

Through the Fires of Hell: The Dekulakization and Collectivization of the Soviet Mennonite Community, 1928–1933¹

Colin P. Neufeldt, *Edmonton*

Introduction

The citizens of the Soviet Union had no idea of the apocalypse that was about to be unleashed upon them soon after Stalin assumed power in 1926-27. Claiming to be Lenin's political and ideological successor, Stalin imposed radical new political, economic, and social policies, and eliminated anyone who stood in his way. Between 1928 and 1934, the new Soviet dictator forcibly implemented programs to collectivize and industrialize the USSR with the aim of creating the first modern socialist state. In striving to achieve this goal at an unprecedented rate, Stalin's regime employed brutal and oppressive policies that not only destroyed many of the economic, political, religious, and social ties that had previously held the Mennonite community together, but also resulted in the torture and premature death of thousands of Soviet Mennonites.

The Soviet government's decision to collectivize the Soviet countryside—that is, forcibly create collective farms and state farms from land held by

peasants—was made in 1928-29 and implemented in 1929-30. The government's plans included collectivizing Ukraine by the autumn of 1930, the North Caucasus and Volga region by the spring of 1931, and the remaining grain-producing regions of the USSR by the spring of 1932. Approximately 25 million peasant farms were to be transformed into 250,000 collective and state farms (hereafter referred to as "collective farms" or "collectives"). Although the Soviet hierarchy declared that most peasants would participate in the collectivization process voluntarily, the government also employed draconian measures, including prohibitively high taxes, the expropriation of peasant property, and terror to guarantee the success of its collectivization program.

Dekulakizing the Countryside

Central to the government's strategy for collectivizing the countryside was the use of terror. On December 29, 1929 Stalin announced that the more prosperous elements of the peasantry (the so-called "kulaks") would have to be eliminated in order to rid the countryside of those who previously exploited the labour of poorer peasants and sabotaged earlier attempts to collectivize Soviet agriculture. The government called for a class war against the kulaks and subsequently issued injunctions to local village officials to implement whatever measures were necessary to "dekulakize" *en masse* those peasants considered to be kulaks—that is, to dispossess them of their property and to eliminate them. In defining "kulak" the government stated that there were both "hostile" kulaks (those who must be dispossessed of their property and imprisoned, exiled or executed) and "non-hostile" kulaks (those who must be dispossessed of their property but not necessarily exiled, imprisoned, or executed). The Soviet hierarchy estimated that between three and five percent of the entire population of the USSR were kulaks, and issued quotas of the number of kulaks who were to be imprisoned in or exiled from various regions of the USSR. When all was said and done, however, the dekulakization rates in most Russian and Ukrainian villages ranged between 5 and 15 percent and a staggering 20 to 25 percent in the majority of Mennonite settlements.²

Who was a kulak? This was a purposely slippery term. Local authorities used tax lists, annual income or property records, participation in the *Selbstschutz* or the White Army, and reaction toward the German occupation of Ukraine in 1918 to determine who was a kulak. In September of 1929, for instance, households that collectively earned annual incomes of 1,500 rubles or more were labelled kulaks. By 1930, anyone who regularly employed labourers, owned a wind or water mill, agricultural machinery, a horse, a cow, commercial buildings, or a large house was called a class enemy or kulak. Often people were labelled kulak if they were related to one, taught Sunday School, led a church choir, belonged to a church, refused to join the local collective, or exchanged letters with relatives in North America or Europe. Using such arbitrary criteria, authorities could effectively apply the term to anyone they pleased.

To ratify lists of kulaks, local authorities called meetings of voting members of the village councils who, terrified that their own names would appear on kulak lists if they demurred, raised their hands in unison. Sometimes, in the absence of such meetings, only poorer villagers were invited to give formal approval to the lists of those to be dispossessed, evicted, arrested, exiled or even executed. With the blessing of local Party newspapers, village committees of the poor became judges of who belonged to which class. Personal vendettas against neighbours and relatives were not infrequently the result. In describing this process, one Mennonite pleaded to his relatives in North America:

Help! Help! To proceed according to the law more people are disenfranchised only for the purpose of increasing the kulak class.... The newspapers write that special measures must be employed to exile these people to the North, to the forests in Siberia to cut lumber. Yesterday in our local newspaper there was a telegraphed order that the kulak class was to be cleaned out and quickly. Things are proceeding in such a way that the mind can not keep up.... What they intend to do [with the kulaks] is quite clear: give them a walking stick and drive them off of their property. Whoever does not go into the collective is treated like a kulak and is also driven out.... Save us!...³

A household designated as kulak was immediately targeted with inflated grain quotas and a barrage of taxes, frequently based on hugely inflated estimates of income. Tax levies on households could range from five to more than 100 percent of their income. Consequently, people were ordered to pay more in taxes than they were able to earn and to deliver more grain than they could harvest during a bumper crop year. In Einlage, Burwalde, and Osterwick (Khortitsa), anyone who was considered wealthy by local activists was automatically levied a tax of between 1,000 and 2,000 rubles. Initially, Mennonite kulaks were paid a token sum for their wheat in 1928 and 1929, but by mid-1930s, their grain was expropriated without any compensation. In short, grain quotas and income taxes were used to strangle the kulaks, ensuring that the vast majority of their farms would be “voluntarily” surrendered to the state.

Mennonite religious leaders, who were branded as enemies of the state, were the target of similarly inflated taxes and grain quotas. In Khortitsa, two Mennonite preachers who previously paid 250 rubles each in taxes were taxed 1,400 and 1,500 rubles in 1931. A government law that prohibited kulaks and clergymen from selling their property made it impossible for the clergymen to raise enough money to pay their taxes, which were often arbitrarily increased 700 or 800 percent. Those who allegedly purchased livestock or grain from Mennonite kulaks and preachers were frequently ridiculed in local newspapers as kulak sympathizers. Mennonite congregations that tried to assist their ministers by collecting money soon discovered that the government simply levied additional taxes. By mid-1930 few congregations could afford to bail out their clergymen who were arrested for their tax arrears. “The largest number of our preachers,” reported a Mennonite believer, “sit behind bars with sentences of one-and-a-half, two or more

years. Many preacher families have been forced from their homes and farms, and robbed of their belongings.”⁴

Mennonite preachers and kulaks who did not pay their taxes were disenfranchised, dispossessed of their property, and evicted from their homes. With disenfranchisement came the loss of any status or voting privileges. Their property, including everything from milk cows to milk pails, was confiscated and auctioned off at fire-sale prices. In describing the plight of the disenfranchised, a Mennonite eyewitness reported:

....I am “disenfranchised” because I preach. To be disenfranchised means that one is without rights.... [The disenfranchised] are not permitted to vote, say anything at community meetings or even attend them, and must always pay twice as much in taxes as others and often much more. They are entirely at the mercy of the lower authorities.... In the stores, they are not allowed to buy the necessary foodstuffs for their families....If the head of the family is disenfranchised, then so is the entire family. These are the conditions in the ideal workers’ state....⁵

The expropriated homes of dekulakized Mennonites were also used for social planning purposes. Poorer peasants in many villages, including Khortitsa, Neu-Halbstadt (Zagradovka) and Gnadenfeld (Molochnaia), moved into the houses vacated by Mennonite kulaks. In other villages former kulak residences and churches were surrendered to collective farms that subsequently converted the homes into multi-family dwellings, clubhouses, workrooms, kindergartens, schools, livestock stalls, chicken coops, or granaries.

Mennonites did everything they could to avoid being labelled as enemies of the state. Some Mennonites believed that by hiding their surplus grain, slaughtering their livestock, and damaging their farm implements and homes they would appear to be poverty-stricken peasants rather than candidates for dekulakization. This tactic often backfired, however, and Mennonites caught committing these self-liquidation measures were fined and often exiled or imprisoned. Other Mennonites packed their belongings and moved to nearby cities or even distant regions—such as the Caucasus, Siberia, and the Amur Region—in order to avoid possible arrest.

