

Mennonites, German Occupation, and the Elimination of Jews in Ukraine

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Abstract: This paper seeks to identify and map out the social interactions between Nazi Germany, Mennonites in southern Ukraine, and local Jewish populations during the Holocaust by examining experiences and relationships in two of the region's larger Mennonite settlement areas, Molotschna/Halbstadt and Chortitza. The paper also examines the content and impact of Nazi propaganda in ethnic German communities as well the pressure to officially change "Jewish-sounding" names to Germanic names in later applications for naturalization. This mapping of interactions aims to contribute to a fuller understanding of the complexities of twentieth-century Mennonite history in Ukraine under Nazi occupation and open a door towards a healing of memories. The focus on one small ethnic-religious group in its interactions with Nazi Germany during the time its Jewish neighbors are eliminated is a small contribution towards understanding how social relations shaped the evolution of the Holocaust.

Archival documents suggest that a majority of Soviet Mennonites were silent, fearful observers as local Jews fled, sought refuge, or were gathered to be executed during the 1941–1943 German occupation of Ukraine. While the vast majority of Jewish murders in these regions happened at the onset of German occupation, there is also some evidence of active Mennonite collaboration or participation in subsequent killings—though this is still thinly documented. Some Russian Mennonites with surnames like Ediger, Penner, Wiens, Dick, and Jantsen have been identified as auxiliary police (*Hilfspolizei*); others were appointed as mayors in predominantly Mennonite villages and nearby towns—some of these officials were likely involved with the execution of Jewish neighbors.¹

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¹ See e.g., Markus Eikel, "Division of Labor and Cooperation: The Local Administration under German Occupation in Central and Eastern Ukraine, 1941–1944," in *The Holocaust in Ukraine: New Sources and Perspectives Conference Presentations*, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, 101–20 (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2013). <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20130500-holocaust-in-ukraine.pdf>; also Aileen Friesen, "A Portrait of Khortytsya/Zaporizhzhia under Occupation," in Mark Jantzen and John D.

Gerhard Rempel has argued these names might only be “the tip of the iceberg in terms of Mennonite involvement with the Holocaust.”² While evidence is meager and in some key cases unreliable,³ repeating the often-made claim that Mennonites in this region were simply victims caught between Stalin and Hitler is not sufficient. Historians as well as Mennonite theologians are beginning to unearth new elements of this story and map out the social interactions between Nazi Germany, Mennonites in southern Ukraine, and local Jewish populations during the Holocaust. This essay builds on these recent contributions to open another small window onto a local context of extreme violence and examine the interactions and responses of one minority Christian group to the destruction of Jewish lives and communities in their area of Nazi-dominated eastern Europe.⁴

About 35,000 Mennonites in Soviet Ukraine lived in close proximity to major killing sites during the Holocaust. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term “Mennonite” broadly to include those who identified or were identified by others as Mennonite because of a significant familial, social, cultural, or theological tie and experience.⁵ Most of these Mennonites would at some point become beneficiaries of crimes against Jews. Some were eyewitnesses and a few were perpetrators. Together they were situated in a borderland region of multiple languages, religions, and ethnicities that was deeply impacted by the pre-war Soviet regime.

Thiesen, eds., *European Mennonites and the Holocaust* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 229–49.

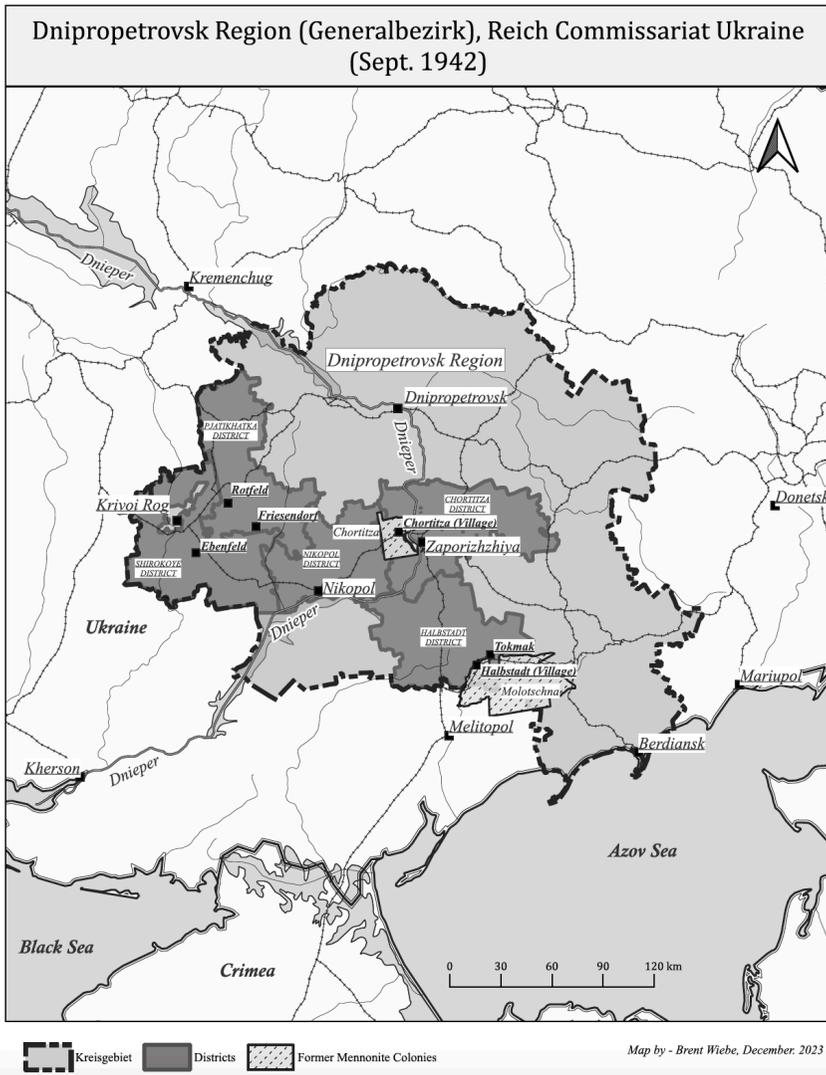
² Gerhard Rempel, “Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetuation,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 4 (October 2010): 535.

³ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1967), 206. Some literature presents atrocities in Zhytomyr and by Special Command R in Transnistria in September 1941 in a way that suggests ethnic Mennonite involvement, though this is improbable because of chronology and location. See Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 40–41. On Alexander Rempel’s much-cited memories of Mennonite involvement in the massacre of 20,000 to 30,000 Jews, see below. Moreover, some confessions were made under duress.

⁴ I build on the collection of Jantzen and Thiesen, eds., *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*; see also Benjamin Goossen, “Mennonites in Nazi-Occupied Ukraine. Childhood Education, Waffen-SS Recruitment, and the Holocaust, 1941–1944,” in *A Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: Global Mennonite Perspectives on Global Mennonite Perspectives on Peacebuilding and Nonviolence*, ed. Fernando Enns, Nina Schroeder-van ’t Schip, and Andres Pacheco-Lozano (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023), 266–80; Benjamin Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁵ Here I follow the model outlined by Doris L. Bergen, Mark Jantzen, and John D. Thiesen, “Neighbours, Killers, Enablers, Witnesses: The Many Roles of Mennonites in the Holocaust,” in Jantzen and Thiesen, *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 12–17.

ARRIVAL OF GERMANS: MOLOTSCHNA (HALBSTADT)



In 1939 some 249 Jews lived in the predominantly Ukrainian and Russian town of Tokmak, which was adjacent to the town of Halbstadt in the old Mennonite Molotschna District. Immediately prior to occupation, German planes flew over the Molotschna and air-dropped leaflets written in both German and Russian that linked Jews and Communism: *“Jews and Communists, flee! Not one of you will survive. We will find you even in the*

remotest corner."⁶ Memoirs recall that east-bound trains were jammed with Jewish families, and a stream of Jewish refugees flowed through the Molotschna as well "with their possessions piled on their wagons."⁷

German military entered villages in Ukraine in 1941 quickly and with terrifying efficiency. SS-Cavalry brigades had clear guidelines for Ukraine: First, the village mayor must be identified and commanded to report. "If it is a Russian or a Jew, another person must be appointed." The mayor was then made personally responsible for any hostility towards SS members. Second, the mayor was required to share all information about Red Army and Communist Party members and their assistants in the village and any partisan groups in the area—their strength, location, direction. Third, all weapons, radios, cameras, and politically or militarily relevant files must be handed over. Finally, there was the SS's highest priority: a detailed list of all Jewish inhabitants was to be created, a Jewish ghetto established, and "the immediate attachment of identification markers to the clothing of Jews" required.⁸ In this way, Mennonites were swiftly drawn into Nazi Germany's atrocities when the invaders arrived in their villages.

A German Rear Army Command Division (*Korück*) was established in the city Melitopol not far from the Molotschna district and was responsible for securing supply routes, pacifying the newly occupied territory, and creating transit camps for prisoners of war. On October 11, approximately 2,000 Jews were killed in Melitopol.⁹ Together with the First German Mounted Rifle Division, allied Romanian troops were the first to penetrate the southern Molotschna villages as the Soviets scrambled to evacuate the population. The Germans controlled Molotschna by October 13, 1941. Some Mennonites were mistaken for Jews: "When we told them that we were in fact Germans, they did not molest us," Albert Dahl recalled.¹⁰

On October 17, Hauptmann Rottendorf ordered that "increasing plundering of the ethnic Germans in the said area, the senseless destruction of belongings, and the destruction of the modest livelihood of

⁶ Johann Rehan (of Schardau, Molotschna), "Etwas aus der Vergangenheit" 1992/1995. Copy of hand-written memoir in author's possession.

⁷ Katie Friesen, *Into the Unknown* (Steinbach, MN: n.p., 1986), 37; also Helene Dueck, *Durch Trübsal und Not* (Winnipeg: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995), 35. <https://archive.org/details/durch-truebsal-und-not/mode/2up>.

⁸ SS-Kavallerie Brigade, "Merkblatt mit Richtlinien als Anhalt bei der Besetzung von Ortschaften und Dörfern, in denen die Einheiten länger als eine Übernachtung verbleiben," August 4, 1941, Bundesarchiv [hereafter BA] MA, RS/3/8, 77.

⁹ Alexander Kruglov, "Jewish losses in Ukraine, 1941-1944," in *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, ed. Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 255.

