

# The Russian Mennonite Story: Bitter End of the Journey

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May the Lord grace our hearts with peace and quietness to be able to continue to hear what He is saying.

I need to correct something I said earlier today. I appreciate the brother who came to me, and helped me understand that I made a mistake this morning. So that's the first thing I want to do. The Scripture does make it clear that the church has something to do with punishment. Here's what it says in 2 Corinthians 2:6, "This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man." And so I take back my words. That is a subject in itself; I'll just leave it there.

Secondly, this is the Anabaptist Identity Conference; how many of you in this audience own this book, *The Anabaptist Vision*, by Harold S. Bender? Unfortunately, it looks like about 1/7 of you. I don't think you should be 21 until you've read this. This a foundational life document. I am disturbed when I find that young people think that Anabaptism is beards and plain clothes. They have no idea what the Anabaptist vision is. These books are available; look how thin it is, only 36 pages. You can get it in audio by Dean Taylor, and there's books back there on the table. Every young person should read this before they're age 21. And if you're 41 and you haven't read it, you're overdue.

Now, brothers and sisters, the Russian Mennonite story, the bitter end of the journey.

I must say at the beginning that the following story is not just a bit of suffering, or a wagon load of suffering. The story I am about to tell is an entire train load of suffering lashed with a thunderstorm of tears. I know the story in my mind. But as I recently viewed the film "When They Shall Ask" I shed tears once again. The story is tragic beyond description. It is the story of how heaven became hell. As I said this morning, for the Russian Mennonites in 1900, life was one long, warm summer evening. But it did not continue.

The first signs of impending trouble began in 1914 when Russia joined Britain and France to fight Germany in WW I. The alternate service work in lieu of military service was not a problem. The Russian Mennonites spoke German; that was the problem. The Russians suspected that the Mennonites somehow supported the national enemy. As I shared in Sarasota at last years event the story of the Mennonite Nazis, I'm not going to repeat that story. But remember, the Nazis later were enemies of Communist Russia. These Mennonite people spoke German, and the Germans were the enemies of Russia.

Then the Bolshevik Revolution took place in 1917. The Czar Nicholas II was deposed and killed. Vladimir Lenin and his communist cronies took over Russia. Lenin promised dramatic reforms that would benefit the urban poor. Some Mennonite intellectuals supported the idea of greater justice. But it soon became clear that Lenin wanted to destroy religion as part of his classless society ideal.

Suddenly Russia made peace with Germany in 1918. As part of the peace deal, German soldiers would occupy Ukraine where most of the Mennonites lived. The Mennonites were doubly glad. War was over, and the Germans were coming to maintain law and order! But the Russian natives noticed. They were more sure than ever that the Mennonites were Russian traitors.

Then the tide quickly turned when Britain and France defeated Germany; the German soldiers needed to go home. The German soldiers warned the Mennonites – get this – that the Russian peasants would take revenge against the German-speaking people. Before they left, they taught some Mennonite young men how to defend themselves with weapons.

When the Germans left, Ukraine was left in a vacuum. Law and order broke down; Russians began to rob Mennonite farms and kill the landowners. But they did not stop there. They didn't stop anywhere. For example, in 1919 bandits killed David and Katherina Dick, founders of the Mennonite Tract Society, in spite of their reputation for generosity.

From there anarchy and chaos erupted as the new Soviet Union descended into civil war. The White Army fought to reinstate the Czar; the Red Army fought to keep the Bolsheviks (communists) in power. The battleground was the Ukraine as armies swept across the land, through village after village, destroying property, confiscating food, and leaving the helpless inhabitants with little of their own. On top of that, a third group of anarchists (people who believe in no government) fought only to loot, steal, and create havoc as they pillaged the landscape. Their black flag carried the words, "Anarchy is the mother of all order."

Mennonites feared most Nestor Machno, leader of the anarchist bandits. He was familiar with Mennonites, possibly having worked for a Mennonite farmer. Machno led 100,000 men in their lawless terrorism. He and his men were cunning and ruthless. They would appear out of nowhere to rob, kill, rape, and steal, often in the middle of the night.

