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Utopian Aspects of the Mennonite Commonwealth  
in Russia

Constance Victoria Classen

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
Religion

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
at Concordia University  
Montréal, Québec, Canada

September 1986

Constance Victoria Classen, 1986

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ABSTRACT

Utopian Aspects of the Mennonite Commonwealth  
in Russia

Constance Victoria Classen

As a form of utopian society, the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia was unique, not only in its success in implementing utopian ideals and in the length of its duration - approximately 130 years - but also in its size - at its height the commonwealth encompassed close to 400 towns and villages.

The aim of this thesis is twofold: to trace the transition in ideology of the Dutch Anabaptist-Mennonites who moved to Prussia and then to Russia, from millenarian mythology to Kingdom theology to utopian philosophy, and then to examine in which ways the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia resembled and aspired to be a utopia, and in which ways it did not.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Historians of the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia have often referred to it as a 'utopia', 'Eden', or 'colony of heaven'<sup>1</sup> without specifying what they mean by these terms or in which ways the commonwealth exemplified them. The aim of this thesis - which by no means pretends to be conclusive - is twofold: to trace the transition in ideology of the Dutch Anabaptist-Mennonites who moved to Russia from millenarian mythology to Kingdom theology to utopian philosophy; and then to examine in which ways the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia resembled and aspired to be a utopia, and in which ways it did not.

Mennonitism began in the Netherlands in the early 16th century as a branch of Anabaptism. Around the middle of the century groups of Mennonites migrated to Prussia and from there to Russia in the late 1700's. In Russia they were allowed and encouraged to establish their own state within a state, a Mennonite 'commonwealth', which reached its height in the period between 1870 and 1914 and from then on increasingly lost its autonomy until its complete dissolution in 1943.

The term 'commonwealth' (not used by the Mennonites while in Russia) is now generally used by historians to refer to the Mennonite federation of villages in Russia<sup>2</sup>

and serves to mark it as a political and economic entity as well as a religious community, and to make the connection with the medieval ideal of a Christian commonwealth. A term the Mennonites did use for themselves was bruderschaft, brotherhood, which bespeaks the high value they placed on social solidarity.

The interpretation given to the term 'utopia' in this thesis is not that of an El Dorado, a fantasy land where all one's desires are instantly fulfilled, nor the totalitarian society of Karl Popper's definition,<sup>3</sup> but Ernst Bloch's and Martin Plattel's "receding horizon of endless progress";<sup>4</sup> the 'concrete utopia' which anticipates a new dimension in human history and offers realistic ways of reaching it.<sup>5</sup>

Rosabeth Kanter in Commitment and Community gives the following summary of the characteristics of utopia:

Utopia is the imaginary society in which humankind's deepest yearnings, noblest dreams, and highest aspirations come to fulfillment, where all physical, social and spiritual forces work together in harmony to permit the attainment of everything people find necessary and desirable. In the imagined utopia, people work and live together closely and cooperatively, in a social order that is self-created and self-chosen rather than externally imposed, yet one that also operates according to a higher order of natural and spiritual laws. Utopia is held together by commitment rather than coercion, for in utopia what people want to do is the same as what they have to do; the interests of the individuals are congruent with the interests of the group; and personal growth and freedom entail responsibility for others.<sup>6</sup>

Harmony - within the individual, within society, with the environment - is the primary characteristic of Eden and of the Kingdom of God, as well as of utopia. The primary difference is the nature of that harmony. Eden is a natural

paradise in which evil is unknown, the Kingdom of God is a supernatural paradise in which evil is known but completely transcended, utopia is a created paradise in which evil is known but coped with.

The edenic nostalgia for a state of innocence and integration with nature was not consciously part of the program of the Mennonites - they were too aware of the Fall and its consequences and of Christ's triumph over sin - however it undoubtedly, as the foundation of all paradisiac longing, nourished their desire for a perfect society.

In the Middle Ages Christianity and society were so interpenetrated that utopianism could only be conceived of in religious terms. Plattel writes:

The Christian Middle Ages did not directly know utopian pictures of the future. For medieval man his destiny lay in the hands of God rather than his own. But even there the utopian mood made itself occasionally felt. For instance the monk Jochim de Fiore (ab 1130-1202) modified the Christian eschatology with its expectation of the final time after the end of world history into an expectation of salvation within the world.... When in the Middle Ages people thought about the future, the result was a blend of transcendent eschatology and humanitarian ideas. That's why social protest against the existing injustice and the desire for a better world - two elements which are eminently utopian - constantly gave rise to a revival of chiliasm.<sup>7</sup>

Millennialism, or chiliasm, strictly signifies the belief in a future thousand year reign of Christ on earth, but is used in a wider sense to refer to any religious or pseudo-religious vision of an imminent, total earthly society.<sup>8</sup>

The religious, cultural and social upheaval of the 16th century brought millennialism to a head resulting in



frustrating attempts to establish an earthly Kingdom of God, doomed to failure because the Kingdom of God, by its very nature, can only be instituted by God.

The Anabaptist forefathers of the Mennonites in Russia rejected the millennialism of the militant Anabaptists and identified themselves instead with the spiritual Kingdom of God as exemplified by the primitive Church. Franklin H. Littel has termed this 'religious primitivism',<sup>9</sup> however the Anabaptist-Mennonites viewed the Apostolic age not only as an exemplary period of history, but as a transcendent ever-present norm.

Plattel makes an excellent comparison of the myth, which we find in conceptions of both the earthly and the spiritual Kingdom of God, and the utopia:

The myth describes things which unconditionally apply to man and which he simply has to accept. Salvation or final catastrophe come to him from without and from above. The myth describes a sacral plan of the world, one which falls upon man as a grace or a fate and which he undergoes. The myth expresses a divine decree which vertically enters the world and determines man.

In the utopia, however, man himself goes forward. He himself wants to overcome the limitations of his existence and go in search of happiness. While in the myth the new and alien come to man, in the utopia man himself tries to explore the new and the alien.<sup>10</sup>

In their allegiance to the spiritual Kingdom of God the Anabaptist-Mennonites were, in fact, anti-utopian; against the possibility of any man-made society having a redeeming value. Harmony - of the individual with God through the community of believers - was only possible in the Kingdom of God and could only be truly experienced in the spirit in this life, for the state could never be

Christian and the Church would always be small and persecuted. Many of the characteristics of the Kingdom of God: brotherhood, peace, etc; are also characteristic of utopia, however what the Anabaptist-Mennonites regarded as a sure mark of the Church in this world, continual suffering, is also a sure mark of their antiutopianism for in utopia suffering must always be minimized.

In Russia the Mennonites had "unparalleled opportunities for establishing and maintaining communities on the basis of their understanding of Biblical truth..."<sup>11</sup> Yet by that time the shift from Kingdom theology to utopian philosophy had already largely taken place, and what would be established in Russia was not a modern version of the primitive Church, but a utopian alternative to contemporary society. This change is not immediately evident because the Kingdom of God and the utopia share a core of basic values. However, in Russia the Mennonites dropped or altered those values of the Kingdom of God which conflicted with the establishment of a utopian society and added others which were utopian but not present in the original Anabaptist vision of the Kingdom.

As we examine the history, institutions, culture and religion of the Russian Mennonites compared to those of the early Dutch Mennonites, this shift in values will become apparent. Perhaps the most significant change was from the first Mennonites' insistence on discipleship and absolute obedience to God's will, to the Russian Mennonites' confidence in their ability to rule their own destiny. This is

certainly not to say that the Russian Mennonite emphasis on utopianism completely excluded Kingdom theology, nor that the Anabaptist spiritual Kingdom of God had been purged of all traces of expectation of an earthly Kingdom - all of these elements are present in the New Testament itself - but rather that the focus of Mennonite aspirations shifted.

This study is based primarily on writings of and about the group, but also, in the case of the commonwealth, on interviews with Russian Mennonites and photographs. In dealing with the commonwealth it tends to center on the two settlements of Chortitza and Molotschna for several reasons. As the oldest and most progressive settlements, Chortitza and Molotschna led the way for the rest of the commonwealth. Historical accounts of the commonwealth usually focus on these settlements, perhaps because most of the writings of the commonwealth were produced by them. The majority of Mennonites who left Russia during the Second World War, the most prolific in writing of their experiences, are from Chortitza and naturally concentrate on that settlement in their writings.

A major difficulty encountered in evaluating the utopian aspects of the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia is separating perceived fact from actual fact. Most accounts of the commonwealth were written by Russian Mennonites or their children after its dissolution and from the perspective of another country. Just as the Anabaptists mythologized the primitive Church, and the later Mennonites myth-

ologized the Anabaptists (Modern Mennonites now try to recover the vision of the Anabaptists much as the Anabaptists attempted to recover the vision of the primitive Church<sup>12</sup>), the Russian Mennonites who look back on their commonwealth are inclined to mythologize it as a 'lost paradise'.<sup>13</sup>

In this case period documents are an invaluable aid to providing a balanced view. However little documentation is available on the cultural and religious life of the Russian Mennonites, especially during the first decades of the commonwealth, and most of the massive documentation which existed on their agricultural and economic life was lost during the Revolution. That is why Russian Mennonite historiography is prone to be ethnocentric, based on oral traditions.<sup>14</sup>

The tendency among Mennonite historians has been to examine the commonwealth almost exclusively from the inside without placing it in the larger Russian and European context, a lapse of which limiting factors make the present study also culpable. It must not be thought, however, that the Russian Mennonites were completely isolated from the outside world: even among those families who could not afford to or did not choose to send their sons to university or to take trips outside the commonwealth, daily intercourse with their Russian workers and interaction with the German colonists in Russia ensured that they kept in contact with the world around them.

The Mennonite commonwealth has been viewed with ambivalence by Mennonite scholars, who censure it from a theo-

logical perspective while praising its social achievements. E.K. Francis describes the commonwealth as having bought its success "at the price of institutionalization of religion and secularization of the inner life of the group",<sup>15</sup> while Donovan Smucker calls it "a brilliant experiment in a semi-communal existence".<sup>16</sup>

Outside Mennonite circles the history of the commonwealth is virtually unknown. (The closed Mennonite communities in Canada and the United States which have received some attention are not equivalent to the Mennonite experience in Russia.) This is partly due to its remote location and to the magnitude of the events in which it was engulfed in the first half of this century, but also to the fact that it is not considered to be of general interest. As a form of utopian society, however, the Mennonite commonwealth was unique, not only in its success in implementing utopian ideals and in the length of its duration - approximately 130 years - but also in its size - at its height the commonwealth encompassed close to 400 towns and villages. In her work on utopian communities Kanter writes: "There are no answers in the experience of utopian communities of the past or present to the problem of building large and complex structures out of very small ones."<sup>17</sup> A study of the utopian aspects of the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia should be of value therefore, not only to scholars of Mennonite history but to anyone interested in the phenomenon of utopianism.

## NOTES: CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>e.g. Frank H. Epp, Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution, (Altona, Man.: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1966), p. 38; E.K. Francis, In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites In Manitoba, (Altona, Man.: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1955), p. 5; Harold J. Schultz, "Search For Utopia: The Exodus of Russian Mennonites to Canada, 1917-1927", A Journal of Church and State, XI, (Autumn, 1969), p. 489.

<sup>2</sup>E.K. Francis, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia, 1789-1914: A Sociological Interpretation", Mennonite Quarterly Review, 25 (July, 1949): 173-182.

<sup>3</sup>Karl R. Popper, The Poverty of Historicism, (London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 91-92.

<sup>4</sup>Ernst Bloch, The Principle of Hope, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972); Martin G. Plattel, Utopian and Critical Thinking, trans. Henry J. Koren, (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1972), p. 48.

<sup>5</sup>Plattel, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup>Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Plattel, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup>Norman Cohn, "Medieval Millenarianism: Its Bearing On the Comparative Study of Millenarian Movements," in Millennial Dreams in Action: Studies in Revolutionary Religious Movements, ed. Sylvia L. Thrupp, (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 31.

<sup>9</sup>Franklin H. Littell, The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church, (New York: Macmillan, 1964). pp. 46-55.

<sup>10</sup>Plattel, p. 54.

<sup>11</sup>The Mennonite Encyclopedia, s.v. "Russia," by Cornelius Krahn.

<sup>12</sup>Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," Mennonite Quarterly Review, XVII (April, 1944): 67-88.

<sup>13</sup>For a prime example see John D. Rempel and Paul Tiessen, eds., Forever Summer, Forever Sunday: Peter Gerhard Rempel's Photographs of Mennonites in Russia, 1890-1917. Letters and diaries translated by Hildegard E. Tiessen, (St. Jacobs, Ont.: Sand Hill Books, 1981).

<sup>14</sup>David G. Rempel, "An Introduction to Russian Mennonite Historiography," Mennonite Quarterly Review, XLVIII (October, 1974): 409-446.

<sup>15</sup>Francis, In Search of Utopia, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup>Donovan E. Smucker, ed.; The Sociology of Canadian Mennonites, Hutterites and Amish, A Bibliography with Annotations, (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1977)p. 118.

<sup>17</sup>Kanter, p. 229.

## II. IN SEARCH OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

On being questioned as to their beliefs and practices, a group of early Dutch Anabaptists responded that they were "seeking the Kingdom of God."<sup>1</sup> The search for the Kingdom of God characterized all the Anabaptists; however as to what the Kingdom of God was and how it should be sought they were far from agreed.

The first Anabaptists were followers of Zwingli in Switzerland who broke with him in 1525 over his practice of infant baptism. Anabaptism soon embraced a bewildering variety of sects. The term was used, in fact, to cover almost the whole left wing of the Reformation. Thus, on the fringes of Anabaptism we find Anabaptists who would play with sticks and throw apples at each other in order to 'receive the Kingdom of God as a little child', Anabaptists who would simply sit and do nothing, waiting for God to act through them, and even Anabaptists who dispensed with the Bible all together, claiming that the Spirit now ruled and not the Letter.<sup>2</sup>

Such diversity was natural in an age of religious exploration. For the first time the Bible was available to the people of Northern Europe in the vernacular, and the Anabaptist movement, unlike the institutionalized churches, encouraged individual interpretation of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> As



Anabaptism (excluding the spiritualists) held the Bible to be the sole authority and all believers to be priests, there were as many interpretations of Scripture as there were Anabaptists with strong opinions and leadership ability.<sup>4</sup>

While the fringe movements received a lot of attention and played an important part in Anabaptist self definition, however, they were denounced by the majority of Anabaptists and were short-lived.

Anabaptism was first introduced on a large scale to the Netherlands - the birthplace of Mennonitism - about 1529 by Melchior Hofmann, a Lutheran who had become attracted to the biblical literalism of the Anabaptists. Traveling as a self-proclaimed prophet of God, Hofmann brought Swiss Anabaptist ideals of discipleship and fidelity to the New Testament, infused with his own intense eschatology, to the Netherlands where the mixture was received enthusiastically by thousands of converts. So convinced was Hofmann of the imminence of the Kingdom of God that he set a year for it - 1533 - and a place - Strassburg. There the 144,000 saints would gather to establish the New Jerusalem after a period of great tribulation as foretold in Revelations. In order to fulfill one of the preconditions of the Second Coming, Hofmann had himself imprisoned in Strassburg early in 1533 and remained in prison until his death ten years later.<sup>5</sup>

After Hofmann's imprisonment his followers separated into two bands: one group, the majority, although retaining

a strong eschatological expectation, concentrated on practicing New Testament ideals and left the when and the wherefore of the Second Coming up to God; while the other group decided to precipitate the Second Coming by ushering in the Kingdom itself.<sup>6</sup> The question was one of interpretation. Would the Second Coming precede the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth (post-millennialism) or would the Kingdom be inaugurated as a precondition of the Second Coming (pre-millennialism)? Hofmann never attempted to militantly introduce the millenium himself, however by setting a time and place for it he put it into the framework of historical time and space and made it appear accessible to human manipulation.

