

Intellectual Developments Among the Mennonites of Russia: 1880-1917

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This article will examine educational and intellectual developments among the Russian Mennonites between 1880 and 1917, with particular emphasis on the Mennonite intelligentsia of the first decades of the twentieth century. I shall deal briefly with the Russian-Mennonite educational system prior to World War I, the students who advanced to study in Russian and foreign institutions, their experiences there, their reception in the home communities, and finally their contributions to Mennonite society and culture.

Russian and Mennonite Intelligentsia

The emergence of an intelligentsia among the Mennonites is connected with developments among the Russian intelligentsia in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.¹ Between the 1830s and 1860s the Russian intelligentsia comprised a small group of intellectuals mostly from the estate-owning nobility who were often critical of Russian social, cultural and political institutions, and pessimistic about their country's future. Some looked to the West for models of development and progress, while others, the Slavophiles, hoped to transform Russian society from within its own Slavic past. These early Russian intellectuals, many of whom had studied and travelled in the West, were alienated outsiders, some of them being nihilists, living as it were on the edge of Russian society. As Russia sought to reform itself, beginning in 1861 with the emancipation of the peasants and continuing with political and industrial developments, the intelligentsia sought closer cooperation with the forces that pushed for reform. The Russian intelligentsia between 1880 and 1917, was a small but growing elite group. They came largely from the noble and professional classes: lawyers, scientists, and lower bureaucrats, who worked toward the improvement, reform, even transformation of Russian society from within. Others, however, followed radical ideas and became revolutionaries. Some of the leaders of

this group were active in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Radical, liberal and conservative intelligentsia, however, were agreed that their duty was to serve the Russian people.

What the Russian intelligentsia sought to do for its society, the Mennonite intelligentsia, as the educated elite among the Russian Mennonites of this period has been called,² sought to accomplish for the Mennonite communities. Few Mennonites, however, were supporters of radical policies. The objective of this group of educated individuals was primarily to serve Mennonite society through educational and cultural reform, raising Mennonite awareness of their place in Russia and in the wider world.

Russian-Mennonite Education and Schools

The origins of the Mennonite intelligentsia, like its Russian counterpart, lie in the first half of the nineteenth century. Educational reformers such as Johann Cornies (1789-1848) and Philip Wiebe, educators such as Tobias Voth, Heinrich Heese, and Heinrich Franz, and schools like the Ohrloff *Vereinschule* (association school), the Halbstadt and Chortitza *Zentralschulen* and the Steinbach private school must be seen as the source of Mennonite intellectual life and reform. While the early educators and even the later teachers and ministers like Bernhard Harder (1832-84) were still very much under the Prussian-German influence in their thinking and cultural orientation, efforts were made by some of them to learn the Russian language and Russian history and culture. However, the real breakthrough in education and intellectual pursuits, and a desire to serve Mennonite and Russian society came after the Great Reform. The establishment of local School Boards, teachers' conferences, and a new generation of leading teachers such as Heinrich Epp and his sons, David, Heinrich and Dietrich, Kornelius Unruh, Jacob Bräul, P. M. Friesen and especially Abraham Neufeld continued the process of educational improvement.

The years after 1905 saw a veritable explosion of education among the Russian Mennonites and a new generation of more highly trained teachers. By 1914, with a total population of some 104,000, the Mennonites of Russia boasted 450 elementary schools which were attended by 16,000 pupils. These schools had either six or seven grades and were taught by 570 instructors, including 70 female teachers. In addition, there were 25 *Zentralschulen* (secondary schools) in which three to four-year-courses were taught. Nineteen of these *Zentralschulen* were boys schools, four were girls schools, and two were coeducational. The *Zentralschulen* and *Mädchenschulen*, some of which had two additional years of pedagogical training, supplied the Mennonite colonies with their elementary school teachers and administrative officials. By 1914 there were about 2000 students registered in the secondary schools, with a teaching staff of some 100 male and female instructors.³ Also founded af-

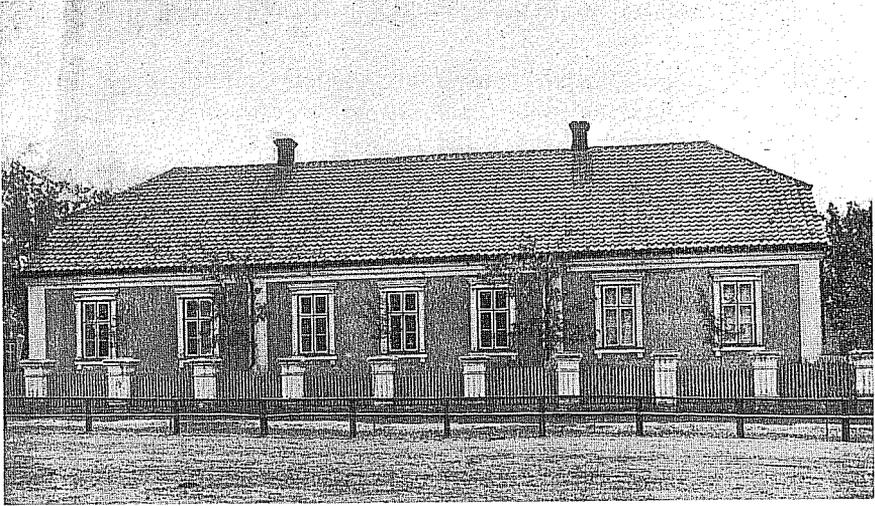
ter 1905 were middle schools, the Kommerzschule in Halbstadt and a private Realschule in Berdiansk.

