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THE RUSSIAN ORIGINS OF THE MENNONITE BRETHERN: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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Centennial celebrations invariably generate appropriately laudatory speeches and histories. Surviving one hundred years implies an inherent worthiness and an obviously positive contribution. There is one cardinal centennial principle: celebrate and don't ask too many questions! Fortunately for this symposium, the Mennonite Brethren centennial was held more than a decade ago. No ongoing celebration will be enhanced or dampened by our queries of "why, when and under what circumstances."

Historically speaking the problem of origins is never simple and always complex. Trying to explain the emergence of a small group of dissenters amidst another group of historic dissenters in mid-nineteenth century Russia presents the same basic difficulties as ascertaining the causes of world wars in the twentieth century. Certain fundamental questions must be answered. What was the setting of the event? What ideas were involved? How long were they in circulation? What kind of personalities participated in the dispute? Did socio-economic factors play a role? Was the event an isolated episode or part of a widespread upheaval? Answers to these questions involve two further questions basic to the study of any history. What kind of sources are available and how can they be interpreted?

Two perspectives complicate our despatch of these problems with regard to the origins of the Mennonite Brethren. The first involves the group's awareness of its past. This consciousness need not include a knowledge of precise historical data or even an intense loyalty to the faith of the fathers. Its essential ingredient is an idealized concept of its past which somehow validates the group's current religious status and practice. Such a popular pious tradition might well be beneficial if it contains revitalizing ideas, debilitating if it undergirds religious pride. Almost any dissenting group with a long history tends to be inflexible when dealing with the interpretation of the documents upon which its history is based. Since it knows the truth about its past any further questions are redundant. A second problem complicating our task of historical reconstruction involves the current status of small group historiography. Thanks to the generosity of sociological and anthropological research we are everywhere beset by sect typologies and small group systems. We have been shown that sects have distinguishable profiles, that they usually generate ethnic groups, and that ethnic groups are characterized by a deep consciousness of their own special identity. We have been told that, whether sectarian or ethnic, a given group's behaviour and reaction pattern is rather predictable.¹ For the historian small group models only become distressing if it is assumed they can be taken back in time to fully explain century-old historical events. The historian still naively assumes the uniqueness of each historical situation and seeks to

work from the evidence which the situation itself supplies. In a historical analysis of Brethren origins only two previously stated questions are really relevant. What are the documents? How can they be interpreted?

Unfortunately we cannot simply ask these two questions and in our answers supply the necessary information concerning the origins of the Brethren. Even the most cautious interpretation of the documents demands a careful examination of the setting which generated them. An adequate understanding of Russian Mennonitism in the mid-nineteenth century is crucial to an understanding of the type of conflict which emerged and the kind of documents the confrontation produced. What were the salient characteristics of that community in C.1850?

The Mennonites who left Prussia for Russia at the end of the eighteenth century were already an ethnic group. During their sojourn in Prussia they lived mainly in self-contained villages, relied on agriculture for economic survival and as historic nonconformists held to their Anabaptist distinctives. Common traditions, beliefs and language ensured a strong cohesiveness and homogeneity. When the Mennonites arrived in Russia the differences between them and their host society reinforced their isolation and separateness. The economic terms of settlement, by which the village held title to all land within its boundaries, ensured the intact transfer of the old social structure. Initially the centralized control which such a land holding system implied, was neutralized by long-standing egalitarian traditions which featured election to both civil and religious office. A strong sense of participatory democracy prevailed since all village property owners voted. Failure to re-elect quickly eliminated capricious or nonresponsive leadership. Then too, migration itself partially disrupted the institutionalized leadership, religious or civic, which had prevailed in Prussia. In the case of early Mennonite settlement in Russia the frontier certainly had a democratizing effect. On the other hand the circumstances of frontier life made leadership based on community consensus a precarious affair as men like Hoepfner and Bartsch so unfortunately discovered.²

The Trend Towards Authoritarianism

By the mid-nineteenth century the Mennonite community in South Russia found itself subjected to a more and more centralized form of local government. Basic to the experiences of the Brethren in the early 1860s was the kind of power structure and leadership which had become acceptable to the Mennonite community as a whole. An "open" society relying on consensus had become "closed" and ruled by an elite. The trend towards a more authoritarian power structure was rooted in two major developments in the Russian Mennonite colonization experience. The first of these was economic and demographic in character. Rapid population increase a few decades after settlement not only absorbed reserve lands but produced an impoverished proletariat as well. What was the impact of this sustained population growth? As of January 1st, 1856, the Molotschnaya settlement (48 villages) numbered 17,516; by 1860 it stood at 20,828; in

1865 it reached 24,235. While the total population still stood at 17,516 the colony listed 2,059 landless families compared to 1,188 with land. Assuming an average family size of 5.0 there was only enough land to support a population of 5,940 in a system where indivisible farmsteads were the rule.³ What kind of pressures existed when the population stood at 20,828 or 24,236? We must remember that systematic colonization under the supervision of the mother colony only began in the late 1860s.

