

# Mennonite Medics in Russia During World War I

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Recently the *Mennonite Historian* published a special issue dealing with conscientious objectors and military service on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the CO experience in Canada during World War II. It also featured a picture of a group of Russian Mennonite medics during World War I. The caption of the picture calls for some corrections and further explorations.<sup>1</sup>

First, the statement, "Russian Mennonite COs who served as medics in the Russian Army during WWI," is incorrect. The approximately 6,000 Mennonite servicemen involved in this kind of alternate service did so not in the army, but in public or in private agencies and organizations outside the government. Among these were the All-Russian Zemstvo Union, the All Russian Union of Cities, the Red Cross, the United Council of the Nobility, and a few small private agencies, with all of them bearing the costs of maintaining them.

The second assertion which is in need of considerable clarification refers to a number of these medics who had been captured on the front by the enemy and had been imprisoned in Germany for the duration of the war. It then states, "When they



*“This is a group of Russian Mennonite COs who served as medics in the Russian army during WWI. They were captured on the frontline in 1915 and imprisoned in Germany for the duration of the war. When they were released, Moscow authorities accused them of being spies, and it took some time to clear up the matter before they could get home” (Mennonite Historian, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, Sept. 1991, p. 10.). On the back side of this photo are the following words in blue ink: “Kriegsgefangene Sanit ter (Mennoniten aus Russland) in Deutschland 1915. Hier betten sie einen verstorbenen Kameraden zur letzten Ruhe.”*

*(Photo Credit: Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives)*

were released, *Moscow authorities* (emphasis mine) accused them of being spies, and it took some time to clear up the matter before they could get home.” Here the chief query is as to whether the accusation actually came from Moscow or *Petrograd* authorities, a matter of greatest importance, and whether it emanated from military or civilian officials. The best known Mennonite accounts leave no doubt that the accusations came from military authorities in Petrograd, not Moscow. In the latter case they would have had to come from civilian officials. Unfortunately, so far we have no account from a study of the archival materials of the Headquarters of Hospital Trains of the All-Russian Union of Zemstvos (hereafter referred to as VZS, the abbreviation of its Russian title, *Verossiiskii Zemskii Soiuz*).

The foremost Mennonite records stem from the accounts of two of our medics on VZS Hospital Train No. 189. The first comes from David Neufeld, a teacher in civilian life, foreman and chief instructor of the Mennonite medics, and appears to have been written in 1917 and was published by Abraham Kroeker in 1918.<sup>2</sup> The second account was penned by Peter J. Giesbrecht.<sup>3</sup> It is not clear whether Giesbrecht’s story was expressly written for this collection or had been prepared many years earlier. This is significant, for Neufeld and Giesbrecht came from the same Molochnaia village of Gnadenfeld, served on the same train at the time of its

capture and were, at least for some time confined to the same prisoner-of-war camp. However, it is not clear whether both were in the same group of prisoners when in the spring of 1917 these Mennonite medics were exchanged with Germany for similar personnel. The exchange took place in three separate groups, with times of departure from Germany and arrival in Petrograd varying by several weeks.

Generally speaking, there is a strong similarity between these accounts in regard to the dispatch of Hospital Train No. 189 to the front, the loading of wounded personnel at night and under confused conditions, the actual capture of the train's staff, and a few other common observations and experiences by both. But then come distinct differences between the two accounts. Neufeld, for example, points out how brutally the German guards treated the Russian prisoners and stresses the loyalty of the Mennonite medics to Russia. He reports how the trains' doctor, N.A. Sudakova, transmitted information to the Mennonite Duma deputy, Bergmann, for relay to the folk at home, as well as to Armin Lehn, chief of the Mennonite medics at the VZS. Furthermore, Neufeld also mentions the successful flight of two of the captured men from prison camp via Denmark, where with the help of the Russian embassy they had been assisted with their return to Russia. Upon their arrival in Petrograd, they were well received at first, but then arrested on suspicion of espionage for the enemy. Eventually they were released, but only after the overthrow of the Old Regime. Emphasis is placed on the efforts made by the VZS in Moscow on behalf of freeing the Mennonite medics from their plight at the hands of the military in Petrograd, but repeatedly Neufeld denies that the VZS had made any effort to assist the captives to escape from their agonizing plight, and he ascribes the same utter failure in this respect to the Council of the Mennonite Servicemen at the VZS. Giesbrecht also does not mention anything about the Sudakova testimony concerning the loyalty of the Mennonite men.<sup>4</sup>