The schools in Russia had come a very long way from their primitive beginnings. The Mennonite educational system, with its progressive methods was derived from both German and Russian models.⁴ Emphasizing basic skills in reading, writing, arithmetic and religion, the elementary schools ensured that illiteracy was practically eliminated among the Mennonites.³ While six to seven grades were the extent of formal education for most children, Mennonite education exceeded that available to the bulk of the Russian population and compared favourably with the general level of education in Europe and the United States.⁶

The curriculum of the secondary schools included German language and literature, Russian language and literature, mathematics, geography, science or nature studies, history, and of course religion. Except for religion and German, courses were taught in Russian. The cultural, literary and artistic interests and activities in the *Zentralschulen* were considerable. The *Literaturabende* (literary evenings) at which music and drama were performed indicate that Mennonites knew and loved both Russian and German classical works. Among the authors read, studied and staged were Dostoevsky, Gogol, Pushkin, Goethe, Schiller, Ibsen, Shakespeare and others.⁷ From 1900 some secondary schools had "rich and well-selected" libraries which teachers and students could "utilize to the fullest extent."⁸ Nearly all teachers (and many ministers) in the Mennonite colonies had completed their secondary school education.⁹

That in certain quarters there was a "Drang nach Bildung" (intense desire for education), as the Mennonite papers reported,¹⁰ can be seen from the expansion of secondary schools and the steady increase of their enrolments. We have, for example, enrolment statistics for the secondary schools in Chortitza.¹¹ When the *Zentralschule* in this town opened its 1891-92 year there were 75 students enrolled. By the year 1903-04 there were 179. Thus within a decade the enrolment had increased by 134 percent. The Chortitza *Mädchenschule* began with 17 students in 1895-96, and in 1902-03 the school had 52 students; by 1912-13 there were 89, a slight fall from a high of 102 in 1908-09.¹² The increase cannot be accounted for by the population increase of Chortitza alone, although students from daughter settlements also came to the Old Colony. After 1905 this registration trend increased greatly with secondary schools being opened in many areas. The upward enrolment trend no doubt indicates an increase in educational interest among Mennonites generally.

With regard to the need for formal theological training the Russian Mennonites could not apparently make up their mind. The Mennonite papers in the first decade of the twentieth century discussed the advisability and possibility of establishing a theological seminary.¹³ There were those who were in



Second building of the Halbstadt Zentralschule, erected 1860. Photo: P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*.



Third building of the Halbstadt Zentralschule, erected 1895. Photo: P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*.

favour of developing such a school for training Mennonite ministers, while others felt that the preachers should be trained within the congregations as had been done in the past. P. M. Friesen, for example, argued that through Bible courses and theological extension work in the churches the educational needs of ministers could be met, and such home training would also be less costly. He agreed, however, that “especially gifted young men eager for an education will in any case seek to acquire a formal theological education in the universities of other countries.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, eventually four Bible schools were established, one prior to World War I in Friedensfeld and the other three between 1923 and 1926 in Davlekanovo, Tschongrav and Orenburg.¹⁵

According to P. M. Friesen, of the approximately 500 ministers and elders in Russia, between 160 and 170 had a theological education. These figures comprise about one third of the Mennonite clergy. The rest, about two thirds of all ministers, were self-taught, although all ministers had completed their elementary education and many of them had a secondary education.¹⁶

Post-Secondary Studies

Given the educational level in the Russian colonies, it is not surprising that some bright young students wished to continue their studies on a post-secondary level. Moreover, there was a practical need for higher education as the *Zentralschulen* and teacher-training institutions expanded and the professions in the colonies gained in importance. While it is understandable that promising students were encouraged by their teachers to continue their studies it is to be noted that the families of these students and even their communities were willing to support them in their educational endeavors.¹⁷ This no doubt points to an acceptance of higher education by at least the educated elite among the Mennonites and a realization that teachers, ministers, missionaries, and the various professionals like doctors and lawyers required an education which the Mennonite educational system could not provide. Moreover, a strong sense of mission and a desire to serve the community lay behind this “Drang nach Bildung.”

A number of Mennonite students attended Russian academies and universities in such centres as Petersburg, Moscow, Ekaterinoslav, Berdiansk, Alexandrovsk, Melitopol, Odessa, and Sevastopol,¹⁸ while others went to study abroad, primarily in Switzerland and Germany. According to P. M. Friesen the number of students, both male and female, studying at middle and university level schools in Russia reached 200, and in foreign countries, 50.¹⁹ Friesen further reports that in 1910 there were six students studying theology abroad.²⁰ This latter figure appears to be rather conservative. The majority of students in Switzerland and Germany went to study Bible and theology but not all remained in that discipline.²¹ Some of the lists of students in

Swiss and German institutions indicate that the majority of Mennonite students studied theology and pedagogy, the traditional disciplines for Mennonite minister-teachers. Ernst Crous, for example, lists the names of 16 Russian-Mennonite students who had studied theology and pedagogy at the Freie Evangelische Predigerschule in Basel before World War I.²² We also have the names of 25 Russian-Mennonite students, many of whom came from the Rückenau Mennonite Brethren, who between 1882 and 1916 studied at the Predigerseminar der deutschen Baptisten zu Hamburg-Horn.²³ Many others who eventually ended up pursuing disciplines other than theology and pedagogy were part of this Russian-Mennonite migration to Russian and foreign academies and universities. Cornelius Krahn, following Nikolai Klassen, lists 96 Mennonite university graduates between 1880 and 1917. Of this number 11 were theologians and ministers, 29 were teachers and professors, 14 were physicians, 3 worked in forestry science, 7 were lawyers, 24 were engineers and architects, and 8 were "others," including some writers and artists.²⁴

