"Siberia" in the Writings of North American Mennonite Historians

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Siberia holds a special place in the imagination of North American scholars. No shortage of articles by American and Canadian historians highlight encounters between Siberia and North America; they recount events from the travels of nineteenth-century scientists from the United States to the "invasion" of early twentieth-century Canadian military forces off of Vladivostok. Others have speculated on what Siberia has meant for Russia.[1] U.S. historian Mark Bassin has seen in Siberia a "frontier" that has shaped the very character of the Russian nation, not unlike the affect the American frontier has had on the United States.[2] More recently Claudine Weiss has argued that while Russians themselves may have been ambivalent about Siberia, from a global perspective "Siberia … made Russia an empire."[3]

Mennonites have also seen Siberia differently at different times.[4] Often they venture from the strictly geographic definition–that is the vast land region east of the Urals and bounded by the Pacific ocean–to a more inclusive and amorphous definition, to include those places east of the Volga River, Asiatic Russia or Central Asia, including

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In stretching Siberian geographical boundaries, Mennonites were not unlike many in European Russia who often consigned its boundaries to that which lay beyond their own cultural practices, even if only a few hundred kilometers beyond Moscow or St. Petersburg.[5]

But always the term "Siberia" has invoked a powerful, people-shaping imagination. For Mennonites the term "Siberia" reflects Arjun Appadurai's 1991 notion of a "global ethnospace," a place beyond strict spatial boundedness or cultural homogeneity, a place that includes a symbolic landscape and place that evokes historic consciousness.[6] The published writings of Mennonites over the last 120 years have cast Siberia sequentially as a place of banishment, a frontier of messianic or economic hope, a land of exile and repression, or a place of survival, purification and rebirth.

These literary constructions are apparent in the large twentieth-century Mennonite corpus of writing on Siberia. These works today fill the libraries of any one of the dozen Mennonite universities in North America, but especially those institutions—Bethel College (Kansas), Pacific Fresno University (California), Conrad Grebel University College (Ontario), Canadian Mennonite University (Manitoba)—located in regions that drew the highest number of so-called "Russian" Mennonites, that is, Mennonites of Dutch and North German descent who sojourned in the Russian empire and Soviet Union and came to North America in the 1870s, 1920s and 1940s.

The earliest of the publications on Mennonites in Siberia stemmed from the Russian Empire itself, but a very significant body of writing, beginning in 1919, came from North America. The first of these writings appeared in the United States and focused on the plight of co-religionists following the Russian Revolution. A generation after the arrival of the so-called Russländer Mennonites in Canada in the 1920s, numerous accounts in the immigrant language of High German told of ill-fated Siberia. The last generation of the twentieth century saw post Second World War refugees and their children produce a plethora of personal narratives of suffering, initially written in German by survivors themselves, then in English by the children of the survivors. Always the works were meant to inform youth of the lost worlds of grandparents. Academics too considered the time of mid-twentieth-century suffering and pondered its affect on creating a North American Mennonite community. Finally, a few voices focused on the most recent chapter of the story, the survival of the Mennonite community in Siberia, its religious life and diasporic culture.

The earliest reference to Siberia as a place of banishment came in the mammoth 1911 history of Russian Mennonites by P. M. Friesen.[7] In the attempt to reign in nonconformists groups which separated

from the larger Mennonite church in south Russia (now Ukraine), exile to Siberia could readily be invoked. Mennonites, while relative newcomers to the Russian environment, no doubt knew of the long history of Siberia being the destination for various kinds of dissidents. The Molochna (Molotschna) colony, the largest of the Mennonite settlements in south Russia, was hardly established in 1804 when religious leadership from the Chortitza colony, the older colony established in 1789, utilized the threat of Siberian banishment in an effort to reign in the divergent views of leaders who shaped the emerging Kleine Gemeinde group. That was seemingly also utilized by Mennonite civil authorities and the Russian Board of Guardians for Foreign Settlers officials following the Kleine Gemeinde separation in 1812. Friesen similarly noted that leaders of the Mennonite Brethren secession in 1860 received "constant threats of banishment to Siberia" which came from numerous "influential opponents" of this new group.[8]