Meanwhile in the 1850s the rich became richer and the poor, poorer. The agricultural innovations of Johann Cornies (1789-1848) had accrued mainly to the benefit of the landowners and these were now in a position to capitalize on the European demand for Russian grain which developed in the mid-nineteenth century. The capital inflow generated by the new agricultural markets benefitted the already affluent and facilitated their further expansion. Naturally this capitalist minority struggled to retain control. Since the right to vote was tied to land holding, power in the Mennonite community devolved to a declining (in relation to the overall population) but economically dominant minority. The landless revolt of the 1850s was not only a protest against economic deprivation, but also against a centralized and authoritarian leadership.⁴

This new type of leadership was not only typified by the kind of civic tyranny exercised by Johann Cornies but included an ecclesiastical dimension as well. Adolf Ehrt in his Das Mennonitentum in Russland makes the significant observation that by 1850 the landowning class in the older Mennonite settlements was in a position to elect its own members to all ecclesiastical and civic positions. A "Herrschaft der Wirte" (rule of the landowners) subsequently dominated not only the economic but also the religious life of the colonies.⁵ The Mennonite elders, often elected because they were economically self-sufficient and hence served gratuitously, invariably reflected the interests of their class. Obviously the formation of the Kirchenkonvent (Council of Elders) sometime before 1850 marked the creation of an ecclesiastical parallel to the kind of civic power exercised by Cornies. Without obtaining community consensus the elders designated their agency as the supreme arbitrator in all religious matters. The diarchy was now complete. Secular officials could now deal with dissent in cooperation with the Kirchenkonvent or simply instruct this body as to what action should be taken.

It was soon apparent that within the diarchy the church was subjected to the state. An interesting case in point involved the head of the Supervisory Commission in Odessa during the 1840s, Edward von Hahn. From the little we know of him he was certainly the tsar's man and did not hesitate to wield his master's power. Hahn's participation in the deposition of elder Heinrich Wiens of Margenau (1847) provides some enlightening perspectives. Wiens excommunicated several of his members for assisting in the corporal punishment of a youth after they were ordered to do so by the village mayor. The action apparently challenged the jurisdiction of the local civic authorities.⁶ Hahn visited Halbstadt on July 20th, 1846 and ordered Wiens to appear before him.⁷ Wiens immediately began defending himself on the ground that the Mennonite Privilegium guaranteed religious freedom. He implied that as an elder he

had exercised that right. Hahn disagreed. Ministers should not involve themselves in worldly affairs and like others in the community submit to established civic authority. When the elder once more sought to justify his stance Hahn curtly reminded him that he was "only a farmer (Wirt) with 65 dessiatines of land and as a farmer was subject to the major (Schulze) and also not exempt from corporal punishment."⁸ Turning to the rest of the assembled elders Hahn observed that if they held to Wiens he (Hahn) would make official representations aimed at abolishing the Mennonite Privilegium. He expected the elders to show their good faith towards established authority by appropriately dealing with Wiens. On August 14, 1846, Hahn wrote to Mennonite civic leaders in the Molotschnaya and reiterated that spiritual leaders should not "involve themselves in secular affairs" and that it was the first duty of every citizen "to obey the authorities appointed by the government."⁹

Wiens was not a rabble-rouser. His farewell sermon tells us that.¹⁰ Tactically Wiens may have hurt his cause by his brash talkativeness before von Hahn, but perhaps he won in the end. He would not allow secular authorities to dictate to his religious conscience. Hahn could only answer with threats of imprisonment and physical punishment. The other elders capitulated to civic pressure and deposed Wiens. In doing so they played into the hands of the Mennonite state and established a precedent for dealing with religious nonconformity. Less than two decades later district chairman Friesen felt entirely within his rights when he ordered a close surveillance of the new religious dissenters as though they belonged to a secret society.¹¹ By then the Mennonite elders accepted their submission to the state without protest. There was no longer a clear line of demarcation between religion and politics. When Friesen requested information regarding the reasons for the secession from Molotschnaya elders they cited the dissenters insistence upon personal interpretation of the Scriptures; private observance of the Lord's Supper; the corruption of the existing church. Taking no further note of the religious nature of the protest the elders noted that "Irritations and disorders could emerge if they continue as a free and new religious fellowship: and that we cannot give our consent to the formation and existence of a free and new religious fellowship within our Mennonite community."¹² Then, almost like medieval bishops, they do not wish to specify "what further treatment or punishment be applied" by civil authorities.¹³

Our analysis of mid-nineteenth century Russian Mennonitism has already suggested a second major element contributing to a shift in the Mennonite power structure--the union of church and state. An examination of confessions of faith drafted prior to their departure for Russia suggest that the Prussian Mennonites had not forgotten such historic Anabaptist distinctives as the believers' church, the separation of church and state and nonresistance. In practice, however, these concepts became institutionalized and ~~cred~~radicalized. Since the terms of Mennonite settlement in Russia eliminated outside pressures by granting virtual autonomy in matters of religion and local government, already tarnished ideals formalized further. An ironic sequel ensued. Historically dissent separated the Mennonites from the rest of society. Once apart they created their own social frame in Prussia as well as Russia, and the Volkskirche tradition,

against which their forefathers so vigorously protested, became comfortably established within their own midst. The Mennonite church in Russia became co-extensive with society and accepted as members all those within its political and social order. Religious volunteerism, so basic to the Anabaptist-Mennonite past, produced its own social frame in the Russian environment. Functioning within a self-contained system, the Mennonite community was not required to elect a religious or secular stance as the underlying base of its social structure because these interests tended to merge into one.

