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## Who are 'the Mennonites of Russia'?

by Lawrence Klippenstein

The country which came to be called Russia has hosted a wide diversity of religious groupings from its very beginning to current post-Soviet times. As a full-blown empire emerged and continued to expand, it added ever more dimensions to this multi-religious fabric of its population. The matter of fully profiling this religious reality has been a challenge difficult to meet and seems never done.

For a millennium and more the church of Kievan Rus, followed by the Russian Orthodox Church headquartered in Moscow, has been the heavyweight among Russia's religious bodies. Islam would ultimately take a very visible and powerful place among the nation's religions as well, and the rise of the so-called sects has then added immensely to the complexity of the religious scene.

It is no wonder that Russians and indeed the people of the entire Commonwealth of Independent States have found the current situation particularly confusing and full of potential conflict and competition. Self-identification and witnessing to one's own truth take up much energy of all participants, in their concern to survive and grow in this new climate and ever more diverse spiritual-religious environment.

The Mennonite community continues to exist as a minority among minorities in Russia and Ukraine, and in other former Soviet republics to which Mennonites have migrated or were forced to move to under Soviet rule. Who are the Mennonites of Russia and what place do they occupy within the collectivity of believers of various faiths now present in the entire region?

Some years ago I was asked by Don Loewen in the Moscow office of the Mennonite Central Committee to provide a short 'catechism' – brief questions and answers – which could serve as a starting point for anyone interested in learning about Mennonites. Here it is, somewhat updated to take account of changes over the last decade or so.

### *Where does the name 'Mennonite' come from?*

The Mennonites took their name from one of their early leaders, Menno Simons, who was born in Holland in 1496 and in the last years of his life lived in North Germany, where he died in 1561. He began his work as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church, but after his conversion in 1536 served a number of followers who left this church because they could no longer agree with certain of its teachings and practices. Menno Simons helped to found and nurture a number of congregations of those who accepted his teachings, preaching and writings.

### *What were some of the new teachings which he came to hold, and where did he get them from?*

Menno Simons was greatly influenced by the teachings of Martin Luther and other Reformation leaders in the early part of the sixteenth century. They emphasised the reading of the Bible as the revelation of God's truth, and believed that the salvation taught by God's Word came only through confessing one's sins and turning to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and a 'rebirth' through which one could become his disciple and follower.

Simons was influenced especially by the teachings of other leaders in the Reformation such as Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, who lived in Switzerland. Some of their fellow workers lived in South Germany. These men taught that saving faith could come only through a personal acceptance of Jesus Christ, which must then be publicly acknowledged through baptism into the Christian fellowship and voluntary joining of a group of believers meeting as a congregation. Here participants could become accountable to each other for leading a life according to the teachings of Jesus in the Bible.

This meant showing love to one another, with a readiness to help anyone in the fellowship who might have spiritual and other problems. Most of these leaders also believed that this life must be peaceful and non-violent with a rejection of all forms of killing, including war. Persons so joined together also needed to make an effort to share the Good News of the Bible with those who did not believe. Some of these groups came to be known as Anabaptists because they re-baptised believers, upon confession of faith, who had already been baptised as infants, according to the teaching of the Catholic Church.

The first baptisms of the Anabaptists were held in Zurich, Switzerland, in January, 1525. After that thousands of believers joined the new Anabaptist movement in Central Europe, while Menno Simons and his helpers founded churches of the same movement in Holland and North Germany.

### *When and why did Mennonites move to the Russian Empire?*

A Mennonite doctor is said to have served Peter the Great, but the first group of families moved to southern

parts of Russia in 1788 and 1789. They came from northern Poland, the region around Danzig which became part of Prussia around that time.

These Mennonite families left northern Poland because the new Prussian rule wanted to force them to join the armed forces, and would not let them buy more land if they refused to serve. They moved to New Russia (later Ukraine) at the urging of the local vice-regent, Grigori Potemkin, and the invitation of Catherine the Great, who was ruler of the Russian Empire at the time. Later on Alexander I also actively encouraged foreigners to come and settle new areas north of the Black Sea which had been recently wrested from Turkish control.

