

# Mennonite-Ukrainian Relations (1789-1945)

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*The test of critical thought is the readiness to face unpleasant facts and painful issues and to scrutinize the preconceptions, biases and favourite myths even of one's own community.*

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## Introduction

This article is based on a paper I presented at the Learned Societies in Winnipeg in 1986. The subject, Mennonite-Ukrainian relations, is an aspect that Mennonite history had not dealt with before. I concluded at that time that Mennonite-Ukrainian interaction had occurred but that it had lacked the conscious desire to understand each other, and that only after the Russian Revolution and the disastrous civil war a positive interaction began to develop. However, after more research that conclusion had to be modified. New materials had to be added and the interpretation modified accordingly.

## The Regional Stabilization Policy of the Russian Government.

Rivers have always been important in the development of nations, but few rivers have played such a significant role as the Dniepr River. It was the route by which the Goths came to establish their kingdom on the shores of the Black Sea, it was the trade route of the Vikings in the ninth century, and it remained a crucial trading route to the present day.

Just below the rapids of the Dniepr bend was a large island in the Dniepr River which offered a good position for a defending army against would-be invaders. This was the territory of the Cossacks, and around 1550, Prince Dmytro Vyshnevetsky fortified the island Khortytsia, improving his position against Tatar raids from the Crimean Peninsula. The Cossacks were in

alliance with Lithuania at the time, but in 1556 they changed their allegiance and sided with Moscow. Vyshnevetsky was again on the side of Lithuania in 1561, until he was captured and tortured to death by the Turks in 1563. But the famous “Baida” (Vyshnevetsky) had created on the island Khortytsia a significant Cossack fortification, which served as a first line of defence for the Cossack “Sich” just above the Dniepr rapids.

The Cossacks changed their allegiance according to the demands of the hour, for they had no reason to be strongly attached to any of the powers surrounding their territory: Russia, Lithuania, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire. However, after the political union with Moscow in 1654, Russia expected the Cossacks to be loyal to Russia, which the Cossacks found very difficult to accept. Atamans and Hetmans continued to make their own foreign policy where such action seemed to be in the interest of the Cossacks and the population which identified with them. Hetman Mazepa sided with Sweden against Russia in 1709, and in 1767 the Ataman of the Sich, Kalnishevsky, considered siding with the Turks (Soloviev XXVIII 47-48). Eventually the Cossacks fought on the Russian side in the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774, but when the war was over, the Russian government moved to settle the matter once and for all. The Cossacks who had been unreliable from the Russian government’s point of view—and who consistently had opposed the settlement of Zaporozhian territory, which would have made the presence of the Cossack army and their “Sich” superfluous—were resettled. In June 1775 the “Sich” was surrounded by Russian troops and the Cossacks removed by force.<sup>1</sup>

When fourteen years later the first Mennonites arrived on the Dniepr and settled the region, including the island Chortitza (Ukrainian: Khortytsia), against their will, they were totally ignorant of the region’s history.

### The First Mennonite Settlements.

At the end of Elizabeth’s reign (1762), the population of the large Russian Empire, which already stretched from the Baltic and the Black Sea to Kamchatka, was estimated at 25 million. The country was still far behind Europe in agriculture and improvements were badly needed to control the almost regular recurrence of famines. The government had attempted to bring settlers into the country, with preference for people of Slav origin and Orthodox faith, but with little success. An experiment with Serbian settlers in Zaporozhian territory in the 1750s had failed. Whether Cossack resistance to this colonization decided the fate of the new Serbian villages may be debatable, but the fact remained that the large territory, which Russians called New Russia or Little Russia, lacked agricultural development, and the total population of New Russia was estimated at 150,000 to 170,000 (Doroshenko 469). In this context we have to see the decision of the Russian government, in the latter part of Elizabeth’s reign, to invite European settlers.