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The Mennonite marriage of church and state remained functional, perhaps even happy, for several decades. As long as either facet was not seriously challenged or forced to survive independently the Mennonite community appeared secure. The prevailing politico-religious system became regarded as sacred and inviolable and any religious nonconformity was interpreted as an attack upon the very fabric of Mennonitism. In a system somewhat akin to that of the Mennonites in Mexico today any deviation, civic or religious became a major threat. In retrospect it appears ironic that a subjective religious experience involving the independent celebration of the Lord's Supper posed a collective danger and that volost chairman Friesen instinctively invoked his civil authority and the provisions of czarist law to squelch an act of piety. In the Russian Mennonite community once radical religious ideals were molded to fit a narrow ethnic setting. The Mennonites who held religious and political power in 1860 were born, raised and elected to office within a self-contained world. They were simply not imbued with the ideals of the French Enlightenment. They had not rejected their God like some of the philosophes but were unfortunately not aware of philosophe ideals like toleration and freedom of thought, ideals for which their nonconformist forefathers paid dearly. The Mennonite bureaucrats of 1860, much like their czarist counterparts, were imprisoned by the genius of their own system and acted instinctively in defense of the only world they knew. Neither group could see beyond the structure which engulfed them. Some of the dissenters of 1860 interpreted the actions of Mennonite leaders as outright persecution directed against the true believers and as the blind hatred of the unrepentent and ungodly. As Bekker expressed it they were "the associate accomplices of those who persecuted their fathers---." Neither party seemed to understand that the tenuous balance between church and state had been fatally undermined when a segment of the community clamoured for religious independence.

The power structure of mid-nineteenth century Mennonite community was not only buffeted by religious dissent but by economic turmoil as well. The landless struggle of the 1850s constitutes one of the most reprehensible chapters in the story of Russian Mennonitism. Well over two-thirds of the landless proletariat despaired of ever improving their economic lot because the executive power to do so lay in the hands of the affluent minority. This same minority dictated the political authority structure, an attack on which was out of the question for the propertyless Mennonite. Two unrelated situations may possibly symbolize the same thing. The first involves the career of an Abraham Thiessen who was exiled to Siberia in 1874; fled to Switzerland in 1876; migrated to the

U.S.; returned as a U.S. citizen to Russia and was expelled. His crime: he vindictively fought on behalf of the landless Mennonites against landed Mennonite capitalism. His pamphlets and representations earned him the wrath of the Mennonite and czarist bureaucracy and the praise of the Party of the Peoples Will, the most radical of the Russian revolutionaries in the 1870s and 1880s.¹⁴

The second relates to the observations of Elder August Lenzmann of Gnadenfeld, a friend of the "brethren" before the 1860 split. With a tinge of polemicism he gave the following description of some Brethren services.

In their worship services there was disorder and capriciousness. Soon this one and then that one, regardless of sex or age, loudly expressed his view or prayed, while others expressed their approval with loud shouts like "Victoria!", "Gloria!", "Hallelujah!" or through handclapping, jumping and loud laughter--- At times in their services they make such unnatural tumult with shrieking (shouting), singing, making music, dancing and jumping, that neighbours and passersby came running to see if lives were endangered in the house.¹⁵

Lenzmann also noted that in Liebenau and Wernersdorf the otherwise sensible Johann Claassen and his friend Cornelius Reimer disturbed the worship services by "winking and smiling to one another during the singing and the sermon and usually after the service they addressed the congregation."

The two situations possibly have a common meeting point. Historiographically there is a tendency to express the propertied and minority view of the mid-nineteenth century Russian Mennonite experience and certainly for this segment there was much sweetness and light. But can we adequately comprehend the totalitarianism which controlled the life of the impoverished Mennonite? He was part of a corporate whole which allowed him no say in his destiny. In this setting might not the early Brethren and Abraham Thiessen have something in common, namely a desire to reassert their individualism? One party was ultimately successful in the religious field, the other failed in the political one. The proletariat struggled for freedom wherever possible and when they achieved it they celebrated boisterously. Certainly some of the behaviour reflected elements of the charismatic and pentecostal but was it not also a rampant individualism protesting the corporate structure dominating Mennonite life? As things turned out nonconformity was really only viable in the religious field. Inadvertently Lenzmann described the early Brethren as a democratizing movement emphasizing equality and free speech. Almost anyone "loudly expressed his view or prayed." He and his contemporaries would have found it difficult to believe that group consensus was a long claimed privilege in the Anabaptist tradition. By 1870 many Mennonites began to find new economic, religious and political freedom by settling on new frontiers. That alternative did not exist in 1860.

Intellectual Attrition

A second major characteristic of the C.1850 Mennonite setting in Russia related to the deep-seated and widespread intellectual attrition which coincided with the centralization of civic and religious power. In some ways this intellectual poverty is difficult to explain. Some of the villages were fifty years removed from frontier settlement. Furthermore the protracted migration from Prussia in the 1820s and 1830s did not consist solely of illiterate peasants.¹⁶ Yet in 1860 education beyond the elementary level was still the privilege of a few since there was only one high school (Halbstadt - founded 1835) in the Molotschnaya settlement. The entire publication record of this epoch includes the reprinting of an old songbook, several confessions of faith and some polemical tracts of the Kleine Gemeinde.¹⁷ By 1860 a few perhaps subscribed to Mennonitische Blätter in 1863, he noted with some annoyance that they ignored traditional Christian references like Hoffacker, Brastberger and Stark's Gebetbuch and favored the Friedensglocke and assorted mission pamphlets.¹⁸ Inadvertantly Lenzmann told us something about the kind of intellectual exposure influencing the average Mennonite churchman. The Mennonite intellect, like the contemporary economic and social world, was strongly rooted in the past. Writing to Mennonitische Blätter on July 28, 1862, elder Bernhard Harder spoke of the "self-satisfied preachers who do nothing in their ministry, except read a sermon occasionally, which, together with their position, has been an heirloom in the family for a half or a whole century."¹⁹ The evidence does not suggest they were not pious, only uneducated. Historically, reform is usually related to an inquiring mind.

