

Mennonite Migration to Russia

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To describe and understand the Mennonite migration to Russia, we do well to first understand their beginnings during the Reformation and the initial migration of thousands to Poland/Prussia.

Already in the 1300s and 1400s there were several people that started pre-reformation thinking even though the really noticeable change began mainly with Martin Luther. Previously there were men such as William of Ockham, John Wycliffe, John Ball, Jan Hus, and Sir Jon Oldcastle. This all took place with very few Bibles available since they were all hand written and cost about a year's wages. During this time Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press. In 1456 Johann Gutenberg printed the first Bible which was the Latin Vulgate. In the late 1400s, several noteworthy priests were born, namely Martin Luther in 1483 in Eisleben, Germany; Ulrich Zwingli in 1484 in Wildhaus, Switzerland; and Menno Simons in 1496 in Witmarsum, Netherlands. They all had access to the newly printed scriptures. This access helped open the doors to the Reformation.

Historians mark 1516-1517 as the approximate beginning of the Reformation. The first two significant events marking the beginning of the Reformation are Erasmus publishing the Greek New Testament in 1516 and Martin Luther posting his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517 after Martin had studied the scriptures for years.

Starting in 1519 priest Ulrich Zwingli initiated the Reformation in Switzerland as he began thoroughly studying the New Testament. He advocated reform but moved slowly only with the consent of the Zurich city council. Some of his keen students disagreed with Zwingli's approach and began meeting alone for Bible studies. During one such meeting, one of the students, Georg Blaurock, asked another, Conrad Grebel to baptize him. Georg then also baptized the others. So on January 21, 1525, "Anabaptism" was born. "Ana" means "re." These men were re-baptized as adults after their confession of faith.

By this time Zwingli strongly opposed his radical students, such that persecution began of the Anabaptists. Zwingli himself became part of the target and was killed during a battle against the Zurich forces. Conrad Grebel began preaching in various centers including baptizing a huge group of followers at St. Gallen in the nearby Sitter River on April 9, 1525. He died in August, 1526 of the plague. Georg Blaurock also began preaching and was burned at the stake on September 6, 1529 near Klausen in Austria.

As a result of preaching, Anabaptist beliefs spread widely in many parts of north western Europe. Charles V had become the Holy Roman Emperor in 1519. He did not approve of the Reformation. So persecution was especially prevalent where staunch Catholic monarchs reigned. After 1525, persecution forced the Anabaptists to flee in all

directions. There were pockets of Anabaptists in Switzerland, along the Rhine, and especially in the Netherlands. Also in the history of the Anabaptists was the radical warlike group at Muenster which tried to form a kingdom on earth. They were defeated in June 1535.

Sometime after the defeat at Muenster, Menno Simons became recognized as the peaceful leader of the Anabaptists. Menno Simons had become a priest in 1524 in Witmarsum, Netherlands, where he was born. He began doubting some of the churches customs in about 1526 and started noticing the Anabaptist theology and the pious lives and deaths as a result of persecution. In 1535, 300 Anabaptists were slaughtered just 2 1/2 miles from his church in Witmarsum, Netherlands, one being his brother. Finally in 1536, he made a public statement about his own Anabaptist stance and renounced his priesthood.

Menno became a marked man and fled with his family, stopping and living in cities such as Emden, Cologne, Wismar, and Wuestenfelde. During this time he taught and preached all the way from Flanders to the Vistula Delta. He wrote and published about 24 books and pamphlets including his best known book *Foundations of Christian Doctrine*. During this time, the Anabaptists were constantly being repressed in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, and the rest of northwestern Europe. Many would move from one village to another where they could seek haven until they were forced to move again. Since Menno Simons provided much of the leadership for the Anabaptists, they were being called Mennists, Mennonists or Mennonites. One thing to note is that Martin Luther continued the church-state relationship which gave him local protection from the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Emperor. Menno Simons and the Anabaptists did not want spiritual affairs to be controlled by secular authorities and, because of Muenster, they never had a chance to convince the authorities that they were peaceable.

The more tolerant areas were northeast Germany and Poland which included Schleswig-Holstein and further down the coast as far as Danzig and Koenigsberg in Poland. The Vistula Delta region was marshy and required the expertise and hard work of dedicated farmers such as the Mennonites from the Netherlands. Because of a good degree of religious tolerance (not part of the Holy Roman Empire) and the invitation of noblemen in the area, a large number of Mennonites settled in the Delta and lowlands from the 1530s and onward. The cost was very high at first with many dying from swamp fever, but finally the area was turned into fertile farmland and flourishing communities. By the middle 1700s, they had become successful merchants, manufacturers, bankers, craftsmen, brewers, or other town laborers. As the years went by and more land was needed, the Mennonites settled all along the Vistula River as far south as Warsaw and also into East Prussia.

