

The Abuse of Power Among Mennonites in South Russia 1789-1919

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The abuse of power in South Russia was the result of two series of massive compromises to Menno Simons' vision of an only-the-sword-of-the-Spirit lifestyle. As Menno studied the Scriptures he discovered that Christ came to earth to recruit volunteer citizens for God's kingdom of peace. These kingdom volunteers were placed on this earth to master a lifestyle of peace required of all citizens of that kingdom.

Menno parted company both with the medieval Catholic Church and with the mainline Reformation in part because of his disagreement with them on their theology of salvation. His major disagreement with them, however, was with their dependence on the use of force within the church and God's Kingdom. He saw membership in God's kingdom of peace as a totally voluntary decision. Jesus' true disciples needed no coercion for them to follow their master's footsteps and no material benefits (bribes) to keep them faithful.

Menno objected strongly to four misuses of the sword (power) on the part of

both the Catholic Church and the mainstream of the Reformation. These "abuses" were: (1) the use of the sword of iron to defend the truth, (2) the use of the sword to convert people, (3) the use of the sword to do church discipline, and (4) the use of the sword to protect property and privilege. He called believers into a lifestyle which depended only on the sword of the Spirit.

But instead of growing in fidelity to the vision of kingdom citizens practising a lifestyle of abstaining from all use of force or coercion, the northern stream of Mennonites—Holland, North Germany, Poland, South Russia—underwent a series of slippages, adjustments or compromises which ultimately led to the widespread power abuse in the Mennonite Commonwealth in South Russia.

The compromises occurred in two areas: the first relates to the believers' citizenship and the second relates to the Scriptures and the nature and the functions of the believing community.

In both categories the first shift is foundational and those that follow in the series are the results, or the outworkings of the former.

In the first category our study identifies the following shifts:

- (1) The believer's citizenship: from citizenship only in Christ's kingdom of peace to also becoming citizens of the kingdoms of this world.
- (2) Separation from the world: the shift from radical separation characterized by an only-the-sword-of-the-Spirit lifestyle to only the refusal to wield the sword of war.
- (3) Property: from stewardship of God's earth to private ownership.
- (4) The covenant community: from a community of equals to a class structure largely based on differences in wealth.
- (5) Governance in the believing community: from governance by the Spirit of God mediated by the *Lehramt* to the development of a *Gebietsamt*, a Mennonite secular state.
- (6) The exercise of power: from an only-the-sword-of-the-Spirit lifestyle to a just war with the sword of iron.

In the second category the following shifts occurred:

- (7) The Scriptures and their exegesis: from the focused canon and Christ-centered exegesis to a flat canon.
- (8) The exegetical community: from the congregation as an exegetical community to a church controlled by professional exegetes.
- (9) Decision-making: from community consensus to democratic majority voting.
- (10) Church governance: from congregational control to ministerial or denominational control.
- (11) The privileged community: from a persecuted suffering church to God's privileged chosen people in their own promised land.
- (12) Identity: from a people with a clear vision of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus to a loss of identity and vulnerability to outside -isms.

This study of power abuse in South Russia will not present a fully balanced

picture of the events that took place there. It will focus specifically on the power abuses. These abuses, like the shifts listed above, occurred in two areas of the Russian Mennonite experience: (a) Those relating to the *Gebietsamt* (the commonwealth government) and (b) those relating to the *Lehramt* (the church leadership) and the behavior of church members. The two will be treated as separate sections of this paper.

A. THE *GEBIETSAMT* AND POWER by Wesley J. Prieb

When the Mennonites of South Russia were given a mandate to govern themselves in the colonies and to become a “development engine” for the country, the former victims of persecution and abuse embarked on a new road. They were not aware of the Pandora’s box of power possibilities, including abuses, they were opening. Could the persecuted become the persecutors?

The typical self-governing civil order in the Mennonite colonies is described by D.G. Rempel. Each village was governed by an executive committee composed of an unpaid mayor (*Schulze*), two assistants, a paid clerk, assisted by one unarmed unpaid “police” deputy per ten households. The villages were linked under the central authority of the *Gebietsamt* consisting of a paid mayor-in-chief (*Oberschulze*) and his office staff (D.G. Rempel 1973:53-59).

The amazing agricultural and industrial success of the Mennonites in South Russia quickly led to economic and political power that extended beyond the colonies. And with power came the inevitable temptation to abuse power. Mennonites soon compromised their “only-the-sword-of-the-Spirit” lifestyle. Power abuses emerged in many areas. This paper will highlight the following areas of abuses: (a) governmental sword-power, (b) exploitation of labor and the poor, (c) power monopoly of the landlords, (d) the aristocratic class system of the Mennonite estates, (e) expanded powers of the industrial giants, (f) the impact of Mennonite wealth, (g) Johann Cornies’ influence, and (h) the *Selbstschutz*.

a. Abuses in civil government

The Mennonite *privilegium* empowered the colonists to govern their own civic and community affairs (Rempel 1973:11). This meant that colony authorities could issue local ordinances and order their own police deputies to enforce them.

Nomadic tribes: When the Mennonites arrived in South Russia, nomadic tribes still roamed the steppes. These people saw easy booty in the unarmed Mennonite communities (D.H. Epp 1909:133, Urry 1989:93). The Mennonite settlers repeatedly appealed to Russian authorities for protection. The Russian police exercised immediate heavy-handed frontier style justice by indiscriminately punishing and killing suspects whenever some injustice was reported

(Hildebrand 1888:68ff). Often Mennonite complaints became the occasion for violent governmental retribution against tribal offenders (D.H. Epp 1909:131-134, George K. Epp 1989:133-134). Representative justice was often administered—all suspects were flogged, so as to teach a lesson to both the guilty and the innocent. Here we see a clear compromise of Menno's ideal that no Christian should appeal to the secular "sword" for protection of personal property (Stayer 1972:172).

Non-Mennonites: Many non-Mennonites conducted business or found employment in Mennonite villages and towns. Sometimes colony authorities were forced to arrest, to judge and to punish non-Mennonite offenders. The most common offenses were drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and theft. Mennonite deputies soon were flogging increasing numbers of non-Mennonite offenders.

Mennonites: For Mennonites themselves the *Gebietsamt* levied taxes, granted travel documents, preserved law and order, issued orders for communal labor, hired herdsmen, etc. In short, it provided all the necessary functions of civil government. It is ironic that the very Russian law which guaranteed their minority privileges also led to the creation of a Mennonite state (John B. Toews 1982:33) and to the eventual complete merger of the Mennonite Church and state (John B. Toews 1977:88). What Menno rejected during the Reformation—the sword of flesh—was now embraced by his followers.

b. Abuses by the Mennonite employer

During the early years in the colonies landholders would often provide a small plot of land for a house, garden, and grain for the landless. Such live-in-workers were called *Anwohner* (adjacent residents). In exchange for such privileges all the able-bodied members of the *Anwohner* family worked for the landholder, who usually paid them in kind.

