

Benjamin Unruh, Nazism, and MCC

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Abstract: This essay explores Mennonite Central Committee's encounters with National Socialism in the person and work of Benjamin H. Unruh (1881-1959), the official representative of Russian Mennonites in Germany throughout the period of National Socialism. Benjamin Unruh's extensive correspondence deposited in five Mennonite archives and his published articles are used to document and assess how MCC's humanitarian efforts with Soviet Mennonites were entangled with National Socialism and its legacy. The essay explores the roots of Unruh's pro-German Mennonite orientation, documents his growing pro-Nazism in the 1930s, and his explicit promotion of its racial goals. A fresh reading of these materials offers a more complete accounting of the tumultuous events of the twentieth century in which Unruh played a role, and identifies related themes in the larger Russian Mennonite community which embraced his leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Professor Benjamin H. Unruh's biography is connected to the very beginnings of Mennonite Central Committee in 1920-1922 when he served as a key spokesperson in Germany for the famine-stricken Mennonites in South Russia. Some years later he again played the central role in the rescue of thousands of Mennonites from Moscow in 1929 and, along with MCC, their resettlement in Paraguay, Brazil, and Canada. Because of Unruh's influence and deep connections with key German government agencies in Berlin, his home office in Karlsruhe, Germany, became a relief hub for Mennonites internationally. Unruh facilitated large-scale debt forgiveness for Mennonites in Paraguay and Brazil, and negotiated preferential consideration for Mennonite relief work to the Soviet Union during the Great Famine (Holodomor) of 1932-1933. He also was instrumental in the relief assistance MCC extended to those suffering from war in Poland and France in 1940. The efforts by Nazi leaders in Germany to support and resettle Mennonites from Ukraine after 1941 was also done in close consultation with Unruh.

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Much of this was possible because of Unruh's tireless promotion of the German racial purity of Russian Mennonites, and his commitment to their cultural survival. Unruh was convinced that there was no contradiction in being both a faithful Christian in the Mennonite tradition and a supporter of National Socialism and Adolf Hitler. At the conclusion of World War II, Unruh's past Nazi sympathies led MCC to quietly retire their relationship to Unruh with a small pension. Long after his death in 1959, however, Unruh continued to be held in the highest regard by thousands of Mennonite families in North and South America whose release from the Soviet Union was due in part to his efforts. He was a complex, larger-than-life figure, whose accomplishments have helped to define MCC's own narrative.

Although Unruh's life and work have been well documented by family and friends,¹ his very troublesome connections with German National Socialism have not received sufficient examination.² This essay uses Unruh's extensive correspondence deposited in five Mennonite archives along with his published articles to examine his pro-German Mennonite roots, his evolving relationship with MCC—especially in the context of Nazi Germany—and, through Unruh, MCC's encounters and entanglements with National Socialism.

EARLY YEARS

Benjamin Heinrich Unruh was born in the Crimea in 1881, the son of a Mennonite Church elder and a Mennonite Brethren mother. Following his father's premature death, his uncle Kornelius Unruh—a leading educator in Russia—recognized his nephew's extraordinary gifts and guided his development. Three wealthy Molotschna district Mennonite families offered Unruh a scholarship for graduate and doctoral-level studies in theology and history in Switzerland, where he studied from 1900 to 1907. Prior to the Communist Revolution in Russia, some 150 Mennonites had completed a Russian, German, or Swiss university education. They formed an emerging "Mennonite intelligentsia" of enlightened,

1. Cf. Heinrich B. Unruh, *Fügungen und Führungen: Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, 1881-1959* (Detmold: Verein zur Erforschung und Pflege des Russlanddeutschen Mennonitentums, 2009), including Peter Letkemann's important "Nachwort," 361-447. Also Jakob Warkentin, "Benjamin Heinrich Unruh (1881-1959)," in *Shepherds, Servants and Prophets: Leadership Among the Russian Mennonites (ca. 1880-1960)*, ed. Harry Loewen (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 2003), 401-425.

2. In this direction, see Benjamin W. Goossen's thorough study: "Taube und Hakenkreuz: Verhandlungen zwischen der NS-Regierung und dem MCC in Bezug auf die lateinamerikanischen Mennoniten," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 18 (2017), 133-160. On Nazi Germany's view of Mennonites—transmitted largely by Unruh—see also Goossen, "'A Small World Power': How the Nazi Regime Viewed Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* [hereafter *MQR*] 92 (April 2018), 173-206.

independent, and critical thinkers in Russia, with Unruh among the most brilliant and promising of his generation.³

Living on the Swiss-German border as a student and soon connected to South German Mennonites by marriage, Unruh became immersed in a context which increasingly conflated German nationalism and European colonialism on the one hand, with Christianity and the growth of God's kingdom on the other. One evening in Basel, Vladimir Lenin, then in exile in Switzerland, met with Russian-German students, and—according to Unruh—responded “warmly” to a speech Unruh gave on the economic contributions of the German colonists to Russian life and their loyalty to the Russian people.⁴ Basel was a hotbed for socialist-leaning Swiss Reformed pastors and theologians, including some, like Leonhard Ragaz, who were rediscovering the values of Anabaptists as an impulse for their religious activism, and challenged the power and influence of wealthy industrialists in their parishes, especially the low wages they paid to their workers.⁵ These voices seemingly had no impact on Unruh.

Unruh's recommendations around Mennonite nonresistance, and his inclination toward political involvement to support Mennonite ambitions, reached back to the February Revolution in Russia in 1917 and the collapse of the Romanov Dynasty. When the provisional government called for elections, Unruh and his colleague Johann A. Willms penned a brochure titled “How do we Mennonites organize for a National Assembly?” (March 3, 1917). In it they spoke of the duty of ethnic self-preservation, and the need for self-protection and the advancement of group-interests in a competitive environment if Mennonites were not to be crushed or simply left to self-destruct.⁶ The strategy required grass-roots political work in every village, with verbal and print “propaganda” created especially by teachers who were free in the summers. When Unruh traveled to speak to the younger Mennonite medics still stationed in Moscow for their Red Cross alternative service assignments, there was

3. Nicolai J. Klassen, “Mennonite Intelligentsia in Russia,” *Mennonite Life* [hereafter *ML*] 24:2 (April 1969), 51-60.

4. B. Unruh, “Einige wichtige Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben und ein Vorschlag,” 2, letter to multiple editors, MS 295, folder 13, MLA.—https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_295/folder_13/.

5. Cf. Leonhard Ragaz, *Du sollst: Grundzüge einer sittlichen Weltanschauung* (Freiburg i.B.: Watzel, 1904), eg., 8.—<https://archive.org/details/dusollstgrundzge0000raga>.

6. B. Unruh and Johann Willms, “Wie organisieren wir Mennoniten uns für die Nationalversammlung?,” file 3603, 58-68, reel 77, Peter J. Braun Russian Mennonite Archive, Robarts Library, University of Toronto. Cf. Alfred Eisfeld, “Deutsche Autonomiebewegungen in der Ukraine und in Westsibirien 1917-1918,” in *Deutsche in Rußland und in der Sowjetunion 1914-1941*, ed. A. Eisfeld, V. Herdt, and B. Meissner (Berlin: LIT, 2007), 127-144; H. Unruh, *Fügungen und Führungen*, 117f.

a feeling by the majority of the listeners that the speaker [Unruh] had been too voluble, pompous, and assertive, too impressed with his own brilliance of mind, too defensive of the status quo at home, and too transparently obvious in his ambition to hold the position of *starshii* (elder or leader) in Mennonite organizations,

according to historian David G. Rempel—whose brother Johann was in the group.⁷ While harsh, this assessment of his personality and leadership style helps to illuminate later chapters of his life.

On June 7, 1917, Unruh gave a major address on nonresistance at the request of the General Conference of Mennonite Congregations in Russia. After a lengthy account of the Mennonite “dogma” of nonresistance, Unruh prepared listeners for the real possibility that Mennonites could lose their special privileges in a political environment in which all citizens shared the same rights and responsibilities. In this case, they would have to consider accommodation “like the Mennonites in the West [i.e., Germany],” Unruh suggested. But even if they were guaranteed a non-resistant option under the new government, elders and ministers should extend patience and tolerance to their fellow believers who might take up the sword and participate in military service.⁸

Ninety-eight per cent of Mennonites participated in the long-delayed November elections—a sign of their willingness to cooperate with the new government, according to Unruh, who himself was a candidate for the “German Farmers of Tavrida Party.”⁹ The urgency of the moment also brought voting rights for women to the forefront for the first time as well: “Even our women must cast a vote if we do not wish to fall behind,” Unruh and Willms wrote.¹⁰

As it turned out, however, the Bolshevik Party under Lenin seized power three weeks prior to the elections, and Lenin moved to dissolve the new constituent assembly after its first brief meeting in January 1918. Civil war and anarchy now crashed upon the Mennonite colonies in waves. By April large numbers of Mennonites took up arms to protect the town of Halbstadt. “Besides the armed riders, half of the village stood guard

7. David G. Rempel, “Recollections from trip to Canada, Summer 1939,” 67, box 36, file 29, David G. Rempel Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

8. B. Unruh, “Die Wehrlosigkeit,” address given at the General Mennonite Conference, June 7, 1917 (Halbstadt, 1917), 22.—<https://mla.bethelks.edu/gmsources/books/1917,%20Unruh,%20Wehrlosigkeit/>.

9. Cf. B. Unruh, *Die Auswanderung der niederdeutschen mennonitischen Bauern aus der Sowjetunion, 1923–1933* (unpublished draft, ca. 1944), 115, “B. H. Unruh Collection,” MS 295, Mennonite Library and Archives-Bethel College [hereafter MLA] .— https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_295/.

10. Unruh and Willms, “Wie organisieren wir Mennoniten uns für die Nationalversammlung?”

during the first half of the night, and the rest took the second watch."¹¹ According to one eyewitness "everybody was for [armed self-defense / *Selbstschutz*]; all the preachers of every persuasion."¹²

Between April and October 1918 Ukraine was under "friendly" German occupation, and a new sense of German nationalism and incautious enthusiasm for the German Empire took root in the Mennonite community. Unruh's brother-in-law Fritz Hege was one of the German soldiers stationed in Halbstadt in 1918.¹³ According to a program meeting description

Under German occupation non-resistance had become a "burning issue" for our congregations, especially since a good portion of our young men, mostly due to the pressure of external circumstances, has breached the principle of non-resistance. . . . We appear to have reached a major turning point in our religious thought and perception."¹⁴

The use of arms for organized self-defense was clearly something novel in the longer tradition of this people in Russia. The General Mennonite Conference of Churches organized four days of meetings in Lichtenau on "political questions," including "the confession of nonresistance among Mennonites."¹⁵ Mennonites were required to respond by July 4 to a directive by German authorities for the establishment of self-defense militia units.

With Brother Benjamin Unruh in the lead there were those who considered our nonresistance as a mere tradition and pointed out how Abraham of old rescued Lot militarily, how David had killed the giant Goliath, Samson the Philistines, etc.¹⁶

When Unruh, who was typically the most memorable speaker at any gathering, seemed to argue that nonresistance was "tradition" rather than

11. *Troubles and Triumphs 1914-1924: Excerpts from the Diary of Peter J. Dyck, Ladekopp, Molotschna Colony, Ukraine*, ed. John P. Dyck (Springstein, Man.: Self-published, 1981), entry for April 18, 1918.

12. A. A. Wiens to B. B. Janz, letter, cited in Josephine Chipman, "Mennonite *Selbstschutz* in the Ukraine: 1918-1919" (Master of Arts thesis, University of Manitoba, 1988), 92.— <http://hdl.handle.net/1993/3535>.

13. Cf. *Our Stories*, trans. and ed. Walfried Jansen (Winnipeg, Man., 2010), 37, Walter and Linda Jansen Fonds, 1946-2009, vol. 5477-5478, 5691, Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, MB [hereafter MHA].

14. "Progamm," in *Volksfreund* 2 (16), no. 22 (40) (31 May 1918), 2.— <https://chor.square7.ch/pletk27.pdf>.

15. *Friedensstimme* 16, no. 36 (23 July 1918), 1.— <https://chor.square7.ch/pletk47.pdf>.

16. Bernhard J. Dick, "Something about the *Selbstschutz* of the Mennonites in South Russia (July 1918-March 1919)," trans. and ed. Harry Loewen and Al Reimer, *Journal of Mennonite Studies* [hereafter *JMS*], 4 (1986), 137f.

a fundamental biblical principle, it was the “straw that broke the camel’s back,” and the path to self-defense was opened.¹⁷ The Congress had 283 delegates, including nineteen elders and 139 ministers.¹⁸ Almost twenty years later in Nazi Germany, Unruh reflected on those days and a sermon he had heard on Abraham and Lot by Halbstadt minister Gerhard B. Harder: “Love and mercy compelled Abraham to act. It was completely new terrain in which he sought and experienced God’s help. He did not seek the spoils of war. He vigorously rejected them.” Rather, Abraham took on “a tough and distasteful duty” and still became the prototype of the New Testament church.¹⁹ This was the “first *Selbstschutz* sermon that I had heard,” Unruh recalled. With such arguments, Unruh and others sought to move Russian Mennonites away from a longer tradition on nonresistance to a “Just War” position. He was well aware that “faithful” Anabaptists in the sixteenth century—Balthasar Hubmaier and Jakob Hutter are the typical examples—came to opposite conclusions on self-defense. Many years later this question would continue to be at the heart of MCC’s difficulties with Unruh in both Germany and Paraguay.