The Seven Years War (1756-1763) gave Russian officers an opportunity

to see the far more advanced European agriculture. The Russian commanding general, Rumiantsev, who occupied Danzig and its surrounding Prussian territory in the years 1760-1761, was one of the strong supporters of an aggressive immigration policy to develop Russian agriculture and industry. He apparently tried to invite Mennonite farmers, but the behaviour of Russian occupation troops may have dampened the interest of Prussian peasants (Fleischhauer 82). Seven years later Rumiantsev was commanding general in the Russo-Turkish war of 1768-1774, and there he met 67 Hutterian refugees, the last remnant of that Anabaptist movement, and he invited them to settle on his estate near Kiev (Horsch 107).

In 1789 the first Mennonites arrived at the Dniepr rapids, the Porohy, at Alexandrovsk. They were forced to settle in this region because there was no end in sight to the Russo-Turkish hostilities which had started again in 1787. The Mennonite settlers would not believe Potemkin that there was any danger to their dreamland on the Black Sea, and at first refused to settle in the "mountainous region" of the Dniepr bend opposite from Alexandrovsk. However, they had no choice, and within eight years sixteen Mennonite villages were established on the western side of the Dniepr and two on the left bank near Alexandrovsk and Ekaterinoslav respectively. The colony was named after the island Chortitza, which was also settled at that time.

Between 1803 and 1835 a larger Mennonite colony was established about 100 km south-east of Chortitza. By 1850 that colony, which became known as Molotschna, after the river Molochnaia, had settled more than 50 villages, and the two colonies had become thriving agricultural communities. In 1835 they contributed to the opening of the Russian wheat export.

### Early Interaction With the Native Population.

The interaction of Mennonite settlers with their neighbours in the new land was complicated by the language barrier. To this was added a deep mistrust of the settlers against Russian officials but also against the population. The settlers had been promised protection and financial support, but the delivery of the payments was irregular, slow in coming, and in small amounts, and the settlers got the impression that the officials were not trustworthy. On the issue of protection their grievances were even more serious. Many of the crates of the Chortitza settlers containing their vital winter supplies arrived filled with rocks, their lumber was stolen, and many horses were lost to thieves. Word apparently got around that these settlers were unarmed and would not defend themselves.

These problems were compounded by internal tensions and fear of an uncertain future. No wonder that the first impression of the settlers was rather negative and that their opinion of the native population was low. This impression of the Chortitza colonists was reinforced by the experience of the Molotschna settlers, who came better prepared, but had similar problems with their native neighbours. The Molotschna settlers did not want to settle

the land which had been pasture land for the nomadic Nogais (Isaac 8), but they were treated with the same kind of authoritarianism that Chortitza settlers had seen in Potemkin. They had to take what the Russian officials gave them.

Next came the problem with the Nogais. These people resented the newcomers and for years made life difficult for them. There were several murders and the government's punishment of the guilty was usually swift and harsh. But this was not what the Mennonites asked for—they wanted protection, preventive measures rather than stiff penalties after the crime had been committed. All this contributed again to the low esteem for their neighbours and for Russian administrators.

Fortunately there were men among the settlers who recognized some of their own weaknesses. Heinrich Heese immediately after his arrival in 1808 took up Russian studies. Johann Cornies who spearheaded the Ohrloff "Fortbildungsschule" (secondary school), called Heese in 1829 to put that school into firm hands, and among other things he emphasized the need for Russian instruction. Cornies himself had no difficulty conversing in Russian. And it was Cornies who improved relations with the Nogais dramatically; indeed they eventually saw in him their protector and "father." It was Cornies who convinced the Nogais to accept his breed of the Merino sheep, and he also succeeded in settling 17,000 Nogais in villages (Haxthausen 165-166), which Russian officials had never been able to do.

There was another kind of interaction which cannot be measured easily, but which should not be ignored. Mennonite millers were among the first in the business in New Russia, and eventually they controlled over 50% of the milling business in Southern Russia. Heinrich Thiessen was the first miller to move into a city, in 1805. He established in Ekaterinoslav a treadmill and a vinegar factory. Soon his example would be followed by others and in every Ukrainian/Russian town or city Mennonite mills would often get all the business. It is obvious that these individual miller families must have had active interaction with the native population, which was Ukrainian in most cases.

