More than Sheep to Slaughter: Reflections on Mennonites and the Stalinist Terror

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It is clear that Soviet Mennonites suffered devastating losses in the course of the 1930s. Measured one way, thousands perished in wave after wave of devastation. By a more immediate measurement, fathers were unjustifiably separated from their families by police guards who arrived in the dead of night. They were loaded onto cattle cars and sent off to distant labor camps where many died under terrible circumstances. The fate of those left behind in the villages was often no less harsh as they confronted conditions ranging from famine to the advance of entire armies.

Two generations have passed since that time, and still the words "collectivization, industrialization, and the purges" embody the unholiest of trinities for many. How many people ended their days in unmarked graves in seemingly godforsaken outposts, far from those they loved? How many others survived this ordeal, and even managed to make a new life in the west, yet were ultimately unable to escape the ghosts of this era? How many old men and women today still carry the scars of their childhood, when worlds dissolved as family life disintegrated?

Thus, it is not surprising that so many presentations at this Consultation focused on Mennonites as utterly helpless victims against an overarching, all-controlling regime. In his powerful keynote address, Waldemar Janzen spoke of Mennonites' seeming inability to respond in any way to the Stalinist terror: "The powers that held sway seemed unchallengeable from within and invincible from without. Stoic, fatalistic, or despairing submission to this static condition seemed the only option for living." Henry Paetkau begins his paper with the claim that "The experience of suffering . . . is not so much something that we can solve or do something about as something that we live in response to and through." Similarly, Arnold Neufeldt-Fast has emphasized the Mennonite

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inability to do much in the face of this relentless suffering: "Any real opportunities among Mennonites to respond in a sustained and articulate way to their suffering so as 'to wrest land from this sea of speechless death' were brutally curtailed."[1]

Nor is this perspective surprising, for the historical memory of this period has reduced everything to an epic struggle between good and evil in which Mennonites were helpless and powerless participants. It seems as if Moscow got everything that it wanted, which was no less than the complete subjugation of the entire Soviet state. Those who hold these views, of course, are making claims about the Soviet state as much as they are about the Mennonite experience within it. If that is so, might reconsidering the one necessitate rethinking the other? This is a question that Mennonites can hardly avoid addressing, given the revolution underway in how historians understand the Stalinist era in light of the Soviet Union's disintegration.

Those wishing to make sense of the Mennonite experience might start by considering how few historians still portray the Stalinist state as totalitarian and all-controlling, engaged in a Manichean struggle with "the people."[2] Several works typify recent trends in the larger field and especially the rich possibilities that they open up for students of Mennonite history. In his study of the great Soviet industrial experiment in Magnitogorsk, Stephen Kotkin has provided an impressive account of the countless ways in which Moscow's decrees rarely made it to the Siberian steppe.[3] The Communist Party, faced with myriad obstacles, was anything but totalitarian; its reach always exceeded its grasp. As a result, regional officials were constantly compelled to improvise and thereby make sense of "Stalinism." Even then workers themselves used what power they had at the local level to make sense of their lives. Kotkin disputes any suggestion that the center merely willed and the periphery merely implemented.

Recent studies on the Soviet countryside have reached similar conclusions. Sheila Fitzpatrick's study on Stalin's peasants has persuasively argued that peasants were not passive subjects in the 1930s.[4] Instead, collectivization involved a give-and-take between a Muscovite center determined to maintain absolute control and a peasantry that used every means at its disposal to block it. In the end, collectivization involved no small measure of accommodation and even resistance on the part of peasants. This latter

perspective has been argued most forcefully by Lynne Viola. In *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin* Viola seeks to catalog how peasants resisted the full-bore imposition of an urban, Stalinist model on their fields and villages. Peasants provided a meaningful opposition when they kept alive visions of a coming apocalypse, when they slaughtered their own livestock rather than surrender them to the state, and when they occasionally murdered Moscow's ambassadors when they set foot in the countryside. Peasants also appealed to the "good Stalin" in letters written in the late 1930s, considering this to be the only safe way to formally protest the actions of local officials. Though Viola's study is weak on statistical summaries of how many protests happened and when, her point is hard to dismiss.[5] Even those who argue for the eventual failure of such protests, given the eventual "victory" of Collectivization, have some difficulty accounting for the abrupt collapse of the Soviet state in the 1980s. Nor do these works dispute the massive famine which stalked the countryside in the early 1930s or the millions who perished as a result of it.