Soon the *Anwohner* system, which seemed satisfactory, was discontinued and "slum" sections began to develop on the edge of the larger Mennonite villages. These people were called *Kleinhaeusler* (little-house people,) or *Armenreihe* (the poor row) or even *Einwohner* (renters) because they did not even own the hovels they occupied (Urry 1989:60, H.L. Dyck 1989:187). They were totally dependent on finding employment. They didn't even have a garden plot or a cow to put on communal pasture. Some were completely dependent on charity. Thus by mid 19th century when Cornies died, more than two-thirds of all the Mennonites in Russia were landless. They were dependent either on establishing a business, learning a trade or working as day laborers for other Mennonites, or as a last resort, surviving on private or public dole (C.H. Smith 1981, ME 2:187, 4:389).

Many of these landless Mennonites would have drifted to other colonies or to Russian cities, but the *Gebietsamt* controlled the required travel documents, and refused to issue any because it wanted to prevent loss of cheap Mennonite labor.

It is clear that many Mennonite landholders used their economic and political power to develop a stratified society which clearly compromised Menno's view of stewardship in community as well as equality and brotherhood in the church. This their official confession of faith could never condone, (Urry 1985:18, J.J. Toews 1951:206), because it called for a community in which all members were equal in status and in which all shared equally in the returns from everyone's labors.

In their treatment of non-Mennonite labor, Mennonites opted for the standards of their Russian neighbors. They did not make any effort to improve their wages, nor did most of them create better working conditions (Urry 1989b:107). It is true, however, that Johann Cornies introduced a labor statute which at least prevented some of the more serious abuses (Urry 1978:144).

Unlike their Russian neighbors, however, Mennonites usually worked in the fields together with their outside laborers and often worked as hard or harder than their employees. The relationship between the Mennonite worker and his non-Mennonite employees was marked in the social distance that separated the two. Servants did not share the master's table (Frank H. Epp 1962:24). On returning from their common work, they were strictly segregated: the Mennonite went to a comfortable house, the Russian worker went to the workers' barracks or to his sod hovel. The greatest discrepancy was in the inequality of the return which each received from their common labor (Urry 1985:24, Urry 1989c:106-107).

The most severe abuse suffered by non-Mennonite labor was punishment for theft. Once a Mennonite discovered a Russian in his grain bin filling bags with grain. Since it was late Saturday afternoon, the Mennonite simply nailed up the grain bin with the Russian in it. Monday morning he notified the mayor's office and the deputies came, extracted the thief and flogged him (Cal Redekop personal communication).

c. Power monopoly of the landowners

Only landholders could vote in colony affairs according to Russian law (Land law of 1764, Rempel 1973:71). As land became scarce, more and more people became landless. The landless were neither eligible to vote nor to run for office in colony affairs. One landless person said, "One thousand people vote and three thousand others just have to swallow the pill the voters give them!" (OZ #112 1863:974-976, #4 1864:26, Krahn 1935:171).

Another Russian rule was that the property grant entrusted to a colonist was indivisible. Only the youngest son could inherit it. This rule prevented fathers from subdividing their farms. Inevitably the other sons became landless (Rempel 1973:12).

During the Crimean War the *Gebietsamt* introduced family-based rather than property-based taxation to supply wagons and drivers for hauling war supplies. Landowners hired servants while the landless had to borrow money to

buy horses and wagons and then operate the wagons in lieu of the cash they were unable to raise (Urry and Klippenstein 1989:12-13,19). Obviously here was a blatant power abuse.

Other forms of abuse involved reducing the amount of land which *Anwohner* were permitted to cultivate (OZ #112 1863:974-975, #4 1864:26), restricting the number of animals they could put on communal pasture (OZ #4 1864:26), raising the pasturage fees of the landless, and assessing them with all kinds of new levies, including a school levy, a pasturage levy, and herdsman levy, etc. (OZ #4 1864:26).

d. Class system of Mennonite estates

After 1817 many prosperous Mennonites purchased land outside the boundaries of the Mennonite colonies. At their height, when World War One began, there were about 500 estates in Russia (Reimer 1989:2). These Khutors controlled an estimated one million acres of land. The largest estate, that of Wilhelm Martens, is reputed to have had about 300,000 acres (Reimer 1989:6, J.C. Toews Sept/15 1954:4, Urry 1988:15). These large estate owners represented only 3% of the Mennonite population, but they controlled 30% of all the land in Mennonite hands. They alone employed 22% of the Mennonite population (Krahn 1935:170).

The estate owners often aligned themselves with their Russian noble counterparts and became part of the oppressive system of "noble" landowners. The unhappiness of their "serfs," together with the urban worker dissatisfaction, eventually produced both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. Jacob Toews reports that at one time 5 out of 7 positions on the regional government council in Melitopol were filled by Mennonite estate owners and two Mennonites even served in the Tsarist Duma, the Russian parliament (Rempel 1933:91, J.C. Toews July/21 1954:3, Reimer 1989:9, Urry 1985:25). As part of a vast system of power abuse the Mennonites, considered as ethnic foreigners, were singled out as targets by the revolutionaries (J.C. Toews Aug/11 1954:45). On one Mennonite estate three generations of males were massacred by the bandits in a single day (Reimer 1989:17).

Traditionally Mennonites have considered themselves "people of the land." Krahn cites a villager in Russia who said, "God is our father, the soil is our mother, nature is our teacher..." (1935:169, also Ehrst 1932:18). Can land ownership also become a form of power abuse? At a Mennonite anniversary celebration in 1925 Jacob Kroeker said that land may also have been a cause of Mennonite downfall because, "(We) love the sickle more than the pursuit of peace and the ownership of the earth more than our spiritual inheritance...." (Ehrst 1932:17-18).

e. Expanded powers of the industrial giants

Unprecedented economic growth opened new possibilities for land related industrial development for Mennonites in South Russia. By 1908 there were

more than one hundred windmills in Chortitza and Molotchna colonies and another 73 motor-powered mills (Urry 1989c:113). By 1914 two-fifths of all flour and feed mills in Russia were located in the south, largely on Mennonite lands (Urry 1989c:102). The four largest Mennonite mills had an annual production turnover of over 6 million rubles, of which the Niebuhr mill in Alexandrovsk alone produced 50% (Ehrt 1932:92, Urry 1985:12).

Mennonite innovations included the multiple share plow called *Bugger* and the *Drillbugger*, an implement which combined plowing and sowing into a single operation (John B. Toews 1982:6). There were machines for tilling, harrowing, seeding, cutting grass, raking, harvesting cereals, threshing and grain cleaning. Mennonite craftsmen produced all kinds of farm wagons and luxury horse-drawn carriages. In fact, the wagons were among the most renowned in Russia (Urry 1985:16).

