Time of Terror: Biblical-Theological Perspectives on Mennonite Suffering during the Stalin Era and World War II

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Introduction

This paper is neither a detached theological dissertation nor a conclusive treatment of the Mennonite experience of terror and suffering during the Stalin era and World War II. It will not be detached because I was born into the midst of that experience, so that the course of my life was largely shaped by it, although significant other factors also made their impact. From the distance of over half a century, I realize increasingly how much the experiences under discussion, which I at times believed to have left behind, still cast their shadows on my existence today. Nor will it be conclusive regarding an understanding of that era even for myself. I am still struggling for a personally satisfying perspective on those years, one that can somehow incorporate them into the true flow of Mennonite history, and not simply see them as a terrible interlude best left behind and forgotten. This struggle for incorporating into life a time that may seem like death is somewhat parallel to the task we face when serious illness strikes us. Our tendency is to consider such a time as a temporary cessation of life, a life that can begin again if and when we recover. Yet times of illness and suffering must be owned as real parts of our life rather than as interruptions. Only then can we continue to live without being held back by them.

In spite of these disclaimers, a time distance of half a century, or approximately two generations, seems right historically and for me personally

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to look at that era with some detachment from earlier emotions. Such detachment is necessary for gaining a comprehensive, if not conclusive, picture that can aid us towards incorporating that era into our understanding of God's leading and God's goals.

Starting with the future

In a time conscious of the importance of narrative for the shaping of identity, we may well be ready for highlighting certain key dynamics of the confessional narrative of the Bible as helps for an interpretive telling of our own story. Pre-eminent among these dynamics is the forward thrust of the biblical story. This is what allows it to be a story of salvation. Its starting points are always those life settings where dark powers seem to have control. One is the story of the first human rebellion against God – the story of the Fall, culminating in human estrangement from God and the scattering of a splintered humanity across the face of the earth (Genesis 3-11). Another is Israel's enslavement in Egypt and rebellion in the wilderness (Exodus). Later there follows the captivity of Israel in Babylon, and then the "darkness" that lay over Judea at the time of the coming of Christ.

Yet the dynamic of the biblical story does not revel in these settings of darkness; instead, it highlights the goings forth, the new beginnings initiated by God. Abraham sets out for the land promised by God. Israel, after a long detour to Egypt, takes up this move towards the land. Judah in Babylonian captivity hears the call to a new exodus into God's future (Isaiah 40ff.). God's people are encouraged in prophetic and apocalyptic texts to see themselves as people on the way to the Day of the Lord, or the Kingdom of God as the New Testament calls it. And Jesus declares that this Kingdom has already gained a strong foothold, through his coming and ministry, in the present world, although its fullness still lies in the future.

To tell the story of God at work, the story into which God's people are invited, means to become more conscious of God's goal than of one's own starting point. We are called by the biblical story to see the significance of the experiences of the past to lie in shaping our understanding of God's goals for the future. The function of remembering is to awaken hope. The biblical story is more like a good novel drawing the reader's attention forward towards a promised ending than a judicial inquiry report dredging up once more all the

dark events of the past. (That the dark past needs to be revisited to some extent will receive attention later.)

The goal of the biblical story's forward movement is at first limited and concrete; it is contained in God's promise of descendants and land to Abraham, and later to Israel. The land, however, at first understood very concretely as the land of Canaan, becomes symbolic, pointing beyond itself to God's future, the Day of Yahweh or the Kingdom of God. Everyday life and the flow of history gain purpose and meaning to the extent that they become part of this movement towards God's ultimate goal. There is no golden age, no perfect society, no life now already fulfilled in itself, but only that fulfilment which consists of placing the self into the God-directed movement to the ultimate God-set goal.

The grip of a futureless present

If we could find a way to place the Mennonite era of Soviet terror into a story moving toward that God-set goal or *telos*, we could be set free to find positive meaning in it for ourselves and our history. But the grip of a meaningless, static present is strong. People in the depths of suffering tend to perceive their situation as eternal. It is for them the state of things. During my childhood in the Stalinist Soviet Union it seemed to me – but I am sure also to many adults – that life had entered a static form of existence marked by poverty, want, scarcity of food, clothing and everything else, submission to authorities driven by a hostile ideology, and above all, fear for one's own life and freedom and for those of one's family, relatives, and friends. The powers that held sway seemed unchallengeable from within and invincible from without. Stoic, fatalistic, or despairing submission seemed the only option for living.