When the next strong wave of anarchy and war returned in the fall of 1918, some 100 to 120 students from Unruh’s Halbstadt Commerce School—largely sons of well-to-do Mennonites—along with some of their teachers formed an active *Selbstschutz* unit.²⁰ Unruh was the unofficial chaplain of the group.²¹ Later, Gerhard Wiens would recall that:

Professor Benjamin Unruh’s attitude was one of tacit support for resistance. Somewhat of a shock to me. He was my Bible instructor and was highly educated. . . . Everyone in Halbstadt looked up to him. I was greatly influenced by his attitude towards the *Selbstschutz* as were others.²²

In February 1919 the First Mennonite Infantry Regiment took ten prisoners who had committed grisly criminal acts and executed them. After this deed Unruh was quickly brought up from Halbstadt to lecture the soldiers not on a Mennonite peace theology, but on a key principle of the ancient Christian doctrine of “Just War.”

17. Dick, “Something about the *Selbstschutz*,” 137.

18. Cf. D. H. Epp’s brief history of the congress in *Unser Blatt* 2, no. 1 (Oct. 1926), 19.—https://chort.square7.ch/Pis/UB26_01.pdf.

19. Cf. Unruh’s recollections in *Mennonitische Rundschau* [hereafter *MR*] 60, no. 39 (Sept. 29, 1937), 7.

20. “Nonresistance on Trial, or Selbsterlebtes u. Selbstschutz: Molotschna Mennonite Settlement, 1918-1919,” n.d.—MLA, https://mla.bethelks.edu/books/289_74771_Se48.pdf.

21. Cited in Unruh, *Fügungen und Führungen*, 141.

22. Gerhard Wiens, in *Constantinople—Escape from Bolshevism*, ed. Irmgard Epp (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2006), 47f. I thank James Urry for this reference.

He [Unruh] regretted the execution of the prisoners. Despite the brutality of the enemy, a Christian should not judge or seek revenge. He pointed to the enormous task we must perform in protecting our villages and thereby our loved ones from such bands. . . . This speech by our highly esteemed teacher impressed all of us deeply, and each promised to do his duty.²³

Less than a year later Unruh and two Halbstadt colleagues, C. H. Warkentin and Abram A. Friesen, were commissioned by the Mennonites of Russia to travel to western Europe and North America to describe the horrors of revolution, anarchy, and impending famine, and to request immediate aid. The urgency of those presentations in America stimulated the formation of Mennonite Central Committee in September 1920. One year later as famine raged in South Russia, Unruh expressed concerns about both the level of aid that was required and the fragile cooperation of the “countless” Mennonite splinter groups in North America. Throughout 1921 Friesen and Warkentin were delegated to North America and Unruh to Europe to actively explore immigration opportunities for Russia’s 100,000 Mennonites with authorities from Argentina, Canada, the Dutch East Indies, Mexico, New Zealand, Paraguay, South Africa, Suriname, and USA. Presenting Russian Mennonites as a community of skilled agriculturalists and bearers of European culture, they negotiated with colonial powers for lands, unique privileges, and protections. Unruh also quickly developed political relationships in Berlin to plea for intervention, aid, and investment.²⁴ After the relief work was completed in 1926 and some 17,000 Russian Mennonites had immigrated to Canada, Unruh considered an invitation by colleagues in Canada to establish a theological seminary (*Predigerseminar*) there.²⁵ Instead, he chose to remain in Germany as the designated “representative of all the Mennonites of Russia,” as Harold Bender described his role in 1930,²⁶ as well as the official European representative of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (hereafter CMBC), which had facilitated Mennonite immigration into Canada.

23. “Nonresistance on Trial, or Selbsterlebtes u. Selbstschutz.”

24. In December 1921, Unruh was in Berlin twice to negotiate for European tractors and seed grain for Ukraine. Cf. Dec. 27, 1921, report, in Unruh, *Auswanderung*, folder 10, 544b; also letter to federal politician Gustav Stresemann, excerpted in folder 10, 535, MLA.

25. B. Unruh to Peter J. Braun, June 18, 1926, 2; also Dec. 21, 1925, 3, MS 91, folder 2, MLA.—https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_91/folder_2/. For immigration numbers by year, cf. Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona, Man.: Friesen, 1962), 282.

26. H. S. Bender to S. C. Yoder, March 3, 1930, 1, letter, IX-03-1, box 3, file 3a0004, Mennonite Central Committee Archives, Akron, Pa. [hereafter MCC-A].

Before leaving for the United States as a delegate in 1920—and even before the start of the Russian Revolution—Unruh had emerged as a strong, tireless, and fearless leader, who shone on the stage or in crisis. His politics were decidedly conservative and pragmatic. His self-confidence was resolute and his political skill tested and proven. Despite his love for the Russian language and expertise in Russian literature, Unruh's cultural identity—and his sense of the future direction for his community in Russia—pointed clearly toward Germany. He spoke obsessively of the cultural achievements of Mennonites as Germans in Russia and of their success as colonists. He had a strong grasp of Anabaptist-Mennonite thought and history, and his oratory, exegetical skill, intellectual strength, and warm piety were respected by Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren alike. Unruh was committed to a vision of Mennonites as a single global, ethnically-shaped ecclesial family.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that his people trusted him in their great need, that he would play a role in inspiring MCC's beginnings, or that he would bring Mennonites to the attention of conservative political circles in Germany in the years ahead. Indeed, Unruh's connections with MCC would continue to define the organization's successes and failures through the end of World War II.

MCC AND THE FLIGHT FROM MOSCOW

Between 1929 and 1931, Unruh collaborated closely with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), and particularly Harold S. Bender, to resettle 3,885 Mennonites rescued from the USSR via Moscow. In the fall of 1929, more than 9,000 Mennonites and 4,000 other ethnic "German farmers" from across the Soviet Union fled to the Soviet capital in a last desperate attempt to emigrate. Thousands more were turned back along the way, and those in Moscow were threatened with serious reprisals. The relief and resettlement efforts that followed were made possible because of Germany's intervention, and would tie MCC to Unruh and to successive German governments long-term.

Already in January 1929 the MCC Executive Committee received information that the situation for Mennonites in Ukraine was "very precarious,"²⁷ but concluded with the Friends (Quakers) Service Committee that there was virtually no possibility for relief work in Russia at the present.²⁸ Wanting not to aggravate the situation, MCC Secretary-Treasurer Levi Mumaw advised against further institutional actions,

27. David Toews to MCC Executive, Jan. 26, 1929, 1, letter, IX-02, box 3, file 9, MCC-A.

28. Cf. P.C. Hiebert to MCC Executive, Feb. 24, 1929, letter, IX-2, box 3, file 9, MCC-A.

while supporting smaller congregational efforts.²⁹ Yet by mid-summer, some 100 Mennonite families had received exit visas, and news of their intention to emigrate circulated quickly. By the end of October at least 6,000 people—and perhaps double that number, largely Mennonites from Siberia—descended upon Moscow with belongings in hand in a massive attempt to flee the country.³⁰ Confident of support from relatives and coreligionists abroad and of the diplomatic goodwill and pressure by Germany, the would-be emigrants disposed of all their assets—mostly at rock bottom prices—and convened in the capital.

The German embassy in Moscow followed these dramatic developments closely. Since Germany's humiliating defeat and territorial loss in the Great War, an emerging German identity as an ethno-cultural Volk that extended across national borders and institutions had taken on a new imagined reality, which inspired strong loyalty toward beleaguered German minorities in the East.³¹ In this context, not only did the German embassy insist that the Soviet Union respect the rights of ethnic German farmers, but letters from private citizens requesting intervention quickly inundated the Russian Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.³² "The fate of these pioneers and colonists is very German and touches on the deepest questions of our ethnic peoplehood (*Volkstum*) in general," one Berlin paper argued.³³ Herbert von Dirksen, the German ambassador in Moscow, did not support asylum in Germany; such a move could trigger a powerful attractional force for the remaining Germans in the Soviet Union³⁴—a group numbering as many as 700,000 or 800,000 people who would be impossible to assimilate or resettle. Despite the many "levers" Unruh could pull, "the mood in Berlin is not very rosy," he wrote to friend Peter J. Braun in the summer of 1929.³⁵ In August of that same year von Dirksen

29. Levi Mumaw to MCC Executive, Feb. 22, 1929, letter, IX-2, box 3, file 9, 0006, MCC-A.

30. See Harold Jantz, *Flight: Mennonites Facing the Soviet Empire in 1929/30: From the Pages of the Mennonitische Rundschau* (Winnipeg, Man.: Eden Echoes, 2018).

31. Cf. Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 117f.

32. Cf. Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 261, no.109.

33. Bernhard Lamey, "Richtung Moskau—Kanada," *Vossische Zeitung*, no. 522 (Nov. 5, 1929), 4.

34. Julius Curtius to the State Secretary of the Chancellery, Nov. 6, 1929, in Hans Rothfels et al., eds., *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945*, Serie B: 1925-1933, Bd. XIII (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 227, no. 104.—https://digi20.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb00055363_00001.html. On the fear of mass migration of Russian Germans, cf. James E. Casteel, "Russian Germans in the Interwar German National Imaginary," *Central European History* 40 (2007), 445; Erwin Warkentin, "The Mennonites before Moscow: The Notes of Dr. Otto Auhagen," *JMS* 26 (2008), 209.

35. B. Unruh to Peter Braun, June 12, 1929, letter, MS 91, folder 2, MLA.—https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_91/folder_2/.

advised his department that immigration—if possible—should be to Canada or, if that path was blocked, to Paraguay or Chile. Canada was problematic for him insofar as farmers were typically settled in “checkerboard style, which is without a doubt a threat to the preservation of German identity.”³⁶

In North America, Mennonite leadership was hardly united on how to assist their co-religionists assembling in Moscow. Throughout October, Unruh conducted a series of meetings first in London and then with authorities in Berlin that included Counsel Carl Dienstmann and P. S. von Kügelgen, chair of the Board of Confidence (*Vertrauensausschuss*) for Eastern Colonists in German Foreign Affairs. With the endorsement of Kügelgen, Unruh submitted a written petition to the Foreign Affairs office outlining the critical condition of the refugees and options for assistance.³⁷ On October 13, Dienstmann was dispatched to Moscow for diplomatic negotiations with his counterpart Boris Shtein of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.³⁸ The first meeting, held on October 15, did not go well; on October 16, the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks decided to forcibly return the Germans gathered on the outskirts of Moscow to their places of origin. But Germany forced a compromise leading to a Politburo decision signed by Stalin on October 18 that read, “Do not object to emigration of Mennonites gathered near Moscow.”³⁹ Unruh was told in Berlin, however, that Soviet authorities would respond very harshly to any new “flights” to Moscow; and that should this occur, German Foreign Affairs would not be able offer further assistance.⁴⁰ Surprisingly on October 26 the USSR actively urged Germany “to accelerate the departure of the colonists,”

36. Herbert von Dirksen to German Foreign Affairs, Aug. 1, 1929, in *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945*, Serie B: 1925-1933, Bd. XII (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 307, no. 141.—https://digi20.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb00045951_00005.html.

37. B. Unruh, “Bericht über die katastrophale Lage der menn. Ansiedlungen in Russland und die Massenflucht der Kolonisten,” Oct. 29, 1929, 1b, report to MCC, IX-02, box 4, file 4, MCC-A. For overview, cf. B. Unruh, “Verzweifelte Selbsthilfe,” in *Rußlanddeutsche suchen eine Heimat: Die deutsche Einwanderung in den paraguayischen Chaco*, ed. Walter Quiring (Karlsruhe: Schneider, 1938), 106-115.

38. B. Unruh, “Bericht II: Über Verhandlungen in Berlin, vom 19.10 bis 24.10.,” Oct. 25, 1929, report to CMBC, IX-02, box 4, file 4, MCC-A; also B. Unruh to Peter Braun, Oct. 29, 1929, letter, MS 91, folder 2, MLA.—https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_91/folder_2/.

39. Cf. Andrey I. Savin, “The 1929 Emigration of Mennonites from the USSR: An Examination of Documents from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” *JMS* 30 (2012), 47f.; Otto Auhagen, *Die Schicksalswende des Russlanddeutschen Bauerntum in den Jahren 1927-1930* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1942), 49. Cf. also Colin Neufeldt, “Flight to Moscow, 1929: An Act of Mennonite Civil Disobedience,” *Preservings* 19 (Dec. 2001), 39-41.