Chortitza suffered 400 (including children) killed, 92 women raped, and sixteen villages burned to the ground. This is taken from the book *The Russian Dance of Death*; when you read this book you are stunned. And brother Gary Wurtz just told me this evening of another book entitled *These Stones* (I hope it's translated into English; I have not read it yet), where some of the terror of these times was put into print, and it's beyond what you and I can fathom. Anyway, if that wasn't bad enough, a typhus epidemic struck, killing 1,200 more. The survivors faced starvation because the bandits had taken 113 horses, 1,717 cows, 1,073 hogs, 40,000 bushels of wheat, and 10,000 bushels of barley. The discouraged living buried the dead in mass graves.

The young Mennonite men who had learned how to handle weapons from the Germans decided it's time to intervene. Church leaders agonized over what to tell the young men. Everyone lived in fear; no one had ever lived in a situation of chaos like this before. No government existed; only roaming, undisciplined armies. The church leaders could not bless defense units so they finally left the matter with the individual consciences of the young men.

These young men formed *Selbstschutz* (self-defense) units, using the weapons and ammunition left by the vacating Germans. The Lutheran and Catholic German colonies did the same.

At first the Mennonite militia seemed successful in the Molotschna area. But the Mennonite militia was soon out-numbered and out-gunned. Machno and his bandits focused their brutality on the people who had compromised their professed values. The compromisers were targeted for revenge. Furthermore, some Mennonites had mistakenly fought the Red Army. Now the Communists could claim that Mennonites were enemies of the state. A Red Army general angrily told the Mennonites, "You claim to be nonresistant when it comes to fighting for your country, but you become resistant to defend your own possessions!"

However, to be fair, most Mennonites did not take up arms.

The civil war had shattered the Mennonite colonies. The horses and cattle were gone, the crops and grain were gone. On top of these miseries it seemed as if God Himself increased the suffering by bringing drought and a dreadful famine into the land. First the children and old people died, then the ones in between. Get this next statement: Many Mennonites felt like the judgment of God was falling upon them. Let me read the back of this book, *The Russian Dance of Death*. It says, "This is a story of terror and brutality, of murder, plunder, and suffering. Willa Cather, noted American writer, said 'I cannot doubt that it's the story of an actual experience. It has made me realize the terribleness of the Russian Revolution more vividly than anything else I have read.' "

There are incredible stories; I'm just going to tell you one of them. It seemed like the people came in to ravaged these people delighted in abusing them. For example, it tells this story of these bandits, I think, in this case, who came into a house and killed the family, and then cut off their heads and placed them on the table where they would normally sit at their meal times, so that the family was still there looking at each other, with no bodies. That's the kind of thing they did.

Let me show you a picture, which comes from the book *Through Fire and Water...* And I'd just like to point out, you can't see from where you are, but if you have a handout with this picture, take notice at the bottom; it shows you Mennonite villages, Ukrainian villages, and destroyed Mennonite villages. You'll notice that the Mennonite villages were interspersed with the Ukrainian villages, except the Ukrainians only lived in their villages, and the Mennonites only lived in their villages. Also the Lutherans and the Catholics each lived only in their own villages. There was no general intermingling of these people like we have in the United States.

Here in this picture is a common scene; "Five members of the Theissen family were murdered during the anarchy and civil war that followed the Russian Revolution."

In 1920 the Russian Mennonites sent four men to visit Mennonites in Europe and North America to tell the terrible story. The response was immediate. Canadian and American Mennonites sent food and supplies for the suffering, as well as set up the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to coordinate their work.

But MCC could not freely do its work until 1921 because of the reigning chaos. A government relief agency named The American Relief Administration assigned MCC to the Mennonite area of Ukraine. For three years MCC distributed food to 75,000 people, mostly Mennonite, saving thousands from starvation.

By 1924 the Red Army had gained control, bringing the civil war and anarchy to an end. Once again the farms began to produce crops and the MCC emergency feeding program ended.

But as the Communists took over the government they also took over the farmland to form collectives. They took complete control over the education so that they could promote atheism, the belief that there is no God. At the same time the communist government began to round up church leaders and to send them into exile in Siberia.

Now the Mennonites wanted to leave Russia, the land of nightmares. Between 1923 and 1929, 22,000 Mennonites emigrated to Canada. But by 1929 the communists were closing the gates and the Canadian government also needed to end the exodus because the Great Depression had come to North America. The door had closed. 80,000 Mennonites would remain behind, unable to leave. For them their misery and sorrow was just beginning, and would continue for many long years.