For Mennonite migrants of the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, European Russia had been a land of refuge, a place where cherished values threatened in their Prussian homelands could be preserved. It was so in part because of the special status and generous grants given by successive Tsars to various incoming peoples. In Mennonite historiography those grants have been defined as a "Privilegium"–a set of privileges. Into the last third of the century those privileges held. The Great Reforms of Tsar Alexander II (1855-81) contained various objectives including an ethnic one designed to inculcate a greater sense of loyalty and belonging to Russia.[9] The reforms altering the status of foreign colonists and requiring some form of universal military service had rather the opposite effect; they introduced considerable anxiety among Mennonites. One of the most visible signs of that unease were the migrations both east and west, to North America and to Siberia. Nearly one-third of the Mennonite colonists in new Russia migrated to North America in the 1870s and 1880s. While the numbers migrating "east" were much smaller than those going "west" they both sought a new place of refuge, a place to maintain what now seemed threatened in European Russia. The Siberian and Central Asian areas of the Empire with vast stretches and marginal areas could potentially offer seclusion from integration into the imperial political system.

The most extensive first-hand account of the initial large Mennonite migration (often termed the Great Trek) to these eastern regions—Franz Bartsch's *Unser Auszug nach Mittelasien* published in Halbstadt (Russia) in 1907 and reissued in Winnipeg (Canada) in 1948—recounts being torn between going to North America or Central Asia. For Bartsch and others, Siberia won because of a European literature spanning decades, and even centuries, which held that in

the unfolding of Biblical prophecies a remnant of the true believers would be saved from the rule of the evil one, a transcendent escape would be provided in the "east." For some authors, including Klaas Epp who inspired the migration, the fulfillment of those prophecies became localized in Central Asia.[10]

A century-long debate over the meaning of the Trek story ensued. It attained a substantive scholarly level in Fred Richard Belk's *The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites to Central Asia, 1880-84*, published in Kitchener, Ontario in 1976.[11] It solicited other responses by Mennonite historians: Waldemar Janzen in 1977, A. J. Dueck in 1985, and Walter Unger in 1999. The mystique of the trek suffuses Dallas Wiebe's novel, *Our Asian Journey* (1997).[12]

Following a 2007 retracing of the Mennonite migration to the east, James C. Juhnke and Walter Ratliff turned the discussion in a different direction. Initially understood, or misunderstood, mostly in millennial terms, they contextualized this search for a place of refuge in the expansion of the Russian Empire, resistance to Russification on the part of Muslim emirates in Central Asia, and the continuing Mennonite migration search for military exemption. Far from being millennial zealots, many of the eastern travelers were sober-minded Mennonites who established thriving economic communities in what is now Uzbekistan. And they become a Mennonite down-payment on Christian-Muslim dialogue.[13]

The economic promise of the early Siberia settlements that took off between 1897 and 1914 became a focus of several mid-twentieth-century studies by Mennonites in Canada. Gerhard Fast's 1952, *In den Steppen Sibiriens* (published in Rosthern, Saskatchewan) described the origin and development of Slavgorod Colony, before proceeding to descriptions of its catastrophic end.[14] Fast's book became an authoritative source for North American historians, frequently cited in the 1955 edition of the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* by US Mennonite historian Cornelius Krahn and others. In 1952 as well, Winnipeg's J. J. Hildebrand published his two volume account titled *Sibirien*, the first part a settlement history, the second an examination of religious life.[15] That Siberia held promise in the early twentieth century was later demonstrated in various pieces by historian James Urry, most explicitly in his 1985 *Journal of Mennonite Studies* article, "Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth and the Mennonite Experience in Imperial Russia" and by John B. Toews in "The Mennonites and the Siberian Frontier (1907-1930): Some Observations," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (1973).[16] For Mennonites historically rooted in the land, the opportunities of Siberia attracted both those in search of ownership and investors from larger Ukrainian settlements in search of wealth. The economic aspirations were more fulfilled in the Omsk region with

its proximity to markets than in the larger settlement of the Slavgorod region.