In almost all cases, these historians have been considerably influenced by James Scott, whose work has stressed the countless ways seemingly powerless peasants in contemporary Southeast Asia confront powers they regard as unjust. For example, Scott clearly regards apocalyptic thinking as a "weapon of the weak," as is the deliberate decision to put minimal effort into work done for the state.[6]

Might not students of Mennonites under Stalinism wish to apply these insights to their own investigations? Perhaps Mennonites were more than defenseless lambs being led to slaughter. Indeed, even a brief overview reveals the many ways in which Mennonites, like Fitzpatrick's peasants and Kotkin's workers, resisted the Soviet juggernaut. This resistance was evident when Mennonite children refused to sing the Soviet national anthem in school, or when families maintained their strong Christian belief that they were living in the "end times," in which God – not the Communist party – would have the final say. Mennonites resisted evil when they denounced it in the privacy of their own homes, or when they prayed at funerals. It happened when Mennonites destroyed their livestock rather than hand them over to the new collective farms, or when they refused to denounce those in their midst who clung to their religious practices. Others managed to outwit the state's directives when they declared their villages to have been "collectivized" even though

nothing else had changed. The state was challenged when women who had lost their husbands combined their households during the winter months so that heat could be preserved. In this way cousins became siblings, and the informal network of support and encouragement was enlarged. The Soviet state was threatened when families held onto their Bibles, or when remarkably resilient mothers took their children out to the fields to show them which weeds could be safely eaten for nutrition, and which could not.

Mennonites did indeed suffer, and they did so for overwhelmingly unjustifiable reasons, but they did much more than simply endure suffering. Even this partial rendering of Mennonite "resistance" suggests that we have barely begun to highlight a vital part of this story, even as we acknowledge the ultimate horror of those years.

In the end, those who today seek to understand the Mennonite experience in the Soviet Union must confront a terrible irony. On the one hand, the time is ideal for such investigations. Thanks in large part to initiatives undertaken by Harvey Dyck, there is now a truly global community of scholars committed to Mennonite history. It seems that new linkages are being made monthly, much of this development owing to the highly successful international conference on Mennonite history held in Ukraine in 1999. Moreover, scholars now enjoy an unprecedented access to primary sources as previously sealed archives in the former Soviet Union have begun to see the light of day. Under these circumstances, the scholarly potential for these investigations is enormous.

Yet all this has occurred at a time when the descendants of those Soviet Mennonites seem to have only a limited interest in this story. Almost none continue to live in the places where these events transpired. Instead, these erstwhile Russian Mennonites are now scattered to Germany, North America, South America, and beyond. Culturally, aversion to the Soviet system prompted many of them and their descendants to throw themselves fully into their new milieus. Beyond the first generation of emigrants, there appears to be little nostalgia or other positive association with the "motherland." Their children and grandchildren do not speak German, let alone Russian or Ukrainian. Moreover, those who have stayed within the church find themselves in congregations richly textured with people of many different histories. The

Mennonite church has truly become a global church, and will continue to be one in a way that discourages the telling of more parochial stories.

Should we then abandon telling this particular story? By no means, though in this case context is everything. In his keynote address to the Consultation, Waldemar Janzen encouraged Mennonites to set their particular story within the larger context of the biblical narrative. I strongly agree, but to do so fully requires that we bring all of our stories into this larger narrative. The Soviet Mennonite experience was one such story worthy of inclusion, even it was not the only one. Nor was it a story of a perfect people, as so many are quick to point out. Quite the contrary; and like so many North American Mennonites, these people's imperfections were glaringly obvious then and remain so now. Yet none of these faults can even begin to account for the violence that unfolded in the 1930s. Suddenly, they were like sheep being taken to slaughter. Yet, remarkably, they were also so much more.

Notes

[1] Waldemar Janzen, "Time of Terror: Biblical-Theological Perspectives on Mennonite Suffering During the Stalin Era and World War II"; Henry Paetkau, "Suffering Servants: Pastoral Leaders in the Stalinist State"; and Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, "*Gott kann! Gott kann nicht!* The Suffering of Soviet Mennonites and Their Contribution to a Contemporary Mennonite Theology," all in this issue.

[2] For a discussion of this earlier historiography and its link to the Cold War, see Stephen Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917* (Princeton University Press, 1985).

[3] Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[4] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

[5] Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford University Press, 1996). Interested readers can also consult *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1 (Winter, 2000). This inaugural issue is focused on "Resistance to Authority in Russia and the Soviet Union."

[6] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1985).