Review of Klippenstein's "Peace and War, Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union before World War II, and other COs in Eastern Europe"

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Lawrence Klippenstein, *Peace and War, Mennonite Conscientious Objectors in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union before World War II, and other COs in Eastern Europe*, Winnipeg, MB. 2017. 367pp. $30.00 including postage outside Canada. Self-published in limited spiral bound edition, and also available in CD format and online. All editions are available from lawklippenstein@shaw.ca

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This book by Lawrence Klippenstein consists of a collection of essays on the topic of peace written during his long career as historian and archivist. In particular, the essays focus on the objection to war on the basis of religious conscience. This collection of essays, self-published in a limited edition, makes a significant contribution to understanding the witness to peace, and the history of conscientious objection to war in Russia/Soviet Union and in other Eastern European countries.

Part I includes chapters from Klippenstein’s Ph.D dissertation which have not been published elsewhere. His dissertation was entitled, “Mennonite Pacifism and State Service in Russia: A Case Study in Church-State Relations 1789-1936,” (Minneapolis, 1984). Part II consists of articles which grew out of Klippenstein’s research during 1984-86 when he was seconded by Mennonite Central Committee to Keston Institute, London England. (Keston Institute was established to study religious life in Eastern Europe during the communist era.) This research at Keston Institute focused on witnesses to peace and conscientious objection to war in various communist countries in Eastern Europe. Both parts of the book conclude with a bibliography. All articles are liberally footnoted.

The nine chapters in Part I begin with a general discussion of the Anabaptist Mennonite pacifist heritage, and then follow the Mennonite story from its beginnings in the Netherlands, to Poland where Mennonites negotiated their first exemption from military service, to Prussia

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where exemptions were difficult to acquire, and to Russia where Mennonites were again exempted. (Klippenstein uses the term pacifist, acknowledging that Mennonites have historically preferred the term non-resistance.)

The next four chapters deal with different episodes in the Mennonites’ struggle to maintain a peace witness. Chapter 2 focuses on four letters written by the Prussian Mennonite delegate, Johann Bartsch, on his trip to inspect Russia. Chapter 3 provides an eye witness account of the Mennonites’ substantial non-military contribution to Russia’s Crimean War effort. Chapter 4 discusses the Russian government’s termination, in the 1870s, of the exemption from military service which had been promised as being “for all time.” And chapter 5 describes the launch of the forestry service as the alternative to military service. Three chapters deal with Mennonites and war. Chapter 6 discusses Mennonites in Russia during World War I when the forestry service was transformed into a medical corps. Chapter 7 deals with Mennonites’ response to the violence of the Machno forces in the years 1918-1920, by forming a Mennonite militia, especially in the Molotschna settlement. Chapter 8 provides insight from a diary by Jacob Janzen about Mennonite resistance to the formation of a Mennonite militia. And chapter 9 concludes Part I with a discussion of the termination of the CO option within the Soviet Union in 1936 in Stalin’s New Constitution.

The first essay in Part II provides a general overview of the struggles in Eastern European countries to gain exemption from military service. In chapter 11 the author discusses the valiant efforts in Hungary, during the years 1975-85, by Father György Bulányi, the leader of a Roman Catholic basis community, to gain exemption from military service. His greatest opposition came from the Hungarian Catholic bishops who feared reprisals from the government. In chapter 12, Klippenstein deals with protests against military service in the Soviet Union and in the German
Democratic Republic (GDR) during the post war era through to the mid-1980s. In the USSR, men from various pacifist backgrounds, like Jehovah Witnesses, Reform Baptists, True and Free Seventh Day Adventists, some Pentecostals, as well as Mennonites increasingly objected to bearing arms or swearing the military oath. The Soviet government sentenced objectors to lengthy prison terms. In the GDR, the government provided alternative service for conscientious objectors by creating non-combatant Baueinheiten (construction units) under military command. Those who demanded full exemption were given jail sentences.

Part II concludes with three short historical surveys of peace witness. The first discusses the emergence of peace movements in Poland in recent years. In the second essay, the author describes the Doukhobors’ burning of their weapons in the Caucasus in 1895, and the local government’s harsh response to this dramatic act of defiance. This repression caused about a third of the Doukhobors, 8,000 in total, to emigrate to Canada and settle in Saskatchewan. The third essay discusses the British Quakers’ vigorous reengagement in the larger issues in British society after some years of disengagement. Specifically, Quakers made a concerted effort to prevent the Crimean War by publically challenging the British government to seek peace, and by sending a delegation to meet with the Russian Tsar Nicholas I to try to influence his policy. The author concludes that neither initiative bore much fruit.

The book ends with two personal reflections; one on biblical teachings about peace, and the other about the many new ways in which the message of peace is expressed today. Klippenstein suggests that a future edition of this book may follow, which would include photos, maps and an index. In this book, Lawrence Klippenstein presents his conviction that a witness for peace can be a powerful force in society. In most of the articles, he discusses the issue in terms of exemption from military service. But it is clear that exemption from military service is
rooted in a much broader view of biblical peace making. As such, Klippenstein’s book can be an inspiration to many who value biblical pacifism, and see it as an important witness in a violent world.