Muenster, and not Strassburg, was now the appointed 'city of God' for those followers of Hofmann who were unwilling to give up the dream of an earthly Kingdom here and now. Under the leadership of Jan Mathijsz, Anabaptists (the divisions between one and another group were not yet hard and fast) gathered in the city from the surrounding regions and all non-believers were forced to leave. The authorities quickly laid Muenster under siege and the trapped Anabaptists felt they had no alternative but to defend the chosen city. At first spiritual means of defense such as hymn singing were used, but when these proved of no avail arms were taken up. Jan Mathijsz was killed trying to pass through the lines and the more radical Jan van Leiden assumed command. As the seige continued, the situation inside the city became desperate. In a last

attempt to actualize the Kingdom of God, Jan van Leiden shifted his emphasis from the New Testament to the Old, establishing a militaristic 'New Israel' in which baptism by force, community of goods, and polygamy were practiced, and over which he reigned as 'King David'.<sup>7</sup>

This religio-social model had a precedent in the teachings of Thomas Muentser (1490-1525), an eschatologically oriented Lutheran and one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt, who envisioned an Old Testament style Kingdom of God brought about by social revolution. Among some of the radical reformers (e.g. Balthasar Hubmaier, Michael Gaismair) social revolution and religious revolution were inextricably entwined. Gaismair, for instance, equated godliness to social justice.<sup>8</sup>

The Muenster episode, therefore, should not be regarded as an isolated incident of fanaticism, but as an extreme example of the idealistic desire for religious and social reform prevalent at the time. In 1525 the city of Muenster fell and the experiment was over, however it was to leave a permanent mark on Anabaptism. Henceforth the authorities would regard all Anabaptists as potential violent revolutionaries while the Anabaptists themselves would seek to disassociate themselves from the Muensterites and present themselves as peaceful citizens with no desire to transform society into an earthly Kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup>

It was Menno Simons (1496-1561), the foremost leader of the Dutch Anabaptists after Muenster, who would gather

the different Dutch Anabaptist congregations into one Church. Menno developed a theology of the Kingdom of God as a spiritual entity corresponding to the Church and replacing the physical kingdom of Israel.<sup>10</sup> The Kingdom of God - the Church - is perpetually in contention with the kingdom of Satan - the world - however, as the Church can only use spiritual weapons in its battle it is fated to be continually persecuted by the world. In the words of Menno: "The Scriptures teach that there are two opposing princes and two opposing kingdoms: the one is the prince of peace; the other, the prince of strife. Each of these princes has his particular kingdom and as the prince is so also is his kingdom."<sup>11</sup>

The two kingdom doctrine was an integral part of the Dutch Anabaptist philosophy of history, according to which the whole dynamic of history results from the conflict between the two kingdoms. Adam and Eve in their fellowship with God were the prototype of the Church on earth. After the Fall the confrontation between the kingdom of peace and the kingdom of strife was perpetuated through their descendants; with Abel representing the godly strain and Cain, the ungodly. This conflict takes place both on earth and in the spiritual realm, and was brought to its climax by Jesus Christ who triumphed over Satan and his kingdom through love and self-surrender - the way of the Cross.<sup>12</sup>

The conflict between the Church and the world continued, however, because the world was unwilling to accept

the truth revealed by Christ. After the 'Golden Age' of the Apostles, the Church began to accommodate itself to the world, the definite sign of its fall being its union with the State at the time of Constantine. The corruption of the Church continued during the centuries with only a remnant of believers remaining true to the original ideal until the restoration of the true Church with Anabaptism.<sup>13</sup>

The fallen Church could be recognized by certain marks, the most significant of which was its union with the State which resulted in the use of compulsion in religion, antithetical to the Church as a community of freely associated believers. Another sign of the Church's fall was its departure from New Testament ideals, as witnessed by its hierarchy of power, its pomp, its use of man-made rituals, and the unChristian-like conduct of its members who not only did not treat each other like brothers, but in pursuit of worldly goods even went to war with each other.<sup>14</sup>

Franklin H. Littell explains the position of the Anabaptists:

With the addition of large numbers of nominal Christians at the time of the 'Fall', and successive centuries of admission of all the people of the land through infant baptism, the church was no longer the congregation of the elect. In general a slipshod practice of spiritual laxity resulted; this the Anabaptists energetically condemned. They told in contrast how the spiritual athletes of the Heroic Age conducted themselves, and warned and admonished men and women of the latter days whose lives conformed to the world rather than to the Kingdom.<sup>15</sup>

The Dutch Anabaptists, along with the other major Anabaptist groups, desired not just a reformation of the

Church, but a restitution. It is important to understand that theirs was not just an attempt to pattern themselves after the early Christians, but an active identification with the primitive Church which had for them a transhistorical value.<sup>16</sup>

The interest of the Dutch Anabaptists in theology was principally practical rather than speculative and they stressed the obedient will, rather than reason, as the primary means of obtaining spiritual knowledge.<sup>17</sup> They held that faith not only justified, but also transformed the individual and thus necessarily resulted in works. The true Church could be recognized by its fruits for, in the words of Menno, "where the Spirit is there shall also be the fruits of the Spirit."<sup>18</sup> The fruits by which the Church was to be recognized were, principally; separation from the world, mutual aid, and witnessing the Gospel.<sup>19</sup>

Separation from the world, necessary because of the different and sometimes conflicting demands of the Church and the world, entailed a wide range of practices. Christians could not bear arms, even in self defense, their only weapon was the Word of God, for the Kingdom of God was one of peace. Menno Simons said of this: "Christ did not want to be defended with Peter's sword. How can a Christian then defend himself with it? Christ wanted to drink the cup which the Father gave Him; how then can a Christian avoid it?"<sup>20</sup> Nor should Christians participate in the functions of the State for fear of compromising their principles, and Christian integrity forbade the swearing of an oath.

Separation from the world applied to a Christian's personal affairs as well. Marriage so intimately binds two people together that a believer should not marry an unbeliever. A Christian's lifestyle should be kept simple, displaying no worldly ostentation. With respect to those 'so-called' Christians who did not practice simplicity, Menno wrote:

They say they believe, and yet, alas, there are no limits nor bounds to their accursed haughtiness, foolish pride and pomp; they parade in silks, velvet, costly clothes, gold rings, chains, silver belts, pins and buttons, curiously adorned shirts, shawls, collars, veils, aprons, velvet shoes, slippers, and such like foolish finery.<sup>21</sup>

Tainted with worldliness and therefore to be discouraged were such things as alcohol, dancing, theaters, art and literature.

As regards the attitude of the Christian to the government, "the general rule was that the magistrate was given for the sins of the world and should be obeyed in all things favorable or adverse except those of conscience."<sup>22</sup>

Although the leaders of the Dutch Anabaptists were often well-educated, higher education tended to be disparaged by them as distracting from the pursuit of godly wisdom. The agriculturalist and the artisan were considered to be more apt to understand and teach God's message than learned doctors with their clever human sophistries. After all, had not the disciples of Jesus been simple men?<sup>23</sup>

The Anabaptist pessimism concerning the world was countered by an optimism as to the Christian's ability to live in accordance with the ethics of the Kingdom of God.

Community of goods was not practiced by the Dutch Anabaptists as it was by the Hutterites, partly because of the opprobrium with which the practice was regarded after Muenster, however they had a doctrine of mutual aid which stated that goods should be shared with those members in need. Mutual aid involved concern not only for the material welfare of the members, but also for their spiritual welfare, for the members of the Church, united through their participation in the Lord's Supper, formed one body.<sup>24</sup>

The Dutch Anabaptists believed in the priesthood of all believers and each member of the congregation had a role and responsibility in the same. Ministers needed no formal training, they were members of the Church called by God and the congregation. Within the Church there was no hierarchy and congregations were independent. While perfection cannot be claimed in this life, it should be sought, and a high standard of ethical conduct was required of church members. Errors within the Church were to be corrected, as expounded by Jesus, through brotherly admonition and, if necessary, by shunning the offending member, a practice known as the ban. A person who was under the ban could have no fellowship with other believers until such time as he repented of and corrected his sin. Such strict discipline not only served to bring the sinner to repentance, but also to protect the integrity of the Church and make a sharp distinction between it and the world.<sup>25</sup>

The relationship of the believer to the outside world was that of a witness. The Great Commission - the command



of Christ to go forth and preach the Gospel to the whole world - applied to all believers. Concerning this Menno Simons wrote:

We preach as much as opportunity and possibility afford, both in daytime and by night, in houses and in fields, in forests and wildernesses, in this land and abroad, in prison and in bonds, in water, fire and the scaffold, on the gallows and upon the wheel, before lords and princes, orally and by writing, at the risk of possessions and life, as we have done these many years without ceasing.<sup>26</sup>

The visible Church should seek to correspond as closely as possible to the invisible Church - that known only to God. The antithetical natures of the Church and the world ensure that the Church will always be small and persecuted, and in order to avoid the ever-present danger of accommodation to the world, it must constantly renew itself.<sup>27</sup>

The beliefs and practices of the Dutch Anabaptists should be viewed from the perspective of discipleship, a dominant element in their theology. The union of the human and the divine in Jesus Christ proves that they are not incompatible, and through grace the Christian can participate in the divine nature of Christ. Menno says: "We must hear Christ, believe in Christ, follow His footsteps, repent, be born from above; become as little children, not in understanding but in malice; be of the same mind of Christ; walk as He did, deny ourselves, take up His cross and follow Him."<sup>28</sup>

Under Menno Simons' direction, the eschatological Kingdom of God of Melchior Hofmann became a present spiritual Kingdom of God corresponding to the true Church.

In "The Doctrine of Two Worlds" Robert Friedmann describes the Kingdom theology on which Mennonitism was based as consisting of three essential characteristics: a value system based on the Sermon on the Mount; a philosophy of history which viewed all history in terms of a battle between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness with the former eventually triumphing at the end of the world; and a social ethic which called for a loving fellowship of believers. While the other reforming movements were also influenced to some extent by Kingdom theology, the Anabaptists alone considered Kingdom ethics to be fully binding on all Christians at the present time and in this world.<sup>29</sup>

The kingdom theology was never systematically formulated by the Anabaptists; implicitly, however, it is very much there.... Very clear, even radical is their dualism concerning the two realms. Their disparagement and even fear of the world goes beyond that opposition which we would find in Paul's derogation of the flesh. While the latter leads to asceticism and celibacy, the Anabaptist dualism is of a rather different kind, requiring complete separation from the world as the realm of the prince of darkness. The Anabaptists, however, were not Puritans. The mere practice of purity of morals would mean little to them even though the idea of a 'church without spot and wrinkle' is quite common with the Anabaptists. The Puritans certainly had one aspect of the kingdom theology, the strictness of discipline; but they lacked certain other elements, due to their Calvinistic outlook.

The terms most often used by Anabaptists are Nachfolge (discipleship) and Gehorsam (obedience); that is the acceptance of Christ's leadership and that spirit which permeates His teachings. In short, their way of thinking and evaluation is that of the kingdom theology, even though an explicit theology of this kind might not be so easily demonstrable. They felt absolutely certain that they were citizens of that other (spiritual) world here and now, and accepted the values, the outlook on history and the social consequences which follow this position as a matter of course.<sup>30</sup>

Although baptism was used as the dividing line between the Protestant reformers, who allowed infant baptism, and the Anabaptists (literally 're-baptizers'), who did not, the primary distinction between them was their concept of Church: the Protestants aimed to reform the old Church by the Bible; the Anabaptists (referring here to the main-line groups) attempted to build a new Church from the Bible. Baptism itself was part of this program.<sup>31</sup> As Roland Bainton points out, "infant baptism goes with a theory of the Church as co-terminus with the State and affiliated with all of its institutions,"<sup>32</sup> and Luther, Calvin and Zwingli all adhered to the concept of Christendom; a commonwealth of Christians in which the Church was united to the State.

The established churches had a 'civilized agreement' (the Peace of Augsburg, 1555) with each other that they would not encroach on each other's territory. The Protestants could agree to this because they held that the missionary mandate applied only to the Apostles and was no longer operative. James Thayer Addison sums up their attitude as follows:

For nearly two centuries the Churches of the Reformation were almost destitute of any sense of missionary vocation. The foremost leaders - men like Luther, Melancthon, Bucer, Zwingli and Calvin - displayed neither missionary vision nor missionary spirit. While conceding in theory the universality of Christianity, they never recognized it as a call to the Church of their day.<sup>33</sup>

The Anabaptists, however, who considered the Great Commission to be binding on all believers, respected no boundaries in their proselytism.

In general it can be said that, while the Anabaptists insisted on apostolicity, the concern of the Protestants was apostolic succession. As Gunnar Weston puts it: "Either the message and example of the New Testament are taken to be a binding norm or they are considered to be historically undeveloped beginning patterns which had later to be altered. The Protestant parish- and state-churches have generally agreed with the second point of view."<sup>34</sup> Their approach made the Anabaptists the most thorough-going of the reform movements; so thorough-going as to arguably constitute a phenomenon sui generis.<sup>35</sup> From their point of view Luther, Calvin and Zwingli were 'half-way men' who compromised on essential issues in order to pursue worldly goals.<sup>36</sup>

So far the doctrine of the Dutch Anabaptists as it was developed by main stream Anabaptism and given distinctive form by Menno Simons. To the degree that it is possible due to limited documentation, it is now necessary to examine their history.

In order to distinguish themselves from the militant Anabaptists and to have a name without negative connotations, the Dutch Anabaptists called themselves 'Mennists', and later 'Mennonites' (the first recorded usage was in 1544) after their leader. The name gained respectability and eventually the Swiss Anabaptists adopted it for themselves as well. There has been a tendency among historians of

Anabaptism to suppose that what was true of the Swiss Anabaptists was also true of the Dutch, however this should not be taken for granted. Although they shared the same faith, there were significant cultural and doctrinal differences between the two groups, and those Swiss Anabaptists who sought refuge in the Netherlands had great difficulty in assimilating. "C. Henry Smith writes that they were "practically an alien people, belonging to the Dutch only geographically; and having little in common with the other groups [of Dutch Anabaptists] either organically or culturally..."<sup>37</sup> Eventually the Swiss either left or assimilated with the Dutch.

The Netherlands had been prepared for the teachings of Anabaptism by the popular Sacramentarian movement (which reduced the traditional sacraments to two: the eucharist, interpreted in a purely symbolic sense, and baptism, administered only to adult believers) and also by humanism and mysticism, particularly as expressed by the Brethren of the Common Life. The members of this group were not bound by a vow but lived together in community houses and practiced obedience, poverty and celibacy, especially emphasizing the need for a spiritual communion with Christ. The Anabaptists' practical application of theology, their stress on free will, their heroic approach to Christianity, their vigorous congregational life, and their optimistic assesment of human nature appealed to the practical minded Dutch who had wrested their country from the sea and made such skillful use of all available land

that it became the vegetable and flower garden of Europe. (According to a popular saying, "God created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands").<sup>38</sup> As well, the Netherlands was under oppressive Spanish rule at this time and Dutch nationalism manifested itself partly in a rebellion against the Catholic state church.

Although Anabaptism drew adherents from all levels of society, it found its greatest following among agriculturalists and artisans who were displaced by the shift from a land-based to a commerce-based economy in the 16th century and had both the mobility to act as wandering missionaries and the desire for a new form of social life.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, Anabaptism was first and foremost a religious, and not social, movement.<sup>40</sup>

At this point (the early 16th century) the followers of Menno Simons were composed of ethnically heterogeneous elements held together by a distinct body of religious beliefs and practices. E.K. Francis writes that they could be considered "a religious group which remained within the framework of a societal system."<sup>41</sup>

While the Mennonites have been described as monastic, they were not strict ascetics (indeed, they would have considered the practices of ascetics to be a symptom of worldly pride). There were Mennonites who remained celibate and others who left their families in order to missionize, however, as not all believers could be celibate, and the Mennonites were against the creation of any special class of be-

lievers, no special importance was attached to celibacy.

Men were at the head of the Mennonite community, as the father was at the head of the family, however the Anabaptist doctrines of freedom of conscience and the priesthood of all believers - men and women - "constituted a major breach in patriarchalism and a momentous step in the Western emancipation of women."<sup>42</sup> Children were held to be without sin. Although they were not yet believers, and thus not members of the church, they were considered part of the congregation as witnessed by the rite of infant dedication. Concerning the upbringing of children Menno wrote:

Let us be mindful and solicitous of our own children... be sure that you instruct them from their youth in the way of the Lord that they fear and love God, walk in all decency and discipline, are well-mannered, quiet, obedient to their father and mother, reverent where that is proper, in their speech honest, not loud, not stubborn, nor self-willed; for such is not becoming to the children of saints.<sup>43</sup>

Although, presumably, a proper upbringing might not be enough to protect a child from the world and all the children of saints might not become saints themselves, the Mennonites felt accountable for their children and naturally did all they could to ensure that they would be of the same faith. As important as the family was, however, in the eyes of the early Mennonites a Christian's relationship to Christ came first.<sup>44</sup>

Despite their common disapproval of worldliness, the Dutch Anabaptists tended to be more culture-oriented than the Swiss. This was partly due to the more rural and iso-

lated nature of the Swiss Anabaptist communities, but also to the cultural and economic 'golden age' of which the Netherlands was on the verge. The Swiss Anabaptist Conrad Grebel insisted that singing was contrary to God's will,<sup>45</sup> but the Netherlands was renowned for its choirs and hymn singing was very popular among the Mennonites<sup>46</sup> (although it did not form part of the church service). Nor was higher education and involvement in the affairs of the world viewed with the same distrust as by the Swiss. Menno had recognized the value of education when it was properly employed<sup>47</sup> and had involved himself in the affairs of the world by calling on rulers to carry out justice without the use of tyranny.<sup>48</sup>

Since the movement's inception the Mennonites suffered persecution. At the Diet of Speyer in 1529, Catholics and Protestants alike agreed to subject Anabaptists to the death penalty throughout the Holy Roman Empire. What made them such dangerous radicals in the eyes of the authorities was not so much their religious non-conformity as their political non-conformity. In an era when the Church allied with the State in a Christian commonwealth was the accepted ideal and norm, the Anabaptists' rejection of infant baptism - the rite of entry into the commonwealth, their refusal to bear arms, serve in government or swear an oath, their missionizing, their insistence on social equality and mutual aid appeared anarchic. That their program did not seem practicable by worldly standards did not concern the Anabaptist-Mennonites however; they had their own stan-



dards to follow and they accepted their persecution as proof that they were the true Church which suffers in the flesh but rules in the spirit.

All of the known methods of torture and execution were used on the Mennonites to force them to recant and discourage potential adherents to the sect. That so many remained steadfast and went to their deaths courageously singing and witnessing is a tribute to the intensity and depth of their faith. Only a firm faith in spiritual truths and values could make such worldly suffering endurable. The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians, commonly known as the Martyrs Mirror, a 17th century collection of cases of Mennonite martyrdom, was a common book in Mennonite homes for centuries. Some of the most positive testimony of Mennonite life came from detractors of the movement, in fact, in places one had only to lead an exemplary life to be accused of being an Anabaptist.<sup>49</sup>

Ironically, the Mennonites' very rejection of tyranny made them a difficult people to organize. At the start of the movement there were few formal doctrines, however as theological positions were formulated many divisions arose. While strict discipline was maintained within each group, the Anabaptist abhorrence of compulsion in religion meant that any member who disagreed was free to leave and start a new sect. So pronounced was the Anabaptist tendency to subdivide that it was called the Taeuferkrankheit, the Anabaptist disease. Some of the disagreements concerned

theology - e.g. the nature of Christ and of the Trinity, the role of prophecy in the Church - and others, ethics and practice - whether war taxes should be paid, how strictly the ban should be applied... Mennonitism was thus marked not only by tension between the Church and the world, but also by tension between individuality and uniformity.

The most important division among the Mennonites arose between the Frisian Mennonites of the North and the more liberal Flemish Mennonites of the South who took refuge in the North. The differences were not only doctrinal (centered on authority in the church and the use of the ban), but also cultural: the Frisians disapproved of the fine clothes and love of good food which characterized the Flemish, while these found the Frisians to be given to worldliness in their houses and household goods.<sup>50</sup> Soon the terms 'Frisian' and 'Flemish' denoted not ethnic background but two mutually exclusive denominations. The result of endless quarrels over details was sometimes a commonly agreed on uniformity.

According to one Dutch writer:

The simplicity of the forefathers developed through their descendants into a Mennonite uniformity because the question arose which color, material and design of the clothes, which style of architecture of houses and color of paint, which furniture, etc. could pass the test of simplicity until a mutual feeling had been established; then everyone conformed to this standard to avoid annoyance or excommunication...<sup>51</sup>

This would be truer of the smaller group of more conservative Mennonites, however it affected all the Mennonites to some extent.

Persecution of Mennonites in the Netherlands ended

with Dutch independence in the 1600's (during which period Calvinism became the national religion), although complete freedom of worship did not come until the 19th century.