But hope springs eternal in the human breast. Seventy desperate Mennonites fleeing famine and a heavy government hand in Siberia showed up in Moscow trusting somehow that they might be permitted to leave. And wonder of wonders, the Soviet government permitted emigration!

The news spread like wildfire among the Mennonites. Quietly, to avoid suspicion, and some in such haste that they just left property behind, about a thousand Mennonite families showed up in Moscow, somehow hoping the Dutch or American Mennonites would rescue them. And more and more followed until 14,000 people, had hurried to Moscow, hoping to somehow get out. To make their desires public they demonstrated in Moscow's Red Square.

The Soviet Union had boasted that it was the freest country in the world. But economic conditions and general dissatisfaction belied the claim. The free world press delighted to publish the irony of so many people wanting to emigrate. The Soviet government was embarrassed.

In response the communist authorities herded the unwilling Mennonites into freight train cars and sent them back to Ukraine or exiled them to Siberia. They gave no regard for food, clothing, or sanitation. Families became separated, some shipped to one place and some to another. Some became sick because of exposure and neglect. Back east, they were worse off than they had been before they left, with no household furniture, no farm equipment, and no livestock. Many found their homes occupied by strangers. Life was harder than ever.

But the Western free world had gotten the story. The German government intervened with President von Hindenburg donating two hundred thousand *marks* from his own private fortune to help with emigration. Germany agreed to take 6000 refugees; 4000 of them were Mennonites.

To counter the negative press, the Communists finally allowed 4000 Mennonites to emigrate. 1000 went to Brazil and 2000 went to Paraguay, the rest to relatives in Canada. And then the door slammed shut firmly. The year was 1929.

After Lenin died in 1924 Joseph Stalin rose to power in the USSR as a brutal dictator, making life yet harder for most of the Soviet people. His government arrested more and more pastors and teachers. Thus more and more people became desperate to flee.

In their desperation some Mennonites moved to eastern Russia, to a location near China. From this location they began to cross the Amur River into China. In 1930 in a daring nighttime move an entire village of 217 Mennonites crossed the frozen Amur River on sixteen sleds in temperatures near 40 degrees below zero. From China these Mennonites moved to Reedley, California, or to Brazil or Paraguay.

Joseph Stalin ordered several "purges" in the 1930's. The government forbade worship. It labeled as *kulak* anyone who had prospered under the czar. That meant that most Mennonites got the label *kulak*. During Stalin's purges many "undesirables" were simply killed. Farms were collectivized, meaning farms were joined together and run by a central command station. There women and children struggled to exist without their husbands and fathers. And if you'll just let me read a bit about this. It's the story of a family, and this is typical.

It was September 1937. The family had gone to bed, hoping that they would be spared of what had happened to so many of their friends and relatives in the last few weeks. Nicholas, a veterinarian, was a useful and productive citizen on a collective farm, but that did not guarantee him safety. Officials had recently imprisoned his father, an expert horticulturist, on trumped-up charges.

Then, after midnight, the family heard a loud knock on the window, and a voice demanding that the door be opened. Anna turned to her husband and murmured, 'Now they've come to get you.' She dressed, and began to sob quietly. Nicholas got up, lit a lamp, and opened the house door. Two secret policemen entered, and ordered Nicholas to go with them. They searched drawers for documents and valuables, including mail from relatives in North America. It was a crime to have connections with the foreign country.

When they finished, they took Nicholas by his arms and led him to the door. Nicholas turned to say goodbye to Anna and the children. He stopped at the bed of his six-year-old son and whispered, 'My boy, perhaps I'll never see you again. Be good to Mother and help her as much as you can.' Anna was weeping uncontrollably. One of the policeman said, 'Don't cry; your husband will soon be back.' Anna snapped, 'Don't give me that; I know how he'll return. He'll never come back.' The door closed, and Anna and her children heard a car drive away. The children never saw their father again.

During the next few weeks Anna was permitted to visit her husband in the local prison, taking him food and clothing. One day Nicholas returned his shoes, telling Anna that he did not need them anymore. When Anna examined them at home, she found the inside soaked with blood. Guards had tortured Nicholas until he had agreed to sign a confession that he had poisoned the cattle on the collective farm. Anna never saw her husband after that. Nicholas and his father the horticulturist were both shot shortly thereafter.