Another very significant point of interaction between Mennonites and Ukrainians came in 1830, when the government asked Cornies to establish agricultural apprenticeships on his experimental farm at Juschanlee. Cornies agreed to do so under several conditions: a) He would choose the candidates; b) he would accept sixteen men and four young woman, who would get their instruction from Mrs. Cornies; c) students had to arrive in proper dress, but once accepted, he would be responsible for their clothing; and 4) at the time of their graduation the government would pay to each graduate, man or woman, 200 rubles. The project started in 1840 with three men and two women, and by 1843 Cornies had sixteen men and four women learning the skills of model farming (D. H. Epp, *Cornies* 81-82). However, Cornies could not take all the apprentices, and the government agreed that more farmers

should be invited to become "teachers," but the selection of qualified farmers had to be done by Cornies.

The success of this interaction became obvious when the government realized that these Ukrainian model farmers could succeed only if settled in separate villages where they could support each other. Several of these villages, like Novo-Filipovka and Novo-Pavlovka, became real model farming communities and they were recognizable by their architecture as well as by their prosperity.

### Interaction During the Crimean War.

The Crimean War brought a degree of interaction of Mennonite settlers with their Russian and Ukrainian countrymen that could not have been foreseen by any Mennonite leader.

In 1854 French, British, Turkish, and Piedmontese forces landed on the Crimean peninsula. The Russian government was taken by surprise and was totally unprepared. The German villages in southern New Russia all of a sudden became indispensable bases for the Russian army that did not have a developed transportation system to back an army fighting far from the centre of power. The Mennonite villages were ordered to supply the army with horses, waggons, and men to serve as drivers. For two years several thousand young Mennonite men were invaluable transportation experts for the Russian army, becoming involved in the vital supply delivery for the Russian army.

Perhaps for the first time Mennonites even identified with the Russian soldiers who were defending their homes. It cannot have escaped the Mennonites that in case of a Russian defeat, part of the Mennonite Commonwealth would have come under Turkish rule. Soon Mennonite villages were turned into provisional hospitals. At one time there were close to 7000 wounded soldiers in Mennonite villages of the Chortitza and Molotschna colonies. According to Alabin, there were 5000 wounded in the Molotschna colony alone (quoted in Friesen 483).

At the end of the war the Russian press was full of praise for the German settlers, but especially the Mennonites were singled out as fine citizens. It was obvious that whatever the mutual prejudices had been, they had crumbled in a common experience.

The solution of the landless problem in the Mennonite colonies coincided with the liberation of the Russian serfs, which the Mennonites celebrated as a victory of benevolent autocracy (Harder 583), not quite realizing at the time that the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 would affect the Mennonite Commonwealth in a very significant way. The solution of the landless problem created a shortage of labour in the flourishing Mennonite agriculture, and the now free Ukrainian and Russian peasants, who did not have enough land to occupy their large families, eagerly sought out the villages of foreign colonists to find some extra income. The Mennonite villages became the favourite places of work for the former serfs, but also for

many of the free peasants, for several reasons. It would appear that besides better food and pay, many of the workers were also conscious of the training they received in these villages. After three or four years some of the aggressive workers would say: "Barin, I will now be busy with my own land. I have learned a lot. Thank you."<sup>2</sup> Another recorded case tells us something about the employer-employee relationship. After three years at a Mennonite estate, Petro became foreman of the work force, but due to many complaints from the Russian (Ukrainian) workers, the owner decided to fire him. But Petro simply refused to go. "Barin, give me another chance, you will see I can change." He was given another chance, became an excellent foreman, and during the years of anarchy, Petro hid the Mennonite owner of the "khutor" (estate) under his roof, taking a serious risk for himself and his family.<sup>3</sup>

The contact with the Ukrainian population was further increased by the rapid development of several industries in the Mennonite colonies. Mennonite millers dominated the milling industry in the Dniepr region, and soon there were clock-making factories, waggon factories, and agricultural implement factories. By 1914, Mennonites produced over 6% of all agricultural implements in Russia and 10% of these implements in Ukraine. This created many jobs and by 1890 Mennonite-Ukrainian interaction was taken for granted. However, this interaction was not on the basis of equality. The bosses were Mennonite and the majority of the workers were Ukrainian. It is quite obvious that this relationship could not always be a happy one. It is fair to say that most Mennonites treated their workers better than many native employers because there was a strong church influence in the way Mennonites related to their neighbours, but not all Mennonite employers were ideal bosses.

