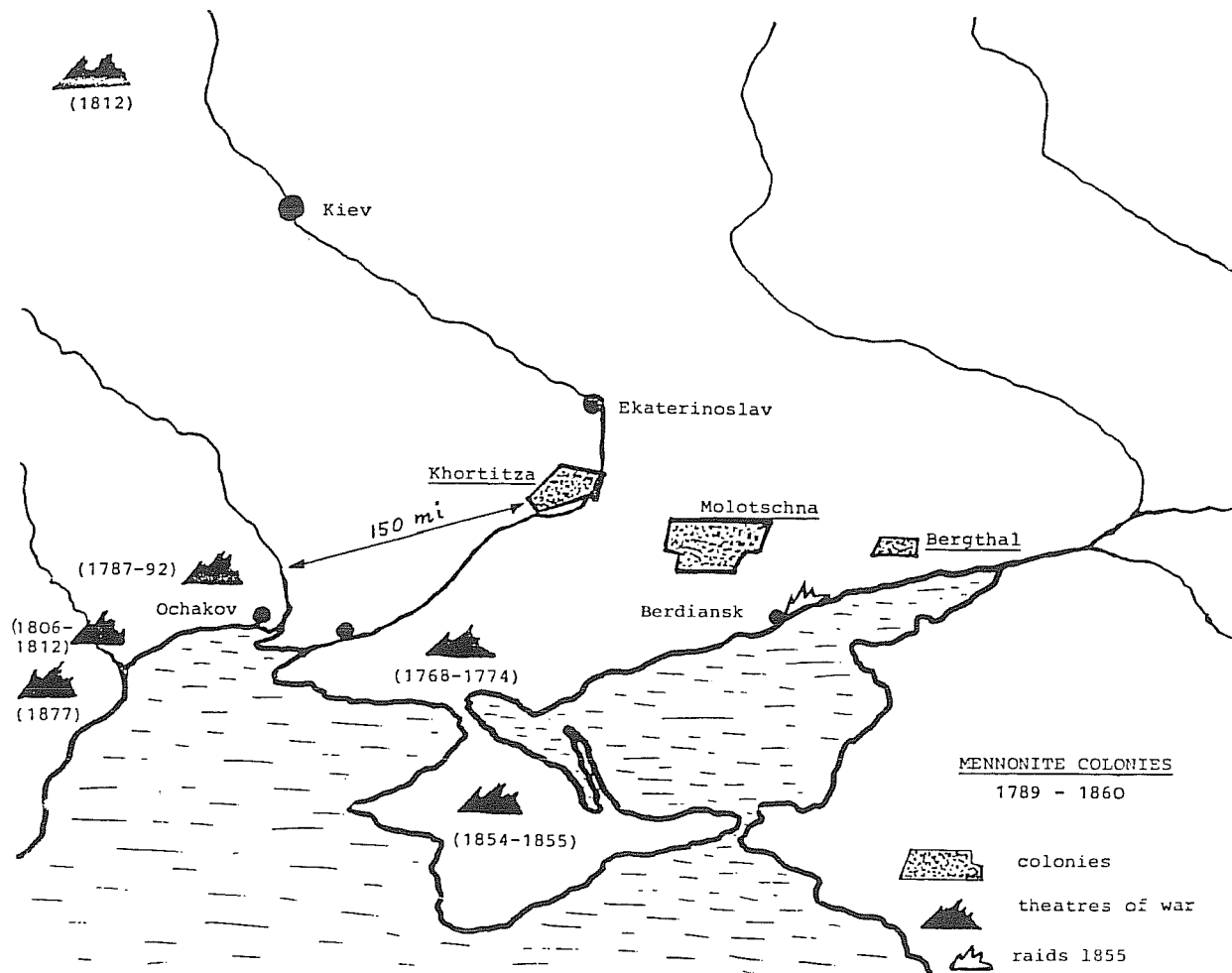
The above mentioned facts certainly influenced the attitudes of Mennonite farmers, but they do not yet explain fully the strong Mennonite Russian patriotism, with its almost embarrassing enthusiasm for Russian military victories. To understand this phenomenon one must see that Russian Mennonite community in the context of international developments of the time, and also appreciate the impact of its geographic location on community attitudes.

Between 1801 and 1815 Russia fought wars with Napoleon, with Persia, and with Sweden, but none of these affected the Mennonite colonies in Russia. However, there were also wars with the Ottoman Empire (Turkey), and these wars were geographically too close to the Mennonite colonies to go unnoticed by the Mennonites. When the Mennonite settlers came to Russia, they were ignorant of the fact that they were given land which only 15 years before their arrival had been the domain of the famous Sich of the Dniepr Cossacks. Only after the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774 were these Cossacks resettled on the Kuban and Terek, regions of the Caucasus. The Mennonites were probably also unaware of the fact that they were settled on one of the hottest battlegrounds of Europe — on a traditional crossroad of armies: Goth, Scythians, Sarmatians, Khazars, Vikings, Mongols, Russians and Turks. And above all, they did not know that their chosen "Heimat" was not as safe as they thought. They had escaped Napoleon in search of peace, but the Russian government was using them and other settlers to bring

stability to its most vulnerable borderlands on the Black Sea, an area which to that point had not known stability for centuries. When the Mennonites arrived in 1789, they were upset and felt betrayed by Potemkin, who would not let them settle in the area they had chosen near the Black Sea. However, they may have attributed to Potemkin the wrong motives. While Bartsch and Hoepfner were negotiating in St. Petersburg, the war between Turkey and Russia (1787-1792) was just starting. Potemkin had hoped to push the Turks far enough back to make the promised land safe for settlers, but when the Mennonites arrived the war was far from over. At that point Russian and Turkish cavalry fought only 50 to 80 miles from the land promised to the Mennonites. The Turkish cavalry could have reached the area in a day's ride, and even the new location of the Khortitsa colony was only 200 to 250 miles from the theatre of war (see map).