In the 17th century the Netherlands was the foremost commercial power in Europe and also a center of art and literature. The Mennonites contributed significantly to this 'golden age', producing outstanding poets, artists, agriculturalists, engineers, merchants and particularly physicians (one Mennonite physician founded the first school of medicine in Russia). While in one sense the 17th century was the "peak of Mennonite achievement"<sup>52</sup> in the Netherlands, prosperity and interaction with the world led to a change in some traditional Mennonite values, particularly among the more liberal groups. By the 19th century the ideal of simplicity was largely lost, the principle of non-resistance had been discarded, and, under the influence of rationalism, much of the Gospel narrative had come to be regarded as myth, even by the conservatives. Under these conditions the differences between one and another group no longer appeared so unbreachable and a spirit of mutual toleration set in.<sup>53</sup> Due to centuries of intermarriage with non-Mennonites, hardly any Mennonite family names of the 16th century are found among the 20th century Dutch Mennonites.<sup>54</sup>

This was not the route of all the Mennonites, however. The persecution of the early 1500's drove groups of Mennonites to seek refuge in the Vistula Delta on the Baltic coast where Dutch settlers were welcomed for the draining and colonization of marsh lands. There they made some con-

verts among the settlers already established in the region. It is not known when the first Mennonites went to this area, nor how many migrated in total, however by 1608 a local bishop was complaining that the whole delta was overrun with them.<sup>55</sup>

While living together in compact settlements facilitated separation from the world, the practice of mutual aid, and the reinforcement of common beliefs, in the Netherlands constant persecution had prevented the Mennonites from organizing socially up to this time. In Prussia, however, the situation was different. There the Mennonites lived in communities separate from the local population. This separation was both voluntary and imposed: the Mennonites wished to remain apart from what was for them an alien culture, and the Catholic and Lutheran rulers, while admiring Mennonite abilities, limited the movement of the 'heretics' among their subjects. E.K. Francis notes that "the pattern of colonization in the region fostered group settlement and the formation of ethnic communities."<sup>56</sup>

The next two centuries in Prussia would be an important period of transition for the Mennonites, however, little has been written on the subject by North American scholars. As had happened in the Netherlands, honesty, industry and thrift brought prosperity to the Mennonites of the Vistula Delta. They were prohibited from living in the cities, however important congregations of Mennonites were established in the vicinities of Elbing, Koenigsburg and especially Danzig. Their separation from the larger society and strong

group cohesion enabled these transplanted Mennonites to maintain their sense of identity. (One major change which did take place was the replacement of Dutch with Low German, the language of the region, as the principal language of the Prussian Mennonites in the 18th century.)

Thus the liberalization which took place among the Mennonites of the Netherlands did not occur to the same extent among the Mennonites centered in the Vistula Delta region of Prussia. (In 1692 a Mennonite portrait painter from a Danzig congregation was banned for violating the second commandment until he agreed to confine himself to landscapes.<sup>57</sup>) The various Mennonite congregations in the Netherlands and Prussia were independent but kept in contact with each other and, despite their differences, maintained a strong system of mutual aid which supported congregations in need.<sup>58</sup>

Separation from the world, originally a religious doctrine, had become in Prussia a cultural policy. This had several important effects on the Prussian Mennonites, namely: identification with a rural lifestyle; an emphasis on self reliance, a general feeling of superiority, cultural and ethnic homogeneity, and an escapist tendency.

As regards ethnic homogeneity, it's interesting to note that a 1912 study of typical names among the Prussian Mennonites found that they descended almost exclusively from the original Dutch settlers. This shows how little conversion of and intermarriage with the outside community took place.<sup>59</sup>

The escapist tendency aforementioned combined with a pioneering spirit to create a pattern of migration and re-settlement among the Prussian Mennonites which they would return to whenever what appeared to be insurmountable difficulties arose in their adopted homeland.

The reign of Frederick the Great (1740-1786) began with relative tolerance for the Prussian Mennonites and they, in turn, now the Stille im Lande, the quiet in the land, responded with gifts for their monarch - on one occasion two oxen, 400 pounds of butter, twenty cakes of cheese, and an assortment of chickens and ducks.<sup>60</sup> The increasing militarization of the regime soon created problems for the Mennonites, however, who were forced to contribute financial support to the military effort and forbidden to acquire any further property. These measures endangered the Mennonite way of life in Prussia and the Prussian Mennonites began to consider the possibility of emigrating.

At the same time Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, was looking for skilled, preferably German, settlers for her just conquered territories to the south of Russia, a region which was christened 'New Russia' (present-day Ukraine). In 1786 the Mennonites were told by an officer of the Russian government that special privileges and concessions would be offered to them if they chose to settle in New Russia.

The same year two Prussian Mennonite delegates, Jakob Hoepfner and Johann Bartsch, set out for Russia where they

examined a suitable site for settlement, met with Empress Catherine, and negotiated the terms of the move. These included 175 acres per homestead, government subsidies, complete religious freedom, self autonomy and exemption from military service for all eternity. One of the conditions was that proselytism among the Russian Orthodox Catholics was strictly prohibited, but this did not dissuade the Mennonites who were accustomed to a similar prohibition in Prussia.

When the delegates returned to Prussia in 1787 with the good news they were greeted with enthusiasm by the Mennonites, particularly those most concerned about the future of Mennonitism in Prussia and those without land. The Prussian government placed restrictions on the emigration of land-owning Mennonites and so the first group of emigrants consisted mostly of poorer Mennonites who worked in various trades around Danzig. On Easter Sunday, 1788, the move to Russia began.<sup>61</sup>

While the theology of the Prussian Mennonites was still that of the early Dutch Mennonites, the original otherworldly emphasis had become this worldly. In Prussia religious customs became formalized and static; while the early sermons were improvised, for instance, by the end of the 18th century they were generally read from a book of sermons. Baptism was preceded by a period of formal religious instruction and delayed until a candidate was in

his 20's or even 30's. C. Henry Smith reasons that "this postponement of the age limit for entrance into the church, together with the insistence that church membership must square with consistent living was the source no doubt of considerable loss to the membership at large."<sup>62</sup> Of course, the ban on proselytism meant that there was next to no influx of new blood into the church. Those Mennonites who had become wealthy adopted styles of dress (e.g. shoes with buckles, wigs, neckscarfs) which once would have been considered unacceptably ostentatious. The ministers of the church decried as well gambling, dancing and kindred frivolities among the Mennonites.<sup>63</sup> A Mennonite elder of the late 18th century wrote that "the beautiful, simple practices of Menno Simons are disappearing more and more"<sup>64</sup>

Despite the assertion of an immigrant recruiting agent for Russia that "the Mennonites love nothing so much as to baptize people",<sup>65</sup> the possibility for evangelism among the non-Christian peoples of New Russia was far down, if it figured at all, on the list of Mennonite reasons for emigrating. What attracted them was the prospect of settlement in a new country where they would not only have unprecedented control over their religious and civil affairs but also abundant land of good quality and financial aid.<sup>66</sup>

As the persecution had decreased in Prussia, the creation of an ideal Christian society in this world appeared increasingly more possible. Particularly influential in this regard were the writings of the Dutch Mennonite Peter



Peters (1574-1651), especially his work entitled The Way to the City of Peace. Delbert F. Plett describes this book as dealing with "a Christian utopia in which the citizens are all earnest disciples of a loving king who had redeemed them from a life of sin and misery outside the boundaries of this City of Peace (Freidensreich)."<sup>67</sup> This "Christian utopia" is the kingdom of peace of Menno Simons, however the use of parable enables Menno's spiritual kingdom to be conceived of in material terms - the first step to utopianism.

In the latter half of the 17th century a Dutch Mennonite, Pieter Plockhoy, approached the Dutch government with a plan to establish in the New World "an experimental cooperative commonwealth in which there was to be religious toleration, the abolition of all poverty, and perfect equality of all classes, economic, social and political," excluding only "Catholics, Jews, Stiff-necked Quakers, and foolhardy believers in the Millenium."<sup>68</sup> Plockhoy was permitted to set up a colony in New Amsterdam, but the English conquest of the territory ended the experiment soon after it began.

An interesting comparison could be made here to the desire of the Puritans, who did not share the Church/world antagonism of Mennonite theology, to create an earthly Paradise in New England by restoring the Early Church; or the Quaker attempt to found a 'City of Brotherly Love' in Pennsylvania. Unlike the Mennonites, however, the Puritans had no qualms about the use of force, and even the Quakers, who were non-resistant, had no objections to serving in government.

Pieter Plockhoy's vision of a perfect society was vanquished by harsh reality before it had a chance to prove itself. In Russia the Prussian Mennonites would have both the opportunity and the time to establish a cooperative commonwealth in which to implement their ideals. The original millennialism of Hofmann's followers had been sublimated into a Kingdom theology and was now being transformed into a utopian philosophy. The Prussian Mennonites were no longer the suffering, witnessing Kingdom of God, in the world but not of the world, they were a separate people looking for a land where they could establish an ideal society, one of the prerequisites for which, but not the only one, was religious freedom. The search for the Kingdom of God had become a search for utopia.

## NOTES: CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>Cornelius Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism: Origin, Life, Spread and Thought (1450-1600), (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), p. 125.

<sup>2</sup>Claus-Peter Clasen, Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525-1618, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1972), p. 123.

<sup>3</sup>C. Henry Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, 4th ed., rev. and enl. by Cornelius Krahn, (Newton, Kan.: Mennonite Publication Office, 1957), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>Frank H. Epp, Mennonites in Canada: 1786-1920, The History of a Separate People, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 39.

<sup>5</sup>Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, pp. 86-117.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 135-164.

<sup>8</sup>Hans-Jurgen Goertz, ed., Profiles of Radical Reformers, (Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup>Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, p. 166.

<sup>10</sup>Delbert F. Plett, The Golden Years, The Mennonite Kleine Gemeindeg in Russia (1812-1849), (Steinbach, Man.: D.F.P. Publications, 1985), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup>John Christian Wenger, ed., The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, trans. Leonard Verduin, with an introduction by Harold S. Bender, (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1956) p. 554.

<sup>12</sup>William Echard Keeney, The Development of Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice from 1539-1564, (The Netherlands: Nieuwkoop, B. de Graaf, 1968), pp. 176-177.

<sup>13</sup>Franklin H. Littell, The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church, (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 64.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 64-72.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>17</sup>Keeney, p. 192.

<sup>18</sup>Menno Simons, Opera Omnia Theologica, Quoted by Keeney, p. 115.

<sup>19</sup>Keeney, pp. 123-136, and Littell, pp. 82-111.

<sup>20</sup>Wenger, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 377.

<sup>22</sup>Littell, p. 105.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>24</sup>Keeney, p. 135.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>26</sup>Menno Simons, quoted by Plett, p. 58.

<sup>27</sup>Keeney, p. 180.

<sup>28</sup>Wenger, p. 100

<sup>29</sup>Robert Friedmann, "The Doctrine of the Two Worlds" in The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, ed. Guy F. Hershberger, (Scottsdale, Pa: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957).

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 115-117.

<sup>31</sup>Littell, p. xv.

<sup>32</sup>Roland H. Bainton, The Age of the Reformation (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 44.

<sup>33</sup>James Thayer Addison, The Christian Approach to the Moslem, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), p. 66, quoted by Littell, p. 114.

<sup>34</sup>Gunnar Weston, Der Weg der freien christlichen Gemeinden durch die Jahrhunderte, (Kassel: J.G. Oncken Verlag, 1956), p. 16, quoted by Littell, p. 82. X

<sup>35</sup>Littell, p. 44.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 215.

<sup>38</sup>Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, pp. 1-2.

<sup>39</sup>Littell, p. 124.

<sup>40</sup>Fritz Blanke, "Anabaptism and the Reformation" in The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, p. 66.

<sup>41</sup>E.K. Francis, "The Russian Mennonites, From Religious to Ethnic Group", American Journal of Sociology, LIV (September, 1948), p.103.

<sup>42</sup>George H. Williams, The Radical Reformation, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 507.

<sup>43</sup>Wenger, p. 950.

<sup>44</sup>William Klassen, "The Role of the Child in Anabaptism", in Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural and Literary Essays Dealing with Mennonite Issues, ed., Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980), p. 31.

<sup>45</sup>Walter Klaasen, Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant, (Waterloo, Ont.: Conrad Press, 1981), p. 31.

<sup>46</sup>Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, pp. 7-8.

<sup>47</sup>Wenger, pp. 790-792.

- <sup>48</sup>Keeney, p. 131.
- <sup>49</sup>Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., An Introduction to Mennonite History, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1967), p. 312.
- <sup>50</sup>Williams, pp. 765-766.
- <sup>51</sup>C.N. Wybrands, Het Menniste Zusje, (Amsterdam: 1913), p. 35, quoted by Melvin Gingerich, Mennonite Attire Through Four Centuries, (Breinigsville, Pa.: Pennsylvania German Society, 1970) p. 18.
- <sup>52</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, pp. 200-205.
- <sup>53</sup>Ibid., pp. 206, 222, 223 -224.
- <sup>54</sup>The Mennonite Encyclopedia, s.v. "Names, Mennonite, of Persons and Places" by Cornelius Krahn.
- <sup>55</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 264.
- <sup>56</sup>E.K. Francis, In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba, (Altona, Man.: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1955), p. 14.
- <sup>57</sup>The Mennonite Encyclopedia, s.v. "Art" by Harold S. Bender.
- <sup>58</sup>Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism, p. 219.
- <sup>59</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, pp. 271-272.
- <sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 281.
- <sup>61</sup>N.J. Kroeker, First Mennonite Villages in Russia, 1789-1943, (Vancouver, B.C.: By the Author, 1981), pp.13, 21-23.
- <sup>62</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 276.
- <sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 277.
- <sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 275.
- <sup>65</sup>Kroeker, p. 26.
- <sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Plett, p. 81.

<sup>68</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, pp. 199-200.

### III. UTOPIA IN RUSSIA:

#### HISTORY AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE RUSSIAN MENNONITES

After months of wearisome journeying and long delays, the first group of 228 Prussian Mennonite families arrived in New Russia only to be informed by Prince Potemkin that they would not be allowed to proceed to Berislav, their planned destination, ostensibly due to the proximity of fighting in the region. Instead they were rerouted to what had formerly been Cossack territory in the province of Ekaterinoslav on the Dnieper river. This came as a bitter disappointment to the Mennonites, however they had no say in the matter. In June 1789 an advance party led by Jacob Hoepfner and Johann Bartsch arrived at the new location, a wide valley where the Chortitza stream flows into the Dnieper. It was not a cheering site. The hilly, rocky, almost treeless land was completely unlike that Mennonites had farmed in Prussia, and the soil was sandy and not as rich as that of the Berislav region previously scouted by Hoepfner and Bartsch. The only buildings on the site were the uninhabitable remains of a ghost village and the ruins of the makeshift palace where Potemkin had fested the Czarina Catherine on her tour through her territories. The Cossacks whose land it had been had been evicted by Catherine and now



there remained only scattered nomadic tribes. Rather than the hoped-for promised land, it appeared a place of exile. The disheartened settlers spent their first night in their new homeland sheltering under an oak.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately for the Mennonites, the change in destinations was not to be their only disappointment. When their baggage arrived they found that much of their precious belongings had been stolen and replaced with rocks, or else spoiled by rain. The lumber promised for their housing had also been reduced en route by pilferage. Theft was a constant problem for the Mennonites, as was government corruption and procrastination. (Zavtra, tomorrow, was the first Russian word the Mennonites learned.) The cold weather soon set in and even those settlers who were unwilling to unpack and accept their lot were obliged to seek shelter, in many cases in hastily erected sod shanties - disastrously muddy in the rain - in others, in tents and wagons. Broth prepared with mouldy rye flour provided by the government was the mainstay of their diet during the harsh winter. Not surprisingly under these conditions, many of the settlers died of dysentery.<sup>2</sup>

Almost as demoralizing as the wretched living conditions, was the spiritual malaise among the settlers who had brought the old Frisian/Flemish division with them from Prussia and who were without a minister. The home Flemish church, to which most of the settlers belonged, designated three emigrants as ministers, but this long distance method of ordination did not meet with the approval of all. The

first communion service was held the following spring in an abandoned building. "Loud were the sobs, it is said, that swept through the audience as the participants in this first communion service were reminded in their present miserable condition of the happy homes they had left behind in the Vistula lowlands."<sup>3</sup>

Under the direction of Hoepfner and Bartsch the Mennonites established eight villages. The settlement was named Chortitza after the stream, and the same name was given to the village which was the center of administration. There were fifteen to thirty families to a village and the land was divided among them in strips so that each family should receive an equal portion of good and bad. The original sod shanties were later replaced by large, comfortable houses of wood or brick which were situated along a wide tree-lined street. The front yard was a flower garden and at the back of the house was a vegetable patch and orchard. The barn and stable were connected to the house so that in inclement weather the owner could move from one to another without going outside.<sup>4</sup>

The early years were fraught with difficulties for the settlers, who had few resources. Most of them were not farmers, and even those who were were unsure of how to farm steppelands. The severe winters, droughts, locust plagues, epidemics and raids by nomads (from whom the Mennonites had to be protected by the government), added to their problems. This meant that in the first years all the efforts of the

colonists were directed towards mere survival. The poverty of the Mennonites and the difficult farming conditions led the chief officer in charge of the colonists, Samuel Kontenius, to predict limited progress for the colonies.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most prosperous of the settlers were the two men who had led the expedition: Hoepfner and Bartsch. They had good homes on choice land and generally fared better than the other Mennonites, which made them targets of the frustration and resentment of those settlers who felt they had been misused. The bitterness was such that both men were excommunicated from the Flemish church to which they belonged and Hoepfner was even denounced to the Russian authorities who imprisoned him for a short time. Bartsch made a confession of his sins and was reinstated in the church, but Hoepfner refused to admit any wrongdoing and became a member, instead, of the Frisian church. When he died he was buried, not in the village cemetery, but on his own land as he had requested.<sup>6</sup>

The death of Catherine in 1796 prompted the Mennonites to send a delegation to St Petersburg to ensure that the privileges accorded them by Catherine would be honored by her son, Paul. The valuable document guaranteeing their rights was secured in 1800 and taken back to the settlement where it was housed in a small building especially constructed for it.<sup>7</sup>

An influx of wealthier Prussian Mennonites between 1793 and 1797 had somewhat alleviated the situation of

the colonists; and now that Mennonite privileges had been confirmed for all time even more Prussian Mennonites came to join their co-religionists, founding a new settlement, Molotschna, one hundred miles southeast of Chortitza. In 1819 the government stopped its colonization program, however two hundred Mennonites were still allowed to enter the country annually "in view of the industriousness and the excellent state of farming prevalent among all the Mennonites in New Russia."<sup>8</sup> Historians differ as to the total number of Prussian Mennonites who entered Russia, a reasonable estimate is 15,000.<sup>9</sup>