### *Where and how did the Mennonites settle down in 'New Russia'?*

The first families built up a number of village communities on and just west of the island of Chortitsa along the Dnieper River, across from Aleksandrovsk. Then others came and established more villages east of the Molochnaya ('Milky') River somewhat to the south and east of the older settlement, which then came to be called the 'Old Colony'. The two settlements, Chortitsa and Molochna were sometimes known as 'mother colonies' because in the coming years other settlements, some called 'daughter colonies', were established not only in the region north of the Black Sea, but also in the northern Caucasus, along the northern stretches of the Volga River near Saratov and Orenburg, and finally as well in Siberia around Omsk, Slavgorod, Pavlodar, and even the Amur River region in the Far East.

A large number of the families made their living as farmers, building their homes in the villages, and working the land nearby. Some also set up large

estates in areas where more land could be bought. As time went on some communities came to include factories, and flour mills were also set up in numerous localities.

All the settlements had their own churches and schools and eventually hospitals, and other institutions such as teacher training centres were also founded. Since these families came from a Germanised Prussia, with a Low German dialect, the new colonists continued to use the German language as their own language for many years. Russian also came to be taught in the schools, however, and by the First World War a very large number of people could use both Russian and German, not only in school but in everyday conversation as well. Many also learned to speak Ukrainian from their neighbours and through contacts from working together in homes, on farms and in factories.

### *How did the First World War and the October Revolution affect the Mennonite communities in the Russian Empire?*

These were very difficult years for Mennonites, as they were for all the people of Russia at that time. Because Mennonites were viewed as Germans, in spite of their claim to be Dutch, they were suspected of helping the enemy, Germany, and many pressures were put on them. They had to close their newspapers, if published in German, and be careful about speaking German in public; and they were threatened with loss of their land by new legislation passed after the outbreak of the First World War.

Since 1880 Mennonite young men had been exempted from military service and allowed to serve in forestry camps, and during the war many joined medical

units instead of the army. Not long after the October Revolution of 1917 their Ukrainian villages came under attack from Nestor Makhno's raiding bands. Much property was stolen, and many lives were lost. The war between the Red and White armies caused much destruction also. Some young men organised themselves as a self-defence militia to arm themselves against Makhno to defend their communities, and others joined the White army while it existed during the Civil War. Many Mennonites saw the forming of the militia as a rejection of traditional pacifist principles, and there was much debate about this question during those years, and even among succeeding generations.

As a result of these problems, and pressures put on them by the new Soviet government, many Mennonites decided to emigrate. About 23,000 left Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union in the years 1923-30. The remaining Mennonite population by then was about 90,000 people.

Much-needed help could come for a time from relief agencies like the American Relief Administration, the Mennonite Central Committee, based in the USA, Dutch Mennonites and Quakers, who were able to provide humanitarian aid for Mennonites and also others in the Soviet Union up to about 1928. Then such outside help was cut off.

### *What happened to the churches and their members during the Stalin period?*

When new religious laws were passed in 1929, ministers especially came under severe pressures, and soon many churches had to close. By the time the Second World War began, organised church life had almost totally ceased. Large numbers of younger and older

men had been taken into prison camps and exile, and never came back home again. Then the farmland and the villages were reorganised into collectives, and many more were sent to prison as 'kulaks', rich peasants who were seen as 'enemies of the people'.

The Second World War actually brought about the end of all Mennonite communities of Ukraine. Tens of thousands of people from these areas were deported to eastern Russia when the German army invaded the country in 1941. Those who were not sent away went with the German army when it retreated from the USSR in 1943. Only a few isolated families and individuals remained in the villages where they had lived till then.

Almost two thirds of those who left with the German army were forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union by the Red Army when it pushed through Poland right up to Berlin in 1944 and 1945. Many more ended up in prison camps, and in the *Trudarmee* (forced labour battalions), where all those of German background were finally put under special administration (*Spetskomandantura*) until more freedom of movement was granted in 1955 and 1956, several years after Stalin had died.

### *Could Mennonite communities and churches be re-established after the Second World War?*

Yes, in certain ways it was possible to do so. When the prisoners of the work camps were released, many families could eventually be reunited, but they were not allowed to return to their former homes in Ukraine.