¹⁰ Albert Dahl (born in Marienthal, Molotschna), interview with author, July 26, 2017.

these ethnic Germans requires immediate and decisive action.” Rottendorf ordered that German mayors be appointed and that the villages be posted with clear signage as a “German Colony (village).” Rottendorf was concerned with infractions by the Romanians, the plundering of factories, warehouses and facilities in towns, and the arrest of deserters and “politically unacceptable elements.”¹¹ The latter were delivered directly to the SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*) in Melitopol, which was typically responsible for executions. On October 16, the newly appointed mayor of the predominantly Mennonite village of Lichtenau handed over the bookkeeper of their oil press — “presumed to be a Jew” — to Rottendorf, who on the same day turned over 75 Jews to the SD.¹² The Jews of Tokmak who were unable to flee “were made to wear the Star of David on their backs and a yellow arm band” and “forced to clean the town, especially its streets.” In little more than a week, Jews in Tokmak “were loaded onto trucks and taken to a murder site five kilometers from the village, near the airport” and were “shot, together with Jews from Molochansk (Molotschna).”¹³

Einsatzgruppe personnel typically encouraged “reliable elements” of the local populace to participate in executions both to “absolve the Germans themselves from dirtying their own hands” and give the impression “that the local indigenous population had taken matters into their own hands” to “settle scores with former Communist functionaries” or begin a pogrom.¹⁴ Generally Mennonites were reticent “to settle personal accounts” in this way, at least according to a later member of the First Ethnic German Cavalry, Eduard (Abram) Reimer.¹⁵ While Melitopol maintained a “small but vital Mennonite community” throughout the Stalin years, its ethnic Germans were deported to Kazakhstan at the onset of the war.¹⁶ Its first German-appointed district mayor (*Oberbürgermeister*), however, was Mennonite Dietrich Klassen from Einlage in the Chortitza district. He died a few months later of a heart attack on December 17, 1941

¹¹ Rottendorf, Korück 553, *Sonder-Befehl*, October 17, 1941, BA RH 23/78, no. 30 [60]. Cf. related memoirs, Gerhard Lohrenz, *Lose Blätter*, 129; Selma Kornelsen Hooge and Anna Goossen Kornelsen, *Life Before Canada* (Abbotsford, BC: n.p., 2018), 54.

¹² Rottendorf, Korück 553, telegram to Nikolajew, October 16, 1941, BA RH 23/78, no. 37 [74].

¹³ Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center, “Soviet Report about the mass murder of Jews in Molochansk,” Yad Vashem Archives, M.37/293; TsGAOU 57-4-14. <https://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/index.asp?cid=568>.

¹⁴ Gordon Williamson, *German Security and Police Soldier 1939–45* (Oxford: Osprey, 2002), 28. <https://archive.org/details/GermanSecurityAndPoliceSoldier193945/>.

¹⁵ Eduard (Abram) Reimer, “Memoir” (n.d.), 56. From Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA), Winnipeg, MN, Gerhard Lohrenz Fonds, 60, no. 63, vol. 3333.

¹⁶ See *Letters from Susan: A Woman’s View of the Russian Mennonite Experience (1928–1941)*, ed. by John B. Toews (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1988), 141, 150. https://mla.bethelks.edu/books/wedel_series/letters_from_susan.pdf.

and was given a ceremonial funeral by the German military, according to his sister.¹⁷

It was a horrific two weeks for the Jewish community. Closer to the Mennonite Chortitza district, more than 11,000 Jews were killed in Dnipropetrovsk on October 14th and 15th.¹⁸ In Mariupol over 8,000 Jews were killed on October 20th and October 21st. After the city was declared “free of Jews,” corpses of some ethnic German men who had been killed by the Soviet secret police (NKVD) were “exhumed, made available for inquest, and publicly buried.”¹⁹ This followed a pattern identified by Timothy Snyder, underscoring from the start a connection between Jews and Bolshevik repression: “Wherever the Germans found corpses left by the NKVD, they blamed the Jews and usually shot some.”²⁰

The Black Sea region came under the German military administration of Army Group South (*Heeresgruppe Süd*). The SS-based Ethnic German Liaison Office (*Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* or VoMi) was responsible for the administration, organization, and control of the larger German settlement territory, which was divided into two district commandos.²¹ The VoMi’s mandate was first of all to register the ethnic German population in the settlement area; establish and supply medical and public health services; and organize supplies of food, clothing, and everyday supplies. A second key responsibility was the cultural development and worldview training of ethnic Germans, including the establishment of kindergartens, schools, and teacher training institutions. Finally, the VoMi was tasked with establishing self-defense units in each village for protection from partisans. SS-Storm Unit Leader (*Sturmbannführer*) Hermann Roßner was appointed by the VoMi Special Command R as leader for the district of Halbstadt and its 144 villages.

Soon thereafter Mennonite Adolf (Abram) Rüdiger of Lindenau (Molotschna) was appointed as translator and then mayor of Tokmak and

¹⁷ See recollection of Klassen’s sister, Maria Harder, “Tagebuch, 1907-1965 [part 9],” *Mennonitische Rundschau* 89, no. 33 (August 17, 1966): 14 (hereafter MR; for all articles cited: https://archive.org/details/pub_die-mennonitische-rundschau). Dmytro Myeshkov also mentions Klassen in “Mennonites in Ukraine before, during, and immediately after the Second World War,” in Jantzen and Thiesen, *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 208.

¹⁸ Kruglov, “Jewish losses in Ukraine, 1941-1944,” 255.

¹⁹ Einsatzgruppe D, Operational Situation Report USSR No. 136, to the Chief of the Security Police and Security Service (SD), November 21, 1941, in Yitzhak Arad, Shmuel Krakowski, and Shmuel Spector, eds., *The Einsatzgruppen Reports: Selections from the Dispatches of the Nazi Death Squads’ Campaign against the Jews July 1941-January 1943* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1989), 244.

²⁰ Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Duggan, 2015), 352.

²¹ Andrej Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord: Die Einsatzgruppe D in der südlichen Sowjetunion 1941-1943* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003), 279.

its 22,000 residents, 750 of whom were ethnic Germans.²² In Tokmak another thirty-six Jews were shot in an anti-tank trench 500 meters outside the town on December 15, 1941.²³ Soviet State Extraordinary Commission reports indicate that in the first half of 1942 twelve more Jews were “brutally tortured and shot dead” in a ravine behind Tokmak’s slaughterhouse.²⁴ This continued sporadically over the two years of occupation. In trenches along the road from Tokmak to the nearby village of Sadovoye ninety-five Jews were tortured and shot as late as May 7, 1943. This group included “21 bodies of children and teenagers ranging in age from infancy to 15.” At yet another nearby site, twenty-five corpses of people shot on July 27, 1943, were found later.²⁵

It was discovered that that the bodies of the men, women, and children were not buried in a proper way but were haphazardly thrown into a pit and buried. The bodies were not buried deeply at all, but only at a depth of 15–20 cm. . . . With a few exceptions the bodies in the trenches were without clothing or shoes²⁶

Local Mennonites who traveled between their homes in the renamed German district of “Halbstadt” (which was Molotschna) and Tokmak were very aware of the Jewish killing site they passed *en route*.²⁷ Notably in the first four months of occupation, *Bereichskommando* 31 of *Einsatzgruppe* (Operational Command) Halbstadt executed eighty-one Roma people, and Special Command 10a killed “about one hundred” Roma in Melitopol. “The fate of the Roma was virtually no different from that of the Jews. Like the Jews, the Roma were subjected to annihilation based solely on their ethnicity.”²⁸

²² *Schwarzmeerdeutschtum: Mennoniten*, Propaganda materials, 1944, Office for Resettlement of Germans, Poznań Branch, from Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe (National Digital Archives Poland; NAC), 53/800/0, file 184. <https://szukajwarchiwach.pl/53/800/0/-/184>.

²³ *Yad Vashem*, “Soviet Report about the mass murder of Jews in Molochansk.”

²⁴ *Yad Vashem*, “Bolshoy Tokmak,” May 7, 1944, *State Extraordinary Commission for the Determination and Investigation of Nazi and their Collaborators’ Atrocities in the USSR* (ChGK), *Yad Vashem Archives*, JM/19707; GARF 7021-61-29. https://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/chgkSovietReports.asp?cid=563&site_id=705.

²⁵ *Yad Vashem*, “Bolshoy Tokmak,” *State Extraordinary Commission*, May 7, 1944.

²⁶ *Yad Vashem*, “Bolshoy Tokmak,” *State Extraordinary Commission*, May 7, 1944.

²⁷ Cf. Gerhard J. Klassen [b. 1889], “Elia oder Elias? Erlebnis von unserer Einbürgerung in das ‘Großdeutsche Reich’ in Polen,” *MR* 79, no. 25 (June 6, 1956): 5.

²⁸ Mikhail Tyaglyy, “Nazi Occupation Policies and the Mass Murder of the Roma in Ukraine,” in *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma: Reassessment and Commemoration*, ed. Anton Weiss-Wendt (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 127, 144.



“Halbstadt: German Colony” (image from German propaganda film, 1943).²⁹

During this time in the town of Halbstadt, Rudolf Federau was appointed its first mayor under German occupation, a position he held until February 1942 when he was deployed to Crimea with the notorious SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*). Dmytro Myeshkov has brought to light Soviet documents including witness statements that accuse Federau of shooting Jews on the city outskirts on a number of occasions. Complaints reached the SD command that Federau also arrested innocent Ukrainians in order to extort valuables from their relatives, and then he “typically shot them anyway.” Various women also accused him of rape. The German SD arrested Federau and executed him a few months later.³⁰ Despite his typical Mennonite surname, we now know that Federau’s parents and grandparents were not Mennonite but an ethnic German Lutheran family from neighboring Prischib. Nevertheless, his wife identified as Mennonite during the war and afterwards in Canada, and she was born in Halbstadt to a Mennonite father and Lutheran mother.³¹

²⁹ Two versions of the film are available; shorter (edited for length; higher quality with background music): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VzKxGBCrdk; longer: “Material Nr. 1574,” <https://archiv-akh.de/filme?utf-8=%E2%9C%93&q=halbstadt#1>.

³⁰ Myeshkov, “Mennonites in Ukraine before, during, and immediately after the Second World War,” 203–28.

³¹ Myeshkov assumed for good reasons that Federau was Mennonite; however the “Einwandererzentralstelle” (EWZ) German naturalization file for his wife Frieda Lötke mann Federau, who was a Mennonite, clearly indicates that her husband and his parents were Lutheran from Prischib (A3342, Series EWZ 50-B056, frame 2820, National Archives Collection Microfilm Publication, Washington, D.C.). Frieda Lötke mann’s father was

Many of the smaller Molotschna-area villages were home to one or two Jewish families each.³² Abram Thiessen of Gnadenheim claimed that Jews “of our villages” were taken up in a plane and then dropped out alive.³³ Helene Bräul had often bartered dried fruit and geese for dry goods from a Jewish woman whose family lived on the edge of Marienthal. The village cobbler, a Mennonite, identified the Jewish mother and her children, and they were taken by the Germans to the Marienthal cemetery behind the school and shot.³⁴ Prior to the arrival of the German *Wehrmacht*, Anni (Vogt) Toews of Marienthal was ordered to dig anti-tank trenches in a group that included two Jewish girls from her village, approximately her age (fourteen). When the *Wehrmacht* arrived, they were permitted to return home, but they knew that the Jewish girls needed protection.

On the way back to Molotschna, they hid the two [Jewish] girls on the wagon under straw and thus took them away unseen. At a checkpoint the German girls talked with the soldiers, and all arrived safely back in Marienthal. However, there were some people there who were not quite ‘kosher,’ even during the Communist period and betrayed their fellow Mennonites. They knew nothing better than to betray the two girls as well. Then two young SS-men came and took some 14-year-old boys from the village to dig graves for the Jewish girls at the cemetery. . . . The two SS-men then took the two crying and completely innocent girls to the graves and shot them.³⁵

Nelly Bräul, who lived in Paulsheim, remembered how a pair of Jews in the village were led out by soldiers, made to dig their own grave, forced on their knees, and then shot.³⁶ Agatha Janzen (pseudonym) who lived in neighboring Gnadenfeld remembered her sister and friends playing outside in January 1943 and seeing a hand sticking out of the snow, where

Mennonite and her Lutheran-born mother married three Mennonite men, including the author’s grandfather in Paraguay.