40. B. Unruh, “Verzweifelte Selbsthilfe,” 113; B. Unruh to Peter Braun, Oct. 29, 1929; see also Otto Auhagen to Benjamin Unruh, Oct. 25, 1929, in Auhagen, *Schicksalswende*, 59-60.

whom they now deemed to be “class-hostile elements.”⁴¹ The following day Moscow authorities informed the German Foreign Affairs that a first group of emigrants would depart on October 28. The Canadian Pacific Railway office in Hamburg assured Unruh that transit credits for Mennonites to Canada were available at the Russian Canadian Trade Association in Moscow,⁴² and on October 29, Unruh wired David Toews, chairman of the CMBC, to confirm the larger movement and the need for the Canadian Pacific Railway to assume responsibility.

On November 2 the MCC chair, P. C. Hiebert, received a telegram from Unruh, who seemingly had been directed in a letter by J. W. Wiens in Hillsboro to ask Germany “to bring pressure to bear on the Soviet Government toward the granting of passports to all German-speaking inhabitants of Russia.” The request followed the example of Sweden, which had received a similar permission—though its group of Russian Swedes was only 800 strong. In his cable Unruh wrote: “All has already been accomplished.” Hiebert misinterpreted this to mean that the removal of *all* Mennonites from the Soviet Union to Canada was imminent.⁴³ On the same day, a Saturday, Unruh wired Toews the latest news that “Moscow will send colonists to Siberia if Ottawa, refuses on Monday. Berlin requires a decision whether, despite possible refusal by Ottawa 6,000 should be brought to Hamburg. I urgently request immediate direction before tomorrow Sunday (November 3) evening.”⁴⁴ The next week Unruh reported to his North America colleagues that November 7, 8, and 9 were exceptionally “stormy days” with German authorities—but he had been able to keep the ship afloat.⁴⁵

On November 11, the German embassy in Moscow estimated that the number of colonists gathered in the city had now grown to some 13,000 and reported to Berlin that the movement had “taken on an ominous character.”⁴⁶ In the face of a humanitarian crisis, Unruh played a solo and

41. Fritz von Twardowski to Foreign Affairs, Oct. 29, 1929, in Reichskanzlei, “Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland,” 8-10 [17-21], Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Nov. 1929-Feb. 1935, *Bundesarchiv* (hereafter BArch) R 43-I/141.—<https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/invenio/direktlink/8d143551-e334-41f1-aba3-0d630992139b/>.

42. Cf. B. Unruh, “Bericht III: Zur Massenflucht deutsch-russ. Bauern,” Nov. 23, 1929, report to CMBC, 1b-2, IX-02, box 4, file 4, 0006, MCC-A; idem, “Bericht II,” 2. Cf. also Jochen Oltmer, *Migration und Politik in der Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 199, 206.

43. P. C. Hiebert to MCC Executive, Nov. 2, 1929 (excerpt), with translation of cable from B. Unruh, in Maxwell Kratz to Rodney Landreth, Nov. 6, 1929, letter, IX-02, box 4, file 3, 0003, MCC-A. Cf. also B. Unruh, “Bericht II;” idem, “Bericht III,” 3.

44. In B. Unruh, “Bericht III,” 3, 3b.

45. B. Unruh, “Bericht III,” 5b.

46. Fritz von Twardowski to Foreign Affairs, Nov. 11, 1929, telegram, in *Deutsche Hilfsmaßnahmen zugunsten der Auswanderung deutschstämmiger Flüchtlinge überwiegend mennonitischen Glaubens aus der Sowjetunion und ihre Ansiedlung in überseeischen Gebieten, 1929-*

pivotal role to convince the German government—with only weak assurances from Mennonites abroad—to intervene and provide transport out of Moscow. MCC was decidedly sluggish with its responses, initially confused about the scope and urgency of the matter despite clear communications from Unruh and the moral pressure of the international press. The MCC Executive Committee mistakenly thought that they could do little from the United States. In fact, any international assurances to the reluctant federal and provincial Canadian governments that co-religionists were prepared to help with winter room and board and care for the sick, elderly, and poor would have helped open doors for immigration.⁴⁷

In the morning papers of November 13 and in a radiogram played across Germany, the German Red Cross, along with other German aid organizations, called all Germans to join in the campaign, “Brothers in Need!”⁴⁸ It explicitly evoked the image of model German farmers “who had preserved their German manner, language, and customs” struggling against Bolshevik oppression. The news stories did not employ the term “Mennonite”; instead, the appeal was to race and ethnicity—e.g., “The fate of *one* German concerns *every* German!”⁴⁹

While Unruh was negotiating with Berlin with some success, he was clearly exasperated with MCC. On November 14 he wrote MCC executive secretary-treasurer Levi Mumaw:

Dear Brother Mumaw, I am waiting on pins and needles for the promised letter regarding financial matters. I cannot understand why I have not received a message from you. I have already prepared as much as I can with the Office of Foreign Affairs, but I require the document I requested. Please let me know immediately. . . . The whole world is now looking to our [Mennonite] church in Europe and America for what they will do. In Berlin I have repeatedly emphasized that the Mennonites of the world will do what they can, but that we cannot cope with the need on our own. The German

1932: *Dokumente aus dem Politischen Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 6-7, Archiv Fernheim, PY; also Oskar Trautman to Julius Curtius, Nov. 13, 1929, report, *Deutsche Hilfsmaßnahmen: Dokumente*, 8-12.

47. Cf. B. Unruh’s “Bericht II” and “Bericht über die katastrophale Lage.” Cf. also P.C. Hiebert to MCC Executive, Nov. 2, 1929 (excerpt), with confused translation of cable from B. Unruh, in Kratz to Landreth, Nov. 6, 1929; and Maxwell Kratz to P.C. Hiebert, Levi Mumaw and Ori Miller, Nov. 6, 1929, letter, IX-01, box 7, file 7, 0003, MCC-A.

48. Cf. “Brüder in Not!,” *Vossische Zeitung* (Berlin), no. 536 (Nov. 13, 1929), 6; *Mennonitische Blätter* (hereafter *MBI*), 76, no. 12 (December 1929), 105.

49. Cf. the call to action in *MBI* 76, no. 12 (December 1929), 1.

public [however] is mobilized . . . and I ask you also from the bottom of my heart to do everything possible in this matter.⁵⁰

On the night of November 15 to 16 the worst-case scenario began to unfold in Moscow as the GPU (secret police) forcibly arrested 500 heads of families from the most distant villages. German Foreign Affairs moved quickly and on November 18 recommended to the Reich Cabinet that 6 million marks (\$1,428,000 USD) be approved for the transfer and temporary housing over three to six months for approximately 13,000 German colonists from Russia.⁵¹ The request was framed as a limited action designed not to trigger a further wave of migration. Funds would “be granted to interested church organizations as an interest-free loan as far as possible after approval by the budget committee of the Reichstag.” The “total amount is to be reduced by the proceeds of the collections already initiated.” The Cabinet approved the proposal, which was to be announced on the following day. The domestic pressure on the weak German Weimar Republic to receive the ethnic German farmers at German transit camps was decisive in this action, even if Canada had not yet agreed to accept the immigrants.⁵²

Mennonite American MCC Executive Committee members were tracking the news—worried about the possibility of an exodus of *all* Russian Mennonites. Their correspondence suggests that they did not understand or feel the urgency of the moment, or they felt that there was little they could do from the United States. “It appears to me,” wrote Maxwell Kratz, “that we should take immediate steps to verify the information that a wholesale exodus of our people from Russia is imminent and if we find this a fact I think we ought to take steps toward and in preparation for their assistance and relief wherever necessary.”⁵³ Kratz’s statement appeared in the Mennonite Church weekly, *Gospel Herald*, along with the incorrect claim that the German government had demanded that all German farmers be released from the USSR, and the improbable possibility that 70,000 or more Mennonites could follow this first group seeking similar assistance.

The article, however, was not a call to action. It acknowledged with interest that the development was causing “serious alarm in Government circles in Canada,” but there was little sense of urgency or awareness of

50. B. Unruh to Levi Mumaw, Nov. 14, 1929, letter, IX-01-01, box 10, file 210036, MCC-A.

51. On costs, cf. Julius Curtius to the State Secretary of the Chancellery, Nov. 6, 1929, in *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik*, Bd. XIII, 227, no. 104; 228 n.8; budget proposal, Nov. 13, 1929, in Reichskanzlei, “Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland,” 135, no. 66.

52. On the Reich Foreign Ministry’s early preference for Berlin, cf. B. Unruh, “Bericht über meine Verhandlungen in Sachen der Flüchtlinge bei Moskau, vom 24.10 to 23.11.,” Nov. 13, 1929, 3, report to CMBC, IX-01-01, box 10, file 21, MCC-A.

53. M. Kratz to P. Hiebert, L. Mumaw and O. Miller, Nov. 6, 1929.

how much weight an immediate, active signal of support to Canada would have.⁵⁴ Only on November 27, did MCC executives meet and telegram Unruh that they had taken steps “to mobilize relief forces of Mennonites throughout the country and are confident of full support.”⁵⁵ Unruh, acting as the “European representative” of MCC and the CMBC, immediately offered a verbal commitment to the German government. The organizations were to collect funds and reimburse the German government for costs incurred by 1940, with interest payments starting in 1935.⁵⁶ In November and December 1929, some 6,000 Mennonites were delivered out of Moscow to Germany, thanks largely to the persistence and political savvy of Benjamin Unruh. In December MCC chair P. C. Hiebert acknowledged that “Unruh has been a veritable Hercules in the service he thus rendered.”⁵⁷ Six months later, on June 2, 1930, MCC Executive member Maxwell Kratz signed a memorandum of agreement with the German government, adding that MCC was unincorporated and that its resources were “dependent altogether on relief contributions.”⁵⁸

The efforts of Unruh and MCC pivoted quickly towards resettlement. Because of Canada’s political climate—and especially the repeated complaints from war veterans that German Mennonites had not taken on the “fullest responsibilities” of citizenship to defend the country when it was in danger—only 1,344 of the 3,885 refugees were ultimately permitted to settle in Canada. Brazil had become Berlin’s preferred destination for the other refugees. Instead, MCC chose to establish a new costly settlement in Paraguay where military service would not be required. Harold S. Bender envisioned a “Mennonite state” where the immigrants could live out their “German culture” undisturbed.⁵⁹ “We have assumed full responsibility for the welfare of the colony not only with respect to the German government, but in the eyes of the entire Mennonite world,” Bender reported.⁶⁰ MCC’s \$100,000 financial investment was huge, but the debt to Germany was soon double that figure⁶¹ and Germany’s cultural and political interest in these German “brothers in need” remained strong.

54. “Russian Situation,” *Gospel Herald* 22, no. 34 (Nov. 21, 1929), 689.

55. M. Kratz to B. Unruh, Nov. 27, 1929, letter IX-01, box 4, file 3-0022, MCC-A; also L. Mumaw to C. F. Klassen, Nov. 26, 1929, letter, IX-01-01, box 10, file 210038, MCC-A.

56. Cf. “Verpflichtungserklärung,” in M. Kratz to John Leibl, German Vice-Counsul, Pittsburgh, June 2, 1930, 2, letter, IX-01-01, box 10, file 190004, MCC-A.

57. P.C. Hiebert to M. Kratz, Dec. 7, 1929, letter, IX-02, box 4, file 2-0001, MCC-A.

58. Kratz to Leibl, letter, June 2, 1930, 1.

59. H. S. Bender, “Die Einwanderung nach Paraguay,” in *Bericht über die Mennonitische Welt-Hilfs-Konferenz vom 31. Aug. bis 3. Sept. 1930 in Danzig*, ed. Christian Neff (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1930), 121f.

60. H. S. Bender to MCC Executive, “Report IV: Final and Summary Report,” Nov. 8, 1930, 3, IX-01-01, box 11, file 6, MCC-A.

61. B. Unruh, “Verzweifelte Selbsthilfe,” 113.

MCC settled 1,572 Mennonites in the new Paraguayan Chaco colony of Fernheim, and another 2,529 in Brazil.⁶²

These complex events, commitments, and relationships provide the background for understanding MCC's substantial long-term financial and cultural entanglements with Germany, which would extend through the Nazi era. Throughout this time, MCC recognized Unruh—sometimes only reluctantly—as “the representative in Germany who has represented all the Mennonite organizations to the [German] government.”⁶³

In his final and summary report on the resettlement efforts from Germany, dated November 8, 1930, Bender wrote:

I could not forget to indicate what a great debt we owe to Brother Benjamin H. Unruh for his unfailing help and most useful counsel at all times. No words of appreciation could express my gratitude to him. It is enough to say that my work would have been practically impossible without him. I would suggest also some token of remembrance at this Christmas season, particularly since he has a large family to support under sometimes difficult conditions.⁶⁴

GROWING TIES TO NATIONAL SOCIALISM

During the negotiations with Moscow, Berlin, London, Ottawa, and Asunción, Unruh lamented to friend and archivist Peter J. Braun that they were walking without a roadmap—there was no “scholarly monograph” written on “Anabaptism and the state” to inform and guide their actions. His instincts, however, were that a posture of separation and “negative relation to the state—whether it be Russian or Anglo-Saxon—had to go; it is unevangelical.”⁶⁵

As Unruh reflected some years later, the colonists' experience of Germany's intervention in the midst of these events was “profound.” Many “captured impressions of the National Socialist struggle which they

62. F. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 239. For the work of MCC in this effort, cf. John D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and its Service 1920-1951* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1952), 24-31. Originally MCC rejected a Brazil option because it would require military service.—cf. B. Unruh, “Report VI to MCC,” Jan. 14, 1930, 3, IX-03-02, box 1, file 1, 0005, MCC-A. Later MCC agreed to take “only those to Paraguay who fail to pass the examination for Canada, and refuse Brazil.”—H. S. Bender to L. Mumaw, July 22, 1930, 1, IX-03-02, box 1, file 1, 0005, MCC-A.