Neufeld then points out that two of the medics, J. Kroeker from Neukirch and a "K." from Paulsheim (both villages were in the Molochnaia), had managed to escape from a prisoner-of-war camp despite stringent German guards, and made their way to Demark, then enlisted support and assistance from the Russian embassy and succeeded in getting to Petrograd. There, after experiencing a most favorable reception, they were arrested by military authorities after having their loyalty questioned by agents of the Old Regime still in power at the time of their arrival, and then under military guard they were shipped to Moscow rather than being handed over to the VZS, their assigned superiors. Only after the overthrow of the Old Regime had they been freed and granted an extended furlough. Kroeker adds that J. Kroeker again reported back for duty in Moscow and ventured the opinion that "K." most likely had also returned to duty with the VZS.

The account then recites the fate and experiences of the remaining Mennonite medics from Train 189. Sometime in April 1917 they were told that they were to be exchanged with similar German personnel in Russian captivity, this to take place in three groups to be dispatched at different times. Here Kroeker cites information from the notes of another POW medic and it is not always clear whether bits of information come from Neufeldt's recollections or the new source. At any rate, the

medics were overjoyed, each group reportedly was royally treated enroute via Sweden and received with great fanfare at various places including at Petrograd. Here they were taken by automobile to a military hospital and endlessly interrogated by the military as possible German agents who were repatriated to cause trouble in Russia. At last a leading doctor at this institution informed them that nothing had been found against them and that they were free and would be sent to Moscow to be reassigned to the VZS.

Meanwhile the terribly disappointed medics had appealed to the Executive Committee of the Mennonite Mobilized Medics at the VZS and begged for assistance to be freed from this totally unwarranted treatment. Kroeker notes that one such delegate had come to Petrograd from the Moscow Mennonite Servicemen's Committee, but he does not give his name. He states that this man had worked diligently, quietly and with promise of success. However, when this delegate had received word that as a former teacher he was about to be released from service by the provisional government and was at once to return home to prepare himself for resumption of his teaching career in the fall, he immediately dropped all his efforts and hastily returned to Moscow. As pointed out, this teacher's name is not mentioned in this particular source; however, in scattered notes by other medics, the name is given as Aaron Petrovich Toews. A second appeal was made to the same Mennonite Executive Committee in Moscow and another deputy dispatched by it to Petrograd. This man had also worked very hard to effect the medics' release, but without success. At last a decision was made to make an appeal directly to Kerenskii. Since no exact dates are given by Kroeker, it is not clear whether this was to be made to Kerenskii when he was Minister of Justice (beginning sometime in April) or in his capacity as Minister of War and Navy, to which he was appointed in mid-May 1917. However, before this could be undertaken, the medics were sent under military guard to Moscow and instead of being reassigned to the VZS, they were turned over to a commander of a railroad repair detachment, a man of understanding and compassion. He claimed to have known Mennonites as very good people and maintained that these medics were not possibly guilty of being spies for Germany. Furthermore, he had good use for them at a nearby railroad station, Biriulievo, to repair rails. Here they were treated fairly once the neighboring peasant population had gotten to know them.

For some weeks prior to this change the situation had been an extremely precarious one for these men, at Petrograd as well as on arrival in Moscow. Neufeld, and more so Giesbrecht, note that their lives had been in serious jeopardy, and that they were even in danger of being lynched by an artificially aroused mob. According to Giesbrecht, the military officer who took them to Moscow had been given two different sets of papers in Petrograd. One carried instructions to arouse a citizenry mob in Moscow against the medics to such a degree that the men would be torn to pieces. The second set stated that if the violence did not achieve its intended objective, the medics were to be delivered to the VZS.