By now it was possible for ministers to travel from place to place and baptise believers (secretly at first), as well as help establish new congregations. Many Mennonites had joined Baptist and other

churches by now, but others formed their own groups again. Independent Mennonites found themselves basically in two groups, the Mennonite Brethren and 'kirchliche' (Church) Mennonites. The Mennonite Brethren shared many beliefs, and the immersion form of baptism, with the Baptists, but the Church Mennonites preferred their own ways and so usually remained unaffiliated with other larger bodies.

At the peak of this renewal movement there may have been as many as 50,000 active Mennonite church members again, with as many people of Mennonite background not wanting to be involved in the church. More than 20,000 mostly Mennonite Brethren were part of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians/Baptists or were even associated with the 'unregistered' Baptist congregations; another 10,000 or so Mennonite Brethren had their own independent congregations, and as many as 20,000 may have belonged to Church Mennonite congregations.

### *It is widely known that many Mennonites left the Soviet Union and moved to Germany. Why did this happen and what has been the outcome of this emigration?*

Because Mennonites in the Soviet Union had to a considerable extent kept up their German cultural traditions from the time they left Prussia, they were considered to be part of the German population in the country. Feelings generated by the Second World War and the struggle against Germany had brought much pressure to bear upon the Mennonites. They often felt like second-class citizens, and when the chance came to emigrate in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many were ready to leave.

The result was that most Mennonites now left Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union. This meant that many of their churches were reduced to only a few members, for example in Neudachino east of Omsk, or closed altogether. Large new churches have been established in Germany by those who have left the Soviet Union in the past three decades or so.

### *Some Mennonites still live in the countries of the former Soviet Union today. Where are their communities found at present?*

Many families and communities still seeing themselves as Mennonites live in Siberia, especially along the Trans-Siberian Railway, east and west of Omsk. Others live in the Altai region, and some in the Amur River area of the Far East. A number of families still live in some of the Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan, especially around Karaganda, and a few also in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. There are also a number of small communities, like the one in Kichkas village, remaining in the Orenburg area. One also finds scattered families and individuals around Tula and Novomoskovsk south of Moscow, and in some of the larger cities like Novosibirsk, where there is a congregation still functioning under the leadership of Andrei Peters. Often the parents and children have intermarried with non-Germans.

Mennonites are also emerging as new groups in Ukraine at present. Four of these groups, located in Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Kutuzovka (known as Petershagen, in the former settlement of Molochna) and Balkovye have formed a conference known as the Christian Union of Mennonite Churches. A Men-

nonite humanitarian and development organisation, the Mennonite Central Committee, also has its headquarters in Zaporizhzhia.

The recent opening of a Mennonite Centre in Molochansk (formerly Halbstadt village) has also been an important feature of the Mennonite return to the area, as have two international history conferences held there, 'Khor-titsa 99' in Zaporizhzhia in May 1999 and 'Molochna 2004' in Melitopol and Zaporizhzhia in June and September 2004. The Mennonite heritage of the region was strongly emphasised at these gatherings. Both conferences focussed on several centuries of the history of the two original Mennonite settlements of the region.

### *What are some of the church and other activities found in Mennonite communities of the former Soviet Union today?*

Some of these groups have very active mission programmes, and are trying to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to communities where Christian congregations do not exist. An example of this is a conference of 25 or more congregations centred in the region of Omsk, Siberia, under the name of the 'Brotherhood of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches', but still aware of having Mennonite roots. Sponsoring organisations from the West are initiating ministries to Muslims in some of these areas. These churches are also trying to find ways to provide training for their pastors and young people. Sometimes the young people are able to attend Bible schools or Christian colleges, as well as summer camps, which have been established in the past few years.

### *If so many Mennonites have moved away, is there still a future for Mennonites in the former Soviet Union?*

Many people who have left the former Soviet Union doubt that there is a future for Mennonites there. Others feel they must carry on their work in Russia, Ukraine and other countries of the former Soviet Union because God's Word needs to be brought to unbelievers, and those who are believers need to be built up in the faith. Some think that the Mennonite teaching of peace and non-violence is an emphasis that is needed in a part of the world where there is much violence and great need for reconciliation among the people. There seem to be new opportunities for witness to Jesus Christ now.