In the fall of 1929 thousands of Mennonites also made a last-ditch attempt to emigrate from the USSR to avoid the terror. Although more than 17,000 Mennonites were allowed to emigrate between 1923 and 1927, Soviet officials restricted the number of emigration visas for Mennonites to less than 1,250 between 1927 and the early fall of 1929. What sparked new interest in the emigration option was the news that the government had allowed 29 Mennonite families from Siberia to emigrate to Germany after they travelled to Moscow and obtained visas in the late summer of 1929. By the late fall of 1929, more than 10,000 Mennonites from across USSR had packed their belongings and travelled to the Soviet capital with the hope of obtaining exit visas. Soviet officials were furious over this display of resistance and initially refused to grant any more visas to the Mennonite refugees. Only the diplomatic efforts of the German government and the behind-the-scenes relief work of Mennonite leader

B. H. Unruh in Germany persuaded the Soviet government to allow more than 3,480 Soviet Mennonites to travel to Germany in December 1929. For the 7,000 or so Mennonites who did not receive visas, however, their fate was sealed. Soviet officials rounded them up, imprisoned or executed the ringleaders, and transported the rest to their home villages or to exile settlements across the USSR. In observing this deportation spectacle, a Crimean Mennonite wrote:

[The GPU (Secret Police)]... came into the living quarters, loaded the families into trucks and drove them to the railroad station. Women whose husbands were jailed bravely resisted this manoeuvre, for they did not want to go without their husbands. Four women suffered a tragic death through these tactics of the GPU. One of these women threw herself out of the truck three times. She would not go without her beloved husband. As punishment she was given three lashes across her back with a sword by a GPU soldier. With that she went along on the truck with the others. We, too, were loaded by force into a car and taken into the station. Very soon thereafter the freight cars were pulled into the station and we were pushed into them. There were 42 persons who crowded into this freight car. And on the platform of the station there was an immense crowd of people! An incredible spectacle unfolded before our eyes: children were crying, old people were moaning and groaning and weeping. The distress and the disaster which befell us could not possibly be described in human language.⁶

There was little welcome at home for the Mennonite refugees returning from Moscow. Most local authorities interpreted Stalin's announcement to liquidate the kulak as a license to attack anyone who opposed government policies, including those who had tried to emigrate. Adopting as their slogan the catch phrase, "dekulakize first and collectivize later," local officials temporarily postponed creating collective farms and embarked on campaigns to exile kulaks, refugees from Moscow, and even uncooperative, landless peasants. Often the personal whims of local officials, rather than government policies, determined which and how many Mennonites lost their citizenship rights and property. The campaigns in Mennonite-populated regions often ignored social and economic class lines, and were directed toward Mennonites of every social and economic status.

Who were the local officials who carried out the dekulakization and collectivization programs in Mennonite settlements? Many were Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, and Germans. There were also officials of Mennonite background. Some Mennonites worked for the state because of fear, intimidation, and coercion, believing government propaganda that those who did not support the state would be eliminated. Other Mennonites joined the government ranks because they wanted to improve their standard of living, were promised exemption from dekulakization, were disillusioned with their religious tradition, or agreed ideologically with the policies of the Soviet state.

The majority of Mennonites who worked for the regime did so within the village councils, the lowest administrative bodies in the Soviet state hierarchy. Although the tasks of these village councils were many and varied—including such diverse activities as dissolving Mennonite religious and economic associa-

tions, organizing local collectives, implementing grain expropriation campaigns, holding lotteries for local building projects, educating peasants on the virtues of socialism, and spearheading field mice extermination programs—the job of ridding the countryside of kulaks was paramount. Often under threats of punishment from regional councils and local activists, Mennonite members of village councils such as Burwalde (Khortitsa), Schoeneberg (Khortitsa), Rosenort (Molochnaia), and Muensterberg (Molochnaia) were ordered to decide which local Mennonite families would be dekulakized. To accomplish this, they prepared “characterizations” (economic and social profiles) of each household in their area, identifying those who were hostile and non-hostile kulaks. In February 1930, for example, Mennonite members of the village council in Pavlovka (Khortitsa) characterized 17 Mennonite families as kulaks and passed resolutions to exile one Mennonite family to Siberia, two to the Solovki Islands in the White Sea, and seven out of Ukraine. Initially council members also suggested that one Mennonite kulak be sentenced to death, but later changed their minds and decided that he and his family should be deported to Siberia. Similar decisions were made in Nieder-Khortitsa and Blumengart (Khortitsa) where Mennonite members of village councils dekulakized 13 of their coreligionists and their families in February 1930: five Mennonite families were exiled out of Ukraine, three were exiled out of the region, and the remaining five families had their property sold and the proceeds given to the village collective.

Mennonites also worked for other government agencies preoccupied with liquidating the kulak menace. They signed on as members of the Committees of the Poor, the Regional Land Division Committee, the People’s Court, and the Communist Party and Komsomol. The director of the Regional Land Commission in Khortitsa, for example, was a Mennonite whose job description included expropriating kulak land, livestock, and machinery, and redistributing it to collectives. In both the Khortitsa and Molochnaia colonies the protocols of Communist Party meetings occasionally included the names of Mennonites. As party members and candidates for party membership, they helped to organize anti-religious associations in Mennonite settlements, monitored the activities of suspected kulaks, and spread propaganda about the virtues of communism among Mennonite youth. In 1932-33, there were at least four Mennonites in Gnadenfeld (Molochnaia) who were party members, four in Ruckenau (Molochnaia), and seven in Lichtenau (Molochnaia). Of the 387 members and candidates of the Halbstadt (Molochnaia) Communist Party Organization in 1932, ninety were of German-speaking background, some of whom were Mennonite.

Perhaps the one agency in which Mennonites exerted the most influence in administering the government’s dekulakization campaign was the Executive Committee of the District Council of People’s Deputies (hereafter referred to as the “DCPD”). In some of the larger Mennonite communities, such as Khortitsa and Molochnaia, Mennonite members on the DCPD executive committees finalized the lists of local kulaks to be imprisoned, exiled, or executed. The DCPD issued weekly, and in some cases daily, directives to village councils on

how to identify kulaks and when to expropriate the property of those who failed to meet the exorbitant tax levies and grain quotas. In return, village councils provided the DCPD with resolutions listing which Mennonites were to be deported. After reviewing the resolutions, DCPD officials signed the final orders that dekulakized, and in many cases ultimately led to the exile of Mennonite families. In the Khortitsa region, for instance, many of these orders were signed by Mennonite executive members of the local DCPD. Their orders for the exile, and in some cases execution, of fellow Mennonites often included the following information: the name of the Mennonite to be dekulakized; his or her current age; previous and current tax assessments; a current inventory of his or her property; an inventory of his or her property prior to the Bolshevik Revolution; information as to whether or not he or she took up arms against the Red Army during the Austro-German occupation during World War I or on behalf of the White Army during and after the Bolshevik Revolution; the resolutions of the village council and the DCPD to dekulakize and exile the Mennonite outside of Ukraine; and the signature of the executive secretary of the DCPD. After the individual orders were signed, the Khortitsa DCPD routinely prepared long summaries of dekulakized Mennonites to be exiled; a single list often contained 20 to 40, and sometimes over fifty Mennonite names from a particular settlement.

Membership in a village council, communist party cell, or the DCPD did not, however, guarantee immunity from dekulakization. Mennonite officials who were accused of being kulak sympathizers were summarily expelled from their positions and dekulakized. This happened to Mennonite members of the Burwalde (Khortitsa) Committee of the Poor and the Muensterberg (Molochnaia) village council who were expelled from their posts and dekulakized after they were accused of being too lenient with kulaks and members of the local Mennonite church.⁷

Some Mennonites naively believed that by writing petitions explaining their innocence, local officials would realize that they were loyal citizens of the state and not kulaks. The petitions fell on deaf ears, however, and the dekulakization orders were carried out despite the alleged innocence of the accused. Other Mennonites wrote declarations, either voluntarily or by force, wherein they reported on the alleged kulak activities of their neighbours and relatives. "There were false brothers in some villages," one Mennonite lamented, "who played the terrible role of Judas, betrayed their brothers, and told outrageous lies to authorities."⁸ These Judases hoped that their statements would grant them a reprieve; often, however, their confessions were twisted by the authorities and used as evidence of their own collaboration with kulaks and they were subsequently dekulakized.

The number of Mennonite kulaks and ministers evicted from their homes varied significantly from village to village. Some local authorities were so zealous in carrying out the dekulakization measures that it was not uncommon for a large number of Mennonites in a particular district to be dispossessed and

evicted in the space of a few days. In Osterwick (Khortitsa), for example, eight Mennonite families were driven out of their homes in mid-February of 1930. Around the same time, 17 Mennonite families from Pavlovka (Khortitsa) were evicted from their homes, many of whom were subsequently exiled. Several weeks later, 17 families in the village of Nikolaifeld (Khortitsa), 22 families in Varvarovka (Alexandrovka), and over 230 families in the Molochnaia colony were ordered to leave their homes. A number of villages had so many evictions that few of the original Mennonite inhabitants still resided in the villages by the end of 1933.