63. Orie O. Miller and Abraham Warkentin, “Relief Notes,” *The Mennonite* 54, no. 4 (Jan. 24, 1939), 7.

64. H. S. Bender to MCC Executive, “Report IV: Final and Summary Report.”

65. B. Unruh to Peter Braun, April 8, 1931, 1, MS 91, folder 3, MLA.—https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_91/folder_3/.

took overseas.”⁶⁶ Unruh’s own growing sense of German nationalism was reinforced by events in 1930, including the significant National Socialist electoral gains in September. Around the same time, Unruh’s perspectives on the USSR began to echo the rhetoric of Germany’s emerging far-right parties: “Either Bolshevism will permeate all of Europe and then also the whole world—in which case what good will small migrations serve?—or it will be smashed.”⁶⁷

While thankful for the generosity of the German government, behind the scenes Unruh had joined those who were ultimately critical of the weakness of the German government’s commitment to the *Volkstumsgedanke*—that is, the idea of a united German spiritual, emotional, ethno-cultural peoplehood that extended across borders—to which these doomed Mennonite farmers in the Soviet Union belonged. Along with other Russia experts in Germany Unruh wrote anonymously to complain about the German government’s “sluggish” response to the “destruction of Germandom in the Soviet Union.”⁶⁸ The conclusion that Unruh helped pen emphasized that “the only remaining options are *destruction or emigration*.”⁶⁹

Sometime before January 1933, Unruh also became a financial supporter both of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) and the right wing German National People’s Party.⁷⁰ In the months following Hitler’s seizure of power, Unruh also became a regular financial contributor and Patron Member (*Förderndes Mitglied*) of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), a paramilitary police organization that ultimately became responsible for enforcing the racial policy of Nazi Germany.⁷¹ Why? Unruh claimed to see “things breaking forth which our forefathers in the sixteenth century had advocated.”⁷² Specifically, as Unruh wrote to a state official some years later, “Mennonites find much in the teaching of the *Führer* that they had

66. B. Unruh to Major Reitzenstein, Jan. 29, 1937, 5, letter, MS 416, Potsdam microfilm selections, MLA (copy from BArch-Potsdam).

67. Cf. H. S. Bender to O. Miller, July 26, 1930, 4, letter, IX-03-01, box 3, file 4, MCC-A.

68. Unruh was an anonymous contributor to *Ein deutscher Todesweg: Authentische Dokumente der wirtschaftlichen kulturellen und seelischen Vernichtung des Deutschtums in der Sowjet-Union*, edited by Hans Neusatz and Dietrich Erka (pseudonyms) (Berlin-Steglitz: Eckart, 1930), 108.—<https://chort.square7.ch/Buch/TodWeg.pdf>. Cf. also B. Unruh to Peter Braun, July 19, 1930, 1, letter, MS 91, folder 3, https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_91/folder_3/.

69. Neusatz and Erka, *Ein deutscher Todesweg*, 108.

70. “Fragebogen zur Bearbeitung des Aufnahmeantrages für die Reichsschriftumskammer,” Oct. 7, 1937, submitted by B. Unruh, MS 416, MLA.—https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_416/unruh_harder_quiring_berlin_docs/.

71. Cf. B. Unruh, “Fragebogen zur Bearbeitung Aufnahmeantrages.”

72. B. Unruh, in Erich Göttner, recorder, “Zur Kirchenfrage der Mennoniten: Außerordentliche Kuratoriumssitzung der Vereinigung der Mennonitengemeinde im Deutschen Reich in Berlin vom 17. -19. Nov. 1933,” *MBI* 80, no. 12 (Dec. 1933), 114.

emphasized already in the sixteenth century, e.g., the emphasis on a practical Christianity.”⁷³ At a Prussian Mennonite young men’s retreat in March 1935, Unruh claimed that the Mennonite teaching on the “separation of church and state” was “also in the spirit of our Führer and his book *Mein Kampf!*”⁷⁴ In fact, he likened Hitler to a Mennonite District Mayor (Oberschulz) in southern Russia, “who was usually a man of action, who brought the Mennonite settlements to the height of development, and was perhaps not always the most pious,” Unruh told a former student visiting from Canada a few years later. Similarly, “Hitler was the man for Germany,” to whom the German people owed their present prosperity: “I am 100 percent for Hitler,” Unruh exclaimed.⁷⁵

Because of his work with refugees from Russia, Unruh was elected as an executive member of the Association for German Culture Abroad (*Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland*) in 1932,⁷⁶ and also awarded the Order of Merit First Class from the German Red Cross by Reich President von Hindenburg. “Thus we may recognize,” wrote Elbing Pastor Emil Händiges, editor of the *Mennonitische Blätter*,

how much the highest authorities of the Reich appreciate the untiring activity, obviously blessed by God’s hand, which our Brother Unruh performs in the field of the Mennonite relief for the ethnic German fellow believers from Russia.⁷⁷

Recounting his own experience under anarchy in Ukraine, Unruh shared with *Vereinigung* colleagues an insight into his own approach:

Day in and day out I had to promote our concerns (*Sache*) with authoritative and influential people. I always did so with enormous seriousness and without fear, but with reverence and with great trust in God, in Christ, and also in our German officials. From here—if I may say so—my method arose. It should be plain to see that this method is not arbitrary. You . . . have come to recognize this over time. That is comforting to me and a great motivation. I ask you: believe me, that I only want the “*Sache*” . . . we all have a great goal and a path. I plead to you to see this goal and to walk this path in mutual trust.⁷⁸

73. B. Unruh to SS-Hauptsturmführer Walther Kolrep, Jan. 30, 1940, 1, letter, MS 295, folder 13, MLA.

74. Adolf Schnebele, “Ein Bericht,” *Mennonitische Jugendwarte* 19, no. 2 (April 1939), 32.

75. N. J. Neufeld, “Unsere Rückreise von Europa nach Amerika,” *MR* 59, no. 47 (Nov. 18, 1936), 13.

76. *MBI* 79, no. 7 (July 1932), 64.

77. *MBI* 79, no. 11 (Nov. 1932), 96.

78. B. Unruh to Abraham Braun with copy to E. Crous, E. Händiges, E. Göttner, Feb. 5, 1944, 2, letter, folder 1944, *Vereinigung* Collection, MFS.

Pursuit of that goal required Unruh to steer a path between what he called the “arrogant,” enthusiastic Anabaptist tendencies first displayed in sixteenth-century Münster, and the all-too-familiar Mennonite pattern of flight from the world as the “quiet in the land.”⁷⁹

Unruh’s unique gifts on behalf of the Russian Mennonites were on full display again with the peak of the “Holodomor,” or man-made famine, in the Soviet Republic of Ukraine. As early as April 1930 Unruh reported to MCC and CMBC that “disaster threatens the *entire* Mennonite population. . . . According to reliable estimates there is a serious threat of famine in all Russia within a year.”⁸⁰

In January or February 1933, hundreds of Mennonite families in the USSR wrote “letters of petition” (*Bittbriefe*) to Benjamin H. Unruh and, in some cases, to Mennonite relief committees in Rotterdam, Hillsboro (Kan.) or Rosthern (Sask.).⁸¹ Between January and April 1933, for example, CMBC received over 7,000 letters such letters.⁸² That year, CMBC funneled \$21,377 through Unruh for famine relief.⁸³ This coincided with Hitler’s rise to power who, on the recommendation of his Foreign Ministry, donated RM 1,000 in July 1933 to the aid organization “Brothers in Need” as one of his first official acts.⁸⁴ “Brothers in Need” was chaired by the government-compliant German Red Cross and Benjamin Unruh sat on its board. The Red Cross responded:

The fact that the Reich Chancellor and Führer has placed himself at the head of the relief organization with a considerable sum of money will cheer the readiness of all Germans within the borders of the Reich to also give. Moreover, it will give a ray of hope to the hundreds of thousands of German Volk comrades far away—in Ukraine, Molotschna, Crimea, Caucasus and on the Volga—to be

79. B. Unruh to Christian Neff, Oct. 5, 1936, 1b, Schowalter Correspondence, folder 1929-1945, MFSt.

80. B. Unruh to Levi Mumaw and David Toews, April 1, 1930, 2, letter, IX-03-02, box 2, file 1, MCC-A.

81. “Bittbriefe aus Russland bzw. Ukraine Anfang der 30er Jahre aus dem Archiv von Professor Benjamin Unruh Karlsruhe,” 7/Nl Unruh, Stadtarchiv Karlsruhe, collected by Hermann Schirmacher, https://chort.square7.ch/FB/BUBBrieft_Karlsruhe.php.

82. Cf. Helmut Harder, *David Toews was here, 1870-1947* (Winnipeg, Man.: CMU, 2006), 208.

83. David Töws, “Immigration und Nothilfe,” *Bericht über die zweiunddreißigste Allgemeine Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada, 1934*, ed. Johann G. Rempel (Rosthern, Sask.: D. H. Epp, 1934), 73.

84. German Red Cross President to the Reich Chancellor (Hitler), July 15, 1933, “Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland,” 192, BArch; Cf. e.g., Ewald Ammende, “Eine Pflicht der Nation. Zur Tragödie des Rußlanddeutschtums,” *Rigaschen Rundschau*, Erste Beilage, no. 54 (March 8, 1934); “Der Untergang der deutschen Bauern in Rußland”—state press directive for June 30, 1933 in *N-S Presseanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit*, I:1933, ed. Gabriele Toepser-Ziegler (New York: Saur, 1984), 45.

assured of your personal knowledge and readiness to help in their desolate misery. May I therefore thank you—also in the name of these hundreds of thousands.⁸⁵

Unruh was listed as one of the representatives recommended by the Foreign Ministry to greet Hitler, though Hitler's schedule apparently did not allow for the meeting.⁸⁶

Unruh also raised significant relief support from Mennonite congregations in Germany, which was sent to the USSR through the organization. In the Soviet Union, the Soviet intelligence service (GPU) denounced this aid—sent “in the name of Christ” to a racially-specific group—as “Hitler-help.”⁸⁷ But the new National Socialist government was clearly willing to use its diplomatic influence to send aid to Soviet Germans in order to embarrass Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.⁸⁸

Unruh was convinced that Nazi Germany did not cross the line of restricting the life and ministry of the church. He and others were satisfied that freedom to proclaim the Gospel, freedom of conscience, and freedom from swearing oaths was protected under Hitler. Moreover, along with most Mennonite leaders in Germany, Unruh shared the perception that Germany as a nation had benefited from the totalitarian order of human life introduced by National Socialism, including some coordination of state and church for the restoration and advancement of the German Volk. Unruh coached the most senior Nazi member among Mennonites, Daniel Dettweiler—a member of the Munich Mennonite Church—to be alert for opportunities and to aim for what is possible with the systems at hand.

Whoever knows Mennonite history, especially Prussian-Russian Mennonite history—but also the American story too—knows that here too the apostle's advice is relevant: “Make the most of the opportunity!” [cf. Col. 4:5; Eph.5:16]. Practically speaking, we must see clearly that the NSDAP with its totalitarian orientation will never add “footnotes” [i.e., exceptions for Mennonites] to its measures. To pressure the Reich for a formal or juridical regulation on our matter, with publications and loud announcements, is purely impossible. It

85. German Red Cross President to the Reich Chancellor (Hitler), July 15, 1933.

86. Herr Stieve, German Foreign Affairs to the State Secretary for the Reich Chancellery, June 22, 1933, “Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland,” R 43-1/141, 185, BArch.

87. “No. 87, Einfluss der Nationalistischen Organisationen und der deutschen Konsulate,” May 22, 1934, in *Die Mennoniten in der Ukraine und im Gebiet Orenburg: Dokumente aus Archiven in Kiev und Orenburg*, ed. and trans. Gerhard Hildebrandt (Göttingen: Göttinger Arbeitskreis, 2006), 69f.; 73. Cf. Liesel Quiring-Unruh, “‘Brüder in Not.’ Vor fünfzig Jahren: Wie Deutschland den Rußlanddeutschen zu helfen versuchte,” *MBI* 6/17 (July 1979), 105.

