

## MENNONITES AND MISSION IN EURASIA

Walter Sawatsky

### Too Many Misconceptions

Eurasia became the new “whitened unto harvest” mission field after the great transformation of 1989. No where else in the world did evangelical mission societies cooperate as extensively, raise so much money (\$60 million), and send so many workers (nearly 2000) in the space of a mere half decade. It was also a failure of major proportions.<sup>1</sup> Evangelical missions must now shoulder the blame for the subsequent xenophobic reaction against western, especially American missions, for the troubled relationships with existing free churches in the former Soviet Union regions, and even the renewed visa difficulties of recent years. Many of the missions to Eurasia drew notice because of the singularly poorly trained workers, who arrived with very minimal knowledge of the historic past and of the great test of faith so many believers had been through. This contrasted sharply with the reputation for broad experience that those established mission societies had gained elsewhere in the globe. The primary factor accounting for this unfortunate story, was the degree to which attitudes and information had been framed ideologically: the iron curtain had fallen, communism had been defeated by the good West, and now the Christianization of Russia would start.

How were the Mennonites implicated? Have there been mission initiatives worth reporting and pondering, worth learning from? The analytical survey that follows seeks to examine Mennonite patterns with an awareness of the larger picture.

One of the misconceptions too often encountered is that the post-Reformation Mennonites from north Europe who had moved eastward and became the Russian Mennonites after 1789 promised not to do mission. They kept their promise and it was their downfall, so the misconception. So when Viktor Fast as spokesperson for the Russian Mennonite delegation to the 1990 Mennonite World Conference in Winnipeg, Canada stated that “we Russian Mennonites have sinned” for not having shared the Gospel with the neighbor, parts of his audience had the misconception reinforced. Fast was in fact

---

<sup>1</sup>Of the critical reviews that have recently appeared, the most theologically and missiologically helpful is Donald Fairbairn “Book Review: Glanzer, Perry L. *The Quest for Russia’s Soul: Evangelicals and Moral Education in Post-Communist Russia*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2002.”, *Religion in Eastern Europe*, Volume XXIII, Number 5, October 2003, 51-58.

---

*Walter Sawatsky, Professor of Church History & Mission at AMBS, and Director of its Mission Studies Center, is also East/West Consultant for MCC, teaching and traveling to East Europe and the former Soviet Union semi-annually. This paper was presented as a substitute for a number of new missiologists of Anabaptist orientation in the region who had hoped to attend the conference held in Elkhart.*

announcing major new mission initiatives, many of which continue to the present, because after a 60 year legal prohibition against missionary work, they were now hoping to enjoy freedom of religion. During those 60 years missionary activities were greatly circumscribed, but many of the martyrs suffered precisely because of their missionary work. It was after all the witness of the believers of Soviet Russia, that accounted for the widespread desire to explore Christian faith everyone was talking about in 1989. Rather consistently the reports about Mennonites in Russian imperial and Soviet state archives complained about their missionary tendencies.<sup>2</sup>

### **Missionary Defined**

Here I will limit myself to two meanings of missionary for Russian Mennonites and fellow evangelicals. On the one hand, their entire life as religious and cultural community was known by the rest of the population as formed by their faith. They refused to serve in the military, instead found ways to do alternative service that led to the organizing of whole person ministries. Others kept moving further east on the Russian imperial frontier, or later fled to parts of Siberia and Central Asia in order to escape religious persecution. So the witness of their community became known in those regions as well. Already in the Ukraine, their habit of gathering for Bible study, as did other pietist colonists, is widely regarded as stimulating the birth of the *Stundist* movement, which became a major part of what is more generally known as the Evangelical Christian-Baptists. Today, after more than a decade of learning to know what a Baptist is supposed to believe and think, according to the brand of the missionary they encountered, those Evangelical Christian-Baptists are more consciously affirming a theology and practice rather close to Anabaptist-Mennonites, including the bias toward pacifism. No where in Eurasia did Mennonites organize separate Bible schools or seminaries, rather those from Germany and North America who became involved in teaching missions tended to work in support of the newly formed schools.