As noted above, the medics ended up in the hands of an understanding commander performing railroad repair work. But Kroeker's account here leaves

the reader in doubt as to how many medics were involved at this stage and just when, in either late May or early June, these experiences took place. At one place the number of medics is given as 37.<sup>5</sup> We are also told that the medics were visited by the *zweite Deputierte* (second deputy) who had told them that he had secured their release in Petrograd. At this same time the men had also received letters from home to the effect that the Mennonite Executive Committee at the VZS received a telegram stating that the medics had been cleared of all suspicion of being spies. Still, days and weeks passed without any action on their behalf. Then, at long last, Kroeker reports that David J. Klassen, Plenipotentiary in matters pertaining to the Mennonite alternate service, received a telegram on July 3, 1917, signed by the Assistant to the Minister of War. It contained the following message: "In regard to the 36 Mennonite medics who have been placed in Hospital No. 166 it has been decided to place them at the disposal of the leadership of the division of Hospital Trains of the VZS."<sup>6</sup>

Well, were they now at long last free men in assignments of the VZS? Kroeker ends his account with the disheartening observation that although one might have assumed so, in reality that did not happen—they were not turned over to the VZS, and although strict military guard supervision was somewhat lessened, they were still compelled to perform penal labor on the railroad. He concludes the story with a list of the names and home places of the 38 medics of Hospital Train No. 189 who had shared their German captivity.

The surprising and most disappointing part of this account is that it does not say when these men were eventually freed from their detention under military guard and from performing penal labor finally to be permitted to go home. For this information we have to turn to Giesbrecht's reminiscences.

Let me now turn to Peter J. Giesbrecht's account of the fate of the Mennonite servicemen on Hospital Train No. 189. As noted before, the recollections of the two men in respect to the initial events of this train and its staff are almost identical, except that Giesbrecht relates an incident about the initial loading of the patients into the train which does not appear in Neufeld's account. This account tells of the Russian general who promised the Mennonite orderlies that if they would succeed in transferring all the patients from the hospital near the station onto the hospital train in 30 minutes, each of the men would be awarded the George Medal. And when they accomplished the deed in 20 instead of 30 minutes, the general greeted them with the promise that not only would they receive the coveted medal but also the distinctive black-yellow ribbon accompanying it in special recognition of their feat.

Giesbrecht's account of the initial life in the prisoners-of-war camp scarcely mentions the Russian soldiery. It deals extensively with the medics and particularly with his own experience once he was assigned to work for Mennonite farmers. Here appears a statement which, if it actually reached the authorities in Petrograd (I have no idea whether it ever did) would undoubtedly have worked disadvantageously for our men: "Da nun aber die deutsche Regierung sich sehr um uns kummerte und die Lage eines jeden unserer Gruppe untersuchte, kam ich nach ungefaehr 6

Wochen zu Herrn Bartel Reichfelde bei Altfelde—auf ein Rittergut.” Here his experience was incomparably better than his experience with a small farmer, Holzrichter.

However, it is in connection with his and other of the medics’ experiences after their repatriation commenced and the medics reached Petrograd that Giesbrecht’s account delivers such a negative verdict about the alleged failure of the VZS to do anything to ease the position of the medics at the hands of their military captors in Petrograd. They were forced to abandon all hope of ever being allowed to go home: “Wir wandten uns in Moskau an den A.L.V., wo wir doch hingehoerten, aber der machte nicht die kleinste Anstrengung, tat auch nichts, unsere Lage zu aendern.” They were left in the clutches of an Old Regime’s military organization, composed of veritable German-haters who blamed Germans for all of Russia’s misfortunes.

A similar fate was theirs when they eventually got to Moscow. They were assigned to penal labor on a railroad at Bierulevo, not far from the city, and though their treatment here was considerably fairer, the VZS did nothing for them and they were forced to endure their fate here until November 23, 1917:

Die ganze Zeit haben die Leiter (auch Mennoniten) des A.L.V. nicht einen Finger fuer uns geruehrt, uns frei zu bekommen. Wie oft haben wir immer wieder gebeten, dass sie uns helfen moechten. Umsonst. Sie ueberliessen uns unserem Schicksal. Wir waren also von den Unsrigen verlassen.