Once evicted from their homes, Mennonite kulaks who were not immediately arrested, exiled, or executed faced a dismal future. With little if any money or personal possessions, the displaced individuals now faced the difficult task of finding shelter and food for their families. Some families moved into the homes of relatives or friends—notwithstanding the inherent risks that came with helping kulaks—while others sought shelter in abandoned buildings or homes for the poor. Kulaks were prohibited from using bread ration cards to buy food from cooperatives or government-operated stores, which forced many dispossessed Mennonites to buy their food on the black market at increasingly inflated prices or to resort to panhandling and eating whatever they could find, including weeds, cats, and vermin. Disease and starvation soon took the lives of those who could not survive on such meagre provisions.

The more fortunate received food packages sent by friends or relatives in the West. Desperate letters from Ukraine and the Crimea moved Mennonite relief agencies and individuals in North America and Europe to send food parcels and money to their Soviet coreligionists. Soviet officials, however, routinely used the relief parcels as a means of extorting additional funds (as much as 500 rubles for a single package) from dekulakized households. The officials frequently rummaged through the packages, keeping whatever they wanted before handing over the remaining contents to the rightful recipients. Occasionally, however, dollar bills cleverly hidden in the packages eluded the officials' attention. With this money, Mennonites purchased food on the black market or at greatly reduced prices in Soviet government-sponsored "Torgsin" stores that catered exclusively to customers with foreign currency.

Mennonites targeted for dispossession and exile suffered public ridicule in local newspapers that lampooned those who had allegedly failed to endorse the collectivization and dekulakization programs. In *Stürmer*, a German-language newspaper published in Khortitsa, Mennonite reporters frequently wrote articles that blamed individual Mennonite kulaks for everything from the deplorable condition of horse hygiene on local collectives to the undermining work of class enemies in kindergartens. In some cases, the newspaper published excerpts of judgments from court proceedings in which Mennonites were convicted and sentenced to forced labour for their kulak activities. To demoralize the community, *Stürmer* also published the names of Mennonites who had publicly renounced their religious faith and supported the dekulakization of fellow Mennonites.

Mennonite clergymen were also the objects of derision in village newspapers. Caricaturing religious leaders as political criminals, newspapers warned their communities of the wicked influence of church leaders and explained why they should be disenfranchised, forbidden to send their children to school, prevented from joining collectives, and prohibited from working in the ministry or any other type of employment. Pressured to give up their calling, dispossessed ministers were hounded by local officials, and exiled, imprisoned, or shot for their religious convictions. Some resisted: despite repeated interrogation by officials, a Mennonite minister in Khortitsa continued to preach, organize Bible studies, and baptize new converts until he was exiled in 1934. Other ministers, however, succumbed to the pressure and renounced their faith. A Mennonite preacher from Kleefeld (Molochnaia) signed a statement stating that he resigned from his position in order to help build socialism. Officials immediately printed the statement in the newspapers, hoping to scandalize the local church.⁹

The disenfranchised, dispossessed, and publicly humiliated kulaks and clergy were then forcibly resettled, imprisoned, exiled, or executed. As mentioned earlier, there were two categories of victims: the so-called "hostiles" and "non-hostiles." In the first months of 1930, the Soviet regime forcibly moved thousands of non-hostile Mennonite kulaks to specially designated settlements across the Soviet Union, but usually near their home villages on the least productive lands. Three of the best known kulak settlements in the Molochnaia region were Neuhof, Oktoberfeld, and Krasnopil; in the Memrik area, Dolyniv'ske and Novokalynove; and in the Khortitsa area near the villages of Neuenberg, Blumengart, Burwalde, Osterwick, and Eichenfeld.

Local resettlement was essentially an internal exile of extreme toil and grinding poverty. Government directives stipulated that one hectare of land be allotted for each member of a kulak household, with a maximum of five hectares for a family. Since many of the kulak settlements were new villages, people sought shelter in hastily thrown-up shacks or camped out in the open. Families grew what they could on tiny plots of marginal soil, their only source of food, yet they were also required to pay exorbitant taxes. Often treated like slaves and seldom paid for their work, Mennonite kulaks were also forced to do back-breaking work on government construction and community projects. And if they failed to meet the unrealistic grain quotas, their crops and recently allotted land were confiscated. This hand-to-mouth existence in impoverished kulak settlements drove some to suicide.

Mennonites classified as hostile kulaks, on the other hand, were usually first imprisoned and then executed or exiled to work camps in the northern USSR. Between 1928 and 1933 thousands of Mennonites were thrown into overcrowded, rat-infested holding tanks for "non-payment of grain and tax assessments," spreading of "anti-Bolshevik propaganda," "resistance to the state," "possession of letters from the capitalist world," or "participation in religious activities." In spring 1931, for instance, a Mennonite was jailed with 200 others in a Kharkiv cell designed for 75 men. As the number of arrests soared,

warehouses, factories, barns, and even homes were converted into makeshift lock-ups. A case in point was the conversion of the Hildebrand farm implements factory in the village of Khortitsa into a prison in the spring of 1931. Between 400 and 600 prisoners—the majority of whom were Mennonite—awaited deportation in the former factory.

The overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and spartan food rations (typically a thin green salt soup and a half to three quarters of a pound of bread daily) had calamitous results. Parcels from spouses and relatives were routinely ransacked by guards. In the above-mentioned Hildebrand factory cadavers soon littered the one-time factory floors and were carted to Einlage for burial. Reports of starvation deaths in a prison near Halbstadt (Molochnaia) suggest this was a common occurrence. Torture too became an everyday experience. Prisoners were forced to remain standing in one place literally for weeks, had needles shoved under their fingernails, or were placed in tight spaces lined with light bulbs that burned them at the slightest movement.¹⁰

To invest individual deportation decisions with a mantle of legitimacy, officials went to extreme lengths to orchestrate the appearance of community endorsement. A Molochnaia eye-witness letter dated April 3, 1930 described one such process:

Already at the beginning of March authorities from the district administration began dekulakizing kulaks. The village assembly (to which only the poor belong) stated that it was opposed to this. Then only the poor from the five villages belonging to our local council were called to a meeting. Since they were threatened, the poor from our village did not vote (even though they were against this); however, there were a few degenerates from other villages who voted in favour. They then went to the so-called kulaks and said to them, 'According to a resolution of the citizens of your village you will be dekulakized.' They made a list of their property and took almost all of it away.

Some time later, on the morning of March 31, the men were arrested. The women were told to have everything packed within 10 hours. No family was allowed to take more than 35 poods. On the morning of April 1, the wagons appeared. The women and children were loaded up, the men were taken out of custody, and under close supervision, as if they were terrible criminals, they were transported to the railway station. The military escorted them. The possessions and the people were quickly unloaded.... The women then flocked together and later pushed toward the cattle cars into which their men had been loaded. Forty-five people were squeezed together in each car and they were not let out for an entire day. The doors were also locked. Inside there was stench, heat, misery, and crying.¹¹

The deportation experience was similar for Crimean Mennonites in late March 1930:

...Then the disenfranchised received the news that they must be ready by nine o'clock on Sunday morning to be transported away. But this occurred today, on Monday. Already at seven o'clock in the morning the entire village was on the street. Then came one wagon after another, each loaded with people, and with more than 50 people from Spat [Crimea] and the rest from Sofievka and Menlartshik.... in

total there were 56 full wagons. At around half past two the gates were opened and they proceeded to Simferopol. All of the inhabitants were on the street and we sang three departure songs for them until the last wagon had passed, but with such conviction. You could not imagine it. Nobody knows where they are going. They had to bring along enough food for three months, as well as an axe, a saw, shovels, and two ropes. It is said that they will be sent to Siberia....

On March 25 we had a restless night. We wanted to sleep but then 300 wagons came [through the village]. We heard singing, "In dem Himmel ist Ruhe".... The ones who were transported away yesterday were immediately embarked to Simferopol together with many men who had been sitting in prison for months.... It is said that they are going to the border. What joy if this were the case, but is it actually so? We believe and fear and wait for those things which are yet to come.¹²

The gulag-bound trains of locked cattle cars—nicknamed "red wagons"—held from 45 to 77 exiles per car, and were often very long. On April 1, 1930 more than 2,000 severely crowded deportees (a quarter of whom were Mennonite or German speaking) left on a single train from the Mennonite Molochnaia village of Lichtenau. The largest Mennonite-bearing train on record from southern Ukraine had 98 cattle cars, with about 45 people per car. Such trains were a common sight until well into 1933.

The overcrowded cattle cars were unlit and unventilated. Soldier guards kept the doors locked, nailed shut the windows and ventilation openings, and often provided only a small bucket to serve as a toilet. Drinking water ran out frequently. During one two-week train ride to camps in Western Siberia, a Mennonite deportee received soup only four times and bread even less frequently. Many deportees, especially young children, died en route of dehydration and starvation. Bodies were pitched out onto sidings along the main railway lines of the Soviet north.