Why Mennonites chose Basel and Hamburg for their theological studies is not difficult to determine. Both the evangelical ministers' school in Basel, established in 1876, and the Baptist seminary in Hamburg, founded in 1881, were originally established to counteract the liberal theology taught at the universities.²⁵ Mennonites, theologically conservative and having established good relations with evangelical and Baptist groups, were drawn to institutions which would not threaten their faith. After several years at these schools some students returned to serve their people, while others continued their theological education at the universities. It is interesting to note that students from the "kirchliche" background were drawn to the *Pedigerschule* in Basel, whereas Mennonite Brethren students chose the Baptist seminary in Hamburg, although there were some notable exceptions.²⁶ It might be noted that the school in Basel operated at a university level, whereas the one in Hamburg was more devotional in nature, similar to the later Bible schools in Canada. There were also other Bible institutes which Russian Mennonites attended, including St. Chrischona near Basel.

How did young students prepare for their studies away from home? What did they expect to find in the centres of the "world"? And what were their experiences when they got there?

In reading the letters and autobiographies of these young Mennonites, one senses an air of excitement and expectancy coupled with a sense of responsibility and duty toward those who supported them financially and morally.²⁷ The eighteen-year-old Johann Klassen of Molochnaya, for example, writes to his close friend Abram Enns of Altonau in 1905 that all his preparations have been made, the passport has been procured, and the acceptance papers from the *Predigerschule* in Basel are in order. While he looks forward to seeing other countries and the art treasures of European cities, Klassen is conscious of his responsibility toward his parents who enable him to study



Teachers and students at the Freie Evangelische Predigerschule, Basel, Switzerland, ca 1908. First row, last right: Peter G. Epp; last row, fifth from left: A.B. Enns; last row, last right: Johann P. Klassen. Photo: A.B. Enns, Lübeck, West Germany.

abroad and his community which he later wishes to serve as teacher and minister.²⁸

The journey by train and the sites and cultural wonders in the West open up new worlds to the young Mennonite scholars.²⁹ They visit art galleries in Vienna, Munich, Basel and Paris and then report to their friends at home what they have seen and experienced. Time and again they refer to what they have learned in the *Zentralschulen* and add that now they see and experience that former book knowledge in reality.³⁰ They write about specific works they are reading and studying and about the natural wonders, such as waterfalls, the Alps, and the Rhine River in southern Germany and Switzerland. The Russian steppes, Johann Klassen writes, have nothing that can compare with the mountains, lakes and rivers of Switzerland. He would like to be planted like a rock amidst all this beauty so that he might enjoy these wonders forever.³¹ For Abraham Fast, the Rhine city of Worms is the place of the *Nibelungenlied*, a medieval epic he had studied in the *Zentralschule*.³² And Arnold Dyck on his wanderings near Munich and Stuttgart retraces the steps of German classical writers and, sitting on the “Schiller bench,” reflects on literature and art.³³

Most Russian-Mennonite students had to complete preparatory courses before enrolling in regular programmes at the seminaries and universities. This preparatory work included the study of languages such as German, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and disciplines such as theology, art history, and pedagogy. Abram Enns relates how hard he had to work at these languages.³⁴ Johann Klassen writes to his friend Enns at home that he could speed up his preparatory work by studying languages and general world history *before* coming to Switzerland. He also writes that he has to work hard but that he manages his studies well and that he is determined to do well so that he can enrol later at the university and complete a Dr. Phil. before returning to Russia.³⁵ Like students everywhere, Klassen complains about some of his instructors and the heavy work load. He is quick to add, however, that his slave drivers are good for him and his fellow students, for they prepare them for the assignments and tasks ahead.³⁶

While the Mennonite students were away from home for extended periods of time, they remained in close touch with intellectual, political, and religious developments in their country and colonies. For example, thirteen Mennonite students in Petersburg, among them Theodor Block who later wrote the poem cycle *Hungerlieder*,³⁷ respond in the Mennonite papers to the debate about literary evenings in general and stage productions in particular, arguing that would-be teachers in the *Zentralschulen* be acquainted with all things pertaining to literature and drama.³⁸ The debate soon involved Mennonite students in Leipzig who supported their Petersburg brethren.³⁹ Johann Klassen writes about the revolutionary winds that were blowing in Russia in 1905, and that he will have to study many things, including matters pertaining to political anarchy, so as to understand the ideas and views of revolutionaries.⁴⁰

From time to time there are expressions of apprehension among the students concerning how they will be received at home, especially those students who switched from theology to some "secular" discipline like philosophy and art.⁴¹

Students who intended to study the Bible and theology in order to serve later as ministers, teachers, or missionaries, often transferred to other disciplines. Both Johann Klassen and his friend Abram Enns, for example, abandoned their theological studies for philosophy, language, literature, history, and art studies. The correspondence between these two friends is most instructive with regard to the intellectual development of the Russian-Mennonite students in those years. In the period between 1905 and 1906 Johann Klassen still writes about his work in theology, about visits of ministers and missionaries who sought to inspire the students for their future spiritual activity, and about how great it must be to go out as a missionary to proclaim the gospel to the poor heathen in foreign lands. Soon after Klassen expresses an interest in art and art studies and gradually decides to become an artist himself. He

begins to show disdain for “theology and all the things that smell of theology.”⁴² In his letters he even pities and despises his poor fellow students who still pursue biblical and theological studies.