A third chapter in the "Mennonites in Siberia" story by North American writers and also by far the longest, is a story of suffering and exile. These works include early accounts by U.S. Mennonites of assistance to victims of the Russian Revolution. Reedley, California resident Martin B. Fast, for example, wrote *Geschichtlicher Bericht* in 1919 to describe North American Mennonite assistance to "impoverished co-religionists in Russia" and his own trip to Siberia via Japan.[17] A 1929 piece served as a chapter in Mennonite Central Committee's history *Feeding the Hungry*, told how in this "wild region, a frontier wilderness" one could find 17,000 Mennonites suffering "drought and heat waves" and repressive government directives.[18]

The first sustained analysis of suffering of Mennonites in Soviet Siberia came with the "Historische Schriftenreihe" (Historical Series) of the Echo Verlag in Canada which published fourteen historical monographs between 1945 and 1965. Among these works was *Die Flucht über den Amur* by Abram Friesen and Abram J. Loewen, a short sixty six page account of the flight of the inhabitants of a Mennonite village from Siberia across the Amur River into Manchuria and on to South America.[19] Many other books in German were published at about the same time. P.A. Rempel's 1946 *Ältesten J. A. Rempel's Lebens- und Leidensgeschichte* was a short biography of a Mennonite bishop, including his Siberian exile. Reissued in English in an expanded format *Hope is Our Deliverance: The Tragic Experience of a Mennonite Leader and his family in Stalin's Russia* (2005), it traced the remarkable story of one educated in Switzerland, including at the University of Basel, who declined an appointment at Moscow State University as a Professor of German in favor of providing leadership for Mennonites resisting Sovietization. Championing their cause resulted in a Siberian exile from his arrest in 1929 to his death in 1941. The story took him to labor camps in Solovetsky, Alma Ata and Orel.[20]

The most detailed of these various post-war histories of suffering was Aron A. Töws' two-volume Mennonitische Märtyrer, a total of 897 pages of edited biographies of Mennonite leaders, especially their banishment, and accounts of flight from Russia after the Second World War.[21] The volumes written by immigrants of suffering in the Soviet Union continued with rigor. By the 1970s the works increasingly appeared in English. Anita Preiss' 1972 *Verbannung nach Sibirie*n appeared as a bilingual text, Aron P. Toews' personal account of prison in Siberia, published in German in 1979, was translated into English within five years.[22] The chapter on suffering gained even greater vibrancy as the survivors of the Second World War themselves began to write in English and tried to capture the magnitude of Siberia

for the next generation. Gerhard Lohrenz's 1982 book, *The Lost Generation*, makes this attempt. Perhaps the most poignant phrase in the book describes how "for two months the train dragged us through the endless stretch of the Soviet Union."[23] Harry Loewen's *Road to Freedom* (2000) moves beyond personal encounter, to feature seventy first-person accounts, complete with a rich array of photographs.[24]

In time the story of suffering came to be told by Canadian-born observers. Sometimes, as in Rudy Wiebe's, *Blue Mountains of China* (1970), it was a part of an epic story of migration, of "human dignity and human endurance" by a member of Canada's emerging literary elite.[25] Oftentimes the more educated took on the task to tell the stories on behalf of others: Canadian historian John B. Toews' *Journeys: Mennonite Stories of Faith and Survival in Stalin's Russia* and U.S. physician Wilmer A. Harms' *The Odyssey of Escapes from Russia*, both published in 1998, were efforts to help others tell their stories and thus "affect … forever the lives of those who follow."[26] Sarah Dyck, ed., *The Silence Echoes: Memoirs of Trauma and Tears* (1997) includes many short first person accounts of Siberian experiences. Ruth Derksen Siemens' *Remember Us: Letters from Stalin's Gulag (1930-1937)* brings to public scrutiny an unprecedented collection of primary source material.[27]