88. Cf. recommendation by Herbert von Dirksen to German Foreign Ministry, July 3, 1933, telegram, “Die deutschstämmigen Kolonisten in Rußland,” R 43-1/141, 188, BArch.

is of no value to bring everything to naught by insisting on these things.⁸⁹

Unruh was not naïve about Mennonite history and thought. Together with other German Mennonite leaders, he pointed to the work of sixteenth-century Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier who argued that bearing arms and holding high government offices was permissible for the Christian.⁹⁰ In 1930, after a month of working closely with Unruh on the refugee and resettlement crisis and reading some of his materials, Harold Bender, recommended that Unruh be immediately appointed as associate editor of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, a journal Bender had founded three years earlier. Unruh is an “able scholar and a deep theologian,” Bender wrote to Goshen College President S. C. Yoder. He “has remained a strong conservative thinker, known for his stand against liberalism and evolution. It is beyond question,” Bender continued, “that he will fit into our point of view as a conservative Mennonite.”⁹¹

Missiologically, Unruh was confident that Mennonites *qua* Mennonites had a positive contribution to make in Hitler’s Reich—even to Hitler himself. In 1936, after three years of Nazi rule, Unruh suggested to pastor and scholar Christian Neff that “Hitler’s spirit is open to the truth of the gospel. But he will never be able to perceive this gospel in its broad generosity unless a great redeeming word of the message comes to him from the ‘core troops,’” as Unruh understood church at its best. “The old [theological] liberalism truly cannot help us. . . . And the old pietism, too, has always failed.”⁹² Thus, he recommended theological pragmatism, especially in working with the Nazi state. He rejected any regime-critical approach as “headstrong and therefore ultimately unevangelical.” His method, he told his friend Abraham Braun, was to trust in God, trust Christ, but also to work with influential authorities earnestly and without fear, and, ultimately, to trust them as well.⁹³ On all matters, authorities

89. B. Unruh to Daniel Dettweiler, Feb. 9, 1939, 1f., letter, Schowalter Correspondence, folder 1929-1945, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle Weierhof [hereafter MFSt].

90. On Hubmaier and German Mennonites, cf. B. Unruh, “Die Mennonitische Gemeindekirche,” in *Viele Glieder—Ein Leib: Kleinere Kirchen, Freikirchen, und ähnliche Gemeinschaften in Selbstdarstellungen*, ed. Ulrich Kunz (Stuttgart: Quell, 1953), 114; Emil Händiges, “Gemeinde,” *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, ed. C. Hege and C. Neff (Frankfurt a.M./Weierhof, 1937), 2:55; Emil Händiges, *Die Lehre der Mennoniten in Geschichte und Gegenwart nach den Quellen dargestellt nebst einem Überblick über die heutige Verbreitung und Organisation der mennonitischen Gemeinschaft* (Kaiserslautern, 1921), 54; 59. See also Balthasar Hubmaier, “On the Sword (1527),” in *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, trans. and ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 1989), 492-523.

91. H. S. Bender to S. C. Yoder, March 3, 1930, letter, IX-03-01, box 3, file 3a0004, MCC-A.

92. B. Unruh to C. Neff, Oct. 5, 1936, 1; 2b.

93. B. Unruh to Abraham Braun, Feb. 5, 1944, letter, folder 1944, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

and offices “must be able to trust us unconditionally, morally and politically . . . and then everything else will then fall into place,” he advised MCC’s relief commissioner M. C. Lehman in Berlin some years later.⁹⁴ Lehman naively took Unruh’s advice in dealing with Nazi Germany: “I feel with you that we must continue to consult the German authorities on all matters and retain the most friendly and cooperative relations with them.”⁹⁵

MCC AND PARAGUAY

In Bender’s final report of MCC operations in Germany for 1930, he highlighted the responsibility of the “Mennonite Church through the Mennonite Central Committee” for the material, spiritual, educational, and cultural development of the new Fernheim Colony in Paraguay.

We have assumed full responsibility for the welfare of the colony not only with respect to the German government, but in the eyes of the entire Mennonite world. . . . Our investment of more than \$100,000 in the project also indicates the financial stake we have there.⁹⁶

The debt to the German government which the effort had incurred, however, was much higher (RM 943,676.80, or approximately \$225,000),⁹⁷ and this bound Germany together with MCC to the colony until the end of the war.

Tensions with MCC were inevitable. The Fernheim Mennonites were equally dependent on both Germany—which held their travel debt—and MCC, which supported their settlement. Not only had the German government embraced the colonists, but the idea that they were forming a new Mennonite state (*Mennonitenstaat*), as first articulated by Bender and Unruh, had encouraged the colonists to further merge Mennonite faith with German culture.⁹⁸ The latter soon took on racial and anti-Semitic dimensions. As early as 1931 Bender informed the MCC executive committee that “something is grievously at fault in the colony.” A letter from “a certain Kliewer, . . . a settler in the colony” had been published

94. B. Unruh to M.C. Lehman, Feb. 12, 1940, letter, IX-19-01, box 3, 3/26, MCC Europe and North Africa, MC Lehman Files, US Corr. 1940-42, MCC-A.

95. M. C. Lehman to B. Unruh, Feb. 13, 1940, letter, IX-19-01, box 3, 3/26, MCC Europe and North Africa, MC Lehman Files, US Corr. 1940-42, MCC-A

96. H. S. Bender to MCC Executive, “Report IV: Final and Summary Report,” 3.

97. B. Unruh, “Verzweifelte Selbsthilfe,” 113.

98. Cf. John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933-1945* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 1999), and Peter P. Klassen, *Die deutsch-völkische Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim Chaco, Paraguay 1933-1945. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der auslandsdeutschen Mennoniten während des Dritten Reiches* (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1990).

that included an attack on MCC's representative, Bishop Tobias Hershey, claiming he "was of Jewish extraction."⁹⁹

If MCC was financially responsible for establishing the colony, Unruh was their mentor and connection to the "motherland." When a small anti-*völkische*, anti-Nazi movement developed in Fernheim and caught the attention of German officials in 1936-1937, for example, Unruh shared with German authorities how he had earlier ordered the colony administrator—who was also "very enthusiastic about the Führer"—to warn a certain teacher and preacher to "refrain from all politics in his sermons."¹⁰⁰ Unruh's counsel for successfully navigating these two identities, as Mennonites and as Germans, included a Christian recommendation of the "Heil Hitler" greeting:

"Heil Hitler" means that one heartily wishes the head of the new Germany *Heil* (well-being or salvation). Above all, believing Christians think of "salvation from God," which the Chancellor and Führer honestly confesses, and for which we cannot be thankful enough. Just think of Stalin! . . . In the Hitler greeting "Hitler" is in the dative case. Have you never read 1 Timothy 2:2? . . . Adolf Hitler wants nothing for himself, everything only for his *Volk*. I honor him with my whole heart, and I love him as one can only love a sovereign (*Fürst* [prince, sovereign] means "first" among his people!). Only history will reveal what God through Adolf Hitler has granted the German Volk in its entirety, including Germans in host countries, and what he will still grant to Europe and the world as well. Hitler is the great combatant of Stalin.¹⁰¹

While on an MCC stipend, Unruh managed and grew the relationship of trust between German officials and the Mennonite colony. For example, he offered to share with state and party officials letters written by Fritz Kliewer, a Mennonite doctoral student in Germany, to Fernheim leaders as an authentic documentation of the genuine *völkisch* sentiment that had been growing in colony.¹⁰² Kliewer wrote one of these letters on the eve of Hitler's 1936 re-election and described the euphoria around Hitler's speeches:

99. H. S. Bender to MCC Executive, June 15, 1931, letter, IX-01-03, box 9, file 6-0005, MCC-A; Tobias Hershey to Levi Mumaw, Harold Bender and Orié Miller, "Official Report of Investigation Made in the Russian Colony of the Paraguayan Chaco," March 24, 1931, IX-03-01, box 1, file 4, MCC-A. Cf. also "Nachrichten aus Kolonie Fernheim," *Menno-Blatt* 2, no. 3 (March 1931), 4.

100. B. Unruh, Dec. 8, 1934, extracted in B. Unruh to Reitzenstein, Jan. 29, 1937, 6f.

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Ibid.*

When one witnesses such weeks in Germany, one is involuntarily drawn into the Führer's spell and you cannot help but profess allegiance [to?] National Socialism. I listened to almost all of the Führer's speeches. . . . A response of indescribable jubilation roared out everywhere, which often did not want to end. All the speeches were imbued with a sincere will for peace. I particularly liked the parts where he spoke of his responsibility towards the Volk and to the Almighty and "not to any international court."¹⁰³

This letter went on to remind the colonists of what was crucial. "National Socialism and communism are two opposing powers," Kliever insisted. "As Prof. Unruh has aptly said, 'Adolf Hitler is the great opponent of Stalin,' and that is why he is also the God-sent leader of the German people."¹⁰⁴ Unruh assured concerned German officials that "it is a serious concern for me to help educate our people [in Fernheim] to be good Germans. You may rest assured that I will always do my duty fully in this regard. . . . Heil Hitler!"¹⁰⁵ Where there were opponents, Unruh stood them down.

We stand one hundred percent with Adolf Hitler in his God-given calling to lead Germany out of chaos and thus also to support and protect Europe and the world against Bolshevik ruin. One must be a child not to see this!¹⁰⁶

Because economic progress in Paraguay remained elusive, colonists were increasingly convinced that their ability to repay their debt was hopeless. The idea of returning to Germany was "very much alive" among many young adults, even as Germany was preparing for war.¹⁰⁷ But on this point, German government offices, MCC, and Unruh were united in their opposition to such "agitation."¹⁰⁸ Both the German government and

103. Fritz Kliever, "Aus Deutschland," *Kämpfende Jugend (Menno-Blatt)* 3, no. 5 (June 1936), 3. Cf. B. Unruh to J. Siemens, Jan. 4, 1936, MS 416, folder B. H. Unruh Writings, MLA.

104. Kliever, "Aus Deutschland," 4.

105. Reported in B. Unruh to Reitzenstein, Jan. 29, 1937, 7.

106. B. Unruh to J. Siemens, Jan. 4, 1936.

107. Friedrich Kliever, "Rußlanddeutsche in Paraguay," *Deutschtum im Ausland* 22 no. 5 (May 1939), 295. — <https://dlibra.bibliotekaelblaska.pl/dlibra/publication/70318/edition/65378/>.

108. Cf. Dietrich Rempel, "'Studienfahrt' nach Deutschland," in *Auf den Spuren der Väter. Eine Jubiläumsschrift der Kolonie Friesland in Ost Paraguay, 1937-1987*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff, (Asuncion: Verwaltung der Kolonie Friesland, 1987), 167-171; *Gemeinsam unterwegs. 75 Jahre Kolonie Friesland 1937-2012*, ed. Beate Penner (San Pedro, PY: Verwaltung der Kolonie Friesland, 2012), 125-129. On the experiences of some of the young adults in Germany, cf. Justina Epp Goering, *Eine Familiengeschichte und eigene Erlebnisse* (Nanaimo, B.C.: Self-published, 2001), 50.

MCC were worried about the economic future of the colonies,¹⁰⁹ and in this context Unruh successfully petitioned the Nazi state for interest reductions, ongoing cultural support, and, ultimately, forgiveness of the entire debt.¹¹⁰

After a decade in Paraguay, the colony largely adopted Unruh's dualism—that is, to openly and earnestly confess a Mennonite identity, as well as to grow into the German character of the Third Reich in word and in deed.¹¹¹ While Unruh's coaching troubled MCC leaders, they were slow to confront it. In 1940, Bender met with Unruh and made clear that MCC "did not endorse his policies" and "did not wish his line to be followed in Fernheim." Later Bender felt Unruh had "cleverly exploited" this meeting for his Paraguayan correspondence, giving "the impression that the MCC was supporting Unruh in his [Nazi] attitudes."¹¹²

Unruh fanned these pro-Nazi sparks with dozens of articles in Canadian Mennonite papers like *Der Bote* and *Mennonitische Rundschau*, which were read in Paraguay. Writing as a Mennonite biblical scholar, theologian, and historian—with threads on cultural, racial, and political German identity—Unruh reminded his followers in North and South America that Christians never live in a vacuum, but that they are always situated within an ethnic group (*Volk*), and that each *Volk* has its unique divine mission. Unruh never tired in arguing that "we must cultivate our Germanness with all our energy.

It is one of the most elementary rights of a human being . . . to be a member of his people, to speak one's mother tongue, to pray in it, to love one's "old country," as the Americans so beautifully say, without being in the least unfaithful to the host country. . . . I can find no contradiction between the original Biblical Christianity and genuine ethnic identity (*Volkstum*). . . . The Scripture knows and recognizes ethnic (*völkisch*) character and peculiarity as an instrument

109. Cf. Orié Miller to Ernst Kundt, Aug. 1, 1939, letter, and B. Unruh to Orié Miller and H. S. Bender, July 18, 1939, letter, from Mennonite Central Committee and other Correspondence 1931-39, file 1, 1939, Unruh, B.H. Karlsruhe, MCC-A.