³² E.g., Fischau had sixty resident families, including fifteen individuals who were not Mennonite, “Russians, Jews, Lutherans.” Jacob B. Janz, “The Russian Mennonite Village. A Documentary Portrait from 1909,” trans. John B. Toews, *American Historical Society of Germans from Russia*, Working Papers, no. 25 (Winter 1997), 38.

³³ “Abe Thiessen Interview,” *Mennonite Heritage Museum* (Abbotsford, BC), 1:19–1:37. Uploaded May 21, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwlvrRecc6oE&t=22s>.

³⁴ Albert Dahl and Katharine Bräul Fast, interview with author, July 26, 2017. Both were children at the time from different families, and each with this distinct memory. Cf. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, “German Mennonite Theology in the Era of National Socialism,” in Jantzen and Thiesen, *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 125–52.

³⁵ As told by Johann Toews to Horst Gerlach, *Die Rußlandmennoniten: Ein Volk Unterwegs*, vol. 2 (Kirchheimbolanden [Pfalz]: n.p., 2007), 351. It is important to note that the local SS First Ethnic German Cavalry Squadron—comprised of some 500 Molotschna Mennonite young men—was not formed until later the next year.

³⁶ Nelly Bräul Epp, interview with author, 2017.

“the Germans had taken a Jewish lady into the bush and shot her.”³⁷ There were some Jews in Hierschau and Waldheim who were executed locally; their bodies were said “to have been dumped into the White Earth Pits near Hierschau.”³⁸ In Nikolaidorf a Jewish girl was hunted down by the SS commander after she managed to escape execution. She was shot to death in a ditch on the edge of the village. “She was shown no pity. ... How we grieved for this girl, who grew up among us, and was now so brutally murdered. Many met the same fate.”³⁹ “Anna” (pseudonym), a Mennonite kitchen manager for German troops, told of a sixteen-year-old orphaned Jewish girl under her work supervision who asked if she too would be killed: “Child there is nothing we can do in this manner. We certainly disapprove of these things and I hope nothing will happen to you.” Anna was told by one of the soldiers that the Jewish girl “took her little brother by the hand” and stood with him on the edge of the pit. “The first volley swept both of them into the grave. They felt nothing.”⁴⁰

Twenty-seven-year-old Walter Jansen was appointed Gnadenfeld district mayor in spring 1942 and was aware that Jews who were unable to flee were being rounded up. Attempting to save them from certain execution, Jansen wrote years later, “he would either use the maiden names of the women or transpose Ukrainian names” when translating Jewish names; in this way he was able to save “a number of people, in spite of the obvious danger to himself.”⁴¹ Though this is unconfirmed, it does indicate that Mennonite mayors helped Nazi German officials to identify and register local Jews before their killing.

There was at least one exception in Molotschna. Samuel Dunajewski (b. 1887) of Blumenort was a “deaf-mute with Jewish ancestry,” who had married the Mennonite widow Luise Penner (b. 1878) shortly after the Revolution. Dunajewski was arrested in Halbstadt in 1941 or 1942, and then in a highly unusual act was released at the “request” of his wife.

³⁷ Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars. Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 85. Cf. also the graphic account by Anna Sudermann of Chortitza, where there were larger numbers of Jewish neighbors, in G. Rempel, “Mennonites and the Holocaust,” 528–30.

³⁸ Helmut T. Huebert, *Hierschau: An Example of Russian Mennonite Life* (Winnipeg: Springfield, 1986), 317. <https://archive.org/details/HierschauAnExampleOfRussianMennoniteLifeOCRopt>.

³⁹ Susanna Toews, *Trek to Freedom: The Escape of Two Sisters from South Russia during World War II*, trans. Helen Megli (Winkler, MN: Heritage Valley, 1976), 20.

⁴⁰ “Anna,” in Gerhard Lohrenz, ed., *The Lost Generation and other Stories* (Steinbach, MN: Gerhard Lohrenz, 1982), 136.

⁴¹ Walter Jansen and Linda Jansen, *Our Stories*, trans. and ed. Walfried Jansen (Winnipeg: n.p., 2010), 45. MHA, Walter and Linda Jansen Fonds, 1946–2009, vol. 5477-5478, 5691. For four other stories of help rendered, cf. A. Friesen, “Portrait of Khortytsya/Zaporizhzhia under Occupation,” 234.

Dunajewski was born in the Molotschna village of Ohrloff, perhaps to a Mennonite mother. There is every reason to think he had been a pupil of the Molotschna Mary School for the Deaf (*Marientaubstummenschule*), which started in Blumenort (1885) and in 1890 properly established in Tiede, which was adjacent to Dunajewski's birth village. Mennonites donated generously to this favored charity, especially after it became clear that deaf children too could understand the gospel and request baptism. It is entirely possible that Dunajewski was a baptized Mennonite. He survived occupation and was evacuated to German-annexed Poland in 1943-44 with other Mennonites. In her German naturalization file, his wife Luise Penner indicated that he was "Mennonite," though this is corrected by racial examiners: "He was a Jew." Dunajewski was taken from his wife in the last week of April 1944, and he died in the Litzmannstadt Jewish Ghetto on June 13, 1944. On paper he was a Mennonite Jew.⁴²

SS-Storm *Sturmabführer* Roßner was in charge of all aspects of the VoMi mandate in Halbstadt (Molotschna), including the recruitment and training of the self-defense units in the first year, units that would later become *Waffen*-SS. We know that on one occasion in 1942 a member of the First Ethnic German Cavalry Squadron (ultimately under Roßner) was ordered by their leader (unnamed) to take the young Jewish boy who cleaned their barracks in Waldheim to the edge of the village and shoot him. "At supper time the men talked about the shooting," according to Mennonite Isaak Regehr. "There was no pressure put on the soldier and had he not done it, another man would have been happy to obey the order and kill the Jew."⁴³ Eduard Reimer, a member of the same cavalry unit, confessed that when they sang the war hymn of "The Blue Dragoons," they added an antisemitic verse about the "wandering Jew" and German dive bombers that would "give the Jew rest."⁴⁴ Since the young adult population was almost fully ignorant of their faith tradition and bitter about their family lot under Stalin, there is no reason to doubt that many adapted their worldview fully to the frequently repeated claim that linked Jews with Bolshevism and complied with the new regime as others had

⁴² Cf. G. Klassen, "Elia oder Elias?" 5; Luise Penner: Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry (hereafter GRanDMA), #1189660, with link to one page of Penner's naturalization application form (A3342, Series EWZ 50, folder B030, frame 0520); entry for Samuel Dunajewski, "Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database," *Rejestr Zgonow* (Death Register), ID: 37603_RG-15.083M, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?PersonId=6302225; https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/source_view.php?SourceId=37603.

⁴³ In Harry Loewen, ed., *Road to Freedom: Mennonites Escape the Land of Suffering* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2000), 110.

⁴⁴ Eduard [Abram] Reimer, Memoir, unpublished (n.d.), 63. From MHA, Gerhard Lorenz Fonds, 60, no. 63, vol. 3333. See selective English translation under pseudonym Eduard [Jacob] Allert, in Lorenz, *The Lost Generation*.

done under communism. Reimer, however, surmised years later that their anti-Jewishness likely predated German occupation and had perhaps found a place in their theology.

Almost all ethnic Germans appear to have received supplies of linen, shoes, and clothing from Jewish victims and even some toys for children. Käthe Bräul recalled that for Christmas in 1941 her older cousin Marga Bräul was able to purchase a porcelain doll in Odessa for her sister Lenchen. While the doll's origins are unclear, only two months earlier Romanian allies had killed about 20,000 Jews in Odessa over a period of three days.⁴⁵ A year later on October 6, 1942, SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler sent a memo ordering that depot items from the recently liquidated Jewish ghetto in Lublin and the concentration camp at Auschwitz be distributed for Christmas to all the major *Volksdeutsche* settlements; this included the Halbstadt district, which Himmler was scheduled to visit at the end of the month.⁴⁶ On November 25, 1942, SS-Oberführer Hoffmeyer confirmed that twenty-seven box cars of clothing items had arrived, which were intended for the ethnic Germans for whom he and the VoMi had responsibility in South Ukraine.⁴⁷ It was more than the *Volksdeutsche* could believe, even a decade later: "We were in dire need of clothing, yet even with that we were helped. The Germans in the *Reich* gathered many old clothes and sent them to us in Ukraine."⁴⁸

In his short history of the Molotschna Mennonites and the VoMi, Horst Gerlach was eager to absolve Roßner of any responsibility for the murder of Jews under his watch. Task Force Halbstadt under Roßner should not be confused with the "*Einsatzgruppen* trained for the persecution of the Jews," Gerlach argued.⁴⁹ Gerlach's claim is not convincing and only serves to deflect attention from the murder of individual Jews in Halbstadt under Roßner's command. Roßner remained a friend of the Mennonites after the war, but nowhere does his correspondence show recollection, remorse, or responsibility for the murder of Jews under his command. He recalled incorrectly that "to his knowledge there were hardly any Jews in the [Molotschna] area. They had, almost without exception, been cleared out

⁴⁵ Cf. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic, 2010), 218.

⁴⁶ For details of the memo by Himmler to SS Senior Group Leader Werner Lorenz and to Oswald Pohl, cf. Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*, 267, n. 65.

⁴⁷ Cf. Peter Witte, et al., *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42* (Hamburg: Christians Verlag, 1999), 603, n. 100.

⁴⁸ Käthe Becker, in A. A. Töws, ed., *Mennonitische Märtyrer der jüngsten Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart*, vol. 2: *Der große Leidensweg* (North Clearbrook, BC: A. A. Töws, 1954), 378.

⁴⁹ Horst Gerlach, "Mennonites, the Molotschna, and the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* in the Second World War," trans. John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite Life* 41, no. 3 (September 1986): 5. <https://mla.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/pre2000/1986sep.pdf>.

before the arrival of the Germans.” Stuningly, Gerlach adds that this opinion “concur[s] with that of many others.”⁵⁰



Guide and Map for Halbstadt⁵¹

CHORTITZA DISTRICT

German and Soviet records on the atrocities in the predominantly Mennonite Chortitza region do not conflict in substance, and they complement Mennonite memory. “Jews were shot without mercy by the Germans,” Mennonite Susanna Toews recalled.⁵² Harry Loewen, who was a child at the time, remembered generally that those Jews unable to flee were rounded up and simply executed.⁵³ Osterwick had twenty-two Jews

⁵⁰ In Gerlach, “Mennonites, Molotschna, and the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*,” 6. Cf. Hermann Roßner to Horst Wilke, letter, November 16, 1972, in BA MA N/756, 151/a; Roßner to [?] Schirmacher, March 8, 1972, letter, in BA MA, N/756, 256/a; Roßner to Wolfgang Voperal, November 2, 1983, letter, in BA MA, N/756, 151/a. Also: “Rossner, Hermann,” Special Collection, Nazi War Crimes Disclosure Act Collection, doc. (FOIA)/ESDN (CREST): 519bdeb993294098d5158b8.-https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/ROSSNER%2C%20HERMANN_0003.pdf.

⁵¹ Translated from top to bottom: Labor Office, Railway Station, Mayor’s Office, German Service Post, District Captain, District Agriculturalist, Gendarme (police), Court, Hospital, Regional Agriculturalist, Soldiers’ Residence, SS-Special Commando R[ussia] Offices (*Dienststelle*), SS-Special Commando R[ussia] Lodging, SS-Special Commando R[ussia] BK VIII, Bank, Central Trade Store East. Image from “Halbstadt: German Colony” (German propaganda film, 1943).

