

A New Examination of the “Great Terror” in Molotschna, 1937-1938

ARNOLD NEUFELDT-FAST*

Abstract: Drawing on newly-available arrest, trial, and execution files of the repression of Mennonites in Ukraine from 1937 and 1938, this essay reconstructs a picture of Mennonite life in this context and documents with greater clarity the procedures and experiences of victims and perpetrators from arrest to execution. While much has been written about Stalin’s “Great Terror” of 1937 and 1938, most literature in the West from this period has been limited to selectively leaked and very partial witness accounts, or highly unreliable reports from the Soviet state. This essay presents a new set of detailed stories drawn primarily from the NKVD (The People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs) secret police files and adds to the scholarly examination of these materials. The essay closes with some reflections on the theological category of “martyrdom” and what it means to “be church” in extremely violent, post-Christendom environments.

Until World War I, Mennonites had flourished in South Russia, living largely peaceable and ostensibly pious lives for more than a century. With the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, however, organized Mennonite life in South Russia was violently shattered. Despite enormous efforts, the key pillars that had structured their communities until that point could not be stabilized or, once dismantled, rebuilt. Church life ceased completely in the early 1930s; by September 1943 all Mennonites in Ukraine had fled or were forcibly removed.

This essay focuses on the high point of state terror against many minority ethnic groups in the Soviet Union in 1937 and 1938 when German-speaking Mennonite communities were brought to the brink of their final collapse. The NKVD (The People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs)¹ secret police files and archival summaries of arrests in these years, especially for men and women in the southeast corner of the

*Arnold Neufeldt-Fast is associate professor of theology, vice president academic, and dean of the seminary at Tyndale University, Toronto, Ontario.

1. The Soviet secret police agency was referred to as the NKVD during the years 1934-1946; prior to 1934 it was called the OGPU; between 1946 and 1954, the MVD; and after 1954, the KGB.

predominantly Mennonite settlement of Molotschna (Molochansk),² are astonishingly complete and newly available.³ A selective examination below is complemented with contextual data and with village narratives collected under the very different ideological context of German occupation by “Special Commando Dr. Stumpp,” commissioned by the Reich Ministry for Occupied Lands of the East.⁴ Together these primary sources reveal a disturbing yet complex picture of Mennonite community life and faith, and of the terror experienced during these years.

WHY THE STALINIST PURGES AND GREAT TERROR?

By 1933, with Hitler’s ascension to power in Germany, people of German ancestry living in the Soviet Union became special targets of concern for the NKVD—so much so, that soon thereafter the names and

2. The Molotschna Colony was officially renamed as “Molochansk” in 1924; in 1928 the adjacent German districts of Pryshyb and Molochansk were amalgamated as “Molochansk.” This essay uses the traditional German names of predominantly Mennonite villages, as well as for Molotschna and the Chortitza (Khortytsia) districts.

3. The *Reabilitovani istoriiētū* (hereafter *Rehabilitated History*) project (www.reabit.org.ua) is a national data bank of the victims of Soviet-era political repression in Ukraine, 1917 to 1980. State archives in Ukraine have cooperated to catalog and publish summaries of the secret police (NKVD) files on over 100,000 victims of state terror during this era. The summaries include name, date and place of birth, place of residence, education, occupation, date of arrest, charge, sentence, punishment, date of execution, and date of rehabilitation. From these publications Viktor Petkau has extracted 5,408 names of individuals assumed to be Mennonite (incomplete); cf. “Verbannte Mennoniten in ukrainischen Publikationen,” Chortitza: Mennonitische Geschichte und Ahnenforschung, accessed Aug. 12, 2021.—<https://chort.square7.ch/TerrU.htm>. For the current project, seventeen complete files were examined.

4. Karl Stumpp, a prolific chronicler of Germans in Russia, was commissioned by Alfred Rosenberg’s Reich Ministry for Occupied Lands of the East, to create an official registry and historical overview of each occupied ethnic German village in Ukraine under the ministry’s oversight. In 1942 administrators for “Special Commando Dr. Stumpp” entered villages and, with the assistance of local ethnic German teachers and newly appointed officials, completed extensive questionnaires to document the population, history, and cultural and physical assets of each ethnic German village, including detailed registers of those who were deported, starved, and murdered in the 1930s. Full reports survived for some fifty-six Mennonite villages from the settlements of Chortitza, Sagradovka, Baradow, Schlachting, Milorodovka, and Borosenko. In Bundesarchiv Koblenz (hereafter BArch) R6, files 620 to 633; 702 to 709.—<https://inventio.bundesarchiv.de>. No village reports from the Molotschna (known under occupation as “Halbstadt”) District have survived. Stumpp became well-known to German Mennonites before the war as the director of the Research Center for Russian Germans at the “Deutsches Auslandsinstitut” (DAI) in Stuttgart. A key ethnographic task of Stumpp’s commando was “to provide a genealogical and racial-biological assessment of the ethnic Germans in Ukraine.”—cf. “Das Bluterbe der Väter: Die biologische Kraft der Volksdeutschen in der Ukraine,” *Ukraine Post*, no. 9 (March 6, 1943), 3, <https://libraria.ua/en/numbers/878/32418>. Cf. also Eric J. Schmaltz and Samuel D. Zinner, “The Nazi Ethnographic Research of Georg Leibbrandt and Karl Stumpp in Ukraine and Its North American Legacy,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 14:1 (Spring 2000), 28–64.

addresses of all Soviet Germans were compiled "in preparation for deportation in the event of a military conflict with Nazi Germany."⁵

Stalin's paranoia about the internal threat posed by Soviet Germans came to a head in 1937 and 1938. NKVD policy directives dated February 14 and April 2, 1937, warned of increasing terrorist, sabotage, and espionage activity by the German secret police within the territories of the USSR, and described the situation as "typical of a pre-war period." German spies were suspected of "creating rebel bases among the German population [of the USSR] for the organization of armed action [to assist the enemy] in time of war." The NKVD assumed that German intelligence work was being carried out in all areas where there was "any significant German population," and that they were also preparing "rebel cadres, terrorists, saboteurs, and spies." Because the NKVD defined the general situation as "pre-war"—as did the German Nazi government⁶—the overwhelming majority of German Soviet citizens who were arrested were charged as counter-revolutionary agitators, agents, spies, saboteurs, and terrorists.⁷ A top secret report addressed to the Ukrainian Central Committee of the Communist Party on March 16, 1937, detailed the "counter-revolutionary activities" of the National Union of Germans in the Ukraine, its connections to the German consulates in Kharkiv and Odessa, and the training of two leaders (who were not Mennonite) in Germany as spies, agents, and trainers of underground partisans—in particular at the German Pedagogical Technicum in the historic Mennonite settlement of Chortitza (Khortytzia), and in Pryshyb, across the Molochna River from the Mennonite village of Halbstadt. From this circle six Mennonites were arrested in March of 1937 and sentenced to five, six, seven, or ten years of imprisonment.⁸ The tensions between Germany and the Soviet Union had stretched to the breaking point in 1937. On November 15 the Soviet Ukraine closed the German consulates in Kharkiv and Odessa. Directives from the German Propaganda Office to press

5. J. Otto Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999), 30.

6. Cf. Karen Peter, ed., *N-S Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit, 5:1, Quellentexte Januar bis April 1937* (Munich: Saur, 1998), 12; 336; 441.

7. Cf. the archival work of Nikita Okhotkin and Arseni Roginskii, "Iz istorii 'nemetskoi operatsii' NKVD 1937-1938" [On the history of the NKVD 'German Operation,' 1937-1938]. Presented at the Symposium on Repression against Russian Germans in the Soviet Union in the Context of the Soviet National Policy, Moscow, Nov. 1998. Available at <http://www.memo.ru/history/nem/Chapter2.htm>.

8. "Sonderinformation an das Volkskommissariat der Justiz der Ukrainischen Sowjetrepublik, an das Zentralkomitee der Kommunistischen Partei der Ukraine und an das Volkskommissariat der UdSSR" (March 16, 1937), in *Die Mennoniten in der Ukraine und im Gebiet Orenburg: Dokumente aus Archiven in Kiev und Orenburg*, ed. and trans. Gerhard Hildebrandt (Göttingen: Göttinger Arbeitskreis, 2006), 76-80 (no. 95).

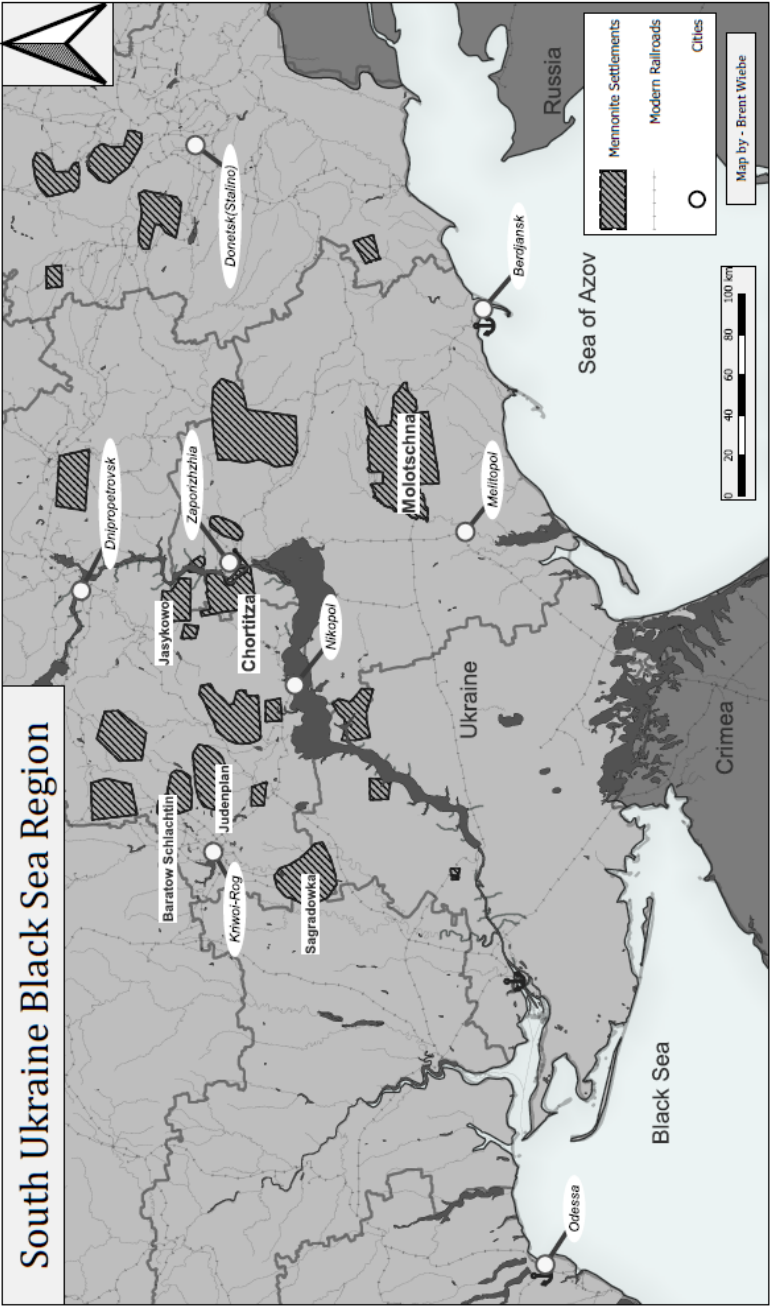
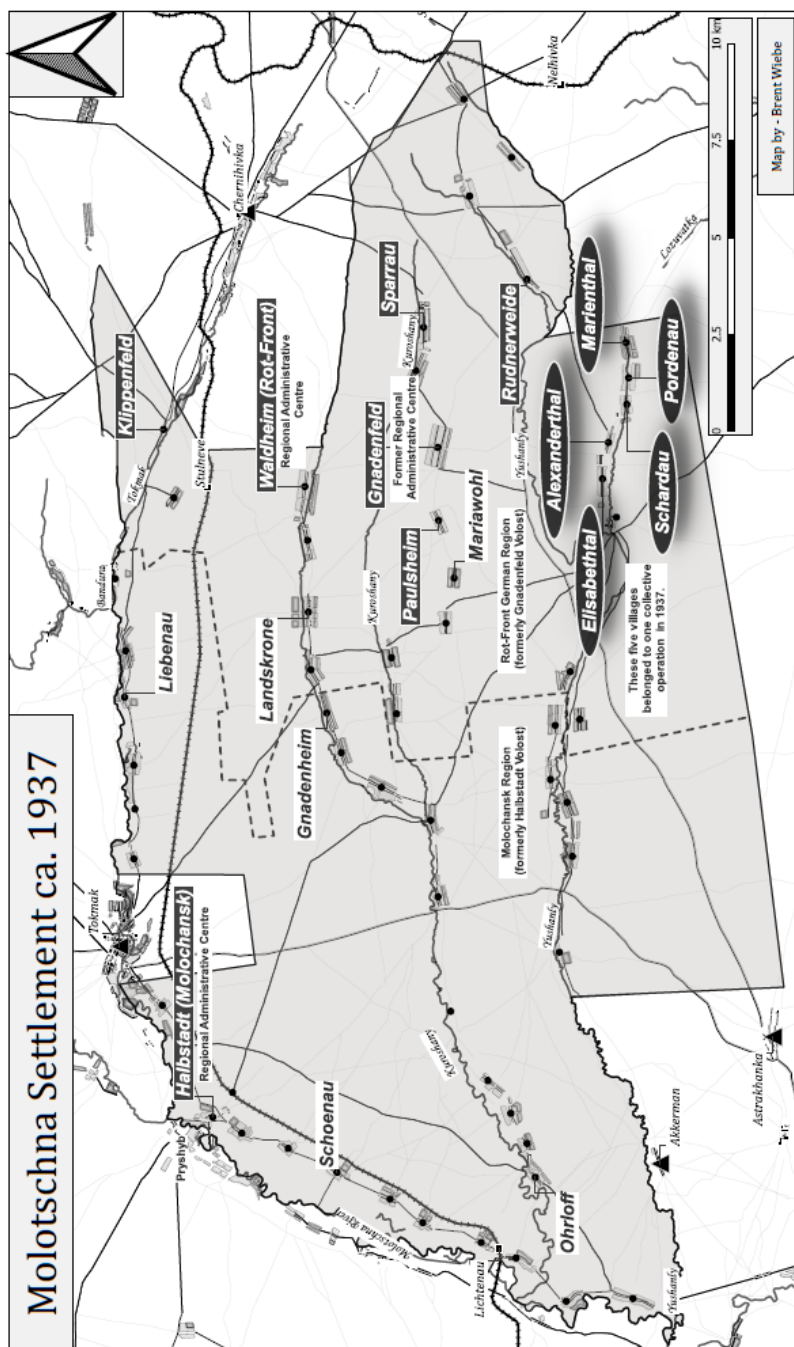


Fig. 1: Mennonite Settlements (by Brent Wiebe).



agencies strategically fanned the flames across borders and solidified Soviet resolve against its own ethnic Germans.