A geographic situation may also have influenced Russian Mennonite piety. On January 1, 1856, only ten churches served the 48 villages comprising the Molotschnaya settlement. Among these were 12 villages with a population of over 400, yet only four of these had built churches. Villagers in a fifth met in a schoolhouse. A number of colonies had been founded as early as 1804-06 and only nine were established after 1824. Why did some of the larger villages not build churches for 35 or 50 years? Certainly the Prussian Kirchspiel idea played a role (i.e. one church serving several communities), but could ten churches adequately serve the needs of 17,516 people? Where did the 321 inhabitants of Lichtfelde go to church? Margenau (built in 1832) some 9 1/4 versts away or Pordenau (1828) approximately 21 versts distant?²⁰ Even in the 1890s many Mennonites only attended services once a month because the church was too far away. Besides shocking the sensitivities of "twice on Sunday and once in mid-week" North American Mennonites, the "church poverty" of the Russian Mennonites raises some fundamental questions as to the quality of their religious commitment. How often did the average Mennonite receive religious instruction or hear a sermon? What percentage of young people were baptized and on what basis? What kind of religious instruction was offered in the village schools? Did the Russian Mennonite of 1850 know what Menno Simons taught? Where could he find out?

Some of the elements traditionally cited as antecedents of the Mennonite Brethren movement could also signify a quest for a broader

intellectual horizon and greater religious depth. Sources like Friesen and Bekker tell us of the pietism of Bernhard Fast at Orloff; the Gnadenfeld Bible studies and temperance movements; the fellowship groups of Tobias Voth; the preaching ministry of Wuest; mission festivals; the apocalypticism which spawned the Templer movement in 1863 and again erupted as the ideological motivation of the great Mennonite trek eastward after 1880. How do we explain these "varieties of religion" within a small geographic framework like the Molotschnaya colony and within a restricted social structure? Some of these movements were certainly extensions of the religious ferment affecting other German and even Russian groups on the South Russian steppes. Stundism with its emphasis on small group Bible study and occasional revivalistic preaching was a constant influence from c. 1830 onwards and certainly must have influenced say, the ministry of Tobias Voth. Perhaps in mid-nineteenth century Russia the Baptists and others simply had more to offer than the Mennonites. Is it surprising that some Mennonites capitulated?

The Documents and the "Inner Story"

We have argued that in ^{the} past the emergence of the Brethren coincided with a widespread economic conflict within the Mennonite community. The movement it could be argued was part of a broad-based struggle against civic and ecclesiastic totalitarianism. On a rather different level it also constituted a reaction against the intellectual poverty, especially in religious ideology, which held sway. Whether these contentions can be adequately documented is probably debatable since the surviving primary documents relate only to the emergence of the group itself and supply little analytical data.

Today with little more than a documentary remnant at our disposal, it is difficult to share P.M. Friesen's enthusiasm about the richness of his historical sources.

"The material for the inner story, with its light and shadows, is so overwhelmingly numerous that the surviving contemporaries who in part participated in the events can scarcely imagine it. Large numbers of letters, documents, diaries, reminiscences, memoirs, etc., are on hand. Especially rich is the collection of letters (his own and those he received) of Johann Claassen of Liebenau, who died in the Kuban."²¹

The primary material relating to the origins of the Brethren fall into two categories. The first grouping encompasses the official correspondence, civic and ecclesiastical, related to the process of secession itself. In all likelihood these latter documents owe their survival to Jacob Mannhardt, editor of the German Mennonite publication, Mennonitische Blätter. In 1863, he published some twenty-two documents pertaining to the separatist movement which he received through "the kindness of a dear brother" in the Molotschnaya settlement.²² Bekker reproduces the Mannhardt material verbatim. P.M. Friesen's presentation of the documents differs somewhat from Bekker's, perhaps because he had access to other handwritten

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versions.²³ The second category of material involves personal memoirs and letters. In the early 1860s Mannhardt published several letters from parties in Russia who had direct contact with or participated in the secession movement.²⁴ These provide at least some indication of the climate of public opinion in the South Russian Mennonite colonies during the first years of the controversy. The only surviving memoirs are included in the recently published Bekker manuscript, which generally has the flavor of an eye-witness account and provides some helpful perspectives.

Was there additional material, now lost, which may have expanded our understanding? Elder August Lenzmann writing in Mennonitische Blätter observed the nonconformists only read Friedensglocke and the "mission pamphlets of baptized Christians."²⁵ The periodical does not seem to have survived nor do we know anything about the content of the mission pamphlets. Similarly P.M. Friesen quotes from the diary of one of the dissenters, Jacob Reimer of Gnadenfeld, another source apparently lost to the vicissitudes of time.²⁶ Whether such additional sources would have contributed to a better understanding of the movement is an open question. For the present we must assume our sources are as complete as they will ever be. How can they be characterized?