The Mennonites usually had large families and the fast increase in population soon created a land shortage. They had been invited to Russia as model farmers and thus their farms had to remain at the size the Russian authorities considered appropriate for a model farm - 175 acres - which meant land could not be divided by inheritance. The result was a large landless class of Mennonites called Anwohner (landless residents) which lived on the edges of the villages. As only landowners could vote in the Mennonite settlements, the Anwohner were at a political as well as economic disadvantage. When the Anwohner petitioned for land, the Wirte, landowners, tried to discredit them as revolutionaries. The church leaders, usually landowners themselves and strong traditionalists, sided with the Wirte. This split generated much misunderstanding and bitterness among the Mennonites until the Russian government instructed

the Mennonite villages to resettle the Anwohner on communal land and permitted the halving, and even quartering, of estates.<sup>10</sup> However this was only a stopgap measure. Recognizing the urgent need for a long term solution, the Chortitza and Molotschna settlements used communal funds to buy large tracts of land on which to resettle the landless. In 1836 the first daughter colony, Bergthal (consisting only of members of the Flemish church in order to avoid conflict between the Flemish and the Frisians), was established, and by 1914 there were forty. (The different perspectives of those who wrote of the commonwealth while living in it and those who wrote of it after its dissolution can be seen in the following example. P.M. Friesen, writing in 1911, says that the land division class war ran its course in the "most wretched fashion",<sup>11</sup> while Gerhard Lohrenz, writing in 1977, holds that it was resolved in a "splendid way".<sup>12</sup>)

The Prussian Mennonites, never having had full citizenship and, in any case, preferring to remain detached from civil affairs, had had limited opportunity to exercise self-government on a large scale.<sup>13</sup> In Russia the Mennonites were expected to administer themselves. After the first years during which both the Russian authorities and the settlers experimented with different methods of administration, a workable system of government was established.<sup>14</sup>

Each village was run by a local assembly, at first

consisting of only the landowners in the village, but after 1870 including the landless Mennonites as well, who had been enfranchised by the Russian government. This assembly ruled by majority vote. At its head was the mayor (Schulze), elected for three years along with two assistants. The mayor had a wide range of duties. He was responsible for enforcing regulations, seeing to the upkeep of community property, settling local disputes, and even checking that the villagers were orderly and industrious and attended church on Sunday. The mayor and his assistants formed the 'court of first instance' which ruled on minor offenses.<sup>15</sup>

A group of five to eighteen villages formed a district, governed by a district assembly made up of village representatives. The district assembly elected a superintendent (Oberschulze) every three years. The role of the superintendent was to oversee the village mayors and decide on matters of common concern to the villages in his district. The superintendent and his assistants formed the 'court of second instance' with the power to impose fines and corporal punishment on offenders. (Capital crimes were tried in the Russian courts.) C. Henry Smith points out that the continued reluctance of the Mennonites to use force on fellow-believers can be seen by the fact that although all other village offices were filled by Mennonites, that of local constable was often given to a Russian.<sup>16</sup>

The Guardianship Committee of the Foreign Colonists in South Russia supervised the Mennonites and other colonists.

The head of this committee, usually a German, advised the colonists on everything from agriculture and self-government to household tasks and social conduct. This advice, while not always followed, was often of considerable value to the Mennonites who were unfamiliar with their new setting and status. In general, as long as the colonists were productive and peaceable, the authorities did not interfere in their internal life. This Guardianship Committee enabled the colonists to bypass much of the bureaucracy which hampered the native Russians.<sup>17</sup>

Russia at that time was a haven for religious dissidents who were persecuted in their own land. Descendants of another group of peaceful Anabaptists, the Hutterite Moravian Brethren, who had endured indescribably barbarous treatment at the hands of both Catholic and Protestant armies during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and later from the marauding Turks, settled near the Mohammedan frontier along the lower Volga in 1764, apparently attracted by the possibility of missionizing among the Tatars.<sup>18</sup> There were also small settlements of Swiss Mennonites in New Russia. Information on the interaction of these groups with the Prussian Mennonites is limited, however they do not appear to have had any significant effect on the commonwealth. In the 1870's nearly all the Hutterites and Swiss Mennonites left Russia.<sup>19</sup>

Within the Mennonite villages themselves there were a few non-Mennonite residents, principally Russians,

Germans and Jews who worked in the community. These, although they could not own land and had none of the rights of the Mennonites, usually maintained good relations with the Mennonites and in some cases were well integrated into village life.<sup>20</sup>

As it had been in Prussia, the church was at the heart of Mennonite community life in Russia. The early Mennonite church in the Netherlands had little formal organization, however in Prussia the Mennonites had developed a structured church system which they continued in Russia. Each congregation, made up of the Mennonite inhabitants of one or more villages, was independent. The Frisian/Flemish division, so strong at first that villages were settled entirely by one faction or the other, was largely overcome by the mid 1800's. New divisions, however, arose at that time which will be treated in the next chapter. In 1850 a Church Council in which elders from all the congregations participated was created in order to deal with matters of common interest. In charge of each congregation were the elder and the ministers who assisted him. These were elected for life by the church members, not only on the basis of their moral qualifications, but also for their financial security which would enable them to carry out their ministerial duties without imposing too much hardship on their families. This combination of religious and economic power made the church leaders the most influential members of the community.<sup>21</sup>



Youths were baptized into the Mennonite faith between the ages of seventeen and twenty after a period of religious instruction. Baptism of all the eligible youths in the congregation took place once a year. While the prohibition on proselytism meant that Mennonitism in Russia could virtually be only hereditary, the integration of church and state in the Mennonite commonwealth made it obligatory, for according to law, to be a member of the Mennonite commonwealth one had to be a member of the Mennonite church, and to be a member of the Mennonite church both one's parents had to be Mennonite.

C. Henry Smith elaborates on this development:

As in the state churches of both pre and post Reformation days, church membership was likely to become confused with the rights of citizenship, for according to their special charter of privileges, the Mennonites in order to enjoy their privileges and exemptions in the empire had to be members of the organization with which the original contract had been made. Church membership, therefore, was essential to the enjoyment of highly desirable civil privileges. Membership thus came to be regarded as a matter of course and was no longer based on actual conversion.<sup>22</sup>

As happened with the church itself, many Mennonite practices of mutual aid became institutionalized and part of the political system of the commonwealth. The land fund was used to buy land for young families who were given ten years to repay their loans. Villages had communal sheep flocks and communal granaries for times of need. The proceeds from communal enterprises such as distilleries and ferries were placed in the common treasury and could be used for social welfare. There was a fire insurance plan

and a trust fund for orphaned minors.

Self-sufficient as it was, the Mennonite commonwealth had been based on the special privileges granted it by Russia, and in 1870, as a result of growing democratization and nationalism in the country, these privileges were abolished. The Mennonite and other colonies were now under the direct control of St. Petersburg, Russian was to be taught in their schools and used as the language of government, and there would be no further military exemption for the Mennonites.

The alarmed Mennonites immediately sent a delegation to St. Petersburg to petition for their rights, however it proved to be of no avail; the government was decided on a program of assimilation. The fact that two of the chief Mennonite delegates could not speak Russian although they had lived in Russia all their lives did not help matters. Emigration appeared the only solution for those Mennonites who wished to retain their identity.

The Russian government, disinclined to lose such prosperous citizens, attempted to make the new regulations more palatable; the Mennonites would still retain a large measure of self-government, and an alternative to military service would be allowed them. The majority of Mennonites remained, however those who found the new terms of life in Russia unacceptable chose to leave. They had a choice of countries in which to re-establish themselves. The British consul in New Russia highly praised the Russian Mennonites

as "a valuable acquisition to any country"<sup>23</sup> and expressed the hope that they choose Canada as their future home. The conditions the Mennonites considered fundamental for the survival of their community can be seen in the guarantees they wished to secure from the Canadian government, primarily religious freedom and military exemption, sufficient moderately priced land of good quality, and the right to have their own local government, run their own schools, and use the German language.<sup>24</sup>

Canada was so eager to secure these renowned model farmers for its underpopulated prairies that it met all of their demands. Eight thousand Mennonites went to Canada, another ten thousand choosing the United States. After an initial period of hardships, those Russian Mennonites who settled in Canada were able to establish a more conservative copy of the prosperous commonwealth in Russia which lasted until an increase in Canadian nationalism caused by the First World War brought an end to their autonomy. At that time the most conservative of the Mennonites left for Mexico and Paraguay.

The depletion of the Mennonite population of Russia by one-third through emigration temporarily eased the pressure for land within the commonwealth. As those who left belonged to the most conservative and absolutist sector, their departure allowed the commonwealth to develop along more flexible lines. At the same time Mennonite institutions were strengthened against the threat of russification,

and the participation of young Mennonites in the forestry service (the alternative to military service) not only required concerted effort on the part of the Mennonites to provide for their financial support, but helped level class differences within the commonwealth. Young men from different Mennonite villages and different economic backgrounds served together in the forestry service where they developed a strong sense of camaraderie.<sup>25</sup>

The quality of life improved notably in the commonwealth in the latter half of the 19th century. Medical service, until then unavailable in rural New Russia, began to be provided in the commonwealth by Mennonite physicians trained in Russian universities. Usually a district would hire a doctor for a year, provide him with instruments, an office and living quarters, and he would then attend to the populace free of charge. The same system was used with the pharmacist.<sup>26</sup>

Mennonite tradition dictated that the orphaned, the sick, the elderly and the handicapped be housed and taken care of by relatives. This often caused significant hardship to the families involved. As the commonwealth grew more established, however, institutions were created to care for such persons. These included hospitals, orphanages, old people's homes, a mental hospital, a school for deaf-mutes, and - in 1911 - a sanitarium. The trust fund for orphans was expanded into a successful bank which gave interest on deposits and lent money at low interest.

A percentage of this interest was used for social welfare.<sup>27</sup>

At the time of settlement there were no schools in that area of the Russian empire. The Mennonites, however, soon developed an extensive school system. At its height the commonwealth encompassed four hundred elementary schools, thirteen high schools, four girls' schools, three business colleges and two teachers' colleges. All of these institutions were paid for and run by Mennonites, however they were also open to non-Mennonites.<sup>28</sup>

These advances in social welfare and education were made possible by the general prosperity of the commonwealth. The Russian Mennonites had more than fulfilled their mandate to create a model farming community. Instrumental in this development was the brilliant Mennonite agriculturalist Johann Cornies (1789-1848) who, as permanent president of the Mennonite Agricultural Association, was able to exert influence on Mennonite farmers to adopt scientific methods of agriculture. His own estate of 25,000 acres was considered a showplace and was visited by Alexander I and Alexander II. Such was his power that his co-religionists referred to him as the 'Mennonite czar'.

The Russian Mennonites, however, were not dependent on any one strong leader, and in fact resisted developments which would place too much power in the hands of one person. As Frank H. Epp comments, "Cornies was as much a child of Mennonite agricultural genius as the father of it, and the commonwealth would have prospered without him."<sup>29</sup>

While Cornies' abilities were exceptional, he was not the only Mennonite to own an estate. During their stay in Russia the Mennonites had accumulated so much wealth that many were virtually landed nobility with enormous estates on land bought by them apart from the Mennonite villages. The number of estates in the commonwealth totalled 384, the largest one comprising 50,000 acres.<sup>30</sup>

Industry played a large part in this accumulation of wealth. The first and most important industries established in the commonwealth, mills and farm machinery factories, were related to agriculture. Some of the farm machinery factories produced as many as 15,000 mowers and 10,000 plows a year. In the two original settlements of Chortitza and Molotschna there were a hundred stores, one hundred and eighty flour mills, twenty-six factories and thirty-eight brick yards. With industry came a need for improved methods of transportation and, despite initial opposition from farmers through whose lands the tracks ran, a railroad was built connecting the major towns of the Chortitza settlement.<sup>31</sup>

All this time the commonwealth was expanding with settlements along the Volga in the province of Samara, and reaching all the way into Siberia and Turkestan. In all there were forty-five colonies with an average of ten villages each in which lived approximately 110,000 Mennonites in 1914.<sup>32</sup>

During the Crimean war in the 1850's the Mennonites

had contributed food to the army and nursed wounded soldiers. During the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905) they worked diligently in the medical service and gave substantial support to the families of Russian soldiers. Nonetheless, all of their efforts to prove themselves loyal Russian citizens could not prevail against the growing tide of anti-Germanism in Russia caused by increasing Prussian militarism. The First World War brought the matter to a head. In 1914 the use of German in the press or in public assembly was prohibited, and in the Mennonite and German schools in Russia all subjects now had to be taught in Russian, except for Religion and the German language. In 1915 a property liquidation law was passed which required all colonists of German descent to sell their lands. Before the slow-working Russian bureaucracy could put these laws into effect, however, the Revolution came.

The democratic government installed after the Revolution of 1917 gave the Mennonites a brief respite. Although they governed themselves along democratic principles, the Mennonites had not previously been in favour of democracy which seemed dangerously innovative and apt to take away their privileges entirely. C. Henry Smith notes that, "strange as it may seem, the special privileges of a minority frequently fare better under an autocracy than in a democracy."<sup>33</sup> However the Mennonites realized that they had to adjust themselves to the new situation and an All Mennonite Congress was formed to represent Mennonite

interests to the new government. During the meetings of this congress held in August of 1917 the issues of the day were debated with great earnestness by the Mennonite delegates. The question was brought up as to whether Christianity was allied to any particular economic order, and whether socialism was more Christian than capitalism. In the end it was decided to recommend the creation of a state land bank to distribute land to the homeless.<sup>34</sup>

While the majority of Mennonites, therefore, might have limited their interest to what concerned the commonwealth, their leaders at least were apprised of the current political and economic situation in the country.

In November of 1917 the Bolsheviks took power and all hopes for a liberal democratic regime were crushed. The Bolsheviks ruled by decree, and one of the first allowed land and livestock to be transferred to peasant land committees without any compensation to the owners. Stunned by the sudden changes, Russia immediately became embroiled in a civil war; the White army consisting of those opposed to the new regime, be they aristocrats, church leaders, or republicans; and the Red army, of communists.

This was the start of a period of terror for the Mennonites, who had worked hard and long to establish their own 'commonwealth' and achieve a standard of living well above that of the surrounding communities, and now found that their very affluence made them an attractive target for all factions. Local soviets (councils) of



Russian workers were in control of the Mennonite settlements and they took advantage of their power to rob, imprison, and even murder Mennonites. When one Mennonite, David J. Dick, was imprisoned, his friends gathered seven thousand signatures from among the neighboring Russians requesting his release. Nonetheless, as was often the case for Mennonites in those years, Dick escaped from one danger only to fall prey to another: in 1919 he and his wife were killed by bandits.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1918 the German army had occupied the region and expelled the soviets. The occupation lasted less than a year but it made a deep impression on the Mennonites. Technically, the Germans were their enemies, and yet they shared their language, freed them from the oppression of the Bolsheviks, and gave them back many of their rights.<sup>36</sup>

When the Germans left the Mennonites were once again on their own. The war between the Reds and the Whites became centered in the South of the former Russian empire where nationalism was very strong. In some Mennonite areas the front shifted back and forth as many as twenty-three times. The complete breakdown of law and order made the commonwealth fair game for roving bands of robbers. The most notorious band was led by Nestor Makhno, a former cowherd for the Mennonites. Under a black flag displaying the legend "anarchy is the mother of all order," Makhno and his followers devastated the Mennonite villages.

In the Mennonite village of Eichenfield eighty-five people were murdered in one night. Other villages suffered similar losses. The homes of the Mennonites were plundered of all their belongings, from farm animals, to silverware, to clothes. Frank H. Epp notes that "farmers were fortunate if they had a horse and a manure wagon with which to take the bodies to the cemetery."<sup>37</sup> Women and girls were attacked en masse by the bandits resulting in an epidemic of venereal diseases.<sup>38</sup> The litany of horrors did not end there, Epp continues:

A plague of typhoid fever followed the terror of the bands. The men of Makhno frequently occupied the beds of the villagers. Since most of their sheets had been stolen very unsanitary conditions prevailed. The disease spread like fire. In Village Rosenthal with 1,346 inhabitants, 1,183 were sick...<sup>39</sup>

The Mennonites felt all the more helpless because, in accordance with their faith, they could offer no resistance to the marauders. Some of the young Mennonites, who had been influenced by the German forces, found this too heavy a cross to bear. They joined forces with men from the German colonies to form a self-defense unit called the Selbschutz to protect their homes and families. Despite their well-organized efforts and initial victories, however, they were overcome by the superior numbers of their adversaries. Those Mennonites who had belonged to the Selbschutz had to go underground to save their lives.<sup>40</sup>

By the end of 1920 the Red army was in virtual control of New Russia, which was now known as the Ukraine. Now came two years of severe drought and famine, to which

the ravages of war had made the Ukraine particularly susceptible. But for aid from Dutch and American Mennonites, an estimated 10,000 Russian Mennonites would have starved.<sup>41</sup> Feeding kitchens were set up in Mennonite villages by American Mennonite Relief workers and at the height of the famine in August of 1922 they issued 40,000 rations of food daily, not only to Mennonites, but to all the hungry within the area.

The American Mennonite Relief also distributed much needed clothing and sent some fifty Ford tractors to the Russian Mennonites to replace the horses which had been taken during the war. In spite of their attempts at recovery, however, most of the Russian Mennonites desired to emigrate. In 1920 a Mennonite Study Commission went to investigate possible mass resettlement in another country. As a result of the work of this commission, between 1922 and 1930 thousands of Russian Mennonites emigrated to Canada and South America; yet they represented only a small part of those who wished to leave. The Communists, aware of the adverse publicity they were receiving as a result of these refugee movements made up of supposedly content citizens, made emigration increasingly difficult and finally almost impossible. Police rounded up the Mennonites who had left their homes and gone to Moscow in the hope of receiving permission to leave and sent them in freight cars to Siberia, often separating family members in the process, where they were resettled.<sup>42</sup>

In 1925 those Mennonites who remained in Russia made a last concerted attempt to retain their most essential rights: freedom of worship, religious instruction, and military exemption. However the absolute nature of the Communist ideology could make no allowance for divergent viewpoints. One Mennonite writes of the Communists: "We could have been friends with them only if we had surrendered to their ideology absolutely and unconditionally."<sup>43</sup> The Mennonite churches were converted into stables, theaters and storehouses, atheism was taught in all the schools, and children were encouraged to denounce their parents if they instructed them in religion.<sup>44</sup>

The Mennonites no longer had any control over their settlements and many of them, branded as 'kulaks' - landowners and counterrevolutionaries - were exiled to Siberia. (Out of 12,000 Mennonites remaining in the Chortitza settlement, 1,500, mostly men, were exiled from 1929-1940.<sup>45</sup>) In 1932 and 33 there was another severe famine and once again Mennonite aid from other countries saved the Russian Mennonites from starving.