June 14, 1937. Important! Events in Soviet Russia . . . must now be exploited in all their breadth propagandistically for the further enlightenment of the world. . . . Terms “scum of the earth” and “Soviet paradise delivered” are to be used extensively to characterize the Soviet-Russian system.⁹

A partisan Russian Mennonite press in Canada also carried articles and letters praising Hitler and National Socialism. As historian James Urry has noted, “the sentiments of such recent emigrants who also maintained links with citizens still living in the USSR, could not have escaped the attention of Soviet security services.”¹⁰

ARRESTS IN MOLOTSCHNA VILLAGES

Stalin’s great purge began in 1936 with a list of some 43,700 high-ranking military officers, party and government leaders, and other important personalities.¹¹ Included on those lists were names of at least twenty-seven Mennonite professionals such as engineers and architects.¹² Arrests in the countryside began after this first phase. In the Molotschna Mennonite villages some 1,800 arrests occurred between the fall of 1936 and December 1938 within a population of 20,000 people—a ratio “at least four times higher than the national average,” as Peter Letkemann has calculated.¹³ The Molotschna arrests in 1937 were more sporadic than systematic. On April 1, 1937, in the rural administrative division (*sel-soviet*) of Pordenau—that also included the villages of Marienthal, Schardau,

9. Cf. *NS-Presssanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit*, ed. Gabriele Toepser-Ziegert (New York: Saur, 1984) vol. 5, pt. II, doc. 1432, p. 481.

10. James Urry, “Dietrich Heinrich Epp: First Editor of the *Der Bote*,” in *Shepherds, Servants and Prophets: Leadership among the Russian Mennonites (ca. 1880-1960)*, ed. Harry Loewen (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2003), 112. Cf. also Frank H. Epp, “An Analysis of Germanism and National Socialism in the Immigrant Newspaper of a Canadian Minority Group, the Mennonites, in the 1930’s” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1965).

11. Nicolas Werth, “The Mechanism of a Mass Crime: The Great Terror in the Soviet Union, 1937-38,” in *The Spector of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, ed. Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 222.

12. Cf. Willi Vogt, “Verbannte Mennoniten in russischen Publikationen,” Chortitza: Mennonitische Geschichte und Ahnenforschung, accessed Aug. 11, 2021.—<https://chort.square7.ch/Terr.htm>. Extracted from <http://stalin.memo.ru/names/index.htm>.

13. Peter Letkemann, “Mennonites in the Soviet Inferno, 1929-1941,” *Mennonite Historian* 24:4 (1998), 7. More recent documents indicate 1,575,000 people were arrested and sentenced in the Great Terror of 1937-1938, of whom 800,000 were executed.—Werth, “Mechanism of a Mass Crime,” 217f.

Elisabeththal, and Alexanderthal¹⁴—Johann J. Dürksen of Pordenau and Kornelius J. Klassen and Heinrich J. Barg of Elisabeththal were arrested and accused of spying on behalf of Germany.¹⁵ Notably these men had been to Germany—captured as medics for Russia during the First World War—a convenient excuse for the accusation that they were spies. "We were always told that we lived in the most beautiful land in the world," a Mennonite and former chairman of the collective surmised years later. "I guess they suspected that these men who had been abroad would disagree, and therefore they would have to be destroyed."¹⁶ In Schardau, Helene Bräul's brother Johann Thiessen as well as her brother-in-law Abram Klassen were arrested early in 1937. Klassen's stepson recalled:

We suspected nothing. One morning we woke up and mother was crying hard. She couldn't speak when we asked what the matter was. Finally, she said that they had taken away our [step]father. Five men in total were arrested in the village of Schardau that same night. . . . When they took our father, they confiscated our best furniture, dishes, etc., from us. We were expelled from the *kolkhoz* [collective farm] and identified as *kulaks* [well-to-do farmers].¹⁷

After some negotiation and documentation showing they were of a lower peasant class, the Klassen house—briefly repurposed as a chicken coop—was returned, but the barn had been demolished.¹⁸

The persecution of the remaining ministers was finalized during the purge that followed. In the 1920s the Pordenau congregation had elected a new elder and seven ministers, including Aron H. Bräul of Schardau,¹⁹ and Rudnerweide had elected eight new ministers and elders as well.²⁰

14. *Sel-soviets* were the lowest level of rural administrative division. On the five-village Pordenau *sel-soviet*, cf. John J. Neufeld, "Erinnerungen und Erlebnisse aus den schweren Jahren 1936-1943 in Sowjetrußland," 1. Fortsetzung, *Der Bote*, no. 19 (May 9, 1990), 8.

15. *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia Oblast*, Bks. 1-6 (Zaporizhzhia: Dniprovskij Metalurg, 2004-2013), Dürksen (4:188f.); Klassen (4:282); Barg (4:26). Cf. the work of Israeli scholar Meir Buchsweiler, who concludes that despite deep anti-Soviet *ressentiment*, there is no evidence of any activity in the sense of a fifth column of the Nazi Reich among ethnic Germans in Ukraine in the inter-war period. — *Ethnic Germans in the Ukraine towards the Second World War* (Tel Aviv: Diaspora Research Institute, 1980).

16. John J. Neufeld, "Erinnerungen und Erlebnisse aus den schweren Jahren 1936-1943 in Sowjetrußland," *Der Bote*, no. 18 (May 2, 1990), 9.

17. Johann Rehan, "Etwas aus der Vergangenheit," 3-4 (handwritten, 1992-1995; in author's possession); *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, Bks. 1-6, have no archival records for either Thiessen or Klassen.

18. Rehan, "Etwas aus der Vergangenheit," 4-5.

19. Jacob P. Janzen, "Diary 1916-1925," Sept. 9; Oct. 23, 1923; cf. June 12, 1923, trans. Edward Enns. From Jacob P. Janzen Fonds, 1911-1946, vol. 5136, Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, MB.

20. *Unser Blatt* 1, no. 5 (Feb. 1926), 93. — https://chort.square7.ch/Pis/UB25_05.pdf.

The Pordenau church was closed after Ascension Day services in 1932,²¹ with the building used as a club and later dismantled for construction materials. Rudnerweide's church was ordered closed in 1934. The few ministers who returned from a previous term of exile were routinely interrogated, assessed with new, exorbitant grain quotas and taxes, which were impossible to fulfill, and consequently, threatened by starvation. In July 1937, the Politburo passed the resolution "On Anti-Soviet Elements" with the associated NKVD Operational Order 00447 "Concerning the punishment of former *kulaks*, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements." The order focused on the "large number of former *kulaks* and criminals deported at one time . . . and then returning to their regions." The resolution claimed that "significant number of former *kulaks* . . . who had escaped from camps, exile, and labor settlements, have settled in the countryside." These individuals were assumed to be "chief instigators of every kind of anti-Soviet crimes and sabotage in the *kolkhozy* [collectives]." The directive to the territorial party committees was that these elements be "forthwith arrested and executed" or—for the "less active" but nevertheless "hostile elements"—be sent into exile. "Sectarian activists" and "church officials" were considered "most active," and "subject to immediate arrest and after consideration of their case by the *troikas*, to be shot."²² *Troikas* were local commissions of three men, including the NKVD chief and procurator, set up in all regions of the USSR to decide into which category the accused fit. In July 1937 the NKVD presented estimates for each region, and within days established exact quotas for hostile or less active elements to be executed or exiled for eight to ten years. Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the NKVD, issued operational instructions to record the name of the accused and a short abstract on each case and proposed punishment within a five-month timeline.²³

The impact was immediate. Mennonite minister Heinrich A. Reimer of Blumenort, living in Melitopol, was arrested on July 3, 1937, as a "preacher of an evangelical sect" and for "conducting counter-revolutionary agitation." He was executed six months later on January 14, 1938.²⁴ Johann J. Peters from Friedensdorf, also living in Melitopol, was arrested on September 4, 1937, as a "sectarian preacher who conducted counter-

21. Selma Kornelsen Hooge and Anna Goossen Kornelsen, *Life Before Canada* (Abbotsford, B.C.: Self-published, 2018), 44.

22. "Document 170, NKVD operational order 'Concerning the punishment of former kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements,' 30 July 1937," in *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939*, ed. John A. Getty and Oleg V. Naumov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 473-475. Cf. also Werth, "Mechanism of a Mass Crime," 218.

23. Werth, "Mechanism of a Mass Crime," 223f.; 235.

24. *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:560.

revolutionary fascist agitation." He was sentenced to eight years imprisonment, and died the next year.²⁵ Peter P. Teichrob of Pavlovka (Osterwick) was arrested on the charge of being "an illegal sectarian" and executed November 26, 1937.²⁶ On December 13, 1937, Peter J. Toews of Ohrloff, "a preacher of the Mennonite community," was arrested for a second time in the city of Melitopol. He was executed on February 28, 1938.²⁷

Aron H. Bräul had been dekulakized and disenfranchised in 1930, and forced to find work in the city of Stalino in the Donbas region. In 1933 he returned to Marienthal, where his brother and sister lived, and soon fled again to Kislovodsk, Caucasus, where he remained in exile for a year.²⁸ He returned in 1935 and lived for a time in hiding at another brother's home in Paulsheim.²⁹ Bräul was re-arrested on October 29, 1937, and charged with being a "preacher"³⁰ and "systematically conducting counter-revolutionary fascist propaganda." The local chairman, supported by his brother-in-law and another ethnic Mennonite, testified on October 31 that Bräul had been a *kulak* farmer who had taught religion to collective workers, agitated against the values of the revolution, "prayed" for a Germany victory, established a self-defense unit in the revolution, and received gifts from two brothers abroad until 1935. Many accusations were implausible: as soon as Hitler would arrive, for example, Bräul was allegedly prepared to help "eliminate" all Communists for the land they had stolen. He had reportedly told one neighbor: "I wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet in your head." Bräul was sentenced to death on November 17 in Melitopol and shot on November 30.³¹ His background as a preacher was important but not central to the 1937 local testimonies against him. Previous land ownership in Schardau (verifiable), favorable opinions about Hitler (alleged), and threats of rebellion (unsubstantiated) were central claims in the case brought against him by three neighbors. "It was a terrible time in which we lived," Johann Neufeld, the Elisabeththal *kolkhoz* chairman, wrote decades later. "I knew, of course, that in every village there was someone who submitted various reports to the NKVD—about

25. Ibid., 2:518.

26. Ibid., 4:560.

27. Ibid., 3: 612.

28. Cf. *Einwandererzentrale* (Central Immigration Office; hereafter EWZ) Collection, file Katharina Unruh Bräul, A3342, series EWZ 50-A073 2002, from National Archives, Washington, DC.

29. Nellie Bräul Epp, interview with author, 2017; the dates of his time in Paulsheim are not confirmed.

30. See "NKVD Case no. 143: Accusation of Bräul, Aron Heinrich," NKVD Collection 5747, inventory 3, file 8239, from State Archives of Zaporizhzhia Region (hereafter SAZR); in author's possession.

31. *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 4:71.

what was going on in the village, whether people were still praying in the house, or who was cheating [the system], and so on. But I have never been able to find out who these people were."³²

Agatha Rempel, the spouse of Heinrich A. Rempel, another Marienthal minister-in-exile, returned to Marienthal in 1937 after her own nine-month sentence; she was disenfranchised because of her husband's case and conviction: "that meant she could not work in the *kolkhoz* in Marienthal. No work, no food."³³

It is impossible to disentangle the local actions against German Mennonites from the fact that they were also considered "stubbornly religious communities," which Soviet documents usually connected to their "Germanness."³⁴ The dominant image of Germans—historically sometimes revered, sometimes resented by Russians—included strict adherence to Christian precepts, love of discipline, and an understanding of order and hard work as pleasing to God—which was combined with a strong, Western European sense of property ownership. In Soviet eyes, these attributes accounted for their "political backwardness," poor reception of "Communist ideas," resistance to collectivization, and their attempts to protect neighbors who were arrested. These peculiarities required special state policies and measures directed towards the Germans.³⁵

Bräul's arrest was part of a small sweep of the Pordenau *sel-soviet* beginning the evening of October 28 and continuing until October 30. The arrests included Johann Koop, Martin Balzer, Franz Dyck, Gerhard Dirksen, and Gerhard Nikkel—all shot together on December 5 and 6 in Melitopol. Two others arrested the same nights had been executed a week earlier—Gerhard Dyck on November 30, together with Bräul, and Peter

32. John J. Neufeld, "Erinnerungen und Erlebnissen aus den schweren Jahren 1936-1943 in Sowjetrußland," 2. Fortsetzung, *Der Bote*, no. 20 (May 16, 1990), 9.

33. Hooge and Kornelsen, *Life Before Canada*, 46f. Agatha Rempel left for Schönsee where her sister Justa lived, and she could work incognito. Bräul did the same with his brother Abram in Paulsheim.

34. See Peter Letkemann, "Mennonites in the Soviet Inferno, 1929-1941," 1, 6, 7. George K. Epp writes: "When the artificial famine and the Stalin terror in the 1930s silenced all voices of reason in the Soviet Union, Mennonites and Ukrainians were probably the two hardest hit communities. . . . In the case of the Mennonites, the government did not like their strong community bonds based on religion; for the Ukrainian community it was the awakened national feelings, but both had to do with the identity of the group."—"Mennonite-Ukrainian Relations [1789-1945]," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* [hereafter *JMS*] 7 (1989), 141.

35. Cf. the archival work of A. A. Herman, "Репрессии как неотъемлемый элемент политики большевистского режима по отношению кроссийским немцам" [Repression as an integral part of the Bolshevik policy regime in relation to the Russian Germans]. Presented at the Symposium on Repression against Russian Germans in the Soviet Union in the Context of the Soviet National Policy, Moscow, Nov. 1998. Available at <http://www.memo.ru/history/nem>, accessed Aug. 11, 2021.

Dyck on November 27.³⁶ The men were imprisoned in Melitopol for five weeks. At times 250 men were squeezed into its cells measuring 20 meters (66 feet) by 16 meters (52 feet)—so small they had to sleep while standing.³⁷

Unpredictable but regular individual arrests kept the village population in constant fear. The dreaded "Black Raven" NKVD trucks always came into the village at night with headlights dimmed.³⁸ One Bräul cousin, Franz Quiring, was arrested on November 14 in Rudnerweide,³⁹ followed by another cousin, Kornelius D. Mathies of Marienthal, on November 18.⁴⁰ On November 19 when Helene Bräul gave birth to daughter Kätthe in the Schardau birthing-house, she heard multiple NKVD cars driving in the night. There were no private cars in the villages. The Elisabeththal *kolkhoz* supervisor Johann J. Neufeld, described the evening:

On November 19, 1937 we received the message by telephone that the ["German Collective"] chairman was to report to the district [Waldheim, Red-Front] at 7 pm with the driver of the automobile, who was not allowed to attend the meeting. When we arrived, I saw more cars there than ever before in my life. Then the consultation took place; elections were to be held again for the Supreme Soviet [December 12, 1937]. There could be harmful elements in the collectives that might hinder these elections, therefore they should be removed as soon as possible. Now it was clear to us why these vehicles were here.⁴¹

That night three women in the Pordenau sel-soviet were arrested, and the next night Johann A. Neufeld of Elisabeththal⁴²—a prelude to a larger sweep to come.

