

Klaas Reimer: Rebel Conservative, Radical Traditionalist

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Mennonite historians have tended to look rather askance at Klaas Reimer and his breakaway church movement. From their perspective this recalcitrant reform group disturbs the flow of early nineteenth-century Mennonite history like a gnarled old oak tree lying across a mountain stream. Historians cannot deny that Reimer led the first Mennonite church reform movement, but they usually fail to see why and are embarrassed by how he did it. The man himself hardly seems like the stuff radical reformers are made of: he was, they agree, well-meaning and sincere, but impossibly narrow and stubborn, and far too uneducated for the role. His movement, they claim, was too modest, too fanatical and too reactionary to make any real impact. The *Kleine Gemeinde* of the 1820s and '30s had none of the charismatic glamor and dramatic sense of renewal that marked the Mennonite Brethren reform movement a generation later.

Thus the significance of Klaas Reimer and his *Kleine Gemeinde*¹ has been largely misread or missed entirely by most historians.² The contempt displayed by contemporaries towards the tiny rebel church has not entirely vanished. All too often Reimer and his followers have been dismissed as a minor historical aberration undeserving of sympathetic or extended treatment.

The thesis I want to develop in this paper is that Klaas Reimer's *Kleine Gemeinde* movement was of much more than local significance in early Molochnaya history; that it was, in fact, a dissenting movement that sprang from the kind of fundamental church and social issues that affected all Russian Mennonites. In one sense, these issues were even more fundamental than those which led to the establishment of the MB church in 1860.

That Klaas Reimer's reform movement was foredoomed to fail as a protest against inevitable changes that were occurring within the social

and religious structures of the Mennonites in Russia is not really the point at issue, nor is the fact that as a church the *Kleine Gemeinde* remained small and without much influence in Russia. What I want to focus on instead are the nature and aims of the movement itself as personified in its founding leader, and on the reasons for the breakaway. To draw attention to the nature of the contemporary response to the *Kleine Gemeinde* is to reveal some sobering things about the temper and state of the Russian-Mennonite church and society of the time.

My analysis will center largely on Klaas Reimer himself, and on his career as he himself has recorded it. Reimer was in many ways a remarkable man and his full story reveals facets of the man and leader not considered by largely unsympathetic writers. To begin with, Klaas Reimer was not a fanatic or eccentric at all: narrow and single-minded, at times petty, he certainly was. He could also be stubbornly unyielding and blandly self-righteous. But he was not a fanatic. Rather, he opposed fanaticism throughout his career — the fanaticism of his arch-foe Elder Jacob Enns and of other authorities in the Molochnaya, as well as the irritating, at times threatening, fanaticism of some of his followers. One's dominant impression of the man is that once he was persuaded that he was following the right course, he acted always in a calm, rational, completely fearless but modest manner.

Before taking a closer look at Klaas Reimer's life and times, we should bear in mind several things. One is that he had already experienced church dissensions in his native Prussia, dissensions that had resulted in an irrevocable split between rural and urban parts of the Danzig *Gemeinde* to which he belonged. It should also be borne in mind that Reimer did not emigrate to Russia with the intention of forming his own church. On the contrary, he went to Russia with a shining vision of finding a Mennonite church in the new land that would be purged and renewed. He regarded his old homeland as a lost Babylon and hoped that he could build an earthly model of the New Jerusalem on the steppes of New Russia.³

What Klaas Reimer envisaged was a simple but vital theocracy along traditional lines that would realize the Anabaptist way of withdrawal from the world, a brotherhood of true believers in a purified church, a loving group of devoted disciples of Christ. What he found instead was more strife and factionalism of the kind he thought he had left behind. He was further shocked by a new threat to the church which he had not encountered before, and that was the threat of civil authority usurping church authority. In Prussia there had been no strong system of local government backed by higher government authority, as there was in the Molochnaya.⁴ Here civic police action and corporal punishment for offenders were being substituted for the traditional, non-violent Anabaptist punishment of the ban. That new un-Mennonite sphere of authority

became for Klaas Reimer the major issue, though by no means the only one, that finally drove him into becoming a rebel *Lehrer* in 1812⁵ backed by the 18-20 adult followers with whom he formed a new breakaway church.

For an account of Klaas Reimer's life and work we must go to his manuscript autobiography, which although written in a rather crude German is by far the most important source for our topic. And yet, with the exception of Peter J. B. Reimer and one or two others, Mennonite historians have ignored this first-hand document and relied instead on the excerpts quoted from it and commented on by P. M. Friesen in *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*.⁶ Unfortunately, Friesen reproduces a scant one-third of Reimer's memoir and, as might be expected of this often cautious historian, the parts left out tend to be the more personal and controversial sections.⁷ Even James Urry, who has made the most balanced and incisive analysis of Klaas Reimer and his movement, uses the truncated version quoted by Friesen.