Thousands of Soviet citizens were exiled to harsh prison labor camps known as *gulags* in Siberia. *Somewhere between 40 million and 60 million people died in Stalin's prison camps.* Half of the Mennonite men disappeared during this "purging" period. During this time 15,000,000 Soviet citizens would vanish without a trace.

Then WW II began. In 1941 Nazi German soldiers invaded the Soviet Union and soon occupied much of Ukraine where thousands of Mennonites still lived. The Mennonites were overjoyed with the German presence. The Nazis allowed churches to reopen, and the Mennonites quickly reopened their schools. But the Mennonites noted that the Nazis were killing Jews.

Two years later the tide of the war turned. The Russian armies began to chase the Nazis back out of Russia. Some Mennonites saw their chance to escape the Soviet Union and fled to Germany early. But most joined a mass movement of Germans trying to escape ahead of the retreating German Nazi army, pushed west by the Russian army. In the cold of winter many children and old people simply died on the way. About 35,000 refugees reached Germany. But then right at the end of the war the Russian army overtook the Nazi army and caught up with the fleeing refugees. The Soviets simply rounded up 23,000 of these Mennonites and sent them back to the Soviet Union. The other 12,000 escaped into the western part of Germany which was occupied by the British and American forces. There the refugees waited in refugee camps supplied again by MCC to see if any country would take them. Eventually, 6,000 were allowed into Canada and 6,000 were allowed into South America, mostly to Paraguay. The story in *Henry's Red Sea* took place at this juncture.

For more than 40 years after WW II thousands of Mennonites continued to live in the Soviet Union under harsh conditions. Some joined Baptist churches. Almost all lost their Mennonite identification.

But every cloud has a silver lining when the sun is shining. In the 1980's remarkable changes began to happen in the Soviet Union as the Communist government lost its grip on power and began to allow people of German background to leave. Between 1987 and 1993 almost 100,000 people of Mennonite origin left the Soviet Union to resettle in Germany. This movement of people has been the largest Mennonite migration in history. The newcomers to Germany are called the *Umsiedler*. Interestingly, the *Umsiedler* are finding it difficult to feel comfortable in Germany where materialism and a sex-obsessed media hold sway. They note that many people are only nominally Christian. At church, singing is a major part of their worship. They prefer the old hymns of their past rather than the lighter, shallower, contemporary music. When I recently watched the film "When They Shall Ask," I could identify with the spirit of the worship service recorded, just the way they handled themselves and sang those songs.

For these people life is no longer about the Golden Age of financial, social, and cultural prosperity. For them, who have been purified by suffering, today is a Golden Age of faith.

Today as we speak, the Russian Mennonite story has ended.

P.S. The land once occupied by the Chortitza and Molotschna colonies is once more in 2015 the scene of war and suffering, but this time the Mennonites are gone.

Let me show you one final overhead. If you watch "When They Shall Ask," this is the gate through which everybody hoped to pass (I think this is the gate into Latvia). As long as they were on one side of the gate, they were in danger. But as soon as they had passed through this gate they could erupt in rejoicing, because they were finally free.

I've learned through the years that when you start preaching, automatically people start backing up. I think this story tells itself, I mean, it's very obvious. I'll just say this: I'm not a prophet, but we have lived in one long summer evening here too, and we have become rich and wealthy. And we have some people who are noticing that. I do not know what our future will be, but it would not surprise me at all if someday in the future all this in America is going to come crashing down. And then, if we have faith, we still have hope for the future. But if our minds and hearts were set on material things, we're going to have to enter into the judgment period just like these people. In a nutshell, that's what I would have to say.

Question and Answer Time:

John D. Martin, Chambersburg, PA: That story of the crossing eastward across the Amur River is in a novel called *River of Glass*, a very engaging story.

Andrew St Marie, Manchester, MI: During that time of the Revolution, with Machno and everything, the Stundist revival took place. What happened to the Stundists? Did they survive, or what happened to them?

Chester Weaver: I don't know anything about that. I'm sorry I can't help you, Andrew. Does anybody know the story?

It is in Peter Hoover's book *The Russian's Secret*.

