5-2017

Mennonite COs Under the Russian Tsars (1787-1917)

Lawrence Klippenstein

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree
Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Eastern European Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol37/iss3/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
MENNONITE COs UNDER THE RUSSIAN TSARS (1787-1917)

By Lawrence Klippenstein

Lawrence Klippenstein completed his theological (BDiv) and earlier academic arts degrees to conclude formal studies with a MA and PhD from the University of Minnesota. He has taught at various places including Goshen College, Altona, and Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, and the University of Minnesota. Subsequently, he served as director and archivist-historian at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg. He did special research on Russian dissidents at Keston College in London, UK and in Moscow, Russia, resulting in a volume on Canadian Mennonite history, Mennonites in Western Canada, numerous articles, the dissertation, and most recently, in 2016, a book on which this article is based, *Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union Before WWII*. A major supplement is currently under preparation and will be in print shortly. Klippenstein has also served as a book review editor of this publication. He is currently retired and resides in Winnipeg, Canada.

This essay is a slightly revised talk given to the Altona History Seekers at Garden on Tenth on March 16, 2017.

The story of Russian Mennonite conscientious objectors (hereafter COs) is probably not well-known. It is a very important story because it explains in large part how it is that we now are Canadians and not Russians, why we live where we do, and why this “objecting” feature is still a facet of our lives today. Without the events of that story, none of us would be here in Altona, Manitoba, Canada, this evening, and in all likelihood, not be what makes us tick.

The Background for Mennonite CO service in Russia

You may, if you see fit, blame a sixteenth-century Dutch minister of the Reformation, Menno Simons (1496-1562), for giving strong utterance to a newly–discovered nonviolent, peace-oriented stream of biblical understanding in Northern Europe. In Reformation times, Menno was very much part of the so-called “Anabaptist” redefining of the Christian faith in his ministry and territory of travels.
This idea gained a firm footing among the Anabaptist-Mennonite leaders who led so-called “Mennonite” congregations through decades of precarious existence in that region.\(^1\) Here, the commitment to abstain from all forms of violence included strong resistance to, indeed at the outset, the blanket refusal, to bearing arms of any kind under any circumstances. This perspective on life, and attitude toward social and civic/political norms, became a hallmark of the entire Mennonite community.

On Polish lands governing authorities in particular, were, however, relatively tolerant toward minorities like the Anabaptist Mennonites who were really held in disdain otherwise, and not seldom persecuted, but often put to death in most other European countries at the time. Generally, people could not really grasp the idea of a community living peaceably as Menno proclaimed it, including what came to be called “non-resistance,” and a series of other reinterpretations of Scripture among his followers. The existence of pacifist thinking and teaching among Mennonites did not appear to trouble Polish ruling authorities unduly. It was possible to work out agreements of toleration and even exemption from military service with Polish kings, quite in contrast to the thinking of ruling Prussian kings when these became dominant in northern Polish lands.

Under the new ruling by Prussian kings, Mennonites soon realized that Prussian rulers had a strong bias favoring governing policy that called for building up a powerful Prussian army. They exhausted every source of getting new recruits as soldiers that they could lay their hands on

---

when possible, including the strong sons of Mennonite families. Mennonite leaders became more and more troubled as they increasingly noticed that more laws were being enacted by the Prussian rulers to resist appeals for legal recognition of non-involvement in military service. They saw more trouble ahead.

Then the Mennonites got an important break. Just as the Prussian situation was becoming increasingly more threatening, a solution seemed heaven-sent. It came from Russia, from the new tsarina, Catherine II. Right from the outset of her rule in 1762, she began to recruit West European farming types to take up settlement lands in sparsely-settled Central and New Russia (later Ukraine). One of Tsarina Catherine’s immigration agents, Georg Trappe, learned about the West Prussian Mennonite farmers and others who were unhappy in their situations under Prussian kings. He went to check it out in the Danzig area, and set out at once to persuade the locals to gather up people interested in leaving Prussia to go to New Russia and resettle there. Trappe reported his successes to the royal Russian court and was given the green light to proceed.

He also discovered immediately that the Prussian authorities opposed his idea of taking hard-working people from Fredrican Prussia to New Russia. Still, after carrying out a scouting trip to New Russia with two delegates, Jacob Hoeppner and Johann Bartsch, to check out the options in New Russia, and meeting the governor, Grigorii Potemkin, the scouts were ready to recommend the move. Before returning, they had worked out a charter of settlement (called a 20 Point Petition) with Potemkin. The scouts said if the governor would accept the petition, a large

---

group of Mennonite families would prepare to move to New (South) Russia immediately. It should be underlined here that the scouts had been informed by the tsarina’s public manifestoes (the most recent one of 1785 included) that the terms of settlement (later called a *privilegium*) included protection of their right to freedom of worship and also exemption from military service. The scouts added the words “for all time” to the exemption clause, and got assent of that emendation also.

