

# Mennonites & the Soviet Inferno: Reflections on the Symposium

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I often tell my Russian history students that my mother was born in the wrong time, and the wrong place. In some ways, all you need to know about her childhood is that she was born on the first day of January 1929, in the village of Margenau, in what was then the Molochnaia settlement, of what is now Ukraine. Most of you will not be surprised to know that she has no memories of her father, who was already exiled to the Vladivostok region by the time she was four, where he died from eating half-rotted fish. As a child, my mother knew which weeds could be eaten in the fields, and which not. Uncles were few in number, and none survived the 1930s. Her family in that time consisted of a brother and a mother, along with an aunt and her children. Unable to heat two homes, they spent their winters together, until, as a teenager, she joined thousands of other Mennonites on the long trek to the west, and eventually to Canada.

It is a lamentable fact that my mother's story is not unique among so-called Russian Mennonites. The papers presented at this symposium, which, regrettably, I am unable to attend, have confirmed this picture in a hundred ways. More than that, they have begun to show us what was happening behind the scenes; far from the village streetscapes.

We now know:

- that Mennonites were a thorn in the flesh of the Soviet state from its inception;
- that they rejected outright any pressures that undermined the religious

basis of their society, which had doubtless been strengthened by the events of the revolution and civil war; that lists of names had been drawn up by at least the end of the 1920s, and that the larger political events of the 1930s further singled Mennonites and Germans out for special "treatment";

- we know that tens of thousands of Mennonites perished in the 1930s, in what was a deliberate, brutal, and senseless assault;
- we know of the cruelties and unspeakable hardships of those who left in the 1940s, and of those who could not;
- we know of those whose trek took them on to the west, and those who found themselves, in Nikolai Tolstoy's phrase, as "the victims of Yalta", to be forcibly repatriated.

I have wondered, over the past few months as I prepared for this symposium, if we as Mennonites have done enough to honour the lives of those involved in these terrible events. One only has to look, for example, at the dramatic way in which the Jewish Holocaust has entered into the consciousness of a world-wide audience, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Here the memories have not been allowed to perish, even with the passing of the first generation of survivors. Instead, the story has been told, and re-told in all of its gripping detail. By this, it not only has the power to become a peculiarly Jewish memory, but one that informs the way that we all look at cruelty and injustice.

So what of the Mennonites? My own sense is that we have not done an adequate job of remembering the Mennonite Inferno of the 1930s. An uneasy silence seems to have fallen over this story, despite the fact that people knew from the outset how horrific it was. Why the silence? Why, for example, have we waited this long to have a conference dedicated to Mennonites and the Stalinist 30s? In this instance, I want to publicly commend Dr. Royden Loewen for his leadership in the organization of this path-breaking symposium.

Let me suggest three possible reasons why this particular story has not received the attention it deserves. First, it seems clear that the dominant Russian Mennonite story in Canada was that told by the 1920s immigration. Many of these Mennonites were traumatized by the fact that their well-contented lives in the Russian empire had been cut short by the tumultuous events of world war, revolution, and civil war. Marlene Epp and others have shown how the 1920s came to define the Russian Mennonite story in Canada, and that the post World War II emigrants largely had to accommodate themselves accordingly. Secondly, I believe that the story has also not received the attention it warranted because of the speed with which Mennonites became "Canadianized" in the baby-boom era of the 1950s and 1960s. We saw ourselves as Canadian; few spoke German, much less Russian, and we found ourselves cut-off from our roots, almost by design. This has been hastened in this decade by the steady passing of the immigrant generation, the carriers of this tragic memory. Thirdly, I believe that another reason for this silence has to do with the belief among some Mennonites that the events of the 1930s can be explained rationally: that

Mennonites somehow got what they deserved because of the way that they had lived before 1917. This was most recently expressed by John Toews, of Waterloo, in a presentation in Leamington, Ontario on 22 March, 1997. In it, he presented a picture of Mennonites as wealthy beyond belief, and surrounded by impoverished Russians. Moreover, Mennonites are described as having hated everything Russian. In effect, Toews left the clear impression that Mennonites got what they deserved.