110. B. Unruh to the Reich Ministry of Interior (Finance), Jan. 31, 1940, R 2/11822, vol. 2, Reichsfinanzministerium, 1931-1942, BArch.

111. "In addition to our Mennonitism (*Mennonitentum*), we want to be and remain good Germans. Just as we have held ourselves pure from foreign influences in Russia, so also we wish to confess faithfully and openly Germanness (*Deutschtum*), including the Germanness of the Third Reich, with words and also with deeds." Cited in Jakob Warkentin, "Wilhelmy, Herbert," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*.—https://www.menonitica.org/lexikon/?W:Wilhelmy%2C_Herbert.

112. Cf. H. S. Bender, "Report of a visit to Mennonite Relief Work in Europe, Aug. 1940," HM1-278, box 52, folder 17, Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana (hereafter GC-A); also H. S. Bender to Orié Miller, 16 May 1944, letter, HM1-278, box 52, folder 27, GC-A. On Bender's visit to Europe in 1940, cf. Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1887-1962* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 1998), 289f.

with which God's reality as Creator and Redeemer is forever praised anew with increasing authenticity.¹¹³

As historian Frank H. Epp summarized Unruh's articles, "[b]eing true to God implies being true to one's *Volk*, which in turn requires faithfulness to the nation."¹¹⁴

Nazi Germany regarded Mennonites as part of a larger German ethnic fellowship (*Volksgemeinschaft*), and Unruh was adamant that Mennonites had a global role in the quest to purify and sanctify German racial-ethnic identity. In Paraguay, Unruh's voice was authoritative: Bender was increasingly incensed that Unruh "repeatedly recommended the articles published by him in the Canadian Mennonite paper as the policy for Fernheim to follow."¹¹⁵

By 1944 Bender commiserated with Orié O. Miller, MCC executive secretary, "how all of us were greatly disturbed that we should be retaining Unruh on our payroll while he was openly agitating against nonresistance. Our failure to repudiate Unruh resulted in a magnification of his influence."¹¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, MCC chair P. C. Hiebert conceded "that Brother B. H. Unruh wholeheartedly supported the Nazi movement," and if MCC "erred anywhere it was in letting some support get to him when we already knew how he stood."¹¹⁷ This concern came to head that summer when Orié Miller was interrogated by American federal investigators who were concerned about the pro-Nazi sentiments in the Mennonite colony in Paraguay and mentioned Unruh by name. Miller told the investigators

. . . that a true Mennonite takes no part in politics and no Mennonite ever runs for public office. So far as possible they attempt to live in a political vacuum; the country the Mennonites happen to live in is of minor significance to them. . . . The basis of Mennonite religion

113. B. Unruh, "Grundsätzliche Fragen (Kirche und Staat)," *MR* 59, no. 40 (Sept. 30), 2.

114. Frank H. Epp, "An Analysis of Germanism and National Socialism in the Immigrant Newspaper of a Canadian Minority Group, the Mennonites, in the 1930s" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1965), 227, 228, 229. Cf. for example, B. Unruh, "Grundsätzliche Fragen (Kirche und Staat)."

115. H. S. Bender to Orié O. Miller, May 16, 1944, 2, letter, HM1-278, box 52, folder 27, GC-A.

116. H. S. Bender to Orié Miller, May 16, 1944, 2, letter, HM1-278, box 52, folder 27, GC-A.

117. P. C. Hiebert to Orié Miller [?], May 2, 1944, letter, excerpted in Office of Chief Naval Operation, Navy Department, Intelligence Division, "Intelligence Report," Re: Paraguay—Political Forces—People—Foreign Infiltration—Foreign Groups [interrogation of Orié O. Miller], Aug. 7, 1944, 4, FBI reference: 100-57384-9; copy in MS 416, folder "Paraguay," MLA.—https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_416/.

teaches loyalty to God, almost to the exclusion of loyalty to country.¹¹⁸

The interrogators were convinced by Miller's account of this "Mennonite principle," though he knew it was not a perspective shared by Dutch, German, or Russian Mennonites, let alone by Unruh who, after all, had been a candidate for the "German Farmers of Tavrida Party" in Russia in 1917.¹¹⁹ Miller's truncated or fabricated account of a "true" Mennonite principle simplified a complex reality. At the same time, some Paraguayan Mennonites had become convinced that the most recent MCCers were serving as agents and political instruments of the American government under the cloak of religion. Many more were incensed by the duplicity and paternalism of MCC leadership, knowing that thousands of young Mennonite men in Canada and the United States had joined the military.¹²⁰

UNRUH AND NORTH AMERICAN SUPPORT

MCC's relationship with Unruh became increasingly ambiguous after the Mennonite World Conference in The Netherlands in 1936. As early as 1935 Bender's mentor and father-in-law John Horsch had given up on Unruh, complaining that he was "such a staunch friend of Hitler;"¹²¹ and again in 1936: "He is out and out for Hitler"¹²²—an opinion explicitly documented in the Mennonite press. Unruh's many articles in *Der Bote* and the *Mennonitische Rundschau* from 1935 to 1939 were penned, moreover, in an "extremely polemical tone," as historian David G. Rempel recalled. But with powerful allies in key Canadian pulpits, "few dared to openly differ with Unruh's interpretation of historical events."¹²³

Nevertheless, criticism of Unruh in international Mennonite circles was becoming more open by 1936. Unruh lived from a small stipend that had

118. Office of Chief Naval Operation, "Intelligence Report," 3.

119. Cf. Unruh and Willms, "Wie organisieren wir Mennoniten uns für die Nationalversammlung."

120. N.n., "Das Mennonitische Zentralkomitee als politisches Werkzeug" [1944]. From MS 139, folder 23, MLA.—https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_139/folder_23_mcc_als_werkzeug/. See Ted Regehr, "Lost Sons: Canadian Mennonite Soldiers of World War II," *MQR* 66, no. 4 (1992), 462ff. On this episode, cf. Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?*, ch. 7.

121. John Horsch to H. S. Bender, Oct. 12, 1935, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 6, folder 2 (John Horsch, 1935-1938), GC-A.

122. John Horsch to H. S. Bender, Nov. 25, 1936, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 6, folder 2 (John Horsch, 1935-1938), GC-A.

123. David G. Rempel, Recollections, summer 1939, 65-69, MS Coll. 329 2B Annex, box 36, file 29, David Rempel Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto. The Schönwiese First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, for example, was a centre for pro-Nazi Mennonite opinion; cf. *MR* 61, no. 5 (Feb. 2, 1938), 3, 10; *Winnipeg Free Press* (Jan. 30, 1939), 3; *Winnipeg Evening Tribune* (Jan. 30, 1939), 3.

fluctuated over the years based on German, Dutch, Canadian, and U.S. Mennonite support. In letters to leaders across his network, Unruh complained about these financial arrangements. To David Toews, CMBC chair, for example, he wrote: "You blame Bender and Bender blames you. What should I do?"¹²⁴ At the 1936 Mennonite World Conference an arrangement was struck with MCC agreeing to contribute half of Unruh's stipend. This agreement, however, never held, and MCC's payments continued to be late or partial.¹²⁵ Moreover Unruh experienced MCC's Orié Miller as a "hard-nosed American businessman,"¹²⁶ and warned that "Berlin authorities will not understand" if Mennonites did not support his [i.e., Unruh's] office.¹²⁷

In May 1938 Henry F. Garber, a newly-elected member of the MCC executive committee traveled to Africa via Europe and spent a night at Unruh's home. "It was at Karlsruhe," Garber reported, "that we first heard the greeting 'Heil Hitler.' Even Bro. Unruh used it on one occasion. There was a political demonstration in the depot at Karlsruhe while we waited for our train that was quite impressive."¹²⁸ Garber's letter offered no critique. Unruh and other German Mennonite leaders had never hidden their political sympathies. Praise for Germany's territorial expansion into Austria and the triumphant entry of the Führer Adolf Hitler, for example, topped the Easter message in the April 1938 edition of the *Mennonitische Blätter*. "To the throne of the Most High," wrote the editors, "we raise our hearts and hands for our Führer and for our whole people (*Volk*) with the petition, "May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our ancestors . . ." (1 Kings 8:57f.).¹²⁹ In 1938 Unruh could even boast that an "overwhelming majority of the elders and ministers in West Prussia and Danzig [were] members of the [Nazi] Party."¹³⁰

Not surprisingly, by summer of 1938 both the Americans and the Dutch took steps to reduce their contribution to support Unruh's role—to the

124. B. Unruh to David Toews, Aug. 7, 1935, letter, CMBC Records, vol. 1315, file 890, B. H. Unruh Collection 1936-1938, MHA.

125. J. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 341; 355n.

126. B. Unruh to David Toews, Sept. 14, 1938, 2, letter, CMBC Records, vol. 1315, file 889, B. H. Unruh Collection 1936-1938, MHA.

127. B. Unruh to O. Miller, July 29, 1938, 2, letter, MCC CPS and other Correspondence, 1931-39, file 1, MCC-A.

128. H. Garber to H. S. Bender, May 22, 1938, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, Box 5, folder 15 (G Miscellaneous 1931-1938), 3, GC-A.

129. Emil Händiges, "Das ganze Deutschland soll es sein," *MBI* 85, no. 4 (April 1938) 1.

130. "Bericht über die Verhandlung im Braunen Haus in München betreffend die Regelung der Eidesfrage," recorded by Gustav Reimer, July 4, 1938, 3, folder 1938, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

chagrin of Unruh's Vereinigung executive colleagues. As Abram Braun reported:

The Americans are undoubtedly aiming to no longer participate in the financing of the Karlsruhe office at all. Brother O. Miller may have said in Berlin that everything should remain as it was; but already from Switzerland he gave the order to Holland to reduce the American contribution considerably, starting August 1. At the same time, Brother Altmann informed Brother Unruh that Holland will also reduce its contribution by at least half as of January 1, 1939. . . . We must look for a solution in the committee. We cannot let Brother Unruh fall; especially not now.¹³¹

The movement away from Unruh was particularly insulting for the German Mennonites who recognized that the German government—acknowledging the poor economic conditions of the Gran Chaco—had once again forgiven the interest payments that were due in 1937 and 1938, thereby making the loan interest free.¹³² Unruh was confident that

the times are coming when our organization will again need me in particular. . . . One should not squeeze a lemon and then throw it away. That is the Mennonite method; . . . I do not want to have this happen in connection with my person.¹³³

In the fall of 1938 both Harold Bender and Samuel Mosiman—a General Conference Mennonite leader and retired Bluffton College president—asked if Unruh was an “agent of Berlin.” In a letter to his friend David Toews, Unruh did not deny the charge, but rather accused his accusers of demagoguery—and in Mosiman's case, of a suspected connection with freemasonry, a favorite Nazi target. The malicious and naive opposition to Germany in America, Unruh suspected, was coming largely from “the Jewish press,” and bore testimony to the “boundless ignorance” and “folly” that went hand-in-hand with American exceptionalism.¹³⁴

American Mennonites were especially concerned about the German Mennonite support for military service. Unruh understood that “tension and opposition” on the issue of military service would always be present for Old Mennonites in North America, but he argued that these disagreements should not be a reason to break fellowship.

131. Abram Braun to Vereinigung Executive, Aug. 1, 1938, 1f., folder 1938, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

132. D.R.d.F. to Mayer, Oct. 26, 1938, R 2/11822, vol. 2, Reichsfinanzministerium, 1931-1942, BArch. <https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/invenio/direktlink/79493e59-9bf4-4b08-a091-ddca426897fd/>.

133. B. Unruh to David Toews, Sept. 14, 1938, 5, letter, CMBC Records, vol. 1315, file 889, B. H. Unruh Collection, 1936-1938, MHA.

134. B. Unruh to David Toews, Sept. 14, 1938, 3.

Americans regulate their relations with governments themselves, and so do we here [in Germany]. All these years the *Rundschau* published attacks against the German Mennonites. . . . Our congregations here were often deeply indignant and grieved. The American interventions always seem to be permitted—God-ordained, inviolable, and irrevocable. And yet when we propose even a most moderate fraternal disagreement, then the apple of God’s eye is harmed [Zechariah 2:8]. Things can’t continue in this way.¹³⁵

In truth, MCC continued to benefit from Unruh’s high-level connections even as MCC leaders grew more concerned about his unapologetic Nazism.