Surviving Mennonite exiles disembarked into sparsely inhabited forests, marshlands, and mountain regions across the vast gulag of the Soviet Union at Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, the Solovki Islands, Narian Mar, Kotlas, Vologda, Perm, Bogoslavskii, Chelyabinsk, Kalchim, Lunevka, Melkoe, Sverdlovsk, Ust-Kulom, Omsk, Narym, Novosibirsk, Tiazhin, Tomsk, Karaganda, Turkestan, Tashkent, Irkutsk, and the Amur River region. Exiles sentenced to hard labour were placed in local prisons, where many died. Most of the rest were consigned to new remote penal settlements that were sometimes located in excess of 100 kilometres from a railhead. The exiles' forced trek from railheads, carrying children and belongings across snowbound forests or through swampy marshlands in knee-deep snow, mud, or muskeg often took weeks and again resulted in deaths from exposure, fatigue, or hunger.

At the camp sites, guards routinely confiscated the small amount of food that arriving exiles still possessed and often refused them fresh rations. Moreover, the exiles were quarantined in unheated holding cells for a week or more, ostensibly to prevent the spread of disease. In camps near settled areas deportees might be billeted in prisons, confiscated churches, or schools until they could

erect more permanent quarters themselves. In more remote camps, exiles had to construct temporary shelters such as lean-tos of branches and dirt. In a camp near Bogoslavskii a group of Molochnaia Mennonites initially lived in crude huts while throwing up more permanent barracks. At a camp near Omsk, the exiles slept outdoors in minus fifty degree Celsius cold. Disoriented and unaccustomed to the harsh conditions, some went mad, wandering off into the deep woods where they perished. Those who endured helped in the construction of barracks that housed from 200 to 2,000 people in overcrowded, bedbug-and-lice-infested squalor. In one such barrack near Vologda more than a dozen women shared a stove to prepare meals.¹³

Mennonite exiles banished to settlements in remote, densely forested regions of the Soviet taiga, worked as woodcutters—obligatory for men between 16 and 60 and women between 16 and 55. Older children and the elderly prepared the meals, looked after the younger children, collected firewood, and kept house for camp officials. Up early, the deportees walked long distances to work sites where they cut and stacked trees amidst swarms of mosquitoes or in bonechilling cold. In describing her daily work regimen, one Mennonite woman wrote:

...In the past summer 30 Germans died and countless more Russians.... The great wonder of it all is that our family is still all alive.... I do not know whether you have any idea about our work. It is like a jungle in which there are trees with extremely thick trunks.... We have to drag these [trees trunks] to our huts.... This is the kind of work that oxen do, but not women. Most have been physically ruined by this kind of work, including myself.... It is very, very difficult work. In the winter, both of my children and S. had to cut dry wood for 27 ovens. They were promised to be paid for their work, but they still have not received anything. Overall they regard us as fools.... Generally I have to say that we are tired and weary of life; since we have such a tormented existence, life is not worth living. It is because of my children that I continue on....¹⁴

In one camp near Vologda, Mennonites worked long shifts uninterruptedly for 116 consecutive days. At camps near Bogoslavskii and Monastyrka few exiles were able to meet daily work quotas—cutting, splitting and stacking one cubic metre of wood a day. Mennonites at another northern work camp had equal difficulty in meeting a daily work norm of chopping and trimming 35 mature trees. At yet another site the quota was fifty trees per day.

In winter, with temperatures plummeting to minus forty or fifty degrees Celsius, deportees worked in deep snow without adequate winter clothing or boots, their only foot covering being tree bark and sackcloth. The results were frost-bitten noses, hands and feet, often leading to death. The spring-time transformation of much of the Soviet taiga into muddy bogs necessitated work in knee-deep mud, resulting again in numerous mishaps with serious, even fatal, injuries. Prisoners were seen as expendable slave labour and forced to work even with hunger-swollen feet, bruised shoulders from hauling heavy logs, and injured hands from tree-chopping. “It seems that we have been sent here to die,” a Mennonite exile wrote to relatives in Canada.¹⁵ In one typical case, a

Mennonite exile was compelled to continue his work after guards had maliciously cut his infected foot and forced him to walk barefoot in the snow. At a camp near the White Sea a Mennonite was stopped from rescuing a seriously maimed fellow exile, ensuring his death from starvation or exposure.

Punishments were severe for even minor infractions, such as failing to meet daily work quotas. Penalties included ludicrous tasks. In one instance, Mennonites who had failed to meet their work norms were required to stand motionless on a tree stump for several hours. Those who moved or fell were forced to carry heavy loads of bricks, often until they dropped from fatigue. For major offences, exiles might be put in prison cells, tortured, and made to do long terms of especially hard labour. There were also cases of execution.

Other work was no less toilsome or dangerous. Large numbers of Mennonites helped construct ice roads for lumber camps or worked as miners. At camps throughout Siberia and the Amur region, Mennonites mined coal, copper, and gold, with primitive tools and under hazardous conditions. They also worked as carpenters, brick layers, in quarries and in the building of shipping canals. Others became farm labourers, cattle herders, grave and well diggers, fire fighters, pulp and paper mill labourers, blacksmiths, locksmiths, cooks, bakers, security guards, bookkeepers, hospital orderlies, and even school teachers.

Certain jobs were almost exclusively reserved for women, including nursing in camp clinics and hospitals. There are reports of Mennonite women in camps near Arkhangelsk, Tomsk, and along the Ural Mountains washing floors, cooking, and working in factories in nearby villages. Mennonite women were also sometimes coerced into providing sex to camp officials and guards.¹⁶

Few exiles could survive on the wages and rations given to them. The better-off received one to two rubles a day, barely enough food to feed one person, and certainly not an entire family. In most cases, however, camp officials refused to pay the exiles anything, and only provided spartan and stale rations that rarely sustained the strength of a working adult. The daily rations for a deportee working in the forests near Tomsk were 400 grams of bread and porridge. One exile candidly observed that the "food rations were such that we received too little to live, but too much to die."¹⁷ The only thing that helped some Mennonite exiles avoid imminent starvation were the food packages from North America and Europe which had somehow made their way past camp guards without being completely destroyed or plundered.

What enabled many deportees to survive this hell on earth was their religious faith. Their trust in God, obedience to Christ's teachings, and recollection of the lives of Christian martyrs provided spiritual consolation in a world which to them was on the verge of its apocalyptic end. Their torment and torture reminded them of images from the Book of Revelation where the Apostle John foresaw the persecution of God-fearing believers and the destruction of the earth before Christ's return. In camps where the rules against participation in religious practices were not strictly enforced, Mennonites did their best to keep their faith intact, holding religious

services in the nearby forests or in the barracks on Sundays and holidays. At other camps, however, officials enforced every letter of the law and required deportees to work on Sundays and religious holidays to prevent believers from meeting. To get around this, Mennonites held secret nocturnal religious services in nearby forests, often under the penalty of execution.

The remote possibility of release or escape also gave Mennonite deportees a reason to hope. On rare occasions camp guards released selected exiles (usually children or the elderly). Some seized the opportunity to return home; many, however, remained in the camps with family members who were not permitted to leave. For those who could not wait for their release orders, escape from the camps was the only way to evade further suffering and torture. Escapees who were recaptured were usually beaten, incarcerated in unheated cells for days without any food, and sentenced to more years in exile. Escapees who did not get caught wandered around in the bush in knee-deep snow and subzero temperatures trying to find their way back to their home villages thousands of kilometres away without the benefit of maps, compasses, food, or proper clothing. Despite insurmountable difficulties, Mennonite fugitives did return to their villages. They were frequently recaptured and subsequently imprisoned or reexiled; in a few cases, however, they succeeded in settling in distant territories where they could live incognito.

Fatal disease, starvation, suicide, and execution snuffed out the lives of most of those who did not escape or were never released from the camps. Perennial shortages of food, extreme exhaustion, and inhospitable living conditions contributed to major outbreaks of diseases—typhus, scurvy, grippe, tuberculosis, dysentery, edema, scarlet fever, and pneumonia—that decimated the camp population. In spring of 1930, for instance, a Mennonite wrote that an average of three to five exiles died per day in his camp near Tomsk. There were 1,200 deaths in a three-month period in a 3,000-person barrack in the Solovki Islands, and at a camp in the Ural mountains a Mennonite exile reported that “of the approximately 7000 people who came there, there were already 2,000 dead. More particularly, there were already a very large number of children who had died.”¹⁸ Even higher death tolls were recorded at a settlement near Vologda where approximately 4,000 of the 40,000 exiles died shortly after their arrival. By all accounts, the government’s program to liquidate the kulak was a resounding success.