36. In *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*: Koop (3:444); Balzer (3:269); F. Dyck (3:370); Dirksen (2:220); Nikkel (4:427); G. Dyck (2:214); P. Dyck (2:216).

37. "Adolf Rüdiger," in *Schwarzmeerdeutschtum: Mennoniten Propaganda materials*, 53/800/0, file 184, Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe (National Archives Poland). This was not unusual. Cf. also Lynne Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), [Google Play eBook pagination], 122; 161.

38. "Steinfeld (Kamenko) Dorfbericht," March 1942, Fragebogen XI.5 (128), Special Unit Stumpf, BArch R6, file 621, case 43.

39. *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:307.

40. "NKVD Case no. 295: Accusation of Mathies, Kornelius David," NKVD Collection 5747, inventory 3, file 4608, from SAZR.

41. J. Neufeld, "Erinnerungen und Erlebnisse" (2. Fortsetzung), 9. On the women arrested, see below.

42. *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 4:420. On the legacies of collective trauma experienced by these women, cf. Elisabeth Krahn, "Transcending the 'Black Raven': An Autoethnographic and Intergenerational Exploration of Stalinist Oppression," *Qualitative*

After a week in the birthing house without any sign of her husband, Franz, Helene Bräul feared he too had been arrested. He finally received permission to visit her, but on November 27—the day Helene and baby arrived home in Marienthal—a friend told Franz Bräul that his name, plus the names of twelve others, were on an arrest list for the next day. It was impossible to hide or flee, but it was enough time to organize a double set of clothes and some food. Bräul told his friend Franz Isaak across the street that he too was on the list. On November 28, the “Black Ravens” visited thirteen families in the Pordenau *sel-soviet* villages. A similar pattern repeated itself in each Mennonite village and is recalled in many memoirs. “We saw through the window a black vehicle driving into the village. We all knew what hour the ‘clock’ had struck, and suddenly the whole family sat there as if paralyzed . . . as if we were facing the end of the world,” Eduard [Jakob] Reimer of Liebenau recalled. “The vehicle stopped at the village council building. After a while, a manager of the council came out and then went to those who were to be arrested. The individual to be arrested would briefly pack his things, a change of clothes (if he still had any) and small towel, and ordered to come to the village council.”⁴³ In Franzfeld, Chortitza “young collectivists” brought individuals to the village council where each was interrogated through the night. The women brought clothes, blankets, and food the next morning before the trucks departed.⁴⁴ A report from Osterwick noted that items were often stolen in the house search as a reward for the village activists.⁴⁵ The median age of those arrested in the Pordenau *sel-soviet* purge was 39—old enough to remember pre-revolutionary Russia.⁴⁶ In the case of Franz Bräul, the NKVD arrived very early in the morning. The men were taken to the district prison “Rot-Front” in Waldheim, twenty-one kilometers away. The local NKVD occupied one building of the former milling complex, and its large cellar was used as a holding cell. Eduard Reimer described the scene around that prison, adjacent to his school.

Sociology Review 9, no. 3 (2013), 46-73.— http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/Volume26/QSR_9_3_Krahn.pdf.

43. Eduard Reimer, *Memoir* (n.d.), 22f., from Gerhard Lohrenz Fonds, 60, no. 63, vol. 3333, Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, Man.

44. “Franzfeld (Rayon Chortitza) Dorfbericht,” April 1942, “Bericht, K. Epp,” 5f. (388f.), from Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 621, case 84, BArch—<https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/>.

45. “Osterwick Dorfbericht,” Fragebogen XI.5, 9, from Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 622, case 101, BArch.— <https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/>.

46. The thirteen arrested were: David M. Balzer (*Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 4:24f.); Jakob H. Barg (2:40); Franz H. Bräul (2:81); David J. Dick (2:214); Heinrich F. Dick (4:194); Jakob J. Friesen (4:610); Heinrich D. Hildebrandt (2:163f.); Franz A. Isaak (2:290f.); Peter J. Martens (2:430); Johann H. Peters (2:517f.); Gerhard A. Regier (4:495); Heinrich J. Tessmann (2:639); and Heinrich G. Wall (2:95f.). In 1944, Helene Bräul listed her husband’s day of abduction as Nov. 30, 1937, perhaps the day he was transferred to Melitopol.—EWZ file “Helen Thiessen Bräul,” A3342, series EWZ 50-A073, 1946.

Every day we students crept secretly to the mill. There we saw the desperate faces looking out of the cellar windows. Often they wanted to tell us something with a gesture or with their fingers, which was not always understood. Some students recognized their own father, brother, close relative or acquaintance among the prisoners. The prisoners were later taken away on open trucks. They sat tightly packed on the trucks, their heads lowered. . . . Two armed guards stood next to the cab and strictly guarded the prisoners.⁴⁷



Fig. 1: Waldheim (Rot-Front) Prison, built as a flour mill, 1909-1911. A sketch of the Waldheim (Rot-Front) flour mill established by I. I. Neufeld & Co., and nationalized after the revolution. One of the smaller buildings to the left housed the prison in 1937. (Photo source: <https://chort.square7.ch/FB/2/Y166.jpg>).

Helene Bräul, together with the other women, came to Waldheim the next day to bring food and clothes for their loved ones. This ritual was not unusual. The women often walked the entire distance if wagons could not be obtained. On arrival, they could never be certain if their packages would be received and passed on to their loved ones. One recalled that the cleaning personnel gave the packages through the iron bar openings in the dark of night. Eventually, they received the answer “that their men no longer needed the things. How terrible this was for the family!”⁴⁸ For the women who would later speak of this grueling walk to the prison through the rain and snow, their “fortune and comfort” was that they were “all

47. Reimer, *Memoir*, 23.

48. Adina Neufeld Bräul, b. 1926, interview with author, Feb. 15, 2019, in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. Cf. J. Neufeld, “Erinnerungen und Erlebnissen” (1. Fortsetzung), 8; also Harry Loewen, *Between Worlds: Reflections of a Soviet-born Canadian Mennonite* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 2006), 21; Marlene Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 24.

pulling together on the same strand of destiny,” and that “sorrow shared is sorrow halved.”⁴⁹

On November 30, Helene Bräul’s home was searched by Inspector Ustimenko of the Rot-Front Rayon Office and one item—a “personal book”—was confiscated.⁵⁰ Written addresses of contacts abroad were of highest interest. Ustimenko also searched the Schardau home of Peter F. Klassen—arrested the same day with two others⁵¹—as well as the Pordenau homes of Gerhard Regier and Heinrich Wall. On the same day, a “Sawatsky”—who was an ethnic Mennonite and the head inspector of the Workers and Peasants Police Service of Rot-Front NKVD—led searches in the Marienthal homes of Peter Martens, David Balzer, Jakob Barg, Jakob Friesen, and Franz Isaak. On the same day, the Pordenau *sel-soviet* chairman, Ivan Pavlovich Kovalenko, and his secretary issued certificates of accusation against each of those arrested on November 28 as well as the three arrested on November 30, with summaries of their crimes. Village administrators also scrambled on November 30 to collect three written accusations per detainee. Seven Mennonite men in Marienthal from fifty-six closely-related households wrote letters of accusation against eight individuals arrested. It is impossible to know how many of these accusers were bribed or intimidated to testify and how many did so as convinced Communists.⁵² In the larger administrative and work unit, for example, three men by the name of Berg, along with a Buhler, Dyck, Funk, Goossen, Harder, Köhn, Kornelson, Nachtigal, Quiring, Schulz, and Willms—all Mennonites—submitted handwritten accusations against Barg, Bräul, Bräul, Friesen, Hildebrandt, Isaak, Klassen, Martens, Mathies, Regier, and Wall—also all Mennonite neighbors. In Marienthal Mennonite Chairperson (*predsedatel*) Kornelsen added detailed accusation certificates for at least eight of the accused that day, and his brother-in-law submitted four testimonies against the same men.⁵³ Another *predsedatel* in adjacent Pordenau wrote two of the accusations.

49. Helena Ens, in *Mennonitische Märtyrer der jüngsten Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart*, vol. 2: *Der große Leidensweg*, ed. A. A. Töws (North Clearbrook, B.C.: Self-published, 1954), 277.

50. “NKVD Case no. 314: Accusation of Bräul, Franz Heinrich,” translated by Olga Shmakina. From SAZR, collection 5747, inventory 3, file 4595; also *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:81.

51. Heinrich J. Nickel (*Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:479) and Dietrich G. Wall (2:96), both of Elisabeththal, and Petker F. Klassen (4:285) of Schardau were all arrested on Nov. 30, 1937.

52. See statement in “Steinfeld (Kriwoi-Rog) Dorfbericht,” Fragebogen XI.5, 128.—<https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/>.

53. Kovalenko, a Ukrainian communist, was chairman for the Pordenau *kolkhoz* from 1934 to 1937; he was succeeded by Johann (John) J. Neufeld from Elisabeththal, who led the *kolkhoz*

THE ARREST FILES, WITNESS STATEMENTS, SENTENCING PATTERNS

Each file of those arrested includes a local interrogation record conducted by the NKVD Rot-Front criminal investigation officer and junior lieutenant of militia in Waldheim. Almost two-thirds of this cluster were members of the collective farm "Avtodor." Other regional arrests during the same week included three in Paulsheim,⁵⁴ three in Mariawohl,⁵⁵ two in Landskrone,⁵⁶ and one in Gnadenheim.⁵⁷

On December 1, medical examination certificates were issued in Waldheim that cleared the accused for prisoner transport "to the North" as necessary. On the same day these twenty-five men—together with the two arrested mid-November⁵⁸—were transported to the Melitopol city prison, where they were interrogated individually. Likewise on December 1, M. I. Barg (or Bartsch)—likely an ethnic Mennonite—was the interrogator in Melitopol for Peter Martens, David Balzer, and Kornelius Mathies. The day before at least eleven Molotschna Mennonite men were executed at the Melitopol prison, including Franz Bräul's brother, Aron, and six from the village of Sparrau, including three Neufeld brothers.⁵⁹

from 1937 until German occupation in 1941. Kornelius Kornelson was *predsedatel* (chairperson) of the Marienthal *kolkhoz* throughout much of the 1930s (Hooge and Kornelsen, *Life Before Canada*, 41). Cf. the important work of Colin P. Neufeldt, including: "Collectivizing the Mutter Ansiedlungen: The Role of Mennonites in Organizing Kolkhozy in the Khortytsia and Molochansk German National Districts in Ukraine in the Late 1920s and Early 1930s," in *Minority Report: Mennonite Identities in Imperial Russia and Soviet Ukraine Reconsidered, 1789-1945*, ed. Leonard G. Friesen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 211-259; Colin P. Neufeldt, "The Public and Private Lives of Mennonite Kolkhoz Chairmen in the Khortytsia and Molochansk German National Raion in Ukraine (1928-1934)," in *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 2305 (2015), 1-87 (<https://doi.org/10.5195/cbp.2015.199>); and Colin P. Neufeldt, "Separating the Sheep from the Goats: The Role of Mennonites and Non-Mennonites in the Dekulakization of Khortitsa, Ukraine (1928-1930)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* [hereafter *MQR*] 83 (April 2009), 221-291.

54. Kornelius K. Dick (*Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 4:197), Franz F. Görtz (2:158), and Johann H. Suderman (2:280) were arrested together on Nov. 28, 1937, in Paulsheim.

55. Heinrich F. Funk (*Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:683), Aron A. Regier (4:495), and Peter K. Klassen (2:321) were arrested on Nov. 27, 28, and 30, 1937, respectively, in Mariawohl.

56. Peter J. Schartner (*Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:716f.) and Kornelius D. Toews (2:635) were arrested on Nov. 28 and 29, 1937, respectively.

57. Isaac I. Friesen was arrested on Nov. 28, 1937 (*Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:680).

58. Johann A. Neufeld of Elisabeththal was arrested on Nov. 20 (*Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 4:420) and Kornelius D. Mathies of Marienthal was arrested on Nov. 18, 1937 (2:435f.).

59. Aron H. Bräul (*Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 4:71); Gerhard J. Dyck (2:214); David J. Harder (3:327); Franz J. Harder (3:327); Peter S. Klassen (4:285); Peter P. Mathies (2:436); Gerhard G. Neufeld (3:522); Jakob K. Neufeld (2:474); Johann K. Neufeld (2:472); Kornelius K. Neufeld (2:473); Heinrich J. Wall (2:96); and Isaac H. Wall (2:96).

Kornelius K. Neufeld, one of the three, had been an estate owner who was dispossessed and "driven four kilometers out onto the steppe, where he lived for three years in an earthen hut dug into the ground," banned from entering the village.⁶⁰

After a very short stay in Melitopol for the interrogation, the Pordenau *sel-soviet* group was taken to Dnipropetrovsk, some 200 kilometers north of the city. There, on December 3, all twenty-seven men, together with two other Mennonites,⁶¹ were tried by the NKVD *troika* (tribunal). The same charge was brought against each man: "conducted counter-revolutionary nationalist propaganda"—a criminal offense under Article 54-10 of the Ukrainian Soviet Criminal Code. By 1937, the article had come to include a broad range of activities that might have a counter-revolutionary motive, including rumors, anecdotes, opinions, and grumblings. All were sufficient for a conviction.⁶² Each was found guilty and all but three were executed by shooting on December 11, 1937, in the city of Dnipropetrovsk. Jakob H. Barg, Heinrich D. Hildebrandt, and Heinrich Tessmann—all from Marienthal—were given more lenient, ten-year sentences.⁶³ Barg died in prison on September 14, 1942 (at an unknown location), and Hildebrandt died in a correctional labor camp in northeastern Siberia on April 30, 1942. Further arrests in Marienthal and Pordenau were singular and sporadic from this point to June 1938.⁶⁴

On December 3, two days after the men had been transported to Melitopol, at least thirty-four more individuals were arrested in the eastern part of the Molotschna settlement under the same charges. They came from twenty different villages that were part of the Rot-Front District (Rayon). The pattern of arresting one to three individuals per village per visit kept the level of fear high. These men were also transported from Waldheim to Melitopol and then Dnipropetrovsk where they were tried on December 8. In sharp contrast to the previous week,

60. Cf. "Sparrau," in Peter Letkemann, "Molotschna Villages," draft document based on George K. Epp correspondence (in author's possession). For a similar account, cf. "Franzfeld Dorfbericht," 7 (389).

61. Jakob F. Hildebrandt of Alexandrovka, Chernigov [Molotschna?] (*Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:165) and Wilhelm D. Reimer (4:561) from the Kherson Oblast were arrested on Nov. 28 and Nov. 13, 1937, respectively.

