

# One History, Many Stories: The Significance of Social, Cultural, Geographic and Generational Distance at *Khortitsa* '99

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One of the luxuries of scholarship is the opportunity for reflection. *Khortitsa 99*, an international conference on Mennonites in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union held on May 27-30, 1999, gives cause for such reflection. The Conference was a rare experience spanning four days with an international group of scholars. Particularly significant was the participation of Ukrainian/Russian scholars who are researching Mennonites as a part of their own history in the region. New archival material made available after the breakup of the former Soviet Union helped to add archival documentation to the mainly biographical and autobiographical content of previous histories. In large measure the researchers confirmed and expanded the travelogues, diaries, and memoirs often referred to as the 'poor stuff' of history. These primarily folk histories while important to group identity failed to grasp the movements of history which are often beyond their scope. In a sense there is only one comprehensive history of Mennonites in the Ukraine based on a common set of experiences and documents. In reality a plurality of histories exist, influenced by generational, cultural, ideological and geographic distance from the events as they originally unfolded. *Khortitsa '99* was more than a scholarly look at Mennonite

history in the Tsarist and Soviet periods but also a revealing look at Mennonite scholars as distinctly 'positioned subjects' whose retelling of the story incorporates elements of their own tradition, experiences and identity.

The new historical documentation in the papers presented at the Conference held few surprises for anyone familiar with the story. The plurality of perspectives, however, have ramifications for Mennonite identity globally and particularly for Mennonites presently living in Ukraine. Central to the latter's experience is an elusive normative Mennonite identity, given the diversity of social situations imposed by the Mennonite diaspora.

The positions taken by the participants at *Khortitsa '99* can be grouped into several broad categories. The inclusion of Ukrainian/Russian scholars provided a new and more detached view of Mennonite history in Ukraine. Even though only abstracts of their papers were made available there was opportunity for useful dialogue. Their detachment allowed them to talk more freely about Mennonites who collaborated with the Soviet regime at the village level. In private conversation they revealed that in Nieder-Khortitza, for example, seven Mennonites were active Communists, one as early as 1914. The scholars' enthusiasm for exploring a forgotten minority group put Mennonite ambivalence about Ukrainian/ Russian history to shame. Ukrainian scholars' interest in Mennonite history appears to be a product of the fluid nature of the Ukrainian identity in the post-Soviet period. From informal discussions at the Conference it became clear that Ukrainians are attempting to come to terms with the ethnically diverse nature of their population.

Evidence of this is found in the pattern for selecting historical symbols of resistance and freedom within the territory. Russians provide the strongest symbol of the 'other' because of Ukraine's long history of occupation under Tsarist and later Soviet rule. Cossacks provide the historical symbols of Ukrainian resistance but not the reality of the twentieth century. Scholarly identification with the Mennonite story comes in part from their common suffering under Soviet rule and the historical evidence Mennonites provide for the productive potential of the former 'breadbasket' of Europe. While other Slavs and Tartars can easily be incorporated into a new Ukrainian identity, Mennonites present a historical enigma. Mennonites shared a common fate under Soviet rule but this does not explain away their privileged position in Imperial Russia or under German occupation during World War II. It is an open question whether Mennonites now living in Ukraine will be incorporated into a new pluralist Ukrainian identity or continue to be marginalized as a German expatriate community.

The depth of the suffering and extreme isolation in Siberia of the Aussiedler Mennonites now living in Germany shapes another interpretation of Mennonite history. The German identity which intensified their stigmatization in the Soviet Union has been transformed into the avenue of their salvation in economic, political and social terms. The Mennonite experience in Ukraine represents both a triumph and a tragedy for a pilgrim people whose spiritual homeland has traditionally been 'other worldly'.

The triumph of Mennonites is represented by economic ascendancy in Ukraine

still visible in many surviving villages and industrial enterprises developed during the Tsarist era. The tragedy is seen as the needless and wasteful destruction of a progressive people as well as the productive capacity of Southern Ukraine. More importantly, Aussiedler Mennonites continue to mourn the human tragedies of executions, deportations, wasted years and wasted lives. At the same time Aussiedler expressed a desire to have their experiences of suffering and enduring spirituality validated by their co-religionists in the West.