Collectivizing the Countryside

What happened to Mennonites who were not dekulakized, exiled, or executed? The majority became the unwilling participants in the great Soviet experiment of socializing the countryside, that is, forcibly converting individual land holdings into collective farms. In late 1929, pervasive fear of being dekulakized compelled millions of Soviet peasants to surrender their land, livestock, and machinery and to sign on as members of collective farms. Over 57

percent of peasant households in the USSR were collectivized by March 1930. Other peasants refused to join the collective farms and used various means of active and passive resistance. In the early months of 1930, for instance, peasants destroyed approximately 14 million head of cattle, losses that compelled Stalin to call a temporary halt to his crash collectivization campaign in March, 1930. By the summer of 1930, however, the government again sanctioned the use of force to drive the peasants into the collectives. Most regions of Ukraine, the North Caucasus, the Ural Mountains, and the Lower and Central Volga were completely collectivized by August 1932. In January, 1933, Stalin announced to the world that his first Five-Year Plan to collectivize the nation was completed in four years and three months.

The maniacal pace of collectivization did not come without a price, however. With the confiscation of peasant land came the expropriation of unprecedented amounts of peasant grain, ensuring widespread famine conditions in Ukraine, the Crimea, and other regions of the USSR. By the winter of 1932-1933, half-starved peasants with swollen abdomens and bare-boned limbs were a common sight in Ukraine. The famine death toll ranged between five and seven million Soviet peasants, of which four to five million were from Ukraine. By most accounts, the famine was a man-made catastrophe of unprecedented proportions which decimated peasant populations in many areas of the USSR and constituted an act of genocide perpetrated by the Stalinist regime against the inhabitants of Ukraine.¹⁹

To avoid collectivization and the ravages of famine, a significant number of Mennonites migrated to larger villages and cities such as Khortitsa to find employment. Although few had the internal passports and working papers that were required, Mennonites still found urban employment with agricultural machinery factories, the Dnieper Dam project, offices, hospitals, pharmacies, research laboratories, and railway and road construction crews. Urban employment usually entailed membership in the Communist Party. At the "Communar" and "Engels" factories in Khortitsa, for instance, Mennonite employees joined the Communist Party and a Soviet-sponsored workers' club since membership in these organizations was often a condition of employment. Membership in the party was also a prerequisite for Mennonites who worked for Soviet newspapers, such as *Deutscher Kollektivist* and *Stürmer*.

Most other Mennonites worked on collective farms. Directives from Moscow and Kiev in early 1930 instructed local officials to collectivize huge tracts of land regardless of the cost. By the spring of 1930, nearly all of the independently owned farms in the Khortitsa colony were collectivized, and by the end of 1931 most of the independently operated farms in Mennonite colonies across Ukraine and the Crimea had been swallowed up by collectives. With names such as "Rote Heimat" (Neuenberg), "Rosa Luxemburg" (Burwalde), "Kommune International" (Khortitsa), "Sovietsteppe" (Molochnaia), "Fortschritt" (Molochnaia), and "10 Jahre Oktoberrevolution" (Molochnaia), the collective farms ranged in size from 12 families (Gruenfeld, Kryvyy-Rih) to 39 villages (Spat, Crimea).

Becoming a member of a collective farm was not a straightforward process, however. Government restrictions on the social class of members prevented disenfranchised Mennonites who did not qualify as poor or middle peasants from joining. Before an individual was admitted, all of the collective farm members met to determine what the membership requirements and fees for that individual would be. Membership fees ranged from five to one-hundred rubles and often included livestock, machinery, and personal possessions. Those who passed the screening test and paid the fees were handed a book of regulations governing collective farm life. Those members who broke the regulations were punished, and if necessary dekulakized. This happened to Mennonites from Tiege (Molochnaia) who were summarily dekulakized after being accused of sabotaging their collective farm.²⁰

Membership in a collective farm also required sacrifice. Having already surrendered their livestock, machinery, and land to local authorities, the members of each collective farm household were usually allotted no more than a cow or a pig, a few chickens, and a half hectare of land for their own personal use. Families were also ordered to relinquish ownership of their homes, which were subsequently converted to multi-family dwellings, livestock stalls, milking parlours, incubator stations, garages, smithies, workshops, dining halls, reading clubs, village council chambers, veterinary clinics, kindergartens, or theatres. The official rationale for this was that it minimized the class lines between the formerly "rich" and "poor" households.

Those who managed the day-to-day operations of the collective farms were members of the executive committees. In villages such as Blumstein and Tiege (Molochnaia), executive committees included Mennonites, some of whom were Communist Party members. In their capacity as collective farm chairmen, accountants, agronomists, livestock managers, and personnel directors, Mennonites planned the affairs of the collective farms pursuant to directives provided by the Communist Party and local DCPD. One of the most difficult tasks for executive committees was convincing their members that the policies of the Communist Party or DCPD were in the best interest of the collective. To perpetuate the myth that their members had some say in the decision-making process of the collective, the executive committee routinely convened meetings for members to rubber-stamp decisions that the executive wanted to have implemented, such as confirming government directives for crop-seeding programs and grain quotas, ratifying the list of members who were to be evicted for their kulak activities, determining which families would share the milk from one of the collective farm cows, selecting those who could attend a local women's conference, or sponsoring a campaign to protest the widespread hunger and atrocities in Germany.

Life could be extremely difficult for executive committee members whose collective farms consistently failed to meet government quotas. These members became the government's scapegoats for the failures of the collectivization program and were castigated in local newspapers for conspiring with kulaks to

destroy the nation's agricultural programs. Dismissal from work, dekulakization, and exile were the usual forms of punishment for executive committee members who fell out of favour with the regime.

Mennonites also held other influential positions on the collectives. Some who worked as cultural affairs directors were given the task of monitoring local school teachers, showing government propaganda films to members, stocking the reading rooms (*Roten Ecke*) of the collectives with government publications, and choreographing musicals dedicated to glorifying the Soviet Union. Mennonites were also employed as brigadiers, playing an important role in ensuring that specific tasks, such as field work, machinery repair, and livestock care, were completed on a daily basis. Often despised by ordinary collective farm workers, the brigadier assigned daily tasks to each member in his or her brigade, supervised the brigade members to insure that the work was completed satisfactorily, determined what wages and rations each member should receive, organized cultural and political instruction sessions, and disciplined those who had failed to live up to community standards. Brigadiers who failed to perform their duties were ridiculed in local newspapers and often imprisoned or exiled. This was the experience of a Mennonite brigadier from Franzfeld (Khortitsa) who spent two years in forced labour because he was accused of taking discarded grain sweepings left behind by his brigade after they finished threshing a crop.

School teachers also played an influential role in collective farm life. Kept in check by the local Communist Party cell, education inspectors, and government authorities, Mennonite daycare workers and teachers were required to follow the atheistic Soviet education curriculum to the letter. To ascertain the religious backgrounds of their teachers, local officials circulated questionnaires that required teachers to disclose their family's social class, religious beliefs, and affiliations with the Communist party, anti-religious groups, and Soviet-sponsored associations. Although a large number of Mennonite teachers failed the questionnaires and were dismissed from their positions, a significant percentage of Mennonites met the qualifications and worked on collective farm schools. Their curriculum included such diverse topics as reading, mathematics, the spring seeding program, the role of propaganda during the harvest, how kulaks and preachers influenced the emigration movement, and the detrimental work of Western relief agencies. Mennonite teachers were also required to organize Pioneer and Komsomol organizations where the children were instructed in Marxist-Leninist theory, the folly of religious faith, and the importance of informing on suspected kulak family members.

The majority of rank and file Mennonite members worked as labourers on the collectives. The better paid positions included those of cook, veterinarian, horseman, milker, swineherder, beekeeper, carpenter, machine operator, sawmill operator, and blacksmith. Those unable to secure one of these positions toiled in the fields, performing such tasks as plowing, seeding, weeding, harvesting, cleaning silos, and digging ditches. Mennonite labourers accused of coming to work late, sleeping on the job, abandoning their posts, attending

church services, or stealing collective farm property were immediately branded as saboteurs, kulaks, and hooligans, and saw their names and misdeeds published in the local newspaper. In Tiege (Molochnaia), for instance, a number of Mennonites were evicted from a collective when it was alleged that they had previously used hired help on their farms and obtained membership in the collective using false documents. Officials at a Zagradovka collective went further when they ordered the execution of a Mennonite accused of stealing 29 poods of grain; they later commuted his death sentence to a 10-year period of disenfranchisement.²¹

Officially, not all members were required to work on the collectives. Government regulations stipulated that only men between 18 and 50 and women between 18 and 45 were required to work. In reality, however, Mennonite men and women of all ages, as well as the elderly, infirm, and children toiled on collective farms. As it was, Mennonite women who worked in the fields and performed all of the cooking, housework, and child care tasks around the house, frequently found their lives more difficult than those of their menfolk. Often rising before anyone else in the morning, the woman of the household prepared breakfast for her family, milked the cow, fed the livestock, and brought the children to the nursery or school. She then worked in the fields or at other tasks until evening when she returned home to look after her children, prepare supper, and clean the house. She might temporarily escape from some of her work duties if she was selected to attend a women's conference which would address such issues of concern as cattle care, unproductive housework, and meeting the objectives of Stalin's Five-Year Plan in less than five years.