Israel's experience of such an apparently futureless present is well described in Exodus 2:23: "After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out." The text continues (verses 24-25): "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." But this was not known to the Israelites at that time. When Moses came later to lead them out of Egypt at God's command, they considered him a stirrer of trouble who had made their lot worse rather than better (Exodus

5:19-21). Best to submit to the inevitable, they thought, than to cherish futile hopes for change.

I remember when, late one night, two young women came to visit the family with whom my mother and I lived and to whom they were related. Under the cover of darkness and secrecy they shared a rumor that Hitler would bring about the removal of all Germans from the Soviet Union to Germany. It seemed like a dream experienced momentarily as real, but bound to dissolve into nothingness. It was a dangerous dream at that. Don't say such things! It's dangerous! Who knows who might hear you! And in the end we will be disappointed anyway!

In retrospect we know that the apparently invincible Soviet Union would fall apart almost in the twinkling of an eye. But were the people back then not right to perceive their situation as a futureless present of oppression and endurance? What good would the knowledge of the Soviet Union's eventual demise have done my father and all the others in concentration camps who never saw that day?

Breaking the grip

The only way out of the grip of a futureless, God-less present was the route of faith. There were those, and they were many, who had learned and come to believe that God is a God of the future, a God who is leading the world towards his Kingdom, and a God whom nothing can stop. These were the people who waited and hoped.

Such a hope could not be individualistic, however. These people had no assurance that they themselves would experience God's apparently stranded train of history moving again. If their hope sustained them, it did so as members of the people of God, a people who would continue towards God's goals, even if they as individuals would not experience the awaited future on this earth. But they would still be a part of it as sharers in the resurrection, in a life eternal awaiting them. To what extent they thought in corporate terms, that is, perceived themselves as members of a world-wide church that was ongoing even while their own church and personal life was being destroyed, I cannot say. My impression is that an individualistic hope for life after death predominated.

Many did, of course, escape to the west during World War II and were able to start a new life of freedom, comfort, and opportunity. I was one of them. Others experienced a lessening of the terror after the death of Stalin in 1953. Still others were able to resettle in Germany decades later, after horrendous hardships in Siberia and elsewhere.

Whether survival, escape, and new beginning were experienced as meaningless fate or accepted as foretastes of the work of a God advancing the work of salvation made a fundamental difference for understanding the times of terror. For those holding to the former position, the years of suffering were lost years, a lost stretch of life, perhaps so long that its ending came too late for life to pick up again. For those with the latter perspective, even the dark years could be incorporated into a life participating, through faith, in the dynamic forward-movement of God's story.

Modes of experiencing God at work

Within this general framework of faith in the biblical panorama of God working to establish the Kingdom, and a sense of participation in God's ways, Mennonites in the times under discussion – if they lived by faith – drew on the Bible's perspectives on suffering selectively as they faced oppression, deprivation, persecution, or death. It may be helpful here to consider our ancestors' ways of appropriating biblical themes on suffering. My attempt to depict some of these ways is based on memories, impressions, and random readings rather than on systematic research. It is more an indication of the direction for further research than an authoritative characterization of attitudes in that time.

1. Throughout the Bible, suffering typically evokes the question of sin and punishment. The narrative books and the prophetic oracles are full of accounts and announcements of God's judgment, through various forms of suffering, on sinful peoples and individuals. Similarly, the lament psalms contain many confessions of guilt and promises of future faithfulness or, alternatively, of protestations of innocence. Even though the book of Job, the Suffering Servant text of Isaiah 52-53, and a number of words of Jesus emphasize that suffering does not *have* to be judgment for sin, they do not say that it cannot be.

As far as I know, however, few if any Mennonites in the Stalinist era and its sequels interpreted their sufferings as specific judgment from God calling for acceptance and repentance, either corporately or individually. Unlike what some North Americans have done in retrospect, they did not interpret the peaceful era of the Mennonite settlements in Russia before the Revolution of 1917 as deserving of special judgment. Although Mennonites have been given to a strong sense of personal and general human sinfulness, those of the era under discussion did not seem to account for their special sufferings by perceiving them as God's judgment on a sinful Mennonite history in Russia.

