

# Reflections on Harvey L. Dyck's Images of Johann Cornies

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In his balanced and stimulating essay (see *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 2, 1984), Dyck analyzes the various images of Johann Cornies within the setting of three distinct periods: the period of Cornies' life; the period from his death in 1848 to the end of the Tsarist regime in 1917; and the period from 1917 to the present time. Of special interest is Dyck's analysis of the Cornies myth which developed toward the end of the nineteenth century when Mennonites were suspected of disloyalty toward their adopted country and criticized in the national press for their alleged accumulation of wealth at the expense of their Slavic neighbors. To deflect these suspicions and charges, Dyck argues, Mennonite writers found it to their advantage to elevate men like Cornies as examples of Mennonite loyalty and enlightenment for the benefit of Mennonite colonies and the non-Mennonite society around them. This, I believe, is a novel observation which deserves careful consideration.

Dyck's essay on the images of Johann Cornies is lucid, probing, and generally convincing. His approach is objective and his data based on the available documents is representative and inclusive. In his conclusion, however, Dyck seems to be somewhat ambivalent. While Dyck sketches and analyzes the images and the growing myth of Cornies and briefly indicates the possible reasons why the majority of the Mennonite clergy in Cornies' time feared and hated the man, he has shied away from making up his mind about the "real" Cornies, that is, the man and the significance of his work for his time and after. It seems to me that the numerous accounts, both Mennonite and non-Mennonite, which portray Cornies as a model and pillar in the Mennonite communities and beyond them, contain sufficient references to the character, actions, motives, and views of the "enlightened despot," so that on the basis of these at least a partial portrait of the "real" Cornies emerges. I don't think that Dyck is suggesting at the end of his essay that Agronomist Gavel's obituary,

which according to Dyck himself is one-sided and hagiographic in tone, will be of greater value to the biographer in search of the historical Cornies than the testimonies of those who opposed him.

Those who have written on Cornies have followed Cornies' admirers like Gavel, with the result that next to Menno Simons Johann Cornies appears in their works as the greatest man that Russian Mennonites have produced. And from a modernist point of view they are no doubt right. It is understandable that progressive and cultured Mennonites in the second half of the nineteenth century would hail the views and policies of an enlightened leader like Cornies. And educated, materially affluent, and professionally successful Mennonites today will no doubt view Johann Cornies as a leader who more than any other helped to open the closed world of the early Russian Mennonites, and who prepared the cultural bases and institutions for the "Mennonite commonwealth" in Russia. There may even be — and this would have to be investigated — indirect and direct relationships between the policies of Cornies some 150 years ago and the economic, educational, and professional accomplishments of North and South-American Mennonites today.

Whether one agrees with Cornies' critics and detractors or not, their voices will have to be taken as seriously as those of his admirers. The various criticisms of Cornies, as revealed in the available sources, indicate that the differences between the "progressive" Cornies and the "conservative" Mennonite leadership were not mere differences of opinion with regard to implementing certain reforms but fundamental differences in their views of life and the goals they had for their communities. There is no doubt that many critics of Cornies were bigoted, backward in many ways, ultra-conservative and stubborn. However, they sincerely believed that Cornies' policies blurred the traditional lines which had separated ecclesiastical and state issues among Prussian-Russian Mennonites, and that his collaboration with the Tsarist government and his liberal-humanistic educational views and policies opened the floodgates to secular influences which were bound to transform the inherited ways of their forebears. Johann Cornies was thus seen by many as a leader who did not lead Mennonite society to spiritual heights and a new appreciation of their traditional values, but as one who led them astray from the narrow path of Christian discipleship.

P. M. Friesen in his reference to Cornies' critics admits that Cornies made "mistakes," adding that others, including the Kleine Gemeinde and the Mennonite Brethren, also made mistakes (Friesen, 198). This, I suggest, is misleading at best. The critics of Cornies, I think, would have been willing to forgive "mistakes" had they been convinced that Cornies' views, plans, goals, and policies were in accord with their own *Weltanschauung*. To put it simply, as far as the critics of Cornies were

concerned, the chairman of the Agricultural Society was "secular" in his orientation, as Harvey Dyck has correctly indicated, and the Mennonite writers who defended Cornies' policies, notably P. M. Friesen and David Epp, were also more liberal and secular in their views than they themselves realized.