INVASION OF POLAND AND ALSACE AND MCC RELIEF

After months of silent negotiation, on August 23, 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a ten-year non-aggression treaty that also redefined the borders of their spheres of influence. The reduced tensions immediately improved the situation of Mennonites and other ethnic Germans in the USSR. Within weeks German and Soviet armies entered and divided Poland. Hitler’s racial resettlement plans envisioned ethnic Germans moving into the Warthegau—the German-annexed region of Poland—including the full evacuation of its Jewish population and the gradual removal of Poles. The implications of these political events were stunning for German Mennonites who gathered on November 22, 1939, for a conference in Ludwigshafen.¹³⁶ Unruh held his brethren spell-bound as he spoke of their people in the East “whose fate was being decisively transformed at the present time.” Privy to confidential German government communiques, Unruh shared a glimpse of the Reich’s unprecedented resettlement plan, based on race and nationality, which could bring hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans from the Bolshevik east into Warthegau. This world-historical event, Unruh claimed, would “with certainty” include “60,000 to 80,000 Mennonites” from Russia.¹³⁷

A memorandum of the Nazi Office of Racial Policy days later anticipated that large numbers of ethnic Germans from Canada and “primarily Mennonites” from Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, and Mexico would also desire to “return home” and could be settled in the newly-annexed territory of the Warthegau. Ethnic Germans would be given generous space; resident Poles will be forced off their land to serve

135. *Ibid.*, 5.

136. Cf. “Bericht,” in *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten* [hereafter *GBl*] 71, no. 1 (Jan. 1940), 3.

137. *Ibid.*

exclusively as laborers and servants of the ruling German racial class. A 1939 Party memo was optimistic that a new generation of Mennonites would gradually grow out of their narrow “confessionally-conditioned way of life and no longer be distinguishable from the larger German population.”¹³⁸ Unruh joined the larger chorus, but emphasized that MCC “must be treated fairly”;¹³⁹ that is, Germany’s annexation of western Poland would bring the question about the “return” of Mennonites from South America back on the table—which would directly impact MCC’s investment in Fernheim.

German Mennonites greeted the military annexation of Polish land for German “living space” (*Lebensraum*) as something more than political: it was a new movement of God in and with the German *Volk*. In a column in the South German Mennonite periodical *Gemeindeblatt* in July 1940, the anonymous author reminded readers—“confident of victory”—that this “awakening in the *Volk*” and their current existential battle were consistent with the divine ordering of creation (*schöpfungsbedingt*). “Something new is in the process of becoming here, according to God’s will and armaments. For it is He who measures out space and the paths of nations (*Völker*) and determines their borders.” The article included a quote from a soldier on the front: “One thing is certain: behind the work of the Führer stands the Almighty One. . . . How manifestly we see God’s hand working on us, our *Volk*, and our Führer! We have reason to give thanks and to pray.”¹⁴⁰ The vision to resettle the Warthegau was a grand utopian project to reorganize “living space” according to the principle of nationality, which would “solve the minorities problem.”¹⁴¹

138. E. Wetzel and G. Hecht, NSDAP Office of Racial Policy, Nov. 25, 1939, “Denkschrift: Die Frage der Behandlung der Bevölkerung der ehemaligen polnischen Gebiete nach rassenpolitischen Gesichtspunkten,” in *Hitlers Ostkrieg und die deutsche Siedlungspolitik: Die Zusammenarbeit von Wehrmacht, Wirtschaft und SS*, ed. Rolf-Dieter Müller (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1991), 122f.; 124. With regards to “tens of thousands if not hundred thousand” German resettlers from Russia, German officials expressed some concern about the political perspectives of the youth who had been raised wholly with “Bolshevik-communist ideology”; cf. *ibid.*, 123. Himmler’s office also expected a return of Mennonites from overseas; cf. *Der Reichsführer-SS und Chef der Deutschen Polizei, Meldungen aus dem Reich*, April 29, 1940, IV, 10, Zentral Parteiarchiv der SED, Reichssicherheitshauptamt, Abteilung IV, R58/3543, vol. 46, April 1940, BArch-Lichterfelde.

139. B. Unruh’s letter to district mayors, teachers and churches in Fernheim and Friesland, April 28, 1940, as well as the response by the Friesland district mayor to Unruh, Aug. 15, 1940, in *Auf den Spuren der Väter. Eine Jubiläumsschrift der Kolonie Friesland in Ost Paraguay, 1937-1987*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff (Asuncion, PY: Verwaltung der Kolonie Friesland, 1987), 172-176.

140. *GBl* 70, no. 7 (July 1940), 27.

141. Cf. Casteel, “Russian Germans in the Interwar German National Imaginary,” 463. Similarly Unruh, “Grundsätzliche Fragen (Kirche und Staat).”

At the Conference of South German Mennonites gathering in November 1940, Unruh reported on a stream of letters from Mennonites globally on the “homecoming of ethnic Germans.”

This, too, is how we may think about our people (*Volk*) before God. God needs this people, “the Middle Kingdom,” in the heart of Europe. Now our land is experiencing the homecoming of its children by the hundreds of thousands, a return of unprecedented scale. The tragedy of those distant from home . . . is coming to an end. It is high time, that the children return home!¹⁴²

The Mennonite congregations of Deutsch-Wymysle and Deutsch-Kazun were among those German Volhynians and Galicians on the eastern borders who were “led back into the home of the fathers.” In May 1940, their elder Gerhard Ratzlaff praised this return in the Mennonite press as the “the great achievement of our Führer.”¹⁴³ With Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler’s encouragement, the German Foreign Institute (DAI) was deployed to document the new racial resettlements. In a DAI booklet, staff member Walter Quiring— who, like Unruh, was a Russian Mennonite émigré, scholar, and expert on Mennonites—praised the Volhynians and Galicians as the “biologically healthiest ethnic German group with the largest number of children” per capita. Despite living for generations in the East, “intermarriages with Poles and Ukrainians hardly ever occurred among their rural population.”¹⁴⁴ Already in 1939 Quiring had helped shape the Nazi German anti-Semitic version of the ethnic-German Mennonite narrative, arguing that “countless thousands fell victim to the Bolshevik Jews’ burning hatred of Germany after 1933.”¹⁴⁵

MCC was quick to indicate interest in providing relief to Polish war sufferers in German occupied territory. In November 1939, MCC appointed Martin C. Lehman as MCC’s relief commissioner to the areas controlled by Germany. With Unruh on their payroll, MCC commissioned Unruh to use his “energy and time in furthering the new program of the MCC,” to help Lehman “make the necessary contacts in Berlin” and to “constructively advise him” based on Unruh’s “rich past experience.”¹⁴⁶ Lehman had no experience in Germany, did not know the Mennonite

142. B. Unruh, Nov. 20, 1940, Ludwigshafen, summarized in *GBI* 72, no. 2 (Feb. 1941), 6.

143. “Bericht,” *GBI* 71, no. 11 (1 Nov. 1940), 42.

144. Walter Quiring, “Die Deutschen in Galizien und Wolhynien. Ein abgeschlossenes Kapitel aussendeutscher Volksgeschichte,” *Deutschtum im Ausland* 23 (1940), 6-10.—<https://chortitza.org/pdf/0v771.pdf>.

145. Walter Quiring, “Die Urenkel kehren heim: Die Massenflucht der rußlanddeutschen Bauern 1929,” *Deutschtum im Ausland* 22, no. 5 (May 1939), 277.—<https://dlibra.bibliotekaelblaska.pl/dlibra/publication/70318/edition/65378/content>.

146. O. Miller to B. Unruh, Nov. 15, 1939, letter, IX-19-01, box 3, 3/26, MCC Europe and North Africa, MC Lehman Files, US Corr. 1940-42, MCC-A.

conferences and their distinctives, and had only very poor German language competency. After one early reprimand by Unruh, Lehman was quickly overwhelmed by the force of Unruh's personality and leadership style. Unruh insisted that the MCC order required Lehman not to undertake any actions, make decisions, report or publish anything about the relief work without Unruh's explicit agreement. "I will never resent any suggestion or correction you may make with reference to the work we are to do for relief in or near Germany; I will always accept your guidance cheerfully," Lehman assured Unruh. Lehman confessed that "if I should try to do this work without your guidance, I would invite disaster. Be assured brother that I will follow your advice carefully."¹⁴⁷

MCC had, in fact, informed Lehman that Unruh was their "liaison in all dealings with the German government in our interests in Germany," and instructed him that given "Unruh's ability in negotiating with the German government and other agencies" Lehman should "work in the closest cooperation with him [Unruh] in any plans for investigation of relief needs in any German controlled territories or among Polish refugees in contiguous territories that you may plan to do."¹⁴⁸ Not surprisingly Lehman not only received Unruh's assistance, but complied fully with Unruh's strategy towards the Nazi regime: "I feel with you that we must continue to consult the German authorities on all matters and retain the most friendly and cooperative relations with them."¹⁴⁹

In the spring of 1940 Germany continued its military advance into France and Holland. In response, MCC sent Bender to Europe to survey relief needs in Poland and France. Bender and Unruh met in Berlin where, among other topics, they "thoroughly discussed" MCC's growing concerns about Fernheim. According to Bender, he "made it clear to Unruh that we [MCC] did not endorse his policies and that we did not wish his line to be followed in Fernheim." But Unruh and Bender also found a new common project. Following the German invasion of Alsace, the region was incorporated into the province of Baden. Unruh had "some acquaintance" with Robert Wagner, the political leader (*Gauleiter*) of Baden and new Reich Commissioner for Alsace, who was stationed in Karlsruhe. Bender asked Unruh to contact Wagner and "make a formal

147. M. Lehman to B. Unruh, Feb. 18, 1940, letter, IX-19-01, box 3, 3/26, MCC Europe and North Africa, MC Lehman Files, US Corr. 1940-42, MCC-A.

148. MCC to M. Lehman, Nov. 15, 1939, letter, IX-19-01, box 3, 3/26, MCC Europe and North Africa, MC Lehman Files, US Corr. 1940-42, MCC-A.

149. M. Lehman to B. Unruh, Feb. 13, 1940, letter, IX-19-01, box 3, 3/26, MCC Europe and North Africa, MC Lehman Files, US Corr. 1940-42, MCC-A.

personal application in the name of the MCC" for permission to open a child-feeding operation at Strasbourg.¹⁵⁰

Unruh was a known figure in Karlsruhe. Earlier that year the rector of the Karlsruhe Technical University petitioned the province to appoint Unruh to a chair in Cultural Policy and Worldview Studies, praising him as "a man with very high qualities—especially from the National Socialist point of view." The request was made "in full awareness of [the rector's] responsibility to the Party" and in his capacity as provincial party Führer-of-professors (*Gaudozentrenführer*).¹⁵¹ Unruh believed that his refusal to register as "God-believing" (*Gottgläubig*)—a Nazi-era term for those who had left the church—scuttled the application.¹⁵² Bender later complained that Unruh had "cleverly exploited" their meeting in his correspondence to Paraguay, in order to give pro-Nazi leader Fritz Kliever "the impression that the MCC is supporting Unruh in his [Nazi] attitudes."¹⁵³ Bender clearly gave Unruh a mixed message about MCC's attitude toward him.

Only a few months later Wagner ordered the removal of all Jews from Alsace and Baden for detention in German-occupied Vichy France.¹⁵⁴ Unruh never mentioned this in his correspondence, though fifteen years later he told Bender he had "labored" on behalf of the Jews. "Ask the renowned Jewish jurist in Karlsruhe, he will tell you everything. I will go with you to meet him!!"¹⁵⁵

UKRAINE AND WARTHEGAU

On June 22, 1941, Hitler's armies invaded the Soviet Union, introducing the Führer's campaign of peace and security in Europe in the form of a Lightning War (*Blitzkrieg*). The USSR had ostensibly broken the friendship treaty with Germany and, according to Hitler, had undermined the resettlement plan of ethnic Germans. By August 17, 1941, the advancing German army had reached the Mennonite villages on the west bank of the

150. H. S. Bender, "Report of a visit to Mennonite Relief Work in Europe, Aug. 1940," HM1-278, box 52, folder 17, GC-A.

151. Rector [Rudolf Weigel], Technische Hochschule Karlsruhe, to Minister of Culture and Education, State of Baden, May 10, 1940, Benjamin H. Unruh Personalakte, S499, Schrank 2a, Fach 24, Technische Universitätsarchiv Karlsruhe (copy at MLA).

152. B. Unruh to H. S. Bender, Nov. 8, 1955, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

153. H. S. Bender to Orie Miller, May 16, 1944, letter, HM1-278, box 52, folder 27, GC-A. On Bender's visit to Europe in 1940, cf. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1887-1962*, 289f.

154. Cf. "Doc. 113, Report, dated 30 Oct. 1940, on the deportation of German Jews to southern France," (BArch, R 3001/20052, fols. 107-108), in Caroline Pearce and Andrea Löw, editors, *German Reich and Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia Sept. 1939-Sept. 1941* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 311-312.