2. A second biblical option is represented by the suffering of Job, beginning with his vehement protests against a God whom he could only understand as the great Rewarder and Punisher, and ending – through the intervention of God – with an image of God as both more mysterious and more trustworthy than he had thought possible.

The outcry of Job in his innocence must have been repeated by many Mennonite men and a number of women in Siberian concentration camps, and by many a woman struggling to support her family without husband, father, brothers, or sons. Explicit references to Job's story, however, seem not to have characterized Mennonite attitudes. Had this biblical book not been studied much in religion classes? Had it been read – as throughout much of church history – with an emphasis on the patience of Job? Or had Job's sufferings been absorbed into the image of the greater innocent sufferer, Jesus Christ? I do not know.

3. A third biblical theme is that of vicarious suffering, or suffering for others. We find it in the sacrificial cult of Israel, in the "Suffering Servant" passages in Isaiah (particularly 52:13-53:12), and above all in the vicarious suffering of Jesus Christ. Again, as far as I can tell, Mennonites in the Soviet Union did not interpret their suffering as a sharing in Christ's redemptive work. To be sure, they tied their suffering very closely to that of Jesus Christ, but in three rather different ways. First, "taking up Christ's cross" meant leading a life of confession and obedience even to the point of incurring suffering, just as Christ had suffered obediently. In this sense they saw what was happening to them as a direct result of their Christian faith and life. Second, they were encouraged by the knowledge that God who in Jesus Christ had experienced great suffering could fully empathize with them (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:14-16). Third,

they were confident that God in Jesus Christ was with them even in their darkest hours. Many psalms and words of Jesus confirmed this for them.

4. The point just mentioned, the presence of God with faithful sufferers, must be distinguished from a notion enjoying considerable favor in theology today, namely that God suffers with, or even through, suffering humanity. Elie Wiesel, in his story *Night*, describes a concentration camp scene where prisoners watch a young boy die on the gallows. To the question, "Where is God now?" Wiesel has someone answer, "There on the gallows." While many Mennonites in concentration camps felt the presence of God with them, I doubt that any of them thought of God as suffering in or through them.

5. Sometimes in Proverbs, and repeatedly in the New Testament, suffering is presented as a form of training or of meeting a test of one's faithfulness (e.g., Prov. 3:11-12; 10:17; Rom. 8:18; 1 Pet. 1:6-7; cf. Heb. 12-13). Those found faithful would inherit eternal life. I am under the impression that suffering was often borne in this light in those times. The view of this life as merely preparatory for eternity was strong. It was part of the Pietist heritage, and it was confirmed by the experience that this world was indeed a "valley of the shadow of death."

6. The Bible makes repeated reference to the sufferings of the faithful remnant in the face of super-human powers standing in conflict with God. The task of this remnant is faithful endurance. I am not aware of widespread, explicitly millenarian or otherwise endtime-focused expectations among Mennonites in the Stalinist era, but their attitude seems to have resembled that called for by the apocalyptic writings of the Bible (parts of Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation). The political-military forces at work had all the appearance of super-human powers. In contrast even to the brief *Selbstschütz* interlude in the chaotic times of the Revolution, when some Mennonites took up arms to defend themselves and their families against anarchist terrorists, no one in the Stalin era contemplated resistance by any external means. Only prayer, faithful endurance, and the hope that God would step in remained available.

7. We should also consider a frequent modern attitude to suffering, even though not directly biblical, at least in its modern liberationist version. I refer to the notion that suffering is meaningful in so far as it is an agent for social-political change, whether it meets us in South American liberation thinking, in the Filipino theology of struggle, or related positions. As far as I

know, Mennonites in the Soviet era did not interpret their suffering as a means pregnant with power to bring about change in the social-political order.

Questions we need to address

Those who lived in that time of terror made their decisions and died or survived, either with faith in God's – temporarily invisible – leading or in resignation to what seemed inevitable but meaningless. We today look back at that time with sufficient distance to face attempting to make sense of it as a part of our story; not just any sense, but theological sense. What are the areas we need to address and the questions we need to ask? The areas suggested here are but a start. I am sure they will lead to further explorations and questions.

1. REMEMBERING

Although I stressed the need to model our own story-telling on the biblical dynamic of focusing on the future, a certain kind of recalling and preserving the terrible past experiences of our people is necessary. It forms the basis for understanding even the darkest times in our history as times in which God has not abandoned his will to save. But remembering is a very selective activity. In the act of remembering we sort out what is to be remembered and, conversely, what ought to be forgotten.