62. Sarah Davies, "The Crime of Anti-Soviet Agitation in the Soviet Union in the 1930s," *Cahiers du monde russe* 9:1-2 (1998), 159, 160.

63. Cf. "NKVD Case no. 316: Accusation of Barg, Jacob Heinrich," and "NKVD Case no. 296: Accusation of Hildebrand, Heinrich David," from SAZR, NKVD Collection 5747, inventory 3, files 2938 and 2744; also Heinrich J. Tessmann in *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 3:639.

64. Johann A. Voth (Marienthal) was arrested Dec. 13, 1937 (*Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:676), followed by: Jakob Löwen (Pordenau), Dec. 1937; Heinrich Penner (Pordenau, Jan. 30, 1938; Gerhard Reimer (Pordenau), March 10, 1938; Johann Quiring (Pordenau) June 3, 1938; and Dietrich Loewen (Pordenau) June 24, 1938.

thirty men were given ten-year sentences, and two were given lesser sentences. Curiously, only two received a death sentence.⁶⁵ On December 13, 1937, a particularly large sweep gathered up fifty-three individuals from twenty-one Molotschna villages. They were tried over three months and in different places: most in Dnipropetrovsk, but some in Melitopol, and some in Zaporizhzhia as well. All were sentenced to death.⁶⁶ The Dnipropetrovsk troika was initially allocated 1,000 executions for the 1937 phase of the "kulak operation," with 2,000 to be sent to labor camps. These numbers were repeatedly increased at the request of the Dnipropetrovsk NKVD. By the end of 1937 they had been allocated 2,600 executions and 3,500 deportations.⁶⁷



Fig. 2: "Troika" (Triumvirate). Interrogation. The arrested man is forced by the NKVD to sign the written protocol of his "guilt" and therefore also his judgment. Bronze by Jakob Wedel (1992). Museum für russlanddeutsche Kulturgeschichte in Detmold, Germany. Used by permission.

65. The following individuals were arrested on Dec. 3, 1937: Franz H. Banman, Jakob H. Barg, Heinrich G. Warkentin, Heinrich J. Willms, Heinrich P. Willms, Johann A. Willms, Heinrich J. Wiens, Johann G. Wiens, Jakob G. Wiens, Jakob J. Heinrichs, Abram A. Dick, Boris B. Dick, Heinrich A. Dick, Aron P. Ens, Heinrich H. Siebert, Jakob J. Klassen, Peter F. Kliewer, Johan P. Martens, Abram Matthies, Heinrich P. Neumann, Peter J. Penner, Franz P. Penner, Gerhard B. Plett, Johann A. Schellenberg, Franz I. Sawatsky, Nikola H. Siebert, Abram A. Teichrob (eight-year sentence), Jakob J. Friesen, Jakob G. Klassen, Gerhard D. Thiessen, Boris J. Schmidt, Jakob J. Schmidt (death sentence), Kornelius P. Nickel (five-year sentence), and Dietrich J. Goossen (death sentence). Teichrob, Sawatsky, H. Wiens, and Barg all died in prison before the completion of their terms. Extracted from *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia* 1-4.

66. Extracted from *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia* vol. 1-4. For example, David D. Funk from the Pordenau *sel-soviet* (Elisabeththal) was arrested on Dec. 13 and executed in Zaporizhzhia on Jan. 31, 1938 (2:683f.).

67. Dmitry Voltchek, "Personally shot 2,100 People. The Story of the Executioner and his Victims" (Лично расстрелял 2100 человек. История палача и его жертвы), Radio Liberty (Радио Свобода). — <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29591642.html>.

The vastly different sentences from week to week—mostly with the same tribunal—support the claim that executions were largely determined by quotas or the logistics and availability of boxcars heading to the Soviet Union's far north. The use of torture or "physical measures of influence" to obtain confessions of counter-revolutionary activities was widespread in the NKVD interrogation cells. Forcing the arrested men to beat each other and making them stand for ten to fifteen days without rest resulted in large numbers of "false, made-up violations."⁶⁸

The NKVD prison in the town of Uman, west of Dnipropetrovsk, provides an example of the killing operation. While the prison was built to house 400, "as many as 2,500—some said more—were packed into its cells" at the height of the purge in November and December 1937. Prison guards funneled the convicted first into the interrogation rooms, and then into the cellar for execution. The execution squad used torture to achieve their quota of 100 confessions a day. The executions took place in three rooms in the cellar. In the first, each person's identification was checked. In the second, prisoners were searched and told they would be sent to baths before transport to a labor camp. "None were aware of their fate until the penultimate moment. In the third room, according to records, "they were shot." The NKVD chauffeur "raced the engine of his car in the courtyard to cover up the sounds of the bullets." Truckloads of corpses, "hidden under tarps," were then taken to the burial site. Regularly, the bodies would be looted for gold teeth and the clothing sold in the bazaar.⁶⁹

CONFESSIONS

The analysis that follows is based on primary documents for the arrests, trials, and executions of twelve individuals arrested in October and November 1937 from the Pordenau *sel-soviet*. The files give a detailed picture not only of the process of arrest, trial, and execution, but also of the disordered and toxic state of village life and relationships. Each file includes a local interrogation record in which the accused gave a fulsome confession to the charges of "counter-revolutionary activity." The answers to questions regarding German fascism and insurrection appear largely standardized and rote, with implausible claims tailored for the charge of treason. But each account is also mixed with at least some accurate information that drew on local references and memories. These details include family histories, the size of their farms before the revolution, loyalties during the revolution, connections to family abroad, gifts received, and the identification of past church leadership in the extended

68. Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators*, 123.

69. *Ibid.*, 127f.; 131.

family. Some attitudes or discussions in the confessions seem plausible as private thoughts, but embellished and standardized to fit the charge of agitating rebellion. The confessions were written by a recording secretary and each page is signed by the accused as true and accurate.

Franz Bräul's signed confession is a typical sample:

Being opposed to the existing Soviet system and especially collectivization, I tried to show the collective farmers that we, German Mennonites, were forced to join the *kolkhoz* and then made to work from morning till late at night. Those who took our property did not themselves work on the *kolkhoz*—they only managed it—but they and the Communists lived very well and lacked nothing. I said this . . . to stir discontent and disrupt their work ethic on the collective farm.

At the same time we were starving as well and lived in poverty, and so I told the collective farmers that in Germany people and farmers lived very well because they had private property and everybody worked for himself. Everything that they obtained from their farms was their own property.

In my conversations with the collective farmers I tried to convince them that our life was . . . deteriorating with every passing year with poor harvests. But most troublesome is that the state does not take that into consideration and set very high quotas for various procurements so that there was nothing left to be distributed among the collective farmers.

I tried to convince them that only a change of power and the introduction of fascist dictatorship in Ukraine could save us from the Soviet authorities. Fascism in Germany was able to restore its economy, and will be able to restore our economy as well and make us owners again as in former times. . . . I told the collective farmers that war between Germany and the USSR would happen as early as this year and that Germany would be victorious. I was suggesting that we, as Germans, should . . . stand up with arms against the Soviet system. . . ; only then would we live a truly human life. I said that when the war between Germany and the USSR begins, I would take up arms against the Soviet authorities and would show no mercy to any activists or communists for making us Mennonites destitute. . . . I have always considered Germany to be my motherland.⁷⁰

Bräul acknowledged that prior to the revolution he had owned a full-farm of 65 *desiatinas* [175 acres] with a thresher, motor, and necessary agricultural implements, and that he had used laborers. He therefore was,

70. "NKVD Case no. 314: Accusation of Bräul, Franz."

by definition, a *kulak*. Moreover, he confessed that he fought in the Denikin Army in 1919 and the Wrangel Army in 1919-1920 against the Red Army. Bräul's shaky signature to each page appears to be that of a man twice his age, suggesting physical or psychological duress. Bräul's final statement is a line repeated in nearly all of the files: "Yes, I fully admit the guilt of carrying out counter-revolutionary activity. . . . Everything is written down from my words correctly and has been read to me, I confirm the written text with my signature."

Bräul's accusers in Marienthal claimed he had "maintained written correspondence with Germany, and from there he received money transfers for his fabricated correspondence." Not only did he have a farm, but he also had "10 to 12 horses, 5 to 7 cows, 6 young stock, and he hired 3 to 4 workers during the busy season and 2 to 3 people on a permanent basis," thus an exploiter with "hired labor." Moreover, he was deemed an "enemy to the nation" because, it was reported, he "always" talked with other Germans about his grievances, thought a war with Germany was imminent, and had claimed he would shoot village activists and communists without mercy. The accusation continued that he was still closely connected to his brothers abroad and to a brother [Aron] in Ukraine who was a preacher.

The testimony of Bräul's accusers echoed his confession. Together with the related confessions and severity of punishment, the accusations suggest that no conversations or social engagements were safe. With the mix of ideological confusion, poverty, and food insecurity, some accusers were easily bribed with food or clothing in exchange for a letter of betrayal. In some villages, accusers were paid between 25 and 100 rubles for false testimonies; by comparison a mid-level worker on the collective farm earned between 200 and 250 rubles per year; a work outfit cost between 80 and 100 rubles, and a pair of shoes between 30 and 50 rubles.⁷¹

JEWISH NKVD OFFICERS

Mennonites sometimes linked their repression in Dnipropetrovsk or Zaporizhzhia not to the individuals involved, but to Jews more generally—especially after German occupation. In 1934, 38 percent of the powerful NKVD in the USSR was Jewish, but that would fall to 20 percent

71. "Schönau (Sagradovka) Dorfbericht," 268, and "Tiege (Sagradovka) Dorfbericht," 290b, from BArch, Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 620, case 37, and file 621, case 49.—<https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/>. These actions were known and acknowledged in the Mennonite community: "There was no shortage of false witnesses; others had to or were forced to affirm false accusations."—A. A. Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer der jüngsten Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart* (Winnipeg, Man.: Christian Press, 1949), 1:293; Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer*, 2:74.

in Ukraine by 1938 and much lower in the rest of the country by 1939 when a large number of Jews were also being repressed.⁷²

From 1936 to June 1938 the commandant and head of the NKVD (state security police) regional prison in Dnipropetrovsk was Naum Tsalevich Turbovsky. Turbovsky signed the execution orders of the following individuals from the Pordenau *sel-soviet*: David M. Balzer, Franz H. Bräul, Jacob J. Friesen, Franz A. Isaak, Peter F. Klassen, Peter J. Martens, Kornelius D. Mathies, Gerhard A. Regier, and Heinrich G. Wall. In each file the follow sentencing is found: “Ruled: TO BE SHOT. All belongings owned privately by him are subject to confiscation.”

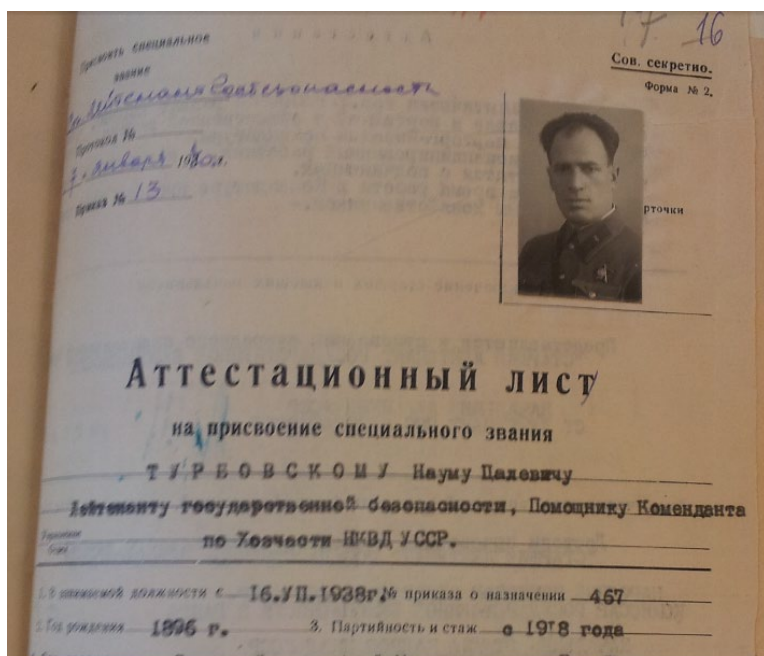


Fig. 3: Turbovsky's NKVD Personnel File

On December 7, 1937, just days before this small group of Mennonites was executed, Turbovsky was commended for “personally executing 2,100” convicted prisoners and awarded the Order of the Red Star.⁷³

72. Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators*, 39, 42.

73. Cf. Andrei Zhukov et al., editors, *Staff of the State Security of the USSR, 1935-1939* [Кадровый состав органов государственной безопасности СССР. 1935-1939], s.v. “Turbovsky, Naum Tsalevich [Турбовский, Наум Цалевич],” https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Турбовский_Наум_Цалевич. This directory by the Moscow human rights group “Memorial” includes biographies of 39,950 NKVD who were promoted to special state security ranks from 1935 to mid-1939.

Clearly, Turbovsky was involved in more executions of Mennonites than just these nine. One researcher estimates that about half of all those shot in the Dnipropetrovsk region between July 1937 and July 1938 were shot by Turbovsky himself.⁷⁴ Turbovsky received a commendation for the security of his prison and for his method of isolating and transferring prisoners to their interrogation. All of this “greatly contributed to the success of the investigations over the enemies of the people,” namely “military-fascist conspirators, spies and saboteurs.”

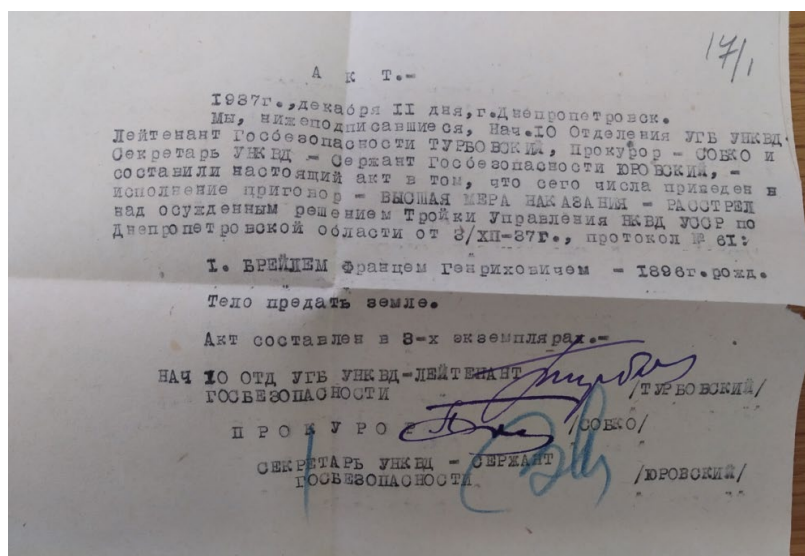


Fig. 4: Document of execution of Franz Bräul: "capital punishment by shooting." Signed by Naum Turbovsky and Abraam Yurovsky.

