

# The Russian Mennonite Story: The Golden Era

Chester Weaver

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May the presence of Christ be here among us, and instruct us.

The things that I have to share in the next two parts with the Russian Mennonite story I feel I owe to the Swiss-German people, because as Swiss-Germans we focus on our own story, and we don't even know that. So I would for like us to pay attention to the Russian Mennonite story because it is hugely instructive, and we want to pay attention to that in the next two sessions.

But before I do so, there's two things that I'd like to point out as a leftover from last evening, and I owe you this as a matter of integrity. Last night at the panel I made a mistake: If a husband and wife have four children, and you increase it by a factor of four, by the tenth generation, it's one million. By the twelfth generation it's up to sixteen million. So I had my numbers wrong, and I wanted to officially correct that. This is simple math, you can check me out with your calculator. But it still makes the point I was trying to make last night: Do you see how many people we have lost?

Second, this is in reference to the statement I made last night. A husband and wife having four children again, and one of those is unfaithful. The faithful children again have four children, three faithful, one unfaithful. The unfaithful will most likely have four unfaithful children. By the third generation there are twenty-seven faithful, and thirty-seven unfaithful. To me this is very serious. We cannot afford in our stewardship before God to be careless at all to lose anybody.

Moving more directly to the topic at hand, first of all, I said we are Swiss-German people; we had our origins here, and our story separating from here. One of the men who was here Thursday night and Friday, I don't know if he's here right now, he is one of our people who moved over here to Volhyna, so I was pleased to meet someone like that. But all of us sitting here are the people who emigrated to the New World. The people we're going to be talking about today are the Russian Mennonites who originated here in Holland. In the 2014 conference we talked about their story in Prussia, we had part 1 and part 2 in Prussia. Then there were two topics of them coming to Russia. Today's topic is going to pick this up in Russia. So this gives a context geographically of where we're going today.

You'll notice on the map that there are four separate destinations of Mennonites moving east from Prussia. The first two of the following four settlements happened with the encouragement and financial assistance of the Russian government. The immigrants were granted a long list of privileges, including the right to operate their own commonwealth within the greater Russian commonwealth. In reality they became a state within a state, a kind of state church of their own creation. This arrangement violated the founding principles of the Anabaptist movement, which stood for complete separation of church and state. And so the question arose: How could they operate a civil government, which included law enforcement, with only their own church people?

Russia, by offering its generous terms of settlement, was not operating on a humanitarian basis. They were not being kind to these Prussian Mennonites who were in trouble over there in Prussia. They knew that if they could get these Mennonites over into Russia, Russia would benefit, and they, as we shared before, gave them a whole list of privileges. The Mennonites bought it, and they came, and the Russians were pleased. Russia was seeking to become great and powerful, to become more progressive like the European lands further west. The Mennonites from Prussia were experienced, capable farmers who could help modernize Russia.

However, in accordance with the social and religious culture of the times, the Mennonites lived and worked – now get this – in isolation from their Russian neighbors to the point of many Mennonites not even being able to speak the Russian language. Their villages did not include native Russians. Furthermore, their German Lutheran and German Catholic co-immigrants lived and operated much the same. The Mennonites were only a small fraction (about one tenth) of the German people who immigrated to Russia. Eventually these "German islands" in Russia came to haunt the Mennonites even though they were legal Russian citizens. Harry Loewen wrote, "The majority of the Russian Mennonites (around 1870) were patriotic and loyal to the Czar, but they did not identify with the Russian people, and did not accommodate themselves to the culture."

In the following descriptions of the four Russian settlements from Prussia, the earliest settlers were the poorest and the latest were the wealthiest.

#### 1. Chortitza

By the end of 1788, 228 Mennonite families ended their long trek southeast from Prussia. Eight villages of earthen huts sprang up before that winter.

These pioneering families experienced the most difficulties, including the absence of any preachers. Can you imagine that? 228 families emigrated from Prussia with basically no leadership, no ministers. The writer Horst Gerlach wrote, "The emigrants were in the truest sense abandoned, poor in body and soul." By 1796, eight years later when Empress Catherine the Great died, 118 additional families had arrived. By 1824 when the settlement process for Chortitza ended, 400 hundred families had come, settling in eighteen villages. A village was comprised of a central street with a cluster of houses on both sides. This same village pattern can still be seen among the Old Colony Mennonites to this day, if you go to Mexico. (Old Colony always refers to Chortitza.)