Some of the newly-rich farmers and industrialists behaved arrogantly and treated their workers according to Russian rule and practice: He who has the power can afford anything. In all fairness it must be added though that the number of Mennonites who ignored the Christian principles with regard to human relations was small; but as is well known, evil is remembered more easily than good. During the years of anarchy, 1918-19, this fact would bear horrible fruits for the whole Mennonite community.

There was, however, a growing awareness of Ukrainian presence and a significant segment of the Mennonite community began to recognize its responsibility toward its neighbours. The Pietist movement, which reached the Mennonite community from Germany, exerted generally a positive influence upon intercultural relations and created a new respect for neighbours of different ethnic background. But foreigners were not allowed to proselytize among the Orthodox population. However, more interaction and better relations were bound to have an impact on every aspect of contact. In the 1860s the first Russians were baptized by Mennonite preachers, and to avoid the law which made it a criminal offense to proselytize among the Orthodox population and for the Orthodox to join the Mennonite Church, the new converts eventually joined a Baptist Church, which was recognized by the Russian authorities as a Russian-Protestant church body.

Another significant level of interaction was fostered through the Russian educational reforms of the 1870s. Mennonites felt threatened by those reforms, because they feared for their identity. This equalization process was also aiming at Russification and therefore affected Ukrainians as well as Mennonites. In consequence of these reforms, Russian (Ukrainian) teachers were forced upon the Mennonites. Every school—and at the turn of the century Mennonites had about 350 elementary schools, 12 high schools, two teachers colleges, and several girls schools—had to have at least one Russian teacher. For the elementary schools that was expensive, for the village had to hire two teachers now, no matter how small the school was.<sup>4</sup> The tensions created by this regulation were understandably highest in the less sophisticated rural setting where prejudices were strongest. Russians had always been workers for the farmers, now they suddenly moved up to be teachers of the farmers' children. This was a healthy experience but not an easy one to deal with at first. In his novel *Lost in the Steppe*, the Mennonite writer Arnold Dyck deals with this problem in a very honest but sensitive way, vividly describing the relationship between the Russian teacher and the Mennonite community. But Arnold Dyck was already the product of the new educational policies of the Russian government. He expresses less prejudice and indeed likes the Russian teacher.

By 1890, Mennonites were studying in ever growing numbers at European and Russian universities. There were dozens of Mennonite students at the Universities of Petersburg, Moscow, and Kharkov. Mennonite students met Ukrainians and Russians for the first time as equals, and they discovered that intellectually they had more in common with their Russian friends than with Mennonite villagers. When it came to marriage alliances, the Mennonite village girl often lost against the Ukrainian or Russian girl. The first intermarriages came as a shock to Mennonites, but the community had to learn to live with the new reality. More than 20% of all Mennonite students studying at Russian universities entered a mixed marriage with Ukrainians or Russians (Klassen 54). These marriages presented a real problem because by law the Mennonite partner had to become Orthodox, and if he did not, his or her partner and the children were still considered Orthodox by law. It was not so much the mixed marriage that was resented by the Mennonite community, but rather the fact that the church automatically lost a member. Mennonites in Poland and Prussia had been open to non-Mennonite converts, as names like Koslovsky, Sawatzky, Telitzky, Quitkovsky, Brosowsky and many others prove, but in Russia a mixed marriage always meant a loss, not a gain.

### Interaction in the Political Arena.

The participation of Mennonites in political and social life of Russian and Ukrainian towns and cities has been recorded for a number of important centres like Berdiansk, Orekhov, Pology, Millerovo, Alexandrovsk, Melitopol, and Ekaterinoslav. The Mennonite community settled in Berdiansk in

the 1840s and became politically involved quite early. The extent and quality of Mennonite participation can be measured in a number of city projects, such as the settlement of the suburb Makorty, the founding of the prestigious Pushkin School (Russian) by Heinrich Ediger, and the election of Mennonite city counsellors and the popular mayor, Heinrich Ediger. However, Berdiansk was not an unusual case.