Adding this wording was not a casual restatement. Hoeppner and Bartsch understood them to be a solemn word of assurance from the royal court that would apply to the community as long as the tsars ruled in Russia, and would be regarded that way by all future Russian heads of state. With the signature of the governor soon to be bolstered by that of the tsarina, Catherine, herself, the scouts had every reason to believe that this primary charter now permanently established the kind of contract they needed to bring home to Prussia. Their people would now realize that they had all the backing and security they needed for a protected legal and permanent domicile in New Russia. In the last days of October, 1786, the first pioneers prepared to board ship at Danzig and be on their way.

The year of the scouting in New Russia, 1786, thus became the founding year of these Mennonite peace–questing colonies in their new world. The actual move of several hundred families to a place to be called Chortitza on the lower Dnieper River would follow in a year or so. The ensuing sojourn under the jurisdiction of the Russian tsars would endure for almost 130 years. It may not have been the best of all possible options for a new home. However, it would
endure for more than four generations with a deal which completely freed them from military service under the tsars through that entire time. 3

The details of pioneering in a strange new setting, as well as establishing their own cultural milieu and community organization must be left for another occasion, as their future was unknown to all. The Mennonites of New Russia could not have known, for example, that the Russian tsars would take them all through six minor and major wars before a different and much worse cataclysm would engulf them, and their peace theses would be tested as never before. The tsars themselves would be gone by then and new leaders would take them all in a direction none could have anticipated when they made the move over a century before. 4

In this further discourse, our theme can be meaningfully linked to these military ventures. Each one of the wars impacted the new Mennonites as it did other Russians in some form. In each one, the issue of military service would need to be looked at by the Mennonites and by the leaders of their new adopted homeland. In my further comments, I want to put a magnifying glass up close to each of these half-dozen military situations to see what each one of those encounters looked like for the Mennonites closer up, especially as it concerned their exempted military service privileges prevailing throughout these embattled occasions.

The Vanishing Turkish Front, 1787-1792

The lands which the tsarina wanted settled in New Russia included large areas that had belonged to Turkey until just before the Prussian Mennonite emigration took place in 1788-89.

---


4 A skeletal discussion of these military encounters can be found in numerous treatments of Russian history. A title that has endured through at least five (?) editions in Russian historical studies in English-speaking countries is Nicholas V. Riasonovsky, A History of Russia (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, Fourth edition).
Seemingly, Potemkin, the local governor, viewed this region as quite secure when he virtually opened this entire region for inspections by the land scouts, Hoeppner and Bartsch. It was clear when decisions were made about the settlement availability of the Berislav region that the new immigrants would travel through not too far away from what was once the front, where Turkish and Russian armies had fought fierce battles not many years before.

In fact, when the first immigrant families approached this region where they would find their destination by earlier arrangements, they were told by Governor Potemkin that because of the recent war with the Turks, they would not be able to settle as arranged with Heppner and Bartsch on their initial tour. Potemkin simply told the leaders then, the former land scouts, they would need to move on further up the Dnieper River where they would be given a place to settle down. He told them he was sure this area would meet their needs. Whether the change was actually required because of real existing dangers, or was made for other reasons which Potemkin was keeping secret, has never been quite discerned by historians even today.⁵

As it turned out, this “full satisfaction with the new site” never happened. Some emigrants certainly will have had immediate reservations about the security of the whole region. Not too surprisingly, many of the travelers actually blamed Hoeppner and Bartsch for this fiasco, and never quite forgave them for this “big mistake.” This war had already dealt them a bitter blow. Their response was not nearly as peaceful as it ought to have been. Most of the emigrants were so upset that when they got to the place newly assigned to them, they refused to unload their goods and settle down. With the little Chortitza River running right through the settlement area, it seemed to be all hills and valleys, completely useless for farming which they wanted so badly to do. They were given places and food to survive the winter, while Hoeppner and Bartsch

⁵ The career account of Governor Potemkin and fairly detailed descriptions of the progress of subjugating the former Turkish possessions to Russian rule, are found in Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Potemkin: Catherine the Great’s Imperial Partner* (New York: Random House Inc./Vintage Books, 2005).
chose places for new homes and began building at once. They got some of the best spots in the whole area as a result. There were no guns on hand to start a real rebellion, but feelings were remembered that may well have affected responses to the tsar in the next war he had to face not much later.6