#### 2. Molotschna

By the end of 1803, 163 new families had reached Chortitza but did not intend to stay there. This new cluster of immigrants were headed a bit further east to Molotschna. By the end of the next year they were 342 families strong. This second group stayed at the Chortitza settlement while they built the Molotschna settlement. By the time emigration from Prussia ended in 1836 forty-four villages had been established. Children from the original pioneers planted other villages so that by 1863 the Molotschna colony was strong with 2000 families and over 8000 inhabitants.

Around 1840 the Russian government settlement projects came to an end. Further settlement projects would need to be self-supporting. In 1848 Prussia ended the privilege of exemption from military service based upon religious confession. This religious constriction prompted a new wave of emigrants to Russia. This time the Mennonites asked the Russian government for permission to emigrate to Russia, to a new location. The Russian government permitted 100 families to come.

### 3. Am Trakt

The first 22 families led by Claas Epp left Prussia in 1853. Other well-to-do families soon followed until by 1858 1,000 Mennonites were settled in 10 villages. Economic prosperity followed right behind. From this colony Claas Epp Jr. led a group of emigrants further east to present-day Turkmenistan to await the return of Christ in 1889. You can read that story in *The Great Trek*. How many of you have read that story? 3 people. The rest of you are in for a treat. It's quite a story.

### 4. Alt Samara

In 1859 Claas Epp led other families east to the Alexandertal area. By 1870 100 families had settled in 10 villages in the broad plains of the Samara area. Alt Samara was the last settlement from Prussia although individual immigrants, especially from East Prussia, Lithuania, Neumark, and Poland, came to the four settlements up through 1880. Interestingly, some Swiss Mennonites of our background, who had earlier moved east to Volhyna, became a part of the larger picture.

Industries that support agriculture developed with time. The Chortitzan industrial firm, Lepp and Wallmann, was producing 50,000 grain swathers by 1900. Eight years later 151 Mennonite industrial firms were located in the single town of Chortitza. By this time the Mennonites were serving all of Russia, providing 6% of the agricultural equipment for the nation.

At what price did the Mennonites acquire their wealth?

When the Mennonites came to Russia, they had no experience in self government. Previously they had been tolerated by governments who grudgingly gave them space in return for the tax money they provided. But what should they do when the Russian government told them to govern themselves? They could govern themselves however they wanted to, but they had no experience.

The two original scouts from Prussia, Bartsch and Hoepfner, became the first political leaders but they were soon deposed, charged, and jailed by the church leadership! No church/state separation existed! Horst Gerlach wrote, "In the beginning it seemed very strange to the individual that one 'brother' would be placed above another 'brother.' Somebody had to charge and collect tax, build and maintain roads, apply fire and insurance regulations, provide schools and hospitals, care for the poor, keep order, and punish offenders." So the real question was: How would they manage these civil responsibilities?

Here's their plan: The Russian government had stipulated that a Mennonite family could own 175 acres in one farm which could not be subdivided. Thus each Mennonite farm owner would have one vote. The voters in each village would vote for a mayor and his assistants as well as a colony administrator who would work with Russian officials. Note that the owner needed to be Mennonite because the czar had granted the land only to Mennonites. Thus to own land one needed to be a member of the Mennonite church. Now if your head is working, you begin to see complications.

There was an outstanding Mennonite man by the name of Johann Cornies, who lived from 1789 to 1848. I just need to share some things about this man. He was born in Prussia and immigrated with his parents to the Molotschna colony in 1804, while the colony was in its earliest days. His father owned the typical 175 acres and acted as the community doctor.

But Johann was noted early for his diligence, intelligence, and sense of responsibility. When he married, he quickly became a successful farmer in his own right. Whatever he set out to do prospered.