By 1914, eight Mennonite manufacturers were producing 10% of the Russian farm machinery (see list in Urry 1985:2). By that time Mennonite-made machines were operating everywhere in Russia, from the eastern Ukraine to the far reaches of Siberia (John B. Toews 1982:6). Indeed they were competing with American giants like McCormack and International Harvester Company, which opened a factory near Moscow in 1912 (Urry 1989c:119 quoting Carstensen), not only in Russia, but also on the world market (Urry 1985:18).

The industrial system developed by the Mennonites in South Russia provided employment for the landless. There are very few records of labor abuse. But the expanded power of wealthy industrialists did create some serious problems discussed in the next section.

f. The impact of Mennonite wealth

The enormous wealth accumulated by Mennonite industry, the estates, and landed farmers in the colonies made a great impact—both positive and negative—on society and the church community.

Comparative Incomes

When we compare the incomes of Mennonites in South Russia the following revealing picture emerges (Ehrt 1932:91-92, David Epp 1955:81, Jacob C. Toews 1954, Urry 1985:12-13).

In 1914, miller Niebuhr in Alexandrovsk had a 3 million ruble output and machinery manufacturers Lepp and Wallman had a 900,000 ruble output. Actual net earnings figures are not available.

On the land a typical Yekaterinoslav estate owner had an annual income of 250,000 rubles with production costs of just under 40,000 rubles, giving him a profit of more than 200,000 rubles (Urry 1985:13). By comparison a village full-farm (65 dessiatine) holder earned between 3,000–10,000 rubles with production costs mostly under 1000 rubles, leaving a profit of 2,000–9,000

rubles (Urry 1985:13).

When we look at the income of the landless Mennonites, by comparison, we find that an educated teacher's salary averaged about 600 rubles per year; a good craftsman earned about 500 rubles per annum; a Mennonite laborer got about 100 rubles annually and his Russian counterpart got between 60 and 90 rubles per annum. Females received one half the amount paid to males (Urry 1985:13).

The rapid increase of wealth, especially among Mennonite estate owners and industrialists, had a very dramatic effect on Mennonite community solidarity. The super-rich no longer felt comfortable in Mennonite villages. In order to escape their community pressures and control, these people now moved their residences to their private estates or to nearby Russian cities (Urry 1985:21). The super-rich felt more comfortable with Russian aristocracy than they did with fellow Mennonites (Urry 1985:21). To the credit of the wealthy we need to point out that they did not withdraw from Mennonite life entirely. They continued to be willing to invest large sums in better schools, hospitals, etc. In regard to alternative service the super-rich 2% contributed some 30% of the operating costs of these programs (Ehrt 1932:88, Urry 1981:33). Urry, however, adds that there are clear indications that the super-rich also cheated in the property values they reported to the colonies for such tax purposes (Urry 1989c:116).

The super-rich formed a separate in-group whose members socialized with each other and whose children intermarried, thus creating some vast family fortunes (Urry 1985:17). Ehrt (1932:93-96) argues that this produced two Mennonite economies, the capitalist economy of the estate owners and industrialists and the peasant economy of most Mennonite villagers. However, in retrospect we should add two more economies, namely that of the landless laborers who were exploited by both groups and who survived at more or less subsistence level, and that of the "poor row" who were dependent on private or public dole.

When we look at the resulting attitudes we notice that the super-rich were generally very condescending toward their Mennonite colonist co-religionists. However, they manifested definite disdain toward the landless poor. They considered the poor irresponsible and lazy, unwilling to put forth the effort necessary to improve their lot (Urry 1985:19).

Estate owners and industrialists also had definite superiority feelings toward Russian peasants and serfs (Urry 1985:24). They observed a strict class distinction toward their Russian labor. As their wealth increased the master-servant distinction became more marked. If a servant ever displeased his estate-owning master, he could expect instant and rough retribution (Urry 1985:24). Observers note that by 1914 the Mennonite elite expected more and more deference from their laborers and servants.

It needs to be pointed out, however, that officially all Mennonites, including the estate owners, were still classed as peasants even though some of

them, who were estate owners, functioned as nobility. Just how much solidarity Russian peasants felt toward Mennonite peasants, even when the latter were still poor, has not been documented. But there is no question that when the peasant and worker unrest began at the beginning of the 20th century, the peasants not only reacted against the Mennonite wealthy, they also considered the poorer Mennonite peasants traitors to the peasant class (Urry 1985:26-28). J.C. Toews points out that especially during the 1905 revolution nobles made a conscious effort to deflect the revolutionaries' anger away from themselves toward the Mennonite "foreigners" (Aug/11 1954:4-5). These two factors provide some explanation about why the Mennonites reaped so much suffering.

The Mennonite aristocracy and the Mennonite leadership

This Mennonite aristocracy exerted considerable influence on Mennonite leadership as such. When the elite removed themselves physically from village observation and control, they also largely withdrew themselves from the authority of church and colony leadership. This not only weakened the overall Mennonite community solidarity, but it also greatly increased the insecurity of Mennonite leadership in both church and colony. To combat the erosion of authority which the church and the colony leadership experienced, both now moved toward greater authoritarian control. Before long the church, which had always considered itself the senior partner in Mennonite community authority, was reduced to the junior partner. Eventually both church and colony leadership worked hand in glove to protect their turf (J.B. Toews 1982:9-11). Several of these dimensions will be explored more fully in Loewen's part of this paper.

The developments described so far in this chapter illustrate the famous dictum: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lord Acton, 1887). The amazing shift in the Mennonites' life in South Russia, from a people in pilgrimage, seeking religious freedom and basic human rights, to a stratified class society with economic, political, and religious power vested in a privileged minority which controlled both church and state, (Kreider 1951:17-33) leaves one speechless. Fortunately, it also was creating increased pressures for a major round of reform.

g. Johann Cornies

Johann Cornies (1789-1848), was a man of vision, determined to implement the Mennonite *privilegium* in Russia. Through his aggressive leadership Mennonites became the model farmers and the "development engine" they had promised the Tsar they would be (Isaak 1908:25-26). In this effort Cornies was fully supported by Senator Kontenius, the chairman of the Settlement Guardians Committee in Odessa (Urry 1978:183), which represented the immediate Russian government authority to which the Mennonite colonies related at that time.

Cornies started a model farm on his own private estate (*Khutor*) at

Juschanle near Ohrloff some time around 1813. Five hundred dessiatines of this land had been a gift from the Tsar (Quiring 1948:30-34). Some four years later Cornies' personal effort to improve agriculture and animal husbandry became the focal point of an agricultural society which eventually embraced all the Mennonite colonies in southern Russia. By 1830 the Russian government had already elevated this society to the status of a "free academy" (P.M. Friesen 1980:193) and not only named Cornies as its permanent head, but also made him a life-time counselor to the Russian government. Backed by the full authority of the Russian crown, Cornies became the "de facto Mennonite Tsar" in southern Russia who could single-handedly issue decrees and force both the Mennonite Church leadership and colony authorities into compliance (F.H. Epp 1974:166, Ehrh 1932:39, Goerz 1950:34).