Hence, it is not surprising that they gained hope when the Communists seized power and it became known that they released prisoners of war. And this proved to be true: their appeal to a Communist commander had resulted in their being freed from penal labor and turned over to the VZS in Moscow. Now at last the medics felt greatly relieved and expected an early trip home after three years of service. But nothing of the sort was intended by the VZS, even though the Communist commissar had already earlier pronounced his judgement: “Wenn die festgehaltenen 38 Mann Montag morgens nicht mit dem 9-Uhr Zuge in Moskau ankommen, dann wird Bierulevo dem Erdboden gleichgemacht.” This threat had sufficed to get them to Moscow, but only to be told by the VZS: “Den Gedanken gebt nur auf. Ihr fahrt nicht nach Hause. Sowas gibt’s garnicht.” But now the medics took matters into their own hands—the 38 Mennonite medics went to the railroad station and succeeded in getting on the Moscow-Sevastopol train home to South Russia.<sup>7</sup>

The confusion in the number of medics involved appears in other accounts. Thus Kroeker in his 1919 story gives their number as 36. At the General Conference at Neuhalbstadt, June 6-8, 1917, a reporter, Heinrich Janz, in reporting on the work of a Mennonite delegation sent to the capital city of Petrograd in regard to “Mennonite affairs,” gives the figure of these medics still being held as 36, even though they had already been exonerated of all guilt. Still later, at the All-Russian Mennonite Congress held at Orloff, August 14-18, 1917, a Peter Froese from Moscow, reporting on the situation of the medics, gives their number as 37, a figure also given by another reporter, Aron Toews, at this same Congress. That the fathers at home had not forgotten the plight of these their sons in Moscow, is evidenced in the minutes of both the General Conference of June and the Orloff Congress of

August 1917. Unfortunately only brief summary statements are given.

An interesting, though a bit confusing, reference to Mennonite efforts in Petrograd is also to be found in the reminiscences of P. Heese.<sup>8</sup> Heese states that the Council of the Mobilized Mennonites in Moscow had decided to send a delegation to Petrograd to appeal to the Council of Ministers to have the land liquidation decrees set aside. The delegation consisted of Aaron P. Toews, Peter Sawatzky (both medical orderlies) and a civilian, Viktor Heese (the latter was the son of a prominent Mennonite lawyer in the city of Ekaterinoslav and at this time is reputed to have been an actor in the famous Moscow Art Theater). Furthermore, Heese also notes that the Council of Mennonite Mobilized Men in Ekaterinoslav also dispatched a three-man delegation to Petrograd for the same purpose. This delegation consisted of Peter Funk, Heinrich Andres and Gerhard Sawatzky. The first one was an attorney and the latter two were teachers. Both served as medics with the Red Cross.

Meanwhile, the account adds, reports appeared in the newspapers that the decrees in question had provisionally been set aside, but that thereupon a meeting of the local Mennonite congregation was called, at which Duma Deputy Bergmann was present. Upon his recommendation a delegation was also sent to Petrograd to appeal expressly to Kerenskii, the Minister of Justice. Kerenskii received the delegation in a friendly manner and assured it that the decrees would be set aside. The Minutes of the June General Conference<sup>9</sup> indicate that Heinrich Janz, reporting on the delegation sent to Petrograd in "mennonitischen Angelegenheiten," reported that the 36 medics still held in confinement had been absolved of all guilt, but had not yet been released. This indicates that this issue had also been on the agenda of the delegation. At the All-Mennonite Congress in August, Peter Froese, from Moscow, reported that the behavior of the 38 medics during their captivity in Germany had demonstrated that they remained good Russian subjects and that there existed no reason for their administrative banishment. He was convinced that the frequent interrogations would establish their complete innocence which would lead to their complete rehabilitation.

The above statements from several different and unquestionably reliable accounts demonstrate that the VZS officials, including the Council of Mennonite Medical Orderlies at the headquarters, tried to get the returned medics of Hospital Train No. 189 declared innocent of the charges of disloyalty to Russia during their captivity and tried to secure their freedom from penal labor. It is therefore most difficult to comprehend and accept Giesbrecht's categorical assertions that the officials at the VZS in Moscow had done absolutely nothing on behalf of the 36, 37 or 38 medics. The assertion of such inactivity in this matter is all the more incomprehensible in view of the repeated statements of a number of the servicemen who were assigned to the VZS headquarters virtually from the inception of its operations in the late summer of 1914 and until their eventual termination of service in late 1917. All the statements testify to the high regard in which the Mennonite servicemen were held by the highest officeholders at the headquarters and that their services were valued. Let me cite from several such recollections.