The other more obvious meaning of 'missionary' has to do with organized outreach ministries. Even though Russian Mennonite historical studies are not yet as comprehensive as they could be, we do know that the network of associations with pietist missions learned in Poland/Prussia continued in Russia. The settlers needed time to get established, but Bible society activity involved Mennonites as early as 1813, later the Baptist missionary society in Britain that drew support among Dutch Mennonites, also had contacts with the Russians. By the 1860s the first foreign missionaries followed Dutch Mennonites to Indonesia - Russian Mennonites continuing to send and support workers into the 1920s, and the last Russian origin missionaries ended their work when World War 2 ended the mission work

---

<sup>2</sup>For details, see Walter Sawatsky, "Mennonite Sectarians in the Eyes of Russian/Soviet Authorities: What the Official Archives Reveal", in Daniel Heinz & Denis A Sdvizhkov, eds. *Postizhenie ideala: Iz istorii mirotvorchestva I intelligentsii. Sbornik pamiati T. A. Pavlovoi*. Moscow: Institute of General History, Russian Academy of Sciences, 2005, 93-117 [in Russian].

in Indonesia. The newly organized Mennonite Brethren were more noticeably active in local outreach, several of their number were key leaders in the new Slavic Baptist union, first formed in 1884. There were also ties to mission in India, and the eventual taking on of churches in the Hyderabad region from the Baptists was due to the Russian connection. According to Hans Kasdorf's broad review of this story,<sup>3</sup> the MB and Mennonite churches were discussing mission theory by the late 1860s, notably the degree to which missiology and ecclesiology belonged together, or whether the point was to preach for conversions and leave church formation and nurture to be resolved situationally. By 1910 formerly divided Mennonite conferences were cooperating, and during the general evangelical growth spurt of the 1920s, Mennonites shared in evangelistic ministries with traveling tents, organized Bible schools, fostered Bible and other publications through Raduga Press. Also in the 1920s there were attempts to reach indigenous tribes in Siberia and Kyrgyzstan, including some Bible translation attempts.

When most forms of life and witness were forcibly suppressed after 1930, Mennonites went through their greatest testing. When church life began to recover after the ravages of World War II, the revival story among the Soviet Evangelicals featured many Mennonite preachers, including women organizing churches or keeping the fellowship going after ordained men had been arrested.<sup>4</sup> Many families were separated during the forced relocations of Germans, resulting in some children left alone in Kyrgyz and Kazakh villages to survive with the help of merciful local tribes. Such family relationships later influenced the ways in which witness among Kazakh and Kyrgyz people became possible. When a new period of state repression of religion under Khrushchev began around 1959, precipitating a split in the evangelical community, the dissident and more missionary wing revealed a disproportionately high number of Mennonites. Most prominent was Georgi Vins, but the structures of the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (CCECB), the regional bodies in Karaganda oblast, Kazakhstan, in Slavgorod Siberia, around Novosibirsk, and in Kyrgyzstan were dominated by persons from the Mennonite community. When Friedensstimme Mission emerged in the late 1970s in Germany as arm of assistance to the CCECB in the USSR, virtually all the key leaders were "Mennonite". True, by then, they had learned to denigrate the AUCECB churches and the Mennonites for a lower order of piety, but that sectarian predilection could be seen to reveal a common Mennonite trait.

### **New Mission Initiatives After the Great Transformation**

The freedom to be missionary was claimed by many groups and individuals several

---

<sup>3</sup>Hans Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich. Mission der Mennoniten unter Zaren und Sowjets 1789-1989*. Bielefeld: Logos Verlag, 1991. See especially 102-12.

