



Erb Street, Waterloo

Mennonites, Immigration & War

Seeking to escape persecution for their beliefs, Mennonites from Switzerland and south Germany began immigrating to Pennsylvania in 1683. Following the American Revolution, Mennonites began to settle in Canada in 1786.

Mennonites from the Netherlands began to settle in northern Germany and Poland in the 16th century. These settlements adopted the German language and an affinity for German culture. Mennonites were invited to settle south Russia (now Ukraine) in 1789.

For over a century, Mennonites in Imperial Russia lived largely in prosperous, autonomous settlements or “colonies.” They made great progress in agriculture and industry, developed an educational system, formed hospitals, churches, and systems of internal governance. The Russian state exempted them from military participation.

One immigrant family's photographs: Abraham and Margarethe Regier

Abraham P. Regier and Margarethe Kroeger were married in south Russia in 1920. Her family were makers of the famous Kroeger wall clocks.



Abraham and Margarethe had nine children. The family immigrated to Alberta in 1923 and moved to the Niagara Peninsula in 1943, where Abraham was a founding members of the Niagara Township Credit Union.

The couple carried with them family photographs from south Russia as mementos of a time and place before war and revolution.



Alternative Service & the First World War in Russia

In the 1860s, Russia undertook attempts to “Russianize” foreign settlers. This included the introduction of compulsory military service for all young men. Nearly 7,000 Mennonites responded by immigrating to Manitoba in the 1870s. The remaining Mennonites, as conscientious objectors to war, were allowed to complete their four-year service terms doing forestry work.

During the First World War, about 12,000 Mennonite conscientious objectors served in forestry and medical corps. Mennonite women engaged in Red Cross work. In 1917, Mennonites contributed the equivalent of \$1,500,000 for the support of their men in Alternative Service.



Above: Mennonites in the medical corps served on trains equipped to carry hundreds of wounded men away from the front. Below: Mennonite women serving with the Red Cross in Simferopol, Crimea

The Russian Revolution and Civil War (1917-1921) brought violence, hunger, and the dismantling of much of the Russian Mennonite way of life. Families and villages debated whether conditions would improve or emigration was the only option.

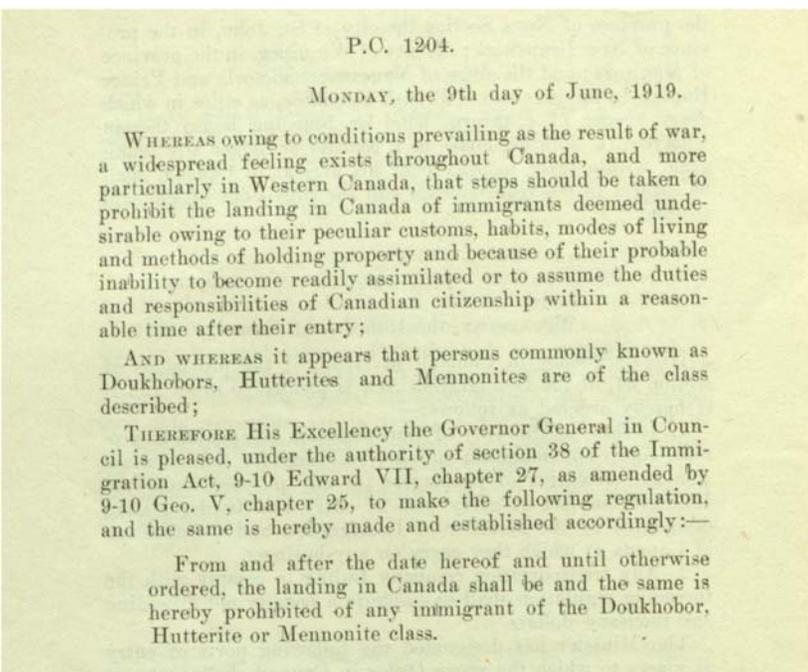


Canada bans Mennonite immigrants, 1919

At the end of the First World War, Mennonites and Hutterites from the United States began to immigrate to Canada, partially in response to the harsh treatment some of them experienced during the war, including imprisonment and the death of several Hutterites. Initially Canada welcomed them as good agricultural settlers, but this welcome changed almost overnight.