Members of the Aussiedler community who attended the Conference as observers expressed bewilderment and resistance to the paternalistic attitudes of both North American and German Mennonites towards them. Several reported having retained their Baptist affiliation in what appeared to be a protest after emigrating to Germany. While they share an exceptionalist view of the Tsarist era with other Mennonites, they alone experienced the brunt of Soviet public policy for three generations. Aussiedler Mennonites struggle with sorting out the factual and emotional content of their historical experiences and Mennonite heritage.

Displaced Persons (DPs) like myself escaped the final years of Stalinist rule during World War II. I was too young to have direct memories of Ukraine but grew up in a community where the story was kept alive. I would suggest that DPs do not suffer from delayed mourning as one of the presenters suggested, but from continuous mourning. While passing near Eichenfeld where all of my male relatives over the age of 16 were executed in the Russian Civil War I wrote:

Tread gently,  
 the soil of this land contains the blood and bones of my ancestors  
 not in neat rows buried in consecrated ground  
 marked by engraved monuments  
 but in unmarked shallow graves  
 scattered from the Black Sea to the Arctic Circle  
 in ground consecrated by God's tears

Tread softly,  
 the bones of my ancestors still live  
 nourishing new life in hostile soil  
 the seeds of my ancestors are sending up fresh shoots  
 watered by new wells  
 taking root in foreign soil  
 I will not end my grieving  
 lest I forget my heritage  
 and turn from the God who is weeping still

The DP 'position' on history is largely informed by the cataclysmic, often very personal events which accompanied the Russian Revolution and Civil War, the Stalinist era and World War II. These circumstances brought out the worst and best in Mennonites in Ukraine as documented in numerous autobiographies. The evi-

dence covers the full range of human possibilities. We harbour memories of exceptional courage and dignity as well as villainous cowardice and degradation. Rev. Enns from Hochfeld risked exile or possible execution by ministering to the needs of Mennonites in Nikolaifeld after *Ältester* Heinrich Epp became incapacitated during the Stalinist era. Rev. Enns and his family suffered the fate of disenfranchisement and eventual arrest. In Neudorf, it is said, a Mennonite functionary of the local Soviet used his position to extort sexual favours in exchange for protection. Illustrations such as these have made some of us DPs sceptical of exceptionalist or triumphalist conclusions about the Tsarist and Soviet era which lack accuracy and balance. From our perspective the Tsarist period was characterized by internal class dynamics. Soviet times are seen as an intense struggle for Mennonite religious and cultural continuity and integrity given the regimes coercive policies and practices in attempting to resolve the peasant, national and religious questions.

European Mennonite scholars attending the Conference tended to view the Tsarist and Soviet period from a distinctly German perspective. We know that educational, economic and religious ties to Germany were promoted among the Mennonite elite throughout the Tsarist period. The liabilities of this identification are understandable given the hostile nature of the Soviet regime toward prosperous, religious national groups. The historical problem this presents for German Mennonite understanding of the Soviet period is the identification, at least in part, with German nationalism. The scholars' glorification of Mennonite accomplishments during the Tsarist period in contrast to the depressed conditions in the former Soviet Union has a distinct air of ethnocentrism. A fundamental issue I sensed that has not been successfully resolved by German Mennonite scholars is Mennonite active and tacit identification with Hitler's notion of *das Herrenvolk* and *Lebensraum*. This lack of resolution will continue to influence their interpretation of Mennonite history in Tsarist and Soviet times.