Similarly Klassen’s friend, Abram Enns, turns from theology to art history and literature. He begins to write poetry, sending his verses to Klassen for comment and criticism. The discussions between the two young friends about art, poetry and life in general leaves little doubt that they have left the narrow confines of their earlier ethical and spiritual thinking and are now trying their intellectual wings in the freedom of the literary and fine arts. They exchange letters in which they discuss the nature of artistic and literary inspiration, they refer to the “Goddess of art and beauty,” and are conscious of the freedom that literature and art demands of their devotees.⁴³

The students in Germany and Switzerland do not mention, much less visit, the centres of early Anabaptist history, but instead flock to the museums and art galleries of Europe and speak with enthusiasm about literary, artistic, and musical figures whose works they love and worship.⁴⁴ If they had been exposed to Anabaptist-Mennonite history in the *Zentralschulen* and congregations at home — and there is some evidence that they were, as some articles and other publications indicate⁴⁵ — this particular knowledge seems to have receded into the background when the students encountered the outside world. There is some indication that in the decades prior to the Revolution of 1917 Anabaptism was not well known, and certainly not emphasized, among the Russian Mennonites.⁴⁶ Abram Enns insists that in his time there was no Mennonite history taught in the Ohrloff *Zentralschule*.⁴⁷

While the Russian-Mennonite students generally did well academically and were well liked by their instructors and mentors, they failed to enter fully into the social life of their Russian, Swiss, or German surroundings.⁴⁸ Arnold Dyck in southern Germany writes of lonely excursions into the mountains and forests with knapsack on his back and his own thoughts and feelings within — “only twice with a companion,” he writes, “but generally alone.”⁴⁹ Johann Klassen in Switzerland writes about the “Prussian” students who do not seem able to understand the “Russians,” meaning the Russian Mennonites, nor to appreciate the wonders and spectacles of nature around them. He stands alone, with no friend to share his discoveries and experiences. Peter Epp, who later wrote the novel *Eine Mutter*, seems to have been a loner, rising as early as five o’clock in the morning to read Plato and the works of other philosophers. Even his friend and roommate Abram Enns found him cool and distant.⁵⁰ And Abraham Fast, later pastor of the Mennonite Church in Emden, leaves the impression that the best discussions he had were not with fellow students but with the young woman he later married.⁵¹ These “Russians” at the academies and universities may have occupied a privileged position with the teaching staff and administration, but they were outsiders as far as the native students were concerned.⁵² There seems to be some evi-

dence that Mennonite students in Russian institutions also kept aloof from their Russian fellow students, forming their own social groups and seeking support from Mennonite leaders residing at these centres.⁵³

There is little doubt that the Mennonite students in the universities and academies were affected by the spirit of enquiry, secularism, and liberal thinking. Abraham Fast, who studied theology in Basel and other centres, writes of professors who ridiculed the Bible, especially the Apocalypse of John, and considered much of the Bible as "myths." Such subjects as individualism, free will, religious doubt, and the humanism in literature and drama certainly had an effect on the thinking of young and impressionable minds.⁵⁴ Cornelius Benjamin Unruh (1849-1910), one of the leading teachers in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, had religious doubts "in the years before, during and after his [studies in Switzerland]."⁵⁵ Abram Enns, who studied literature, philosophy, and art history in Basel, Marburg, Berlin, Munich, Lausanne and Kiel expressed his developing *Weltanschauung* in his poems. The poems reflect his preoccupation with art, human existence, reality and ideals, and life in general. He writes of the poet's exalted position and loneliness, and suggests that the poet-artist-individual stands alone in the universe with no support from anyone or anywhere.⁵⁶ Enns lost his simple Mennonite-Christian faith in those early formative years in Germany and embraced a theistic humanism which has guided him throughout his life. The well-known Jacob H. Janzen, who taught for many years in the Ohrloff-Tiege *Mädchenschule* and was later a minister and author in Canada, states that he was also influenced by the destructive philosophy of his time. Studying pedagogy in Melitopol and Kharkov and reading philosophy and natural sciences at the Universities of Jena and Greifswald in Germany in 1913-14, he "fell prey to the influence of Russian nihilism" and then found himself in the "company of Russian revolutionaries."⁵⁷ Janzen returned to his Christian faith and as a teacher sought to instill in his students a love for Mennonite values and to develop their intellectual skills and independent, critical thinking.⁵⁸

One of the most graphic descriptions of what went on in the minds and hearts of some of these young students can be found in a letter written by Johann Klassen to his friend Abram Enns in 1910. Having returned to Russia from his art studies in Munich, Klassen went to Yalta in the Crimea where his father was seeking a cure from a severe ailment. Being pious Mennonites, his parents prayed to God for his father's healing. One day Klassen's mother asked her son with tears in her eyes: "Why is it that our father does not get well? I'm praying so much about it, but often I feel that I'm not being heard."⁵⁹ This set off the following reaction in Klassen:

I didn't say a word. Yet everything was clear to me. "Poor little mother!" my heart cried out, "you can pray for a long time before someone up there will hear you. . . ." I was beside myself. "This joke must end," I cried aloud and rushed out toward the sea.⁶⁰

Klassen then describes in poetic language his search for God and his inability to find him in the faith of his fathers. He writes:

It was very windy. The sea raged. Dark clouds covered the immense sky and hung down black and thick. I was driven by the storm. The waves were high and beat powerfully against the shore. In an instant I found myself in the midst of one of the tallest waves. With great force it drove me higher and higher. I stood firm on it, however, and did not even tremble. . . . I was terribly agitated. Enraged I began to tear down the clouds and to throw them into the turbulent sea. . . . I broke through heaven itself and bellowed . . . : "God, where are you! I want to see you!" . . . There was no answer. . . .⁶¹

This remarkable Promethean outburst and philosophical reflection by a twenty-two-year-old Russian Mennonite points to the fact that these young intellectuals grappled with problems of faith honestly and existentially. Klassen later found his way back to the "faith of his fathers," but some who studied in the institutions of higher learning left the piety of their traditional community forever.