During his early years Cornies, riding unarmed, discovered an Armenian pasturing his flock of sheep on Cornies' land. The intruder was well armed and rather aggressive. In spite of the odds Cornies confronted the man and demanded payment for the use of his pasture land. The Armenian got violently angry, but Cornies quietly stood his ground until the intruder finally gave him the money. Cornies then invited him to spend the rest of the day and also the night with him and they became good friends (Epp 1946:18-19).

Horst Penner reflects another view of Cornies. He quotes Cornies as follows: "I trust no one. I pay no attention to insults. I depend on God as my Savior. There are opportunities here for all. But I want no one cold, no one lukewarm. In God's name work!" (1955:130).

This no "lukewarm attitude" has certainly characterized the reaction of others toward him. People either have glorified him as a tough saint or condemned him as a cruel dictator.

Cornies was not a villain. He was a man who had a great vision for the Mennonite people. His was not an unbridled quest for power. In fact, Cornies refused nobility offered to him by the Tsar, because "I want to remain a simple Mennonite" (Krahn 1935:171). It was his utopian dream for an ordered society under God's sovereignty that drove him to become increasingly autocratic. On the whole the Cornies' period in the Mennonite colonies was a period of unprecedented educational, social and economic development which raised the overall standard of Mennonite life to a degree hardly deemed possible.

At first the village and colonial civil authorities cooperated fully with Cornies' reforms, but eventually their patience grew thin, for he was constantly ordering them to enforce all kinds of new ordinances. Here are some of the decrees Cornies, the lifetime leader of the Agricultural Union, issued by fiat (Ehrh 1932:v-vi, H. Goerz 1950:40-53):

Colony wide tree planting, especially millions of fruit trees; building dams for flood control and irrigation; planning villages with the placement of industry and stores and standardizing road width; planting uniform hedges around all properties in the villages; abolishing the wood enclosed mud chimneys as a fire hazard; establishing a labour code for non-Mennonite employees; establishing homes

for orphans and neglected children; standardizing education, producing better instructional material, building normal and other specialized schools; putting the slothful and indigent to work under colony supervision; apprenticing non-Mennonite people in the Mennonite environment, to teach them how to become successful settlers; introducing proper cattle breeding, especially German Red cattle which even today is Russia's mainstay; his agricultural experiments and seed production raised the quality of agricultural products; helping to resettle and to train other settlers, Hutterites, Molokans, Nogai, Tartars, Jews, etc. (Urry 1978:144, H. Goerz 1950:40-53, Anonymous 1921:23).

Impact of power abuse

Wittingly or unwittingly Johann Cornies became instrumental in moving the Mennonite colonies farther and farther into the Russian governmental power orbit (John B. Toews 1988:19). The *Gebietsamt* felt the erosion of its authority very deeply. It could execute only those of its decisions which Cornies approved.

We can summarize the impact as follows:

1. He helped tip the balance of power between bishops and colony administrator in favor of the latter (Urry 1989:149). The bishops were thus forced to become dependent on a powerful *Oberschulze* who, for all practical purposes, was the local representative of the Russian state. This shift, says Calvin Redekop, moved Russian Mennonites out of the *Gemeinschaft* (meetinghouse) milieu and firmly entrenched them in the individualistic and capitalistic (counting house mentality) (1985:99-103).

2. He was instrumental in "secularizing" education in the Mennonite colonies. Teachers, up to this point, had been part of the ministry and thus servants of the church, subordinate to the ministers and certainly to the bishop. After the Russian government gave Cornies full control of education in 1843, schools were effectively removed from church control and no teacher could be appointed without Cornies', i.e., without Russian state approval (Isaak 1908:276, F.H. Epp 1962:211).

3. During the Crimean War Cornies' Agricultural Union became the driving force that pushed the Mennonite colonies into large-scale participation in the Russian war effort (Urry and Klippenstein 1989:14).

4. Cornies brought Russian government authority, in the form of the Odessa Guardians Committee, into the day to day affairs of the Mennonite colonies (Ehrt 1932:39). Mennonitisches Lexicon says that Cornies developed a German state inside Imperial Russia (4:711).

5. As economic and health conditions improved, the population grew rapidly and the number of landless families increased to crisis proportions (Krahn 1935:17, Kuhn 1942:14). Cornies introduced new industries and trades to provide work for the landless (Goerz 1950:111), but as it turned out, there was neither enough capital nor entrepreneurs to achieve this goal. Thus at the time of Cornies' death over half of the families in the Mennonite colonies were

not only landless, but many were destitute.

6. Prosperity of the landholders, coupled with the rapid population expansion, destroyed the original egalitarian society and produced a three-tiered one (J.J. Toews 1951:206, Kreider 1951:25). On the top was the landholding and governing minority. In the middle was the landless majority who were deprived of all voting in civic affairs. And finally, at the very bottom were the more or less status-less non-Mennonite workers and servants employed by the landed minority. These workers, in spite of Cornies' efforts to introduce fair labor practices, often were no better off than the serfs under Russian nobility (F.H. Epp 1962:24).

7. There was a breakdown of the brotherhood concept in both church and community (Kreider 1951:27). When the landless appealed for redress to their church brothers, the village and colony leaders denounced them as rabble-rousers and revolutionaries.

8. Intense resentment developed among those who felt abused. Cornies unilaterally terminated farming privileges of farmers he considered irresponsible. He released teachers if they did not carry proper credentials. He had bishops removed from office if they did not support his reforms.

And so the great achievements of Cornies were tarnished. He compromised the vision of Menno because he used coercion to achieve his goals.

h. *Selbstschutz*

By far the most tragic departure from Menno's vision in South Russia was the organization of the self-defense army (*Selbstschutz*) during the Bolshevik revolution following World War One. While the church provided some Biblical justification for organizing a self-defense army, it was the *Gebietsamt* that organized and managed this military venture by the Mennonites.

What was the cause? The treaty of Brest-Litovsk April 1918 led to the occupation of Southern Russia by German and Austro-Hungarian troops (Neufeld 1989:10). Since the Russian revolution had already begun in the previous year, the anarchy and the destruction at the hands of bandits and revolutionaries was already in progress in South Russia by the time the occupation troops arrived. Some of the largest and wealthiest Mennonite estates had already been plundered and their owners had been forced to flee.