The sheer number of Turbovsky's victims, even from one small corner of the Molotschna District, gives Turbovsky a place in the Soviet Mennonite story. Turbovsky's NKVD personnel file offers a glimpse into his life and career. In 1937, Turbovsky and victim Franz Bräul, for example, were both 41 years old. Both were raised in a closely-knit, religious-ethnic community in Ukraine. Turbovsky grew up in an observant Orthodox home and received a traditional Jewish education, and Bräul was the son and grandson of Mennonite teachers. Both were common people who remembered life before the revolution. In 1918, Turbovsky fought in the Red Army against Denikin's forces, whereas

74. Cf. Voltchek, "Personally shot 2,100 People [Turbovsky]." Zhokov's ("Staff of the State Security of the USSR, 1935-1939") entry for Turbovsky includes a link to Turbovsky's complete personnel file for download (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

Bräul, like his neighbor Jakob J. Friesen, were accused of taking up arms with the White Army and Denikin. Both Bräul and Turbovsky apparently fought against the anarchist Nestor Makhno. Both came from large families, and each had siblings in North America. For both in some ways, the civil war was still being fought. A few years later some members of Turbovsky’s family were murdered by German troops instructed to cleanse Ukraine of its hundreds of thousands of Jews.

The certificates of execution signed by Turbovsky above were also co-signed by Avraam Izrailevich Yurovsky, a Russian Jew—as per his identity papers—born in 1905 near Poltava. Yurovsky was secretary of the NKVD at Dnipropetrovsk, and state security lieutenant. Eight days after the executions of these Pordenau-area Mennonites, Yurovsky was decorated with a “Orden Znak Pocheta” (Order of Honor) medal for outstanding achievement. He was a member of the Communist Party since 1928, and a member NKVD and its predecessor OGPU since 1930. Yurovsky was killed on July 22, 1943, on the battle front against Nazi German occupation forces.⁷⁵

Boris L’vovich Linetskii, born 1906, was from a white-collar Odessa Jewish family. He had only an elementary education and worked as a weaver until joining the OGPU in 1932. He was an operational plenipotentiary and then section head in the Dnipropetrovsk NKVD; in 1937 he was awarded with a bicycle for his work. In May 1938 Linetskii was transferred to Zaporizhzhia (administratively part of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast), where he had largely unrestrained powers for the mass NKVD operations in a region that included significant Mennonite populations. He required a “relentless pace” of interrogations by his subordinates, and was later charged, among other things, with sanctioning beatings and with disposing of corpses in a cesspool in the NKVD courtyard. Consistent with the logic of the Great Terror, intent on destroying the omnipresent “fifth column” by all means available, Linetskii created a large-scale German fascist espionage case netting some 260 to 280 individuals, in part with names extracted from a pre-revolutionary Mennonite factory owner. In May 1939 he was dismissed and executed by Stalin in 1940.⁷⁶ While the well-documented roles of Turbovsky, Yurovsky, and Linetskii in the torture, conviction, and

75. Zhukov, *Staff of the State Security of the USSR, 1935-1939*, s.v. “Yurovsky, Avraam Izrailevich [Юровский, Авраам Израилевич],” https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Юровский_Авраам_Израилевич (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

75. Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators*, 136.

76. Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators*, ch. 6; also Zhukov, *Staff of the State Security of the USSR, 1935-1939*, s.v. “Boris L’vovich Linetskii [Линецкий, Борис Львович],” — https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Линецкий_Борис_Львович (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

execution of Mennonites in 1937 and 1938 were significant, ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Mennonites played roles as well.

TERROR OPERATIONS IN UKRAINE

What happened to the Pordenau group was hardly unique. A comparison of Bräul's story with an arrest file of Johann J. Thiessen of Klippenfeld arrested on December 20, 1937, shows almost identical procedures and forms—even down to the patterns of accusation and confession.⁷⁷ "Comrade Sawatsky," a member of the Rot-Front NKVD, undertook the house search and was involved with the Marienthal searches as well. Thiessen was taken first to Melitopol where he was also interrogated by M. I. Barg/Bartsch. Three witness interviews were collected from Mennonite neighbors and colleagues—Fast, Franz, and Dick. "He said that in case of a war between German and the Soviet Union . . . he will do away with the leaders of the Soviet system and activists, who victimized *kulaks*," and [according to another neighbor], "that he would personally hang Communists whom he had been hating for a long time." The third witness testified that Thiessen admitted "he would be the first person to take up arms and start shooting all enemies as he could not tolerate being a victim anymore." Witness statements were recorded by the local militia inspector of Worker's and Peasant's Militia.

As in the Pordenau area cases, the deputy special investigative agent, Kivenko, together with Georg Fomin, the junior lieutenant of service,⁷⁸ signed the "Conclusion to Indict" and sent the case for consideration to "the Special *Troika* of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast NKVD Department." Fomin had a reputation for his use of torture. One guard later confessed: "I was forced to observe so-called concerts which consisted of prisoners beating each other at the suggestion of the interrogator—they danced and sang. Fomin, Petrov, Tomin, Kuratov led these concerts."⁷⁹

For Thiessen—as with the Pordenau cases above—the *Troika* of the Dnipropetrovsk NKVD ruled that the accused be executed by shooting, and that his private belongings were subject to confiscation. A statement confirming the execution of the sentence by shooting was signed by the *Troika* in Dnipropetrovsk, including the head of the 10th Department of the

77. "NKVD Case no. 527: Accusation of Thiessen, Ivan Ivanovich," translation by Olga Shmakina. From SAZR, NKVD Collection 5747, inventory 3, file 4411. I thank Harold Thiessen for sharing his family's file.

78. Georg Philip Fomin was born 1905; see *Rehabilitated History: Odessa Oblast*, Bk. I (Odessa: Plaske, 2010), 462.—<http://www.reabit.org.ua/files/store/Odessa.1.pdf>; also Zhukov, *Staff of the State Security of the USSR, 1935-1939*, s.v. "Fomin, George Filippovich" [Фомин, Георгий Филиппович].—https://nkvd.memo.ru/index.php/Фомин,_Георгий_Филиппович (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

79. Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators*, 136.

State Security Agency of the NKVD Directorate and Lieutenant of State Security Naum Turbovsky, Prosecutor Sobko, and the head of the Corps of the 10th Department of the NKVD Directorate, Sergeant Lipovoy. On the evening of Thiessen's arrest, local Molotschna NKVD officials took a broad tour through ten villages which more or less encircled Waldheim (Rot-Front) and arrested thirteen individuals on the same charge.⁸⁰ Most were sentenced on December 26, and all were shot early in the New Year.

Other regional examples offer small variations. A group of three Mennonites in the city of Nikopol were arrested on November 27, 1937. Each was forced to testify against the other. The files have a few specific references: "both of us were members of the counter-revolutionary organization 'Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine.'" ⁸¹ One was a minister, and another had been previously convicted for failing to fulfill a grain-procurement plan. Almost all other remarks are formulaic. They initially met in a Nikopol apartment "to establish a counter-revolutionary fascist-terrorist group in Nikopol." Their agreed task was to attract and prepare other Soviet Germans to "conduct destructive sabotage and terrorist activity." Thus, when the war started, they would "assist Germany to defeat the USSR and to establish a fascist state." One confessed that he had openly "praised the system, might, and culture in Germany as well as the personality of Hitler." Another confessed that when they receive arms and explosives, they "would be ready to blow up any factory, station or railway bridge and kill Communists."⁸² Like those accused from the Pordenau area, these three were found guilty under Art. 54-10 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code. Kornelius Dyck (Dik), Jakob D. Schultz, and Peter P. Koop were executed together on January 5, 1938. The fourth individual implicated in the "plot" was Wilhelm W. Janzen, who had been shot months earlier. With the arrest of Dyck, Schultz, Koop, and Janzen, the Nikopol NKVD was assured that this "terrorist cell" had been "liquidated."⁸³

80. The following individuals were arrested on Dec. 20, 1937: Jakob J. Dirksen, Sparrau; Heinrich J. Becker, Schoensee; Jakob J. Rempel, Wernersdorf; Peter P. Thiessen, Landskrone; Jakob D. Wiens, Kontinusfeld; Peter P. Janzen, Gnadenfeld; Kornelius Isaak, Gnadental; Peter P. Bergman, Landskrone; Heinrich P. Loewen, Gnadenfeld; Gerhard H. Reimer, Mariawohl; Jakob J. Thiessen, Morgenau; David A. Boldt, Sparrau, Johann J. Thiessen, Klippenfeld; and David I. Peters, Kontinusfeld.—Extracted from *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, Bks. I-VI.

81. Cf. *Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine (1922-1927), Mennonite and Soviet Documents*, ed. John B. Toews and Paul Toews, eds., trans. J. B. Toews, O. Shmakina, and W. Regehr (Fresno, Calif.: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2011).

82. "NKVD Case no. G-1818: Accusation of Dyck, Kornelius Franz," NKVD Collection 6478, inventory 2, file 3607, from State Archives of the Dnipropetrovsk Region. I thank John van Dyck for sharing his family's file.

83. Cf. "NKVD Case no. G-1818: Accusation of Dyck, Kornelius"; Jakob Dietrich Schultz, in *Rehabilitated History: Dnipropetrovsk Oblast*, Bk. 2 (Dnipropetrovsk: "Monolit," 2008), 1090;

Another sample accusation—this one against Johann I. Braun from the Donetsk Region, who was arrested on December 23, 1937—shows similarities to the other confessions of “counter-revolutionary” activities, including “harmful work on the collective farms,” having “hostile feelings” towards the Soviet Union and agitating “an anti-combine [work] mood” among workers.⁸⁴ Braun, who admitted to speaking positively of life in America and Germany, was said to be involved in a Trotskyite counter-revolutionary organization supervised by the German consulate, with the goal of harming “industry, railways, and agriculture,” and helping “Germany capture Soviet Ukraine.” In another case, the signed confession read: “I added moldy flour to the bread to adulterate it. I did this to make workers dissatisfied. I delayed the baking and the delivery of bread. I added mice to the bread.”⁸⁵ The statements were clearly contrived.

The nineteen predominantly Mennonite villages of the Chortitza District under German occupation in 1942 reported that 826 individuals had been exiled or shot in 1937 and 1938.⁸⁶ The village of Neu-Chortitza on the west side of the Dnieper River was typical: fifty-nine heads of household were missing; only seventy-seven men over 18 years of age remained in the village, compared with 143 women.⁸⁷ In nearby Gnadenental (Baratow), “forty men were taken by the NKVD in short succession [mostly in June 1938], always by night . . . all have disappeared without a trace.”⁸⁸ The largest numbers were incarcerated in the nearby NKVD prison in Zaporizhzhia. Of these, hundreds were executed there as well. On November 2, 1938, for example, seventeen Mennonite men were executed; a week later seven were killed; the next week sixty-six.⁸⁹ The torture employed in this prison in 1938 has been well documented.⁹⁰ Cells

Wilhelm Wilhelm Janzen, in *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, Bk. 4:690; and Peter Peter Koop, in *Rehabilitated History: Dnipropetrovsk*, 2:422. —<http://www.reabit.org.ua/files/store/Dnipropet.2.pdf>.

84. Anne Konrad, *Red Quarter Moon: A Search for Family in the Shadow of Stalin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 290; cf. *Rehabilitated History: Donetsk Oblast* (Donetsk: KP Region, 2011), 2:319. — <https://www.reabit.org.ua/files/store/Don8.pdf>.

85. Konrad, *Red Quarter Moon*, 291, 293f.

86. “Rayon Chortitza,” July 1942, Special Unit Stumpp, from BArch, R6, file 626. — <https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/>.

87. “Neu-Chortitza (Barotow) Dorfbericht,” May 1942, 1, from BArch, Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 623, case 184. — <https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/>. In the villages in the Chortitza District in 1942, the male “head” was missing in 47% of all family units. Cf. “Verzeichnis der Verschleppten” in “Chortitza Dorfbericht,” May 1942, 69, from BArch, Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 621, case 81. — <https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/>.

88. “Gnadenental (Baratow) Dorfbericht,” May 1942, Fragebogen XI.5, 9 (469), from BArch, Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 623, case 182. — <https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/>.

89. Cf. “Verbannte Mennoniten im Gebiet Saporoshje [Zaporizhzhia].” — <http://chort.square7.ch/Pis/Sapor.pdf>.

90. Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators*, chapter 6.

designed for four people held at times thirty to seventy people. Those who refused to sign the fabricated interrogation protocols and confessions "were forced to endure prolonged standing; they were beaten with a rubber truncheon cut especially for the purpose; or they were caged in a tiny airless cell (cell No. 8) in the prison's dank cellars." The "sheer amount and varieties of torture" used in Zaporizhzhia suggests to historian Lynne Viola that many people initially resisted self-incrimination.⁹¹

The level of cruelty employed during prison interrogations in order to secure signatures depended largely on how local subordinates interpreted the directives received from the NKVD leadership.⁹² Only a few survived the arrests, interrogations, and torture in this region between 1937 and 1939, but some of the accounts written under German military occupation are broadly consistent. For example, in the Mennonite village of Grünfeld (Schlachtin) twenty-six individuals were arrested in 1937 and fifty-six in 1938. Of these, only one person—Jakob Siemens—returned after being imprisoned between November 5, 1938, and October 11, 1939, first in Kriwoj-Rog and then Dnipropetrovsk.

I spent two months in solitary confinement and then two months with 200 men in a room where we had only one square meter for every four men. Day and night we sat one-on-one with our feet on each other's shoulders. I was beaten terribly during the interrogations with glass bottles filled with salt or with a chair leg. Once I was interrogated for 12 hours without interruption, during which a Chekist beat me continuously on the forehead with the flat of his hand for half an hour; then my fingers were jammed between doors and I was pricked with needles under my fingernails. Once they put thirty of us in a heated room two meters wide by three meters long; a guard stood in front of the door to make sure no one sat down. I stood in it for four days. My feet swelled until they burst. I also joined others on a hunger strike for 5 days.⁹³

The senior school teacher in Franzfeld (Chortitza), K. Epp, collected very similar stories.⁹⁴ Nearby German Lutheran villages experienced the

91. *Ibid.*, 145f.; 161.

92. For sample accounts, cf. Anne Giesbrecht Fast and Hans Fast, *Two Lives, One Faith: The Memoirs of Anne Giesbrecht Fast and Hans Fast* (Waterloo, Ont.: Self-published, 2006), 54; and Susanna Toews, *Trek to Freedom: The Escape of Two Sisters from South Russia during World War II*, trans. Helen Megli (Winkler, Man.: Heritage Valley, 1976), 16. A most sadistic account is told by Maria Unger in 1947 to Mennonite Central Committee representative in Paraguay, in Cornelius DeFehr, *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben* (Winnipeg, Man.: Christian, 1976), 104-107.