Napoleon’s March on Moscow, 1812

Napoleon’s march on Moscow in 1812 was meant to be the start and finish of conquering all of Russia. But, all of Moscow was burning when he got there. Russian governing authorities and most of the population had fled east. Winter had come and provisions for the army and animals were nonexistent. Napoleon knew they had to retreat and did so. This invasion displayed for all to see the greatest defeat the powerful armies of Napoleon had ever known. Ninety percent of his military force was left behind, either dead or imprisoned, as the remaining 60,000 were starving, and freezing French and allied soldiers who had crossed the Russian border now headed westward or home. Only a handful made it all the way.7

The Mennonites residing in New Russia lived far removed from the conflict. Still they were made aware of the tsar’s struggle when they got his “invitation” to gather “contributions” of money for the government to help defeat the dreaded invader, Napoleon. When the village mayors sent around the offering baskets to their villages, the response was hardly overwhelming. There was, of course, no call for Mennonites to become regulars in the tsar’s army because the Privilegium promising exemption from military service remained firmly in place.8 The majority

---

6 See also the discussion of these pioneer years in James Urry, None But Saints, The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1889 (Winnipeg, MB: Hyperion Press, 1989), 34-63.
7 Familiar commentary on the war is found in Leo Tolstoy’s well-known novel, War and Peace. See also the notes on Napoleon in Riasonovsky, A History of Russia, 693 and index references.
8 Around 1800 Paul I had confirmed the Charter of Settlement of 1787 with a formal document that came to be called a Privilegium in which the tsarist commitment to permit Mennonites total exemption from military service held central significance for the Mennonites. It would become the mostly highly-prized document in the archives of
of the village leaders, however, believed they could hardly ignore the directive from the tsar altogether. It would be seen as the highest order of ingratitude to their tsar.

There was in fact no strong consensus among Mennonite leaders as to what would be their obligation given the exemption they had been granted. Indeed, one of the younger ministers, Klaas Reimer, who had moved to Molotschna from West Prussia not many years before, forthrightly announced his belief, quite strongly held, that any help given to the war effort by Mennonites would be an unbiblical act. He clearly included the recent call for contributions from the tsar to be the sort of thing not to do, if gifts were given that needed to be condemned. He remained a lone figure among the leaders, with that view. While certainly creating hesitancy for some villagers, it did not, however, totally prevent a collection from being held, and the total (no record available) was sent on to the tsar. It is very possible that some gifts in kind went along, though records do not give details on that.  

This event no doubt caused Reimer a number of concerns and misgivings he had about church life in the Mennonite settlements. In the same year that Napoleon entered Moscow, Reimer called fellow believers and followers of his to form an independent worship group not subject to the established Mennonite leadership. Though supported by a strong co-leader, Cornelius Janzen, the group remained small, and in popular parlance came to be known as the “small church” (*kleine Gemeinde*), a title some descended followers of Klaas Reimer hold to this day. The actual peace-making power of calling for peaceful living remained to be tested again in other arenas at another time.

---


89
In future times, however, when the exemption issue came to the fore among Russian Mennonites, it tended to be persons from this “small” group who would most readily declare themselves willing to challenge state authorities when state policies seemed to threaten the old Privilegium arrangements in any way.

The Crimean War, 1853-1856

The most dramatic early challenge for Mennonites to serve under the terms of the 1787 and 1800 Privilegia sprang from the challenges of the Crimean War, as Russia fought to hold back an invasion by Britain, France, Austria, Turkey, and Prussia in 1853-56. Fought this time in the general proximity of the Mennonite “mother” colonies, Chortitza and Molotschna, the issue of military service was brought much closer to home, arriving with an impact that no other military engagements until then had made on the foreign colonists, including the Mennonites of New Russia.

Beginning the invasion with a naval attack on the Crimean shoreline in the extreme southern border of Russia gave the Western Allies an early advantage. It offered easy access to the Russian mainland, albeit at a very heavily–fortified site, namely the seaport of Sevastopol. For Russia, it was a losing battle from the outset. Fighting here involved long distances that Russian supplies would have to be transported, with open shelling of Russian ports readily possible all along the northern coastline of the Azov and Black Sea littoral. Russia was not at all prepared for another war, and the successes of putting down rebellious elements elsewhere in
eastern Europe may have led the tsar to a “resting on laurels” that was not really compatible with realities of the military situation.\textsuperscript{10}