When he was 41 he established an experimental farming station where he raised purebred horses, cattle, and sheep. He imported the best animals from all over Europe including fine Merino sheep from Spain. By 1847 he owned 500 horses, 8000 sheep, and 200 head of cattle and also cultivated 25,000 acres of land. That's 1847. This was all horse power. He operated a tree nursery from which he sold trees to fellow Mennonites. (Remember, the native steppes were treeless. This man saw the value of trees.) By the end of his life he had provided 5 million trees, many of them fruit trees. He also introduced the potato to Russia. He promoted irrigation (the steppes were semi-arid) and crop rotation. The way you farmed in Russia was not the same as the way you farmed in Prussia.

The Russian officials were impressed. When Cornies was only 28 years old, the czar appointed him chairman of the Agricultural Society, with authority to regulate farming in all the German settlements, Mennonite and non-Mennonite. Since the czar appointed Cornies to his post, not the church, he had almost unlimited powers. Some church leaders resented his influence. They thought he was promoting economic growth at the expense of church concerns. Some leaders thought he was working too closely with non-Mennonites and the non-Christian Nogai (who are similar to our native Americans). When the leaders opposed him, he threatened to have them exiled from the colony!

Cornies set out to improve Mennonite education which at that time amounted to simple rote learning "to the tune of the hickory stick." He studied the latest European educational theories and published rules on how to teach. He introduced new textbooks, programs of study, as well as trained and licensed teachers. He helped establish schools for girls. He established a high school and a teacher training institute, which became a model for other high schools and teacher training institutions. In turn the developing Mennonite educational system became the model for all of Russia. Mennonite teachers began to teach in non-Mennonite schools. Teachers quickly became influential in colony life. Educated men replaced farmer-preachers in the pulpit and in other community posts. By 1900 Mennonite young people began to attend Russian and European universities to prepare for the professions.

Cornies' critics did not like all this. The critics saw him as proud, stubborn, and determined to destroy the Mennonite way of life. When he declined other official government positions he would say, "I am nothing but a Mennonite farmer who, at my baptism promised not to govern or carry arms in accordance with my Christian faith." But Czar Alexander I came to visit with him at his home and Czar Nicholas I received him as a special guest.

When Cornies died an early death at age 59 many people, Mennonites, Jews, Russians, Molokans, and the Nogai followed his body to the cemetery. A marble shaft with the top broken off, symbolizing his unfinished life, marked his grave.

Now I'd like to pause right here and read a story about this man. Two books that are of help if you would like further information are *Through Fire and Water* and *Testing Faith and Tradition*.

Not everybody liked Johann Cornies, and some people could be creative in their criticism:

“From one village came persistent reports that trees planted according to the instructions of Cornies's Agricultural Society have all died. This was surprising because the soil was good, the saplings were the best quality, and the instructions for planting and watering were detailed. The Agricultural Society sent inspectors to investigate. When the village mayor led them into the garden the inspectors saw that the mayor and his villagers had played a joke on Cornies and the Society. They had planted the trees with their branches in the ground and their roots in the air.

The inspectors were angry that the village had made fools of the Agricultural Society. They rushed back to report what they had found. Cornies did not think that planting trees upside down was funny. The saplings cost money. Cornies declared that when the mayor was disrespectful of the Society, he was actually disrespecting the czar, since they Agricultural Society had been chartered by the government. Cornies said that the mayor had to appear before the church to answer for his misdeed. The church then excommunicated the mayor and ordered for him to be shunned. Members of the mayor's congregation even beat him physically as a punishment.”

Johann Cornies' life story symbolizes the larger Mennonite story in Russia. How?

1. The Mennonites came as a persecuted people from Prussia. Russia welcomed them, giving them a home. In return the Mennonites loved the czar, even singing his praises.

2. Many Mennonites became quite wealthy in Russia. Some of them believed that their prosperity was a sign of a godly life and that God was blessing their diligence and industry. Their prosperity had no end. Life was like one continuous soft summer evening.

1. Many Mennonites developed an attitude of superiority over their non-Mennonite neighbors. They considered the neighboring Lutherans and Catholics as a notch lower than themselves socially, culturally, and religiously. Their non-Mennonite hired hands were definitely inferior to themselves.

3. To be married or hold office in a colony, a person needed to be a Mennonite church member. Thus being a church member often seemed unconnected with being a Christian. Therefore Mennonite morals sank into the mud.