Johann Cornies was no doubt a devout Mennonite. He used religious Mennonite language in his private and public writings, referred at times to traditional Mennonite principles, and refused to accept some honors and offers of promotion to governmental positions because, as he put it, he was a non-resistant Mennonite and wanted to remain nothing but a farmer (Friesen, 192). All this, however, failed to convince his Mennonite critics. While Cornies seemed to be one of their own, he was viewed by many as a foreign element in their midst and as one who intended to sell them out to the Russian government and its ways and values. His Mennonitism, his religious vocabulary, and his idealistic sentiments were viewed by his critics as means which Cornies used to achieve his dubious ends.

Perhaps the detractors of Cornies were vague and too general in their criticisms of the plans and policies of the Agricultural Society and they were certainly fearful of expressing their opposition to the Society and its chairman openly. But then those who like Elders Warkentin and Wiens did challenge the *Fürsorgekommittee* (Guardians Committee), the colonial administration, and Johann Cornies, were dealt with decisively and most severely. They were deposed and defrocked and even — as in the case of Elder Wiens — exiled from Russia. The critics were told by Privy Councillor von Hahn of the *Fürsorgekommittee* that the imperial government knew what was best for its children — the Mennonite colonists in Russia — that their traditional principle of brotherhood, whereby issues were discussed and decided upon within the *Gemeinde*, were no longer applicable, and that they did not even know how to interpret the privileges which had been extended to the Mennonites when they came to Russia. The documents relating the encounter between von Hahn and Elder Wiens with regard to whether Mennonites could be forced to administer corporal punishment upon a human being, and von Hahn's subsequent lecture to the assembled clergy read like a tragi-comedy (see Franz Isaac, 114-122).

While it was the Russian government in the person of Privy Councillor von Hahn which acted most arbitrarily in the above-mentioned affairs, Franz Isaac and others indicate that Johann Cornies was behind most of the transactions and machinations that took place. Cornies was a dictator, benevolent and enlightened or otherwise, depending on which side of the issue Mennonites found themselves, and he had little patience with those who stood in the way of his reforms. Even those individuals who worked closely with Cornies indicate that the man was not only a some-

what difficult person to live with, but that he might have been less of a Mennonite Christian than what he wished people to believe. Heinrich Heese, for example, wrote of Cornies: "With the recognition by the government, and with the increase of his wealth, the hardness of his heart also increases" (Friesen, 707). Of Heese's dismissal from his teaching position, P. M. Friesen writes: "His release came as a result of Cornies' influence through Privy Councillor Hahn in a manner which Heese believed to be a deception, and hence he felt deeply offended" (Friesen, 708).

We are not quite certain what caused some Mennonites to think of Cornies as an anti-religious person and even to call him the "precursor of Antichrist" (Goerz, 35). His interference in ecclesiastical affairs and what some considered to be his persecution of Mennonite elders may have contributed to these charges. Cornies' admirers point out that he did not talk much about matters of faith but acted like a Christian, and that he was most tolerant toward persons and groups of other religious persuasion. Could it be, we might ask, that his critics suspected his profession of faith and piety and saw him as one who was indifferent in religious matters only because he was truly tolerant? We know that Cornies was supportive of the *Kleine Gemeinde* (whose conservative views and practices he did not share) because they were model farmers and industrious workers. As far as the expression of Cornies' faith is concerned, Tobias Voth tells us that while Cornies himself had founded the mission prayer meetings in Ohrloff and once "even prayed aloud" at these meetings, "he soon stayed away" from these spiritual exercises. Voth also knew that his own pietism did not sit well with Cornies; the chairman of the Agricultural Society wanted more "manliness" and less pietistic sentimentality in his teacher (Friesen, 694-695).