The second (some would say, the first) version of the Mennonite \textit{Privilegium}, handed to the Mennonites by Paul I in 1800, had expanded a clause to make more explicit what kind of responsibilities would accrue to Mennonites if they were in the path of moving war materiel and personnel. The \textit{Privilegium} as amended called for Mennonites to assist transport by keeping roads and bridges in good repair and by offering transport help if needed in battles fought during such wars. As it happened, the location of the new settlements, Chortitza and Molotschna, put them directly in the path of troop and other movements headed for the battlefields of Crimea. The colonies were also well resourced with various provisions and supplies that were of real importance to the Russians at war. Hence, not surprisingly, almost immediately after the outbreak of the war, Mennonite village reeves received orders from the top Russian war authorities to notify each village to prepare to transport goods and soldiers to north shore Crimean War depots and battle lines.

Without undue delay (again leaning on the good organizing abilities of Mennonite property holders), then came hundreds of sturdy wagons and teams to pull them, and drivers to direct all transports, as thousands of loads of hay and other fodder and supplies for Russian soldiers moved southward toward designated destinations of Russian supply stations and action lines. These same vehicles with their drivers were then instructed to load wounded soldiers to take back to the colonies to be placed in clinics, homes, and wherever aid could be given to prepare them to rejoin their comrades in battle. The wagons tended to travel in convoys, often through mud and swampy areas so they came to known as \textit{podvods}, i.e. loads travelling through

\textsuperscript{10} Lawrence Klippenstein, “Mennonite Pacifism and State Service,” 32ff. and his \textit{Peace and War: Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union before WWII, and Other COs in Eastern Europe} (Winnipeg, MB, Mennonite Heritage Centre, 2016), 33-54.
mud and water. It could take several weeks to make a trip to the front lines and back. Hundreds and thousands of loads were going and coming back with whatever needed moving. A small allowance was paid by the government for each trip, drivers, and other expenses. Whether weapons themselves were moved with the podvods is not clear (one guess is probably). Large amounts of money were raised by the colonists to pay for sundry expenses and sent for general use to Russian government coffers to pay war costs. No one was recruited from Mennonite communities to do any shooting, as far as one can tell from the sources. Some deaths resulted among drivers and other Mennonite families by disease or accidents like drowning, etc. (but no statistics are available). There is some evidence, however, that people from Kleine Gemeinde congregations had again raised questions, at least privately, about whether inappropriate compromise of Christian principles was involved in the manner that aid for the war effort was asked for by authorities, and given by Mennonite leaders during those war years.

It could be added that there was very considerable published acclaim among Russian military leaders for the willingness of Mennonites to help the war effort in this way—something in fact that would be remembered for many decades to come. Notable too is the fact that Mennonite leaders had visited Tsar Nicholas I, who remained in office almost to the end of the war, (died 1855) to get assurance of his support for the Privilegium. He had wondered, it was said, why Mennonites thought this promise of earlier tsars, and the tsarina initially, might at some later time come under duress or be revoked.

As a matter of fact, the Mennonites were greatly relieved when the war ended in 1856, and the war support they had been asked to provide was no longer needed. The Privilegium remained intact as a new tsar, Alexander II, took over in 1855 and called for an end to the war.

11 An account of Mennonite involvements in the war has been published in James Urry and Lawrence Klippenstein, “Mennonites and the Crimean War, 1854-1856,” Journal of Mennonite Studies, 7 (1989), 9-32. See also George K Epp, Geschichte der Mennoniten in Russland, 1820-1874 Band II (Lage: Logos Verlag, 1998), 83-112.
There is no record available suggesting that the Mennonites then went to him to also get assurance that he would honor the commitment of the government to give military service exemptions to Mennonites as earlier Russian rulers had done. In fact, the war had not only drained the Mennonite colonies of resources. It had brought benefits to them also. They would take note of the attractive large unsettled open areas of the Crimean lands, ready for settlement if it could be arranged. They made new contacts for marketing goods. They learned notable things about a much larger Russia with greater needs among peasants than they had been aware of earlier. And they got to know specific individuals who would be able to give good advice later on, like General von Totleben, about whom more will be said later.