Rich Preheim, Elkhart, IN: I very well could be the only person of Russian Mennonite descent here today. I am here actually covering this event for "Mennonite World Review" newspaper. But as, I guess, a representative of the Russian Mennonites, I just want to give an addendum to what Chester just said, and he did a fantastic job of telling the story. But I do disagree with one thing that he said, in that the Russian Mennonite story is over. It is not, and for that I praise God. I live in Elkhart, just half an hour north of here, I'm a member of a Mennonite Church USA congregation; one of my fellow congregants is one of those post-World War II refugees. Her father disappeared... they were from Prussia actually, not Ukraine. Her father disappeared in the closing days of the war; I think he was conscripted by the German army, and the family, the mother, and the woman who is in my congregation, and her brother who now lives in Kansas, were able to come to the United States. And I can attest that the woman and her brother are among the most selfless, most giving people I know. And that is a direct response to the aid they received, both MCC getting them here, and also the support they received once they were here, a widow and two children. Just one more thing to show that the story isn't over: I served with MCC for a couple of years back in the early 90s, and one of my coworkers was of Paraguayan Mennonite descent. So she would've been a child of one of the post-World War II immigrants to Paraguay. She was in MCC specifically because MCC helped her family escape a very uncertain future. So the Russian Mennonite story lives on, and I'm quite thankful for that.

Chester Weaver: Thank you, Rich. When I say the Russian Mennonite story is over, I meant in Russia largely. But thank you for that correction. This is the man I was looking for this morning; he actually has some Swiss-German in his descent, he is one of our people whose ancestors moved from Switzerland or South Germany somewhere, to Russia. Not many did, but his background is an illustration of that.

I also would like to say this: there are a number of books that are now coming out; here's one such, *Red Quarter Moon: A Search for Family in the Shadow of Stalin*. People are going back into the history now, since the Soviet archives are now open, and are discovering, or trying to discover, who their relatives were, and what happened to them. And this book is just a story of a lady finding her people, one of several.

Jack Brikau: I am Assyrian, from Syria; for those who don't know what that is, most of you know about the story of Nineveh, and Jonah, so I'm one of those people. What is happening right now, as you mostly know, is pretty much genocide against the Assyrians. ISIS has attacked 32 villages in the last two or three weeks in Syria. They have killed who they have killed, they have imprisoned some. Stories are coming that they burned a church with people in it. Right now what you're saying about history repeating, it's happening to us, again. Assyrians are pretty much the cradle of Christianity, if not civilization, in that part of the world, and they're being annihilated. So I'm not surprised when you say that things can happen again. It's happened to us; it's happening now. Almost every 50 years something like this happens, so it was in process. I just wanted to let you all know. These people did not defend themselves. They were attacked at 4:00 in the morning; those who were able to run did so, those that did not were captured, some of them killed. So that's the real story today, not 100 years ago. Thank you.

Chester Weaver: Thank you. The thing that scares me about our young people is that they have always grown up in freedom and prosperity, and they think that this is the way life is. What this young man just said, as it follows up this story of the Russian Mennonites, this is the story of history. Every so often we have these things. We think it will forever continue, but it doesn't.

Okay, Clayton Kratz was sent as part of the MCC work, to assist these starving Russian people. Orie Miller and one other man, and Clayton Kratz, were sent over to investigate. Well, Clayton Kratz got on the wrong side of the line, and disappeared, never heard from again; nobody knows where he got to. Orie Miller and the other man survived. Orie Miller is usually associated with MCC. Now here's something very interesting: when the Swiss German people came from Europe to the United States, back in the 1700s, we were so desperately poor from the persecution that we suffered in Switzerland, and our Dutch Mennonite friends paid our way. And we always had a debt to them for getting us over here. But in World War II, with the MCC work, we had a chance to pay back that debt, to the Russian people.

Marvin Coblentz, Bear Lake, MI: I really am blessed with what you said this morning. To the brother from Syria, we'll be praying for you.

I just recently spoke to a young man, about my age, from Holmes County OH, Mennonite background. He said, "I know our forefathers gave their lives, did not bear arms, but he said, if somebody attacks my family, like ISIS, I'm going to defend my family." And I said, "Jesus said, 'He who takes up the sword will perish with the sword.'" He said, "I'll do that."

Chester Weaver: A Mennonite young man said that?

Marvin Coblentz: A Mennonite young man. So let's keep telling the story.

Chester Weaver: Amen, we must tell the story. In "When They Shall Ask," it was published I think in 1983, and some of those old men had been participants in the *Selbstschutz*, and one of them said, "If I'd had a chance, I would have killed them all." He was not repentant, even in 1983. He had not learned that story, that lesson.