Often too the stories were told by the children of the immigrants. Among dozens of such works is Ernie Harder's 2009 *Mostly Mennonite*, a work that arises from "privilege and joy found in the hours spent listening to Mom and Dad's stories"; it recounts his grandparents' 1907 move to the Altai Steppe near Slavgorod, but also of impending doom on those steppes.[28] Most recently and in a forthcoming book, Hans Werner recounts his father's birth and childhood in Siberia, and then his wartime service, first in the Soviet then in the German armies during the Second World War.[29]

At century's end the suffering chapter took on an additional, and decidedly, academic turn. A 1997 symposium at the University of Winnipeg (Canada) saw Harvey L. Dyck outline three decades of upheaval–from the 1920s to the 1950s–under the rubric "Mennonites and the Soviet Inferno." Conference proceedings published in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* included Colin Neufeldt's work on "Dekulakizationn and Collectivization" and Marlene Epp on war-time women refugees who fled with the fear of Siberia on their minds.[30] In the same issue, Krista Taves showed how stories of suffering from Siberia and elsewhere helped shore up the patriarchy of an immigrant Russländer Mennonite church in Canada.[31] In 2002 Harvard University Professor Terry Martin's lectures at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario advanced the debate; in part he argued that the forced Mennonite diaspora in Siberia marked a "savvy and united subculture," at least until 1955 when the 100,000 individuals

of Mennonite descent in "internal exile" in Siberia lost any sense of a Mennonite ethnicity so carefully honed during the nineteenth century.[32]

A fourth and final chapter of the North American account of the Mennonite sojourn in Siberia focuses on survival, especially from about 1960 when conditions began to ease somewhat for sectarian Germans in the Soviet Union. Mennonite historians from North America increasingly traveled to Soviet Siberia or welcomed guests from Siberia. In a 1979 article in Canada's *Mennonite Historian*, Lawrence Klippenstein described a visit by Novosibirsk minister Bernhard Sawatzky, hopeful of congregational renewal in Siberia, despite rocky relations with the Baptist union.[33] Other articles in the *Mennonite Historian* by Peter Letkemann (1980), Paul Kraybill (1982) and Peter H. Rempel (1986) drew similar perspectives.[34] Historian Walter Sawatsky was especially influential in this conversation, arguing in several pieces that Siberian Mennonites had developed a "post-gulag" theology strengthened by participation in the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians, Baptists, Pentecostals and Mennonites (AUCECB).[35]

In recent years some historians have taken the story up to the near present time. Again "survival" and even renaissance is a central theme. In a 2007 *Mennonite Historian* piece, for example, Paul Toews described the "Centenary Anniversary of the Omsk Bruderschaft," a celebration attended by 2,500 people, as commentary both on persistence during difficult times and astonishing vitality when permitted to openly function.[36] Other articles in North America have introduced the work of German "Aussiedler" historians Johannes Dyck, Jakob Penner, Viktor Fast and others who have helped interpret Siberian and Kazakhstan church history.[37] A paper presented at this conference, by Alexander Freund, points out the yet-to-be written chapter on the migration from Germany of many Kazakhstanis of Mennonite background to the western Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan between 2000 and 2010.[38]

As documentary evidence now emerging in Russian archival units is increasingly digested, it may be that yet another theme will emerge from the Mennonite story. Terry Martin in examining the Russian Mennonite story has described them as a "mobilized minority," i.e. a group with a strong sense of identity and some valued skill or achievement that can be utilized to bargain with authorities. Two recently reported incidents of organized protest, and with some measure of success—one in Ak Mechet, Uzbekistan and another in the village of Halbstadt (near Slavgorod)—point to Mennonites as a mobilized minority and may help to inaugurate "resistance" as a motif of the Siberian Mennonite story.[39]

These various writings demonstrate just how strong a hold Siberia has had on the Mennonite imagination. For North American Mennonites the very word "Siberia" conjures up not only a massive

territory, but the full variety of emotion that infuses itself in the human experience. It represents hope for purity or wealth in one generation, loss and suffering for another, survival and faithfulness for another.

In Siberia, Mennonites evolved from a favored, cohesive ethnic group to a scattered religious community. In the minds of North American Mennonites, Siberia is a story that assists an immigrant people to become cohesive and it is a liturgical script that shapes religious faith. Siberia has become an "ethnospace." North American Mennonite historians may debate the meaning of "Siberia" in the Mennonite experience; what they do not debate is the significance of the word in the history of the Mennonites.