While there are no statistics concerning the number of students who abandoned their faith, there is evidence to suggest that while not too many were lost to Mennonitism, a few were lost to service in the Mennonite community. With regard to students in Russian institutions, P. M. Friesen writes: "The number of those who either during or as a result of studies in Russian state institutions have left the Mennonite fold . . . is very small."⁶² He then continues:

The "Mennonitism" of our men who have been educated in Russian secondary schools and universities is just as genuine as that of the average among our people in general. The same can confidently be said of their piety: the educated ones compare most favourably with the average of the Mennonites who experienced nothing but a Mennonite village school training along their educational path.⁶³

Friesen admits, however, that some Mennonite men who married Russian-Orthodox women while studying away from home left their Mennonitism for a practical reason — their children could not become Mennonite.⁶⁴ Some students studying in Germany and Switzerland also married non-Mennonite women, as, for example, Abram Enns did, subsequently settling in Lübeck where he lives to this day. Abraham Fast, on the other hand, married the daughter of a German-Mennonite family while studying in Switzerland and Germany, thus symbolically uniting, as he puts it, the "Swiss" and "Russian" Mennonite traditions.

In what sense some Mennonite intellectuals gave up their faith tradition is a rather subjective question. Benjamin Unruh remained a Mennonite, but his intellectual, cultural and theological pursuits and activities took him beyond traditional Mennonitism. Walter Quiring could boast that he was a Mennonite, but one who did not believe in nonresistance and other traditional Mennonite faith issues.⁶⁵ Abram Enns, when told by a pious Mennonite pas-

tor in Lübeck that the Mennonites had lost a good Mennonite in him, smiled and said that in his own way he still belonged to the Mennonite people.⁶⁶

Reception in the Home Communities

Most students in post-secondary institutions intended to serve their communities with their skills and knowledge. The young scholars and professionals returned to their colonies to contribute as well as they could to the advancement of learning and culture. We have the names of many who returned to Russia and then worked in their committees with distinction and success.⁶⁷

This is not to say that these educated young men were not opposed and severely criticized by the villagers and congregations, who often found it difficult to appreciate the “learned ones” in their midst. Jacob H. Janzen, for example, writes about resistance to his innovative ways and his openness to culture and literature in the schools and community. Musical events, singing sessions, drama, and literary evenings in the *Zentralschulen* at times met with opposition and hostility.⁶⁸ Ethical and moral questions were always of great concern to the community. When teachers of the *Zentral-* and *Mädchenschulen* cooperated in joint cultural programmes, doubts were raised about mixing students of different gender. Teachers sometimes had much to explain and justify in order to put at ease “concerned” parents and parishioners.⁶⁹

For Johann Klassen, who had studied art in Germany and wanted to become an artist, the return home in 1910 proved traumatic. Writing to his friend Abram Enns in Germany, Klassen reports in great detail the hostile reception he met at home and his own feelings and attitude toward his critics:

I now stand all alone in the world. I must be strong and courageous. At home I was received with tears. It is most difficult. . . . My art is a real devil for all my relatives. My mother tries to understand me because of her deep love, but she too does not understand anything. Oh my friend, the people here are too pious to see the beautiful and the good in the world. I expect trouble upon trouble. My father will not understand me, that is impossible. . . . It is frightful . . . all are against me. I feel as if they don't want me to live. . . . My heart cries out toward them: Treat me as you will, but I will still love you!⁷⁰

Before Klassen's father died, he became reconciled to his son and his artistic aspirations, but the community remained cool and distant. He was told in no uncertain terms what they thought of him and his art and he was excluded from their midst. Klassen, however, became indifferent to the opinions of his neighbours. To his friend he wrote: “. . . ever since I devoted myself to art, I find myself on a height where nothing can touch me. I don't even have to listen to what these dear people tell me. . . .”⁷¹

Others were received more favourably upon their return, although the traditional Mennonite suspicion of culture and learning remained just below the surface and would emerge at the slightest provocation. Heinrich D. Neufeld, married and with a family, returned from Basel to teach at Alexanderkrone

in Molochnaya and later Zagradozka. According to one report, Neufeld returned “with courage, a drive to create (*Schaffensdrang*), and a desire to serve his dear people.”⁷² During the Revolution period he was shot and killed by the anarchists, as described later by his brother Dietrich Neufeld, who reflected upon his teaching ministry and contribution to Mennonite culture. Dietrich Neufeld speaks of his brother’s well-received sermons and activities on behalf of the less fortunate and landless people in the colonies. While “his words always made a deep impression and provided much food for thought,” Neufeld was for a long time “a voice crying in the wilderness.” Even ministers misunderstood, criticized, and condemned him, whereas open-minded people, “lovers of truth,” and younger people appreciated his tireless activity in the schools and churches.⁷³ Al Reimer is correct in his assessment of this period when he writes:

[the] last free generation of Mennonites in Russia was, for the first time, producing a small but elite class of intellectuals and artists. They were a group of well-educated, dedicated young Mennonites who would, in all likelihood, have brought about tremendous cultural changes in the Mennonite colonies had they had “but world enough and time.” They did not.⁷⁴

There is ample evidence that these cultural changes were beginning to happen prior to World War I. Johann Klassen and his art were not entirely ignored by Mennonites in Russia. As early as 1913 Klassen reports to his friend Abram Enns in Germany that he had rediscovered the beauty of the Ukrainian steppes and its people and that the Mennonite industrialist Jacob Niehbuhr has commissioned him to sculpt monuments dedicated to Ukrainian national figures and folklore.⁷⁵