It was also Mennonite women who were the most publicly defiant of government efforts to collectivize. In early 1930 a Soviet newspaper reported that some Mennonite women from Nikolaifeld (Khortitsa) refused to join the local collective after kulaks had convinced them that the government would take custody of their children if they became collective farm members. Female resistance also occurred in Liebenau (Molochnaia) when the women of a collective threatened to revolt after they learned that their cows would be expropriated and kept in the community stalls of the collective. Such exhibitions of defiance and sabotage resulted in immediate and severe punishment. This was the experience of Mennonites from a collective in Gnadenfeld (Molochnaia) who were exiled to Siberia in 1931 after they were blamed for the decline of the farm's livestock herds. An even harsher sentence was imposed on a woman from a Zagradovka collective who was sentenced to be shot after she was found guilty of starting a fire that destroyed 450 poods of grain in 1932.

Another way in which Mennonites resisted the government's collectivization programs was by participating in Mennonite religious life. To purge the countryside of all manifestations of religious faith, the Communist Party and the League of the Godless (a government anti-religious organization) had organized antireligious circles (clubs) to convert the peasantry to atheism. The conversion process was accelerated when government officials embarrassed,

punished, fined, and in some cases exiled those who refused to renounce their religious faith. In the Khortitsa colony, for instance, the local newspaper ridiculed Mennonites who attended Bible studies and published the “conversion accounts” of Mennonites who became atheists. Local officials in the Molochnaia colony threatened to exile Mennonites who refused to forsake their Christian beliefs and enlist in the League of the Godless by November 1931. The government also replaced religious holidays with socialist holidays such as anti-Christmas and anti-Easter celebrations. During these celebrations school teachers had their pupils read poems, sing songs, stage plays, and perform gymnastic exercises intended to ridicule the churches and glorify the Soviet state. Mennonites who refused to allow their children to attend such events or were caught attending church services were often fined, evicted from the collectives, or exiled. This was the experience of a number of Mennonite families in Molochnaia in 1931:

At the factory in Halbstadt, every worker who celebrated Christmas was charged. Here generally there is a strong campaign against Christmas. In Halbstadt and also here in Ohrloff there were anti-religious evenings on Christmas Eve where anti-Christmas was celebrated. There was required attendance for all of the school children. Some, however, were in church, even on New Year’s Eve. They were fined from five to eight rubles per child. And whoever had a Christmas tree at their house had a thirty ruble fine.... If it were possible for the Christmas sun to cast its rays only once on this darkness, then everything would be better. But God knows the time and the hour for this. We will trust him, hope and not despair. “Should it become difficult for us, let us stand firm”—so should we pray and God may allow the sun to shine again on our people. We wish you a happy and blessed new year.²²

The government’s plan to eradicate religion from the countryside did not succeed in the Mennonite communities. Despite the imprisonment and exile of Mennonite pastors, Mennonite church services, prayer meetings, Bible studies, weddings, and funerals occurred until 1933, albeit infrequently and usually in private homes. Mennonite congregations even held baptismal services; those who practiced immersion baptism sometimes chopped a hole in a frozen river or lake. In the summer of 1930, 127 people were baptized in Khortitsa, and 56 in Landskrone (Molochnaia) in 1931.

It was often impossible, however, to hold a church service or baptism on traditional religious holidays. This was because collective farms often required their members to work on Sundays, Christmas, and Easter in order to meet escalating grain and meat quotas set by the government. The all-important objective was to overfill the nation’s storage bins with grain. What often prevented this from happening were widespread crop failures and poor harvests. What also exacerbated the problem were the inefficient harvesting and crop-storage practices that prevented the grain from ever reaching the nation’s storage bins. Large tracts of uncut wheat lying under snow or large mounds of unprotected, rotting grain were a common sight. In the Zagradovka region there were thousands of hectares of unharvested snow-covered grain in mid-Novem

ber of 1930, and much of the grain in the Molochnaia region was left for cattle feed after it rotted in the fields.

Also partially responsible for the poor agricultural performance of collective farms were the Machine Tractor Stations—a government agency which confiscated and managed the use of farm machinery across the USSR. Problems inherent in the location and management of the stations prevented them from providing efficient service to the collectives. Supervised by the Communist Party, officials from the Machine Tractor Stations usually based their decisions on political concerns rather than on sound agricultural practices. Notwithstanding their inefficient service, the stations still required collective farms to surrender as much as 25 percent of their harvest for the use of the stations' equipment. A lion's share of the grain that was not forwarded to the MTS was delivered to government officials to meet the additional grain quotas. So much grain was demanded by the stations and government that Mennonites often surrendered all of their seed grain and their last food rations to meet the quotas.

These personal sacrifices did not go far enough, however. When grain quota deficits inevitably arose in 1932, Mennonite collective farm members were routinely accused of conspiring with kulaks to sabotage the country's collectivization efforts. Mennonites from Rosenort (Molochnaia), for example, were expelled from their collective after being blamed for sabotaging the crops on their collective farm. To make up for the shortfalls, collective farm members were ordered to rethresh straw and reharvest fields to find additional grain. The government also organized search brigades which scoured homes to find hidden caches of grain in pillow cases, tea kettles, attics, and root cellars. Those caught with even a few handfuls of grain were arrested, exiled, or executed.

What little food or wages a collective farm member received bore no relation to the amount of work he or she performed. Wages rarely exceeded a ruble for a 10-hour work shift. Mennonites at a collective near Blumengart (Khortitsa) received as little as 18 kopecks for a full day of work, while labourers at a collective near Osterwick (Khortitsa) were paid 18 rubles or one-and-a-half poods of flour for 240 days of backbreaking work.

The niggardly food rations meant that collectivized Mennonites had to supplement their diets with food sent in parcels from the West, purchased on the black market, or obtained by begging on the streets. Collectivized Mennonites became so hungry that they ate cornstalks, rotting vegetables, thistles, tree bark, and sawdust. "Beets used to feed livestock" wrote one Mennonite, "were consumed by many [people] as though they were delicacies; there are not any left, however."²³ Desperation also drove Mennonites from Halbstadt (Molochnaia), Wernersdorf (Molochnaia), and the Zagradovka region to eat the fetid carcasses of dogs, cats, and mice. In villages such as Schoenwiese (Khortitsa) they robbed graves in search of valuables to purchase food. By the fall of 1932, most collectivized Mennonites faced empty cupboards. The symptoms of severe malnutrition (gaunt faces, distended stomachs, and painful headaches) and the incidence of disease (such as typhus, smallpox, pneumonia, diphtheria, and

malaria) were also evident in almost every village. By the summer of 1933, for example, more than 300 people were sick with malaria in the Khortitsa region.

Such widespread hunger and disease resulted in high mortality rates. In the Khortitsa region the burial of starvation victims was a daily event, and in the Molochnaia colony rotting Mennonite corpses could be found on roadsides and in ditches and fields where they were eaten by scavenging animals. The famine's death toll was devastating in some villages: 15 famine deaths in Alexanderfeld (Zagradovka), 17 in Tiede (Zagradovka), 19 in Ohrloff (Zagradovka), 22 in Khortitsa, 26 in Nikolaifeld (Zagradovka), 32 in Halbstadt (Molochnaia), 34 in Schoenau (Zagradovka) and 41 in Neu-Halbstadt (Zagradovka). The impact of the famine on the Mennonite birth rate was also devastating. Among 19 villages in the Khortitsa region, for example, the average number of children per family dropped from 3.7 children per family in 1928/1929 to 2.9 by 1933—a staggering 22 percent decrease.²⁴

Conclusion

The apocalypse of 1928-1933 had innumerable consequences for the Soviet Mennonite community, but several stand out in particular. First, the government's collectivization and dekulakization programs resulted in the long-term oppression, suffering, and premature death of the majority of members of the Soviet Mennonite community. As victims of the government's dekulakization campaign, thousands of Mennonites lost everything that they had—including their property, their family members, and in many cases their own lives—in the name of a political cause that demanded the imprisonment, exile, and death of millions of Soviet peasants. The widespread fear of being labelled a kulak also compelled many other Mennonites to surrender their property to the nearest collective farm and sign on as members. Once having joined a collective, fear continued to play a dominant role in the lives of collectivized Mennonite peasants; the fear of imprisonment and exile compelled collectivized Mennonites to endure deplorable living and working conditions, and to accept starvation and death as a part of everyday life.