The first recollection is from Franz Petrovich Thiessen, formerly of Khortitsa, who arrived at the VZS headquarters with the very first group of Mennonites to report to it in August of 1914 and remained with it in different assignments until the late summer or early fall of 1917. He writes as follows concerning events upon arrival in Moscow:

Wir traten in ein zweistöckiges Haus ein und hinauf in den zweiten Stock. Auf unser Klopfen wurden wir in ein Zimmer gebeten, wo zwei Männer beschäftigt waren: Der Bevollmächtigte Tichon Ivanovitsch Polner, der im Zimmer auf und ab spazierte, und ein Schreiber Boris Nikolajevitsch Saltekov.... Auf ihre Frage, was unser Begehren, sagten wir, dass wir auf eine Adresse vom Duma-Abgeordneten Bergmann uns hier zum Sanitätsdienst melden wollten. Auf weitere Fragen, von wo und wer wir seien, sagten wir, "Bauernsohne aus der Ukraina." "A—Ljudi ot sochi," sagten sie (0, Leute vom h Holzernen Pflug). Doch unser Aussehen (Kleidung) konnten sie nicht mit ihrer Vorstellung von armen Bauernsohnen in Einklang bringen....

Bis ganz zuletzt erhielten wir 50 Kop. pro Tag zur Bekoestigung, die Freiwilligen 20 Rbl. und die gewöhnlichen Sanitäter 75 Kopeken den Monat. Anfangs arbeiteten wir im Gruppenlager des A.L.V. wo die Ausstattung fuer Sanitätszuege hergestellt wurde....

Wie der Name schon besagt, war dieses eine Organisation aller russischen Landschaften, die im Kriege halfen Rote-Kreuz Arbeit zu tun, die Armee mit Produkten zu versorgen, usw. Unsere Abteilung konzentrierte sich auf Sanitätszuege, und zwar waren es 50, von Num. 175 bis Num. 225. Es waren auch noch eine Pferdeabteilung und Versorgungsabteilung .... Ihr Hauptbevollmächtigter war Prinz Ljvov. Der groesste Teil der Arbeiter wurde ich sagen, waren Mennoniten.... Diese Abteilung (Sanitätsabteilung) wurde anfangs von folgenden 3 Beamten verwaltet: Tichon Iw. Polner, Bevollmächtigter, Boris Nik. Saltekov—Sekretär—und Nikolai F. Petlin—Wirtschaftsverwalter. Nachdem ... Polner in den Kaukasus versetzt wurde, war ...Saltekov unser Bevollmächtigter und mit ihm haben wir es auch bis zur Revolution hauptsaechlich zu tun gehabt. Er war vielleicht etwas "rot" angehaucht, zugleich aber auch der meist beschäftigte Mann in unserer Abteilung, immer freundlich und ruhig.... Nie hat er uns fühlen lassen, dass wir Deutsche und Untergeordnete waren. Wir, in der Kanzlei, wurden alle mit Vornamen, Vatersnamen und mit "Sie" angesprochen. Wir hiessen "Mennonite" und wurden von allen Mitarbeitern, mit Ausnahme weniger Unterbeamten, sehr gut behandelt. Die Arbeit in der Kanzlei taten wir Mennoniten ja auch praktisch alle....

Next is an excerpt from the recollections of Peter J. Wiebe, from Gussarovka, Kharkov.<sup>10</sup> Wiebe had first been assigned to forest duty in Central Russia in the area of the city of Nizhnyi Novgorod, but eventually, as a result of a petition with several comrades, in November of 1914 he had been transferred to the VZS Hospital Train Headquarters in Moscow, where he remained in the capacity of a secretary until the Bolshevik seizure of power in November of 1917. However, as we know from other medics' reports, already in the spring of 1917 Mennonite medics in Moscow had followed the strongly urged practice of all kinds of organizations throughout the empire for civilian and military personnel to organize councils or soviets in their units. Wiebe points out that he had remained in the position of a secretary until:



...die neuen Machthaber und "Menschenbegluecker" alle Beamten der Zarenzeit mit ihren Nachlaeufern ersetzen, und in den militaerischen Einheiten Soldatenraete gewaehlt wurden. Unser Vorstand in der Hauptkaserne war auch abgetreten und hatte andere Arbeit uebernommen, so dass auch hier Wahlen der Leitung stattfanden; es war wohl Mitte September, 1917. Bei dieser Wahl hatte ich das Missgeschick oder Unglueck, als Leiter der Kaserne gewaehlt zu werden. Zu meiner Beruhigung erfuhr ich dass unser oberste Chef, Leiter der Abteilung fuer Transport der Kranken und verwundeten Krieger, Graf Boris Nikolajevitsch Saltykov, auf seinem Posten verblieben war, denn er war ein Mann, der allgemein beliebt war, und besonders bei den Mennoniten. Wenn z.B. Maenner fuer einen Posten oder eine Besorgung nach Aussen angefordert wurden, dann fuegte er gewoehnlich hinzu, "Wenn moeglich, Mennoniten," denn er hatte unsere Menschen als zuverlaessige Maenner kennen gelernt, oder befunden, und darum schaezte er sie. Obwohl Aristokrat, hat Boris Nikolajevitsch nie Ehrenbezeugung beansprucht; er war und blieb die ganze Zeit, bis 1918, der tuechtige und wohlwollende der Dienstpflichtigen seiner Abteilung. Dank diesem Vorgesetzten durften wir bis im Oktober, 1917, zweimal jaehrlich kurzfristig unsere Angehoerigen besuchen....

At last, as time went on and disorders increased throughout the land, Wiebe decided that blindness in one eye merited an appeal to a military medical office for discharge from the service. This succeeded, and he concludes, "... ich durfte zu meiner Familie zurueckkehren,—nach einem herzlichen Abschied von unserem verehrten und beliebten Boris Nikolajevitsch und den Kameraden." Similar sentiments regarding the Count—or Prince Saltykov, as he sometimes is called—were shared by my brother John G. Rempel in his recollections of World War I services.

When I reminisce about my departure from Moscow, which at the same time also meant my leave-taking from the war, and try to recall before my mind's eye all the people with whom I came in contact in one form or another during those long and trying years, then I find that I have a wealth of really pleasant recollections of many of those people. Among them are many doctors and nurses who so noble-mindedly and self-sacrificially devoted themselves to the care of the wounded and the sick....

However, aside from the many servicemen of my own Mennonite folk with whom I so-to-say marched shoulder to shoulder through the war, the man who in my opinion, and doubtless in that of so many of my co-religionists stands head above shoulder above all others, is the chief of the Division of Hospital Trains of the All-Russian Zemstvo Unions, Boris Nicholaevich Saltykov. His name is intimately connected with the fate and experiences of thousands of Mennonite men and youths, mobilized or volunteers, during their service years from about September 1914 to the late fall of 1917. He deserves to be recorded on the pages of our history with reverence and affection....

The largest number of these (Mennonite) men served in the various institutions and facilities operated by the Union of Zemstvos. I believe that they had drawn the best lot of all the Mennonite servicemen. The credit for this situation we, that is the Mennonite Church and the servicemen in question, owe to a considerable degree to the Chief of the Division of Hospital Trains. He always treated our men with tact and real affection. When at the beginning of the war the first Mennonite volunteers reported to this division he made it a practice always to take his lunch with those of them who served

in the main office. Nor did it require the events of February-March 1917 to “democratize” the procedures and operations in this division.... Did a Mennonite serviceman die in Moscow, Saltykov always found time, despite his crowded schedule, to attend the funeral, and frequently would serve as pall-bearer....

He showed a broad understanding and fine appreciation of our peculiarities and beliefs and customs, and in all the arrangements he effected, he endeavored to give full consideration to the wishes of our men....

He made it a practice to greet each man who presented a document for his signature, whatever the hour of the day or whether he was on the phone, with a handshake....

He had unqualified confidence in the loyalty of the Mennonites and was greatly pleased with opportunities to voice his trust in them to other officials. A case in point is the following [here John refers to train No. 189, mentioned earlier—DGR]. The train’s medical staff, especially its chief doctor, upon their return to Russia, were full of praise for the service performance of the Mennonites during the critical stages of the capture of the train as well as during the long months of captivity. Several Mennonites many months later escaped from their captivity and managed by way of Denmark to return to Russia, [which] pleased Saltykov to no end, and he used many an opportunity to present the escapees to various visiting officials at the main office and to laud their deeds....

Just prior to my leaving Moscow for Southern Russia I went to my superior and told him that I had come to bid him goodbye. “You, too, are leaving me. But you may soon hear that I am also no longer here.” With that he rose from his seat and shook my hand. His eyes were misty, something I had never seen before in this manly person. He accompanied me to the outer hall and once again bid me farewell....<sup>11</sup>

These three commentaries are from men who had served at Moscow headquarters of the VZS’s main Division of Hospital Trains under its director Saltykov for varying periods of time. They certainly present a picture of the medics’ relationship to a superior who could not possibly have been as indifferent to the fate of the returned Mennonite medics of Train No. 189 as pictured by Giesbrecht.