Changing Political and Religious Views

Mennonites around the turn of the century were becoming more politically conscious and there is no doubt that the students in post-secondary institutions also contributed to this development. While most Mennonite intellectuals were basically conservative, they were open to change in Russia which promised better conditions for both Mennonites and their non-Mennonite neighbours.⁷⁶ No specific political movement emerged among the Russian Mennonites, but there was nevertheless a strong inclination among them toward “Christian-conservatism” and a suspicion of democratic institutions. There were a few Mennonites, “free thinkers,” as Friesen calls them, who accepted political platforms that favoured a constitutional democracy, but in this too they hoped to preserve the monarchy, the empire, and of course, complete freedom of religion.⁷⁷ Philosophical nihilism and political anarchy were rejected by most Mennonites, including members of the intelligentsia. Their love of stability and order found expression in selective political involvement such as voting for “acceptable candidates” and supporting the

Mennonite representatives in the Imperial Duma.⁷⁸ Between 1905, when the Russian empire found itself in a political crisis, and 1907, when the Dumas were dissolved, Mennonite editors and other writers promoted political consciousness and involvement, and “were eager to help shape the future of their fatherland.”⁷⁹

The new intellectual and cultural climate among the Russian Mennonites was also reflected in their remarkably liberal and progressive views with regard to the Christian faith and other religious denominations. Desiring to preserve religious freedom for themselves, the Mennonites were prepared to extend freedom and tolerance toward other groups. On February 7, 1908, at a gathering of leaders in Alexanderwohl, including “Kirchliche” and Mennonite Brethren, the Mennonites agreed to accept a position paper concerning freedom of faith and religious propaganda. The paper, to be submitted to Duma deputy Hermann Bergmann, stated that while Mennonites believed in spreading the gospel, they abstained “from any active propaganda among members of other Christian denominations.”⁸⁰ The paper concluded: “Although we Mennonites confess our religion with the full conviction of its truth . . . we nevertheless recognize that there are truths of the Christian faith to be found in all Christian denominations.”⁸¹

This openness, tolerance and liberal thinking, which coincided with the reforms after 1905, applied to moral-religious issues as well. Although not stated in so many words, in private letters educated young men advocated a high degree of freedom and expression of personal experiences in ethical matters. Thus Johann Klassen advises his friend Abram Enns to enter all areas of life, including friendship and love, so as to be able to write poetry that is rooted in real life.⁸² For his part, Klassen writes of the life-style of artists in Munich, justifying their bohemian life on the basis that artists live in a world to themselves.⁸³ Mennonite students saw and experienced the “world” in all its shades and colors, and when they returned to their homes in the steppe they were wiser but their innocence was gone forever.

The Sunset of Intellectual Life

We cannot know how Mennonite intellectual and cultural life would have developed had World War I and the Revolution of 1917 never occurred. However, all indications are that the Mennonites of Russia would have continued to develop their schools and cultural institutions along progressive lines, with the educated elite setting the pace and direction of development. There is reason to believe that Mennonites were ready for drastic changes in their economic and political spheres. The All-Mennonite Congress held in August, 1917, for example, leaves no doubt that the “closed” world of Mennonites had been left behind decades ago and that Mennonite leaders were beginning to realize that they were part of a larger world and society in which exclusivity and privilege for the few had no place.⁸⁴ There was still a sense

of optimism at this Congress concerning the Mennonite future in Russia, an optimism born of an understanding of history and politics and a sense of justice for all. Such subjects as socialism and Christianity were debated and discussed, with Benjamin H. Unruh, the moderator of the Congress, declaring that the Christian faith had little to do with certain political, social, or economic parties and institutions, including socialism and capitalism, and that such issues were to be left to the specialists in those areas.⁸⁹ Other delegates to the Congress argued that socialism was closer to Christian principles than capitalism, although the two were not identical.⁸⁶ Many at the Congress agreed that Mennonites ought to be in favour of a new "progressive tax on land" and that large estates should give way to distribution of land to the people, an issue that was uppermost in the minds of many people at the time. A resolution was passed at the end of this first and last Mennonite congress in Russia which favoured a "democratic constitution based on strictly parliamentary basis designed to protect and advance the national and cultural possibilities for the development of all peoples."⁸⁷

The Congress with its 198 representatives of various Mennonite regions and interest groups, included well-known teachers and professionals. The debates, discussions and resolutions with regard to the Mennonite position within the new political era in Russia, and such issues as land distribution, justice, education and other considerations, reflect hitherto unknown levels of understanding, eloquence, sophistication, and culture among the Russian Mennonites. The All-Mennonite Congress of 1917 indicates that the Russian Mennonites were coming intellectually and culturally of age, that they recognized the end of their ethnic isolation in Russia, and that they were prepared to take their place and responsibility within the wider world. But 1917 also marked the beginning of the final destruction of the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia.

Conclusion

There are several things which emerge from our study of Mennonite intellectual developments between 1880 and 1917.

Changes and reforms within the Russian empire and threats to Mennonite identity in the latter half of the nineteenth century contributed to a well-developed secondary school system in the Mennonite colonies and the need for post-secondary education. The Mennonite high schools prepared students adequately for their life in the colonies and for post-secondary education in Russian and foreign centres.

Mennonites who received their post-secondary education in Russian and Western academies and universities assumed the intellectual and cultural leadership in the colonies and helped to transform Russian Mennonitism from a predominantly agricultural-ethnic-religious group to a society more urban, industrial and secular in orientation.

The openness of Mennonites to the outside world and their increasingly liberal thinking with regard to religious-moral issues went hand in hand with the political and economic changes around them. It was the Mennonite intelligentsia which was most conscious of the changes which took place in the outside world and who then sought to adapt to these changes realistically yet within the tradition of Mennonite faith.