The emphasis on God's salvific leading to God's future goal, rather than on the initial rule of the dark powers, has already been mentioned. The slavery of Israel in Egypt and God's judgment on Pharaoh and Egypt through the plagues had to be told. Nevertheless, they are not highlighted, expanded, or developed in Israel's confessions; they merely form the starting point for a recital of God's saving acts. These acts constitute the focus and substance of Israel's remembering. Similarly, the story of Jesus does not linger with Caiaphas and Pilate, but moves forward to the Easter events and God's new work of establishing the church and proclaiming the gospel. How do we appropriate biblical patterns of remembering for preserving our own story?

The task of sorting out the content to be remembered is followed, or perhaps accompanied by, the search for the proper forms of preserving it. Gathering and preserving material must be done soon, before eye witnesses die and letters and private papers are lost or destroyed. Story publishing and

history writing are natural further steps. We already see an increase of such publications.[1]

2. MEMORIALIZING AND RITUALIZING

Memorials and rituals can also serve the process of remembering. I refer to the work of visual artists, creative writers and poets, as well as musicians and worship planners. Who are our 'heroes' and 'saints' to be held up for admiration and imitation? Whose biographies do we promote, not simply as family tradition but as the stories of key figures for us as a people? For whom do we erect monuments, like the one on the grounds of the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Steinbach, Manitoba, dedicated on July 28, 1985, to the memory of victims of the Communist Revolution, World War I, the Stalin Era, and World War II? What events are the 'stuff' for novels like Al Reimer's *My Harp Is Turned to Mourning* (Hyperion Press, 1985), that vividly illustrates the Mennonite experience of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath? What paintings can capture our experience? What hymns might emerge from the times under discussion?

I am not referring here to the whole range of private artistic creativity; that will emerge and assert itself, and so it should. It will be varied and personal and, of course, uncontrolled. My concern is with the art that is theologically expressive of our faith, and that we as a people can and want to make our own. It is the art we place in our institutions, such as schools and churches. It includes the illustrations in our Sunday School materials and the hymns in our future hymnals. It is the videos, reader's theatres, dramas and films, for example, that our church libraries and resource centres promote for educational and other church events. To speak of it in this way does not imply strait jacketing or censoring individual artistic creativity but the selection of what appropriately passes on the Christian-Mennonite story of the era in question.

This selection must take its direction from the Bible. It will, for example, not glorify violence, cunning adaptation, or ingenious self-preservation. Instead, it will focus on the Christian virtues, such as sacrificial service. It will look to the example of the biblical servants of God, and above all to Jesus and his example, but also to the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-11) and the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) for guidance in selecting what deserves to be held up to posterity.

3. ANALOGIES OF HISTORY

The Mennonite era of terror in the Soviet Union is only one of many times of severe suffering of Christians and others in history. We can gain better perspective on it if we look at it in the light of other such times – for example, the persecution of early Christians by the Roman Empire or the sufferings of early Anabaptists as recorded in the *Martyrs' Mirror* and elsewhere. We might also ask how the descendants of those experiencing such times of terror handled that legacy. How have martyrs been remembered in the church? We might go beyond the church and attempt to learn, positively or negatively, how the descendants of non-Christian groups handled their past. A particularly relevant example is the Jewish response to the Holocaust.

4. JUDGMENT AND REPENTANCE

Some, but limited, attention should be given to the unavoidable question "Why suffering?" We should let the Bible guide us, however, in preserving the mystery of suffering, rather than seeking explanations and solutions that can only camouflage it.

In the Bible, suffering is by no means always understood as judgment from God. Israel in Egypt was not suffering for its sins, neither was the early Christian church depicted in 1 Peter or in Revelation. Many of the sufferings that befell the Old Testament people, however, are declared by the prophets and other biblical writers as God's judgment on the people's unfaithfulness. The most prominent events so characterized are the destruction of Samaria, followed by the Assyrian exile of the Northern Kingdom (Israel), and the destruction of Jerusalem, followed by the Babylonian exile of the Southern Kingdom (Judah).