For possible explanations as to why the VZS headquarters in Moscow was so ineffective in its efforts to obtain a release of these medics from the claws of the military authorities in Petrograd and later in or near Moscow, we have to look at other factors which were so determinative until the collapse of the Old Regime and its successor, the Provisional Government, in early November 1917. These factors can only be alluded to at this place.

First was the general dislike which the national government showed almost from the very beginning of the war in 1914 toward the VZS and the amazing efforts and successes the unions showed in meeting and overcoming the incredible failures of the government and the military in preparing the country and its armed forces for the armed conflict with the Central Powers. Then there were the monstrous corruptions which obtained in virtually all civilian and military agencies and organizations. Historians will readily recall the notorious Miasoedov Affair and scores of others. The tsarist government first of all feared the democratic forces in

the Zemstvo agencies and institutions. The army medical services, especially under its chief, Prince Oldenburg, were particularly hostile to the VZS and exceedingly peremptory in their demands for delivery of goods and the rendering of services from the Zemstvos to the armed forces. At one time it even threatened to take all its hospital trains and assign them to the Red Cross. This was in November 1916 when the voices in the State Duma were increasingly demanding a "government of responsibility," and the rural and urban Zemstvos were becoming more vocal in their lack of trust in the government. Also the Red Cross did not represent the masses of the public, or reflect the common people's war weariness.

The situation grew so tense that the VZS at last asked the War Ministry to take over all its hospital trains. This the latter did not do, for it realized that it could not possibly operate this facility any better because it mismanaged most everything else. And so the VZS continued to operate not only its existing 50 hospital trains, but in late 1916 it readied 26 additional trains for use commencing in early 1917. The morale of doctors and administrative personnel on trains was at times so low, however, that many doctors and nurses asked for transfer to other facilities or threatened to resign. Such a mood could not help but at times be reflected in the relationships between different staff ranks on the trains and the medics did not always remain immune to it.

Another source of difficulty for the VZS and doctors and administrators of hospital trains arose from the fact that they were coming under greater pressure from the armed forces to employ a larger number of *slabosil'nye* (recuperating military men) as medics in all of its facilities, more particularly on hospital trains. Yet these responsible officials found that the military men in question were seldom qualified to do this kind of work, were usually far more demanding than the Mennonites and were much less dependable in carrying out their assignments. Moreover, the recuperating soldiers often resented the presence of Mennonite medics in their midst, accusing them of having led a life of ease, safety and comfort all through the war years, while they had fought and suffered in the front-line trenches. They also complained that the Mennonite medics had not served in field hospitals and had not picked up the wounded on the battlefield or bandaged their wounds before they had been loaded on trains. Because of this growing conflict between the two groups on some trains, doctors occasionally, in asking for replacements to fill the train's complement of medical orderlies, would ask to have either an entire compliment of Mennonites or an entire compliment of recuperating soldiers.

Obviously the medics brushed aside criticism that they had enjoyed a life of ease, and they especially resented the accusation that they had cared for wounded only after they had been brought to the train. They found this particularly galling because many of them had requested such assignment from the very beginning, but the government had not permitted this on grounds "that Russians of German origin could not be trusted on the battlefield to pick up wounded personnel." Such was not the case on the Russo-Turkish front where, incidentally, Mennonite medics had been assigned to field hospital duties since the beginning of the war, and where

therefore the loss of life amongst Mennonite men was many times greater than any other branch of war-related work in which they were engaged. Typhus and/or cholera were the chief causes of death.

Mention must also be made of the fact that a considerable amount of suspicion and enmity against the returned medics among certain layers of Russia's public, civilian and military, arose because of the time factor of their arrival in Petrograd. It was only a few days after April 16, 1917, that Lenin and his entourage had been greeted here with great fanfare by an enormous crowd of adherents in what was hailed as the greatest bloodless overthrow of an autocratic regime the world had ever witnessed.