North American Mennonite scholars bring several vantage points to historical research which are unique. Those representing the two main revitalization movements during the Tsarist era have a tendency to take on the characteristics of most such movements by claiming "the moral high ground." For example, P.M. Friesen's history of the Mennonite Brethren Church has often been mistaken for a broader representation of Mennonite history in Russia leaving the impression that the Mennonite Brethren define the genesis of Russian Mennonite history. The *Kleine Gemeinde* left Russia as a relatively homogenous prosperous group before the full force of Tsarist reforms took firm hold. Their claim to a normative Mennonite identity comes from an attempt to return to the ideals of Anabaptism as they understood them. The implication for historical research has been a tendency to see the Tsarist and Soviet material in too triumphalist and/or exceptionalist terms. The main problem with approaching history in this way is that it tends to fragment the historical material into competing ideological perspectives. The *Kleine Gemeinde* can conveniently exempt itself from the *Anwohner* crisis which disenfranchised and impoverished up to fifty percent of Mennonites living in Molochnaia Colony by claiming to have resolved the problem internally for its own members. Also the

Mennonite Brethren can deny Mennonite collaboration with the Soviet regime because anyone suspected of Communist sympathies was systematically expelled from their memberships roles and ostracized. Claims to exceptionalism tend to disregard the experiences of other Mennonites and non-Mennonites who shared a common fate. Such strident claims can only be validated once equal rigour has been given to understanding other groups and not from examining selective Mennonite documents alone.

Also present at *Khortitsa 99* were several Mennonite scholars from the Swiss/American tradition. Since they did not share in the Russian and Soviet experience they reflected on the genesis of their interpretation of Russian Mennonite history over time. Their claim to a normative Mennonite identity has been informed by Harold S. Bender's project to recover the "Anabaptist Vision." The early sympathetic approach to Mennonites in the former Soviet Union was replaced with a more critical view during the Vietnamese War as Americans lost confidence in their own government and mediated the hostility towards socialism they held during the Cold War.

The suggestion was that this reevaluation of the Soviet Union raised critical questions about Mennonite complicity in their own suffering. How are North American Mennonites to interpret the landless crisis, abuse of power by Mennonite elites, all of which ensured a cheap supply of labour for Mennonite industrialists? Could Mennonites in Ukraine be seen as "authors of their own misfortune?" The Conference presentation came in the form of a confession and an openness to exploring more appropriate approaches to understanding the history of Mennonites in Tsarist and Soviet times.

The realization that Mennonite scholars are "positioned subjects" represents several problems that need to be addressed in future research. There is, of course, no single normative Mennonite identity, only a plurality of claims which serve useful purposes for individual group identities but detract from writing objective and comprehensive history. Nationalism is too ideological to do justice to the Mennonite story. Triumphalist claims are by definition selective and too neat, masking the telling of the whole story which also contains elitism, oppression and corruption. Exceptionalist claims are by definition isolating. Such claims are problematic in that they tend to be ethnocentric and can only be made guardedly. Mennonite research projects alone cannot establish such a claim. Mennonites should have learned by now that special status inevitably leads to confrontation with their host cultures. Making exclusive claims now will have direct consequences for Mennonites living in the Ukraine and Russia in the future.

The understanding of Mennonite history in Tsarist Russia and the former Soviet Union is in danger of remaining too insular. It is an error to believe that the Mennonite story is internally self-defining. A more helpful starting point would be an understanding of the economic, political, and social forces against the background of which Mennonites formed their identity and lived their particular story. The history of Mennonite resistance to Tsarist attempts at land and social reform, the chaos of the political vacuum during the Civil War, and Soviet public policy

development and implementation have a direct bearing on the unfolding of Russian Mennonite history. By starting from the general and working back to the particular we get a more comprehensive understanding of Mennonites as participants in historical movements which are not entirely of their own making nor exclusively the making of others. If scholars do this correctly Mennonites may actually recognize their common experience with many peoples and accept the vision of a common humanity not only in abstract theological rhetoric but in concrete historical terms. Embracing the Mennonite research of Anatolii Boiko, Sergei Atamanenko, Natalia Ostasheva, Anatolii Karagodin, Dimitrii Meshkov, Alexandr, Tedeev, Oskana Beznosova, Stanislav Kulchitskii, Orest Subtelny, Tatiana Plokhotniuk, Iurii Beresten, Irina Cherkaz'ianova, Aleksandr Beznosov and Svetlana Bobyleva as *Khortitza 99* did is a significant step in that direction.