93. In "Grünfeld (Schlachtin) Dorfbericht," Fragebogen XI.5, 9 (138), April 1942, from BArch, Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 624, case 199.— <https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/>. Cf. esp. Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators*.

94. "Franzfeld Dorfbericht," 7-9 (388-389).

same fate as their Mennonite neighbors. Twenty-seven men and two women were arrested in Nikolaital (Gronau) in 1937-1938, with only a few returning after a year of imprisonment. "They hit me in the mouth with a wrench, so that my teeth were broken. . . . Then they locked me in a room where there were water rats which started to eat at my feet. In winter they put me on the window and poured water over me until the clothes froze to my body."⁹⁵

WOMEN ARRESTED AND THEIR FATE

Some Mennonite women were also arrested during the Great Terror, especially in city of Zaporizhzhia near Chortitza. For example, Margaretha A. Fast, who worked as a nurse, was charged with "systematically conducting agitation against the existing system." Fast was imprisoned for fourteen weeks before her trial, and subsequently executed on December 27, 1937. Anna A. Klassen, born 1900, worked in Zaporizhzhia as a typist. Arrested on December 16, 1937, she was charged with "being a German intelligence agent since 1932" and was executed on February 14, 1938. Elberta F. Dick, Margaretha P. Reimer, and Justina A. Reimer of Zaporizhzhia were arrested between December 1937 and January 1938 and received five-year sentences. After three months detention, 45-year old Anna P. Hamm of Zaporizhzhia was sentenced in December 1937 to five years imprisonment for "systematically campaigning against Soviet power" and for being the "wife of an enemy of the people."⁹⁶ Elsewhere, Malvina M. Wölk of Dnipropetrovsk was arrested in December 1937 and sentenced to five years for being the "wife of a person repressed by the NKVD." Anna D. Löwen and Katharina I. Penner of Stalindorf (Judenplan) were both executed in March 1938 for "participating in a counter-revolutionary organization." Margaretha A. Thiessen, a secondary school teacher in Nikopol, was sentenced to three years correctional labor "as the wife of a repressed prisoner."⁹⁷

In the rural Mennonite villages several women were arrested in 1937 and 1938 and for a time separated from their children. "The sight was almost unbearable," as Susanna Toews recalled.⁹⁸ Margaretha A. Wiens of Schönau was arrested on September 10, 1937, as "the wife of an enemy of the people," and received an eight-year sentence.⁹⁹ On November 19, 1937,

95. "Nikolaital (Kronau) Dorfbericht," Feb. 1942, Fragebogen XI.5 (91), from BArch, Special Unit Stumpff, R6, file 620, case 27.— <https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/>.

96. *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:665; 4:281; 1:384; 496; 5:284.

97. *Rehabilitated History: Dnipropetrovsk*, 2:117; 2:503; 707; 2:925.

98. S. Toews, *Trek to Freedom*, 17.

99. *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:121. For a separate listing of women in the Donetsk Region sent to the Carlag gulag in Karaganda ("for family members of traitors to

Helene (Schmidt) Neufeld, her two sisters-in-law, and another woman—all from Sparrau—were arrested. On the same day in the Pordenau *sel-soviet*, three other women were arrested as "wives of enemies of the people." Their husbands—long imprisoned—would be executed within the next sixteen days. As Johann J. Neufeld later recalled:

There were two men escorting each [NKVD] automobile. We arrived at Mrs. Dirksen's house at midnight. The family was awakened and we entered the house. Mrs. Dirksen had four boys and one girl. First, we asked the age of the children. Then the woman was told that the children were to be sent to two different locations. The clothes were to be packed accordingly, and her own things were to be packed separately. Mrs. Dirksen was actually a very brave woman—never at a loss for words. But now she had nothing to say. She accepted this order silently. . . . I asked the men what should be done with the family's other belongings. "You can distribute them to your people," was their reply.¹⁰⁰

Helene Neufeld's daughter Adina told of how her mother was imprisoned in a Waldheim cell along with several other women. The cell had four concrete blocks—with no beds, blankets, or mattresses, and only iron bars separating her from the cold outdoors. Adina and her sister were sent to an orphanage in Halbstadt run by "Low-German" women who in her memory "only came in at night to ensure that we children did not pray."¹⁰¹ The imprisoned mothers were released sometime in February or March 1938; Adina and her sister were discharged earlier to their aunt in Alexanderthal, but with shaven heads as a mark of family guilt.

Comparatively few Mennonite women were arrested in the 1937-1938 purge, however.¹⁰² Stalin regarded women as the carriers of religion in the countryside—"ignorant, downtrodden, and conservative." But he was also optimistic that the emancipated woman worker could "help the common cause if she is politically conscious and politically educated."¹⁰³

the motherland") see *Rehabilitated History: Donetsk Oblast*, (Donetsk: KP Region, 2012), 9:594-615. — <http://www.reabit.org.ua/files/store/Don9.pdf>.

100. J. Neufeld, "Erinnerungen und Erlebnisse" (2. Fortsetzung), 9. Her husband, Gerhard Julius Dirksen, was executed on Dec. 5. — *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*, 2:220.

101. Adina Neufeld Bräul, interview with author, Feb. 15, 2019. Her father and two uncles were executed together on Nov. 30; cf. *Rehabilitated History: Zaporizhzhia*: Johann K. Neufeld (2:472), Jakob K. Neufeld (2:474) and Kornelius K. Neufeld (2:473).

102. Grünfeld (Schlachting) also reported that eight women were arrested in 1937 and imprisoned for three months or more, and their children sent to children's homes. — "Grünfeld Dorfbericht," 9 (138), Fragebogen XI.5.

103. In David MacKenzie and Michael W. Curran, *Russia and the USSR in the Twentieth Century*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1997), 208.

ANTI-HITLER WAR PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN

Stalin had two larger fears regarding Ukraine. Because it was a border region with multiple ethnicities and potentially fluid national loyalties, Stalin saw “spies, especially Polish and German, everywhere,” and as Viola has argued, he “feared the force, largely suppressed, of Ukrainian nationalism.” Moreover, Stalin feared a larger “remnant” of White Army, anti-Bolshevik veterans who were a “legacy of the civil war.”¹⁰⁴ Before a war with Germany could begin, he insisted, Ukraine needed to be cleansed of its political, economic, national, or biological enemies. An estimated 76 percent of the circa 70,000 men arrested in the “German Operation” from July 25, 1937, to December 15, 1938, were shot at local NKVD prisons within months of their arrest.¹⁰⁵ In total, an estimated 700,000 Soviet citizens were executed in Stalin’s Great Terror of 1937–1938.¹⁰⁶

How did this idea of an impending war with Hitler become widespread in 1937, embellished with elaborate conspiracy theories of spies and counter-intelligence activity at the village level? Throughout the 1930s the press was the primary medium of propaganda in the countryside, and subsidized newspapers and pamphlets were widely distributed to every village “Red Corner” (*Rote Ecke*) library in minority languages, and with mandatory subscriptions for Komsomol and Party members.¹⁰⁷ A popular booklet translated into German was Nikolai Abusow’s 1937 booklet *Gestapo*, which provided all the language found in the accusations in the Mennonite villages. The premise of the booklet was that “intensified war preparations” were now taking place in Germany, and that everyone in the Soviet Union must be prepared for “increased activity by the Gestapo” and its “fascist espionage networks.” “In recruiting spies and other vermin,” Abusow wrote, “the German spy service tries to exploit the German population concentrated in certain districts. The Gestapo directs its focus to places of significant German population . . . including the

104. Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators*, 42.

105. Okhotkin and Roginskii, “Iz istorii ‘nemetskoi operatsii’ NKVD 1937–1938.” For similar stories, see Harry Loewen, “Of Suffering, Forgiveness, and Closure. Reflections on Russian Mennonite Experience,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 8:2 (2007), 48–54. Other relevant literature includes: Waldemar Janzen, *Growing Up in Turbulent Times* (Winnipeg, Man.: CMU Press, 2007), 6–18; *Road to Freedom: Mennonites Escape the Land of Suffering*, ed. Harry Loewen (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 2000); Walter Sawatsky, “Historical Roots for a Post-Gulag Theology for Russian Mennonites,” *MQR* 76 (April 2002), 149–180.

106. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic, 2010), xiv.

107. Cf. Andrej Kotljarchuk, “Propaganda of Hatred and the Great Terror: A Nordic Approach,” in *Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin’s Soviet Union: New Dimensions of Research*, edited by Andrej Kotljarchuk and Olle Sundström (Huddinge: Södertörns, 2017), 95.— <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1166306/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

German villages in the Ukraine." Abusow called for "honest citizens" to join the work of Soviet counter-intelligence services to unmask Gestapo agents and "to cleanse the Soviet Union of the fascist criminals and their agency."¹⁰⁸ Children received the same message. In her memoir, Johanna Dyck (b. 1923) recalled "always" talking with her school friends hoping "for the day Germany might invade the Ukraine."¹⁰⁹ But that memory was likely more complicated. Young Pioneers in the countryside—and all youth, generally—were encouraged to help with the problem of "German" espionage. The *Pioneer Pravda* (Truth) youth paper and "spy booklets" were available in the "Red Corner" reading rooms. The columns and spy stories—with titles like "Be on alert!" "Stranger with a Bundle," etc.—reminded youth that their own "watchful and attentive eyes" made them "good helpers" of the NKVD, not only "to discover traces of the enemy," but to "detain them and expose the vile intentions of spies."¹¹⁰ These children's stories, written as conversational materials for local pioneer group meetings during the period of the purge, point out the depths of ideological confusion and fear present at every level of village life—even to the point of recruiting children to turn against parents and village neighbors. Stalin successfully manufactured and transmitted paranoia and fear from above, generating terror at the regional and village levels below.

SOCIAL BREAKDOWN

Memoirs from the period testify to the breakdown of social relations in many of these Mennonite communities. Heinrich Bergen, from the large center of Einlage, Chorititza, for example, named the informers: "Who were they? Our Mennonites, our brothers in faith . . . Braun, Winter, Wiens, Heide, Kehler, Janzen, and others. And after their measure was full, they too were arrested and banished. Teacher Janzen ended his life with suicide."¹¹¹ Deeply disturbed by the numbers of Mennonites who

108. N. Abusow, *Gestapo* (Moskau: Verlagsgenossenschaft ausländischer Arbeiter in der UdSSR, 1937), 21, 24. — <https://archive.org/details/DieGestapo/>.

109. Joel Warkentin, "Johanna Dyck, born Dec. 24, 1923 in Warwarowka, Ukraine," *Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association*. — <https://www.ekmha.ca/johanna-dyck/>. The date of those discussions is not specified.

110. Vanya Kuznetsova and Anya Kuznetsova, "Stranger with a Bundle" (Незнакомец со свертком), *Pionerskaya Pravda* (Dec. 20, 1937). — <https://www.oldgazette.ru/pionerka/20121937/text3.html>; V. Varmuzh, "Young helpers of glorious NKVD officers" (Юные помощники славных чекистов), *Pionerskaya Pravda* (Dec. 20, 1937); Lev Zilver, *Be on alert!* (Быть на-чеку!) (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1938). — <https://libking.ru/books/det-/det-espionage/445434-lev-zilver-byt-na-cheku.html>.

111. Heinrich Bergen, ed., *Einlage: Chronik des Dorfes Kitschkas, 1789-1943* (Saskatoon, Sask.: Self-published, 2010), 76f.

stoked these fears or who chose to collaborate as a survival strategy, Jacob A. Neufeld of Gnadenfeld (Molotschna) lamented:

The officials, both great and small, showed a peculiar hatred to those of sound character, those who held on to higher values, traditions, and, even worse, to Christian principles, whose steadfastness and uprightness they sought to provoke and tempt . . . zealously working to break all resistance, meting out significant punishments to anyone who did not comply, which often meant a prison camp or extermination and death.¹¹²

For most of those arrested there are no letters or diaries—only a very few memories and stories that have been passed along. None of those executed were afforded a funeral with family and friends who could tell their stories and honor their lives. More recently, however, the NKVD arrest and accusation files have allowed families and researchers to paint a fuller, more complex picture of those executed in the NKVD prisons, and of the strategic dismantling and dissolution within less than a decade of what had once been vibrant, largely pious, Mennonite communities in Ukraine.

The most recent studies on the Stalin era estimate that more than 28.7 million people suffered in the northern prisons and slave camps of the Gulag, of whom some 2.75 million perished prematurely.¹¹³ To this number must be added the “close to a million political executions, the millions who died in transit to the Gulag, and some six to seven million who died of starvation during the early 1930s.”¹¹⁴ The mass deportation of workers and peasants provided millions of forced laborers in the Arctic and Siberia. Not just Mennonites and ethnic Germans were targeted, but also other groups in border areas—Finns, Latvians, Estonians, Koreans, and Chinese.¹¹⁵ The initial goal was to exterminate the “bourgeoisie class” as a whole, which meant that the suffering of Mennonites in the Soviet Union was disproportionately high.¹¹⁶ The men especially—as heads of traditional families, and as leaders in churches and communities—were seen to embody the old regime and to represent the greatest security threat for Stalin. In the words of Hannah Arendt, the horrific genius of the purge was not merely to kill these men, but to make them superfluous “human

112. Jacob A. Neufeld, *Tiefenwege: Erfahrungen und Erlebnisse von Russland-Mennoniten in zwei Jahrzehnten bis 1949* (Virgil, Ont.: Niagara, 1958), 47.

113. Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Anchor, 2004), 562, 580; also Stephane Courtois, et al, *The Black Book of Communism. Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

114. Loewen, *Between Worlds: Reflections*, 42.

115. Cf. Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR*.

116. Harvey Dyck, “Breaking the Silence: *Aussiedler* Images of the Soviet Mennonite Tragedy,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998), 99.

material"—to treat them "as if they had never existed and to make them disappear in the literal sense of the word."¹¹⁷ Thus, these recently uncovered micro-histories provide a small window onto a much larger and complex story of fear, hatred, terror, and murder that marked the lives of millions during the first half of the twentieth century.

When the "master purger" Nikolai Yezhov was also arrested in December 1938, the most intensive phase of the purges had ended. Early in 1939, Central Committee Secretary Molotov began "non-aggression" negotiations with Germany, which included a secret protocol for the partition of Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe into spheres of Soviet and German influence. The threat of a German invasion of its border regions had eased. On May 5, 1939, in the midst of negotiations, the German Ministry of Propaganda even ordered all polemical pieces against the Soviets and Bolshevism—a mainstay of its press for years—to cease immediately.¹¹⁸ For the first time, Mennonite women—unaware that most of their men had already been shot—began to hope for their return and a possible peaceful resettlement in larger Germany. As Maria Fröse, a teacher in Chortiza, reported:

And then when the covenant of friendship was reached, we could all breathe freely again: "Now our redemption is coming, now those in prison will be released from the camps." We waited for this week after week, month after month, but we waited in vain. Nevertheless, we felt freer than before, for at least there were no arrests. Officially the relations between Russia and Germany were very good ... It was astonishing to see how much more secure people felt.¹¹⁹

Only a few Mennonite men who had been arrested and exiled in the purge years successfully petitioned to return home to Ukraine.¹²⁰ In the years that followed a generation of exceptionally strong women emerged from these ashes of Mennonite life, "self-sacrificingly rescuing what they could from the rubble."¹²¹

117. Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace, 1972), 442.