There are also many in the former Soviet Union who once had Mennonite connections and who are trying to find out about their heritage: not only their ethnic roots, but also their Christian background. As these people come together, they may want to worship God again, after having been away from the church for many years. Active Mennonites in older congregations can help to encourage people like this.

### *What is the Mennonite World Conference which some Mennonite leaders from the Soviet Union attended at its meetings in 1978, 1984 and 1990?*

This is a large fellowship of more than one million members of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches found in 70 countries of the world. The largest of these groups are found in Africa, Asia and North and South America. The MWC is an assembly held every six years or so to allow representatives from all these countries to meet for

spiritual fellowship, Christian worship and planning of further witnessing in the world. The meetings of 2003 were held in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe and the next conference sessions will be held in Paraguay in 2009. It is hoped that Mennonites from the former Soviet Union will be able to attend these meetings also.

### *Conclusion*

A very brief sketch like this can only begin to create an external profile of identity. There is a great deal more to be said about theological development and questions of self-identity. Understandably, years of movement, exile and regrouping have brought with them diffusion of older traditional views, but also renewal, especially for those who remain in the former Soviet Union.

As a matter of fact the question of self-identity has been an issue of much discussion among those who emigrated as well; in their new environment they have more resources, energy and educational training to work at this issue. With the ongoing exchange between those Mennonites who remain in the former Soviet Union and those who have left, there is bound to be further development of Mennonite self-identity, as well as of how that identity is perceived by non-Mennonite neighbours. 'Who are the Mennonites of Russia?' is indeed a living question.

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## Trials of a Typist

by Janice Broun

For 20 years Vera Lashkova was responsible for typing screeds of *samizdat* for leading dissidents. Giovanna Paravicini of Russia Cristiana interviewed her in the kitchen of her Moscow flat.

She found a tiny woman, with big grey eyes which lit up when she smiled, brimming over with energy and gaiety, and still enthusiastic about past struggles.

Her name first came to public attention in 1967 when she was arrested for typing the *White Book* on the trial of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel, in which Aleksandr Ginzburg documented how the regime was trying to crush demands for freedom of thought. The trial of the 'Four' – Ginzburg, Yuri Galanskov, Aleksei Dobrovolsky and herself – aroused a huge reaction in the Soviet Union and signalled a rebirth of conscience and civic responsibility.

In the early 1960s, while studying theatre production, Vera became friends with a bunch of fellow-students who wanted to challenge the culture imposed on them from above by mounting exhibitions of their own paintings and sculpture, reading their poems, engaging in debate.

*We were one of many such groups who met quite spontaneously to sing, drink wine, discuss things, just because we were friends. But the KGB started to take an interest in us, shadow us, call us in, accuse us of antisoviet behaviour... We felt indignant at the threat to our liberty. In 1965 the police carried me off to the Lubyanka. We had planned for 5 March, the anniversary of Stalin's death, a protest on Red Square against his progressive*

*rehabilitation. I'd typed out leaflets hand round. My interrogator was brute who lectured me like a father how I had embarked on the wrong road, how I must avoid bad company, I wasn't frightened; I just burst laughing. It was then I realised I belonged to a totally different generation to that of my parents, who would have been terrified.*

Vera was released, but kept under constant surveillance. Despite this she went on to meet more dissidents, whom she felt an immediate rapport with, in particular Galanskov. They became inseparable friends. He was a remarkable person, a pacifist, who had already been in prison for a demonstration on Moscow Square in 1958 and for writing *Manifesto for Humans*. He was to be in a labour camp in 1972, aged only 33.

*They were more significant figures than I ever was but no one attempted to force their ideas on me; they pressed my deepest conviction offered to type Yuri's magazine, *Fenix*, a title he chose to show how it could rise up from the ashes of the past. Then I typed Ginzburg's *Do As youngsters we longed passionately for the truth. I felt an almost physical revulsion against the lies and hypocrisy which surrounded us.**

On 17 January 1967 came her arrest and then a year in prison which was a trial for her because it was in Lefc that she came to faith in God.

*My family had always been believing but I had no experience of religious life and most of my friends were*