All military exemption was abolished in 1936 and when the Second World War started eligible Mennonites were drafted into the Russian army. At the same time the Soviet government embarked on a plan of mass evacuation and resettlement in Siberia of all colonists of German descent in the Ukraine. The Chortitza settlement, more fortunate than the others, lost only 1,300 inhabitants in this way before

the German army took over the region in 1941.

The Germans were welcomed as liberators, not only by the German speaking population, but by large anti-Communist sectors of the Ukrainians. However, the German army's harsh treatment of all Slavic peoples, whom they regarded as Untermensch (inferior people), soon turned the populace against them. The Mennonites were comparatively well-treated by the Germans as Volksdeutsche (ethnic Germans), and after their many trials with the Soviets it was natural that they should feel allied to those whom they saw as their rescuers. Most of the young Mennonite men who were left in the settlements were recruited into the German army, usually not unwillingly. Those who met the requirements were automatically designated for Waffen SS service. Some of these Mennonites had previously been drafted into the Soviet army and now fought with the Germans against the Soviets.<sup>46</sup>

In 1943 the German army retreated to German territory taking the German speaking peoples of the Ukraine with them. The Chortitza settlement was evacuated by train, however those Mennonites who remained in the Molotschna settlement had to make the long trek by wagon under fearsome conditions. The refugees were mostly woman, children and the elderly. Due to the below freezing temperatures, the scarcity of food, and the constant enemy fire from both the air and the ground, many of them died en route.<sup>47</sup>

The total number of Mennonite evacuees is estimated

to be 35,000.<sup>48</sup> When the war ended approximately 20,000 of these were forcibly repatriated by the victorious Soviets (with the consent of the other Allies forces), not to the Ukraine, but to Siberia. The fate of most of these Mennonites is unknown. Those Mennonites who were discovered by the Soviets to have fought with the Germans were treated mercilessly. The remaining fraction of the Mennonite refugees from Russia were resettled with aid from Mennonite organizations and communities, in various countries where they had to start over again from the bottom. The Mennonite commonwealth in Russia had come to an end.<sup>49</sup>

The Mennonites came to Russia to occupy the territories the Russians had annexed by force, and they left Russia when their lands and rights were taken away by force. While there, they were granted exceptional freedom to develop a society of their choosing, yet this society always depended on, and was to some extent formed by, external conditions. The supervisory committee appointed by the Russian government aided and instructed the Mennonite settlers with "benevolent paternalism"<sup>50</sup> and directed them to solve their problems of internal strife and discipline. When it was necessary to hire constables to guard the prosperous Mennonite villages, the Mennonites, adverse to the occupation, could hire Russians to perform the duty. Indeed, the very existence of the Mennonite commonwealth depended on the maintenance of law and order by the Russian

government. When that government collapsed, the commonwealth was left utterly helpless.

The commonwealth's exclusivity was the result of both external and internal factors. On the one hand Russia forbade the Mennonites to convert Russians, made Mennonite privileges contingent on membership in the Mennonite church, and expected Mennonites to create a separate, model, self-sufficient farming community; and on the other hand the Mennonites wished to keep to themselves and establish their own society. The Russians treated the Mennonites as a corporate body and the Mennonites responded as one, creating institutions to administer themselves and represent their interests to the government. In this situation it was inevitable that the church would become involved in secular matters. 51

E.K. Francis says of this development:

It seems that at the moment when the Mennonite utopia, the community of the saints and saved, lay within reach of realization, it became secularized and void of its spiritual content, a commonwealth of ordinary people with the ambitions and motivations of sinners and the fallen nature of man. 52

However, the ideal of a "community of the saints and saved" was none other than that of the spiritual Kingdom of God, displaced in Russia by a utopian ideal dependent on worldly conditions. The Mennonite commonwealth, by its very secular and temporal nature, could never be the Kingdom of God of Mennonite theology, and as soon as the Mennonites entered Russia and dedicated themselves to

establishing a Mennonite commonwealth they committed themselves to worldly objectives and a worldly way of life.

The Mennonites had come to Russia with little more than their own traditions and ability, and using the means at their disposal had established a remarkably affluent and well-organized state within a state. Despite the problems of settlement and internal and external tensions, and probably partly because of the drive to move forward these difficulties gave them, the Mennonites in Russia were able to establish a comprehensive and democratic system of government and outstanding social institutions which made the commonwealth at its height utopian for its time and place, even compared to the leading nations of the world. Although many of the tragedies which befell the Mennonites after the Russian Revolution - war, famine, etc. - had a greater physical effect on the Russian populace, the fact that the Mennonites had gone so far in creating an ideal community to shelter, nourish and motivate them, made the total destruction of their commonwealth by forces beyond their control all the more devastating for them.



## NOTES: CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, pp. 389-390.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 390-391

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 391.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 403.

<sup>5</sup>Kroeker, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 42-46.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 20

<sup>8</sup>Harold J. Schultz, "Search for Utopia: The Exodus of Russian Mennonites to Canada, 1917-1927", A Journal of Church and State, XI (Autumn, 1969), p. 488.

<sup>9</sup>E.K. Francis, In Search of Utopia, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, pp. 396, 409-411.

<sup>11</sup>p.M. Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia: 1789-1910, trans. and ed. by J.B. Toews et al., (Winnipeg, Man.: Christian Press, 1978, originally published in Halbstadt, Russia: Raduga, 1911), p. 123.

<sup>12</sup>Gerhard Lorenz, Heritage Remembered: A Pictorial Survey of the Mennonites in Prussia and Russia, 2d ed., rev. and enl., (Winnipeg, Man.: CMBC Publications, 1977), p. 43.

<sup>13</sup>Kroeker, p. 38.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 37

<sup>15</sup>William Schroeder, The Bergthal Colony, (Winnipeg, Man.: CMBC Publications, 1974), pp. 18-19.

<sup>16</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 422.

<sup>17</sup>Kroeker, pp. 37-38.

<sup>18</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, pp. 368-369, 385.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 402-403.

<sup>20</sup>Kroeker, pp. 61-64.

<sup>21</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 420.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 421.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 445.

<sup>24</sup>C. Henry Smith, The Coming of the Russian Mennonites: An Episode in the Settling of the Last Frontier, 1874-1884, (Berne, Ind.: Mennonite Book Concern, 1927), p. 58.

<sup>25</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 463.

<sup>26</sup>Lohrenz, Heritage Remembered, p. 123.

<sup>27</sup>Kroeker, pp. 116-118.

<sup>28</sup>Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920, p. 334.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>30</sup>Frank H. Epp, Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution, (Altona, Man.: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1962), p. 19.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 17, Kroeker, p. 186.

<sup>32</sup>Epp, Mennonite Exodus, p. 18, Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 403

- 33 Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 482.
- 34 Frank H. Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), p. 143.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., p. 33.
- 37 Ibid., p. 36.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid., p. 37.
- 40 Ibid., pp. 35-36.
- 41 Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, pp. 487-494.
- 42 Ibid., pp. 511-513.
- 43 Lohrenz, Heritage Remembered, p. 44
- 44 Gerhard Lohrenz, The Lost Generation and Other Stories, (Steinbach, Man.: By the Author, 1982), p. 6.
- 45 Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 519.
- 46 Epp, Mennonité Exodus, pp. 356-362.
- 47 Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 522.
- 48 Ibid., p. 524.
- 49 Ibid., pp. 524-526.
- 50 E.K. Francis, In Search of Utopia, p. 21.
- 51 Ibid., p. 26.
- 52 Ibid., pp. 23-24.

#### IV. UTOPIA IN RUSSIA:

##### CULTURE AND RELIGION OF THE RUSSIAN MENNONITES

While sharing the same traditions, the Mennonite settlers in New Russia were not a homogenous group for they belonged to two different churches, the Frisian and the Flemish, and they came from different areas of Prussia. Quarrelling among the emigrants had marked the journey to Russia; and when the Russian promised land turned out to be a wasteland, this quarrelling grew so vindictive as to threaten the founding of a Mennonite colony in Russia. The rebelliousness of the colonists, along with the strangeness of the environment and the harshness of pioneer life, seemed to require a strict conservatism in order to maintain Mennonite values and cohesion and establish a 'pure society' in the Russian wilderness.

An example of this conservatism can be seen in the case of Johann Bartsch, one of the leaders of the expedition. He and his family were ordered by church officials to give up their cherished instruments because "musical performances, even within the family circle, were tantamount to flirting with evil forces."<sup>1</sup>

The first concern of the Mennonites, however, was not developing an ideal religious or social life, but satisfying

their most pressing material needs. While the difficulties of life in Russia brought to the fore some of the negative traits of the Mennonites, it also brought out those qualities which had enabled them to prosper in the Netherlands and Prussia: self-reliance, determination, industry, thrift, ingenuity and a love of order. The Mennonites had been invited to Russia to establish a model farming community and they had every intention of doing so insofar as it was possible under the circumstances. That they achieved their goal in such a short time, despite the fact that most of them were not farmers, speaks of their dedication.

Already in 1821 agents of the British and Foreign Bible Society were calling the Mennonite settlements in Russia "a light in a dark place" and praising the Mennonites for their industry and the prosperity of their villages,<sup>2</sup> while the Russian government, according to one official, "convinced of the surprisingly quick success of Mennonite economy took their institutions, up to a certain degree, as a model for the organization of the majority of the other colonies of foreigners in the Ukraine."<sup>3</sup>

The same Russian official details the achievements of the Mennonites:

The Mennonites very quickly (notwithstanding the fear expressed by Contenius) rose to a level of prosperity and organization hitherto unknown among us. As though by magic one village after another arose on the steppes where earlier neither water nor shrub, not to speak of trees, had been common; plenty of wholesome well-water could be found while groves of fruit, shade and mulberry trees soon grew in abundance; lush, well-cared-for meadows, large herds of sheep, cattle and horses, all of the best breeds, were plentiful.<sup>4</sup>

The Mennonite settlements had become prize exhibits of the Russian government, extensively studied and commented on by Russian and foreign experts and visitors, and the Mennonites were aware and proud of the fact. The emphasis on worldly success led to an increased materialism among the Mennonites, who were able to give full rein to their aspirations in this regard without any of the restrictions which had hampered them in Prussia. This materialism manifested itself primarily in the acquisition of land and livestock, as houses and clothes tended to follow a more or less set pattern imported from Prussia and adapted to the Russian environment.

The landless, who found themselves not only without a good source of income but without status in the community, appealed to the Church for social justice. One such petition reads:

We beg the honorable members of the Kirchen Konvent [Church Council], as stewards, to provide for our needs since we are members of one body (I Cor. 12:26) and members of God's household (I Tim 5:8)... 5

The church elders, mostly landowners themselves, felt this to be impermissible interference in God's design for the commonwealth and upheld the interests of the landowners against the landless. A definite contrast to the dynamic, otherworldly, non-conforming church of the 16th century.

The fact was that, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, ecclesiastical and civil interests were virtually inseparable from the start of the commonwealth. Originally the Mennonite church had assumed that its members

would be drawn from the society at large, into which they would remain politically, culturally and economically integrated, and to which they could return if they left the brotherhood.<sup>6</sup> In sparsely populated New Russia, the Mennonites were both church and society, and as exclusion from the church meant exclusion from society, baptism became routine and excommunication rare. The mutual interpenetration of religious and secular systems resulted in a Mennonite church that was established and territorial. Frank H. Epp notes that "the development, to the extent that it was noticed, was not necessarily considered to be a negative phenomenon. On the contrary, was it not the goal of the church to incorporate all of humanity into the community of God?"<sup>7</sup> The Mennonites in Russia had adopted the rationale of the state churches they had once opposed to justify the establishment of their own church.

Together with prosperity, expansion and the establishment of the church, came a loosening of moral restrictions. The church, no longer threatened and persecuted, did not need to enforce extraordinarily high moral standards to justify its existence and maintain cohesion - nor could it if it wished to embrace all of society - and the Mennonites, no longer struggling for survival, could afford to indulge in some worldly pleasures.

Not all of the Mennonites, some of whom had come to Russia to avoid the growing secularization of Mennonitism in Prussia, were in accordance with these developments.

One who objected early on was Klaas Reimer, a highly idealistic young minister who, after careful study of the Bible, the writings of Menno Simons and the Martyrs' Mirror, came to the conclusion that the church had departed from New Testament ideals. Proof of this, in his view, was the merging of ecclesiastical and civil interests, the formality of worship services, moral laxity as witnessed by ostentation, avarice, gambling, drinking, smoking, dancing, masquerades and bawdy songs; contributions to the Russian war effort against Napoleon, and particularly the use of physical coercion to enforce regulations.<sup>8</sup>

Not only did Reimer's attempts to reform the church go unheeded, he and his followers were threatened with exile by the church leaders who were outraged at this questioning of their authority. In 1814 Reimer founded his own church, which, despite objections from the old church, achieved recognition from the Russian government as a Mennonite church. Reimer's church never attracted a large following among the Russian Mennonites who saw it as too reactionary and isolationist, and it was known as the Kleine Gemeinde, small church, which disturbed its members not at all as they believed that the true Church must always be small.

Thus the Mennonite church in Russia, in the process of overcoming the Frisian/Flemish rift, was split in another direction. Nor did the Kleine Gemeinde escape the ravages of the 'Anabaptist disease'; after years of internal division it eventually split into two groups.



Along with his other objections, Klaas Reimer had denounced the leaning towards Pietism of some Mennonite ministers. Pietism, particularly the writings of Jung-Stilling, had been very influential among the Prussian Mennonites in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Heimweh or "Homesickness", Jung-Stilling's best known work, recounts the protagonist's pilgrimage through Europe, a pilgrimage which Victor G. Doerksen has described as follows:

En route he [the protagonist] is subjected to many tests and trials, but these are mainly intellectual and spiritual, reflected in endless conversations which can be as trying for the reader as for the hero. Not much attention is paid to his physical or emotional needs; it is assumed that they are "looked after" by the providence which leads him to his goal. At Solyma, finally, a small state is established which, despite its heavenly inspiration, resembles nothing so much as one of the petty German dukedoms of the period.<sup>9</sup>

This work was very popular among the Russian Mennonites who could identify with the hero's search for, and eventual attainment of, a divinely sanctioned homeland, and, their own physical troubles behind them, with his spiritual and intellectual trials. As well, it encouraged them to think of their situation in Russia as predestined and based on God's will, and therefore not only justified, but immutable.

Millennialism was an important ingredient in Jung-Stilling's writings, and his proclamation that the Kingdom of God would be inaugurated in the East in the 1830's prompted thousands of Germans, among them some Mennonites,

to emigrate to Russia where they hoped to escape the coming tribulations and partake of the thousand-year earthly Kingdom. (Ironically, the tribulations and kingdom which awaited the descendents of these millennialists were the Revolution and Communism.) Some of the Russian Mennonites adopted this teaching enthusiastically and the whole community was affected by it to some extent.<sup>10</sup>

How had millennialism, so firmly rejected by Menno Simons, come to achieve popularity among the Mennonites? The fact was that the Muenster episode, so traumatic in its day, was too distant to serve as a deterrent to millennialism. Now that the world was no longer hostile to the Mennonites, the theology of two opposing kingdoms, that of the church and that of the world, seemed to lack validity; and now that the Mennonites were no longer suffering and persecuted, discipleship, following Christ in his Passion, lacked appeal.

In many ways Pietism was more suited to the situation of the Mennonites in Russia than traditional Mennonitism which, after all, had developed in response to a peculiar historical situation. Where Mennonitism emphasized suffering and the 'bitter' Christ, Pietism emphasized joy and the 'sweet' Christ; the Pietist stress on the importance of the individual allowed for the seeking of one's personal fortune in a way community-oriented Mennonitism did not; and Kingdom ethics - to be practiced here and now according to Mennonite theology - was comfortably post-

poned by the Pietists until the advent of the Kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup>

The millennialism preached by the radical Pietists no longer seemed so fantastical to many Mennonites now that they had their own 'earthly kingdom'. Rather, it could very well seem that through their own very successful efforts, they were working towards its inauguration. The fact was that the Mennonites had never fully established in their theology how one could live 'in the world' and not be 'of the world', nor had they allowed for the necessity of civil as well as religious functions within the community of believers. Of course the early Mennonites, outlawed and intensely persecuted as they were, never conceived of the possibility of one day virtually controlling their own state. According to their theology political offices, with their ensuing threat of moral corruption, were to be held by unbelievers - of which there would always be plenty. The Russian Mennonites as a group did not become millennialist, but they used millennialism to reinforce the worldliness which was increasingly important to them but which their own religion did not provide for.

The influence of millennialism on Russian Mennonitism must also be seen as the result of a certain naiveté on the part of the Mennonites who had forgotten the lessons of the past and were eager for a different and exciting religious vision. Over the centuries Mennonitism had become static and formalized; Pietism was a dynamic, popular

new movement with enough points in common with Mennonitism to make it accessible to the Mennonites.

Those Russian Mennonites who were most influenced by Pietism broke away from the main church and founded the Mennonite Brethren Church which advocated a return to the teachings of Menno Simons as interpreted in the light of Pietism, particularly stressing the importance of a personal conversion experience and the emotional expression of religion. While never attracting a major segment of the Russian Mennonites, the Mennonite Brethren Church produced several influential leaders and was the second most important church in the commonwealth.<sup>12</sup>

Other, less important, breakaway movements included the Jerusalem Friends who planned to build a new temple in Jerusalem, and the Peters Brethren who were strict New Testament literalists.

All of these new movements were vigorously opposed by the Mennonite establishment which subjected the seceders to harassment ranging from threats of banishment to imprisonment. This although none of the dissenting groups disavowed the basic principles of Mennonitism. It was despite the objections of Mennonite leaders that the breakaway movements were recognized by St. Petersburg as lawful Mennonite churches and allowed full rights in the commonwealth.

From this it would appear that the early Mennonite ideal of religious toleration and voluntary religious

association had been discarded. Of course, dissension within the church had never been well tolerated by the Mennonites, and the freedom of worship granted them by the Russian government pertained to them as a corporate body, not as individuals.<sup>13</sup> What the Mennonite church in Russia denied was not the right of dissenters to form their own sects, but their right to call themselves Mennonites and thus partake of the privileges granted to such.