Having lived in this area together for over 100 years, their religious beliefs became more defined and the local Low German became the everyday working language. Dutch was used in the church and was not replaced with High German until the mid-1700s. As the years went by, a number of Polish kings reaffirmed the original privileges of the first

Mennonites. But there were still local regulations which hindered their communities. They could not build churches until the 1700s or become citizens until the 1800s. Under Frederick the Great, the only way the Mennonites could avoid military service was to pay annual taxes to keep the cadet school in operation at Kulm. Finally by 1786 they were denied the privilege to purchase new land, which would be a problem as there were about 12,000 Mennonites on the Delta and maybe 1,000 in East Prussia.

Developments in Russia started to look favorable and could maybe alleviate some of the worries. Tsarina Catherine II of Russia published a manifesto in 1763 inviting foreigners to settle on land recently taken from the Turks. Catherine sent George von Trappe to make a personal visit to the Mennonites in 1786. In 1787 the Mennonites sent two delegates to Russia. They inspected a large area throughout the winter of 1786-87 and selected land on the lower Dniepr River. They discussed several desires to the Russian authorities including religious freedom, no military service, and no quartering of troops in their villages. They also asked that each family be given about 175 acres of useable farming land. They asked for certain privileges on two islands near the mouth of the Dniepr. They asked for fishing rights to the Dniepr next to their settlements. Funds were to be provided for food and transportation and loans provided for living expenses until the first crop was harvested. They also asked for 10 years of tax exemption.

These terms were put into a decree drawn up and signed in August, 1787. Georg von Trappe accompanied the delegates back to Danzig and all three were received with great enthusiasm. Many Mennonites applied to emigrate but had strong opposition by Danzig and Prussian authorities. The first group left Danzig in 1787 with six families. Thus began the migration of about 400 families from 1787-1797. They followed the Dvina River traveling along muddy roads finally crossing over to the Dniepr River near Dubrovno. By late 1788, 228 families arrived at Dubrovno in Russia spending the winter there. In the spring of 1789, they put most of their belongings on barges to float down the Dniepr. When they got within 200 miles of their destination, they were informed by the Russian government that they would not be allowed to go all the way down the Dniepr because of hostile Turks. So disgruntled they settled there and formed the Chortitza colony along the banks of the Chortitza River which flowed into the Dniepr. By 1797, about 400 families had settled on the steppes of Russia.

After this initial group of emigration, further restrictions were imposed in Prussia by Frederick William III. Extended privileges were offered the Mennonites by Tsar Paul I of Russia. So in 1803, 193 families left the Elbing and Marienburg districts of Prussia traveling with large canvas-upholstered wagons pulled by horses, after selling their farms. The Prussian government tried to discourage them by imposing an exit tax of 10% of their assets. But Russia lured them with interest free loans. They spent the winter in the Chortitza Colony. Then in the spring of 1804 they moved onto their new land on the east bank of the Molotschnaya River.

Later emigration groups were not as well off. Because of lack of financial help, many had to push or pull their own carts. After 1828, the Russian Government would only

allow settling by those with money to make the trip. Over the years approximately 1,000 families emigrated from Prussia to Molotschna Colony.

Volhynia was another colony established in the same time from about 1801-12. A number of Swiss Mennonites also moved to the Volhynia Colony in this same time period, usually forming their own villages. The Swiss and Prussian Mennonites learned to know each other and later migrated together to the US. There also was expansion to other areas as families grew and more land was needed. This took place in about 1850 and later. It should be noted that each colony consisted of multiple villages, sometimes a dozen or more. Chortitza, Molotschna, and Volhynia Colonies are probably the most recognized names of the many colonies.

With the changing times and governments, Russia tried to Russianize every one and in about 1870 the military was revamped. As a result a large number of Mennonites felt it was again time to migrate. This began the great migration of the 1870s. Roughly 10,000 came to the US and about 7,000 to Manitoba. At the time there were about 25,000 in Molotschna of which about 20% migrated. Despite the migration, there was still a steady need to form new colonies because of excess population.

Sources:

The Reformation information was obtained from the *Reformation Time Line* published in 2006 by Rose Publishing.

The majority of the Anabaptist and Mennonite information comes from the book *Mennonite Historical Atlas, Second Edition, Fourth Printing September 2005* by William Schroeder and Helmut T. Huebert. This was a very useful book because it provides a lot of information in a concise format. The two authors used over 100 books, references, maps, atlases, newspapers/journals, and other sources. They also had help from interviews of people describing from memory stories and directions of how to draw maps. One large source they used was the Mennonite Encyclopedia consisting of 5 volumes. This encyclopedia is now available on the Internet at www.gameo.org. It contains a lot of detail of the colonies and the villages in the colonies.