118. Cf. directive of May 5, 1939, in Karen Peter, *N-S Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit*, vol. 7, no. I, *Quellentexte 1939: Januar bis April* (Berlin: Saur, 2013), 423.

119. Report by teacher Maria Fröse, "Chortitza Dorfbericht," 16a, 16b, 17.

120. Cf. "Johann Epp, der Rayonchef von Chortitza," in Adina Reger and Delbert Plett, *Diese Steine: Die Russlandmennoniten* (Steinbach, Man.: Crossway, 2001), 124-127. See Johann Epp's 1942 description of his arrest, torture, and exile in "Chortitza Dorfbericht," 14-15b.

121. H. Dyck, "Breaking the Silence, *Aussiedler Images*," 100.

SUFFERING AS GERMANS OR AS MENNONITES?

"Never since the days of the [Anabaptist] martyrs," wrote American Mennonite historian C. Henry Smith, "have the Mennonites suffered as much as during the twentieth century in Russia."¹²² In the sixteenth century, some 3,000 Anabaptists were killed for their faith; in the 1930s, untold thousands of Soviet Mennonites were executed in Stalin's Soviet Union.¹²³ In recent years, a number of voices have cautioned against the use of the term "martyr" for telling the Mennonite story. "Martyr memory" can easily confuse myth for history; it can celebrate victimhood, encourage passive-aggressive behavior, and also promote arrogance and self-righteousness in relations with other traditions.¹²⁴ The Mennonite martyr memory reaching back to the *Martyrs Mirror* can too easily become a ready-made pattern for Mennonites to give meaning to those who lost their lives under Stalin. Marlene Epp cautions that "their arrests and death arose from multiple factors, mostly political, and not from particular beliefs that they could choose to renounce in order to save their lives."¹²⁵ Survivors reported the same:

With the [National Socialist] takeover of power in Germany in 1933, we Germans in Russia felt sharply the hatred of the Soviet government. The many arrests of Germans in 1933/34, the accusations that they were fascists and had connections with Germany, their conviction and exile, all testify to this. We lived in constant fear that every word, even of a harmless nature, could place us into the hands of the OGPU, later the NKVD, which had spies everywhere, even in the closest circle of friends.¹²⁶

Archival documents from the Soviet era show that after 1929—and especially after 1933—until after the conclusion of World War II, Mennonites suffered not primarily because of their faith traditions, but because they were "Germans" who lived too close to the USSR's western borders. Harvard historian Terry Martin does not shy from using the term "ethnic cleansing" with regard to Germans in the Soviet Union, as well as

122. C. Henry Smith, *Smith's Story of the Mennonites*, 5th rev. ed. by Cornelius Krahn (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life, 1981), 340.

123. George K. Epp has calculated that approximately one-third of Mennonites in the Soviet Union—at least 30,000—died due to exposure, beatings, overwork, disease, starvation, or shootings. —H. Dyck, "Breaking the Silence: *Aussiedler* Images," 97f.

124. See John D. Roth, "The Complex Legacy of the *Martyrs Mirror* among Mennonites of North America," *MQR* 87 (July 2013), 296-305.

125. M. Epp, *Women without Men*, 40. Epp writes that the men "were considered martyrs of Soviet oppression and, as such, their tragedy could be understood within a theological construct familiar to Mennonites, one that eased the integration of men's stories into a known history." —*Women without Men*, 12, 18.

126. Report by teacher Maria Fröse, "Chortitza Dorfbericht," 16a.

for Soviet Poles, Finns, and others in border regions.¹²⁷ This is corroborated by the numbers of men arrested in the historically Lutheran and Catholic German villages adjacent to the Molochna River.¹²⁸ East of Ukraine, for example, the situation was different. Of the 72,000 Soviet Germans who were arrested and sentenced during the "German operation" (comprising 5 percent of the total), comparatively few Volga Germans were impacted.¹²⁹ Yet the Volga Republic had the largest community of Soviet Germans, with arguably stronger ties to Berlin than those in Ukraine. In this regard, historian Ingeborg Fleischhauer has argued that Germans in the Soviet Union "were not so much the direct victims of the unpredictable nationalities policy of Stalin . . . as the indirect victims of the Third Reich's eastern expansionism."¹³⁰ Decades of German sabre-rattling played a significant role in Stalin's choices. Benjamin H. Unruh, Heinrich H. Schröder, Walter (Jacob) Quiring, and other Russian Mennonites in Germany directly contributed to that atmosphere by leveraging the plight of Soviet German farmers as "martyrs" to complement the Nazi anti-Bolshevik propaganda.¹³¹

The sufferings of Soviet Mennonites, however, were real regardless of their symbolic significance for Berlin or Moscow. From the Soviet perspective, the Mennonites—despite many individual exceptions—were clearly among the most radical in their attachments to anti-Soviet values, the ones most unresponsive or opposed to the new worldview. Already in 1925, Soviet authorities had identified Mennonites as a "problem," characterized by "a narrow-national [German-Mennonite] outlook, lack of

127. Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 328; cf. also Terry Martin, "Terror, Forced Labor, and Internal Exile, 1935-1955," *Conrad Grebel Review* 20:1 (2001), 40.

128. Cf. the report of the Sonderkommando Russland, "German Affairs in the Area of Kriwoi-Rog, Saporoshje, Dnjepropetrowsk, in the District of Melitopol and in the District of Mariupol: Preliminary Statement, in particular the Mennonite Settlements," Nov. 1, 1941, p. 5, from Deutsches Ausland-Institut, trans. Allen E. Konrad, film T-81, roll 606, group 1035, item 1405, frames 5396845-854: "Alt-Nassau: ... A large number of men are missing from among the German families, who, in 1933-1938, were banished." — <http://www.blackseagr.org/pdfs/konrad/Mennonite%20Settlements%20in%20Melitopol%20and%20Mariupol%20Districts.pdf>; Cf. *ibid.*, 2; also, e.g., report on an unnamed German village of 562 individuals in "Raion Tsch.," from which "43 family fathers" were abducted in 1937. — "Heimkehr in die Freiheit," *Ukraine Post* no. 14 (April 10, 1943), 3.

129. Werth, "Mechanism of a Mass Crime," 237.

130. Ingeborg Fleischhauer, "'Unternehmen Barbarossa' und die Zwangsumsiedlung der Deutschen in der UdSSR," *Vierteljahrshfte für Zeitgeschichte* 30 (1982), 301.

131. Cf. James E. Casteel, "The Russian Germans in the Interwar German National Imaginary," *Central European History* 40 (2007), 454; also Benjamin Unruh's 1938 propaganda piece *Eichenfeld-Dubowka: Ein Tatsachenbericht aus der Tragödie des Deutschtums in der Ukraine* (Karlsruhe: Schneider, 1938), published under the pseudonym Heinrich Toews, or his four contributions to the Berlin-based Nazi publication, *Deutsche Post aus dem Osten* between 1936 and 1939. See also Heinrich H. Schröder, *Systematische Vernichtung der Rußland-Deutschen* (Langensalza-Berlin: Beltz, 1934).

class stratification, [and a] passive attitude . . . toward Soviet social life." According to one report, this made party and Soviet work among them "more difficult."¹³²

The Soviets generally equated their strong religious identity and their strict adherence to Christian precepts with their cultural Teutonic background,¹³³ and regarded these "cultural" characteristics as evidence of their flagrant, collective counter-revolutionary disposition. In another early report from 1925 officials noted that "it is extremely difficult to conduct party work in Mennonite colonies because it is carried out among a population saturated with religious fanaticism and caste isolation."¹³⁴ Authorities in the Chortitza District reported "extraordinary difficulties" in drawing the Mennonites into "active participation in the construction of the Soviet order" and "the public life of village clubs and reading rooms," because it seemed that youth were both "restrained by parents" and "by preachers in meeting houses."¹³⁵ If Mennonites saw those practices as central to their spirituality, publications by co-religionists in Germany in the 1930s—monitored by Soviet agencies—touted the same qualities as racially and biologically normative of Germanic peoples.¹³⁶ Consequently, "we were referred to as *Hitlerzey* (disciples of Hitler)," one survivor remembered. In spite of the historical record of loyalty and contribution "we now became [Russia's] enemies."¹³⁷

A similar case might also be made for the German Lutheran and Catholic villages in the Soviet Union, even if they were all singularly targeted as Germans. But at least for Mennonites, who did not understand themselves primarily as a *civil* community, cultural and physical

132. "Minutes of a joint session of the Central Bureau of the German Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine with German sections of *okrug* committees about work with Mennonites, Nov. 10-12, 1925," in J. Toews and P. Toews, *Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine*, 318-324.

133. A. Herman, "Repression as an integral part of the Bolshevik policy regime" ("Репрессии как неотъемлемый элемент). Anecdotaly, one young man whose father had just been arrested, was told by a high-ranking officer that there are two reasons for their persecution: "One, you are Germans. . . . You can't help that. But two, you are Christians. That cannot be accepted by those above. They know that, even if you remain silent."—cited in *The Silence Echoes. Memoirs of Trauma and Tears*, trans. and ed. Sarah Dyck (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 1997), 14.

134. Cf. "Conclusions of the Commission of the Presidium Commission following inspection of the Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage, Late July 1925," in J. Toews and P. Toews, *Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine*, 291-296; 294.

135. "Report of the German Section of the Zaporozhye Okrug Committee, January 4, 1926," in J. Toews and P. Toews, *Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine*, 324-329.

136. For example, see the pseudo-scientific attempt by Helmut Hackbarth, *Rassentypische Verhaltungsweisen der Mennoniten im Weichsel-Nogat-Delta* (Munich: Lehmanns, 1939).—<https://mla.bethelks.edu/gmsources/books/1939,%20Hackbarth,%20Rassentypische%20Verhaltungsweisen%20der%20Mennoniten%20im%20Weichsel%20Nogat%20Delta/>.

137. Jacob Braun, *Long Road to Freedom* (Winnipeg, Man.: Word Alive, 2011), 63f.

repression by an explicitly anti-Christian regime that closed its churches and banished and executed its ministers was framed and experienced in large part as religious repression. In the keen assessment of one German consular official, when compared with Lutheran and Catholic Russian Germans, "the Mennonites suffer with particular severity under the suppression of religion."¹³⁸

There are certainly theological frameworks other than martyrdom available for understanding times of extreme suffering for the Christian. Suffering, for example, can be embraced as an opportunity from God for the reformation, renewal, and resurrection of the church—a wake-up call to new action in faith and love, as Benjamin H. Unruh advocated at the Mennonite World Conference in Danzig in 1930.¹³⁹ Yet reformation and renewal in response to trial and tribulation assumes a strong core leadership and vivid memory.¹⁴⁰ By 1938, however, without opportunity for escape, the Mennonite *faith* community virtually "dissolved" as planned. Here, in contrast to "martyrdom"—a designation that is not historically, sociologically, or otherwise verifiable for the Russian Mennonite story—the biblical language of "resurrection" from death seems to offer a more appropriate Christian framework for understanding these events. Resurrection is connected to the concept of martyr in that it points to resilience and witness in the face of tragedy: "We multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of the Christians is seed," wrote Tertullian in the second century.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, especially in light of the fact that many in the Mennonite community were complicit in denouncing their neighbors, the language of resurrection is a confession that God can do something powerful with the death of believers. God can bring new life to the church from the blood of those who give witness unto death. At least one or two generations have felt compelled to use that descriptor.¹⁴²

138. Otto Auhagen, *Die Schicksalswende des Russlanddeutschen Bauerntum in den Jahren 1927-1930* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1942), 50. — <https://chort.square7.ch/Pis/Auhag.pdf>.

139. Benjamin H. Unruh, "Die Massenflucht der deutschen Bauern aus der Sowjetunion, ihre Gründe, ihre Auswirkungen in Rußland und ihre Folgen für das Hilfswerk im Ausland," in *Bericht über die Mennonitische Welt-Hilfs-Konferenz vom 31. August bis 3. September 1930 in Danzig*, ed. Christian Neff (Karlsruhe: Schneider, 1930), 84. — <https://chort.square7.ch/Buch/Konfer.pdf>.

140. Up to 1929, large-scale peaceful resistance was still possible: "We did not rebel against the authority, but only that we do not want to leave nor can leave religion. Up to this line we can surrender to communism, that is, share our small assets with others and work communally. However, to agree to let ourselves to be written into the list of the Circle of the Godless—that goes beyond the material assets; then we need to flee if possible."—letter, n.n., *Mennonitische Rundschau* 53, no. 12 (March 19, 1930): 6.

141. Cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, L, 13.

142. A. A. Töws, *Mennonitische Märtyrer I & II*; A. A. Töws, *Mennonite Martyrs: People who suffered for their faith 1920-1940*, trans. John B. Toews (Winnipeg, Man.: Kindred, 1990). See

Recent archival work supports the perception among the Mennonite survivors of the Great Terror that “we Mennonites suffered much more than our Russian neighbors”—especially at the local level. Yet this self-image also fits into the standard Russian stereotype of Germans as “anti-Soviet elements,” the “irreparable social by-products of the upheavals generated by the forced collectivization.”¹⁴³ Stalin and the Politburo sought to remove these elements “once and for all.”¹⁴⁴

A few Mennonite men survived to speak of their experiences in Stalin’s prisons and correctional labor camps. The following prayer—a composite based on the Jacob A. Neufeld’s memory of his 1933 arrest and interrogation—stands eloquently for all of the others as a psalm of lament, and gives a window into Russian Mennonite spirituality in the face of suffering.

Dear God have you deserted me? With frayed nerves and crushed hopes, my soul grows faint and everything around me turns dark and empty. Merciful God, be gracious to me. Why do my captors condemn me? I have done no wrong. My soul, tortured, flayed, and buried in dust, is in pain and outrage and on the verge of fading away. My heart is empty, on the edge of despair. Dear God, speak to my despairing soul. Let me hear your voice and feel your strong arm. Have we all been delivered into the hands of monsters from Satan’s underworld?

Yet I remain convinced that you, my God, will not abandon me to such iniquity, though the noose around me seems to tighten. Almighty God, keep me from betraying anyone and from plunging others into grief. Is there no deliverance, above all for my loved ones? A shadowy void seems to draw me down into a bottomless pit. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? ... Then in stillness and in your mercy, I hear your voice. I feel a hymn of utter surrender rising up in within me: “Take Thou my hand [*So nimm denn meine Hände ...*], O Father, and lead Thou me, Until my journey endeth,

the important collection of essays edited by Peter Erb, *Martyrdom in an Ecumenical Perspective: A Mennonite-Catholic Conversation* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 2007). See also *Martyrial Mission: The Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today*, ed. Ion Bria (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), 8.