In 1872 Johann H. Janzen moved with his family from Schönwiese, to the Ukrainian town of Orekhov. Orekhov at that time had an almost purely Ukrainian population of approximately 30,000. The total number of German settlers in Orekhov was only about 200. Two years after Janzen's arrival he was elected mayor of Orekhov and reelected to serve 25 consecutive years until he retired. It is beyond any doubt that Janzen must have been popular and that he spoke Russian—the official language—reasonably well. That also implies that Janzen must have had considerable interaction with the native population before he moved to Orekhov. Since this happened before the implementation of the Russian school reforms, we must assume that there were perhaps a good number of Mennonites even before the reforms who had mastered the language sufficiently well to interact even at more sophisticated levels. Schönwiese at that time was becoming a cultural centre in the Russian Mennonite Commonwealth (Olga Lepp Interview, 1987).

A celebrated case is no doubt the Mennonite community in Ekaterinoslav where a Mennonite presence was recorded as early as 1805. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, two brothers, the first Mennonite university graduates, established themselves in Ekaterinoslav. Jakob Esau opened a hospital and the first eye clinic in Ekaterinoslav, while his brother Johann built the first steel manufacturing plant, became the city's chief engineer, was elected to the city council, and eventually Lord Mayor of Ekaterinoslav. In 1909 Esau was offered that position by Kharkov and Baku. He declined and accepted an invitation of Prince Urusov to become Curator of the South Russian International Exhibition. In 1914 Esau was invited to become mayor of Yalta. He declined but another important task was handed to him by his old friend Prince Urusov, who appointed Johann Esau Director of Health Services of the Russian army for the southern front, the Black Sea, and Rumania (Esau, *Autobiography*).

The Russian administrative reforms scared Mennonites at first but it would appear that they very quickly learned to work within the new system. Since most Mennonite villages were within Mennonite volosts, they did not notice any difference from the Gebietsamt administration. However, a number of isolated villages were included in mixed Ukrainian-Mennonite volosts. It is not surprising that these villages learned to cooperate with their Ukrainian neighbours quite early. The Russian zemstvo activist, Kamensky, claims that there were no tensions between Mennonite villagers and Ukrainian farmers in such mixed volosts. Kamensky points to the significant number of Mennonite zemstvo officials in the Ekaterinoslav, Pavlograd, and Bakhmut districts, elected by an overwhelming Ukrainian majority. Kamensky stresses



the contribution of Martin Thielmann and Jakob Loewen as chairmen of the mixed Leshkarev volost court between 1880 and 1892, and of the Mennonite volost judges of the peace Peter Dyck (nine years), Wilhelm Niessen (six years), Abram Krause (three years), Block (nine years), and David Braun (six years) in the Vesselotiernov volost. He also mentions the valuable services of Cornelius J. Reimer from Wiesenfeld and of Thielmann and Braun, who had the confidence of the local population so that they were called as mediators in many disputes (Kamensky 85-86). Kamensky claims that in these mixed districts Russian nationalism or anti-German voices were unknown.

Unfortunately the gradual improvement of relations between the Mennonite and Ukrainian communities was neutralized by the political development of the time. After 1878, when Bismarck, "the honest broker of European politics," disappointed the Russians by trying to mediate rather than to take sides with his good friend Alexander II, Russo-German relations went from bad to worse. This immediately affected all settlers of German background. For the first time in the nineteenth century anti-German feelings, fanned by the growing Pan-Slav movement, began to affect a whole nation. The Russian press became evermore hostile. The good will earned by the Mennonites and other German settlers during the Turkish Wars was forgotten. And no matter how distorted history was presented, the successful settlers, once hailed as model farmers who helped to develop Russian agriculture, now became the "foreign parasites," "the exploiters" who should be sent packing. During World War I, Mennonite men served in non-combatant roles, and a number of them died for Russia. The Mennonite community maintained its nonresistant principle at a high cost—uniforms and maintenance of the medical orderlies had to be paid for by the community. In addition Mennonites volunteered to materially assist the wives of Ukrainian soldiers who were serving at the front and also helped them with their harvest, but the press never mentioned these facts.