Among the negative results of the war for Mennonites, as it turned out, was the fact that the war turned out poorly for Russia. The Russian generals had seen Russian soldiers fight bravely, but realized they had lost most of their battles on the field. They were terribly embarrassed to see their own armies cut to pieces, seemingly very inferior to those of the other European regiments. Tsar Alexander II was easily convinced by his Ministry of War advisors that Russia was very badly in need of an overhaul of its military, all the more so because they noticed their not-so-friendly neighbor, Frederican Prussia, was steadily strengthening its army also.¹²

The New Military Law

The Mennonites learned about changes coming in Russia’s military policy almost as quickly as the press made the news public in 1870. Also almost as quickly, some Mennonite leaders who had personal connections in Prussia decided that these moves might be hard to deal

¹² Efforts to strengthen Russian military strength are discussed in Forrest A. Miller, Dmitrii Miliutin and the Reform Era in Russia (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968).
with by Mennonites leaders. After a rather hurried investigation of what was in the works, these leaders, guided by a certain Cornelius Janzen, a grain buyer and consul of Prussia living in Berdiansk, had decided that likely there was no point in even discussing the matter with the tsar’s ministers and that the only way to deal with this challenge was to leave the country.\textsuperscript{13}

In a matter of weeks, perhaps months, they found other church leaders who agreed about the move. The whole discussion for these people now firmed up around the decision to leave Russia, and possible big problems ahead by doing so. This was still a minority view however. Many more of the Mennonite ministers agreed to meet, first to discuss what the proposed new legislation really said, and whether it was in fact an attack on their \textit{Privilegium}, including an end to the service exemption arrangements which had held so far.

Time came to begin discussions with the tsar and his representatives on what to do about this situation, given the Mennonite \textit{Privilegium}, which was still the law of the land. The fact that this issue was very quickly beginning to split the total Mennonite community was very easy to see. During the next four years, 1870-1874, when the proposal for new military regulations moved toward enactment as law, innumerable meetings among the Mennonites would lead nearly a dozen different delegations to visit representatives of the tsar or try to see the tsar himself to explain Mennonite concerns about the new laws. The tsars, of course, would have much preferred to have them all come together in one group (and in the minds of some ministers, present their concerns in the Russian language). Each one of the groups sought to remind the authorities of the contract “for all time” which had been signed and affirmed by the royal court for the past century and a half or more. Each group expressed the hope of Mennonites that this

\textsuperscript{13} The early phase of Mennonite reaction to the news about military reforms is dealt with in Gustav E. Reimer and G.R. Gaeddert, \textit{Exiled by the Czar: Cornelius Jansen and the Great Mennonite Migration 1874} (North Newton: Mennonite Publication Office, 1956). See also Lawrence Klippenstein,“Mennonite Pacifism and State Service,” 22-82.
contract, the *Privilegium* given by Catherine II and Paul I, would remain in effect as once made by the tsars and confirmed by the tsars as time went on.

They never really got a straightforward promise, confirming that the 85-year-old agreement would remain law, and no changes to it were being planned. Then the break came. Sometime in the spring of 1874, with the new laws now enacted, the word was passed to all Mennonite settlements that a special messenger from the tsar was on his way to deal with the matter once and for all. The messenger turned out to be General Eduard Ivanovich von Totleben who had learned to know and appreciate Mennonites whom he met as *podvod* drivers and nurses’ aides during the Crimean War. Totleben knew that by this time, thousands of Mennonites were either already on their way to North America or would be leaving very shortly. In fact, the first group to meet him when he got to Chortitza was the Bergthal people, wanting only to know when they would get their visas to leave the country. He also knew that the majority of the Mennonites, about two-thirds of them, had not yet decided to leave. The new war regulations for Tsarist Russia had, indeed, become law of the land, but it still was not clear exactly how it would affect the Mennonite colonies and the promises of the tsar made to them regarding military exemption.

The people who had decided to leave the country were very busy getting ready to go. A delegated group, who had come back from visiting Canada, in 1873, to look at the opportunities there, gave a very positive report of the prospects. A *Privilegium* almost like what the tsars had given them, definitely including complete exemption from military service was promised by the Canadian government, and with it came very generous offers of almost free land, much of it

---

ready for immediate cultivation. Excitement in that group was rising fast. In fact, some who
headed for the United States had already left Russia. Large numbers were expected to follow,
some to the USA also, and others to Manitoba in Canada. Then, still in spring, came the striking
news that a special emissary was coming from the tsar himself in St. Petersburg to settle this
whole question once and for all.