With regard to Cornies' educational policies there was dismay and fear among the Mennonite clergy. Not only did the education of the young pass from ecclesiastical control to the colonial administration in general and the Agricultural Society in particular, but according to the critics, under Cornies' supervision Mennonite education became less religious in emphasis and more secular. The elders observed, quite correctly, that once the training of the young was no longer controlled by the *Gemeinde*, a more liberal, humanistic-secular view of life would become dominant in the schools. In this regard it is interesting to note that Cornies' "General Rules" for the Molotschna teachers do in fact emphasize a generally humanistic training rather than a Mennonite-Christian education. The Mennonite tradition is hardly mentioned in the "General Rules"; only once or twice is there a reference to Mennonites and that in connection with religion in general, not specifically Mennonite principles. One "Rule" states that the "teaching and impressions of religion" ought to support all other instructions and moral precepts "because no

man will ever achieve true morality if he does not feel awe, love, and trust toward an unseen Being which he can regard as the shaper of his destiny" (Friesen, 795). Another "Rule" does not speak of Christ as saviour and transformer of human lives and values but of Jesus' "loving nature" and Jesus as the greatest friend of children: "Train them to become friends of Christ; this gives them the greatest nobility in this world and the next" (Friesen, 795). The "Rules" outline a philosophy of education which separates religious instruction from general education and merely uses religion to ennoble and strengthen all disciplines and human endeavors (For the "Rules," see Franz Isaac, 280-289).

P. M. Friesen summarizes the "misgivings" and concerns of an old minister with regard to the new educational trends in the Mennonite colonies. The old minister, according to Friesen, laments the fact, that "the teaching of religion was relegated more to the place of being only a necessary supplement to general education rather than being an integral part of it" (Friesen, 785). When a teacher was criticized for not directing "the attention of the students to the Helper in every need," the teacher had replied that he was not a "teacher of religion and so was not obliged to shift to the religious area" (Friesen, 785-86). The old minister adds: "And the things I have mentioned here are continuing to develop. It is always detrimental when education in the public schools is biased totally in favor of the secular" (Friesen, 786). Friesen, the educator and intellectual, expresses his view — and bias — with regard to the concerns of the old minister as follows: "We trust that the honored writer of the letter . . . is too pessimistic and biased" (Friesen, 785).

However, this minister's concerns sound similar to the complaints expressed by Gerhard Wiebe in his *Causes and History of the Emigration of the Mennonites from Russia* (Wiebe, 63-68). Wiebe supports the view that the concerns and criticisms were fairly widespread if not all that vocal. The conservative view expressed in the above and other documents indicates that the opposition to Johann Cornies' educational policies continued well into the second half of the nineteenth century and beyond. Thus, according to James Urry, when one-third of the more conservative Mennonites left Russia for America in the 1870s, many of them not only wished to get away from nationalistic Russia but also from their "worldly" brethren who had embraced the spirit of Johann Cornies in many areas of their existence (Urry, II.).

Johann Cornies remains an enigma in Mennonite historiography. On the one hand there is the view expressed by an old man who in his youth still knew Cornies. Heinrich Goerz reports in his history of *Die Molotschnaer Ansiedlung*: "This man had nothing good to say about Cornies. He described him as being dictatorial (*herrschaftig*) and cruel, as one who intended to eliminate the true faith among Mennonites. To this purpose he meddled in ecclesiastical affairs, which were

none of his business. Some people wanted him to be exiled to Siberia, and some believed that he was the precursor of Antichrist" (Goerz, 34-35).

On the other hand there were Mennonite intellectuals like P. M. Friesen who saw Cornies as Menno Simons' equal in his importance to Mennonites. "Menno and Cornies," Friesen writes, "have given us Russian Mennonites, both in Russia and America, our ecclesiastical and cultural character for all time . . . We see in Cornies' reform the healthy body . . . for Menno's spirit . . . And we call upon our more than a hundred-thousand brothers and sisters in Russia and America: Let us remember our two teachers, Menno and Cornies!" (Friesen, 199).

In one respect, Friesen may be right. Russian Mennonites in the Americas, much more so than the Swiss-South-German Mennonites, have followed Cornies ideals and policies with regard to economic enterprise, material gain and success, close cooperation with especially conservative governments, and liberal education policies. However, whether traditional Anabaptist ideals and principles have remained strong and vibrant components within the Russian-Mennonite communities in North America is at least open to question.

Harvey Dyck concludes his essay on Cornies by suggesting that the modern biographer of Cornies will have to be thoroughly grounded in modern psychology and have an "intimate knowledge of the sources, the skills to fathom a nuanced reality, and the artistry to recreate a three-dimensional personality within a changing and tension-laden environment" (Dyck, 25). In addition to this, it might be added, the biographer of Johann Cornies will also have to listen carefully to the critics of the man and analyze their concerns within the religious context of the Russian-Mennonite brotherhood.

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