<sup>4</sup>For illustrations see *Soviet Evangelicals*, chapter 2. Hilfskomitee Aquila published the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of liberation from the Kommandantur system in August 2005, detailed histories appeared in *Aquila* magazine pp 18-31, including a detailed biography of evangelist Peter Engbrecht (Viktor Fast, "Peter Engbrecht (1908-1977) - Ein berufener Prediger", *Aquila*, 3/05 (Juli-September 2005) 23-24.

years before it was legally permitted. The most active were the Charity societies that sprang up in the second half of 1988, the Millennium year of Christianity in Russia. Their style, epitomized by the Latvian Christian Mission, was acts of charity in giving relief to the poor, visiting shut-ins, starting youth centers to counter the drug culture, and organize evangelism meetings - usually in the guise of a celebration of the millennium - in order to introduce a seeking public to Jesus Christ. These were broadly ecumenical mass evangelism events. Those millennium celebrations could not be stopped on December 31, but continued into 1989.

Well, 1989 was also the year for the 200th anniversary of the Russian Mennonites. It was the independent Mennonites (Kirchliche), independent Mennonite Brethren, and Mennonites within the Ev. Christians-Baptist churches of Karaganda, Kazakhstan who came to Zaporozh'e Ukraine and negotiated permission to celebrate their bi-centennial. By the time Mennonites in America learned about these plans, the regional ECB union in Zaporozh'e had already circulated fliers to every resident, not only in the city of Zaporozhe, and we had to scramble to do our part together with Mennonites in Germany to get the truck load of Bibles to the stadium in time for the event. Many have seen the event as depicted in Peter J. Dyck's *Dreams and Nightmares* video, fifteen minutes of historical reflection, and an hour of gospel preaching (by Viktor Hamm's father Gerhard) and singing to an audience of 10,000. As late as a decade later I still met people whose life had changed through that event.

Later such millennium celebrations in Omsk, Orenburg and Karaganda itself, marked the start of a continuing process of evangelistic outreach. By 1992 the first euphoria was past, but the methodology of evangelistic meetings in large halls, or using a tent when traveling from village to village throughout the summer has continued to the present, though with steadily decreasing returns. One of the most prominent Mennonite involvements developed when Viktor Hamm, for a decade already a radio preacher in Russian, became the translator for the Billy Graham visit and then played a leading role in the organization of Vozrozhdenie (Revival) as part of an ongoing training in evangelism. Hamm remained with the Billy Graham organization to oversee such training initiatives, until he became overseas director for MBMSI in spring of 2005.

Mennonites had long had a reputation as more organized and systematic when compared to Ukrainian and Russian colleagues. So it was not a surprise that in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (particularly the Karaganda and Shchuchinsk oblasti) the mass evangelism method soon shifted to an every home approach. But it was not unique to the Mennonites and they invariably worked cooperatively with other Evangelicals. In the ECB Unions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan the leadership from 1990 to the present has been Mennonite, with Frants Tissen and Heinrich Vot the most prominent, respectively. Tissen in Kazakhstan organized a five year plan for church members to visit every home, and every few years organized a mission conference where vigorous preaching to inspire calls to commitment,

and testimonials from the field, sustained the high energy of their work. In Kyrgyzstan, a mission named Ray of Hope, which had already engaged in cross-cultural and multi-linguistic work during the Soviet years, was now fully absorbed into the ECB union, then became the bridge through which Kyrgyz congregations and the mixed Ukrainian, Russian and Germanic ECB churches cooperated.

The other area of high energy was in Omsk, where within a few years, the 25 congregations of an independent Brethren union had started at least that many mission stations in surrounding villages. This too was a badly depressed area, never seriously incorporated by the Orthodox, so that most conversions were from quite total religious ignorance to Christian faith as understood by this Mennonite community. The Omsk Brethren (a common designation for them) maintained close ties to the ECB union based in the city of Omsk, the latter staffed by better organized and trained leaders, it turned out, and they regularly kept in touch with the Mennonites who were part of the Shchuchinsk ECB community in Kazakhstan, and also regularly kept in touch with the increasingly separatist Reform Baptists in Slavgorod region.