Charges were made that Hutterites and Mennonites from the United States were getting the best land, crowding out war veterans. The *Calgary Eye-Opener* said in alarm that 2 million Mennonites (a clearly false number) were headed to Canada.

Rumblings of discontent from conservative Mennonites in Manitoba, who did not want their children forced into English-only schools, contributed to the reaction against Mennonites. Many of these Mennonites left for Mexico in the 1920s. In 1919, the government issued an Order-in-Council prohibiting Mennonites, Hutterites and Doukhobors from entering Canada.



Sites of Nonresistance: Ontario Mennonites and the First World War

Mr. EDWARDS: I understood the Minister of Immigration to invite an expression of opinion as to the advisability of taking immediate action for the exclusion of these people who are seeking entry into Canada at the present time. In my opinion, and I think I am speaking for every one of my constituents, the Government should take immediate action by Order in Council, or any other expeditious means, to prevent the entrance of Hutterites, who, I believe, are of the same class and kidney as the Mennonites and very similar to the Doukhobors. The hon. member for Kitchener would like the bars let down and these people now living in Pennsylvania to come and settle in Western Ontario. He has made the remarkable statement that these people are absolutely loyal. What does he mean by absolutely loyal? I would take the qualifying word "absolutely" to mean that they were loyal in every sense of the word. These people who would not lift a hand to save this country from being placed under the heel of the Hun, but were willing to let others go across the seas and fight and die for principles that we hold dear, are in the opinion of the hon. member absolutely loyal. That may be his idea of absolute loyalty, but it is not mine.

We do not want in Western Canada or in Ontario or in any province in the Dominion people who are not prepared to assume their full share of the responsibilities of citizenship. If there are in the United States or Europe people of any class, whether they be called Mennonites, Hutterites or any other kind of "ites," we do not want them to come to Canada and enjoy the privileges and advantages of life under the British flag if they are willing to allow others to do the fighting for them while they sit at home in peace and plenty. We certainly do not want that kind of cattle in this country. Indeed not only do we not want that kind of cattle, but I would go further and support the view that we should deport from Canada others of the same class who were allowed to come in by mistake.

John W. Edwards, a Conservative (Unionist) Member of Parliament from Frontenac, Ontario referred to Mennonites and Hutterites as "cattle" during a debate on immigration on April 30, 1919.

Order in Council 1204. *The Immigration Act and Regulations issued by the Minister of Immigration and Colonization*. Ottawa, Canada, 1919, p. 50

Mennonite Archives of Ontario exhibit, 2017-2019

The ban is lifted, 1922

Mennonites in Canada felt a sense of urgency in getting this ban lifted because of the post-war plight of Mennonites in Russia. After lobbying from the Mennonites of western Canada and Bishop Samuel Coffman of Ontario, the Order-in-Council was rescinded in 1922. In the 1920s, 20,000 Russian Mennonites immigrated to Canada.

Established Mennonite communities in Ontario, mostly descendants of immigrants from Pennsylvania in the 19th century, organized to help with the first stage of settlement by billeting the immigrants in homes and providing farm employment. Others donated clothing and furnishings.



Herbert Enns/ Mennonite Archives of Ontario

Mennonite immigrants from Russia walk up Erb Street in Waterloo from the railway line to Erb Street Mennonite Church to meet their Ontario Mennonite billets, July 19, 1924

Digitized lists of immigrants to Ontario and their billets are located here:

<https://uwaterloo.ca/mennonite-archives-ontario/mennonite-organizations-and-institutions/canadian-mennonite-board-colonization>

Canada “has become my homeland”

After I had moved to Kitchener, and had received employment at the Kaufman Rubber Company, my sisters and I rented an apartment on 313 King St East. Here we lived until 1926, when we purchased a house on Weber Street.

In 1925, my mother, another sister and a niece arrived from Russia, and our whole family was together again, and I had a home.

I am very thankful that I can reside in this wonderful Canada, and that it has become my homeland. In these 46 years, I have endeavored to be a true and loyal citizen in my country.

. Nicholas Fehderau
arrived in Waterloo
July 19, 1924