1. The majority of the documents reflect the actions and attitudes of a few. A highly stratified, self-contained religious community with a more autocratic power structure than we possibly care to admit, was confronted by a small dissenting group. From the very onset the protest was dealt within a legal-bureaucratic fashion because it directly affected the ecclesiastical and civic structure of the community. As such it became a personal conflict between establishment and nonconformist leaders. A few determined the stance of the many both during the struggle and for almost a century after. Antagonistic attitudes which separated the mother church and the dissenters for decades were initially based on a series of administrative documents in which the majority cries persecution and the majority cites seditious and unbecoming religious attitudes and practices. Later stereotypes held by either group were unfortunately based on the assessment of the actual events by a small number of observers and protagonists who left a clear record of their diplomatic strategy and happily included some of their ideological views.

2. Most of the surviving material is singularly in favor of the nonconformists. From an ideological standpoint they represent a plea for freedom of conscience and worship. The secessionists cite their desire for the restoration of such Anabaptist ideals as the believers' church with the appropriate emphasis on baptism and the Lord's Supper. By contrast the opposition offers no refreshing vision. They insist only on maintaining tradition and invoke the aid of civil authorities. The 20th Century Anabaptist, saturated with contemporary free church idealism as well as the nonconformist visions of his sixteenth century forebear~~ers~~, instinctively sides with the dissenters. Can we correct the bias of the primary sources? Unfortunately we don't know what went on in back of the documents. Did some of the Brethren deliberately try to offend the religious conscience of orthodox Mennonitism? Did the new group threaten civic and religious authorities with more than the loss of the Mennonite privilegium? Do

the documents represent a leadership quarrel or are they indicative of widespread public opinion? At present we possess insufficient interpretations of the quarrel from the contemporaries on both sides. Barring such a comparison of views, caution in assigning a precise degree of bias to the documents may constitute the better part of valour.

3. One further perspective characterizes the documents of 1860. They don't tell us enough about the insides of the people involved. Bureaucratic and administrative in nature, they offer few clues as to the theological - intellectual evolution of the early Brethren or of the extent to which their views were held within the Mennonite community. Was there more to the dispute than religion? Did family quarrels, competition for leadership or personal rivalries affect the schism? The surviving material provides no answers to such questions.

In approaching the sources we must assume their inherent veracity even if a bias is suspected. If the originators of the documents were crafty men, using religion in a bid for power or to remain in power, their theology was hopelessly apolitical and their strategy badly formulated. Their diplomatic tactics were an unqualified failure. The very naivete of the dissenters is probably the strongest argument for their sincerity. They were honest about their intentions and we must accept what they had to say about themselves.

The secession document of January 6, 1860, though it begins negatively by attacking the rest of the community as decadent and religiously inferior, adequately reflects a basic dimension in the experience of the early Brethren. In the context of their own circumscribed life style they personally underwent a revolutionary religious upheaval. This upheaval focused upon a tangible conversion; baptism upon the confession of personal faith; a circumspect life of discipleship. The dissenters affirmed a rediscovery of the Anabaptist distinctives contained in the writings of Menno Simons. Their convictions, they asserted, were "in full accord with our beloved Menno Simons." It seems unduly harsh to dismiss the references to Menno as blatant polemicism. Whether the later struggle between the rebel and the parent has conditioned us to blind loyalty or perpetual cynicism, a dispassionate reading of the secession document can only lead us to the conclusion that the nonconformists of 1860 meant what they said. The ideas they committed to paper constituted the essence of the gospel for them and were liberalizing and exciting.

Alien Influences?

In dealing with the origins question, Mennonite Brethren historiography has tended to minimize the element of continuity. Why can we not speak of the evolution of the Brethren? Most would agree the movement did not demonstrate the characteristics normally associated with revolution. There was no cataclysmic or overt action generating radical political and social change. The secession document was not a drastic innovation radically altering existing institutions and society. Could we not argue

that in 1860, as in most historical situations, the element of continuity was stronger than the element of change? Certainly this would somewhat minimize the uniqueness of the Brethren as religious innovators, but would it not be historically more honest? Were the religious quests of Mennonites in the 1840s and 1850s qualitatively different from the one which officially surfaced on January 6, 1860? They were all subjective spiritual pilgrimages evolving amidst an intense, restricted fellowship with like-minded villagers. The early Brethren, like the groups which preceded them, were basically interested in the personal enjoyment of religion and few were concerned as to where their group activity might ultimately lead them. In the early stages their theological evolution was gradual and flexible and certainly not without error. In their initial quest, which began well before 1860, the dissenters did not consciously rebel against the prevailing structure, for their experience was inward-looking consisting of Bible study and prayer. A stated theology was probably incidental to experience.

A social historian like Adolf Ehrt regards the secessionists as both Baptist and pietistically inspired.²⁷ Did alien elements intrude into the religious thinking of the early Brethren and alter some aspects of their Anabaptist-Mennonite orientation? Bekker, displaying the naïveté which so enhances his memoir as a primary document, makes short work of the Baptist question. He notes that on January 6, 1860, "we did not know any Baptist, nor did we know that there were any Baptists in the world."²⁸ He goes on to say "we were ignorant of and knew nothing about baptism by immersion until the first Sunday of September, 1860, when the question concerning baptism arose."²⁹ Bekker then lists a pamphlet on baptism given him by Johann Claassen, his own study of Menno Simons' Fundamentals and the consensus of some of the Brethren as determinative in his decision to baptize by immersion.³⁰ He is careful to point out that the initiative for Baptist - Brethren contact was an outgrowth of Baptist imperialism, inspired in part as Bekker sees it, by Oncken's ordination of Abram Unger in the Chortitza colony.³¹ Bekker's account cites one other instance of foreign "influence" upon the religious practices of the early Brethren. Fellowshiping with the Molokans they found the spiritual kiss practiced heterosexually. At first the Mennonite women, displaying their traditional modesty and no doubt afraid of bearded men, fled the scene. Later "our women did not withdraw timidly for the welcoming salutation" nor did the sister kiss "remain completely innocent."³² With some difficulty the Brethren later got "rid of this practice."³³