With the arrival of the Austro-German troops, Mennonite estate owners, whose properties had been seized and occupied by revolutionaries, now saw an opportunity to regain control of their confiscated possessions. Some of them now armed themselves under Austro-German tutelage and organized posse-like groups which attacked the rebels and reclaimed the estates. The rebel leaders were executed summarily (John B. Toews 1972:15, Reimer 1989:17, J.C. Toews Sept/1, 1954:3).

The presence of the occupation army in the colonies, often quartered in Mennonite homes, brought the Mennonite youth into full exposure of weapons and military force for the first time. Many young men and boys became deeply

enamored with the military precision displayed by the army units. Some young men voluntarily participated in the training drills (John B. Toews 1972:15, 1967:26, Neufeld 1989:13).

The Mennonites were also pressured by other German speaking settlers—Baptists, Lutherans and Catholics—who did not hesitate to use arms to defend themselves (Neufeld 1989:15, B.J.Dick 1986:137).

When the Austro-German army had to withdraw some seven months later following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in November of 1918, a serious power vacuum developed in the area surrounding the Mennonite colonies. The White (Tsarist government) forces were regrouping in the south and the Bolshevik Red Army forces coming from the north so far had been unable to defeat each other. This stand off provided an excellent opportunity for anarchist bandits, like Nestor Makhno, to loot and plunder the unguarded Mennonite colonies which lay in the no-man's land between the opposing armies (J.B. Toews 1967:26).

Day after day brought new stories of bloodshed, looting, raping and killing. One Mennonite is supposed to have said: "Let them finally take my property, but if they touch my wife and daughter, I'm ready to use the axe" (B.J. Dick 1986:135).

Then there were the remnants of the occupation army who remained behind with arms and ammunition. These military men were most eager to organize the settlers into a defence force (John B. Toews 1972:15-16, Adolf A. Reimer 1930:42). The White Army, amassed south of the Mennonite colonies, likewise urged the Mennonites to take up arms (in B.J. Dick 1986:136).

Then, most surprisingly, the returning alternative service workers supported self-defense. In the forestry camps and in the medical service trains they had been wearing military-type uniforms and had been operating under a rigid command hierarchy, using military-type discipline. The result was that some strong leaders emerged among them. These leaders quickly became a challenge to the parochial and sometimes lackadaisical leadership in the churches and villages in the colonies.

These young leaders were appalled at the growing anarchy and were determined to stem the tide. Thus they not only influenced public opinion, they actually formed the core of the volunteers for reestablishing law and order. It seems ironic that their alternative service experience had prepared them to wage war (Ehrt 1932:114).

The erosion of Mennonite loyalty to Menno's peace ideals made it possible to justify self-defense by ministers as well as civil officers. The estate owners were already committed to upholding law and order (Loewen and Urry 1991:42, also see Juhnke 1989:83). They had aligned themselves with the land-owning elite Russians of their day (Loewen and Urry 1991:43). They strongly favored the defence of property and the upholding of law and order.

Once law and order collapsed under revolutionary conditions in South Russia, the emergence of the *Selbstschutz* was more or less inevitable, given

the prevailing attitudes (Loewen and Urry 1991:48-49).

The erosion of Mennonite loyalty to Menno's peace ideals in South Russia has been well documented in a recent article by Loewen and Urry (1991:34-53). As these researchers describe it, the rapid development of the Mennonite colonies and their remarkable achievement of prosperity during the second half of the 19th Century was tragically accompanied by a concomitant erosion of loyalty to Anabaptist-Mennonite ideals of simplicity and peace.

B. THE *LEHRAMT*, CHURCH MEMBERS AND POWER

by Jacob A. Loewen

When the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement in Holland began, Menno conceived of it as a voluntary community of equals dedicated to understanding and obeying God's Word. The authority of this committed community lay in the headship of Jesus Christ and the community as a body of obedient disciples which executed the will of its head. This body under Christ selected for its own nurture and guidance from among its members three kinds of "servants": servants of the poor (deacons), servants of the Word (ministers and teachers), and servants of the ordinance—baptism, communion and ordination (elders or bishops). As the common name "servants" implied, the chosen individuals were to serve the body. They were not its head. All authority rested in the body under the Lordship of Christ. The three types of servants were to represent differences of function, not differences in power. Sad to say, these "servants" soon grabbed ruling functions, and as rulers they fell into sundry kinds of power abuse.

The shaky beginnings of the Lehramt in South Russia

When the first group of Mennonite emigres left Danzig, there was no minister or elder among them. During the time the group camped for winter in the Russian village of Dubrovna, they realized to their dismay that they were a body without servant leadership. And since they felt uncomfortable with being an exegetical community they tried to correct the situation by electing deacons and ministers (at Dubrovna) and an elder as soon as they arrived in their settlement area in South Russia. They asked the elders in Danzig to ordain by proxy the people they had selected. This was done, but doubts about the legitimacy of these only ordained-by-proxy servants lingered (ME 1:158). This situation lasted for about three years. Finally two elders from Prussia came to ordain the selected individuals in person. The insecurity of the interim, however, had laid the foundation for long range problems.

Since the inception of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement in Holland, the *Lehramt* had functioned as the maximal authority of the believing group. Now in Russia the insecure *Lehramt* felt threatened from two sides.

On the one hand, the Russian crown, having negotiated the *Privilegium*

with the original “spy delegates,” Bartsch and Hoepfner, considered these two men the legitimate leaders of the settlers. The Tsar consulted, extended privileges and heaped favors on the two men. This resulted in severe tension especially for the *Lehramt*. This tension increased until the *Lehramt* finally decided to denounce especially Hoepfner for insubordination to the duly installed church authorities and for misappropriating government funds. Hoepfner was condemned, stripped of his property and sentenced to exile in Siberia. However, the next Tsar, having realized the internal power struggle in the Mennonite community, exonerated him and returned all his property (ME 2:811, MLx 2:346).

On the other hand there was the new *Gebietsamt*. This was established as soon as the first villages of the colony were laid out. It, too, was basically a church election. All church members were landholders and so all voted for the *Gebietsamt*. The new colony government was recognized not only by the settlers themselves, but also by the Settlement Guardians Committee (SGC), the immediate Russian governmental authority to which the Mennonite colonies related. The SGC considered the *Gebietsamt* the legitimate governing body of these self-governing colonies (Isaak 1908:114-121). When unrepentant Hoepfner then leaned toward the *Gebietsamt* as maximal authority, the insecure *Lehramt* began to react also against the *Gebietsamt* (Rempel 1974:57, Urry 1978:169).

The Lehramt/Gebietsamt struggle for superior power

The Russian colonies provided the first occasion for a full-fledged dual governing structure. The *Lehramt*, on the basis of church tradition, considered itself maximal under God. The *Gebietsamt*, however, was recognized as the maximal authority by the SGC and the Russian government. This dual governing structure soon ran into conflict. All colonists were church members and any misbehavior was a church affair according to the *Lehramt*. However the *Gebietsamt* was to govern the civil life of the colony according to Russian Civil and Criminal Law. Thus certain types and occasions of misconduct were defined as the responsibility of the civil colony government. This overlap soon created serious misunderstandings and severe tensions (Isaak 1908:114-121).