"Ein Schreiben von Klaas Reimer," we can deduce from internal evidence, was written within a year or two of its author's death in 1837.⁸ In it Reimer describes his early life, his migration to Russia and his long, debilitating struggle primarily with Elder Jacob Enns but also with other church and civil authorities, as well as with his own adherents. The whole is an intensely personal narrative written in a rough, unadorned style with little of a reflective or theological nature but with many vivid anecdotes and personalities, all unabashedly named and identified. The middle section reads almost like a medieval morality play with Elder Jacob Enns as the black foe and Klaas Reimer as the hard-pressed but persevering moral and spiritual hero locked in moral combat with him. The positive qualities that come through in Reimer are his strength of character, his clear-headedness, his indomitable will and his genuine humility. His negative qualities, as already indicated, are his intransigence — often sheer bullheadedness — and his tendency towards self-righteousness which at times turns into naive gloating.

Reimer records that he was born in Petershagen in the Werder in 1770 and that he received no formal schooling. As a young man he joined the carpenters guild and began to live a rather worldly life. In 1790, at the age of 20, he was baptized and received into the church, but he states candidly that he continued to be attracted to frivolity and worldly pleasures. The turning point in his life came when at the age of 28 he made a good marriage to the daughter of the former Elder Peter Epp, who had been one of the most influential Mennonite elders in West Prussia and instrumental in bringing about the first migration to Russia in 1789.

Now well-connected in the Danzig church, Reimer was elected to the ministry (*Lehrdienst*) in 1801, although he admits to having felt totally unworthy and unprepared for a ministerial career. He began to read and study assiduously, however, not only the Scriptures but the *Martyrs*

Mirror and the writings of Anabaptist leaders like Menno Simons, Peter Peters, and Dirk Phillips. Now that he was on the inside of the church he soon perceived that it was far from being what it should be. Convinced that he was living in a sinful Babylon, as he came to call West Prussia, Reimer began to shape a vision of the church firmly based on the teachings of the Anabaptist forefathers. It was this vision of a purified church that he took with him when he emigrated to Russia in 1804 along with about 30 adult followers.

The Epp family into which Klaas Reimer had married was well known in Khortitza, and the young minister must have been well received there.⁹ Actually, Reimer and his group were not really interested in settling in the newly opened Molochnaya, but instead negotiated for an estate near the Old Colony only to discover that it came complete with a distillery and numerous serfs. When Reimer realized the moral implications of buying slaves, he quickly bowed out of the deal. When government orders came that the group must settle in the Molochnaya they obeyed, but somewhat reluctantly. Reimer had already been there as a visiting minister and had seen firsthand the tensions and strife developing between minister David Hiebert and *Oberschulze* Klaas Wiens, the powerful local official who was supervising and controlling the establishment of the colony.

Klaas Reimer's worst fears were soon realized in his new home colony. The local *Gemeinde*, having become an independent congregation, chose as its elder Jacob Enns, a tailor by trade.¹⁰ Almost at once Reimer and Elder Enns were at loggerheads. Both strong-willed and stubborn men, they clashed constantly over how the church should be run and conduct itself vis-a-vis the affairs of the community. In Reimer's memoir we see this struggle, of course, entirely from his point of view, but there is evidence from other sources that Enns was of rather unstable character and temperament.¹¹ Interestingly enough, while P. M. Friesen admits that Elder Enns was a man of "exceedingly violent character"¹² and frequently guilty of "hot-tempered outbursts,"¹³ he leaves unquoted practically the whole section of the memoir that deals with this troubled relationship, presumably because it was missing from the copy he was using.

The first and main quarrel between the two men was over the issue of offenders being turned over to the district office (*Gebietsamt*) for corporal punishment. As early as 1806 Elder Enns got into an ugly feud with *Oberschulze* Klaas Wiens, the result of which was that the Elder won and got Wiens banned for a time. Klaas Reimer, however, was appalled at the highhanded methods used by Enns against the *Oberschulze*, which included physical violence by Enns's men that left Wiens seriously injured. The scene in which Reimer describes the vote in the church that sealed Wiens's fate has all the turbulence of a kangaroo court and almost

ended in a general fight.¹⁴ While on the surface Enns appeared to be striking a blow on behalf of church authority against the encroachment of secular power, Reimer saw clearly that the Elder was simply carrying on a personal fight for power with Wiens, and that Enns himself was ready to resort to police action and physical violence whenever it suited his purposes.