Thus, some believe that Mennonites suffered “for their sins”. Such views, I think, are widespread, and in part can be expected as people come to terms with past traumas. They are also, at least in this case, hopelessly, utterly, and cruelly wrongheaded. Recent scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that peasants who lived near the Khortitsa and Molochnaia Mennonite settlements were anything but impoverished; in fact, they were consistently seen as the most progressive and prosperous peasants in the entire region. In addition, Mennonites were, at least until 1914, passionately connected with the Russian empire. This was true, on the one hand, when it came to supporting Imperial initiatives against Germany; but it was also true in the acquisition of so-called “Mennonite” dishes from their Russian and Ukrainian neighbours, including borscht, paskha, and vareniki. Finally, the German language was hardly a sign of disloyalty in a multi-national empire where reigning monarchs were occasionally of German descent, conducted their correspondence in French, and favoured Italian architects.

Under the circumstances, it is high time that Mennonites divest themselves of the notion that their suffering was deserved, a notion that would also not apply to Tatars, Bashkirs, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Jews, Ukrainians, and Russian peasants. The truth is that what unfolded in the 1930s can only be explained through a consideration of the perverse notions of state and society that Bolsheviks brought to power with them in 1917. All of this, of course, can only be hinted at in a presentation of this length. We can now give a more accurate rendering of the past because of recent scholarly findings in Russian, Ukrainian, and Mennonite history. Much of this has been made possible by the new perspectives that have arisen since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as the new sources that have been unearthed. Without a doubt, a key role has been played by George Epp, who has consistently reminded us of the terrible events of the Stalinist 30s. Harvey Dyck’s own scholarship has played a pivotal role in challenging cynical interpretations of Mennonite history that until recently enjoyed such prominence. In addition, Dyck’s work in the major archives Odessa and Zaporozhe have allowed for the preservation of and scholarly access to hundreds of thousands of pages of previously restricted materials.

It will take a lifetime to work through these materials, and that task will only fall on the shoulders of relatively few individuals. What about the rest, those of you who have participated in these sessions this weekend? Should we all just move on from this story? I strongly believe that we should not. Those who lived, suffered, resisted, died, and fled deserve to have their stories told, their

memories honoured. Those of us who know this story have a special obligation, as the passing of another generation in this very time increases the danger that the story will not be told, and that future generations will be cut off from their own roots. Thus, I see this process of remembering as vital, as it binds us to both past and future generations. It is also essential that we do so if we ever wish to truly reach out to those from other cultural backgrounds; for if we do not come to terms with our own past and suffering, how will we ever empathise with the suffering of others?

In this spirit, Mennonites from around the world have agreed to highlight 1998 as a Memorial Year to the Victims of Soviet Repression. Events are being planned throughout Canada and beyond so that voices long silent can again be heard. It will allow the thousands who lie in mass, nameless graves to again be named, and appropriately honoured.

If some still think that this is a poorish kind of nostalgia, I want to close with reference again to my mother. All of my childhood she was reluctant to talk about her childhood for fear of the nightmares it gave her. When I lived in the Soviet Union with my family for a year, she would not visit. Then, in 1989, I was finally able to persuade my mother to accompany me on a tour that I led to the former Soviet Union. On one remarkable day, we returned to the former Molochnaia settlement, to where her former village of Margenau had stood. And in that emotional, memorable day, I believe that my mother was liberated from the past by returning to it

It was also one of the most important days of my life. Is it possible that we too can be transformed, as individuals and as a people, by first returning to the darkest days of the past? I think so, even as I believe that it is not the only place that we need to return to. I invite you to make this Symposium an important first step in this difficult but necessary journey of honouring and remembering. There is unfinished business to be done. Let's make 1998, the Memorial Year, the time when we return to the past, so as to be better fortified for the future.