⁵² S. Toews, *Trek to Freedom*, 18.

⁵³ H. Loewen, *Road to Freedom*, 22, 60.

(six families) before occupation. "It did not matter what kind of life a Jew had lived, all Jews were brought together and summarily shot," recalled villager Victor Janzen.⁵⁴ With more detail, Margaretha (Sara) Vogt Letkeman recalled that in Osterwick it was "mostly [the] Ukrainians who had declared themselves willing to help the Germans," but they were supervised by "Mennonites men"; these Ukrainians were "ordered to round up the Jews in the area and take them to some undisclosed destination and shoot them."⁵⁵ Helen Rempel seemed to know that they were taken to the city of Zaporizhzhia in October and November 1941. "At first we didn't know what happened to the Jews that were sent away. But then we began to hear—the Jews were all being murdered. This happened in all the villages, wherever there were Jewish families."⁵⁶ One twenty-year-old German soldier boasted to a Mennonite in Kronsweide (Chortitza) of personally shooting 180 Jews. (NB: there were no Jews in Kronsweide before or after the occupation).⁵⁷

Not long after the start of the occupation, as Jacob Braun of Neuendorf (Chortitza) recalled,

. . . we heard of a Mennonite woman in a neighbouring town who had married a Jewish man. Since he was Jewish, he had fled east, leaving his wife and small child behind. When the Germans found out this child had a Jewish father, they took him from his mother and poisoned him.⁵⁸

Braun also recorded that around the same time he had heard that German soldiers "had shot and killed ten Jewish men just outside our village."

I was working with a number of women in the field who decided to go and see these corpses after work. I went with them and witnessed

⁵⁴ Victor Janzen, *From the Dnieper to the Paraguay River* (Winnipeg, MN: Victor Janzen, 1995), 36; also Hans Werner, *The Constructed Mennonite: History, Memory, and the Second World War* (Winnipeg, MN: University of Manitoba Press, 2014), 149. See statistics in "Osterwick Dorfsbericht," in Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp, BA R6/622. Prepared for the German Reichsminister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, 1942. Village Reports below are found at: BA R6, 14.2, files 620 to 633; 702 to 709. <https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/invenio/main.xhtml>. Also available at State Electronic Archive of Ukraine, <https://tsdea.archives.gov.ua/deutsch/>.

⁵⁵ Werner, *Constructed Mennonite*, 149.

⁵⁶ Helen Rempel Wiens Franz, "My Memoirs," *Preservings* no. 23 (December 2003), 116. <https://www.plettfoundation.org/files/preservings/Preservings23.pdf>.

⁵⁷ G. Klassen, "Elia oder Elias?" 5. See "Kronsweide Dorfbericht, Rayon Chortitza," Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp, BA R6/622, Mappe 86, May 1942.

⁵⁸ J. Braun, *Long Road to Freedom*, 66.

a pile of dead and decaying bodies. Some men were stripping these corpses of any valuable items.⁵⁹

Immediately prior to the German occupation, 402 Jews lived together with 2,178 ethnic Germans and 11,507 Ukrainians in the administrative center of Chortitza and neighboring Rosenthal. There were no Jews left in Chortitza in June 1942.⁶⁰ Peter Harder—whose aunt Aganetha Krahn (b. 1914) had married a “half Jew” in Rosenthal, Bernhard (“Boris”) Tinkelstein—witnessed a truck loaded with local Jews leave Chortitza and return empty; Harder was sixteen years old. His “Onkel Boris” operated a store with candy in Rosenthal, as Peter recalled fondly, and fled east before occupation. However, the young daughter, Peter’s cousin, was identified as part-Jewish by neighbors; the girl and mother were required to go to an administrative center in Zaporizhzhia, where the daughter was “examined” behind doors; she was not returned to her mother.⁶¹ Similarly, Johann A. Bräul, an engineer on the Dnjeprostroy hydroelectric dam at Einlage who had grown up Mennonite, had children with two Jewish wives. These children were also not spared.⁶²



Chortitza District Mayor Hans Epp greeting Alfred Rosenberg June 27, 1942⁶³

⁵⁹ J. Braun, *Long Road to Freedom*, 66.

⁶⁰ “Chortitza (Rayon Chortitza) Dorfbericht,” Village Reports Dr. Stumpp, BA R6/621, Mappe 81, May 1942, Fragebogen Nr. 4, p. 1.

⁶¹ Peter Harder, interview with author, November 7, 2018. Cf. “Chortitza Dorfbericht,” Familienverzeichnis (mit Rosenthal), no. 748. See Bernhard Tinkelstein, GRanDMA #1414902; also Anna Sudermann Diary, extracts, in G. Rempel, “Mennonites, War Crimes, and the Holocaust,” 43.

⁶² John P. Dyck, compiler, *Braeul Genealogy (1670-1983)* (Springstein, MN: John. P. Dyck, 1983), 31. Bräul divorced his first wife. See also Franz, “My Memoirs,” *Preservings* no. 23 (December 2003): 116.

⁶³ Image taken from “German Occupation Forces in Russia 1942,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKPojLXMhW8>. Alfred Rosenberg served as head of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (1941–1945). The scroll Epp is holding contains a greeting to Adolf Hitler.

Mennonites surely disappointed the Germans by not rising *en masse* against local Jews; nevertheless, locals could be recruited as auxiliary police for a variety of tasks to enable the killing of Jews. Einlage (Chortitza) provides a good example. This village was also established by Mennonites and included a population of 633 Jews before German occupation. Most of Einlage's Jews fled in advance, but, according to village chronicler Heinrich Bergen, those who could not were "just simply shot."⁶⁴ However, this did not happen immediately or concurrently. Soon after "liberation," newly appointed mayor Isaak "Heinrich" Reimer's "first gruesome task" was to apprehend ethnic Mennonites Bernhard Dueck (Neuendorf) and Heinrich Winter (Einlage) for execution as communist informants;⁶⁵ they were shot by the military police. The gendarme did not want the newly appointed civil administration present at the executions.⁶⁶ In this context, a policing agency was soon established comprised of local ethnic Mennonites. David Tiessen, who took on the functions of the Gestapo, "excelled in chicanery against Ukrainians and Russians," as Bergen remembered.⁶⁷ The *Geheime Staatspolizei* (*Gestapo*) recruits were politically reliable individuals given the task of combating political subversion, though that could include frontier policing in the occupied territories, including the roundup of "undesirable" civilians.⁶⁸ A certain Janzen and then Johann J. Dueck took over the role of police chief in Einlage; the latter was remembered for organizing "binge drinking parties" with German officers and for engaging "Ukrainian girls and young Russian women to serve him and his assistants."⁶⁹ Two years later both Dueck and Tiessen "identified as nonresistant Mennonites" and claimed to embrace "the heritage of our fathers," Bergen noted with cynicism.⁷⁰ "In total, *not including Jews*," twenty-six Einlage civilians were executed between October 1941 and September 30, 1943, by different policing agencies—military police, the SD, and Hungarian and German troops.⁷¹ While the number of Jews killed was not counted, Bergen recorded that the Field Gendarmerie (military police) ordered the Einlage police headed by Janzen to round up three local Jews for execution: the

⁶⁴ Heinrich Bergen, ed., *Einlage: Chronik des Dorfes Kitschkas, 1789-1943* (Saskatoon, SK: H. Bergen, 2010), 80.

⁶⁵ H. Bergen, *Einlage: Chronik*, 117, 75. Compare "Einlage Dorfbericht," Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp, BA R6/621, Mappe 83, May 1942, XI.5, 424 and Addendum 9a.

⁶⁶ Heinrich Bergen, ed., *Einlage! Kitschkas, 1789-1943: Ein Denkmal* (Regina, SK: H. Bergen, 2008), 366, 235, 363.

⁶⁷ Bergen, *Einlage: Chronik des Dorfes Kitschkas*, 118.

⁶⁸ Gordon Williamson, *German Security and Police Soldier 1939-45* (Oxford: Osprey, 2002), 43. <https://archive.org/details/GermanSecurityAndPoliceSoldier193945/>.

⁶⁹ Bergen, *Einlage: Chronik des Dorfes Kitschkas*, 118.

⁷⁰ Bergen, *Einlage: Chronik des Dorfes Kitschkas*, 118.

⁷¹ Bergen, *Einlage! Kitschkas: Ein Denkmal*, 366; 370. Emphasis mine.

butcher Lejba Schief, the merchant Isaaksann, and the mill worker Sasmanowitsch.⁷²

In Einlage as in Chortitza, there were no Jews eleven months after the start of German occupation.⁷³ We still know relatively little about those Mennonites recruited for policing agencies, involved in handing over Jews, and in some cases involved in the execution of Jews. Ethnically defined denunciation of neighbors had been part of Soviet life for at least a decade, and now the denunciation of Jewish neighbors followed that familiar Soviet pattern. Violence changes everyone; the arrests, torture, deportations, and executions of Stalin's Great Terror had traumatized thousands of Mennonite families prior to the German invasion.⁷⁴ This social process perhaps lowered the threshold for some to commit acts of physical violence and negotiate their new roles in a different violent regime.

With the seizure of Zaporizhzhia on the left bank of Dnieper, Isaak ("Heinrich") Reimer and several of his coworkers from the local police were relocated for new roles in Nove-Zaporizhzhia. Kornelius Loewen was subsequently appointed mayor of Einlage.⁷⁵ Reimer's Einlage deputy Wilhelm Wiens was appointed District Mayor of the Zaporizhzhia Region (Rayon).⁷⁶ A document by Alexander Rempel has been used frequently to support claims that Mennonites were involved in the execution of up to 20,000 Jews in Zaporizhzhia. In this letter by Rempel, which was copied to at least one Mennonite historian and one Mennonite archive in 1984, he claimed that on the outskirts of Zaporizhzhia "one to two dozen Mennonites from the Old Colony of Chortitza, together with 50 to 60 Ukrainians and Russians, murdered approximately 16,000 to 20,000 Jews during the first six months of the German occupation of Ukraine, from October 5, 1941 to March 23, 1942."⁷⁷ Bergen's collection of Einlage documents in fact confirms the deployment of some Mennonites from the right bank of the Dnieper to Zaporizhzhia for local administrative and

⁷² Bergen, *Einlage/ Kitschkas: Ein Denkmal*, 364–65.

⁷³ "Einlage Dorfbericht," Fragebogen Nr. 4. See also Karl Stumpp, *Bericht über das Gebiet Chortitza im Generalbezirk Dnjepropetrowsk*. Berichte der Sammlung Georg Leibbrandt (Berlin: Publikationsstelle Ost, 1943), 453. <https://media.chortitza.org/pdf/Buch/Stumpp.pdf>.

⁷⁴ See Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, "A new Examination of the 'Great Terror' in Molotschna, 1937–38," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 95, no. 4 (October 2021): 415–58. <https://digitalcollections.tyndale.ca/handle/20.500.12730/1031>.

⁷⁵ Bergen, *Einlage/ Kitschkas: Ein Denkmal*, 366, 364. On Reimer, cf. also A. Friesen, "A Portrait of Khortytsya/Zaporizhzhia under Occupation," 236; also in the same volume: Myeshkov, "Mennonites in Ukraine before, during, and immediately after the Second World War," 208, 211, 219, 221.

⁷⁶ Cf. Bergen, *Einlage/ Kitschkas: Ein Denkmal*, 235, 363, 366.