It was this Russian-Mennonite intelligentsia which later laid the foundation for Mennonite education, scholarship, and writing in Germany, the Soviet Union and in North America. The work of Johannes Harder, Arnold Dyck, Peter G. Epp, Dietrich Neufeld, and Johann Klassen, to name only a few, is unthinkable without the Russian-Mennonite foundations prior to World War I.⁸⁸

It is no doubt ironic that while the educated elite in Russia was often mistrusted and opposed by its less educated community, it was this group which preserved and advanced Mennonite faith and culture long after the Mennonite world in Russia had come to an end.

Notes

¹On the Russian intelligentsia see the following: George Fischer, "The Intelligentsia and Russia," in *The Transformation of Russian Society*. Ed. by Cyril E. Black (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960); Angus Calder, *Russia Discovered. Nineteenth-century Fiction from Pushkin to Chekhov* (London: Heinemann/New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976).

²On the Mennonite educated and professional people toward the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see N. J. Klassen, "Mennonite Intelligentsia in Russia," *Mennonite Life*, 24 (Apr., 1969) 2:51-60. See also John B. Toews, "Cultural and Intellectual Aspects of the Mennonite Experience in Russia," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 53 (Apr., 1979) 2:137-159.

³Peter Braun, "Education Among the Mennonites in Russia," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. 1955-59, 2:153-57; Leonhard Froese, "Schulwesen der Mennoniten in Russland," *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, 4 vols. 1913-67, 4:109-14.

⁴On Johann Cornies and his educational reforms, see: P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia 1789-1910*, transl. from the German (Fresno, California, 1978), pp. 775-97; Franz Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte derselben* (Halbstadt, Taurien: H. J. Braun, 1908), pp. 273-95; D. H. Epp, *Die Chortitzer Mennoniten. Versuch einer Darstellung des Entwicklungsganges derselben* (Odessa, Russland: Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1889. Reprint: Steinbach, Manitoba: Derksen Printers, 1984), pp. 273-95.

⁵Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 790.

⁶James Urry, "Prolegomena to the Study of Mennonite Society in Russia: 1880-1914." Paper delivered in November, 1989, at the University of Winnipeg.

⁷Cf. Arnold Dyck, *Collected Works Vol. I, Verloren in der Steppe. Aus meinem Leben*, eds. Victor G. Doerksen and Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1985), p. 474. Abraham Fast, *Aus unserem Leben*, Aufzeichnungen zum Tage der goldenen Hochzeit, 22 Mai 1962, p. 5.

⁸Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 1033.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 927-28.

¹⁰*Die Friedensstimme*, Aug. 4, 1907.

¹¹David H. Epp, "Die Arbeit an unserer Jugend," *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch*, 1903 [1905], pp. 57-67.

¹²H. Epp, "Die Chortitza Mädchenschule," *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch*, 1913, p. 98.

- ¹³*Der Botschafter*, May 10, 1906. See also J. Toews, "Über eine mennonitische Predigerschule," *Der Botschafter*, 10 Mai 1906.
- ¹⁴Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 37.
- ¹⁵*Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 11:157. See Abram H. Unruh, *Die mennonitische Bibelschule zu Tschongraw, Krim, in Russland*, n.p., n.d.
- ¹⁶Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 927-28.
- ¹⁷A. B. Enns, Lübeck, West Germany, interview Aug., 1989.
- ¹⁸Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 790.
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 790.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 1041.
- ²¹Enns, interview Aug., 1989.
- ²²Ernst Crous, "Mennonitentum und Pietismus. Ein Versuch," *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 8 (Juli/Aug.), 1952), pp. 292-93.
- ²³*Festschrift zur Feier des 50-jährigen Jubiläums des Predigerseminars der deutschen Baptisten zu Hamburg-Horn, 1880-1930*, n.p., n.d.
- ²⁴Cornelius Krahn in C. Henry Smith, *Smith's Story of the Mennonites*. Fifth Edition Revised and Enlarged (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1981), pp. 353-56, basing himself on an earlier work by N. J. Klassen.
- ²⁵Crous, "Mennonitentum und Pietismus," p. 292.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 292-93, and *Festschrift*.
- ²⁷Johann P. Klassen letters to his friend A. B. Enns, Dec. 3, 1905; Jan. 13, 1906. The originals of these letters are located in Lübeck, Germany, city archives. On the writer of these letters, see Harry Loewen, "A Mennonite Artist as a Young Man: The Letters of Johann P. Klassen to a Friend (1905-1913)," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 5, 1987:21-36.
- ²⁸Klassen letter Aug. 25, 1906.
- ²⁹Klassen letter March 22, 1906.
- ³⁰Arnold Dyck, *Collected Works I*, pp. 472-74; 481-82.
- ³¹Klassen letter Apr. 24, 1906.
- ³²Fast, *Aus unserem Leben*, p. 3.
- ³³Arnold Dyck, *Collected Works I*, p. 481.
- ³⁴Enns interview Aug., 1989.
- ³⁵Klassen letters Aug. 25, 1906; Sept. 13, 1906.
- ³⁶Klassen letter Sept. 13, 1906.
- ³⁷Harry Loewen, "Mother, give me something to eat": Theodor Heinrich Block and His *Hungerlieder* (1922)," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 6, 1988:152-64.
- ³⁸Theodor Block et. al., "Offener Brief an die Redaktion der *Friedensstimme*," *Der Botschafter*, 28 (9/22 Apr. 1910).
- ³⁹*Der Botschafter*, 34 (4/17 Mai 1910).
- ⁴⁰Klassen letter Aug. 25, 1906.
- ⁴¹Klassen letter Sept. 13, 1906.
- ⁴²Klassen letters, March 27, 1909; Sept. 2, 1910; Oct. 2, 1910; March 19, 1911.
- ⁴³Klassen letters March 24, 1911; Apr. 20, 1911.
- ⁴⁴Arnold Dyck, *Collected Works I*, p. 481.
- ⁴⁵See Cornelius Bergmann, "Das Prinzip der Wehrlosigkeit in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung," *Der Botschafter* 50 (29. Juni/12. Juli, 1910); 51 (1./15/ Juli, 1910); 52 (6./19/ Juli, 1910). See also Martin Klaassen, *Geschichte der wehrlosen taufgesinnten Gemeinden von den Zeiten der Apostel bis auf die Gegenwart* (Danzig: Edwin Groening, 1873).
- ⁴⁶Peter J. Klassen, *Verlorene Söhne. Ein Beitrag in der Frage der Wehrlosigkeit*. N.p., n.d., pp. 90-93; Gerhard Wiens, "Russo-German Bilingualism: A Case Study," *Modern Language Journal*, 36(8), Dec., 1952. pp. 392-95.
- ⁴⁷Enns interview Aug., 1989.
- ⁴⁸*Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹Arnold Dyck, *Collected Works I*, p. 482.
- ⁵⁰Enns interview Aug., 1989.
- ⁵¹Fast, *Aus unserem Leben*, pp. 5-6.
- ⁵²See Klassen letters of 1910 and 1911.
- ⁵³Peter Braun, "Peter Martinovitch Friesen (1849-1914)," *Mennonite Life*, 3 (Oct., 1948), 4:8.