The general, von Totleben, who had just arrived, tried to encourage the Mennonites to
stay. Speaking quite fluent German, the general then thanked the people for trusting and
supporting their tsar so well during the Crimean war, and coming out now to hear him say what
Tsar Alexander II had to tell them about future plans for improving the lives of the Russian
people, and allowing the Mennonites to also keep a free conscience about theirs. Von Totleben
then assured his listeners that their concerns about how the new military laws might affect them
had been heard, and he was now authorized to give them all an idea to consider as a solution to
the dilemma of having to now deal with what was called universal military conscription.15 He
then made it clear that complete exemption from serving the country during war time, as the
Privilegium had once put it, was no longer possible. But the tsar had found another way to solve
the dilemma. He was giving them permission to serve the country in ways that did not involve
carrying lethal weapons. The tsar, said von Totleben, was prepared to offer them a choice of one
of three other kinds of service: one was working in state workshops, another was working in
forestry maintenance camps, and the third was working on other state projects like building
roads, etc. Each recruit would need to put in the same length of time as regular army recruits, get
a small salary from the government, and do the kind of work the Mennonite churches would
prefer to support. The Mennonite communities would need to pay for housing, upkeep, and
certain other miscellaneous expenses.

The New Alternative Service Program

After a period of deliberations by smaller local groups, the churches told von Totleben that they would be ready to accept the forest camp option as a service alternative for their young recruits. Very pleased to hear this feedback, von Totleben prepared his report to the tsar, and set out to provide personnel to work out smaller details of a comprehensive program to make this plan work.

Among the terms of the preliminaries of this new plan, the Mennonites were told they would be given ten years of time in which to set up initial facilities for the men to be brought to certain locations after the camps were completed. These ten years would also be open years for the emigration to North America to be completed. 1880 was set as the end of the open period. That is when the emigration to North America would end.

By that time, about a third of the Russian Mennonite population did in fact leave to go to Manitoba in Canada and several western states of the USA. About 7,000 persons ended up in Manitoba and about 10,000 in the USA.

The program outlined for the forestry camps took shape with involvement at ten or more camp sites, six major ones to begin with, near major settlement centers in the Russian guberniias (provinces) of Taurida, Ekaterinoslav, and Kherson. At least six smaller camps were added over the years. Mainly the work involved tree planting and care of existing plantations on the still largely bare steppes of South Russia. A special service unit was created for dealing with vineyard diseases along the coasts of Crimea and road building in new areas of settlement. Dealing with individuals’ needs recruited for service, finances and other administrative needs would occupy the Mennonite congregations consistently from now on. A special “Forestry Commission” was set up to handle these matters. It would remain active for a time even after the
war ended. All the Mennonite groups, if they remained in Russia, had to work together as one body to make all this happen. Ultimately, the mounting living costs and upkeep of the facilities that fell on Mennonite home church treasuries would come to a virtual crisis point for the community as a whole. The introduction of a revised taxation system for the colonies after 1900 helped to ease the situation somewhat. It is clear, however, that some debts accrued by the program never did get paid during the period of its existence in the tsarist era. The venture had been costly and the costs were not always evenly divided among the property holders. Not all agreed it had been worth it, but most, it would appear, did think it had been. The men in the camps did not always appreciate their “alternative,” but on the whole made the best of it. Some claimed it had taught them much that was useful for their later lives.

The last camp to open was constructed in 1914 in Siberia near the town of Issyl Kul on the Trans Siberian railway. One can find traces of the camp there even today, we are told. You can see its location on your forestry camp map. World War I broke out about the same time so it operated only for about four years.\textsuperscript{16}

The Russo-Turkish Balkan War, 1876-1878

Among the open military conflicts of the nineteenth century, the Russo-Turkish Balkan War of 1876-78 may seem like little more than a blip. It did, however, have its bearing on the emigration, especially for those heading for the United States. In the mid-seventies, Russia fell heir to what one correspondent to North American newspapers called “the fluctuating situation regarding Turkey.” A possible confrontation in the Balkans did create Mennonite involvements in preparations for fighting there. The Halbstadt volost prepared to outfit a 100-bed hospital to be furnished at their own expense. Monies were gathered to help suffering Christians in the

\textsuperscript{16} Lawrence Klippenstein, “Mennonite Pacifism and State Service”, 153ff.
Balkans. Some Russian papers expressed gratitude for emerging Mennonite support even before war was officially declared in 1876. A call for transport aid got immediate response. A letter assuring the tsar of full (not weapons, of course) Mennonite support in the war was sent to the tsar. The Treaty of Stefano brought the conflict with Turkey to an end in 1878. Later that year, Mennonites sent representatives to Simferopol to offer congratulations to the tsar for what Russia had achieved in the fighting.\(^{17}\)

**The “Small War” with Japan, 1904-1905**

Starting up an unprepared war with Japan was largely meant to distract people from growing internal unrest and talk of revolution, i.e. ousting the tsar. Hostilities with Japan in the Far East had been simmering for some years. The tsar, now Nicholas II, was well aware of growing problems of fighting on his western frontiers, and was reluctant to open another front, but finally gave in.