When the Russo-Prussian Alliance was defeated by Napoleon in 1806, the Turks, encouraged by Napoleon, declared war again and that war raged from 1806-1812. Finally the parties had to stop fighting because they were exhausted. The Turks were actually defeated, but there was still Napoleon, and the Russians now had to concentrate on the threat he posed. However, by the peace treaty with the Turks, Russia now got the city of Ochakov, just west of the area originally promised to the Mennonites. Temporarily, the Mennonite colonies on the Dniepr were safe, but the Turks waited for another chance. In 1851, Napoleon III made himself emperor of France and looked for a battlefield to prove that he was the equal of his great ancestor. He encouraged the Turks to regain lost territory, and England, France, and Piedmont (future Italy) joined them, to keep Russia in line (1854-1856). This time it could not escape the Mennonites what was at stake for Russia, but also for the Mennonite settlements. If the Turks regained control of the Crimean Peninsula, that would certainly lead to a destabilization of the Black Sea region. And what if the Turks should push their claims further north, as they had done in the past and again during the Crimean War? Heese and Harder never state these concerns bluntly, but Heese says in a letter to his son, young Heinrich Heese, that Russia will win the war, but not without facing "great dangers,"¹⁸ and Harder expresses that feeling in one of his poems, "we see and feel the horror and suffering, and we tremble."¹⁹ Certainly both men were thinking of the killing that went on, but in the back of their mind there was the concern for the safety of their community. Indeed, that concern probably made them more aware of the suffering of Russian soldiers. These soldiers were dying for their safety as well as for Russia.

The Russian army moved through the Mennonite villages of the Molochna and of Khortitsa, requisitioning horses and means of transportation, even enlisting men for the job. Russian officers and soldiers had high praises for the Mennonites, who stood by the Russian soldier during



these hard times. A noted Crimean War hero, Alabin, said: "We experienced love and friendly cooperation everywhere. And what did the Mennonites from the Molochna colony do? They took full responsibility for the care of 5000 wounded and sick . . . Their wives and daughters took on the sacred duty of sisters of mercy . . . they tore up their own laundry for cotton batting and bandages."²⁰ Mennonites and other German colonists supplied the Russian army with the best transportation units, its closest and best hospitals, and with considerable food supplies. Their contribution in the Crimean War was far more significant than is usually thought. The Russian government recognized fully the great help these colonists had offered when the Russians were caught off guard in the Crimea.

The war was lost by Russia, but it had taken a heavy toll on both sides and Russian stubborn resistance prevented the return of the Turks to the region. The Mennonites escaped disaster, but it was very clear to them that their safety had been at stake, and when 20 years later Turks and Russians once more locked in battle the colonists could not be complacent. But Russia defeated the Turks at Plevna, and after that the Turks were no longer a threat to the area.

When we look at these events, Mennonite Russian patriotism may no longer puzzle us. History has demonstrated again and again how even the staunchest pacifists, in times of danger, have acted somewhat inconsistently with their ideal of total non-resistance. The Russian-Mennonite experience created a setting where the whole community was forced to respond. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century had seen the Turks as the whip which God used to punish unrepentant Europe. The Russian Mennonite Anabaptists had concluded from their experience that God used the pious Russian princes for their protection.

From all available evidence we have to conclude that while Heese and Harder may have been eccentrics in their community, during the Crimean War the majority of their co-religionists shared their convictions. Their patriotic feeling was genuine and the fear for the safety of their villages could only enhance that feeling. There was no opposition expressed to this patriotism, and if there was a minority opposing this attitude, its views were not recorded at that time.

Notes

¹Peter M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789-1910)*. (Halbstadt, Taurien, Verlagsgesellschaft "Raduga", 1911), p. 743.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 581.

⁷David H. Epp, *Heinrich Heese* (Steinbach, Manitoba, Echo-Verlag, 1952), p. 38.

- ⁸Ibid.
⁹Peter M. Friesen, p. 580.
¹⁰Ibid., p. 581.
¹¹*Gesangbuch der Mennoniten* (Newton, Kansas: Verlag Faith and Life, 1968), p. 436.
¹²Bernhard Harder, *Geistliche Lieder und Gelegenheits-Gedichte*, (Hamburg, Verlagsanstalt und Druckerei A. G. [vorm. J. F. Richter], 1888), p. 564.
¹³Ibid., p. 562.
¹⁴Ibid., p. 570-571.
¹⁵Ibid., p. 577.
¹⁶Ibid., p. 583.
¹⁷Ibid., p. 581.
¹⁸David H. Epp, p. 38.
¹⁹Bernhard Harder, p. 580.
²⁰P. M. Friesen, pp. 484-486.

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