A major confrontation between the two governing bodies came to a head in 1806 over a case of public fornication about which history provides only fragmentary information. Al Reimer has given us a fictional account. The account here presented is a composite of historical tidbits and Reimer's fiction (Al Reimer 1985:75-77).

A Mennonite youth was caught behind a hay stack fornicating with a Russian peasant girl. The *Oberschulze's* deputies apprehended the two in the act and gave the two a severe lashing as per Russian law. When the bishop learned of this disciplinary event, he was furious. A sexual transgression by a church member was the domain of the church. He considered the mayor's action an infringement on the bishop's authority and demanded a public apology. The mayor countered

by stating that this public interracial infraction was a disturbance of the public order for which he, the mayor, was responsible according to Russian law. The bishop, however, continued to insist on a public apology from the mayor-in-chief. When that was not forthcoming, Bishop Jakob Enns used what he considered his bishop's prerogative and arbitrarily excommunicated Klaas Wiens, the offending colony official, for insubordination to his elder/bishop and for using church-forbidden violence as punishment (Urry 1978:206-207, 1989:74,76-79).

1. THE ABUSE OF POWER THROUGH CHURCH AND STATE COLLUSIONS

The dual structure of the colony governance, with its overlap of responsibilities, also contained the potential for collusion between the two administrative branches. The nature of these collusions, and their particular manifestations, illustrate the extent to which Mennonites had departed from Menno's ideal of "only the sword of the Spirit."

Only four years after the above incident, in 1810, the very same bishop began to feel that congregational discipline alone wasn't effective enough anymore to deter deviant behavior among church members. As a result Bishop Jakob Enns, who had earlier excommunicated the *Oberschulze* for having used physical punishment on an erring church member, now appealed to the *Gebietsamt* to strengthen the church's disciplinary actions by meting out corporal and financial punishment to those whom the church disciplined (Urry 1978:206-207, 1989:74,76-79). Consequently church discipline could now be accompanied by village or colony discipline. The latter could include fines, other economic sanctions, imprisonment and lashing. In fact, Bishop Enns not only wanted to deliver church miscreants to "secular" colony justice, but asked the colony authorities to exile all the members of his own *Lehrdienst* who opposed his approach to church discipline (John B. Toews 1988:12). Obviously church discipline had lost its redemptive intent and had become a punitive instrument of power. Ehrt sees the landowner-preacher-mayor system (i.e., the commonwealth structure) as the crucial factor which robbed Mennonite community life of much of its moral integrity (1932:50). The church had forgotten that Menno had insisted that the sword of government was not to be used for church discipline.

By 1812 a number of ministers were objecting strongly against bishop Enns' use of colony force to carry out church discipline. This group called for a "return to Menno" especially in using the ban as a vehicle of redemption rather than of punishment. These ministers called on church people to separate themselves from those who would use the Russian flogging whip as an instrument of the church (Urry 1989:79, Klippenstein 1984:75-93, C.F. Plett 1985:6). The result was the emergence of the *Kleinegemeinde*. In order to punish this group *Lehramt* and *Gebietsamt* colluded and refused to recognize *Kleinegemeinde* ministers as clergy and made them work on communal work

projects like lay people, while all the other Mennonite ministers were all exempt from such work (H. Goertz 1950:57).

The tension between the two governing entities in the colonies became even stronger when Johann Cornies came on the scene. Cornies had a vision! He would push the Mennonites to fulfill the commitments they originally had made to the Tsar. They had promised to be the model farmers for the region and to be a "developmental engine" which would stimulate the economy of the entire region (Isaak 1908:25-26). When Cornies shared his dream with the SGC, they called him to the Tsar's attention. The Tsar was so taken in by Cornies' vision that he committed himself and the SGC to give Cornies more or less unlimited support to implement this dream (Urry 1978:183).

Thus Cornies became the Mennonite Tsar of South Russia. He could unilaterally issue decrees and the SGC and the Russian government itself would back him in their enforcement (F.H. Epp 1974:166, Ehrst 1932:39, Goertz 1950:34). Both his decrees and his achievement are amazing.

The first governing body to challenge Cornies' authority was the *Lehramt*, specifically *Aeltester* Warkentin, who served well over two-thirds of the churches in Molotschna colony. He made a scathing denunciation of Cornies before the SGC insisting on exile to Siberia as punishment. Since he had been heard out politely, Warkentin assumed victory and announced Cornies' exile on his return to the colony (Urry 1978:69). This was premature because on further investigation the SGC demanded Bishop Warkentin's defrocking on the grounds of opposing legitimate government. Cornies now called on (forced) the rest of the *Aelteste* to execute the defrocking (L.R. Just 1948, John B. Toews 1988:18, C. Redekop 1989:80-81, Urry and Klippenstein 1989:21).

When Bishop Wiens, one of Warkentin's successors, not only continued but stepped up the opposition to Cornies, the SGC ordered that he not only be defrocked, but that he be banished from Russia (Klippenstein 1984:22, Isaak 1908:116).

Cornies now stepped up his campaign against the authority of the bishops. He convinced the Tsar to proclaim him the head of all colony education in 1843. This effectively removed teachers from *Lehramt* control and secularized them. From now on only those teachers who had Cornies', i.e., Russian government approval, could operate (Isaak 1908:276, F.H. Epp 1962:211). This action caused one *Aeltester* to exclaim in frustration: "Now they have taken everything away from us" (Goertz 1950:95, D.H. Epp 1909:85).

Cornies not only went after the bishops who opposed him, but he frequently ordered individual churches to excommunicate individual church members who opposed his reforms. The result was some rather widespread ministerial disapproval of Cornies' autocratic approaches. Minister Epp from Chortitz colony in his diary reports after a visit to Molotschna: "Cornies is more despotic than Christian" (D. Epp 1838:56, H.L. Dyck 1991:14).

The Gebietsamt did not launch any special campaign against Cornies. Oberschulze Johann Klassen did accompany Bishop Warkentin to Odessa to

complain to the SGC, but he himself seems to have taken no overt action against Cornies. However, the *Gebietsamt* did feel the erosion of its authority very deeply. It could execute only those of its decisions which Cornies approved and it had to enforce endless decrees unilaterally ordered by Cornies in the name of the Agricultural Union which Cornies had established under the authorization of the Tsar.

Some of the decrees ordered by Cornies are listed above. If the manner of their promulgation lacked Menno Simons' spirit, the accomplishments that issued from these decrees were nevertheless quite impressive.

