

IN THIS ISSUE

Few topics have generated more historiographical energy—and moral anguish—among Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars in recent years than the renewed conversation about the complicity of German-speaking Mennonites, particularly those living in the Soviet Union, in Hitler’s effort to conquer the Soviet Union and the murderous campaigns against the local Jewish population that were part of that effort. For decades, Russian Mennonite historiography has either ignored or greatly minimized the level of Mennonite support for the German army during its advance into the Soviet Union in 1941 and its subsequent occupation of the Ukraine, where Mennonites had made their home for well over a century. Instead, the story focused on the extreme suffering Mennonites had recently endured in Russia, first as a consequence of the Bolshevik Revolution and the famines in the early 1920s, which were soon followed in the 1930s by the repressive tactics of Josef Stalin, who targeted German-speaking minorities as class and political enemies of the emerging Soviet state. Against the backdrop of forced collectivization, coerced labor in the “worker armies,” anti-religion campaigns, severe restrictions on the German language, and the systematic execution of thousands of men, it should come as no surprise, the standard argument went, that German-speaking Mennonites would regard the advancing National Socialist armies as liberators.

In 2010, however, an article published in *MQR* by Gerhard Rempel (“Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetuation”) challenged that simplistic assessment. Rempel conclusively demonstrated that Mennonites in the Ukraine were not merely passive recipients of the liberation offered by Hitler’s armies; they were, on the whole, enthusiastic supporters of National Socialism and eagerly claimed their status as citizens of the Third Reich. Moreover, they actively participated in actions against their Jewish neighbors. Rempel’s essay opened a new chapter of critical reflection that has since led to a flurry of sobering revelations about the degree of support for National Socialism among Mennonites in South Russia.

But even as we now acknowledge the complicity of many Mennonites in the National Socialist cause in the early 1940s, the reality of suffering under Stalin’s rule cannot simply be dismissed. In an opening essay titled “A New Examination of the “Great Terror” in Molotschna, 1937-1938,” **Arnold Neufeldt-Fast**, associate professor of theology and dean of the seminary at Tyndale University, draws on newly-released files of the Soviet secret police to describe the brutal repression of Mennonites in the Ukraine in the late 1930s. Along the way, Neufeldt-Fast clarifies that even

though Mennonites interpreted the brutality against them as motivated by their religious beliefs—hence, their frequent recourse to language of “martyrdom”—the Soviet state regarded them primarily as a political threat on account of their sympathies for the German language and culture. The persecution they suffered in the 1930s under Stalin by no means justifies their enthusiastic welcome of Hitler’s armies in 1941 and 1942; but that persecution was real and devastating nonetheless.

In the essay that follows, **David Y. Neufeld**, a historian at Conrad Grebel University College, explores a different sort of confusion around identity. During the tumultuous years of the Reformation, transitions from one Christian religion to another were often framed in the language of “conversion” and marked by a public ritual of confirmation or, in the case of the Anabaptists, by baptism. Yet, as Neufeld demonstrates, definitions of conversion, particularly among Anabaptists, were notoriously blurry, focused less on personal beliefs and ritualized practices than on shaping perceptions of group identity. Whereas Anabaptists conversion narratives depicted converts as earnest Christians, Reformed authorities identified them as threats to civil order.

Questions of identity also haunt the essay by **Marius van Hoogstraten**, who provides a close reading of the earliest account of the first Zurich baptisms in January of 1525, which marked the symbolic beginning of the Anabaptist movement. How does a church that previously did not exist, van Hoogstraten asks, call itself into being? His response is something of a paradox: Such a presumption is both absurd and impossible. Yet it is precisely this “de-centered” beginning—in which a church was constituted not by unilateral decree but “by provocation and invitation”—that signals the possibility of Christ’s uniquely nonviolent sovereignty and our own responsibility in the ongoing “making” of the church.

Finally, we close this issue of *MQR* with a research note by two Argentinean anthropologists, **Alejandro López and Agustina Aleman**, who describe attitudes toward Catholicism among Mennonite missionaries in Argentina in the 1930s and 1940s. Their essay traces the negative rhetoric that Mennonite missionaries employed in their depictions of the Catholic Church, particularly as Catholic leaders in the country sought to consolidate and extend their political and cultural power. These negative portrayals of Catholicism were part of the Mennonite church’s own theological formation in the struggle for a distinctive identity within the evolving religious landscape.

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– John D. Roth, editor