And what role had Mennonite men of military age and subject to conscription played in this titanic struggle? Unfortunately, in the eyes of many high-ranking and ordinary soldiers, the fine specimens of our young men in their well-fitting uniforms of medical corpsmen had already since the early months of the war been regarded as highly fit for combat. We have, for example, recollections of some of the first 400 of our mobilized men who arrived in St. Petersburg in the second week of September, 1914, and temporarily quartered in a famous park. They were asked by a passing general who they were and what assignment awaited them. The response was that they had been told "to work as medical orderlies." The General then exclaimed: "That kind of work? You are the fittest men to fill the ranks of the decimated guard regiments." It is not widely known among Mennonites that in Moscow and other cities, where Mennonite medics were a common sight, envious male citizens often referred to them as *Zemskie gussary*—*Zemstvo* Husars.

In sum, I firmly believe that the leaders of the various organizations (the All-Russian *Zemstvo* Union, the All-Russian Union of Cities, the Red Cross, the Council of the United Nobility and other less well-known agencies which depended to such a large degree upon the unstinted work of Mennonite servicemen), were firmly convinced that the ca. 6,000 Mennonite medics rendered incomparably more valuable service to their Russian motherland than they could possibly have rendered in the country's armed forces. Unfortunately, the tsarist regime, after the fall of 1914, seldom or never allowed men like Prince Lvov, Prince Saltykov, Prince Urusov and Johann Esau (the latter two of the Red Cross) openly and freely to inform the general public of the esteem in which they held Mennonite men and the valuable work they performed.

It is imperative for Mennonite historians, once the opportunity presents itself, to obtain access to the archival materials of these agencies and organizations, to study the relevant documents, and to make them available to our constituency.<sup>12</sup>

October 1991.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Mennonite Historian*, XVII, 3 (September 1991), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>David Neufeld, "Die Leidensgeschichte einer Gruppe mennonitischer Sanitaeter," in *Christlicher Familienkalender* (Raduga, 1918), 133-146.

<sup>3</sup>"Das Schicksal des 189 Sanitaetszuges des Allrussischen Semstwo-Verbandes im ersten Weltkriege," in "*Onsi Tjedils: Ersatzdienst der Mennoniten in Russland unter den Romanows*," col. and edit. by Waldemar Guenter, David P. Heidebrecht and Gerhard J. Peters (Clearbrook, BC, 1966).

<sup>4</sup>After the repeated severe setback of the Russian armies in the late fall of 1914, the Russian government sought by every means possible to prevent any organization employing Mennonite medical orderlies to publicize news about the excellent work our men were performing, their loyalty to their Russian motherland and how their unstinted devotion to duty and performance under very difficult conditions was appreciated by their employing organization. I believe it was the VZS which, more than any other of these agencies, pursued this course—Saltykov writing to Bergmann, asking him to convey this to Mennonite congregations in the south of Russia, and also personally expressing such appreciation to men at his own headquarters.

<sup>5</sup>Kroeker, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup>Kroeker, pp. 144-45.

<sup>7</sup>It is baffling that Giesbrecht here at the end of this long odyssey still writes about the 38 Mennonite medics of Hospital Train No. 198 in captivity when one of the original 38 medics had died in a German camp in 1915 and two of them had succeeded in escaping and got to Russia much earlier.

<sup>8</sup>"Die mennonitische Kolonie der Stadt Jekaterinoslaw," 18, 1923 (unpublished manuscript), which has a four-page insert from a notebook (between pages 60 and 61), in different handwriting from the rest of the manuscript.

<sup>9</sup>John B. Toews, ed., *The Mennonites in Russia from 1917 to 1930: Selected Documents*, (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1975), 403.

<sup>10</sup>*Onsi Tjedils*, 116-129.

<sup>11</sup>This account was taken from a manuscript which was a free translation by David Rempel of Johann G. Rempel, "Aus den ersten Tagen der Revolution: Moskauer Erinnerungen" *Der Bote* 22 (June 3 1931), 2-4.

<sup>12</sup>The few currently available studies directly or indirectly relating to one or several of the agencies under consideration (mainly doctoral dissertations in history departments of American universities), scarcely even mention the work of the medics in hospitals and hospital trains. An illustration is William Ewing Gleason's doctoral dissertation in the history department of Indiana University entitled, "The All-Russian Union of Towns and the All-Russian Union of Zemstvos in World War I: 1914-1917" (1972), which deals with the often very difficult relations of these agencies with the tsarist government officials.