Not every Mennonite during this time of persecution was a martyr, however. Whether they were members of the village council, the Communist Party, or the DCPD, a significant number of Mennonites were actively involved in the political and administrative hierarchy of a regime that murdered millions of people. This marks an important development in Mennonite history in that it is one of the first times that so many Mennonites compromised their longstanding Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition of noninvolvement in government institutions, and became foot-soldiers in the Soviet regime's war against the peasantry. No longer only victims, Mennonites were now perpetrators of violence, making life-and-death decisions about which of their Mennonite and non-Mennonite

neighbours, clergymen, and family members would be dekulakized, dispossessed of their property, and subsequently imprisoned, exiled, or executed. While the signatures of Mennonites on many documents relating to dekulakization and collectivization are proof positive that there were Mennonites who betrayed their relatives and friends to the Soviet state, it is not at all clear how many Mennonites were motivated to collude with the Stalinist regime because they had pistols pointed at their heads or because they were inspired by Soviet ideology and propaganda.

Finally, dekulakization and collectivization resulted in the Mennonite community's loss of control over its own economic, social, religious, and political destiny. By destroying many of the economic, cultural and religious institutions that formerly united the Mennonite community, the Soviet government successfully severed the ties that had previously linked Soviet Mennonites to their identity, their sense of peoplehood, and their past. With the Soviet government dictating virtually every aspect of life in the countryside, most Soviet Mennonite communities were unable to stop the further erosion of those traditions and characteristics that had previously distinguished the Mennonites as a unique people and allowed them to flourish in czarist Russia. Unable to determine its own destiny, the Soviet Mennonite community after 1933 became fractured, dislocated groups of individuals who no longer shared a common future, but only memories of a common past.

Notes

¹ The author thanks Lynette Toews-Neufeldt, Harvey Dyck, and Anne Konrad for their comments and suggestions.

² Zaporizhzhia Regional State Archive, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine [hereafter: ZSA]: collection #235, inventory list #1, file #834, p. 12f [hereafter: ZSA:235/1/834/12f]; Communist Party Archive in Kiev, Ukraine [hereafter: CPA]: collection #1, inventory list #20, section #11, file #3142, p. 16ff [hereafter: CPA:1/20/11/3142/16ff]; CPA:1/20/11/3190/1ff; CPA:1/20/11/3190/31ff; Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow* (Edmonton: 1986), 113, 126; M. Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power*, trans., I. Nove and J. Biggart, (Evanston: 1968), 495; R. W. Davies, *The Socialist Offensive* (Cambridge: 1980), 138ff, 229ff, 243ff; L. Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin* (New York: 1996), 68ff; D. Zlepko, ed., *Der ukrainische Hunger-Holocaust* (Sonnenbühl: 1988), 17.

³ *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, Winnipeg [hereafter MR], 9 April 1930, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.* See also ZSA:1415/3/1/7ff; ZSA:235/1/766/136ff; ZSA:235/1/730/23f; ZSA:235/3/52/10ff; CPA:1/20/11/5843/71ff; CPA:1/20/11/6265/74ff; ZSA:3452/1/45/22; ZSA:235/2/144/78ff; ZSA:235/1/747/51; ZSA:235/5/76/16ff; ZSA:235/3/50/23f; ZSA:235/3/49/3ff; ZSA:235/1/766/122; ZSA:235/2/148/22; ZSA:235/1/766/217ff; ZSA:235/2/95/27; ZSA:235/2/95/17; ZSA:1429/1/16/40; ZSA:235/1/747/51; ZSA:235/2/127/1ff; *Der Bote*, Winnipeg [hereafter DB], 5 March 1930, 4f; MR, 21 May 1930, 8f; MR, 25 November 1931, 6; *Stürmer*, Khortitsa [hereafter ST], 22

February 1934, 2; *ST*, 10 April 1934, 2; *ST*, 21 April 1934, 2; A. Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer*, 2 vols., (Clearbrook: 1972), 1:153, 174, 230, 306, 339, 350ff; *DB*, 12 February 1930, 4; *DB*, 22 April 1931, 4; *MR*, 11 June 1930, 7; *DB*, 8 October 1930, 3; *MR*, 14 December 1932, 7; *DB*, 2 April 1930, 4; *Captured German War Documents*, Washington [hereafter *CGWD*], container 150, reel 4, images 477-516 [hereafter *CGWD*:150/4/477-516]; J. Redekopp, *Es war die Heimat* (Brasil: 1966), 70.

⁵*MR*, 9 April 1930, 9.

⁶H. J. Willms, ed., *At the Gates of Moscow*, trans., G. Thielman (Yarrow, BC: 1964), 143. See also B. H. Unruh, "Bericht XIX," Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, KS [hereafter *MLA*], October 1930, 1; J. Rempel, *Liebenau*, (Winnipeg: 1977), 244f; *Zionsbote*, Hillsboro, KS, [hereafter *ZB*], 19 February 1930, 12; H. Dyck, *Weimar Germany and Soviet Russia, 1926-1933* (London: 1966), 162ff.

⁷ZSA:235/5/72/2ff; ZSA:235/1/815/4f; ZSA:235/2/127/1ff; ZSA:235/5/72/10ff; ZSA:235/5/76/3ff; ZSA:235/5/76/18ff; ZSA:235/3/49/50ff; ZSA:3452/1/6/34; ZSA:235/1/839/78f; ZSA:862/1/36/14; ZSA:235/4/111/14; ZSA:235/1/833/21; ZSA:235/3/52/29ff; ZSA:235/2/95/1; Zaporizhzhia Communist Party Archive, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine [hereafter *ZCPA*]: collection #286/inventory list #170/file #14/page #41ff [hereafter: *ZCPA*:286/170/14/41ff]; *ZCPA*:1/867/41/17; *ZCPA*:286/1/48/17ff; *ZCPA*:7/1/119-4/7f; *ZCPA*:286/13/1/99; *ZCPA*:226/8/1/48; *ZCPA*:226/7/1/15, 69, 73ff, 135f; *ZCPA*:226/7/1/73ff; *ZCPA*:286/448/17/1ff; ZSA:235/3/50/3ff; ZSA:235/3/28/19f; ZSA:235/5/79/52ff; ZSA:235/5/79/21f; ZSA:235/3/48/26ff; ZSA:235/5/79/3f; ZSA:235/1/825/130; ZSA:1429/1/36/53; ZSA:235/3/28/5ff; ZSA:1429/1/38/42; *ZCPA*:241/205/1/1/68f; *MR*, 3 December 1930, p. 6; Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer*, 2:196.

⁸*DB*, 12 March 1930, 4. See also ZSA:235/3/50/2ff; ZSA:235/3/50/66.

⁹*DB*, 9 April 1930, 4; ZSA:235/5/76/3f; ZSA:235/3/49/54f; *DB*, 16 April 1930, 5; ZSA:235/4/290/7ff; ZSA:235/4/123/15ff; ZSA:3452/1/6/57f; *DB*, 2 April 1930, 4; *MR*, 10 December 1930, 6; *DB*, 29 April 1931, 4; *ZB*, 12 February 1930, 11f; *DB*, 6 May 1931, 5; *DB*, 8 February 1933, 4f; *CPA*:1/20/111/5444/14; *MR*, 30 March 1932, 6; *ZCPA*:1/963/43/13f; *DB*, 15 February 1933, 2; *DB*, 5 October 1932, 4; *DB*, 12 February 1930, 4; *ST*, 21 April 1934, 2; *ST*, 24 August 1934, 2; *ST*, 18 April 1934, 2.

¹⁰*DB*, 16 July 1930, 5f; *DB*, 20 May 1931, 5; *DB*, 28 May 1930, 3; ZSA:235/3/48/17ff; ZSA:235/3/4/14; *DB*, 16 July 1930, 5f; *DB*, 13 May 1931, 4; ZSA:1429/1/40/55f; ZSA:1429/1/40/58; *DB*, 26 July 1933, 3; *MR*, 5 March 1930, 5; *ZB*, 5 March 1930, 10; *MR*, 9 November 1932, 6f; *DB*, 28 May 1930, 3; *ZB*, 15 October 1930, 13f; *DB*, 8 February 1933, 4f; *DB*, 1 July 1931, 4; *DB*, 29 July 1931, 4; J. Neudorf, *Osterwick: 1812-1943*, (Clearbrook:1972), 189ff; J. Neufeld, *Tiefenwege: Erfahrungen und Erlebnisse von Russland* (Virgil, ON; 1954), 40.

¹¹*MR*, 7 May 1930, 8.

¹²*MR*, 30 April 1930, 8.