The ministry of pietist Eduard Wuest is traditionally considered determinative in the early theological evolution of the Brethren.³⁴ In dealing with this problem it is important to recall the widespread religious ferment criss-crossing the South Russian steppes in previous decades. The fact is that some residents of the Molotschnaya are pious before Wuest arrives. The Gnadenfeld Temperance Union has sought to deal with the liquor problem; the Templars have seen their vision of Jerusalem; Tobias Voth has organized fellowship groups, mission meetings and a Christian literary society. Pietist Wuest is something of a latecomer to the scene. His ministry begins indirectly via Mennonites who come under Wuest's influence in Berdovsk and then moved to the Molotschnaya. Here, as

Mennonite religious zealots they became Stunden-gaenger (Meeting-goers), temperance advocates, mission conference promoters and, if a Women's Missionary Society is indicative, they contributed to the partial liberation of the Mennonite woman. These activities, though occasionally reinforced by Wuest's visits, were indigenous to the community.

The Wuest saga raises an obvious but difficult question. Did external religious pressures assimilate a somewhat stagnant Anabaptism or did Anabaptism use these to suit its own purposes? In seeking an answer we should remember that the alien influences were not necessarily antagonistic to a Mennonite theology which stressed separation from the world (including Volkskirche) and the necessity of individually appropriating faith. We must not only allow for occasional ideological compatibility but try to determine how extensive and intensive the theological brainwashing really was. Unfortunately the evidence is rather circumstantial. The Molotschnaya settlement of 1860 experienced limited social mobility. Mennonite young men were not yet forced to leave the community for state service nor were members of the Mennonite intelligentsia being exported to Germany for theological study or to Russian universities for professional and technical training. The divisive literature needed to undergird a substantial ideological shift among leaders and followers alike simply did not exist. According to Elder August Lenzmann the only "outside" material read by the dissenters consisted of some mission pamphlets and the religious periodical Friedensglocke. In the three decades prior to 1860 the visits of foreign ministers, be they Quakers, Baptist, Pietists or British and Foreign Bible Society representatives, were sporadic.³⁵ Though these visitors provided a revivalistic impetus and periodic encouragement, the renewal itself was the end product of the Mennonite community's own religious evolution. These additives helped the Russian Mennonites to rediscover Anabaptism from within, but could hardly have exercised a determinative role.

In South Russia the Anabaptist legacy had a welcome though not always beneficial ally - the closed ethnic community. Did the individuals or groups who flirted with pietism in the 1840s and 1850s lose their ethnic consciousness or characteristics? Were alien influences able to force basic changes in the prevailing belief and social structure? Certainly a pietistic presence might imply a relationship and a relationship might imply a realignment or shift in identity. Knowing what we do today about the character of closed ethnic communities and their tenacious interest in self-preservation, however, it seems doubtful that even decades of pietistic influence substantially changed the colonist either before or after he joined the Brethren. It was inevitable that the forces of continuity were stronger than the forces of change. Most of the religious experiences precious to the nonconformists were rooted in the historic legacy of their own community. Unfortunately, the chief bulwark against foreign influence also contained some elements which were self-destructive. For many ethnicity meant orthodoxy. A conservative leadership resolved to maintain the status quo and allowed no further re-examination of the community's Anabaptist heritage. The dissenters, rejected by the majority, cast about in search of their own Mennonite identity. Their quest was not singularly free of shadows. By celebrating a private communion they generated a

cleavage within the Mennonite community which all but terminated the quietistic, evolutionary renewal of the past decades. In the confrontation which followed some aspects of renewal suffered a setback.

Premature Institutionalization

When the Brethren by a public act focused upon the restoration of the believers church with its judicious practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper, however, they inadvertently challenged the flexibility of the traditional Mennonite social structure. Why should the pious activities of a few threaten the entire community? Perhaps as in Luther's day a Volkskirche based upon a historic creedalism and embracing the entire community could not be expected to allow an independent group to flourish without defining itself. Religious renewal had barely begun for the dissenters when establishment pressures demanded they formalize their belief structure. In some ways this was fatal to the movement. The religious revolution had barely begun when its ideas were written down. Its theology was no longer evolving, dynamic or flexible. In a sense the Brethren substituted a creed for a gospel and their secession document already constituted a preamble to a confession of faith. A fixed structure replaced experience. Their protest against Volkskirche was in part neutralized as the new group fought for its place in the Mennonite world. A nonconformity born out of the dynamic of renewal all too quickly changed into a dissenting group with well defined ethical standards, a piety demonstrable in the community context and a theology which soon generated dogma out of such newly discovered experiential truths as the new birth and baptism. By forcing the renewal movement of 1860 to define itself almost at the moment of its birth, the Russian Mennonite community encouraged an orthodox stance on the part of the Brethren which squelched some dimensions that had been spiritually life-giving.