Some Mennonites believed that farming and godliness go together. What was to be done when Mennonites multiplied (doubling in number every 25 years, similar to the Amish today)? Farms could not be subdivided and when all available land was purchased, what could be done? Please remember that only landowners had a vote. Soon a large number of Mennonites had no land and thus no vote. By 1860 two-thirds of the Mennonites in the original two colonies had no votes. Thus the colonies had a landholding class, including ministers, and a powerless landless class. Something had to be done.

Johann Cornies maintained that a person did not need to be farmer to be Christian. He proposed that manufacturing would provide employment for young people. But the manufacturing businesses could not keep pace with the mushrooming population.

Now this is a very sad part of the Russian Mennonite story. When the land-owning leaders refused to deal with the landless problem of their own people, the landless people took their issue directly to the Russian government. At this point the Russian government allowed subdivisions of the 175 acre farms, and allowed their own lands to be sold to landless buyers, and permitted Russian nobles to sell land so that daughter colonies could be created. In the 1870's when one third of all the Russian Mennonites (18,000 people) left Russia for the United States and Canada, the land situation was temporarily relieved. Obviously, having so many people leave made more land available. But the damage had been done. Where was the Christian ethic of love for neighbor in all of this?

I'm going to mention two renewal movements here. Klaas Reimer of the Moloschna colony provided leadership for the first renewal movement (1812) which has become known as the Kleine Gemeinde. In 1870, when the first Mennonites began to move out of Russia, the entire Kleine Gemeinde group moved to North America. Is there anybody sitting here today that has a Kleine Gemeinde background in any way? One person.

In 1860 a larger renewal movement now known as the Mennonite Brethren formed. The traditional Mennonites did all they could – now get this story – to discredit the new group. Mennonite Brethren teachers lost their positions, Mennonite Brethren businesses were boycotted, and some Mennonite Brethren men were jailed and beaten by other Mennonite villagers. The traditional Mennonites went to the Russian authorities to blackmail them there and tell bad stories about them, but instead the Russian government recognized them as a legitimate Mennonite group. For years hard feelings lingered. The feelings were made worse when Mennonite Brethren began to include non-Mennonite background people into their church membership. All the while the Russian government was noting how these "non-resistant" Mennonites were not all that non-resistant with their own people! At one meeting officials told the Mennonites, "We have rooms full of files concerning quarrels and fights within your settlements." Why should the Russian government grant them exemption from military service when the Mennonites pled for the extension of their long-held non-military privileges, if they're fighting among themselves?

But spiritual renewal had come to stay. The Mennonite Brethren renewal movement not only improved the spiritual quality of their own movement but it eventually improved the quality of spiritual life among the people from which they had separated.

The Mennonite Brethren movement was barely off the ground when terrible news came from Czar Alexander II. The Mennonite privileges, granted many years before, would come to an end. The Russian government would no longer grant military exemption. Furthermore, the Russian language would need to be taught in the schools. It was terrible that after all these years the Mennonites still did not know the Russian language! The Russian Minister of War exclaimed, "You have been in Russia seventy years and still cannot speak Russian? That is a sin!"

The Mennonites knew of one solution, the solution of their history: move. Move to North America. And they all decided they had to leave. When the Russian officials learned that they were about to lose their entire group of exemplary Mennonite farmers, they relented with some concessions. The government would allow the Mennonites to serve a four-year term of alternate service in forestry work.

When the government relented, only one third (18,000) of the Russian Mennonites left for North America. Those leaving were the more conservative, the more conscientious of both the Mennonite groups. Did you get that? The first to leave were the more conservative and the more conscientious of both the Mennonite groups. The entire group of Hutterites left. The Hutterites were in close connection with these Russian Mennonites.

There's an interesting story about the Hutterites. When they came over here to investigate, they met with President Grant. There were four Hutterites. They asked President Grant if they could have privileges like they did in Russia. They didn't understand how the United States worked, and President Grant said, "I can't promise you anything." He was not the czar. But the railroads heard about it, and they came to visit the Hutterites, and they were anxious to make some deals. So it's really the railroads that helped bring a lot of these people to this country, and probably to Canada as well.