¹³ZSA:235/5/72/4; ZSA:235/5/76/3f; *DB*, 28 May 1930, 3; *MR*, 25 May 1932, 6; *MR*, 23 September 1931, 6; *MR*, 6 September 1931, 6f; ZSA:1429/1/35/142; ZSA:1429/1/44/6; *CGWD*:150/51/-40; H. Görz, *Die Mennonitischen Siedlungen der Krim*, (Winnipeg: 1957) 69; Töws, op.cit., 1:230; *DB*, 30 April 1930, 4; *MR*, 30 April 1930, 8; *DB*, 28 October 1931, 3; *DB*, 7 May 1930, 4; *MR*, 17 September 1930, 12f; *DB*, 11 June 1930, 3; ZSA:1429/1/40/55f; *DB*, 24 August 1932, 4; *MR*, 1 October 1930, 10; *DB*, 3 February 1932, 2f; *MR*, 6 September 1931, 7; *MR*, 2 March 1932, 6; *DB*, 16 April 1930, 4; *MR*, 26 November 1930, 11; *ZB*, 2 July 1930, 11; *ZB*, 18 June 1930, 1f; *DB*, 23 December 1931, 3; *MR*, 11 November 1931, 6f; *DB*, 3 August 1932, 3; *DB*, 30 July 1930, 3.

¹⁴*DB*, 21 September 1932, 3.

¹⁵*MR*, 13 April 1932, 7. See also *MR*, 17 September 1930, 12f; *DB*, 21 May 1930, 4; *MR*, 9 March 1932, 6; *MR*, 2 March 1932, 7, 11; *DB*, 30 April 1930, 4; *MR*, 18 May 1932, 6; *MR*, 11 November 1931, 6f; *MR*, 10 June 1931, 7; *DB*, 16 April 1930, 4; *DB*, 16 April 1930, 4f; J. B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites* (Newton: 1982), 157ff.

¹⁶ MR, 1 April 1931, 7; DB, 5 August 1931, 4; ZB, 27 August 1930, 11f; MR, 2 March 1932, 6f; DB, 20 January 1932, 3; MR, 10 August 1932, 6f; MR, 30 November 1932, 7; DB, 17 May 1933, 6; DB, 10 May 1933, 3; MR, 6 April 1932, 6; MR, 2 March 1932, 7, 11; J. Martens, *So wie es war* (Winnipeg: 1940), 29ff, 40; Töws, *Mennonitsche Martyrer*, 1:231, 279ff, 297; 2:161, 248, 316.

¹⁷ A. Klassen, "My Siberian Escape and Exile," (Winnipeg, n.d.), 1.

¹⁸ MR, 2 March 1932, 7. See also DB, 20 April 1932, 3; MR, 10 February 1932, 6; MR, 5 November 1930, 9f; DB, 3 August 1932, 3; DB, 14 September 1932, 4; DB, 27 May 1931, 4; ZB, 22 October 1930, 13f; MR, 4 March 1931, 6f; DB, 16 March 1932, 5; ZB, 18 June 1930, 8; MR, 25 March 1931, 6f; DB, 25 March 1931, 3; MR, 10 August 1932, 6f; J. Loewen, *Jasykowo* (Winnipeg: 1967), 57f; DB, 27 May 1931, 4; MR, 5 November 1930, 9f; DB, 29 April 1931, 4; DB, 27 August 1930, 3; MR, 18 June 1930, 8f; DB, 18 June 1930, 3.

¹⁹ J. E. Mace, "The Man-Made Famine of 1933 in Soviet Ukraine," *Famine in Ukraine 1932-1933*, eds. [hereafter *Famine*], R. Serbyn and B. Krawchenko (Edmonton: 1986), 7; Zlepko, *Der ukrainische Hunger-Holocaust*, 30f; ZSA:2953/1/10/41; ZSA:3952/1/20/265; B. A. Anderson and B. D. Silver, "Demographic Analysis and Population Catastrophes," *Slavic Review* 44 (1985), 517-536; M. Maksudov, "Ukraine's Demographic Losses, 1927-1938," *Famine*, 27ff; F. Chalk and K. Jonassohn, "Conceptualizations of Genocide and Ethnocide," *Famine*, 189.

²⁰ ZCPA:241/205/11/80f; ZSA:235/1/813/303ff; ZSA:235/1/809/8; ZSA:235/2/95/16; ZSA:235/1/771/31ff; DB, 9 December 1931, 4; DB, 10 June 1931, 4; ZSA:235/1/823/51f; DB, 4 March 1931, 3; DB, 15 July 1931, 6f; ZCPA:286/1/15/31f; ST, 12 Juli 1934, 1; ZSA:3452/1/9/1; MR, 3 September 1930, 12f; ZSA:235/2/97/46; MR, 18 October 1933, 11; ZSA:235/1/772/7, 350; ZSA:235/3/47/26; ZSA:3452/1/24/39; MR, 8 April 1931, 7; MR, 16 March 1932, 7; ZSA:3452/1/7/15ff.

²¹ ZSA:235/2/163/1ff; DB, 30 April 1930, 4; ZSA:3452/1/24/126; ZSA:1429/1/12/229f; MR, 4 June 1930, 8f; ZSA:3482/1/13/69; ZSA:1429/1/19/102; ZSA:3452/1/18/122; ZSA:3452/1/25/1ff; ST, 4 Oktober 1934, 2; ST, 23 Juli 1934, 2; ST, 21 Mai 1934, 2; ZSA:1429/1/12/206; ZSA:3452/1/24/27; ST, 10 April 1934, 2; ST, 7 Juni 1934, 2; ST, 6 September 1934, 2; MR, 9 April 1930, 9; ZSA:3452/1/7/18; DB, 17 February 1932, 5; ST, 2 April 1934, 2; ZSA:235/2/62a/18ff; ZSA:235/2/62/27f; ST, 18 Januar 1934, 2; ST, 5 Mai 1934, 2; ZSA:3452/1/9/144; ST, 18 Mai 1934, 2; ST, 23 Juli 1934, 1; ST, 24 August 1934, 2; ST, 16 September 1934, 1; ST, 10 April 1934, 2; ST, 22 Juli 1934, 2.

²² MR, 2 March 1932, 7. See also ZSA:235/2/95/27; ZSA:235/2/95/28; DB, 12 March 1930, 4; MR, 15 July 1931, 6; ST, 27 Januar 1934, 2; ST, 5 April 1934, 2; ST, 7 Juni 1934, 2; MR, 30 November 1932, 7; ZSA:3452/1/92/8ff; ST, 12 Juli 1934, 2; ZSA:1429/1/36/20; ZSA:3452/1/11/1ff; ZSA:235/2/54/7ff; ZSA:235/2/56/14; ZSA:235/2/65/1; ZSA:235/2/62a/4f; MR, 16 December 1931, 6; ST, 14 April 1934, 2; ZB, 23 April 1930, 11ff; ZB, 5 July 1933, 14f; ST, 18 April 1934, 2; DB, 2 December 1931, 2; DB, 22 April 1931, 4; CGWD:146/1/3ff; DB, 19 October 1932, 4; DB, 29 July 1931, 4; MR, 14 January 1931, 7.

²³ DB, 1 June 1932, 3.

²⁴ ZSA:1429/1/12/149; ZSA:3452/1/11/49; ZSA:3452/1/24/119f; MR, 18 February 1931, 6; ZCPA:286/82/5/119; ZSA:2953/1/2/22; ST, 28 März 1934, 2; DB, 23 December 1931, 3; MR, 2 March 1932, 7; MR, 30 March 1932, 6; ZSA:3952/1/20/241ff; ZSA:862/1/14/58ff; MR, 11 January 1933, 7; MR, 17 May 1933, 6; ZSA:3482/1/18/182; ZSA:3452/1/9/23; DB, 8 June 1932, 4; MR, 17 February 1932, 11; MR, 18 May 1932, 7; B. H. Unruh, "Deutsches Rotes Kreuz," MLA, 8 November 1932, 1ff; MR, 15 February 1933, 12; DB, 1 June 1932, 3; DB, 29 March 1933, 5; MR, 20 July 1932, 6; MR, 8 June 1932, 6; MR, 1 February 1933, 12; DB, 18 May 1930, 4; DB, 15 November 1933, 4; MR, 15 November 1933, 6; DB, 26 April 1933, 4; MR, 14 June 1933, 6; CGWD:149/1/238ff; ZCPA:286/73/251/47ff; DB, 13 May 1931, 4; ST, 18 Januar 1934, 2; CGWD:146/1/159ff, 238ff; DB, 10 June 1931, 4; MR, 25 February 1931, 6f; ZSA:3452/1/18/146; DB, 23 September 1931, 4; DB, 10 June 1931, 4; DB, 29 April 1931, 4.