Large numbers of ill-equipped and poorly trained soldiers (still mostly peasants) were sent off to the Port Arthur battlefront (now South Korea). A large flotilla of ships set out to travel to the South China Sea to destroy the Japanese navy. Some Russian generals and others grumbled about their foolhardy tsar, and this terrible mistake, but the gung ho “hawks” (as we call them) felt certain that Russia would win and that morale in the country would then go up quickly.

As a matter of fact, the war did create quite a lot of enthusiastic support among the people, with the help of anti-Japanese propaganda, and what was being promoted as an easy

---

victory because of Russia’s huge army, and Japanese people deemed unlikely to enter a fight with the “Russian bear.” As it turned out, Mennonite newspapers also stood solidly behind the war decision, sharing the voices which spoke of how the tsar had been abused by the Japanese, and some, of course, sensing how a quick victory would boost the tsar’s wavering control over his people and shut out a revolution at least for a time. Mennonite ministers encouraged young men to volunteer for medical services. Their communities raised a total of 300,000 rubles to help the hospitals and some fifty Mennonite men volunteered to leave the forestry camps and help in a German hospital which had been set up as a mobile clinic on the Far Eastern front line. One doctor, Nicolai Friesen, died of exhaustion and probably disease during his work period on the front.

In the end, the Japanese proved to be much more powerful fighters than the Russians, and the Russian ships sent out to do battle there were nearly all sunken before they could do any damage to the Japanese. Losses of Russian soldiers were huge. It soon became evident that Russia was losing and that Nicholas II was ready to make peace before the disaster became any worse. An end to the fighting, partly negotiated with American help, came in 1905. For the Russian Mennonite COs, it was the opening up of another area of service, that is, in hospital work, which caught the imagination of many Mennonite young service recruits. Hundreds of them had become totally disillusioned with the meaninglessness of forest work. They did see meaning in helping the wounded and were warmly welcomed in those ranks. For some time now, many young men had been looking for some kind of service more challenging and more directly helpful to their non-Mennonite neighbors in Russia who were laying down their lives on the front lines.18

---

The “Big War,” World War I, 1914 – 1917

The Mennonite forestry camps had been in operation for more than three decades when World War I broke out, and Russia became involved immediately. Very quickly too, hundreds of thousands of wounded soldiers needed attention. To deal with that need, several large civilian organizations agreed to take over the equipping of hospital trains for that task alone and to organize a country-wide system of taking them to, and back from hospitals situated inland. Again, Mennonite leaders ordered their CO service recruits to volunteer, and especially recommended medical aid involvement.

Then came the suggestion from Russian authorities that Mennonite COs might be prepared to take over part of this task. Mennonites and Russian authorities alike agreed that this could work well. A new Moscow office on Nikitinski Street was set up to coordinate the transportation and other aspects of this new initiative. A regional hospital was set up in the Ekaterinoslav area, and one Jacob Esau was appointed as regional director for Mennonite wartime assistance. A certain Armin Lehn from Chortitza took on the job of a Moscow CEO (we would say today) i.e. directing the Mennonite side of the venture with Russians, providing personnel for other needs of the operation like doctors and on the field administration.

Very soon, hundreds of trains were moving back and forth between the front lines and hospitals further inland to deal with the wounded, and their transport back to the fighting areas in the west. It was dangerous work—the shelling, disease rampant in the army, exhaustion from overwork, etc. It is estimated that 120 or so COs lost their lives at the front and otherwise in hospital train and related action. Meanwhile, entire Mennonite communities were pitching in to

See also Helmut T Huebert, Mennonite Medicine in Russia 1800-1930 (Winnipeg, MB: Springfield Publishers, 2011), 145,155.
raise funds to provision these trains and give other aid. Those not of the age groups to be recruited for active service gave their energies to helping Russian and other farmers with sowing fields and bringing in harvests, and other kinds of neighborly assistance to non-Mennonite families. Hundreds of thousands of rubles were collected to help needy families and other aspects of assistance for the Russian population.

Very considerable pressures faced Mennonites and other Germans in Russia throughout the duration of the war. Very soon, all German-language publications were shut down including Der Botschafter and Friedenstimme. Meetings of larger groups using the German language were forbidden. Rumors of Mennonites serving as German spies floated about the country-side. New laws were passed expropriating German lands in large parts of the country. Huge numbers of German families from western parts of Russia migrated eastward. Many stayed in Mennonite homes right through the war. In the end, only a very small part of Mennonite property was affected.