⁷⁷ Alexander Rempel to David G. Rempel, June 4, 1984, letter (German), in David G. Rempel Papers, Box 1, Correspondence, 1932–1991. From Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.

policing roles. The use of larger numbers of collaborating “Ukrainians and Russians” to carry out German-ordered executions is a pattern found elsewhere as well. In contrast to Rempel, however, the Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center records a much smaller—though no less horrific—number of Jews murdered around Zaporizhzhia in 1942: “On March 28, 1942 about 3,700 Jewish men, women, and children were taken to an anti-tank trench near the Stalin sovkhos and shot there.”⁷⁸ While Alexander Rempel’s “report” offers some documentation, he was mentally ill when writing, and hallucinations dominate parts of the document. David G. Rempel replied politely that he simply “cannot believe that the USA government deliberately and continuously shadows you and tortures you”⁷⁹ and challenged Alexander Rempel pointedly to give names:

Did the Mennonites participate in the Nazi atrocities against Russians and Jews in the Ukraine during the years 1941–1943? Here, so it seems to me, you should fearlessly let your knowledge of the matter speak for itself so the matter can be judiciously studied and judged once and for all. And you ought to mention names if such are known to you. *That much you owe to us Russian Mennonites.*⁸⁰

Rempel’s request received no answer.

In the 1942 village reports commissioned by Alfred Rosenberg’s Reich Ministry for Occupied Lands of the East, ethnic German mayors and teachers were specifically instructed to give detailed “descriptive reports of arrests [of ethnic Germans], incarcerations, maltreatments, persecutions, and the like.” Where a known Jew was involved, it was highlighted. Reports for some fifty-six (predominantly) Mennonite villages from the historic Mennonite settlement areas of Chortitza, Sagradovka, Baratow, Schlachtin, Milorodovka, and Borosenko have survived.

Twenty-two of thirty-three families in the village of Schöndorf, Borosenko (Rayon Friesendorf) were missing the male head, for example. Their 1942 official village report included a survivor account which repeated three times that the interrogator and torturer of some was a Jew.⁸¹ In neighboring Heuboden, purportedly it was “a Jewish supervisor” who whipped the women and older men on to dig trenches in order to thwart

⁷⁸ “Zaporozhye,” Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center. <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/untold-stories/community/14621812-Zaporozhye>.

⁷⁹ David G. Rempel to Alexander Rempel, July 10, 1984, letter, p. 1, in David G. Rempel Papers, Box 1.

⁸⁰ D. Rempel to A. Rempel, July 10, 1984, 2. Underlining in original.

⁸¹ Schöndorf (Rayon Friesendorf) *Dorfbericht*, August 1942, Fragebogen Nr. XI.5, 9, “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,” BA R6/702b, Mappe 180, 97.

the German advance.⁸² In Nikolaidorf, forty-four-year-old Johann Buller was purportedly “discovered and shot dead by a Jewish commissar” when he escaped arrest just outside his village immediately prior to the arrival of German troops.⁸³ From Nieder Chortitza, Mennonite village Mayor Redekop reported in July 1942 that their Jewish manager “had a brother who came to help” with the evacuation. “They were all armed and because they were Jews everyone was afraid.” The evacuation was accompanied by the “military, GPU [secret police] and Jews.”⁸⁴ Another village report noted that “immediately after the arrival of the German troops there was calm again, and everyone began to breathe easy, even the Ukrainian population was happy to be saved from the Jewish yoke.”⁸⁵ And the Schönhorst (Rayon Chortitza) village report noted that until recently they had had “a wind orchestra and sixteen instruments, but these were taken when the Jews fled the village.”⁸⁶ The village reporter for Gnadental (Sofiewka) recalled their thoughts when war was declared: “Either we are now completely lost, or we will finally be freed from Judaeo-Bolshevik slavery by Germany.”⁸⁷ It was not unusual for a report to be signed with exuberant praise: “*Heil* to the Liberator and *Führer*, Adolf Hitler!,” which is how ethnic Mennonite Mayor Redekop concluded his report. It was stamped with an official village swastika seal and the signature of the regional administrator for Special Commando Dr. Stumpp, Gerhard Fast (a Mennonite leader and preacher).⁸⁸ In Franzfeld its senior teacher remembered that a Jewish communist party organizer was sent to introduce alternatives to the Mennonite-led choirs, drama, sports, and music circles and that a Jewish communist “who understood nothing about agriculture” was made chairman of their collective.⁸⁹

Not only was maltreatment or threats at the hands of local Jews recorded. So was the elimination of Jewish neighbors. The Ebenfeld

⁸² *Heuboden (Rayon Friesendorf) Dorfbericht, August 1942, Fragebogen Nr. XI.6, 10, “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,” BA R6/623, Mappe 170, 156b.*

⁸³ *Nikolaidorf (Rayon Kronau) Dorfbericht, March 1942, Fragebogen Nr. XI.6, 10, “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,” BA R6/620, Mappe 39, 352b.*

⁸⁴ *Nieder Chortitza (Rayon Chortitza) Dorfbericht, July 1942, Fragebogen Nr. XI.6, 10b, “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,” BA R6/705, Mappe 100, 37.*

⁸⁵ *Friesendorf (Rayon Friesendorf) Dorfbericht, July 1942, Fragebogen Nr. XI.6, 10, “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,” BA R6/623, Mappe 169, 106b.*

⁸⁶ *Schönhorst (Rayon Chortitza) Dorfbericht, June 1942, Fragebogen Nr. VII.e, 4, “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,” BA R6/622, Mappe 92, 160b.*

⁸⁷ *Gnadental (Rayon Sofiewka) Dorfbericht, May 1942, Fragebogen XI.6, 10 (469b), “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,” BA R6/623, Mappe 182.*

⁸⁸ *Nieder Chortitza (Rayon Chortitza) Dorfbericht, July 1942, Fragebogen Nr. XI.6, 10b, “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,” BA R6/705, Mappe 100, 37.*

⁸⁹ *Franzfeld (Rayon Chortitza) Dorfbericht, April 1942, “Schulisches Leben: Bericht,” 4f., “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,” R6/621, 387b–388.*

(Schirokoje) report noted that the village was “founded by Jews in 1921,” but “after the entry and occupation of the region by the German army, the Jews were resettled (*ausgesiedelt*) and replaced with ethnic Germans who lived scattered in the district of Schirokoje.”⁹⁰ Similarly Rotfeld (Sofiewka) was founded as a Jewish colony in 1926, and after the “evacuation of Jews,” ethnic Germans—primarily Mennonites who lived nearby—were resettled (*angesiedelt*) there.⁹¹ Another Jewish village in proximity to this Mennonite area was renamed “Friesendorf” shortly after the arrival of the German army. A few months later on the few streets of Friesendorf, one could hear Low German, Swabian, and Bavarian spoken by a mix of Lutheran, Catholic, and Mennonite families. While Mennonites did not make up a majority of the new inhabitants, their Frisian ethnic background was honored in the renaming of this once Jewish village and of the district (Rayon). Those families—Enns, Epp, Funk, Kasper, Klassen, Penner, Reimer, Tillman, Unger, Wiebe, and Wielers—came largely from surrounding Mennonite villages, in particular Novo Podolsk, Friedensfeld, Steinfeld, Miloradovka, Neuendorf, etc., after the Jews of “Stalindorf” or “Tschemerinsk,” as it was previously known, were “resettled (*ausgesiedelt*).”⁹² Stumpp’s reports for the nineteen villages of the Chortitza District record that none of the 1,066 Jews who lived in these villages prior to German occupation remained. These predominantly Mennonite villages were “*Judenfrei*” by summer 1942 at the latest.

Jacob Jantz of Friedensfeld (Miropol, Borosenko), seventy-five kilometers west of Chortitza, was still a child in 1941 and conveniently conflated Jews and Communist party members responsible “for arresting all of our fathers.” He was an eyewitness to a local execution:

It was in October [1941] and there was a little frost on the ground. The four prisoners were marched from a house across from our place, barefoot and in their underwear, to a field about half a kilometre away. We followed them. There were three soldiers and an SS officer. The prisoners were ordered to dig a hole with the small folding spades which all soldiers carried. It was six foot square and not very deep. Then the men were shot, shoved in the hole and covered with

⁹⁰ *Ebenfeld (Rayon Schirokoje) Dorfbericht, June 1942, Fragebogen Nr. 4, 2, “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,”* BA R6/624, Mappe 96, 93b. Only a few Mennonites were settled here.

⁹¹ *Rotfeld (Rayon Sofiewka) Dorfbericht, July 1942, Fragebogen Nr. V, 2 [290b], “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,”* BA R6/6623, Mappe 185.

⁹² *Friesendorf, Dorfbericht, July 1942, Fragebogen Nr. V, 2, “Village Reports Commando Dr. Stumpp,”* BA R6/623, Mappe 169, 102b.

earth. We thought we could still see the earth moving when the grave was covered.⁹³

PROPAGANDA

From the mandated village reports completed by Commando Dr. Stumpp, we know that multiple copies of the German-language Nazi daily newspaper *Deutsch-Ukraine Zeitung* [DUZ] were circulated in each Mennonite village beginning early in 1942.⁹⁴ The DUZ was complemented by the weekly *Ukraine Post*, which published its first issue on July 18, 1942. In some villages these were the only German reading materials available and were used in schools as instructional material and worldview training.⁹⁵ Between crossword puzzles and tips for gardening, the *Ukraine Post* reported on the German settlements including Halbstadt and Chortitza and almost daily reinforced the messages that “Bolshevism equals Judaism” and the Soviet Union is a “state of Jews.”⁹⁶ Lengthy columns by Professor Dr. Johann von Leers, a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Propaganda, were notoriously antisemitic.⁹⁷ In an article with the byline “Judah’s War Goal,” von Leers cited from a “Jewish-political journal from England” and argued that “the military goal of the Jews is the extermination of our [German] people.” It is a war between the German *Volk* and “our ancient evil foe,” he wrote, quoting Luther’s most popular hymn, “Ein feste Burg,” in order to link Satan “with global Jewry (*Weltjudentum*).”⁹⁸

Exposure to official propaganda from von Leers and others was inescapable in the ethnic German communities in Ukraine, and the articles served to make the persecution of Jews seem somehow acceptable or even necessary. Von Leers emphasized to his readers that “Judaism is the devil

⁹³ Jacob Jantz, in H. Loewen, *Road to Freedom*, 47. Prior to German occupation, there was only one Jewish family in the village; the majority were Ukrainians. Cf. *Friedensfeld (Rayon Nikopol) Dorfbericht. August 1942*, BA R6/622, Mappe 137.

⁹⁴ Cf. *Chortitza Dorfbericht*, sec. XII (b), 7 [3]; *Blumengart (Chortitza) Dorfbericht, July 1942*, sec. VII (b), 383 [3], BA R6/622, Mappe 97; *Osterwick (Chortitza) Dorfbericht, July 1942*, sec. VII (b), 191 [3], BA R6/622, Mappe 107. The Blumengart report notes that these papers are “a popular read,” and the situation was similar in Osterwick. The Chortitza report notes that German-language reading material was passed on from house to house during German occupation.

⁹⁵ “Hunger nach dem Deutschen Wort,” *Ukraine Post*, no. 12 (October 3, 1942), 3. For *Ukraine Post* articles below, see: <https://libraria.ua/en/all-titles/group/878/>.