War-time propaganda is always destructive when it is directed against the enemy, but here it was directed against citizens who had settled in Russia at the invitation of the government and who were serving the country like any other citizen, albeit as non-combatants. Over the years this propaganda against a minority became a time bomb that only needed a slight jolt to blow the German-speaking minority to pieces. And that is what happened after the Revolution of 1917, when law and order disintegrated and anarchy ruled the country.

### The Total Breakdown of Relations.

There were guilty Mennonite employers, who had treated their workers badly, but they were the exception on the estates and in the villages. However, the poor Ukrainian peasants who had been told again and again by the old government and by the nationalist press, and now also by Lenin, that all land belonged to them and that it could be taken away from the rich, were

now impatient, angry, and armed. And logically, if there was “no good German,” as the press had assured them, there was also no reason to distinguish between bad and good settlers. In retrospect it is thus easy to understand what happened between 1918 and 1920 in Ukraine.

Circumstances compounded the problem. When the German army briefly occupied the region, it was natural for the threatened communities to hope for some protection by any power that offered relief; but these communities were German speaking and thus from their neighbours’ point of view, they were suspect of collaboration with the enemy. The reaction after the retreat of the German army was predictable. The raids on all German-speaking villages were renewed with greater viciousness, and the timid self-defence of some Mennonite villages against the raping, looting, and killing bands added yet another reason for more violence, for in the eyes of their neighbours, Mennonites had proved that they were willing to defend their villages with arms but not their country during the last war. Thus the atrocities increased and whole villages were slaughtered indiscriminately.

When the Red Army finally gained control and the new order became firmly entrenched, Mennonites and Ukrainians became equals in every respect. They were all poor and uncertain about the future. From 1922 to 1923 they experienced the greatest famine of the century together and millions died. For the Mennonite community this was the first serious famine they had ever experienced. In the Molotschna 823 families were starving and 326 people died as a result of starvation (Hofer 26).

A four-man delegation of Russian Mennonites, led by B. H. Unruh, went to the United States to inform the churches and to plead for help. In March 1922 AMRA (American Mennonite Relief Agency) started to feed the hungry in the Molotschna region. By the fall of 1922 American Mennonites had also provided 25 tractors to plow the fields, and by spring of 1923 fifty tractors were plowing the steppe of the Ukraine to prevent a recurrence of the famine in the following year. This help focused on the Mennonites but it did not exclude the Ukrainian population.

During the following NEP period (1923-1928), Mennonite and Ukrainian communities prospered, and as a result they became companions in suffering in the next stage of the Stalin experiment, when the de-kulakization—the elimination and extermination of all strong farmers in the Soviet Union—began; although the Mennonites, because they were a foreign element, were still the most vulnerable target for the government. Mennonite farms also gave a more prosperous appearance and thus the de-kulakization affected many more Mennonites than Ukrainians, but the Ukrainian community felt cheated by the new government. The Ukraine had been promised autonomy, but what they now got was anything but autonomy.

Ukrainian peasants had been promised land and they enjoyed the brief NEP period, but now they were herded into collective farms, which was not their idea of freedom, and they fought the system. For this reason, the

oppression that now set in had different roots for the two communities, but the fact is that Ukrainians and Mennonites shared the bitter cup to the fullest. In both communities all potential leaders were eliminated. In the Mennonite community people in lay leadership of the church were the primary targets, while in the Ukrainian community potential leaders of opposition and anticipated opposition were weeded out.