#### **Theological Education and Mission**

Allow me to sketch out a few patterns that developed, that show how widespread was the idea that theological education is mission. The Omsk Brethren had sustained their integrity by keeping their distance from the Moscow Baptists and schools, and now after 1990 were in touch with German and North American Mennonites, but also kept a bit of distance. So there was funding from abroad to improve local publishing houses, where Bibles, commentaries, and even a biography of Menno Simons in Russian was reprinted. The Omsk Brethren started holding their own winter Bible Schools, assigning a number of their younger leaders the task of reading what materials they could find and presenting lectures to the leadership group. In Kyrgystan in contrast, the Ray of Hope mission started a Bible School with dormitory, printing press, and radio studio, deliberately offering a theological program for the pastors and missionaries in their midst, and by the end of the century were offering cross cultural courses, addressing the issue of mission in a Muslim culture. Another group, with Viktor Fast a key figure, organized visiting lectureships for German professors, usually teaching in the area of philosophy or science, but who were practising Christians, who interacted with the educators and students in the schools of higher learning in Karaganda region.

What made much of this possible was the fact that between 1987 and 1993 well over 90% of the Soviet Germans with ties to Mennonites had emigrated to Germany (about 100,000). Negatively speaking, this mass migration had emptied out churches. Positively speaking, children or earlier and current emigrants returned as missionaries, but now armed with some theological education. Other emigrants sent money and goods. The ministries in Kyrgyzstan, Karaganda, and in Orenburg were soon totally dependent on that German

financial and personnel connection. It differed from the near total dependence of so many Russian and Ukrainian churches and schools on western mission largesse between 1994 and 2001, because the dependency was less asymmetrical. That is, the culture gap was narrower, the familial intertwining was so deep that consulting and communication remained rather high. The Aquila Mission has turned out to be the main link. Although its leaders have encouraged theological education, its quarterly magazine is filled with archival materials and articles reflecting on the Soviet experience, but the grass roots flavor is its most pervasive element. One of the largest bodies of Mennonites in Germany, claiming over 20,000 active members, and calling itself simply the Bruderschaft, has developed its own mission organization, Bible school, youth and service programs, while avoiding the administrative trappings. Hence its impact back in the Eurasian regions of origin of its members is hard to measure statistically.<sup>5</sup>

Another mission that arose at the time of the Transformation was Logos Mission. At first it concentrated on theological education by extension. Its leaders, such as Johannes Reimer, Andrei Rempel, Heinrich Loewen and Peter Penner had discovered an MB connection, managed to obtain an M Div degree from MBBS, returned to Germany and to ministries in Russia while some of them also pursued doctoral degrees, Reimer and Penner were David Bosch students. Logos began publishing books, Reimer, for example started a series of biographies of early Russian Mennonite missionaries. One major focus was to start a TEE center, at first in the Ukraine, then they moved to St. Petersburg where today the school is called St. Petersburg Christian University. Penner was its academic dean during its most formative years, currently the President is Alexander Negrev, whose doctorate in Old Testament set him on a course where he was organizing a conference in 2005 on Old Testament textual sources involving Orthodox scholars and some from the West.

The St. Petersburg Christian University, at first interdenominational, then aligned itself with the large Russian ECB union in order to strengthen its ecclesial accountability. Soon its leaders were meeting regularly with the leaders of Baptist seminaries in Moscow and Odessa, and with a similar school in Donetsk Ukraine which had ties to the Reform Baptists initially, to the ECB union and to the group in between, now known as the united independent ECB churches. Out of this pattern of consulting there emerged the Euro-Asiatic Accrediting Association (EAAA) that quickly became more than a straightforward accrediting association. The EAAA took over the management of an oral history program started earlier with the four schools in cooperation with MCC and the Int. Baptist Seminary in Prague. It managed a wide ranging book publishing program (Bibleiskaia kafedra) through which translations of materials into Russian for use in schools became possible.