⁹⁶ “Bolschewismus = Judentum,” *Ukraine Post*, no. 14 (October 17, 1942), 4. Similarly, “Vom Ziel dieses Krieges,” *Ukraine Post*, no. 21 (December 5, 1943), 1.

⁹⁷ Cf. Martin Finkenberger, *Johann Von Leers (1902-1965): Propagandist im Dienste von Hitler, Perón und Nasser* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023).

⁹⁸ “Judas Kriegsziel,” *Ukraine Post*, no. 15 (October 24, 1942), 1. See Johann von Leers, *Die Rassen Geschichte des deutschen Volkes* (Berlin/Vienna: Industrieverlag Spaeth & Linde, 1939), especially chapter 20, “Der Einbruch des Judentum in das deutsche Volk,” 39-51. <https://archive.org/details/nsdap-gaws-bd1-gr1-bg4-rassengeschichte-des-deutschen-volkes/>.

in human form, criminalism incarnated, and the expulsion of these 'servants of Satan' from all countries is an imperative of justice and self-protection of decent peoples."⁹⁹ Even the war itself was ultimately explicable by Jews in Washington, Moscow, and London, according to von Leers: "There would be no war without Roosevelt—a half-Jew under the influence of world Judaism."¹⁰⁰ The Red Army too "upsets the order of life among other nations in order to bring their property into the hands of the Jews."¹⁰¹

Many of the antisemitic articles in the *Deutsch Ukraine-Zeitung* and the *Ukraine Post* were designed to provide ethnic Germans with an explanatory framework for their years of suffering in the Soviet Union.¹⁰² Von Leers told his readers that "when the half-Jew Lenin and the full-Jew Trotzky together with their Jewish accomplices smelled opportunity and seized the government, their merciless destruction of the people revealed the true Jewish soul as thirst for human blood and diabolical mockery of the human disposition."¹⁰³ That "most brutal exploitation of workers" which they had endured was "in the interests of the Jewish potentates in Moscow."¹⁰⁴ The *Ukraine Post* published photographs of Stalinist torture chambers with the first-hand accounts of survivors. The editor surmised that the described methods of torture could "only be devised by a Jewish-Oriental mind" and added that "such practices by their [Jewish] protégés will, of course, make no impression on the mendacious apostles of humanity in London and New York."¹⁰⁵ One columnist twisted a biblical verse into a rationale for the annihilation of Jews: "What did Moses say in Deuteronomy 7:16? 'You shall consume all the peoples whom the LORD your God gives over to you. Show them no mercy . . . !' However in the end it will be the Jewish people, who will be consumed!"¹⁰⁶ Moreover regime-coherent answers by Mennonites were encouraged and high-

⁹⁹ Johann von Leers, "Tod der Tausend Qualen," *Ukraine Post*, no. 16 (April 24, 1943), 3; also Johann von Leers, "Kulturträger, Made in USA," *Ukraine Post*, no. 21 (May 29, 1943), 4. Post-Holocaust Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim doubts that von Leers and his argumentation were an aberration but rather the result of a longer tradition of thought; cf. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1989), 296.

¹⁰⁰ Johann von Leers, "Schachfiguren Judas," *Ukraine Post*, no. 11 (March 20, 1943), 8.

¹⁰¹ Von Leers, "Kulturträger, Made in USA," 4.

¹⁰² For *Deutsche Ukraine-Zeitung* (1942–44) articles see: <https://libraria.ua/en/all-titles/group/875/>.

¹⁰³ Rudolf Dammert, "Juden auf Bauernjagd: Ihr Weg aus dem Getto zur Macht," *Ukraine Post*, no. 9 (September 12, 1942), 2.

¹⁰⁴ "Volksgemeinschaft statt Klassenkampf," *Ukraine Post*, no. 7 (February 20, 1943), 4.

¹⁰⁵ "Folterkammer 7, 8, 9: Inquisitionen in den Gefängnissen," *Ukraine Post* no. 24 (June 19, 1943), 3.

¹⁰⁶ "'Du wirst alle Völker zehren': Jüdische Massenmorde in der Geschichte," *Ukraine Post* no. 26 (July 3, 1943), 4. "Trotz schwerer Prüfungen: Volksdeutsche Bauern packen wieder an," *Ukraine Post* no. 26 (July 3, 1943), 7.

lighted in the *Ukraine Post*: “A five-year ordeal crippled these men who were persecuted for being German. . . . ‘the Jews tortured us the most.’”¹⁰⁷

Already for years the Office of the Propaganda Ministry in Germany had issued daily press directives concerning what may or may not be said on any issue, whose speeches should be reprinted, and which themes should be exploited for maximum impact on German readership—e.g., a Jewish connection to anything contemptuous. This was especially the case with regard to the Soviet Union. For example, in 1938 German newspapers were not to show antisemitism in Soviet-Russia. They exploited it in other contexts, but there the policy was to display the violence of “intra-Jewish cliques.”¹⁰⁸ International communist rebels in 1935 were not to be referred to as “Russians,” but as “Bolshevik Jews,” or “Bolshevik hordes,” and in 1937 the press was always to mention Jewish names in foreign governments when they arose.¹⁰⁹ Five years later and during war, German occupation newspapers were entirely Party-controlled and employed targeted antisemitic propaganda.

Over twenty-five weeks the *Ukraine Post* also sought to winningly explain and outline the twenty-five planks of the Nazi Party platform to its new *Volk* German readership, with the fourth installment on the racial unity of the German *Volk* published on October 24, 1942.¹¹⁰ Pseudoscientific beliefs about blood purity were deemed to be critical for understanding the “why” of German cultural achievement or decline, and it gave a rationale for Germany’s rejection of universal human rights.

A people can only attain high achievements if it keeps its blood pure. For us Germans, the Jew . . . is a foreign race, just like the Negro. A mixture of German blood with Jewish blood leads to a reduction in the achievements of our people and thus to racial decline and finally to collapse. National Socialism is the fiercest opponent of that Marxist theory of the equality of all that bears the face of man, for it knows from the history of our people how disastrously Jewry has influenced

¹⁰⁷ “. . . daß ihr endlich da seid: Volksdeutsche umjubeln unsere Soldaten,” *Ukraine Post*, no. 24 (Weihnachten [December 25], 1942), 8. On some of the interrogators in the 1937–1938 purge who were Jewish, cf. Lynne Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁰⁸ Karen Peter, ed., *N-S Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit*. Edition und Dokumentation 6, no. 1, 1938: Source text January–April (Berlin: Saur, 2013), 207.

¹⁰⁹ Gabriele Toepser-Ziegert, ed., *N-S Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit*: Edition und Dokumentation 3, no. 2, 1935 (New York: Saur, 1987), 800; Karen Peter, ed., *N-S Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit*. Edition und Dokumentation 5, no. 1, 1937: Source text January–April (Berlin: Saur, 2015), 491; cf. also 394, 509, etc.

¹¹⁰ “Die 25 Punkte: Das Programm der Nationalsozialistischen Deutschen Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP),” *Ukraine Post*, no. 15 (October 24, 1942), 4.

the history of the *Reich* in all fields, and how much it has endeavored to deliver up this *Reich* to its opponents.¹¹¹

The article connected this party plank with Hitler's 1935 Nuremberg Race Laws, which sought to "eliminate the influence of Jewry on the racial value of the German people." This required that "every German must be able to prove that there are no Jews among his ancestors. . . . Only he who has German blood in his veins can think, feel and act German. He is free from the bad qualities inherent in the Jewish race."¹¹² 35,000 Mennonites from Soviet Ukraine would follow this line of thought in 1944 when they applied to become naturalized German citizens.

When Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels first received the reports of "huge shootings of Jews in the Ukraine" on October 19, 1941, he ordered an increase in anti-Jewish propaganda in the newly occupied territories: "Bolshevism has gradually weakened the antisemitic instincts of the peoples of the Soviet Union. We must, so to speak, start over from the beginning."¹¹³ This was correct, at least in part. The bulk of Soviet citizens including ethnic German Mennonites were associated with the Soviet regime. As Timothy Snyder has argued, everyone generally knew that Jews were not responsible for communism, but it was highly convenient to ethnicize the horror of the past decade and so absolve oneself from any guilt or responsibility for previous Soviet practices. For Mennonites, this guilt included involvement in denunciations and arrests of fellow Mennonites. The Judeo-Bolshevik myth could release non-Jewish Soviet citizens from their own past and allow Jews to be punished for communism. "[T]he clarity of German anti-Jewish stereotypes (Judeo-Bolshevism) combined to create an easy and callous excuse for murder. . . . Jews were sacrificed for the holy lie of the collective innocence of others."¹¹⁴

In his November 16, 1941 radio broadcast and lead column in newspapers supplied to soldiers on the Russian front, Goebbels emphasized that international Jewry plunged the world into a war with only one of two possible outcomes: either the "Bolshevization of the world" or "the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe." The propaganda address sought to convince listeners and readers that Germans were targeted for extermination by an international conspiracy orchestrated by Jews and that their gradual annihilation now is a defensive act according to their own law, "an eye for an eye . . ." Jews are by virtue of their birth

¹¹¹ "Die 25 Punkte (no. 4)," *Ukraine Post*, no. 15 (October 24, 1942), 4.

¹¹² "Die 25 Punkte (no. 4)," 4.

¹¹³ Joseph Goebbels, diary entry for October 19, 1941, cited in Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2008), 116.

¹¹⁴ Snyder, *Black Earth*, 349; see also 357.

enemies of National Socialism, according to Goebbels, and anyone who stands by Jews is an enemy of the German state.¹¹⁵ This basic message would be repeated and reinforced in German-occupied Ukraine for almost two years.

Goebbels's October 1941 intention to increase antisemitic propaganda in the newly occupied eastern territories was an extension of the themes he had repeated since his infamous 1936 address, "Communism with the Mask off" —namely, that a Jewish minority was the terrorist power behind the Russian Revolution and contemporary Bolshevism; that international Bolshevism was nothing less than international Jewry; that both were joined in a satanic battle against human civilization itself to control world politics; and that both must be met with the same ruthless and even brutal means. Notably, the address was reprinted in the Canadian Russian Mennonite paper *Der Bote* in 1936,¹¹⁶ a sign of the larger Mennonite community's openness to its arguments. Nazi propaganda fueled latent, local Christian antisemitism in Ukraine and encouraged this interpretive framework for the cause of Mennonite suffering.¹¹⁷

Did the propaganda have an impact on Mennonites in occupied Ukraine? In May 1942, Hans Spittler, an engineer in the German military Organization Todt assigned to the Dnieper River dam project near Einlage, wrote a letter to his uncle Emil Händiges, the German Mennonite Union (*Vereinigung*) denominational chair and pastor in Elbing, with greetings from the 84-year-old Halbstadt midwife Helene Berg. "Despite her advanced years she was physically and intellectually fit," Spittler wrote, "and is curious about everything, even political matters. She had studied the *Führer's* [*Mein*] *Kampf* with the appropriate interest," the young

¹¹⁵ Joseph Goebbels, "The Jews are Guilty! (November 16, 1941)," *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin College, <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb1.htm>.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Joseph Goebbels, *Communism with the Mask Off: Speech Delivered in Nurnberg on September 13, 1935 at the Seventh National Socialist Party Congress* (Berlin: Müller, 1935). <https://archive.org/details/6-communism-with-mask-off/>; Jonathan F. Wagner, *Brothers Beyond the Sea: National Socialism in Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1981), 108; *Der Bote*, October and November 1936 issues. As early as 1933, the *Mennonitische Rundschau* printed a longer article by Goebbels on Jews, Marxists, and Hitler in MR 56, no. 12 (March 22, 1933): 12. https://archive.org/details/sim_die-mennonitische-rundschau_1933-03-22_56_12/page/12/.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Wendy Lower, "Hitler's 'Garden of Eden' in Ukraine: Nazi Colonialism, *Volksdeutsche*, and the Holocaust, 1941–1944," in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed. by Jonathan Petropoulos and John Roth (New York: Berghahn, 2006), 191. See a typical antisemitic joke told by a Mennonite doctor in Molotschna to American Mennonite Relief operations administrator C. E. Krehbiel during the 1922 famine (C. E. Krehbiel's *Journal*, February 19, 1922 to March 23, 1923, Sunday, October 8, 1922, 360. From Mennonite Library and Archives—Bethel College, MS 11. https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_11/Diary%201922%20May-Nov/pages/170.php).

man reported.¹¹⁸ Years earlier Berg and Händiges had been in a reading group together in Basel, Switzerland. Spittler assured his uncle that “the German essence and nature (*Art*) in this *Volk* are healthy and strong enough to withstand the blows and tests which they had to endure.”