Reimer records that the following year — 1807 — he went through another disillusioning experience with Elder Enns over the so-called war-contribution issue. The Russian government, at war with Napoleon, was soliciting cash and other contributions from its citizens. The whole *Lehrdienst* at first took a firm stand against circulating the subscription book sent out by the Inspector. But the Elder soon began to weaken under government pressure and secretly authorized the new *Oberschulze* to send around the subscription book. Reimer was furious and confronted the Elder with his hypocrisy. The issue was resolved when Reimer got the Elder's order rescinded by a vote of the brotherhood, a defeat for Enns which caused him to lose even more respect.¹⁵

So strained did the relations between Reimer and Elder Enns become that in 1812 Reimer and his supporters stopped taking communion in the church and began holding their own services in Muensterberg and Petershagen. But not with impunity. Men from Muensterberg threatened Reimer and his supporters with beatings if they persisted with their meetings, and shortly thereafter Reimer and his supporting minister Cornelius Janzen were summoned to appear before the *Oberschulze*. The situation deteriorated rapidly and soon Reimer and his followers found themselves berated by Elder Enns on the one side and threatened by the civil authorities on the other. Meeting after meeting followed, but between Enns with his insane fits of rage and Reimer with his self-righteous tenacity, no reconciliation appeared possible. Of one such confrontation Reimer writes: "Denn da wir hinkamen und anfangen zu reden und ich bei meinem alten Glauben blieb, da wurde Enns entsetzlich zornig, fuhr sehr laut mit schrecklichen Worten aus, schlug hart auf den Tisch, griff seine Mütze von seinem Haupt und schmiss sie aller forsch auf die Erde und da war die Vereinigung bei mir ganz vorbei."¹⁶

Reimer seems to have been fully aware of the seriousness of the step he was taking. By separating from the parent church he was serving notice that he and his supporters had given up trying to reform the church from within and that they no longer considered it worthy of their support. James Urry goes so far as to aver that by taking the action he did, Klaas Reimer "was, in fact, shunning the whole colony."¹⁷ Regardless, there was now no turning back for Reimer. He was convinced he had acted on scriptural grounds, and that to give in to Enns merely for the sake of preserving public peace would be inexcusably hypocritical. Nevertheless, the decision to leave the mother church caused him much

agony and soul-searching, and he confesses to his own weakness and ignorance, as well as to his fear of leaving the church without knowing what the consequences would be. "Denn ich weiss," he records, "was es mir hat zuwegen gebracht, in Preussen, auch hier, die Gemeinde zu verlassen."¹⁸

Reimer received another shock when the respected Elder Johann Wiebe came out from the Old Colony to mediate the dispute only to tell Reimer and Janzen privately that though he was convinced that their stand was scriptural, they faced banishment to Siberia if they refused to submit. Elder Wiebe's hypocritical warning seems to have been the last straw for Klaas Reimer. Thereafter he refused even to meet with his adversaries. The threats of arrest continued and the rebellious ministers were informed that they would no longer even be exempted from the *Reihendienst* (community labor) from which all ministers were exempted.

Reimer and his group finally got some help from an unexpected quarter. The former *Oberschulze* Klaas Wiens, for whom Reimer had shown sympathy during his fight with Elder Enns and who was now a member of the colonial board in Ekaterinoslav, intervened on Reimer's behalf and influenced the board to send a stern rebuke to Elder Enns.

In 1814 Klaas Reimer was elected elder of the new church, but none of the Mennonite elders in Russia was willing to ordain him, as tradition prescribed. Finally, in 1816, Reimer had himself ordained by his fellow minister Cornelius Janzen and assumed the title and function of elder. However, his church was still not officially recognized.

Elder Enns's death in 1818 did not end the persecution suffered by Reimer and the *Kleine Gemeinde*. New pressures were brought to bear on him by two elders of the more liberal Frisian church — Goerz and Wedel — who had recently immigrated from Prussia with their groups. Both men were missionary-minded and ardent millennialists, attitudes which Klaas Reimer scathingly rejected. Nor could he accept the notion that believers in other faiths were safely in the Christian fold. When Elder Wedel and other ministers tried to pin him down on this issue he would only answer that "all those who justified infant baptism, the swearing of oaths, and war could not be true Christians no matter how holy they [might] otherwise appear."¹⁹ Reimer was equally forthright in denouncing the foreign tract mission of the Bible Society, of which Elder Wedel was president for the Molochnaya. Narrow and illiberal Reimer may have been but there was never any doubt as to what his views were.