To what extent should Mennonite suffering in the Soviet Union be assessed as God's judgment on our history of unfaithfulness? This is a very sensitive question. It should certainly not result in blaming the victim for the crime. We must at all cost avoid – or, where it has rashly been done in the past, negate – the temptation to sit in judgment, from a North American perspective, on our ancestors in Russia. In the Bible we find repeatedly how later generations identified themselves with their history in the corporate confession, "We have sinned . . . ." Only as we Mennonites in North America stand in solidarity with those in Russia can we perhaps declare some of *our*

joint history, not *their* history, as a history of covenant breaking and judgment that calls for repentance and re-commitment.

5. Forgiving our enemies

There is no question that great wrong has been done to the Mennonite people in the Soviet Union. How do we deal with that? Both the Bible and historic Mennonite convictions reject, first of all, any literal attempt at revenge, and second, any harboring of historical grudges against Russians or Ukrainians, such as those that have vitiated relationships between peoples in many areas of the world for centuries. We must fight all anti-Russian or anti-Ukrainian biases among us, even while we condemn unhesitatingly the atheist Marxist/Stalinist ideology and power system that perpetrated the terror.

More difficult is the question whether and in what sense we have the right to forgive those who committed crimes and atrocities against our ancestors. Can anyone forgive what has been done to someone else? But if we identify with our ancestors in a solidarity of judgment and repentance, as I advocated above, we might also – at least in that corporate sense – exercise forgiveness. Requests for forgiveness have been expressed and granted between the descendants of various groups whose ancestors, sometimes centuries removed, had respectively incurred guilt and suffered injustice. What expression might such forgiveness best take?

6. Coping with the emotional load

The very existence of the time of terror in our history, and therefore in our minds, constitutes a heavy emotional burden. There were times in my life, and surely also in the lives of others, where I deliberately protected myself from the stories and memories of the earlier time of terror, such as the Communist Revolution of 1917, or the time of anarchy and of marauding bands, like that of the infamous terrorist Nestor Machno. Having heard volumes of oral tradition on these subjects, including the story of my grandfather's murder, I simply avoided listening to such stories whenever I could or reading any accounts of them. This was not simply repression; it represented to some extent the healthy self-protection of a young person against emotional overload. It was Reimer's novel *My Harp Is Turned to Mourning* that made it possible for me eventually to look at that part of our history with the help of artistic

distance and ordering. I could not escape the terror of the Stalin era in the same way, since it was part of my personal experience. Many of my generation have thrown themselves with all their energy into the new possibilities offered by Canada, to rebuild life economically and professionally. Yet the burden cannot be lifted in this way alone.

All the descendants of the Mennonites who lived through the Stalin era carry this emotional burden. It weighs on us like the Holocaust weighs on Jews. How do we deal with it constructively? We eschew the satisfaction of revenge. We recognize the unhealthy character of silent repression. Yet, how do we deal with our pain, our horror, our sympathy with the victims, and our fear of similar times in the future? The program of Logotherapy, developed by the Jewish psychiatrist Victor Frankl on the basis of his concentration camp experience, is a prominent example of one approach to coping with suffering, an approach that tries to deal with suffering by finding meaning. It is mentioned here merely as one avenue – albeit a significant one – of approaching the psychological task under discussion.

A particular dimension of this task is the question: How do we hand on the knowledge of this part of our history to our children in such a way that they can own it as part of their corporate Mennonite story without being unduly burdened by it?

7. Our suffering-based mission

Inherent in any significant experience is a call to new attitudes and actions. To understand our time of Soviet terror theologically cannot but lead to questions regarding the possibilities and responsibilities this places on us now and in the future. What have we learned? How have we been reshaped? How have we learned to understand God's ways better? How can our suffering help us to relate to and help others suffering today? In sum, what impact should this time of terror have on our life and our mission as a people?

Notes

[1] Early examples are Olga Rempel, *Einer von Vielen: Die Lebensgeschichte von Prediger Aaron P. Toews* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1979); and Hans Rempel, *Waffen der Wehrlosen: Ersatzdienst der Mennoniten in der UdSSR* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1980). More recent ones include Katharina Ediger, *Under His Wings: Events in the Lives of Elder Alexander Ediger and His Family*, ed. Elisabeth Schulz, trans. Mark Bachmann (Kitchener, ON: by the author, 1994); and Sarah Dyck, ed., *The Silence Echoes: Memoirs of Trauma and Tears* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997).