While there are any number of anecdotes of heartfelt praise by Mennonites for Hitler and the German forces, there are also many indicating that Mennonites could not internalize all of the regime’s values or accept the brutal treatment of their Jewish and Slavic neighbors. Shortly after the war, Anna Braun of Einlage was interrogated and said, “I often thought of the German soldiers: how is it possible to do such things? For example, with respect to the Jews. . . . it is not right, the way you treat the Jews, murder the Jews; the Jews, they are a chosen people.”¹¹⁹ If this was once the dominant pulpit perspective, the younger generation now largely lacked a faith-shaped historical compass and were more easily convinced by German-occupation propaganda that they, ethnic Germans, were in fact were the “chosen race.”¹²⁰

PERSONAL NAMES AND THE HOLOCAUST

As Germany’s fortunes declined in Ukraine, ethnic Germans were evacuated in the fall of 1943, including 35,000 Mennonites. Most arrived in German-annexed Poland (largely Upper Silesia and Warthegau) between October 1943 and March 1944. They were designated to resettle a region where Jews and Poles had been systematically removed or enslaved. After some months in resettler camps, some of which were in close proximity to Auschwitz and its subcamps, they were naturalized as German citizens, beginning in January 1944.

The Nazi regime recognized that Mennonites had a preponderance of “purely Jewish sounding” Old Testament names; this posed a problem for registration personnel at the Central Immigration Office (*Einwandererzentralstelle* or EWZ) in Litzmannstadt, an agency of the Reich Security Main Office, RSHA. There was a sanctioned list of first names for Jews in Nazi Germany, and in cases where Jews had forenames other than

¹¹⁸ Hans Spittler to Emil Händiges, May 7, 1942; copied in Emil Händiges to Benjamin Unruh and Abraham Fast, May 18, 1942, letter, Vereinigung Collection 1942, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle Weierhof (hereafter MFSt).

¹¹⁹ “David P. Boder Interviews Anna Braun; September 20, 1946; München, Germany. Transcript,” *Voices of the Holocaust Project*; translation corrected. <http://voices.iit.edu/interviewee?doc=brauna>.

¹²⁰ E.g., Heinrich Dirks, “Das Volk Israel, beleuchtet mit dem prophetischen Worte,” *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch 1905/6*, 3 (1906), 24, 25. <https://media.chortitza.org/pdf/Buch/MJ/MJ05-1.pdf>; cf. also Eduard Wüst, *Drei Weihnachts-Predigten gehalten in der Berdianischen Brüder-Gemeinde am Aowischen Meer in der Weihnachts-Zeit 1851* (Reval: Lindfors, 1853), 21–24; 28. https://mla.bethelks.edu/books/252_61_W967d/.

those allowed, they were required to adopt a second name for identity papers—"Sarah" or "Israel" (= Jacob), two of the most common names in any Soviet Mennonite family.¹²¹ Personal names enabled officials to quickly pinpoint Jews on governmental lists, employ anti-Jewish legislation, and ultimately relocate Jews to a ghetto or transport them to an extermination center. One week after the arrival of thousands of Molotschna Mennonites in the new German province (*Gau*) of Wartheland, where all Jews had already been ghettoized, interned, or eliminated, the EWZ issued a directive titled "Regarding the elimination of Old Testament and Communist Given Names in the Registration of Ethnic Germans from Russia."¹²² An appendix to the directive gave immigration officials a list of recommended "German first names" to "be suggested to the resettlers when necessary."¹²³ The directive mentioned "Mennonites" twice, recognizing not only their many "biblical names," but also that after years of religious repression they had remained a "Bible-believing" Christian group with "religious feeling." Immigration officials were instructed to avoid a tactic of "forced change . . . especially among the Mennonites," but rather to persuade and recommend the benefits of a "good German" name in their new country.

The head of the registration office must therefore point out to the head of the family unit that these . . . Jewish first names are undesirable in Germany and that the change is not only in the general interest, but also in the interest of the resettled person. If the resettler does not have a second first name, the first name of a German grandfather or grandmother is to be used in place of the undesirable first names in order to strengthen the clan consciousness, but the choice of the first name is to be left up to the resettler. It is to be made certain that only good German first names are selected. If the head of the family does not express a wish, the head of the registration office must make an appropriate suggestion.¹²⁴

The EWZ was comprised of representatives of *Reich* ministries for health and labor, party officials, SS organs for political and criminal examination,

¹²¹ Cf. Iman M. Nick, *Personal Names, Hitler, and the Holocaust. A Socio-Onomastic Study of Genocide and Nazi Germany* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

¹²² Cf. Gordon Horwitz, *Ghettostadt. Lodz and the Making of a Nazi City* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008); SS-Obersturmbannführer von Malsen, "Anordnung Nr. 4/44, Betr.: Beseitigung alttestamentarischer und kommunistischer Vornamen bei der Erfassung der Volksdeutschen aus Rußland (March 13, 1944)," BA R 69/401, 81–81b. <https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/invenio/direktlink/07e0520a-72c1-47bc-9084-966c35d84fa8/>.

¹²³ Regierungsrat Hahn, addendum to von Malsen, "Anordnung Nr. 4/44," May 26, 1944, 82–82b.

¹²⁴ Von Malsen, "Anordnung Nr. 4/44," (March 13, 1944)."

and SS racial office experts.¹²⁵ It was well-informed on strategies for working with Mennonites and also invested in their successful resettlement and integration.¹²⁶ The directive was distributed the same week that the Governor of Wartheland Arthur Greiser met with Mennonite expert SS-*Sturmbannführer* Karl Götz and Prof. Benjamin H. Unruh.¹²⁷ Unruh was *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler's recognized representative of the Russian Mennonites.¹²⁸

The EWZ directive hints at a hesitant but open attitude among Mennonites to changing their Old Testament first names. This was, in fact, the case. For example, Helene Bräul's EWZ naturalization file (this author's grandmother) included an application to have her daughter Sara's given name changed to the more Germanic "Else."¹²⁹ Another Sara changed her "Jewish-sounding name" to "Agatha,"¹³⁰ another to "Margarethe,"¹³¹ another to "Anna,"¹³² another to "Sofie,"¹³³ and another to "Dorothea."¹³⁴ One Mennonite boy with the name David was given "the

¹²⁵ Valdis O. Lumans, *Hitler's Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933–1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 189.

¹²⁶ The following men were at some time connected with the work of the EWZ, which was under Himmler's direction until 1943, and all of them committed to the successful resettlement of Mennonites: SS-*Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler, SS-*Standartenführer* Horst Hoffmeyer, SS-*Obergruppenführer* Werner Lorenz, SS-*Obersturmführer* Dr. Gerhard Wolfrum of the Ethnic German Liaison Office (VoMi), Mennonite expert SS-*Sturmbannführer* Karl Götz, principal of the teacher training school in Prischib, leading German ethnographers Professor Walter Kuhn and Dr. Karl Stumpp, and Mennonite émigré Dr. Walter (Jakob) Quiring.

¹²⁷ Cf. Benjamin H. Unruh to Rudolf Dick, Kutno, Warthegau, February 14, 1944, letter, and Unruh, "Bericht über Verhandlungen in Warthegau im März 1944," March 30, 1944, 6b, Benjamin H. Unruh Collection, folder "Correspondence with Abraham Braun, 1930, 1940, 1944–45," MFSt. In Litzmannstadt from March 14 to 16, 1944, *Gauleiter* Greiser hosted the first conference of the Regional and District Leaders of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) Wartheland. In the addresses, the resettlement challenges were addressed; cf. "Der millionste Deutsche im Wartheland angesiedelt," *Litzmannstädter Zeitung* 27, no. 75 (March 15, 1944): 1. <https://bc.wimbp.lodz.pl/dlibra/publication/31192/edition/29742/content>. At this Party gathering Götz presented on his "Mennonite" booklet, *Das Schwarzmeerdeutschum: Die Mennoniten* (Posen: NS-Druck Wartheland, 1944), BA R 187/267a. https://mla.bethelks.edu/gmsources/books/1944_Goetz_Die_Mennoniten/1944_Goetz_Die_Mennoniten.pdf.

¹²⁸ Cf. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, "Benjamin Unruh, MCC and National Socialism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 96, no. 2 (April 2022): 157–205. <https://digitalcollections.tyndale.ca/handle/20.500.12730/1571>.

¹²⁹ Helene Bräul, b. 1903, GRandMA #466431 (A3342, Series EWZ 50, folder A073, frame 1946); daughter Sara [Elsie] Bräul.

¹³⁰ Sara [Agatha] Penner (A3342, Series EWZ 50 folder, A056, frame 1282).

¹³¹ Hans Werner writes here of his mother, *Constructed Mennonite*, 149.

¹³² Sara [Anna] Janzen Friesen, b. 1910, GRandMA # 1348469.

¹³³ Sara [Sofie] Matthies Epp, b. 1886, GRandMA #202056 (A3342, Series EWZ 50, folder B047, frame 904).

¹³⁴ Sara [Dorothea] Penner Funk, b. 1914, GRandMA #1069113 (A3342, Series EWZ 50, folder B089, frame 1496).

sturdy German” name “Albert,”¹³⁵ another takes “Peter,”¹³⁶ another “Viktor,”¹³⁷ another “Reinhold,”¹³⁸ another “Franz,”¹³⁹ and another “Arnhold.”¹⁴⁰ An “Isaak” took the name “Georg,”¹⁴¹ another “Heinrich.”¹⁴² A “Jacob” took the name “Peter;”¹⁴³ an “Abraham” took the name “Gerhard,”¹⁴⁴ another “Eduard,”¹⁴⁵ another “Heinrich,”¹⁴⁶ another Dietrich,¹⁴⁷ and another Adolf,¹⁴⁸ etc. Some changed their names before resettlement, but most after the trek. Together with a short genealogy, each family head signed their EWZ confirming “that there is no trace of Jewish blood” in the family. The naming policy not only enabled the efficient elimination of “undesirables,” but also gave “the opportunity to build a foundation [in Warthegau] on which the German future will be built,” according to Greiser¹⁴⁹—or, in Himmler’s words, to create a “blond province” to rule the newly won German *Lebensraum*.¹⁵⁰ This is the larger

¹³⁵ Cf. Helene Bräul, EWZ 50-A073, 1946; see also Dorothy Siebert, *Whatever it takes*, 2nd ed. (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 2004), 35.