The last chapter in Klaas Reimer's struggle with the parent church began around 1822, when two-thirds of its members deserted Elder Bernhard Fast because they considered him too liberal, and established their own "pure" Flemish congregation. In what must be seen as a cowardly, treacherous act of retaliation, the frustrated Elder Fast and his

friends Elders Wedel and Goerz turned on the despised *Kleine Gemeinde*, although it had nothing to do with the new schism, and instigated the civil authorities right up to General Insov to get Reimer and his associates banished to Siberia. For a while they were ordered to appear in the *Gebietsamt* every eight days in attempts to scare them into submission. Even P. M. Friesen, in his understated way, admits that the three elders "provoked by Klaas Reimer's stubbornness, did not act completely honorably."²⁰

During these hard years of persecution Reimer also had to cope with many internal problems created by his more fanatical followers. Sometime after 1816, Cornelius Janzen, his right-hand man, became in Reimer's words "proud and defiant" and no longer trustworthy.²¹ He replaced Janzen with his own brother-in-law Abraham Friesen. Janzen left the *Kleine Gemeinde* in 1822, taking a segment of the tiny church back with him to the parent church. Reimer's church was left even weaker than before.

The fanatics in the movement resorted to weird practises. They would lie in ditches all night praying and lamenting loudly. At table they tried to move themselves to tears while saying grace, and left the table hungry if they failed. At least one man died of exposure as the result of these unnatural practises. Others wanted to dress only in rags, shun others in the community, and accept no community offices. A certain Warkentin frightened many people with an exact prediction for the end of the world. Reimer himself remained skeptical but admits drily that many were taken in, "denn Warkentin redete so schrecklich von dem letzten Tag wie es brennen und knallen wird, wusste die Heilige Schrift wie es schien einmal auswendig und redete viel daraus."²²

It is characteristic of Klaas Reimer that he blames himself for not having opposed these various excesses strongly enough: ". . . ich war wohl dagegen aber nicht eifrig genug denn ich suchte nicht ernstlich genug in Gottes Wort."²³ Finally, he delivered a powerful admonitory sermon against the fanaticism of his followers, only to have much of the congregation walk out on him in disapproval. At a special *Bruderschaft* he was challenged on a vote of confidence which he barely survived. It was the low point of his church leadership. He expresses his despair over the situation with the words, "O Gott, wie soll doch die Welt lang bestehen, wo solches unter die wehrlosen Christen so viel ist und alles so verdunkelt bleibt."²⁴

After that crisis Reimer's relations with his own church members seem to have improved somewhat. In 1829 the *Kleine Gemeinde* adopted the ritual of footwashing that had fallen into desuetude in most Mennonite congregations after Anabaptist times. Reimer's quietly intense, eloquent sermon inaugurating this communion practise has been preserved and effectively refutes P. M. Friesen's pietistical judgment that

"the religious disposition of Klaas Reimer, although a sincerely pious one, was devoid of any joyous knowledge of God's grace."²⁵

As late as 1835, however, Reimer found himself in hot water with his church when one of his own sons — probably Abraham — invented a new type of wagon "driven [with wheels] from the seat," which may have been an early version of the bicycle.²⁶ Such a newfangled contraption could not escape censure, and both Reimer and his son were obliged to confess to a sin that stemmed from a weakness for "too much curiosity."²⁷

In the closing pages of his memoirs, also omitted by Friesen, Reimer attempts a humble assessment of his life and work. Among other things, he gives a curious justification for the divisiveness within the Mennonite church in the Molochnaya, a divisiveness that resulted in a three-way split in a single decade.²⁸ God had led them to Russia and split them into factions, he writes, "um das sie durch ihr langen streit doch sollen in Gottes Wort forschen und fragen was Gott von uns fordert."²⁹ As for his own modest role, he comforts himself with Paul's words in I Corinthians that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise."³⁰

After Klaas Reimer's death in 1837, his brother-in-law Abraham Friesen was elected elder, but again the other elders refused to ordain him and Friesen was forced to assume his duties without ordination. Finally in 1843, a full 30 years after the church began, the influential Johann Cornies intervened and got the Board of Guardians at Odessa to compel the elders of the various congregations to recognize the *Kleine Gemeinde* as a legally constituted church.