143. Cf. A. A. Velitsyn (pseudonym for A. A. Paltov), “The German Conquest of Southern Russia,” trans. Harvey Dyck, *MQR* 56 (Oct. 1982), 318-341. Velitsyn’s inflammatory articles of 1889-1890 claimed, in short, that Mennonites were leading the “German penetration into Russia,” and were a people who evidence “traits, alien and unsympathetic to the Russian spirit,” who “present a greater and more serious threat than would bloody and noisy wars” through “economic and spiritual oppression” which inevitably leads to the “impoverishment of the peasants.”

144. Werth, “Mechanism of a Mass Crime,” 220.

eternally." I submit myself to you afresh as the Lord and Shepherd of my soul and the immovable pole of my existence.¹⁴⁵

Many recalled the place of the interrogations as a "labyrinth of death."¹⁴⁶ Neufeld cited the hymn by Julie Katharina Hausmann, sung in countless Mennonite services before and after the great purge, which came to embody the spiritual experience of that generation: "I cannot walk alone, not a single step; wherever you will walk or stand . . . take me along . . . though I feel nothing of your power, you will bring me to the goal, even through the dark of night."¹⁴⁷

A recurring theme identified by Walter Sawatsky in extensive interviews with Soviet Mennonite survivors of the Great Terror, the Gulag, and the "Special Deportation Regime for Soviet Germans" (*Spetskomandantura*), is a humble yet confident confession that the "blood of the martyrs" was seed used by God to fulfill "the Mennonite mission task in Russia."¹⁴⁸ Their experience of that death of church, peoplehood, and culture only deepened after 1941.

The way a community confesses and tells its story of suffering, like that of an individual writing an autobiography, reveals its identity in the deepest way possible. The insistence on the use of theological categories like "martyr" for meaning-making narratives—which survivors have not done casually—need not testify to historical revisionism, selective memory, a celebration of victimhood, hagiography, or self-righteousness. Rather the category of martyr can simply testify to the fact that for this community as a whole the biblical story remains the larger, more ultimate, narrative framework for interpreting—not denying—the significance of all other factors, including suffering "in Christ."

MENNONITE LIFE AFTER THE GREAT TERROR

The period of terror for thousands of Mennonite women—defined by the arrest and execution or exile of a husband, brother, or son—caused many to break down. Helene Bräul suffered both physically and

145. Based on J. Neufeld, *Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule*, ed. Harvey L. Dyck, trans. Harvey L. Dyck and Sarah Dyck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 57; 59; 60; 61; 65; 67; 69, 74f., 80.

146. Term used by John B. Toews regarding B. B. Janz's interrogation in Moscow years earlier.—*The Lost Fatherland: The Story of the Mennonite Emigration from Soviet Russia, 1921-1927* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1967), 145.

147. My translation reflects the text of the German original; cf. *Gesangbuch der Mennoniten* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press), no. 423.

148. Sawatsky, "Historical Roots for a Post-Gulag Theology," 175. Cf. also Cf. Colin P. Neufeldt, "Reforging Mennonite *Spetspereselents*: The Experience of Mennonite Exiles at Siberian Special Settlements in the Omsk, Tomsk, Novosibirsk and Narym Regions, 1930-1933," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 30 (2012), 269-314.

psychologically. In 1937, she was so ill she could not even care of her newborn, Käthe. So Helene's sister-in-law moved in to assist. In this context of fragmentation, the reconfiguration of families became a normal survival strategy.¹⁴⁹ It was not unusual for two or three trusted families to live together in one farmhouse.¹⁵⁰ The challenge to keep their families alive and together left women with few opportunities for self-pity or self-care. According to her daughter, Helene Bräul maintained her dignity during those times by cultivating the virtue of cleanliness and by not allowing her children go wear ragged clothes.¹⁵¹ From interviews with many of these women, Marlene Epp has noted how they processed their trauma with each other, and found informal ways for mutual care.

The formal institutions of mutual aid that had operated through the church were no longer active, but the principles of helping one another that imbued Mennonite culture continued to function. . . . Sharing limited material resources, caring for each other's children, even working side by side on the collective farm, brought women closer together and reinforced a sense of community.¹⁵²

The context of repression demanded that Mennonite women develop new practical skills, adaptability, and strength to assert themselves strategically.



Figure 5: "To Mennonite Victims of Tribulation, Stalinist Terror and Religious Oppression. 'Blessed are those who mourn' (Matthew 5:4)." Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine (2009). Designed by Paul Epp (Photo: T. A. Dyck)

149. See further M. Epp, *Women without Men*, 10.

150. Cf. "Neu-Chortitza Dorfbericht," 7.

151. Katharine Bräul Fast, b. 1937, interview with author in St. Catharines, Ont., 2017.

152. Epp, *Women without Men*, 26.

Although the Great Terror came to an end by December 1938, the Soviet government introduced a new initiative to dismantle and strip the identity of "enemy" ethnic minority children by demanding that the language of instruction in all schools be Russian. Minority, or "national," language instruction would now only be offered after the fifth grade as a second language. According to the new policy, mastery of Russian was critical for successful military service, higher education, and for national unification.¹⁵³ The previous "unsatisfactory level of instruction" was blamed on the "subversive work of counter-revolutionaries" aligned with one-time Stalin allies Leon Trotsky and, more recently, Nikolai Bukharin, together with other "bourgeois-nationalist elements."

For Jacob A. Neufeld, the shift to Russian-only in school instruction and official business was a final blow for an already humiliated and shattered ethnic minority: Mennonite or Christian "interests and knowledge could not be sustained and consequently were pushed far into the background; one thought of oneself only as German—one spoke German and one was persecuted as a German."¹⁵⁴ In Hans Rehan's memory, the suffering experienced throughout the 1930s was because they were Germans—a point that Soviet-era government documents largely confirm. As Germans, they were not to be trusted, they were fascists, and they were the scapegoat for the threat of German National Socialism. "We Germans were seen as enemies and treated as such. . . . People of all nationalities hated us because we were German."¹⁵⁵

Did Stalin successfully dismantle and crush the Mennonite-Christian faith as planned? The Protestant elements in Mennonite understandings of faith include a conviction—shared with the Lutheran tradition—that through Christ everyone has direct access to God without the need for a human or priestly mediator. Protestants have taught that preaching, along with the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, are the most crucial

153. Based on a Volga German newspaper article, April 18, 1938: W. Dalinger and J. Popok, "Ueber die obligatorische Erlernung der russischen Sprache in den nichtrussischen Schulen der Wolgadeutschen Republik," *Rote Sturmflamme* 8, no. 81 (April 18, 1938), 1f. In the German-speaking Autonomous Soviet Volga Republic, German language instruction continued at all grades. All teachers were involved in intensive Russian language courses through the summer.

154. Jacob A. Neufeld, "Welcher Methoden bediente sich der Sowjet-Bolschewismus der Mennonitengruppe zu zersetzen und aufzuloesen (Gedanken eines Beteiligten)," unpublished manuscript, 1956, 1. From Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kan.

155. See Rehan, "Etwas aus der Vergangenheit," 3, 5, 7, 8, 11, 17, 18, 20, 23. Jacob Braun of Neuendorf, Chortitza recalled how difficult the language change was for him as an 11-year-old and for his siblings: "We could hardly speak a word in either Russian or Ukrainian."—*Long Road to Freedom*, 23.

signs of Christ's presence—where these occur in faith, there is church. By and large, Stalin successfully dismantled these elements.

However, since the time of Menno Simons Mennonites have also held—consciously or unconsciously—that there are four additional “marks” or “signs” of the church, which broaden this classic Protestant understanding. These include holy living; love for others; witness to the name, will, word, and ordinance of Christ; and a willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ and the gospel.¹⁵⁶ In this view, the presence of Christ is mediated not simply, or even primarily, through preaching or the sacraments, but through the very life of the community of believers expressed in service.¹⁵⁷ Consciously or not, many Mennonite women after the Stalin purges successfully embodied those other “marks” of the church in their common life: holy living, which distinguished them from those who do not follow Christ; sisterly love and support for one another; a sustained witness and testimony to Christ in the face of cruelty, tyranny, and violence; and the readiness to suffer for the sake of Christ and the gospel. Many stories testify to these qualities. Nonetheless by the late 1930s they were but bare threads, held together predominantly by women, 40 and older, who had been taught scripture in Mennonite schools, whose values and identity were formed in the rich life of the church and embraced in baptism, who knew their hymns and Bible stories, and were practiced and severely tested in prayer.

Since 1929, or even earlier with the Russian Revolution, the common path for these women—and, indeed, the whole community—had been a single uninterrupted journey of suffering and loss which led to unprecedented and deeply disheartening levels of indifference and demoralization. The minds of survivors were generally depressed, confused, and disrupted. According to Jacob A. Neufeld, they were poor and needy, both in body and mind. Within the community, neighbors were intimidated, threatened, but also enticed to become informants and accusers. Faith leaders were mocked and persecuted; over time, they

156. Cf. the summary and analysis given by John H. Yoder, “The Church in the World: Theological Interpretation,” in *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, ed. James Leo Garrett, 250–283 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1969); cf. also the 1853 “Confession, or Short and Simple Statement of Faith of Those Who are Called the United Flemish, Frisian, and High German Anabaptist-Mennonite Church,” published by the Church in Rudnerweide in South Russia, 1853, in *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith*, trans. Peter J. Klassen, ed. Howard John Loewen (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute for Mennonite Studies, 1985), 117. — <https://archive.org/details/onelordonechurch02loew/>.

157. A growing ecumenical rapprochement on these affirmations in the twenty-first century can be seen, for example, in the concluding reflections by the Lutheran World Federation, the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and the Mennonite World Conference in “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church: Lutheran-Mennonite-Roman Catholic Trilateral Conversations, 2012–2017,” *MQR* 95 (Jan. 2021), 9–94.

became fearful, suspicious, passive, servile, and unable to act or to resist. Because everything was taken from them, many justified lying and stealing from the collective in order to survive. Child rearing was taken out of the hands of parents; and the abductions of approximately 40 percent of the men, according to Neufeld, was a "general act of rape" that broke any remaining psychological or moral will to resist in the community.¹⁵⁸ No one had the courage left to say, wish, or hope anything. Even the community and support that the women sought to preserve among themselves in their settlement and work was infiltrated and shattered by the planting of Soviet-friendly activists in the community.

The 1942 village reports during the German occupation confirm an almost complete breakdown of social life. "Because of the many frictions on the collective [farms], each became weary and wary (*überdrüssig*) of the other."¹⁵⁹ "After collectivization, neighbors no longer wished to see their neighbors."¹⁶⁰ "If a few people got together, they were politically suspect. No one trusted each other anymore."¹⁶¹ "Life on the collective farm embittered people, and they began to hate each other. Each lived for him- or herself alone, in dreary brooding, without hope of a better future"¹⁶² and was "happy if on a Sunday he could stay away from the community for a few hours and finally be alone to himself."¹⁶³ "Sociability had completely ceased under the Bolsheviks" because "trust in each other" had eroded.¹⁶⁴ Young adults in the Sagrodovka villages, with very little memory of church, organized dance parties each Saturday and Sunday night with a band of violins, mandolins, guitars, and balalaikas until band members were exiled or arrested.¹⁶⁵

Seven decades later, the children who grew up in that context were conscious of how that experience had shaped them differently than their relatives in Canada—that is, without any sense of nostalgia for Russia or

158. J. Neufeld, "Welcher Methoden bediente sich der Sowjet-Bolschewismus?" 5f.

159. "Adelsheim (Chortitza) Dorfbericht," April 1942, Fragebogen VII (f), 4 (348b), from BArch, Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 622, case 82. The Hochfeld, Neuhorst, and Nikolaifeld village reports also use the term "*überdrüssig*" to describe relationships within their respective village.

160. "Blumengart (Chortitza) Dorfbericht," July 1942, Fragebogen VII (f), 4 (484b), from BArch, Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 622, case 97.

161. "Chortitza Dorfbericht," Fragebogen VII (f), 4 (7b).

162. "Katharinovka (Borosenko) Dorfbericht," May 1942, Fragebogen VII (g), 4 (2b), from BArch, Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 624, case 193.

163. "Kronstal (Chortitza) Dorfbericht," July 1942, Fragebogen VII (f), 4 (443b), from BArch, Special Unit Stumpp, R6, file 622, case 199.

164. "Franzfeld Dorfbericht," Fragebogen XII.f., 4 (381b).

165. Cf. "Musikhöre," Fragebogen VII (e) in the village reports of Alexanderkrone, Altonau, Friedensfeld, Neu Schönsee, Nikolaifeld, Schönau, Steinfeld and Tiege in Sagradovka, from BArch, Special Unit Stumpp, R6, files 620 and 621.

Ukraine as their homeland. "See, when we grew up there, all we knew was fear and poverty. . . . The generations above us—they still had some very good memories. . . . I don't think we ever thought of Russia as our homeland. I think we thought of ourselves as German all the time."¹⁶⁶ "It is practically impossible," wrote Eduard Reimer, "to imagine how afraid everybody was in the villages at that time."

Already as children and especially as teens, we learned to put on a false face and were compelled to hide our true thoughts and feelings. I believe that this forced two-facedness left many of my generation with life-long inhibitions. . . . I was compelled—like most in the village and in school—always to have two faces, one that was shown outwardly, and one that was turned inward. Nothing in my life has been more repulsive to me.¹⁶⁷

Yet even though many failed in small or large ways, the systematic, targeted, and brutal dismantling which the Mennonite community experienced was regularly frustrated, not by any one person or in a coordinated effort, but by the lingering group ethos as a whole. In a context where the key pillars of the church—clergy, places of worship, sacraments, and proclamation—were removed, destroyed, or made impossible, other pillars emerged for many that sustained life and faith, even in the face of heavy repression: holy living, sisterly love, testimony to the will and word of Christ with their children and neighbors, and the willingness to suffer for God's sake.

The newly-available archival materials referenced in this essay, together with the memoirs of survivors and witnesses, offer deeply moving depictions of the horrific human tragedies of this period—including the tragedies of those caught up as perpetrators in grand but misguided social and political causes. Reflections on a theology of forgiveness and reconciliation have sometimes been championed too easily in the West, for example, by citing Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu. But Mennonites as a Christian body have only started to document and incorporate the costly lessons learned from the profound testing of the Soviet era.¹⁶⁸ The task of theological and moral reflection remains an ongoing challenge.

166. "Focus group: *Fluechtlinge*," in Cynthia A. Jones, "Grounding Diaspora in Experience: Niagara Mennonite Identity" (PhD diss., Wilfrid Laurier University, 2010), 324. — <https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/1099/>.

167. Reimer, *Memoir*, 22, 17, 26.

168. I would like to thank the peer review editor for confirming and helping me to articulate this next step.