However, the Mennonite church in Russia was virtually an enclave within a foreign country and 'Mennonite' was a political as well as religious designation. Therefore, the attempt of the Mennonite establishment to ban the dissenters from the commonwealth because of their unorthodoxy and disruptive influence, was not unlike the response of Church and State to the Anabaptists in the 16th century.

The multiplication of internal divisions within the commonwealth was in large part due to the lack of external threats. In 1870, however, the withdrawal of the Privilegium forced the Mennonites to turn their attention to the outside world. What most concerned the Mennonites was the loss of their military exemption. The Russian government, which knew that the Mennonites in Prussia and the Netherlands had already given up their non-resistant stance, could not understand why Mennonites in Russia should be so intractable. A member of the commission responsible for the new conscription law asked one of the Mennonite delegates how he would defend himself in the case of an attack. The

delegate responded that he would reach out his hand and embrace the attacker, which reply greatly amused the official who was well acquainted with the inability of the Mennonites to practice this principle of brotherly love with each other.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, a non-combative alternative to military service was provided for, which satisfied most Mennonites.

The other major concern of the Mennonites was the impact of russification on their community. A census of 1879 shows that less than one percent of the Mennonites in Russia spoke Russian as a first language,<sup>15</sup> and many scarcely knew any Russian at all. Some of the Mennonites feared that learning Russian would lead to a loss of Mennonite identity. One Mennonite leader stated that "those of our young people who enter Russian highschools are lost",<sup>16</sup> while another countered that, "our American brethren confess that it is much more difficult to keep their young people in the congregations than in Russia.... The number of those who have left the Mennonite faith while studying at Russian schools.... is very small"<sup>17</sup>

The Mennonites who remained in Russia felt that those who left were unrealistic absolutists. The Mennonite missionary Heinrich Dirks wrote from Sumatra concerning the matter that "those who advise too much to emigrate, positively do not know the world, neither the character of this present time, otherwise they must know that that from which they propose to escape will overtake them wherever in this wide world they choose to settle".<sup>18</sup> Another

Russian Mennonite characterized the emigrants as "forever dissatisfied and forever seeking an Eldorado which would eternally satisfy all their desires."<sup>19</sup>

Most of the departing Mennonites went to North America, but a small group chose to migrate east to Turkestan instead. Some of these were influenced in their move by millennialism, for Claaz Epp, a Mennonite minister, had come to the conclusion after interpreting biblical prophecies that the Second Coming would take place in the East in 1889. In 1880 the group of pilgrims set out singing:

Our journey is through the wilderness to the promised Canaan.

However, their journey would be closer to the reverse of that mentioned in the popular hymn. Their new place of settlement proved to be an insect infested swamp where the Mennonites were not only prey to disease but also to raids by the local natives who entered their houses and took whatever they wanted, including, in some cases, some of the young Mennonite women. The young Mennonite men asked their leaders to allow them to arm themselves against the raiders, but these permitted only the use of clubs - no match against the swords and guns of the raiders. Finally the settlers had to move to another site where they would be protected by the local government.<sup>20</sup>

In the meantime, Epp's fanaticism had increased. A fellow minister who had been excommunicated by him was called the 'Red Dragon' and his expulsion was commemorated

annually by the congregation. Other unorthodox holidays came to replace the traditional ones. When the expected date for the Second Coming came and went, a new date was set. Epp now claimed that he was the son of Christ and insisted on the use of the formula, Father, Sons and the Holy Ghost. However, by this time most of his disillusioned followers had left him, as eventually did all. These gave up millennialism and settled down into a fairly stable congregation.<sup>21</sup>

The withdrawal of the Privilegium and the emigration movement, which at first had seemed to signal the end of the commonwealth, had, in fact, had positive consequences for the commonwealth. Overpopulation was eased, the commonwealth was freed from absolutist and extremist elements, and the Mennonites were united in a common cause. The conference of congregations created in 1863 to work together in areas of general concern had as its motto: "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things love."<sup>22</sup>

In 1889 the Russian Mennonites celebrated the centennial of their arrival in Russia. A monument was raised to commemorate the occasion, and monuments were also erected in honor of Hoepfner and Bartsch as leaders of the first expedition. The giant oak under which the disillusioned first settlers had taken shelter, called the Hundred Year Oak, was now a beloved symbol of endurance



to the Russian Mennonites. The first miserable villages had been replaced by a flourishing commonwealth which had come to seem almost a part of the natural landscape to the Mennonites, appearing, in the words of one, "as if it had been deposited there by the calm Dnieper waters."<sup>23</sup> The landscape itself, which had seemed so hopelessly bleak to the first settlers, was now seen by the Mennonites as abundant in natural beauties, enhanced by their own efforts at forestation.

The following examples, written after the dissolution of the commonwealth, are typical of the feeling the Russian Mennonites had for their land.

It was Sunday and the wide Main Street of Rosental lay deserted in the summer heat. A festive mood had spread throughout the countryside and tranquility had descended on the homes and gardens. The warm air created a shimmering effect against the backdrop of the distant woods; the warm, fragrant smell of the soil from the wide, unending steppes drifted down into the village like a vitalizing stimulant. The arms of God, the Almighty, were spread over the landscape laden with heavy harvest treasure manifested in the lush Dnieper hills and deep valleys of roses. Blessings surrounded us.<sup>24</sup>

The next excerpt deals with Koloniesgarten, a sheltered valley enjoyed by the Mennonites as a park.

Leisurely winding paths led the wanderer between big oaks and stately poplars, dozens of different varieties of flowers and hosts of birds singing overhead, nightingales singing early and late. It was so much fun to hunt for sweet smelling violets along the small stream "Kantserkaia", gather acorns for playing all the way down into the valley. The bright red roofs of the houses below showed the contrast against the deep green foliage around creating a magic setting.<sup>25</sup>

A century of shared traditions and experiences had transformed the Russian Mennonites into a distinct ethnic group.<sup>26</sup> As the Mennonites in Russia were a closed community, marrying only amongst themselves, the commonwealth came to be like an extended family. Certain family names were so common, just forty names accounting for the majority of the group, that an individual's last name was often prefaced by his occupation, place of residence, or some other personal characteristic in order to distinguish him from all the other Epps or Penners or Friesens.

Paradoxically, the very homogeneity of the Mennonites tended to accentuate their differences. When so much of what they did and had was similar, a minor difference, such as whether the minister stood while he preached, as he did in the Frisian church, or sat, as he did in the Flemish church, could appear insurmountable.

From the history of their divisions, one might well come to the conclusion that the Mennonites were a dour, self-righteous people whose chief social activity and diversion was bickering. In fact, however, the Mennonites in Russia had a lively sense of humour about themselves. Humorous nicknames, for instance, were very common among the Mennonites, not only for people (one sixty-two year-old man who married an eighteen year-old was known as actien twe en zastig, "1862"<sup>27</sup>), but also for villages and objects of everyday life. There was much rivalry among the villages in the commonwealth, particularly between those of Chortitza

and Molotschna, which often expressed itself through humour. A Mennonite from Molotschna, who later settled in Chortitza, recalls how, tired of the continual jibes of the Chortitzans, he finally thought of the perfect rejoinder: On the way to founding the Molotschna settlement, the new settlers stopped over in the old colony of Chortitza. While there, one of the Chortitzans stole a wheelbarrow from them and in this way the thief, and eventually all the inhabitants of Chortitza, learned to walk upright.<sup>28</sup>

Later on humour would also be used to ease the tension caused by the violation of Mennonite principles. In a skit written by the Russian Mennonite humorist, Arnold Dyck, a Russian Mennonite (Bergen) explains to an astonished Canadian Mennonite (Bua) how he could have taken up arms during the Revolution:

Bergen: Well a rifle's a funny sort of thing. Once you've got it in your hands it goes off suddenly without you having to think about it much.

Bua: And you actually shot at people?

Bergen: At people? Not on your life. I shot in the air.

Bua: In the air? What good did that do?

Bergen: Oh, it helped all right, in an odd sort of way. It made a nice bang, and of course I didn't shoot very high in the air - only about so high (he indicates a height of about four feet). Now it may have happened that some of that Red riff-raff collided with a bullet once in a while, or stood in the way of one. But I always made a point of firing in the air.<sup>29</sup>

These examples show how the Russian Mennonites used humour to counteract pretentiousness and diffuse tensions, and also illustrate the playfulness which, according to Plattel,<sup>30</sup> is essential to the utopian mood.

The most important means the Russian Mennonites had of overcoming divisions and maintaining cohesion within the group, was the practice of mutual aid, not only a religious principle, but an engrained way of life. The importance of this practice to the Russian Mennonites is set forth by Harold S. Bender and J. Winfred Fretz as follows:

The ideals and principles of working together for the common welfare of all became the accepted way of doing things. To carry on activities on a selfish, extremely individualistic basis without thought of the effect on others would have been considered a gross sin, causing one to be avoided by his fellow men. This would have been the severest punishment for anyone in a small village where fellowship and companionship were the very basis of happiness.<sup>31</sup>

This applied to all members of the Mennonite community. Thus the estate owners, who lived apart from the villages and were certainly wealthy enough to be independent, were chief contributors to Mennonite charitable and educational projects.<sup>32</sup>

Avoidance, or shunning, was a very effective means of social control. Delinquency was rare among the Mennonites, however the following example shows how one such incident was dealt with:

When two Mennonite men ran off without paying a Russian peasant for driving them from the train station to their village an anonymous letter appeared in the Botschafter [a Mennonite newspaper]. Their names would be published, it warned, if they refused to make retribution.<sup>33</sup>

Far better to make good the offense than suffer social disgrace.

Social life in the commonwealth was centered on the family. Visiting relatives, in fact, took up a large portion of the Russian Mennonites' leisure time. Favoured social activities were weddings - often involving a whole village - picnics and excursions. Young people formed themselves into theater groups, which presented German plays and gave poetry recitals, and choirs. These last were especially popular among the Russian Mennonites who had songs for every occasion and used choir singing to teach cooperation. Harmonious singing was symbolic of the harmony which should reign in the Church. In the words of a Russian Mennonite minister:

The Mennonites would sing so sublimely that all hearts would soften to the blessed joy in Christ and even the angels in heaven would join in praising and honoring God... To the extent to which harmonious singing in our church was lost, to the same extent our fathers lost their holy way of life.<sup>34</sup>

String and brass bands, as well as choirs, were widespread in the commonwealth, for to play a musical instrument was no longer considered tantamount to flirting with the devil, but admired as a valuable social grace.

The easing of moral and cultural restrictions objected to by Klaas Reimer at the start of the 19th century was even more pronounced at the close. Men shaved, women reduced their traditional bonnets to a symbolic ribbon; and while the Mennonites were not fashion innovators, neither did they stay far behind the trends. Some of the Mennonites were extremely wealthy and adopted corresponding lifestyles: mansions, servants (most Mennonite households, in fact, had

at least one servant, usually Russian), trips abroad, etc. - although Mennonite values of self discipline and order served as a restraint to excessive self indulgence. Perhaps the most notable evidence of this love affair with the material signs of prosperity and culture, was the proliferation of handsome schools, civic buildings, and even churches in the commonwealth. Compared to these ostentatious new edifices, the old-style Chortitza church, built of clay and lacking ornamentation, looked decidedly plain and provoked disparaging remarks from the villagers.<sup>35</sup>

Like most of turn of the century Europe, the Russian Mennonites were optimistic about technological progress, an optimism more ingenuous in the case of the Mennonites who did not ill-treat their factory workers. Considering their isolation, the Russian Mennonites were remarkably up to date with many of the latest technological advances. A sanitorium acquired in 1910 by a Russian Mennonite was furnished with the most modern equipment.<sup>36</sup> In another area of the commonwealth the purchase of an x-ray machine for a local hospital was announced in the newspaper with great satisfaction: "We proceed under the sun of progress."<sup>37</sup> The Mennonites themselves produced high quality agricultural machinery, however when it was a question of greater efficiency they did not hesitate to use imported equipment over their own.<sup>38</sup>

The bicycle was quickly availed of by the Russian Mennonites soon after its introduction, as were the motor-

cycle and the automobile. The following excerpt, written by N.J. Kroeker, gives an example of the carefree consumerism which prevailed among the wealthier Russian Mennonites.

It is difficult to say who brought the first automobile to the villages but by 1911, the author's neighbours the Heinrich Fast family bought their first Ford auto. It was a black Model T. Peter, the youngest son, a young man of about twenty, took complete control over it.... Going downhill Peter couldn't slow down and the car hit those animals that were in the way. Nothing serious happened to the cows but the front of the auto looked a mess.... A few weeks later he came home with a beautiful red car, a German Opel....<sup>39</sup>

How did the villagers react to the introduction of the automobile? According to Kroeker it was "hailed with joy."<sup>40</sup>

Nor were the Russian Mennonites willing to stop at automobiles. In 1909 three young Mennonites built their own airplane, a biplane, which unfortunately crashed soon after getting off the ground. N.J. Kroeker was among those in the crowd and later wrote of the event.

We were so sorry to see this happen because it had been such a challenge. We admired everything and kept our hopes high that someday everything would come right.<sup>41</sup>

Of course, life in Russia was not always idyllic. After recalling how her father's store was robbed once, Anna Epp Wiebe remarks: "That was life in Russia - thieves, rabid dogs, wolves, etc.," but adds, "yet all in all life was very good."<sup>42</sup>

Nowhere is this good life better chronicled than in the photographs of the epoch. While the more conservative Russian Mennonites regarded photography, particularly por-

trait photography, with distrust, most were eager to have their lives recorded by the camera. In these photographs we see fashionable ladies sipping tea, smart looking young men playing chess, vine-covered cottages with picket fences, a stable on an estate which, by its exterior at least, would qualify for a modern day mansion, industrial complexes, shining cars, picnics with guitars and wine, children playing croquet, boat rides on the Dnieper, neat, orderly hospitals with their staff, a rest home for Mennonite teachers on the south coast of Crimea, elegant, imposing schools...<sup>43</sup> They show us a world of beauty and order, proud of its model homes and schools, self-consciously posing as modern and cultured, and looking ahead with confidence to the future.

This broadening of horizons was largely the result of education: From the start of the commonwealth schools were established in every village, however the education they provided was elementary. When Johann Cornies was president of the Agricultural Association in the 1840's the schools were taken from the control of the church and placed under his auspices. Cornies renovated the school system, building modern new schools, introducing a well-planned curriculum, and creating teaching standards. The quality of education improved greatly, and some schools enjoyed such high renown that neighboring Russian nobles sent their children there.<sup>44</sup> In 1872 a Canadian immigration officer found the Russian Mennonites to be "a people not like the general run of emi-



grants - they are a reasoning, thinking, cautious, and to a large extent an educated people."<sup>45</sup>

School was compulsory between the ages of seven and fourteen. The language of instruction was High German until Russian was introduced in the late 19th century. Around the mid century secondary schools were established in the commonwealth, and later on specialized schools were created, such as the Teachers' Seminary. Schools were all coeducational until, partly because of pressure from the Russian government, some separate girls' schools were built. Work in general was divided by sex, the women working in the home and the men outside, however after the turn of the century teaching and nursing became increasingly more common occupations for women. At the same time women gained a stronger voice in community affairs. The greatest change in the role of women in the commonwealth came after the Revolution when so many households were fatherless that women were forced to work outside as well as inside the home.<sup>46</sup>

Not all the villages were equally in favour of higher education and the innovations that accompanied it. As in other matters, the two oldest settlements of Chortitza and Molotschna were more progressive regarding education than the younger ones. Ironically it was the Russian government's growing control over the Mennonite schools which finally united the Mennonites in defense of their educational system.

Mennonite teachers and other professionals, although low paid, were highly respected in their communities.

A significant number of students went on to study in German, Swiss and Russian universities, bringing their skills back with them to the commonwealth. Surprisingly few Mennonites, in fact, were lost to the commonwealth. This was partly because life outside was foreign, but mainly because life inside was good. When the Russian Mennonite photographer Peter Rempel was asked by his sister to join her in California, he saw no reason to go, replying, "I can't imagine a better world than this!"<sup>47</sup>

The growing class of Mennonite professionals formed a young Mennonite intelligensia which inculcated a love of culture and a thirst for knowledge in its students and contemporaries. The minister P.J. Penner's using a precisely calibrated sun dial in order to calculate the correct time, and the industrialist Kornelius Hildebrand's creating a collar with coil springs and a scale in order to measure the growth of the Hundred Year Oak are typical examples of this quest for accuracy and knowledge in everyday life.<sup>48</sup>

In keeping with the growing awareness of the natural environment, a Society for the Protection of Nature was founded in Chortitza in 1910 which, as part of its role in research and the dissemination of information, envisaged the creation of a museum, library, laboratory and botanical and zoological gardens.<sup>49</sup>

While somewhat behind the sciences, the arts were also coming into their own in the commonwealth. Art was now taught in the schools and some of the wealthier students

planned careers for themselves as artists. Particularly influential in this regard was the teacher Heinrich J. Dyck who had studied art in Germany. With art came a new degree of spontaneity to the commonwealth. Dyck, for example, would paint different designs in watercolour on his household linen after every wash day.<sup>50</sup>

Poetry, on the other hand, had a firm footing in Mennonite tradition. The Mennonites were very fond of composing and reciting poetry on all occasions. For his farewell speech to his congregation, a minister composed a poem of fifty stanzas of eight lines each;<sup>51</sup> upset at not receiving more mail from home, the head baker at a forestry camp sent a plaintive twenty-five verse poem to his family;<sup>52</sup> while a young housekeeper, in order to make known to her employer who was looking for a wife that she was available, quoted to him an appropriate verse from Goethe.<sup>53</sup> Most of the poetry composed by the Russian Mennonites, however, was verse rather than true poetry.

The commonwealth has been severely criticized in retrospect by Russian Mennonites for not producing more in the way of artistic endeavours, and particularly for not expressing the concerns of its people through literature.<sup>54</sup> Yet the closed and highly interrelated nature of the commonwealth hampered the development of an indigenous literature - it's difficult to write about one's relatives and remain a member of the family. The Mennonites, with their tradition of honesty and straightforwardness, distrusted fiction and

preferred to read historical works or the newspaper - the Russian Mennonites had a thrice weekly press. An added impediment was that the everyday language of the Russian Mennonites, Low German, was not considered a suitable literary language. Taking into account these points, and also the fact that the Mennonites in Russia totalled only some 100,000 and lived in an agriculturally based and culturally isolated society, the criticism is excessive, revealing how much the Russian Mennonites expected from their commonwealth.