The 1930s were also the time when Mennonites began to understand more fully that there was a difference between Ukrainians and Russians. They began to understand that there was more than a geographic distinction between “Khokhol” and “Katsap” (the frequently used somewhat negative terms for Ukrainians and Russians). Mennonites had expected that their German schools would be closed and that Russification was their lot, but Ukrainians had been promised a free Ukraine and a free Ukrainian culture. The reality was somewhat different. Parents were given a choice between Russian and Ukrainian. But pressure and pragmatism combined to give the Russian schools the better chance. Most Mennonite districts opted for Russian schools because all Mennonite teachers had been trained in the Russian school system and the Ukrainian language was seen as a dialect of Russian. However, Ukrainian was taught as a second language in Russian schools and in this setting young Mennonites learned to understand Ukrainian as an important literary language.

When the artificial famine and the Stalin terror in the 1930s silenced all voices of reason in the Soviet Union, Mennonites and Ukrainians were probably the two hardest hit communities. The reasons for this special attention from the authorities were not the same and yet similar. In the case of Mennonites, the government did not like their strong community bonds based on religion; for the Ukrainian community it was the awakened national feelings, but both had to do with the identity of a group.

While the two communities were still far apart in many respects, a much better understanding and mutual respect developed between them. The young people were together in school, friendships developed and the century-old prejudices were disappearing. Unfortunately, World War II complicated relations again, when Hitler’s propaganda attempted very deliberately to drive a wedge between the German minority and the Ukrainian population. Generally Mennonites resented this, for the majority disapproved of Hitler’s totally irrational, and for them dangerous, “Ostpolitik” (P. Epp 32). Some of the Mennonite leaders spoke out or demonstrated their disapproval. In the village of Franzfeld, Yasykovo, Kornelius Epp helped out a Ukrainian couple by marrying them in the Mennonite church.<sup>5</sup> Never before had that happened in Mennonite churches, and the symbolic gesture was obvious to the population as well as to the occupation authorities. But the end of all Mennonite-Ukrainian relations was approaching fast. When the German army began the retreat in September 1943, those Mennonites who were in German-occupied territory and 350,000 other Soviet citizens of German descent had no

choice—they fled westward in a mighty stream of hopeless humanity which included over a million Slavs (Tolstoy 427). The events of World War II wiped out all Mennonite communities between the Elbe and Volga rivers.

## Conclusion

Mennonite-Ukrainian relations never developed into the healthy and strong relationship which could have benefitted both communities. Cultural and economic differences made an understanding difficult from the start. Individual Mennonites like Heese, Cornies, and some others during the early period—and later their number increased—recognized the need for better communication with the local population. However, the officially imposed and then also accepted isolation of foreign settlers remained a serious obstacle for meaningful and positive interaction.

When the government changed its policy of separation of foreign settlers from the mainstream of Russian society, the integration attempt of the government was actually quite successful. Mennonite records offer evidence of a significant integration process. Interaction between Mennonites and Ukrainians began in the 1860s and by the end of the nineteenth century it had reached an impressive level, especially in the urban centres and in Mennonite villages that were somewhat isolated from the Mennonite community and therefore had become part of mixed Ukrainian-German volosts. Mennonites from Wiesenfeld, Kronsgart, and from villages of the Bakhmut district actively participated in the zemstvo institutions in various positions but also as chairmen or justices of the peace in district courts.

The urban Mennonite communities participated in town politics quite early. There were at least three very successful mayors of large towns or cities, and their contribution to the development of city administration, after the reforms of Alexander II, is significant. Johann Esau, former mayor of Ekaterinoslav, became a member of Stolypin's Reform Commission for City Government (1910).

At the same time we will have to recognize that the majority of Mennonites, living in concentrated Mennonite areas, changed at a slower pace. People in the villages managed to communicate in a Ukrainian slang with their workers. Some did not speak Russian at all and their interaction remained limited.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>These Cossacks were eventually resettled on the Kuban River, in the northern Caucasus where Mennonite settlers became their neighbours in the 1860s.

<sup>2</sup>Johann Quiring, interviewed 1948, when he was 90.

<sup>3</sup>Family records, Cornelius Dyck, owner of Khutor Rohrbach.

<sup>4</sup>The law was enforced gradually but by 1914 fully implemented.

<sup>5</sup>These observations are based on the author's experiences in the Nikolaipol (Yasykovo) villages and interviews after World War II.

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