In conclusion, by 1900 those who remained in Russia were gently chiding those who left. "See how we are prospering here. You made unnecessary trouble for yourselves by leaving and starting all over again in a strange, distant land. We still have our religious freedom after all. We have good education, good music, good books, good farms, good businesses, and an improved religious community. Everything is better now than it used to be!" And they were correct; the social, economic, and religious life of the Russian Mennonites was stronger than ever. That's 1900.

I would like to show a few more overheads of what it was like. Here's a farmstead owned by Franz Martens of Molotschna colony, and it illustrates how that some Mennonite land-owners had become prosperous. Fine carriage, fine clothes, fine house. Here's another. As Mennonites became more settled and prosperous they imported design features from Europe, such as the ornate stylings of the John Peters residence in New Halbstadt, Russia. If you have money, why not use it? Here's a picture of the girls' school in Chortitza. Education had become very important to these people, largely through the efforts of Johann Cornies.

I'm finished.

Question and Answer Time:

Andrew Ste Marie, Manchester, MI: You mentioned about the Russian Mennonites and how they ended up wedding church and state there. The Hutterites were from the same background and came at the same time so they must have come under the same rules from the Russian government. How did they avoid some of those problems, or did they not?

Chester Weaver: Hutterite colonies are small, small islands in geographically and politically a very large area. And if they manage their own colonies there, they get a chance to be free, mostly, from that kind of responsibility. However in practical... I'm speaking as a non-Hutterite, so if I'm wrong please correct me... There still needs to be discipline exercised in a colony. I visited a colony one time, and I said, "What do you do about people who don't obey?" And this Hutterite said, "We have methods." So I said, "What are your methods?" I could tell that he didn't want to tell me, so I pushed him a little bit, and he finally admitted that they have to kneel on hard beans, it's a physical kind of punishment to deal with infractions. Now Gary [Wurtz] I'm speaking as a non-Hutterite, am I speaking the truth?

Gary Wurtz, Elmendorf: I never heard that before.

Chester Weaver: Not all Hutterites are alike I guess. But I think what your question is, if you have an entity, a community that's all by itself, there has to be some method of discipline. One Russian Mennonite told me that one of the reasons that the Swiss-German Mennonites have been better able to preserve their faith is because they never had to deal with the state-church system, where they had to discipline their own people. It's usually... We live among English people, and we appreciate the policemen, and we never have to deal with a civil offense, we always turn it over to the policemen to do it. And that has spared us greatly.

And here's a question for all of us to consider: Does the church ever punish anybody? Is it the duty of the Church of Jesus Christ to punish people? Somehow along the way some Mennonites and Amish have picked up this idea that the ban and strict meidung is punishment, and I don't know where you find that in the Scriptures. I would understand that discipline is supposed to be redemptive, not punishing.

Leonard T., Millersburg, IN: My roots are from the Bergthal colony that you have on your map. So it would have been my great grandparents who emigrated from the Ukraine. They were a much poorer group of people than those that were in the Molotschna and Chortitza areas. And I want to thank you for all the reading and research you've put into today's presentation. You've done pretty good for not being Russian Mennonite. I'd love to visit with you further.

The main point that I want to reach toward is reconciliation, and what happens when we don't make reconciliation, and reconciliation was not made between the Bergthal colony Mennonites and generally the Mennonites in Ukraine, and on the other hand the Mennonite Brethren, who of course followed a German leader and became much more evangelical. Sadly, from the stories that I've heard from my boyhood and read of, they did not always remain humble. They became fairly self-righteous at times and demeaning of my people. My people on the other hand, of course had their own problems. Scripture was not being studied, many of the sermons became written sermons, there are still some of those around. My sister married a man who was out of the Mennonite Brethren background, and his father told me that it wasn't until 1989 at a conference in British Columbia that there was an official attempt made at reconciliation, when the Mennonite Brethren and the Bergthaler asked for forgiveness and started talking with each other. Talking about your statistics of losing people, that's how we lose people from the church.

Nathan Overholt: Thank you Chester. You're going to develop this and carry it on into your next talk, and I can sense your building up to something, you have more to tell us.