¹³⁶ “Aus Leserbriefen,” MR 100, no. 44 (November 30, 1977): 4; also Peter Dyck, b. 1916, GRandMA #586542 (A3342, Series EWZ 50, folder B030, frame 520).

¹³⁷ David [Victor] Janzen, b. 1929, GRandMA #163627 (A3342, Series EWZ 50, folder D043, frame 0136).

¹³⁸ David [Reinhold] Klassen, b. 1905, GRandMA #1031296 (A3342, Series EWZ 50, folder E009, frame 1706).

¹³⁹ David [Franz] Friesen, b. 1910, GRandMA #434410.

¹⁴⁰ David [Arnhold] Klassen, b. 1927, GRandMA #1031298 (A3342, Series EWZ 50, folder E009, frame 1708).

¹⁴¹ Doris Bergen, “Mourning, Mass Death and Gray Zone: The Ethnic Germans of Eastern Europe and World War II,” in *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Loss at Century’s End*, ed. Peter Homans (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 172 (names altered).

¹⁴² Isaak [Heinrich] Reimer, noted in Bergen, *Einlage/ Kitschkas*, 361.

¹⁴³ Jakob Jakob Harder, (A3342, Series EWZ 50, folder C049, frame 0276).

¹⁴⁴ Abraham [Gerhard] Arendt (A3342, Series EWZ 50, folder A015, frame 716).

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Abram [Eduard] Reimer, *Memoir*, 63.

¹⁴⁶ Franz, “My Memoirs,” 117.

¹⁴⁷ Abram [Dietrich] Klassen, b. 1905, GRandMA #475186 (A3342 EWZ 50, folder E005, frame 2812).

¹⁴⁸ Abram [Adolf] Rüdiger, GRandMA #933688 of Lindenau, in *Schwarzmeerdeutschum: Mennoniten: Propaganda materials, 1944*, Office for Resettlement of Germans, Poznań Branch, from Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe (National Digital Archives Poland; NAC), 53/800/0, file 184.

¹⁴⁹ “Die Parole: Alles für den Sieg,” *Litzmannstädter Zeitung* 27, no. 79 (March 19, 1944): 1. <https://bc.wimbp.lodz.pl/dlibra/publication/31196/>.

¹⁵⁰ Cited by Chef des Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamtes-SS Günther Pancke in meeting minutes to Himmler, December 20, 1939, letter, BA NS 2/60, Blatt 4, <https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/invenio/direktlink/d90b9bc3-f8d2-441d-af46-36a23b3a5d11/>; also reported by SS-Sturmabführer Künzel, December 12, 1939, Blatt 16.

Cf. Nick, *Personal Names, Hitler, and the Holocaust*, 84. Notably Mennonites with the “Jewish sounding” surnames “Elias” or “Zacharias” also faced life and death decisions by naturalization officials; cf. G. Klassen, “Elia oder Elias?” 5.

context that ties the Mennonite story into that of the Holocaust in Warthegau.

In this context, the editor of Warthegau's propagandistic Nazi Party paper *Ostdeutscher Beobachter* profiled the Mennonite "Jakob Friesen." The account reminded readers why resettlement was so important.

Despite the Bolshevik Revolution, loss of property and abductions, Bolshevism could "not rob them of their German face, their German language—preserved like a sanctuary—and their faith in Germany, slumbering deep in their hearts. If their names were not enough—like that of old Jakob Friesen, a pale-blond giant with gray-blue eyes—their bright, open countenance with Nordic characteristics and clear gaze from gray-blue eyes mark them as German people of the best racial affiliation."¹⁵¹

For author and editor Fritz Albrich, the Black Sea Germans represented by Jakob Friesen were the antitype of the Eastern European Jews he had profiled a year earlier: "The satanic quality and restrained cruelty of his race speak forth from this Eastern Jew," according to Albrich.¹⁵² In the Nazi-run Jewish ghettos of Ukraine, Albrich had found "model collections of degenerate, filthy, lice-infested creatures; grimaces instead of faces, with deviousness in their eyes, displaying restrained cruelty and groveling servility at the same," he wrote. Moreover, these Jews had responded to Soviet terror "like an unleashed animal horde that pounced on anyone they suspected of being opponents of the Jews." Albrich repeated the Nazi message that without strong ghettos or occasional pogroms, Eastern European Jews are like a "plague" that regularly "bursts its walls and pours over" to threaten and suffocate host populations. Conversely, Albrich's March 1944 column had the highest praise for Black Sea Mennonites: "The rise of the German settlements in Russia can be seen as one of the most important German achievements abroad." With "German tenacity and industrious" and "German language and manners," they opposed both assimilation and the "Bolshevik chaos." Albrich announced to his readers in Warthegau that the Mennonites and other Black Sea Germans "have found their way home under the security of the Reich . . . and a strong stream of German blood flows back to the homeland. . . . They are entitled to all of our love."¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Fritz Albrich, "Der Ring eines langen Weges schließt sich," *Ostdeutscher Beobachter* 6, no. 74 (March 15, 1944): 3. <https://www.wbc.poznan.pl/dlibra/publication/123932/>.

¹⁵² Fritz Albrich, "Ein Getto in der Ukraine: Die Notwendigkeit der Isolierung—Juden unter sich," *Ostdeutscher Beobachter* 5, no. 41 (February 10, 1943): 3.

¹⁵³ Albrich, "Der Ring eines langen Weges schließt sich," 3. For a similar example, see Petrucci, "Von der Molotschna bis zur Warthe," *Ostdeutscher Beobachter* 6, no. 71 (March 12, 1944): 5. Of particular importance to population planners was that these resettlers had always

CONCLUDING HISTORICAL MEMORY

Mennonites and Jews in Ukraine had a long-shared memory of a parallel existence as noncitizen minority groups in Greater Russia. Existence in Greater Russia for Jews and for Mennonites was dependent on separation, distinct external appearance, unique dialect, inner cohesion, international familial networks, self-governing institutions, a sojourner mentality, a sense of divine mission, and a view of the other as unclean or dangerous. Each ethnic group had its distinct legal privileges, restrictions, and duties under the Tsar, and each looked out for its own. For both Mennonites and Jews, moderation, spiritual values, family, learning, and success were important, and their related dialects made communication possible. There are also multiple examples that show how Mennonites tracked Jewish persecution (pogroms) with concern and sympathy—and offered some hospitality.¹⁵⁴ The similarities and complementary gifts even led to a government plan for a “shared” Jewish-Mennonite colony, but this had decidedly mixed results.¹⁵⁵ Many more Mennonites had regular business dealings in larger or smaller matters with neighboring Jews throughout their sojourn in Russia.¹⁵⁶ But more or less antisemitic attitudes, interpretations of Scripture, and actions by Russian Mennonites before and after the Russian Revolution can also be easily documented.¹⁵⁷

It is estimated that a half-million Jews were murdered in Nazi-occupied Ukraine alone.¹⁵⁸ How does one begin to understand the inexplicable?

“considered mixed marriages to be a great disgrace.” They “remained the same people as their Low German ancestors” with an “inner core that is valuable and pure. . . . They have preserved their ways and language and they have remained good Germans, who have also understood what it means to suffer for the sake of their Germanness.”

¹⁵⁴ E.g., “Die letzten Judenmetzeleien,” *Zionsbote* 21 (November 8, 1905), 2; *Zionsbote* 22, no. 4 (January 24, 1906), 6; *MR* 2, no. 4 (July 15, 1881): 2; *MR* 3, no. 6 (March 15, 1882): 3; *MR* 5, no. 4 (January 23, 1884): 2; *MR* 4, no. 36 [September 5, 1883]: 2; *Christlicher Gemeinde-Kalender* 1 (1892); 133.

¹⁵⁵ See for example, Harvey L. Dyck, “Landlessness in the Old Colony: The *Judenplan* Experiment 1850–1880,” in *Mennonites in Russia*, ed. John Friesen (Winnipeg: CMBC, 1989), 183–201. <https://www.cmu.ca/docs/cmupress/CMU-Mennonites-in-Russia-OCR.pdf>; Jacob D. Epp, *A Mennonite in Russia: The Diaries of Jacob D. Epp, 1851–1880*, trans. and ed. by Harvey L. Dyck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

¹⁵⁶ E.g., in 1913 the “modern” and secure “Molotschna Credit Union” in Halbstadt had 113 Jewish members, ninety Russians, 171 German Catholics, 408 German Lutherans, and 746 Mennonites. See “Ein Kulturwerk der deutschen an der Molotschna,” *Illustrierter Molotschnaer Volks-Kalender für die deutschen Ansiedler in Süd-Russland, 1913* (Prischib: Schaad, 1913), 114. <https://media.chortitza.org/pdf/pdf/vptk89.pdf>.

¹⁵⁷ E.g., “Die Judenfrage,” *MR* 1, no. 17 (February 5, 1881): 3.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Dieter Pohl, “Just How Many? On the Death Toll of Jewish Victims of Nazi Crimes,” in *Denial of the Denial, or the Battle of Auschwitz: Debates about the Demography and Geopolitics of the Holocaust*, ed. Alfred Kokh and Pavel Polian (Brighton, MS: Academic Studies, 2011), 139.

Hitler found understanding and support in Ukraine for the call to eradicate all Jews. For Nazi propagandists, it was a call to cleanse the world of all that is decrepit, to unmask all that is degenerate and evil in order to purify and perfect the *Volk* and inaugurate a joyous new age. James Rhodes likens this to a modern, secular apocalyptic movement—and Mennonites were susceptible.¹⁵⁹

Some Mennonites actively collaborated in the murder of Jews, though the stories and evidence are limited. One Mennonite man who had lived through these events and whom I had known from church since my childhood refused my request for an interview: “I know nothing. I only know that I am in Canada. Otherwise I know nothing.” Many Mennonites themselves were people broken under Stalin,¹⁶⁰ and most were silent, fearful, and confused onlookers as local Jews fled, sought refuge, or were gathered to be executed in their region. However, Jan Burzlaff has suggested that these categories of “by-stander, resistor and collaborator” may be too rigid to sufficiently capture these different levels of opposition or approval; the “complex experiences of communities and individuals” should give caution “to judge behaviors and antisemitism as a universal explanation.”¹⁶¹ While these stories are difficult to record and read, the task is a necessary first step toward a fulsome account of this dark side of Mennonite experience in Russia and multi-generational healing in the families and churches implicated in those events. It also sets an agenda for Mennonites to pursue Christian-Jewish dialogue and develop a robust post-Holocaust Mennonite theology as a resource for new toxic political environments. Whether one is Mennonite or not, this microstudy of one small ethnic, religious group in its interactions with Nazi Germany as its Jewish neighbors were eliminated can be a small contribution toward understanding how social relations shaped the evolution of the Holocaust.

¹⁵⁹ James M. Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement: A Modern Millenarian Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1980), 198.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, “A new Examination of the ‘Great Terror’ in Molotschna, 1937-38,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 95, no. 4 (October 2021): 415-458. <https://digitalcollections.tyndale.ca/handle/20.500.12730/1031>.

¹⁶¹ Jan Burzlaff, “Confronting the Communal Grave: A Reassessment of Social Relations during the Holocaust in Eastern Europe,” *The Historical Journal* 63, no. 4 (2020): 1057.