Mennonite COs on duty were given a choice of staying in the forest camps or joining hospital trains. About half of the Mennonite recruits chose the one option, with the other half staying in the camps to a total of about 15,000 men. Many Russian forestry officials vigorously resisted the departure of their men to work on trains. The war nevertheless gave hospital train service priority. Many Mennonite men were greatly relieved to get this alternative to what the camps had called for until now.

In the meantime, the revolutionary movement headed by Lenin was making headway as it became clear that Russia was losing this war; the home front was falling apart, and the government itself became less and less able to handle the military crisis and other huge problems.
in the country as a whole. Domestic services began to deteriorate quite rapidly. By the end of 1916, it was quite clear that Russia would be losing the war on her front at least.

The Russian government, as it was by then, was being dominated by the Tsarina Alexandra allied to her strange companion, Rasputin (which is another story). They and others in high places were working to end the war by now, even as the tsar and some of his supporters were saying they must fight on. Russia’s allies were pushing them in that same direction as much as they could. Lenin arrived in Petrograd by then and was waiting with his forces for the right moment to seize government reins and take over control of all Russia. When the tsar decided to personally go to the front and lead his country to victory, the end came quickly. Other political powers (not yet Lenin though) took more and more control and finally sent the tsar a message in early March, 1917, that the only useful next move for him to make was to abdicate and let others take over the government. Nicholas did so almost immediately and his family was taken into custody by the Bolshevik forces, and was executed in July, 1918. He had attempted desperately to find a successor but found none except Michael II, a brother, who resigned after a day on the throne. With that, the period of the ruling tsars of Russia had come to its tragic, inglorious end. 19

Termination of the CO Camps

The new, so-called Provisional Government was now led by a socialist, Alexander Kerensky. He appointed new ministers, to a democratic cabinet, and decided to keep the war going, as a socialist but still legitimate body of rulers, to keep the country together. But it was too late. In a matter of months, Lenin had pulled together key leaders of Bolsheviks to take over

key posts and led from there. Before that happened, in October, 1917, the Kerensky government informed all Mennonite COs that they were free to terminate their service work and return home. Most medical workers did so immediately and with them, many of the foresters. Some of the latter stayed to deal with last-minute tasks in the camps and then most in 1917, and some in 1918, made their way home as well. Camp property was mostly auctioned off or sold, some taken home perhaps, or some appropriated by neighboring Russians. The Mennonite forestry service council functioned for a time with discussion of large debts they had outstanding with the forestry program, and how the returning men from the camps could be helped to find their way back into civilian life as soon as possible. 20

Many discussions took place when the young men returned from service and began to raise serious questions about the needs of Russian people and the challenge of helping the poor and needy with resources so bountifully remaining in Mennonites’ hands. Such “revolutionary talk” was sometimes difficult to deal with by the Mennonite elders and older leaders of the churches.

Many memories of those days and experiences would survive in the lives of persons and their descendants who emigrated to other countries during the Soviet period and later. It is interesting to observe that many features of the World War II Canadian Mennonite CO service arrangements for exemption from military service closely resembled the system which had been first crafted in Russia, and so to speak, tested there, by Mennonite COs of the tsarist era, which ended in 1917.

20 Details are still lacking on how all the “loose ends” of terminating the alternative service program for COs in tsarist Russia came together. Some information has been gleaned from Russian Mennonite alternative servicemen. They are referred to in Rudy P. Friesen with Edith Elizabeth Friesen, Building on the Past: Mennonite Architecture and Settlements in Russia/Ukraine. Revised Edition (Winnipeg: Raduga Publications, 2004), 649-62, and Waldemar Guenther, David P Heidebrecht and Gerhard J Peters , eds. “Our Guys:” Alternative Service for Mennonites in Russia under the Romanovs. Trans. by Peter H Friesen, Keewatin, ON, Canada n.d. from the original published in 1966 as “Onsi Tjidels”. Ersatzdienst der Mennoniten in Russland unter den Romanovs. (Clearbrook, B.C.:by the editors, 1966).
A new book* was written recently to tell more of the story and commemorates this year, the end of Mennonite CO service under the Russian tsars. A fuller evaluation of the wider impact and significance of the work of the conscientious objectors awaits.

* See Peace and War. Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union Before World War II and Other COs in Eastern Europe (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Mennonite Heritage Centre, 2016), pb., 367 pages, $25.00 CND, $30.00 US including postage if sent out of Canada. A CD and online versions are also available.

To get a copy of one or more of these versions, contact lawklippenstein@shaw.ca or phone 1-204-221-6473. If no answer, leave a message.