---

<sup>5</sup>Although details have appeared in various publications, including in the recently published *Mission in the Soviet Union*, edited by Walter W. Sawatsky and Peter F. Penner, Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2005; my construction here is based as much on semi-annual travels in the region since 1990 in my work as MCC consultant.

Bosch's *Transforming Mission*, for example, appeared in Russian a half dozen years ago. It held theological consultations, bridging the long standing divide between Pentecostals and Baptists, and produced scholarly journals where the new professors in the schools were learning to become thought leaders.

This is a fascinating story in which the Mennonite dimension is not easily disentangled from Evangelical Free Church, Baptist, and even Pentecostal influences. To illustrate, the first leader of the Odessa College and Seminary, told me in quite straight forward fashion when we were negotiating with his new publishing house to print the Old Testament Commentary series, that he and his group were proudly conservative, not like the Moscow Baptists and the Mennonites from the west, but we could cooperate. At the time his main sponsors were dispensationally oriented Slavic immigrants in America closely tied to Dallas Theological Seminary. In 2004 that same leader from Odessa was spending a half year sabbatical at Fresno Pacific University, and on his return resumed oversight of a project to translate the essential writing of Menno Simons together with a book of essays that included contributions by scholars like Peter Penner and scholars from the schools in Russia, such as a teacher in Omsk, Konstantin Prokhurov, who is currently working on a historical dissertation from the University of Wales but administered by the IBTS in Prague.

Also at IBTS there are a growing number of students, some of them Russian German Mennonite, others Russian or Ukrainian, who share the theological orientation that the IBTS professors describe as anabaptist-baptist. So it is quite natural that Peter Penner has organized the next conference on mission education, with the title *Anabaptism and Mission*.<sup>6</sup> We can imagine some of the contours of the discussion since we know that Wilbert Shenk is the keynote lecturer, but the Russian student/scholars can be counted on to offer a perspective (and a set of footnotes to go with it) that presents yet another side of the global meanings of an Anabaptist perspective on mission.

### **Summary Observations**

So were the Mennonites part of the bad or the good mission record? That is a worthy question we should seek to address more directly than is our normal style. The point is not so much to name the programs, or even the mission agencies (possibly even Mennonite ones) whose efforts are not very worthy, but to keep attempting to frame the question - what makes for good mission?

In this survey the North American involvement got very little mention, which was due not only to the inner restraint about tooting one's own horn, but I have found myself thinking so often that indigenous work, and secondly the partnerships with west Europeans, seem to offer more depth, and will be more lasting. There was always a difference when listening to the witness of the local, formerly despised believer, and when listening to the

---

<sup>6</sup>January 30-February 3, 2006, in Prague, Czech Republic.

well-suited and technically equipped western Christian. If for a brief time, the one with the techniques, the laptop and too many books was rendered excessive respect, it began to sink in that the authenticity of those who had lived and still lived with them, who shared the fateful unknown future of still more unemployment and corrupt governments, was the sister and brother worth having. There is a conscious contextualizing of the Gospel underway in Eurasia, and it is a bit daunting when an Anabaptist perspective is what the new theological leaders want to consider. Usually they do not mean thereby a detailed review of 16<sup>th</sup> century events and writings, but an appropriation of the reform impulses from those creative times in western Europe, and from the legacy of the earlier Hussite movement, as they have begun to notice how the people from the Anabaptist legacy conduct themselves today.

The past decade and a half has involved quick experimentation with things like mass evangelism, radio, traveling libraries, camping and so many other programs. What we have watched come to consciousness, has been this attempt to anchor the life of faith in solid nurture. For some that means keeping a healthy distance from too much book learning. For others, it means facing into that fear of new ideas, and seeking and finding the idiom whereby the leaders of society come to take a Christian option seriously, not merely to do what we can to keep the little flock from disappearing.