Notes

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2 Mark Bassin, "Turner, Solov'ev, and the 'Frontier Hypothesis': The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces," *Journal of Modern History* 65 (1993).

3 Claudia Weiss, "Representing the Empire: The Meaning of *Siberia* for Russian Imperial Identity," *Nationalities Papers*, 35 (2007): 439-56.

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8 P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 1789-1910*, 1911, trans. J. B. Toews, et.al. (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren, 1980), 129-31, 244.

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Silk Road: A Muslim-Christian Encounter in Khiva (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010); Walter Ratliff and Jesse Nathan, *Through the Desert Goes our Journey* (Arile Arts Productions with the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee, 2008 DVD).

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[28] Ernie Harder, ed., *Mostly Mennonite: Stories of Jacob and Mary Harder* (Vancouver: author, 2009).

[29] Hans Werner, *Papa's Stories: Memories of a Postwar Immigrant*, forthcoming.

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[31] Krista M. Taves, "Dividing the Righteous: Soviet Mennonites as Cultural Icons in the Canadian Russian Mennonite Narrative, 1923-1938, *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998): 101-27.

[32] Terry Martin, "The Russian Mennonite Encounter with the Soviet State, 1917-1955," *Conrad Grebel Review* 20, no. 1(Winter 2002): 5-59.

[33] Lawrence Klippenstein, "The 'Kirchliche' Mennonites in the USSR," *Mennonite Historian* V: 4 (December 1979): 1-2.

[34] Paul N. Kraybill, "Karaganda Mennonites: Invited to Strasbourg," *Mennonite Historian* VIII:4 (December 1982): 5; Peter Letkemann, "Mennonites in the Soviet Inferno, 1941-1956," *Mennonite Historian* XXV: 2 (June 1999): 1-2; Lawrence Klippenstein, "The 'Kirchliche' Mennonites in the USSR," *Mennonite Historian* VI:1 (March 1980): 2-3; Peter H. Rempel, "Alexander Rempel (1915-1985): Reflections on his Life and Work," *Mennonite Historian* XII: 4 (December 1986): 5-6.

[35] Walter Sawatsky, "From Russian to Soviet Mennonites 1941-1988," in *Mennonites in Russia, 1788-1988: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz*, ed. John Friesen (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989): 299-339; Walter Sawatsky, "Historical Roots of a Post-Gulag Theology for Russian Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* LXXVI (April 2002); Walter Sawatsky, "Left Behind," *Mennonite Life* 55:2 (June 2000); Walter Sawatsky, "Mennonite Congregations in the Soviet Union Today," *Mennonite Life* (March 1978): 12-26.

[36] Paul Toews, "Centenary Anniversary of the Omsk Bruderschaft," *Mennonite Historian* XXX: 3 (September 2007): 1, 2-4.

[37] Linda Matties, intro and trans., "Tracking Our History in the Soviet Union," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 200-11.

[38] Alexander Freund, "Representing 'New Canadians': Competing Narratives about Recent German Immigrants to Manitoba," Germans of Siberia: History and Culture, Omsk, Russia, June 2-4, 2010.

[39] Ratliff, *Pilgrims on the Silk Road* , 227-29, details the very interesting form of resistance in Ak Mechet when the women refused to let the Soviets take away some condemned families. They stood together chanting "All or None." The Soviets left that day and returned subsequently to move the entire Mennonite population. A. I. Savin, *Etnokonfessiia v sovetskom gosudarstve. Mennonity Sibiri: Annotirovannyi perechen' arkhivny documentov I materialov* (Novosibirsk and St. Petersburg: Rossiiskaia akademiia nauk, 2006) and the English edition, *Ethno-Confession in the Soviet State*, trans. Olga Shmakina (Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2008) abstract many archival files regarding the Siberian Mennonite story. They reference many forms of Mennonite resistance to Sovietization, including abstract numbers 548-90 which deal with the uprising in Halbstadt on July 2, 1930.