The works that we have, a few collections of short stories, a couple of novels, some historical accounts, cannot be judged out of context, but should be seen as the first immature fruits of an incipient cultural 'golden age'. P.M. Friesen, writing in 1911, while acknowledging that the literary output of the Mennonites in Russia up to that time had been limited, adds that "the entire future territory of unlimited possibilities of growth and self-improvement belongs to the young Mennonite literature."<sup>55</sup>

It was the children of these cultural pioneers of the early 20th century who were to inaugurate this 'golden age' of culture, just as the children of the original pioneers had inaugurated an age of plenty. Instead, they grew up amidst war, poverty and cultural alienation to become what Gerhard Lorenz has termed, "the Lost Generation."<sup>56</sup>

While the population of the Mennonites increased, so did that of the neighbouring Russians. Alexandrovsk, on the other side of the river from Chortitza, little more than a military post when the first Mennonites arrived, was now a thriving city whose higher schools many Mennonites attended. Although some Russian words and customs had infiltrated Mennonite life and a few Mennonite intellectuals were developing an appreciation of Russian literature, however, the culture disseminated in the commonwealth was primarily German. The German language had become so identified with the Mennonite faith, in fact, that loss of the former seemed to necessarily entail loss of the latter to many Mennonites. While it was true that the Mennonites had changed their language from Dutch to German in Prussia, that had not been seen as a cultural abasement as the change to Russian would be. The introduction of Russian in Mennonite schools for all subjects except the German language and Religion strengthened the concept of German as a sacred language.<sup>57</sup>

Many Mennonites believed Germans and Russians to be fundamentally incompatible, the former living more by will and conscience and the latter by emotion.<sup>58</sup> The Mennonites as a whole viewed themselves as superior to the native Russians, a view enhanced by the Russians' own admiration of all things German. To feel supported in this attitude they had only to compare their own thriving commonwealth to the poor villages of their Russian neighbours. James Urry notes that by the latter half of the 19th century

the Russian Mennonites no longer saw themselves so much as a religious community as "an elite group of colonists whose task was to present the world with a model of an enlightened and perfected society."<sup>59</sup>

Religion was still of prime importance to the Russian Mennonites, however, and the growing attachment to worldly interests in the commonwealth did not preclude the existence of many sincere believers. Some of the older Mennonites were skeptical about the modern emphasis on the value of education. ~~One~~ old minister wrote that "in former years the dominant idea - held emotionally by some, rationally by others - in the work of the school was to offer that which was considered most necessary in the life of a person: to live in the fellowship and grace of God, and to inherit everlasting salvation," whereas now "no special explanations to students were needed; they were all soon aware that 'education' had now become the password, and that 'education' makes men free."<sup>60</sup>

The teachers of this period, however, did not divorce religion from their liberal humanism. In the words of a former student:

The all important legacy these teachers left to the succeeding generation was not their book learning but the far reaching influence of their total personality. They were committed to the cause and guided our destiny from day to day leading us to see God's all important purpose, preparing us for the future, for eternity. They filled the students with hope, instilling an impetus to press forward on and on.<sup>61</sup>

Yet the theology of the Russian Mennonites was still officially that of the 16th century and had not kept pace with the changes brought on by the commonwealth. This had been made painfully evident when the Mennonite Brethren, influenced by Pietism and Baptism, introduced an interest in evangelism which had long since been dropped by the Mennonite church. As the Orthodox Russians could not legally be converted, the attention of the Mennonite evangelists was turned to the German colonists in the area. This too created difficulties however, as even if a German colonist converted to Mennonitism he could not own land in a Mennonite settlement nor be exempt from military service.

In 1843 a young Lutheran colonist was baptized into the Mennonite church bringing the dispute to a head. Johann Cornies, the most influential Mennonite leader, gave his opinion of the matter: "a great disorder will definitely develop from the receiving of colonists into the Mennonite brotherhood."<sup>62</sup>

The Russian Mennonites resolved the dilemma by carrying their missionizing in non-Christian countries. The first Russian Mennonite missionary went to Sumatra in 1870 and by 1910 the commonwealth had sent forty missions abroad. In this way the Russian Mennonites were able to satisfy their desire for evangelism, which had expanded beyond the Mennonite Brethren Church, without disturbing the balance of their commonwealth, and a Russian nationalist who toured the Mennonite settlements in 1889 could praise the Menno-

nites for being, unlike the German colonists, "completely free of the propagandizing spirit"<sup>63</sup>

Interestingly, the Baptist movement which influenced the Russian Mennonites (and many Protestant groups of the 19th century) with respect to evangelism, can likely be traced back to a group of Dutch Anabaptists who fled to England. Thus, in a sense, the Russian Mennonites were inspired by their own, now foreign, ideal of mission work, presented to them as part of the theology of another religious group.

It has been seen that, despite their apparent isolation, the Russian Mennonites were not immune to the prevalent cultural and religious movements of the day. Prompted by the influence of Pietism and Baptism, and by the development of new Mennonite churches, a move began in the late 19th century to rethink and redefine the religious position of the Mennonites. A minister of the time describes what he sees as the Scylla and Charybdis the Russian Mennonites have to navigate between:

Two mortal enemies have constantly threatened our Mennonitism: dull, 'orthodox' (but not truly believing) obscurantism, hating education; and superficial and pragmatic rationalism and deism, which ascribes to education the be-all and end-all. The former enemy is like a swamp and we have wallowed long enough in this nauseating mess.... the latter is like a barren, stale desert.<sup>64</sup>

In an effort to revitalize and achieve a better understanding of their faith, Bible conferences to which prominent theologians were invited were sponsored by and held on the estates of wealthy Mennonites. As well, permission had



been granted the Mennonites by the government to establish a theological seminary. Yet this movement for renewal was not enough to either adapt the theology of the Mennonites to their situation, or bring their lifestyle more into line with their theology. Many Protestant denominations (i.e. the Society of Friends in England and the Lutherans in Prussia) experienced a similar disparity between their religious doctrine and the changing lifestyles of their members, however none of these demanded the same absolute commitment to an unchanging and all-inclusive ideal as Menno- nitism did. Unlike the English Quakers or the German Lu- therans, who were English or German as well as being Quakers or Lutherans, the sole identity of the Mennonites in Russia was their religion. Religion encompassed all aspects of their lives; their work, their leisure, their style of dress, even their language. In this they were similar to the Swiss Mennonites and the Hutterites, however these did not have their own state nor were they affected as drasti- cally by progress as the Mennonites in Russia were.

E.K. Francis describes the position of the Russian Mennonites of the latter 19th and early 20th centuries with regard to their faith:

Religious convictions and interests now were only one aspect of everyday life, perhaps still a central but by no means the only aspect. Many concessions had to be made to other conflicting interests which frequently dominated and determined action. Religion, at one time a spiritual power permeating all personal hopes and de- sires, was institutionalized, and religious institutions were but one factor among many other institutions often more in the foreground of attention.<sup>65</sup>

After the Revolution the ban on proselytism was temporarily dropped and groups of enthusiastic young Mennonites held tent missions among the Russian populace. These missions ended with the coming of the Civil War when many of the missionaries were killed.<sup>66</sup>

The Revolution and the Civil War were devastating for the Mennonites, however they still retained hopes for rebuilding their commonwealth once the situation stabilized. An entry dated September 15, 1919 from the diary of the Russian Mennonite teacher Dietrich Neufeld reads:

As I look along the valley below I can see, in addition to the fine farmsteads, half-a-dozen steam flourmills, several farm implement factories, and a brickyard topped by tall chimneys. There are also banks, schools and hospitals in the community. True, because of the War and the Revolution the place has deteriorated somewhat and many things are in need of repair. But these are industrious people who are sure to make their agriculture, trade, and industry, as well as their schools and welfare institutions, flourish again when these turbulent times are over.<sup>67</sup>

Then the nightmarish period of anarchy began, and in Neufeld's diary idyllic scenes of former times, "thousands of villages and towns dreaming under a high blue sky", "the grandeur of a steppe sunrise," "reciting lyric poems... with all of us in a serene, happy mood", are contrasted with scenes of horror; the barbary of anarchists who burn down homes, who shoot a man through his hands and then force him to drink a toast with them, who rape pregnant women and girls of thirteen, killing them if they resist, who decapitate children and leave their heads on the window ledge to greet their parents, who steal everything they find and are as "voracious as locusts", killing the chickens

and still expecting eggs, who spread typhus wherever they go and expect their victims to nurse them...<sup>68</sup>

The orderly world of the Mennonites had been turned upside down. They found themselves dressed in rags, covered with lice, their prized possessions gone, their fields bare, their well-cared for animals taken and savagely used, the beautiful trees - some hundreds of years old - cut down for firewood. Nor did the world right itself after the Communists established control. Then they were forced to deny the existence of God, to sell their gold wedding rings in order to buy produce taken from their own farms, to obey illiterate Russian peasants who had formerly been their field hands, their churches were turned into theaters and dance halls, and a medal given for good service from the czar was enough to send its owner to Siberia. The Communist regime was not even consistent within itself, as yesterday's heroes soon became today's traitors.

How could the Mennonites cope? They tried prayer, reason and sheer will power, but these had little effect on the Anarchists and Communists. The Selbshutz, self-defense league, later officially denounced by the Mennonites, was a desperate and futile attempt to ward off destruction by those Mennonites unwilling to stand helplessly by. Most of the Mennonites, however, did not turn to violence as an answer, and many lived and died heroically according to their principles.

After the calamities of this time, many Mennonites

left Russia, however those who were still not prepared to abandon their dream of a Russian homeland remained. Speaking for these Philip Cornies said: "Think of our mission here in Russia, our Mennonite ideals, the beautiful villages, the productive land. What a wonderful future will be ours with help from Germany."<sup>69</sup>

Yet the struggle for many years to come would be one of mere survival. Isolated from the outside world and without the support of their church, the Mennonites left in Russia experienced a steady loss of their faith and traditions. The following passage written by a Russian Mennonite illustrates the atmosphere of the period just before the Second World War.

Radios were extremely scarce, and they were also politically dangerous, since they might enable Soviet citizens to listen to foreign broadcasts. Nevertheless, in 1940 an older cousin of mine managed to put a short-wave receiver together. I still remember the breathtaking excitement of listening to a variety concert from Germany that year, hearing my "own" language spoken and sung by people who were, as I saw it, masters of their own fate. We had, of course, long given up any hope of ever escaping the Soviet Union.<sup>70</sup>

The German occupation of the Ukraine in 1941 was likened by the Mennonites to the Second Coming. The writer previously quoted describes the arrival of the German forces:

On 18 August, the steady stream of farm machinery, cattle, and deportees which had been pouring through the main street of our village, past our house, suddenly ceased, and a strange calm spread over the countryside. This calm was soon broken by distant rifle and machine gun fire. My friend and I climbed a tall tree to watch the distant horizon, and we saw vehicle columns pouring down toward our village. They had to be German!

We laughed, shouted and sang. Around noon the advance guard came rolling down our street - a few German soldiers on motorcycles and in cars. They looked sunburned and friendly, and pretty much like ordinary people. We waved at them and they waved back. One took a brick and smashed the sign over the collective-farm office, "Red Flag". It was without doubt the happiest day of my life.<sup>71</sup>

Finding their ethnic purity, if not their religion, valued by the Germans, and given new hope of regaining their land and rights, most of the Mennonites subscribed wholeheartedly to the German vision of a pan-Germanic republic. The four essential components of Russian Mennonite society were religion, peoplehood, land and culture. The first, however, had lost its original purpose and meaning and was open to other uses, such as those of the National Socialists, who made peoplehood, land and culture into a religion by themselves. Being German now took priority over being Mennonite. It was another form of millennialism - the militant inauguration of the Third Reich, an absolute, ideal society which would last a thousand years - but it had enough in common with the desire of the Russian Mennonites for an 'earthly kingdom' to strike a responsive chord in their battered psyche.<sup>72</sup>

At this point, it must be noted, the Russian Mennonites would have welcomed almost any force which put an end to Communism. They were not in a moral or political position to critically assess the policies of National Socialism, nor did they wish to find fault with their liberators. (Nonetheless, the Russian Mennonites' attraction to National Socialism should not be dismissed on the basis of their

desperate situation. Many of those Russian Mennonites who had left Russia decades ago and were relatively safe and secure [but not satisfied] in North America were also attracted to the movement.<sup>73)</sup> The principle of non-resistance, while long upheld by the Russian Mennonites, was now in fact a floating value, no longer stressed by the Mennonites in Russia and not firmly rooted in a comprehensive outlook. For that reason little attempt was made by the Mennonites to avoid military service in the German army.<sup>74</sup>

German victory was taken as a foregone conclusion by the Russian Mennonites. The German forces were invincible, and any setbacks they suffered could only be temporary, not altering the final outcome. The evacuation of the Mennonites from Russia and the defeat of Germany dealt the last blow to all hopes of a Mennonite-German ideal homeland. From then on there would be no collective vision for the Russian Mennonites and each would have to find his own truth.

#### Good-Bye to Khortitsa and Rosental

It was a beautiful morning without a cloud in the sky. But there was no happiness in our hearts. We were leaving behind the place where our cradle had stood.... Our train pulled out in the evening.... Going into the setting sun we sadly sang: "Num ade du mein lieb" and "God be with you till we meet again."<sup>75</sup>

Despite its tragic end, the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia should not be considered simply the product of a delusion, or a corruption of religious ideals, or an historical anomaly. To quote Bloch, "the concrete utopia stands at the horizon of all reality"<sup>76</sup> and the Russian Mennonites, while leaving behind their commitment to the ideals of the Kingdom of God, made significant strides towards establishing a concrete utopia. As Christians, secure in their attainment of the Kingdom of God, they could resign themselves to the imperfections of earthly life, but as utopianists, they worked towards the eradication of those imperfections.

The commonwealth at its height had a dynamic territorial and social framework. A communal fund was used to buy land on which to establish new settlements, when the money was repaid it could be used to buy more land, making the process self perpetuating. It was not only the landless who benefitted from this possibility of expansion, but dissenting groups who could thereby found separate villages or settlements. Within the commonwealth there were villages of different degrees of conservatism and different religious affiliations. This was a very effective means of accommodating social divergence which might otherwise fracture the commonwealth.

Dissension in the commonwealth was largely based on different interpretations and expressions of the same basic ideals. This agreement on a core of basic issues gave the Russian Mennonites a common ground on which to meet.

Tolerance, when it came, was born not of indifference but of the realization of the need to work together in these areas of mutual interest. As the church was a federation of self governing congregations, so the commonwealth was a federation of self governing villages, approximately 400 in total, grouped into districts. This allowed for local autonomy and necessitated cooperation among villages and communities. Culturally this ideal of harmony and balance was expressed through choir singing and poetry.

Economic freedom flourished in the commonwealth. It had never been a Mennonite precept that all differences between rich and poor should be levelled, but rather that the needy should be taken care of. Mutual aid was a way of life for the Russian Mennonites, practiced on a small scale with their relatives and on a large scale through their welfare institutions. Thus, while there were different economic levels in the commonwealth, there were no cases of real want. At the other end of the economic scale, when so much of what the Mennonites had was similar and prescribed by custom, the estates of the wealthy Mennonites broke the pattern of regularity and offered an alternative to the norm.

The social organization of the commonwealth was based on the family. The Mennonite practice of homesteading resulted in a household usually comprising of only two generations, however ties with the extended family were kept up through extensive socializing. The fact that villages were kept to a small, manageable size meant that everyone in a



community knew one another; one's teachers, co-workers, church leaders etc. were one's neighbours, providing an integrated social life. Nearly all the adult members of the community through their participation in civil or church organizations were involved at some level in the management of community affairs.

Due to the emphasis on brotherhood and social responsibility, crime was rare among the Russian Mennonites and moral standards were high.<sup>77</sup> Apart from the occasional dispute the commonwealth was peaceful as the Mennonites did not engage in war and social control could usually be achieved without the use of force through the practice of avoidance.

The Russian Mennonites lived in harmony with their natural environment. They were able to achieve a certain level of industrial development without divorcing themselves from the fruits of their labour, or losing the rural or semi-rural character of their villages. The rhythm of life in the commonwealth was based on the seasons of the agricultural year. Houses had large vegetable and flower gardens, and picnics and nature excursions were favoured pastimes. This closeness to the land was especially appreciated by the children who spent most of the summer outdoors, hiking, swimming and playing games, and in the winter enjoyed skating and sleigh rides.<sup>78</sup>

School was compulsory up to the age of fourteen (not the case anywhere in Europe at the time) in the commonwealth, providing everyone with at least an elementary edu-

cation. While not all villages were in favour of higher education, opportunities existed in the larger villages for those who wished to pursue their studies. The general mood in the commonwealth was one of enthusiasm concerning the possibilities for cultural, religious and technological growth.

Although there was strong pressure to conform within the Mennonite community, the individual received a personal attention lacking in most modern societies. A case in point is that of Abraham Klassen, known as 'Big Klassen' for his height of 216 centimeters. "Size was no problem as long as tailors and shoemakers were available for custom-made clothes. Later it became a concern, his first picture in Canada shows Grandfather with pantlegs that are much too short."<sup>79</sup>

It was this combination of the freedom of unlimited possibilities for growth with the security of family and community ties and traditions, of open horizons within a closed community, which enabled the commonwealth to retain its members.

It was not so much the institutions of the Russian Mennonites which made their commonwealth successful, but their cultural traits, and these had negative as well as positive aspects. Industriousness could become materialism, thrift could become nearness, order could become monotony, exclusiveness could become elitism, etc. The closed nature of the commonwealth reinforced both the positive and negative aspects of Mennonite ethnic culture.

At the same time, certain cultural practices which contributed to the stability of life in the commonwealth were being undermined by new trends. The acquisition of worldly goods and adherence to worldly fashions undermined the traditional practices of simplicity and separation from the world, and increasing economic competitiveness and individualism undermined the practice of mutual aid. Whether the commonwealth would have been able to balance these conflicting tendencies is an open question.

One of the most serious problems the commonwealth had to confront was that of internal disunity. While the divisiveness common among the strong-minded Mennonites provided a lively interaction among groups and individuals, as well as serving as a release for tensions and allowing for personal assertion, the hardships and suffering it caused should not be underestimated. When Andrew Hacker imagines in his essay "In Defense of Utopia" that once the divisions caused by politics, economics and war are overcome, excitement will still be generated in the utopia by harmless disputes over "the merits of sea shell vs. butterfly collecting"<sup>80</sup> for instance, he overlooks the real bitterness such disagreements over minor matters can create in the absence of larger issues.