This premature concern with the delineation of doctrine had one unfortunate result. The group began to conceive of itself as different and unconsciously set out to prove it. A refreshing emphasis on the church of the brotherhood shifted to an emphasis on the separated church. Within a historic dissenting community, already ethnically isolated by the legal terms of its settlement in Russia, there emerged another group whose definition of nonconformity included separation from its own society. The early Brethren left one type of separation to generate another. When required to formulate a dogmatic basis for their stance, they took up a somewhat defensive, inward-looking position. Religious conversion seemed more dynamic than the faith achieved by a memorized catechism. It followed that the new baptism was more valid than the old and the new ethics more Christian than those practiced by the rest of Mennonitism. Out of the defensive stance of the early Brethren there gradually emerged the feeling that they were qualitatively better, religiously speaking, than the members of the old church. Historically this proved to be a most fatal legacy, separating the rebels from the parent community for generations.

We have argued that the early doctrines of the Brethren, especially the new birth and baptism on faith, were prematurely institutionalized. This does

not suggest that their dynamic was suddenly lost and their effectiveness ended. It may well imply, however, that certain innovative teachings which directed the Russian Mennonites to neglected aspects of their Anabaptist heritage now became a set of tenets undergirding an institution. What had been revolutionary ideas in the lives of individuals now became a part of the fabric of loyalties towards an institution. Some might even argue that the basic doctrines became sacrosanct and objects of worship.

A Revolution of the Poor?

One final dimension in our concern with Brethren origins deserves brief attention. Was it essentially a movement of the Mennonite poor? If some church registers designating the occupations of members had survived, answers to the question could be based on concrete data instead of inferences. Some information does exist, Bekker in his inimitable and uncontrived manner supplies some chance references. There was "Herman Peters the drummer,"³⁶ who was really a carpenter. Others included Johann Claassen who, at what seemed to be a moment's notice, bought a "closed model carriage"³⁷ to go to Kharkov; a Russian servant girl in Gnadenheim who helped convert the local pub owner;³⁸ "a landlord in the pastor's parish,"³⁹ converted in a prayer meeting in the Saratov area; the shopkeeper Jakob Mathies, whose wife physically attacked Bekker;⁴⁰ a number of school-teachers not identified by name;⁴¹ finally a Gnadenfeld minister who identified with the nonconformists before the split, who "although he was the wealthiest materially"⁴² had the confidence of the young people. Such evidence suggests the Brethren attracted a rather broad cross-section of society into their ranks. On the other hand the majority of the Brethren who moved to the Kuban belonged to the "poorer and the poor."⁴³ The Kuban colonists did not of course, represent all of the adherents of the Brethren. It was natural that the opening of a new frontier attracted mainly the landless.

Currently there is little additional information available on the economic status of the Brethren adherents. An inference from general studies on the nature of reform and revolution may provide us with a helpful perspective on the problem. There is widespread scholarly agreement that change or reform in history is rarely fomented by the very rich or the very poor. Usually a diverse socio-economic group known as the "middle class" is involved. Literacy, leisure and the lack of strong vested interests seem to provide a fertile soil for the growth of new ideas. Mennonite society in Russia featured the very rich and the very poor. The former held to the status quo while the latter were helpless victims of a highly stratified system. It is interesting that those who fought most vigorously against the group dominating the system, men like Johann Claassen, were not penniless paupers nor were they ignorant men intellectually speaking. Piety in 1860 was not the prerogative of any class, but relatively few had sufficient knowledge of the tactics needed to launch what appeared to conservative contemporaries as a revolution. Beautiful as a proletarian revolution may appear to some, such a movement rarely occurs in

human history. The poor participate only after the upheaval has been launched by others. Certainly the anger of the poor and the religious quest of the pious coincided in the 1850s and 1860s but it does not follow that a distinct cause and effect relationship existed. It was difficult to distinguish between the economic and religious revisionist as Mennonite civic and religious leaders found out. In practice, however, they dealt with them as two separate problems.

One lesson seems to emerge from a careful study of the origins of the Brethren. In his Law In History Cheyney writes: "Actual origins elude us; everything is the outcome of something preceding --- the immediate, sudden appearance of something, its creation by an individual or a group at some one moment of time, is unknown in history"⁴⁴ Mennonite historiography cannot be involved in a partisan polemicism on the origins of a given group. The debate will be endless. We should rather search for those elements of our past which constitute the continuity of our common heritage. In 1860 a "left wing" crystalized in the Russian Mennonite community. Initially it was subject to fragmentation, emotionalism and alien pressure. In the course of the next fifty years it would move towards a much more healthy view of such Anabaptist distinctives as non-resistance and the believers' church. Meanwhile the parent community began a protracted pilgrimage from orthodoxy towards a revitalization of the same ideals. By W.W.I both groups had met somewhere in the middle as their activities during the conflict and the holocaust which followed amply demonstrate.