⁵⁴Fast, *Aus unserem Leben*, p. 5-6.

⁵⁵Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 720-21.

⁵⁶Enns, *Die Hütte* (Lübeck: H. G. Rathgens, 1924), p. 1.

⁵⁷Janzen, *Aus meinem Leben*, p. 29.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹Klassen letter Apr. 15, 1910.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 593.

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵Walter Quiring interview, early 1980s.

⁶⁶Enns interview, Jan., 1987.

⁶⁷Smith, *Story of the Mennonites*, pp. 353-56; *Festschrift*.

⁶⁸Janzen, *Aus meinem Leben*, pp. 35-47.

⁶⁹*Die Friedensstimme*, July 14, 1907.

⁷⁰Klassen letter March 15, 1910.

⁷¹Klassen letter July 1, 1910.

⁷²Aron A. Toews, *Mennonitische Märtyrer der jüngsten Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart*, Vol. 1 (Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1949), p. 330.

⁷³Dietrich Neufeld (Dedrich Navall), *A Russian Dance of Death. Revolution and Civil War in the Ukraine*. Trans. and edited Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1977), pp. 87-88.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁷⁵Klassen letters May 2, 1913; March 31, 1913.

⁷⁶Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 627-28.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸See Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 627-28; *Der Botschafter*, June 14, 1906; *Die Friedensstimme*, Sept. 22, 1907.

⁷⁹Leonard Friesen, "Mennonites in Russia and the Revolution of 1905: Experiences, Perceptions and Responses," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 62 (Jan., 1988), 1:55.

⁸⁰Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 630.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. 635.

⁸²Klassen letter Aug. 1, 1911.

⁸³Klassen letters Aug. 1, 1911; May 29, 1911; Oct. 24, 1911.

⁸⁴"Protokoll des allgemeinen mennonitischen Kongresses in Ohrloff, Taurien, vom 14-18. August, 1917," *Mennonitische Warte*, 38:4 (Feb. 1938), 34-40; 39:4 (März 1938), 68-73; 40:4 (Apr. 1938), 112-16; 41:4 (Mai 1938), 162-66; 42:4 (Juni 1938), 202-06; 43:4 (Juli 1938), 242-50. These minutes also appear in *The Mennonites in Russia, 1917-1930. Selected Documents*. Ed. by John B. Toews (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1975), pp. 449-78.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, March, 1938, p. 69.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸⁸Much exploratory and critical work has recently been done on Russian-Mennonite literary figures who left the Soviet Union for the West. See, for example, the article on Mennonite literature in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 111:369-71, and studies by: Victor G. Doerksen, "In Search of a Mennonite Imagination," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 2, 1984: 104-12; Al Reimer, "The Russian-Mennonite Experience in Fiction," in *Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural, and Literary Essays Dealing with Mennonite Issues*, ed. by Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980), pp. 221-35; Harry Loewen, "Canadian-Mennonite Literature: Longing for a Lost Homeland," in *The Old World and the New: Literary Perspectives of German-speaking Canadians*, ed. by Walter Riedel (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 73-93; and Hildegard Froese Tiessen, "Das Neue im schon längst Vertrauten entdecken," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter*, 43/44. Jahrgang, 1986/76:132-56. Hardly anything has been written on those Mennonite writers who did not emigrate in the 1920s. Some of them wrote novels and poems in German and had them published in the 1930s, '40s, and later. Their story has yet to be told.

Note: A paper on Russian-Mennonite intellectual development might not be complete without reference to writing and publishing, for through these activities the intelligentsia disseminated its ideas. However, a satisfactory treatment of writing and publishing would have exceeded the

limits of this article. On this subject, see Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 831-41; J. H. Janzen, "Die Belletristic der Canadischen Russlanddeutschen Mennoniten," *Warte-Jahrbuch* 1943:83-89; and Al Reimer, "The Print Culture of the Russian Mennonites 1870-1930," in *Mennonites in Russia 1788-1988. Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz*, ed. by John Friesen (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), pp. 221-37.