Cornies' authoritarian rule in the colonies led to another collusion between the Mennonite Church and state. When Cornies died in 1848, the two governing bodies decided to field a common candidate for *Oberschulze* 'mayor-in-chief' so as to be able to wrest some power from the Agricultural Union. They were determined to prevent the development of a dictatorial dynasty in the Agricultural Union. This common candidate was David Friesen.

In 1851 as part of the *Lehramt*'s effort to gain more ecclesiastical control, the *Aelteste* of all the colonies decided to form a bishop's union (Isaak 1908:122-123, H. Goerz 1950:61). This new body declared all the churches in the colonies subordinate (*Untergeordent*). It gave itself authority to legislate and to speak for the churches without consultation with the church members themselves (Unruh 1954:39, D.H. Epp 1984:71).

This union went against the original "servant" status of the *Lehramt*. It also separated the *Aelteste* from the churches, because until now an *Aeltester* dealt only with the specific church or churches that had selected him. The *Aelteste* were to make no independent decisions, but were to execute the consensual decisions of the congregation. Until now they had had no jurisdiction in other bishoprics and could function there only by invitation and that in purely consultatory capacity.

With the new consistory all the old patterns and attitudes of servanthood passed into oblivion. Bishops now began functioning just like the Catholic hierarchy, completely independent of the thoughts, feelings, and wishes of the congregations (Isaak 1908:122-123, D.H. Epp 1984:71).

This launched a series of unpleasant incidents between bishops themselves and the bishops and the churches (e.g., the struggle about the control of the new Halbstadt Church [Isaak 1908:102-107,145-149], the barley field quarrel, and a bishop's demand for the excommunication of deacon Wall, because he had embarrassed a bishop by revealing his collusion in the dishonesty.)

The bishops had learned from Cornies that one could use outside power sources to get one's way. So bishops began to appeal to the *Gebietsamt* and to the SGC to get their way (e.g., the Halbstadt Church quarrel in which both bishops involved in the struggle sent delegations to Odessa to the SGC to use its power to get their way [Isaak 1908:102-107,145-149]).

The emergence of the consistory of bishops (together with a variety of outside pietist influences) precipitated a second and much more powerful

renewal movement in 1860. It produced the Mennonite Brethren Church (MBC) and several smaller groups.

The first confrontation between the renewal movement and the *Lehramt* developed when the newly converted asked one of the *Aelteste* for a separate communion service. When the bishop refused, the new converts decided to secede (Jan 6, 1860). Instead following Anabaptist-Mennonite guidelines in church discipline, which called for several levels of admonition before the ban could be applied, the consistory of bishops, not the local congregations, now banned the newly converted without even as much as talking to them. In order to destroy this new movement the *Lehramt* and the *Gebietsamt* joined hands to use their joint power to destroy the renewal movement (Isaak 1908:176-180).

In their harassment of the MB Church the two cooperating bodies used their respective rules and laws quite selectively. For example, when merchant Isaak Matthies became an MB, the mother church immediately excommunicated him, instructing its members to shun him thereby avoiding the payment of thirty thousand rubles they owed him. Immediately following this the colony government moved against Matthies with his creditors whom he owed fifteen thousand rubles. His property was sold on a debtors auction (P.M. Friesen 1980:348).

It is only fair to point out that the unwillingness to dialogue by the leadership of the parent church was matched by the MBC's own unwillingness to discuss their differences with the church from which they were seceding (John B. Toews 1982:33).

A very similar reaction took place with the Friends of Jerusalem, another branch of the reform movement, who tried to form an alternative Mennonite Church in Gnadenfeld but were forced to secede from the Mennonite Church in 1863 because of church and colony government harassment (Isaak 1908:238).

No sooner had the MB renewal freed itself from the arbitrary rule of the self-appointed consistory of bishops, authoritarian ministerial attitudes sprang up inside the renewal movement itself. Several of the newly-ordained ministers began to call themselves "apostles." As such they saw themselves as called directly by God. Thus they needed no confirmation by the church. They could issue decrees and perform excommunications quite independently of any congregation (Harry Loewen 1985:120-124, P.M. Friesen 1980:268-270, Hamm 1987:49). Luckily the new church was able to purge itself of these "spiritual despots" and reverse some of their uncalled-for excommunications (Hamm 1987:49, J.A. Toews 1975:61-62, P.M. Friesen 1978:268-270,457, Harry Loewen 1985:120-124).

On the whole the MB Church wanted to return to a non-hierarchical church. Thus it eventually also discontinued the office of *Altester* (Russia in 1909, North America in 1920) and instead developed a General Conference (*Bundeskonferenz*) in which all church people participated in the decisions of the denomination (Loewen 1990:31-35, Braun 1938:11).

However, even the MB was not a total return to Menno's ideal of only one kingdom citizenship. When the new movement received a land grant from the Russian government in the Kuban and settled many of its landless converts there, it perpetuated the church/state compromise by setting up a *Gebietsamt* in the Kuban (P.M. Friesen 1980:401-406).

Already during Cornies' time, due to improved health facilities and the high birthrate, the Mennonite population began to increase dramatically. This eventually resulted in many landless Mennonites. The problem of the landless as such has been discussed under the *Gebietsamt*. However, there was a *Lehramt* dimension to the problem. It is this that we want to highlight here.

The *Lehramt* colluded with the *Gebietsamt* in regard to the landless in a number of ways:

As soon as the landless began to seek justice from the authorities—church and state—the *Lehramt* created a “new church sin,” namely, challenging the decisions and actions of the *Gebietsamt*—of government (D.H. Epp 1984:74-75).

Since the landless outnumbered the landholders, the church seems to have tried to bolster the landholders' power by granting them two votes in church decisions (H.L. Dyck 1991:204).

When the landless appealed to the *Lehramt* for support in their quest for justice from the colony, the colluding bishops piously wrung their hands and publicly claimed that their commission from the Good Lord himself limited them to dealing only with “the heavenly Canaan” (Isaak 1908:54-56).

When the landless then increased the pressure on the *Gebietsamt* and the latter launched two falsehood-laden denunciations to the Russian government against the landless as revolutionaries and rabblers, the *Lehramt* failed to raise a finger in favor of the landless, because the *Lehramt* was “in cahoots” with the *Gebietsamt* (Isaak 1908:63-65).

In Chortitza colony the *Lehramt* even permitted the landholders to table a resolution forbidding the church to rent the lands it controlled to the landless. The landless majority, however, was able to defeat the motion (Klaus 1887:270).

Another serious collusion took place with the emergence of the *Selbstschutz* in South Russia in 1918.

About that time a young man raised the question: “*Why do Mennonites hire Cossacks*” to protect their property? *Odessaer Zeitung (OZ)* (19 Apr/2 May 1903:3). Two people responded to the question in subsequent issues of *OZ*. One obviously was a member of the *Lehramt* (23 May/5 June 1903:2). This writer quoted many Scriptures, but still operated on the principle that it was right to protect one's family and one's property with the sword, especially if the property was necessary for the sustenance of the owner's life. Obviously this member of the *Lehramt* no longer shared Menno's belief that a believer should never use the sword to protect his property (also see Loewen and Urry 1991:34-53).