NOTES

1. The sect typology of Ernst Troeltsch and the subsequent debates which his assertions generated fill many volumes. E. Troeltsch, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches (New York, 1960), II, 691ff. Names like Robert Redfield, Brian Wilson and J. W. Bennett are standard in the field. An especially useful definition of the term ethnic is contained in the report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Vol. IV, The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups (Ottawa, Queen's Printer, 1970).
2. The best study of early Mennonite settlement in Russia can still be found in D. G. Rempel, "The Mennonite Colonies in New Russia. A Study of their Settlement and Economic Development from 1789 to 1914," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1933).
3. J. Martens, "Statistische Mittheilungen über die Mennoniten = Gemeinden im südlichen Russland," Mennonitische Blätter, IV, no. 3 (May, 1857), 33. Adolf Ehart cites 5.18 as the average family size. Das Mennonitentum in Russland (Berlin, 1932), 54.
4. On the landless struggle see F. Isaak, Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten (Halbstadt, 1908), 27-86.
5. Ehart, 49 The power of the rich is also reflected in Heinrich Heese's (1787-1868) autobiography. C. Krahn (transl.), "Heinrich Heese (1787-1868)," Mennonite Life, XXIV, no. 2 (April, 1969), 66-72.
6. Isaak, 117-121.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 119.
9. Ibid., 114-116, "What did the congregation of the church elder Wiens do? It became involved in an affair which had no connection with the spiritual office; it condemned people whose only fault lay in the fact that they, in accord with their duty and conscience, proffered their obedience to those in authority: Ibid., 115.
10. P. M. Friesen, Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland 1789-1910 (Halbstadt, 1911), 119-128.
11. J. P. Bekker, Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church (Hillsboro, Kansas, M. B. Publishing House, 1973), Document 4, 50-51.
12. Ibid., Document 8, 55-57.

13. Ibid., 57. Some years ago Robert Kreider made a very significant contribution to the understanding of the Mennonite church in Russia in his article "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church in the Russian Mennonite Environment 1789-1870," Mennonite Quarterly Review, XXV (1951), 17-33. Taking the view that the Mennonite church in the Russian environment took on many of the characteristics associated with the Volkskirche concept, Kreider asserted that the emigrants coming out of Prussia brought with them "a quietistic, non-missionary Mennonitism which sought to preserve an historic faith by formalistic, tradition-honored means." 21. Once in Russia "they accepted a system of privileges which were bound to qualifications, not of faith, but of blood." 22.
14. On A. Thiessen's career see C. Krahn, "Abraham Thiessen: A Mennonite Revolutionary?" Mennonite Life, XXIV, no. 2 (April, 1969), 73-77. Also A. Thiessen, Die Agrarwirren bei den Mennoniten in Sued-Russland (Berlin, 1887) and Die Lage der deutschen Kolonisten in Rußland (Leipzig, 1876).
15. A. Lenzmann, "An den Herausgeber," Mennonitische Blätter, X, no. 3 (May, 1863), 33, 34.
16. A good example of cultural-religious reinforcement involves the migration of the Gnadefeld community in 1835, whose arrival in the Molotschna stimulated a greater interest in education.
17. Ehrt, 50.
18. Lenzmann, 33.
19. "Aus einem Briefe an den Herausgeber aus Südrussland" Mennonitische Blätter, IX, no. 5 (October, 1862), 53, 54.
20. Martens, 33; "Alphabetische Übersicht über die Entfernung der Kolonien des Molotschnaer Mennoniten = Bezirks: 1846," insert in F. Isaak.
21. Friesen, 165.
22. "Die separatistischen Bewegungen in Süd-Russland," Mennonitische Blätter, X, no. 1 (February, 1863), 11-16.
23. In the case of the secession document of January 6, 1860, he notes its publication in Mennonitische Blätter and observes that it is available in "various handwritten copies." Friesen, 189.
24. Mennonitische Blätter, IX, no. 2 (March, 1862), 24; Mennonitische Blätter, IX, no. 5 (October, 1862), 53, 54.

25. Lenzmann, 33.
26. Friesen, 203.
27. Ehrst uses the term "pietistischen Bruderbewegung." Ehrst, 57.
28. Bekker, 179.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 180-181.
31. Ibid., 182.
32. Ibid., 98.
33. See A. Kröcker, Pfarrer Eduard Wust, der grosse Erweckungsprediger in den deutschen Kolonien Sudrussland (Leipzig, 1903).
34. Ehrst makes a strong case for Brethren contact with outside groups. 56-61. But did such interaction imply as substantial a shift in identity as he implies? Geographic proximity; visiting delegations at conferences; the conversion and baptism of isolated Russians; a few leaders trained in Baptist schools; communion fellowship; an occasional Mennonite joining the Baptists -- do events of this nature occurring over several decades really change the members of a closed ethnic community. James Urry, researching the archives of the British and Foreign Bible Society cites evidence of Mennonite contact with the Society as early as 1821. F. H. Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1786 - 1920 (Toronto, 1974), 171ff. The Quakers William Allen and Stephen Grellet visited the Molotschnaya Mennonites in 1819. Their ministry found a widespread response. R. C. Scott, Quakers in Russia (London, 1964), 113ff. The Russian Mennonites had lived with alien influences of the West variety for more than three decades without substantially changing their theological outlook.
35. Bekker, 84, 85.
36. Ibid., 82.
37. Ibid., 100-101.
38. Ibid., 36.
39. Ibid., 96-97.
40. Ibid., 96-101. Two school teachers signed the document of secession.
41. Ibid., 27.
42. H. Friesen and C. P. Toews, Die Kubaner Ansiedlung (Steinbach, Manitoba, 1953), 17.
43. E. P. Cheyney, Law in History and Other Essays (New York, 1927), 11.

⁴⁶Elton Trublood, The Company of the Committed (Harper & Row, 1961),
p. 66.

⁴⁷Mennonite Encyclopedia, Vol. I (1955), p. 559.

⁴⁸A. H. Unruh, op. cit., p. 18.