Contrary to what some historians, including P. M. Friesen, have claimed, the *Kleine Gemeinde* did not go into almost total eclipse in the middle decades of the century with a mere remnant moving to America in 1874.³¹ In 1865 the group purchased land at Borozenko west of the Old Colony near Fuerstenland, and established itself there until it emigrated to America. As Peter J. B. Reimer has calculated from church records, the *Kleine Gemeinde* enjoyed a slow but steady growth right up to 1874. In 1837, the year of Klaas Reimer's death, the membership stood at 125, and by 1864 it had increased to 250 adult members. In 1874-75, 158 families (some 800 persons) settled in Manitoba, with a smaller group of 36 families settling in Janzen, Nebraska.³²

What, finally, are we to make of Klaas Reimer and the strange little church movement he led? P. M. Friesen's assessment has been generally accepted: "The *Kleine Gemeinde* was a messenger calling the Molotschna Mennonites to repentance, but, it would appear to us, because it was too narrow-minded, too frightened, too isolationist and opposed to education, it never made a profound impact."³³ Friesen might also have added that the Russian Mennonites were not ready to listen to a "messenger" calling them to repentance, as many would be a generation later. And by then the crucial battle Klaas Reimer had tried to fight on behalf of church

authority against usurpation by secular forces would be all but forgotten. We must not forget that the Molochnaya of the time was a frontier society eager to establish itself, euphoric about the future, expansionist in mood, and not about to let a non-conformist like Klaas Reimer set back the clock.

Reimer's would-be theocracy was already an anachronism. The colony was well on its way to full acceptance of the Russian system of administration, which consisted of a comfortable and disarming degree of local autonomy that was nevertheless securely placed within the larger framework of Russian autocracy and centralized control. Johann Cornies, the tireless innovator and shrewd pragmatist, was the perfect representative of this Russian system, the inspiring model for nineteenth-century Russian Mennonites. In such a progressive atmosphere Klaas Reimer and his *Kleine Gemeinde* were inevitably regarded as a troublesome, reactionary band of renegades to be subdued, or at least neutralized, so as not to disturb the smoothly unfolding manifest destiny God had ordained for the Mennonite colonists of South Russia.

Notes

¹The term "*Kleine Gemeinde*" ("*Kjeene Jemeent*") originated as a term of contempt and derision for the breakaway group, but the group itself later adopted it as its official name.

²Two notable exceptions are Peter J. B. Reimer, "Klaas Reimer and His Times," in *Familienregister der Nachkommen von Klaas und Helena Reimer mit Biographien der ersten drei Generationen* (Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1958), 24-27; and James Urry, "The Closed and the Open: Social and Religious Change Amongst the Mennonites in Russia (1789-1889)" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Oxford University, 1975), 200-14.

³Cf. Urry, "The Closed and the Open," 206.

⁴Cf. David G. Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XLVIII (1974), 11.

⁵Klaas Reimer gives the date as 1813, but other sources agree that it was 1812.

⁶P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, trans. by J. B. Toews and others (Fresno, Cal., 1978), 127-33. I use the English translation of Friesen's history wherever possible. Sections of the Reimer memoir not given by Friesen are quoted in German. The text quoted by Friesen differs considerably from the typed transcript of the memoir in my possession. Friesen also mentions that the text he received from the *Kleine Gemeinde* was incomplete, but some of his editorial comments would suggest that he had read more of the text than he is reproducing in his own book.

⁷It is, of course, possible that the text Friesen received had already been edited.

⁸The dates 1835 and 1836 are given in it. The typed ms. is based on a handwritten copy made of the original in 1909 and revised by "Carolyn Reimer" in 1961. It contains 35½ pages of double-spaced typescript.

⁹Urry, 204.

¹⁰Urry, 206, alleges that Klaas Reimer "seems to have believed he should have been chosen Aeltester," but provides no evidence for the allegation.

¹¹See Abraham Braun, "Kleine Chronik der Mennoniten an der Molotschna seit ihrer Ansiedlung bis in mein 80. Jahr," *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch 1906-7* (Tokmak, Russia, 1907), 67; Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, 92; H. Goerz, *Die Molotschnaer Ansiedlung: Entstehung, Entwicklung und Untergang* (Steinbach, Manitoba, 1951), 56.

¹²Friesen, 92.

¹³*Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁴K. Reimer, "Ein Schreiben," 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ Urry, 208.

¹⁸ Reimer, 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰ Friesen, 131.

²¹ Reimer, 26.

²² *Ibid.*, 28.

²³ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁵ Friesen, 93.

²⁶ Reimer, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Counting the Rudnerweide and Old Flemish congregations, there were by this time five different churches in the Molochnaya.

²⁹ Reimer, 34.

³⁰ I Corinthians 1:27.

³¹ See Braun, 69; Friesen, 94; Goerz, 58.

³² Peter J. B. Reimer, *The Sesquicentennial Jubilee: Evangelical Mennonite Conference 1812-1962* (Steinbach, Manitoba, 1962), 10-11.

³³ Friesen, 93.

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