Although the commonwealth was a closed society, it was dependent on the outside world. External religious and cultural influences revitalized and redirected Mennonite traditions, external political pressure kept the commonwealth

from fragmenting, and external military and police protection enabled the Mennonites to live in peace. Part of the attractiveness of the commonwealth was its sharp contrast with the 'unattractive', foreign society surrounding it. In the Netherlands and Prussia where there was no such strong contrast, the Mennonites eventually assimilated. The Russian Mennonites had only to look at life outside their commonwealth to be reminded of their blessings.

How much of the success of the Russian Mennonites was due to their religion, or the utopianism derived from their religion, and how much to their ethnic culture, is impossible to accurately assess. One of the fundamentals of Mennonitism was that Kingdom theology should pervade every aspect of a believer's life. Nonetheless, certain factors contributing to the success of the commonwealth, such as the Mennonites' industriousness, perseverance and pioneering spirit, can be traced to the Dutch heritage of the Russian Mennonites.

In this regard a comparison of the Mennonite settlements with the German colonies in New Russia would prove fruitful. Little information is available on the subject, however it can be said that although both the Mennonites and the Germans (who had all the privileges granted the Mennonites except for military exemption) achieved a higher standard of living than the native Russians, the Mennonite commonwealth was more successful than the German colonies. The two most important elements in the success of the commonwealth were peculiar to the Mennonites. These were

their extensive practice of mutual aid and their sense of mission to create a society which would be a model to Russia and the world. As well, the Mennonite tradition of obedience to civil authorities made their relationship with the Russian government generally smoother than that of the German colonists.<sup>81</sup>

While the original Kingdom theology of the Mennonites made possible the success of their commonwealth in Russia, it could not integrally survive the establishment of that commonwealth, for the commonwealth belonged to the Kingdom of the world to which, according to Mennonite theology, the otherworldly Kingdom of God was diametrically opposed. This is not to say that the Russian Mennonites stopped believing in the spiritual Kingdom of God - it was this belief which prevented them from taking their commonwealth as a literal Kingdom of God and being millennialist or absolutist instead of utopian - but rather that they adapted the ideals of the spiritual Kingdom to their convenience and therefore weakened their binding power.

The Russian Mennonites were not forced to confront this situation because their violation of the principles of their faith was not blatant. In effect they were a self-governing state, however they considered that they were maintaining the doctrine of separation of Church and State by not participating in the Russian government, which was, after all, the authority of the country. They carried out no mission work among the Russians, ostensibly because it

was against the law, but they could see themselves as teaching their Russian neighbours by example of the benefits of a model Christian life.<sup>82</sup> They were non-resistant and did not serve in the military, yet from their financial contributions to Russian war efforts one could say that they preferred being peaceful to being strictly pacifist and suffering the consequences. Once an absolute ideal is compromised in one way, it becomes subject to further compromises as the need arises. This lack of coincidence between the religion of the Russian Mennonites - their supposed raison d'etre - and their way of life, was the fundamental structural flaw in the foundation of the Mennonite utopia in Russia.

## NOTES: CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>Kroeker, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>Epp, Mennonites in Canada: 1789-1920, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup>A. Klaus, Unsere Kolonien: Studien und Materialien sur Geschichte und Statistik der auslaedischen Koloniesation in Russland, translated from the Russian edition of 1869 by J. Toews, (Odessa, 1887), pp. 163f., quoted in E.K. Francis, In Search of Utopia, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>A. Klaus, Unsere Kolonien (Odessa zeitung, Odessa, South Russia, 1887), quoted in Plett, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup>John A. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers, ed. A.J. Klassen, (Hillsboro, Kan.: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1975), p. 24.

<sup>6</sup>E.K. Francis, In Search of Utopia, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>Epp, Mennonites in Canada: 1786-1920, p. 170.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 164.

<sup>9</sup>Victor G. Doerksen, "From Jung-Stilling to Rudy Wiebe: 'Christian Fiction' and the Mennonite Imagination," in Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural and Literary Essays Dealing with Mennonite Issues, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg, Man.: Hyperion Press, 1980), p. 203.

<sup>10</sup>Plett, p. 157.

<sup>11</sup>Friedmann, "The Doctrine of Two Worlds", p. 116.

<sup>12</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 436.

<sup>13</sup>Francis, In Search of Utopia, p. 28.

- <sup>14</sup>Smith, The Coming of the Russian Mennonites, p. 45.
- <sup>15</sup>Epp, Mennonite Exodus, p. 25.
- <sup>16</sup>Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., An Introduction to Mennonite History, (Scottsdale Pa.: Herald Press, 1967), p. 138.
- <sup>17</sup>P.M. Friesen, Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789-1910), (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911), pp. 500-501, quoted in Dyck, Mennonite History, p. 139.
- <sup>18</sup>Epp, Mennonites in Canada: 1786-1920, p. 197.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup>Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, pp. 457-460.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 461-462.
- <sup>22</sup>Dyck, Mennonite History, pp. 135-136.
- <sup>23</sup>Dietrich Neufeld, A Russian Dance of Death: Revolution and Civil War in the Ukraine, ed. and trans. Al Reimer, (Winnipeg, Man.: Hyperion Press, 1977), p. 7.
- <sup>24</sup>I. Klassen, quoted in Kroeker, p. 56.
- <sup>25</sup>Helen Pauls Friesen, quoted in Kroeker, p. 192.
- <sup>26</sup>E.K. Francis, "The Russian Mennonites: From Religious to Ethnic Group".
- <sup>27</sup>Mrs. Herbert R. Schmidt, "Nicknames among the Mennonites in Russia", Mennonite Life XVI (July, 1961), p. 132.
- <sup>28</sup>Gerhard Wiens, "Village Nicknames Among the Mennonites in Russia", Mennonite Life, XXV (October, 1970), pp. 177-180.
- <sup>29</sup>Al Reimer, "The Creation of Arnold Dyck's 'Koopenn Bua' Characters", in Mennonite Images, p. 261.
- <sup>30</sup>Plattel, p. 24.



31 The Mennonite Encyclopedia, s.v. "Mutual Aid" by Harold S. Bender and J. Winifred Pretz.

32 Lohrenz, Heritage Remembered, p. 124.

33 Harvey L. Dyck, "Mid Point Between Revolutions: The Russian Mennonite World of 1911", Mennonite Quarterly Review, 36 (March, 1981), p. 15.

34 P.M. Friesen, p. 111.

35 Kroeker, p. 53.

36 Walter Quiring and Helen Bartel, In The Fullness of Time: 150 Years of Mennonite Sojourn in Russia, ed. Aaron Klassen, (Waterloo, Ont.: Reeve Bean, 1974), p. 44.

37 Harvey L. Dyck, "Mid Point Between Revolutions", p. 13.

38 Kroeker, pp. 83-113.

39 Ibid., pp. 189-90.

40 Ibid., p. 190.

41 Ibid., p. 191.

42 Anna Epp Wiebe, quoted in Kroeker, p. 108.

43 Gerhard Lohrenz, Heritage Remembered; Walter Quiring and Helen Bartel, In the Fullness of Time; John D. Rempel and Paul Tiessen, eds., Forever Summer, Forever Sunday.

44 Kroeker, p. 148.

45 Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 446.

46 The Mennonite Encyclopedia, s.v. "Women, status of" by Cornelius Krahn.

47 Rempel and Tiessen, p. 21.

48 Kroeker, pp. 142-143.

- <sup>49</sup>Ibid., pp. 142-143.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 161.
- <sup>51</sup>Plett, pp. 215-218.
- <sup>52</sup>Helena Braun, The Klassen Clan: From Kaump to Canada, (Chilliwack, British Columbia: By the Author, 1984), p. 11.
- <sup>53</sup>Schroeder, p. 32.
- <sup>54</sup>Al Reimer, "The Russian Mennonite Experience in Fiction," in Mennonite Images, ed. Harry Loewen, pp. 221-222.
- <sup>55</sup>P.M. Freisen, p. 841.
- <sup>56</sup>Lohrenz, The Lost Generation.
- <sup>57</sup>Epp, Mennonites in Canada: 1786-1920, p. 178
- <sup>58</sup>Epp, Mennonite Exodus, p. 67.
- <sup>59</sup>James Urry, personal communication to Frank H. Epp, quoted in Epp, Mennonites in Canada: 1786-1920, p. 170.
- <sup>60</sup>P.M. Freisen, p. 789.
- <sup>61</sup>Kroeker, p. 149.
- <sup>62</sup>Plett, p. 293.
- <sup>63</sup>Harvey L. Dyck, "Russian Mennonites and the Challenge of Russian Nationalism," Mennonite Quarterly Review, LVI (October, 1982), p. 340.
- <sup>64</sup>P.M. Friesen, p. 786.
- <sup>65</sup>E.K. Francis, In Search of Utopia, p. 24
- <sup>66</sup>Lohrenz, Heritage Remembered, p. 174
- <sup>67</sup>Dietrich Neufeld, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>68</sup>Ibid., passim.

- 69 Epp, Mennonites in Canada: 1920-1940, 168.
- 70 H.G. Classen, "Autobiographical Sketch," (Ottawa, 1978), p. 10.
- 71 Ibid., p. 11.
- 72 Jonathan F. Wagner, "Transferred Crisis: German Volkish Thought among Russian Mennonite Immigrants to Western Canada," Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism, 1 (Spring 1974), pp. 202-220.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Epp, Mennonite Exodus, p. 362.
- 75 N. Fast, quoted in Kroeker, p. 234.
- 76 E. Bloch, The Principle of Hope, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), quoted by Plattel, p. 94.
- 77 Epp, Mennonites in Canada: 1786-1920, p. 175.
- 78 Kroeker, pp. 198-204.
- 79 Braun, p. 7.
- 80 Andrew Hacker, "In Defense of Utopia" in Utopias: Social Ideals and Communal Experiments, ed. Peyton E. Richter, (Boston: Holbrook Press, 1971) p. 311.
- 81 Harvey L. Dyck, "Russian Mennonites and the Challenge of Russian Nationalism," p. 15,
- 82 The Mennonite Encyclopedia, s.v. "Russia" by Cornelius Krahn.

## V. CONCLUSION

The millennialism prevalent in the Netherlands of the early 16th century was the product not only of the desire for reform born of social unrest, but of unfocused religious enthusiasm. The Bible, widely available for the first time, offered a cornucopia of eschatological visions and social models to the public, which was apt to take everything it read literally. It was natural that the dramatic prophecy of the millenium, with its promise of an immediate, absolute earthly Kingdom instituted by God, should capture the allegiance of those who wished to inaugurate a new religious and social order but were not able to visualize this change except as coming from above.

Anabaptism, as the most revolutionary and most biblically oriented of the new religious groups, was the movement which most concerned itself with the meaning of the central message of Jesus' ministry: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." When the millennialist vision of the Kingdom as a physical reality proved to have such disastrous results in Muenster, the Anabaptist-Mennonites definitively interpreted the Kingdom of God as a purely spiritual entity corresponding to the Church and forever opposed to and persecuted by the kingdom of the world.

As participation in this spiritual Kingdom transformed

one's whole being, it necessarily wrought a change in the earthly life of the believer who could no longer live according to the ways of the world. The Mennonites created their own social ideal based on Kingdom ethics; primarily community, discipleship, and separation from the world. While optimistic about the ability of the Church to come close to this ideal, the Mennonites recognized the relativity of earthly life: perfection was to be strived for but it could never be attained in this world.

The first Mennonites were able to identify themselves so closely with their model of the primitive Church largely because they responded to the rediscovered biblical message with the fervor of the primitive Church. This fervor, however, could not last generation after generation, especially once that persecution declined, and the result was a decrease in spiritual vitality and an increase in worldly interests among the Mennonites.

Those Mennonites who migrated to Prussia in the 16th century lived apart from the society at large in closed communities and became a separate people with cultural as well as religious characteristics. Continued oppression and restrictions in Prussia led those Mennonites who were unwilling to assimilate to look for a new home where they could establish themselves freely as a people. The move to Russia was one of convenience on both sides: Russia had empty land to populate and the Mennonites wanted a homeland. Each party in the agreement was interested ex-

clusively in its own welfare and the pact between them held only as long as their interests coincided.

The Mennonites had been invited to Russia as model farmers not as model Christians, and it was as model farmers that they excelled and won the respect of the government, going on to create model schools, model welfare institutions, model industries and a model government. In their quest for a model society the Mennonites were motivated not by millennialism, as the militant Anabaptists were, nor primarily by Kingdom theology, as the followers of Menno Simons were, but by the "receding horizon of endless progress" of the utopia.

The establishment of the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia completed the shift of values which had begun in Prussia. Those values which conflicted with the interests of the commonwealth (i.e. its continued existence, its political stability, its ethnic integrity) were put aside or reinterpreted, the original otherworldly emphasis of the Mennonites became this worldly, and the static, immutable model of the primitive Church was superseded by a dynamic social model which the Mennonites themselves created. This shift in values was objected to early on by those Mennonites who wished to retain the original vision, but they made little impact on the group as a whole because its goals were now other. It was not so much the spiritual Kingdom of God the Russian Mennonites wished to preserve, but their own earthly kingdom in Russia.

The Russian Mennonites directed themselves towards a

concrete ideal (a cooperative, motivated, culturally, economically and politically secure society) using realistic methods of reaching it (i.e. the establishment of various institutions), but without believing to have ever conclusively attained it and thus ending the process.

In their self instituted and controlled commonwealth the Mennonites strived for constant improvement according to their utopian ideal; creating social institutions, developing technologically, maintaining a high standard of living, and of ethics, accommodating diversity while attempting to retain a fundamental unity, establishing a balanced relationship with the Russian government, and expanding into and exploring new territory, both physical and cultural. "The entire future territory of unlimited possibilities of growth and self-improvement"<sup>1</sup> which P.M. Friesen assigned to the young Mennonite literature in 1911, also belonged to the young Mennonite commonwealth.

The transition from the millennialism of the first Dutch Anabaptists to the Kingdom theology of the early Mennonites to the utopianism of the Russian Mennonites had been made. This transition, however, did not exclude the overlapping of one ideology with another. While utopianism had displaced Kingdom theology among the Russian Mennonites it did not entirely replace it. The Russian Mennonites had suppressed those characteristics of the Kingdom of

God, such as mission work and voluntary religious association, which were seen as having negative consequences for their commonwealth, but they retained others which they saw as positive and applied them to their worldly circumstances. Thus, as everything pertaining to the Kingdom of God was sacred, everything pertaining to the commonwealth - including its imported German culture - was endowed with a religious aura; and as the Kingdom of God was instituted and upheld by God, the Russian Mennonites saw their own kingdom as the result of God's grace. This, in fact, was the very union of Church and State, so widespread and accepted among Christians at the time, which the 16th century Mennonites had so vigorously opposed. Pietism, with its similar sanctification of worldly goals, lent credence to this development, and the German Volkish movement encouraged the Mennonites to think of themselves as a distinct and superior people.

When war and anarchy came to the commonwealth it was experienced by the Mennonites as a nightmare, unthinkable and incomprehensible, for they had lost the Mennonite theology of suffering and they had come to expect the peace which pertained only to the Kingdom of God of their commonwealth. Seeing their sufferings as a temporary aberration enabled the Mennonites to cling to their dream of a utopia in Russia and welcome the Germans when they came as saviours who would bring order into the world again. When the vision of the Third Reich collapsed and the Russian Mennonites left their



home forever, the dream of a Mennonite utopia in Russia was transformed into nostalgia for a lost paradise.

If the success of a utopian community can be determined by its longevity, as Kanter does,<sup>2</sup> the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia was eminently successful, lasting over a century and showing no signs of decline at the time of its dissolution by external forces. The Russian Mennonites were committed to their commonwealth. It provided them with a healthy, satisfying, secure life, a peaceful, esthetically beautiful environment, community, order and tradition, self chosen government, challenging and fulfilling work, material prosperity, and religious justification. They occasionally (or in some cases, constantly) lamented the divisiveness, materialism, moral degeneracy, etc. prevailing in their commonwealth, but on the whole they were optimistic about its future.

The Mennonite commonwealth has been criticized for remaining separate and being exclusive. If it had not been exclusive, it would have ceased to be utopian, and yet, because of its exclusivity it was at the mercy of the society at large which did not share its ideals. E.K. Francis writes in In Search of Utopia:

The Russian period of Mennonite history thus brings clearly to the fore the dilemma and utopian character of a sect. It must either suffer pagans and sinners to run the world, thereby preserving the purity of its ideals without putting them to the test, or it must, like Doestoyevski's Grand Inquisitor, accommodate itself to the stark realities of life in this world, thereby losing its original character.<sup>3</sup>

It was inevitable that, sooner or later, the outside world would encroach on the Mennonite commonwealth. In the modern world it is impossible for a utopian community, no matter how isolated or how protected by law, to safeguard itself against damage by the outside. Witness the contamination caused recently by the nuclear reactor accident in Chernobyl - not far from the former site of the commonwealth.

The commonwealth was a human enterprise, and subject to the same vicissitudes as any human enterprise, but the Russian Mennonites failed to realize this. Delbert F. Plett says that "the security of a provident land enhanced and developed by the struggles of generations of the forefathers had created a shimmering mirage which was more fantasy than fact,"<sup>4</sup> and in the closing comments of his doctoral dissertation on social and religious change among the Russian Mennonites, James Urry writes:

The separation of the Mennonites from the world about them was the result of historical processes and of their own status rather than because of some total system of discourse or distinctive institution founded on clearly defined premises. But the security of their position, privileged and prosperous for many in the Russian Empire, gave most Mennonites the impression of separation and encouraged the idea that their faith was upholding their position.<sup>5</sup>

The loss of their utopia was incomprehensible to them because from their point of view they had done nothing wrong. They neglected to see that while faith can ensure membership in the kingdom of God, it cannot guarantee the right to a utopia, and while only sin can expel one from the

former, one does not have to have committed any crime to be exiled from the latter.

## NOTES: CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup>P.M. Friesen, p. 841.

<sup>2</sup>Kanter, p. 245.

<sup>3</sup>Francis, In Search of Utopia, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup>Plett, p. 235.

<sup>5</sup>James Urry, "The Closed and the Open, Social and Religious Change Amongst the Mennonites in Russia (1789-1879)", Doctoral Dissertation for the University of Oxford, London, 1979, quoted in Plett, p. 235.

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