On June 30-July 2, 1918 a meeting was called in Lichtenau to resolve the

issue of whether or not to organize a self-defense army (*Selbstschutz*). B.J. Dick, then a young man attending the meeting, reports that only the MB ministers B.B. Janz and Jacob Friesen pleaded for adherence to *Gewaltlosigkeit* based on the Sermon of the Mount (John B. Toews 1982:83, B.J. Dick 1986:137). The consistory of bishops was conspicuously silent. It let the *Gebietsamt*—the civil government—carry the day and organize the *Selbstschutz*.

2. POWER ABUSES IN THE CHURCH COMMUNITY ITSELF

The abuses from church and community life here listed all come from the Epp diaries (David Epp 1838, H.L.Dyck 1991). Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers are from H.L. Dyck 1991 containing the Epp diaries, seemingly grandfather, father and son.

Verbal assault and violence. Epp reports that Mrs. F. had a violent temper and constantly quarrelled with her neighbors. On one occasion she was angry at widow H. and tried to assault her. When the latter didn't let her into the house, she cursed her in rage and smashed in a window (383).

Beating each other. As the quality of Christian discipleship decreased in the colony setting, church people began to exercise violence on each other. This often came in the context of excessive alcohol consumption (386). One church member claimed that by mid-19th century colony Mennonites were operating on the local dictum: "If you don't want to be my brother, I'll beat your head in" (C. Lichti 1924:9).

Beating outsiders. Most of the beating of outsiders came in the context of hired help. Beating of servants, male or female, when they incurred the employer's displeasure, was common. Such servants could be Mennonites, Russians, Ukrainians, or tribal people.

One example reported in the Epp diary reports how a group of drinking Mennonites surprised some Jews watching them, so they caught the "spies" and beat them mercilessly (295).

Beating children. The common attitude in the church was: "If you spare the rod, you spoil the child (Prov 13:24, 23:13). The common idea was that children were born with a stubborn will which had to be broken by means of physical punishment. Especially when fathers or mothers abused alcohol such beatings often became abusive.

Beating wives. Wife beating seems to have been very common, because women (Harry Loewen 1985:120, Bekker 1973:37) in general, were considered *unmündig* (not capable of rational decision) or *unselbststaendig* (incapable of being independent.) Serious wife abuse, however, usually came in the context of alcohol abuse.

Sexual abuse of women. Sexual abuse seems to have been quite widespread in the church and colony family. It involved a wide variety of manifestations:

(1) Abuse of wives. Several authorities have pointed out that because of low female status men expressed their sexuality with their wives at will. The result was the high birthrate. Some women claimed that once they were married, they never had another menstrual period. While the statement is hyperbolic, there is a lot of truth to it. For example, one Mennonite prided himself that he and his wife had had 18 children in twenty-one years of marriage.

The number of women who complained of being used sexually out of wedlock is frightening (266,394,203,259,152).

(2) Sexual abuse of children. This involved several degrees of incest with fathers impregnating daughters, especially step-daughters and brothers impregnating younger sisters (203,394).

(3) Sexual abuse of maids. These could be poor Mennonite girls who were next to slaves in Mennonite homes, or Russian girls employed in the home. Epp's diary lists a case of a young maid (Mennonite) constantly being raped by the three older sons of the house in which she was employed. When she appealed to church and colony authorities for redress, nobody paid any attention to her complaints (394).

(4) Abuse by ministers. Epp also lists several women who were sexually used by ministers (266).

(5) Rape. The rape by sons of the house where a Mennonite girl was employed as a maid has been mentioned elsewhere. Epp also reports that Mrs. E. confessed that as a young woman she had been raped by F. (386).

Stabbing, murder, etc. Violence could be fatal. Epp tells of two men who were drinking together. They were married to sisters and one of them was a known wife-beater. When the latter returned home and began beating his wife, the other man who had followed him home, stabbed him (259).

In a case of a family murder-suicide, the father killed his wife and children and then committed suicide (415).

A man, known to be *gaezornig* (given to violent temper) drowned his wife in a fit of anger (author's family "skeleton").

A number of illegitimate children were exposed at birth and died (399).

Epp sums up the Russian Mennonite situation as follows:

Our Mennonite people think that if we refuse to go to war we are fine Christians. They forget that their hearts are full of malice, vengeance and revenge. Everywhere there are quarrels, disputes, strife and violence. Our people have not let God's Word establish roots in their hearts (adapted from H.L. Dyck 1991:91).

CONCLUSION

The abuses lamented by Epp may well be considered as the accompaniments or consequences of the power abuses exhibited by the community leadership, both the *Lehramt* and the *Gebietsamt*. While the extent of the power abuse must

not be overstated, nevertheless, the institutionalized use of the “sword” to defend the truth, to do church discipline and to protect privilege and property, for the Commonwealth period of Mennonite social history, has been demonstrated in this study.

Proselytizing non-Mennonites was clearly prohibited by the terms of the 1763 law pertaining to colonization (Rempel 1973:269) and seems not to have posed a problem. The use of ecclesiastical and socio-economic power to induct ethnic Mennonites, especially the youth, into the church is a somewhat problematic issue. The measures that “coerced” Mennonites into conversion and church membership, (e.g., voting rights restricted to landownership, landownership in the colonies restricted to church members and the sanctification of marriage in the church) were not primarily directed at securing religious conversion. However, when the prevalence of the following sequence: youthful sexual adventures and pre-marital pregnancy, followed by “conversion” and baptism, and then followed by the publication of marriage bans, is considered, then there is a basis for recognizing the use of power that goes beyond “only the sword of the Spirit” even in the area of conversion.

The descendants of the early Anabaptists had, during the Russian period, accommodated their beliefs and practices to the beliefs and practices of the societies around them. In the process they lost the vision of a peaceful lifestyle to the point of finally engaging in armed defense of property and privilege. By losing their focus on a Christ-centred and community-based exegesis they let their discipleship slip, and along with it, their Christian identity. The abuses of power that accompanied these changes shadowed the economic and social progress of the Mennonite colonies and, at a crisis point in Russian history, left them open to identification with oppressors.

How the history of the Mennonites in Russia would have been different if the Mennonites had used the opportunities afforded by the reform movements to recover Menno’s original vision of a citizenry of the Kingdom of Peace remains a matter for the imagination. Fidelity to Menno’s vision might well have led to persecution and a much more restricted lifestyle. It is hard to escape the conclusion, however, that the twentieth century fate of the Mennonites in Russia—to be attacked as a privileged and propertied class and dispersed into the Gulag—is, at least partially, a consequence of the loss of that vision.

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