155. B. Unruh to H. S. Bender, Nov. 8, 1955.

Dnieper. One month later, Mennonite leaders in Germany were sufficiently informed to know that “new and great tasks have presented themselves” for their larger Mennonite family, as they wished Benjamin Unruh—on his sixtieth birthday—strength “in this fateful hour. . . . May the Lord God grant the strength to fulfill them for His glory, for the blessing of our brotherhood and for the building of His kingdom in our Volk and German fatherland! Heil Hitler!”¹⁵⁶

On New Year’s Eve 1942, in the final stages of the Battle of Stalingrad, Unruh was summoned to confer directly with the Heinrich Himmler at the Führer’s headquarters at Hochwald, East Prussia. During the course of his work on behalf of Russian Mennonites throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Unruh had developed many high-level government contacts. The meeting with Himmler was arranged and prepared by *SS-Sturmbannführer* Karl Götz, principal of the Teacher Training School in Prischib,¹⁵⁷ under the direction of *SS Oberguppenführer* Lorenz.¹⁵⁸ According to Unruh’s memoirs, Himmler greeted Unruh saying, “It is a pleasure to meet the Moses of the Mennonites!”¹⁵⁹ referring to Unruh’s role in Mennonite migration—an ironic reference since hundreds of thousands of Jews had been recently murdered in Ukraine. “I have been in Ukraine [October 1942] and I have observed the people there for myself. Your Mennonites are the best,” Himmler told Unruh.¹⁶⁰ Based on his Molotschna visit, Himmler “approved of the behavior and attitude of the Mennonites.”¹⁶¹ The two spoke about a return and settlement of Russian Mennonites to Ukraine, plans for the election of an elder for Chortitza and one for

156. Emil Händiges to B. Unruh, Sept. 17, 1941, letter, folder 1941, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

157. Cf. letter by B. Unruh to Rudolf Dick, Feb. 14, 1944, letter, Benjamin Unruh Collection, folder “Correspondence with Abraham Braun, 1930, 1940, 1944-45,” MFSt.

158. B. Unruh to Reichskommissariat für die Festigung deutschen Volkstum, Sept. 23, 1943, file folder 1943, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

159. H. Unruh, *Fügungen und Führungen*, 333. B. Unruh allegedly “sat immediately to the right of Himmler and dined with him,” together with *SS-Oberführer* Horst Hoffmeyer and *SS Oberguppenführer* Werner Lorenz.—B. Unruh to Vereinigung Executive, Jan. 6, 1943, 2, letter, file folder 1943, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

160. Diether Götz Lichdi, *Mennoniten im Dritten Reich. Dokumentation und Deutung* (Weierhof/Pfalz: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1977), 140f.—<https://archive.org/details/mennonitenimdrit0000lich/>.

161. Karl Götz, *Das Schwarzmeerdeutschtum: Die Mennoniten* (Posen: NS-Druck Wartheland, 1944), 11, R 187/267a, BArch.—<https://mla.bethelks.edu/gmsources/books/1944,%20Goetz,%20Die%20Mennoniten/>. Also Horst Gerlach, “Mennonites, the Molotschna, and the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle in the Second World War,” trans. John D. Thiesen, *ML* 41, no. 3 (1986), 8.

Molotschna, and possible compensation to Mennonites for property held in 1914 prior to the Bolshevik Revolution.¹⁶²

Four weeks before his tour of the Molotschna district (“Halbstadt”) on October 31, 1942, Himmler inquired about a leading Mennonite in Stuttgart and the community of Mennonites in Germany. The inquiry was sent through the Berlin office of the Gestapo, or secret police, in a letter to Unruh’s longtime acquaintance Karl Götz, then principal of the Teachers College at Prischib/Halbstadt in Ukraine. Himmler

reported that a leading Mennonite . . . who is also an old member of the Party, had succeeded in recruiting numerous Mennonites to National Socialism by means of appropriate action. At the same time, the *Reichsführer-SS* pointed out that you [Götz] would be able to offer more information in this matter.

A handwritten note on the letter states that “the person in question is Prof. D. h.c. Lic. B. Unruh, Karlsruhe.”¹⁶³

After his audience with Himmler, Unruh could report to Emil Händiges, pastor of the Mennonite congregation in Elbing, that the dream was now finally being realized, and that Paraguayan, Brazilian, and maybe even Canadian Mennonites would soon be able to return either to German-occupied Ukraine or to the larger German Reich.¹⁶⁴

The resettlement issues will be of unimaginable scope. I am newly involved in this matter, and it will probably come true what I told our people when they moved overseas: We will bring you back once again! This confidence lives in the hearts of our brothers! Some of them, who were quite agitated, will now realize that their representative has always and everywhere represented their interests selflessly and not entirely foolishly . . . The ethnic Germans will all be naturalized, thus becoming Reich Germans. This regulation alone is of far-reaching significance.¹⁶⁵

In his negotiations with Himmler, Unruh advocated for congregational autonomy for the new Russian Mennonite churches and the ordination of two new spiritual leaders in Prussia, taking as a model the actions of the first Mennonites in Russia 150 years earlier. These leaders would serve as

162. B. Unruh to Werner Lorenz, July 29, 1943, letter, file folder 1943, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

163. Geheimes Staatspolizeiamt, Berlin, to Karl Götz, Oct. 2, 1942, letter, T-81, reel 143, frame 0181573, US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). See handwriting on the letter. Copy at MLA.

164. He also noted that these developments would be of interest to Dutch Mennonites who were seeking additional land.

165. B. Unruh to Emil Händiges, Jan. 22, 1943, 1b, letter, file folder 1943, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

elders for the orphaned congregations and be placed under the oversight of the *Vereinigung* of Mennonite congregations in the German Reich. He also argued that Mennonites and Mennonite soldiers be freed from swearing an oath; that ministers be freed from military service; and that Mennonite cavalry squadrons—which had formed in Molotschna—should not be sent into active combat if at all possible.¹⁶⁶ SS-*Sturmbannführer* Hermann Roßner, who led the Commando Unit (*Einsatzgruppe*) Halbstadt and oversaw the schools, hospitals, and distribution of supplies in the old Molotschna villages, also met several times with Unruh. “I had heard who Benjamin Unruh was and I sought his advice,” recalled Roßner. Roßner, who was also present at the meeting between Unruh and Himmler, remembered years later that “everything Benjamin Unruh requested was promised by the *Reichsführer* . . . Prof. Unruh and I were in complete agreement in the direction we were marching.”¹⁶⁷

In his correspondence Unruh displayed increasing confidence in his government and Nazi Party connections. After his meeting with Himmler he reported to Abraham Braun that he “anticipates significant consequences for our entire *Mennonitica* from this consultation.”

I was received and treated with exceptional warmth, and I was told the most complimentary things about Mennonites, especially the *Volk* German Mennonites. . . . The *Reichsführer* [i.e., Hitler] will eliminate any existing “dualisms,” and Reich German and Volks German Mennonites will be treated on the same level.¹⁶⁸

Unruh’s vision for Mennonites in Warthegau 1939 clearly mirrored the German state’s ethnic (*völkisch*) goal to strengthen “German blood” and to expand and root Mennonite life in German “soil.”

Unruh was among the first to hear of the evacuation of Mennonites from Ukraine in September 1943, and put on alert for the psychological care of the refugees.¹⁶⁹ The Ethnic German Liaison Office (*Volkdeutsche Mittelstelle*), a state office of the Nazi Party under SS-*Obergruppenführer* Werner Lorenz, appointed Unruh, together with the chair of the *Vereinigung* (or his delegate), to order and regulate Mennonite church life

166. Cf. B. Unruh to *Vereinigung* Executive, Jan. 6, 1943, letter, file folder 1943, *Vereinigung* Collection, MFSt.

167. These meetings took place in the home of Unruh’s daughter and son-in-law in Berlin, as well as in Unruh’s home in Karlsruhe.—Hermann Roßner to [?] Schirmacher, March 8, 1972, 5, letter, N/756, 256/a, BArch-Freiburg

168. B. Unruh to *Vereinigung* Executive, Jan. 6, 1943, 2.

169. Dr. Gerhard Wolfrum to B. Unruh, Sept. 29, 1943, Benjamin H. Unruh Personalakte, S499, Schrank 2a, Fach 24, Technische Hochschule Karlsruhe, Universitätsarchiv Karlsruhe (copy at MLA).

in Warthegau, and granted him a stipend for his efforts. In a January 1944 letter, even as the German army was in full retreat on the eastern front, Unruh stated exultantly:

The Volk community of Greater Germany has cast its eye on us as experienced Mennonite farmers. They want to put our people to work when the victory is won. For our part we will need an unbroken Volk-community too. We are too devout not to know that such a community must be sustained and consecrated by Christian faith, not merely—though that too!—by [German] blood. . . .This is our historical duty in this historical hour!¹⁷⁰

Some 35,000 Mennonite refugees from the Black Sea region began to arrive in Warthegau in the fall of 1943 without church records of births, deaths, baptisms, and marriages. A high priority for Unruh and his team of Prussian congregational historians was to verify their racial purity as a requirement for naturalization—which they did with evangelical passion. A confidential SS report written by Götz, with Unruh's assistance, concluded that Mennonites "had preserved the integrity of their bloodline 100%" and "rigorously preserved their Germanness."¹⁷¹

Another urgent task was to secure for the newly-arrived Mennonites the freedom to practice their faith within the legal framework of the Third Reich.¹⁷² The constitution of the *Vereinigung* of Mennonite Congregations in the German Reich—first drafted by Unruh in 1934—became the institutional identity into which Russian Mennonites were to be received and provided pastoral care. In its preamble, the constitution highlighted the cultural achievements of Mennonites who had "carried the German language and customs into the world, specifically to Russia and America."¹⁷³

The constitution also assured authorities that German Mennonites had "renounced giving witness to their Christian peace convictions through the particular principle of non-resistance," and that during World War I they had, in fact, "served with weapon in most cases."¹⁷⁴ Because the distinctives for which Mennonites had often suffered were "secure" in Nazi Germany—and, indeed, "had now become the common heritage of

170. B. Unruh to Vereinigung Executive ("Zur Tauffrage: Ergänzung I zur Einigungsfrage"), Jan. 31, 1944, 6b, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

171. Götz, *Das Schwarzmeerdeutschtum*, 8, 5; cf. Katie Friesen, *Into the Unknown* (Steinbach, Man.: Self-published, 1986), 81.

172. Götz, *Das Schwarzmeerdeutschtum*, 11.

173. Vereinigung, *Verfassung vom 11. Juni 1934* (Elbing: Kühn, 1936), 4.—<https://mla.bethelks.edu/gmsources/books/1936,%20Vereinigung,%20Verfassung/>.

174. Vereinigung, *Verfassung vom 11. Juni 1934*, 5.

all” —Mennonites felt a stronger “responsibility and duty toward the Volk and state in which they lived.” With Russian Mennonites squarely in view, the constitution’s by-laws included a commitment to “foster Christian charity, and in particular to assist co-religionists suffering domestically and internationally.”¹⁷⁵

For years, of course, Unruh had almost single-handedly welded together the support of Mennonites across Germany and abroad through the “Brothers in Need” agency.¹⁷⁶ Though theologically distant from each other, South and North German Mennonites shared a common respect for Unruh: “it is a gift from God that in these times and for such great tasks, that we Mennonites have a man of the stature of our Professor Unruh.”¹⁷⁷ Now that the largest remnant of Mennonites from Ukraine had arrived in Germany’s annexed eastern lands, Unruh had both the political connections and weight to assure their proper administrative reception and protection.¹⁷⁸

During this period Unruh moved freely among the reception camps to provide pastoral care and support. “Here,” he wrote,

I had the opportunity in religious matters to get acquainted with the camps, and I can say that our people were treated extremely well. Whenever any complaints arose . . . we, as representatives of the Church, had the right to bring up these complaints quite freely.¹⁷⁹

Only “recognized” Protestant pastors deemed to be politically reliable were allowed to offer religious services and pastoral care in the camps, and Unruh was the acknowledged, well-connected Mennonite “Moses.”

175. *Ibid.*, Art. 2, § 8.

176. On Mennonite participation in the umbrella aid organization, cf. Quiring-Unruh, “Brüder in Not.”

177. Cf. the report on the 1936 Mennonite World Conference in *GBI* 67, no. 16 (Aug. 15, 1936), 78. On Unruh’s importance, Paraguayan Mennonite historian Jakob Warkentin wrote: “Among the Russian Mennonites there are two persons that must stand out from all the others: Johann Cornies and Benjamin Heinrich Unruh. Both enjoyed great respect among the Mennonites, and were known far beyond the Mennonite world for their gifts of statesmanship.” —J. Warkentin, “Benjamin Heinrich Unruh [1881-1959],” 420.

178. Cf. “Defense testimony by B. H. von Unruh for Werner Lorenz and Heinz Brueckner,” Dec. 17, 1947, 2717, in *The RuSHA Case: U.S. National Archives Collection of World War II War Crimes Records*, case VIII, record group 238, 2714-2730, copy at MLA, SA 1, file 184. —https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/sa_1_184/. For more on Unruh’s ministry in Warthegau, cf. Peter Letkemann, “Nachwort,” in H. Unruh, *Fügungen und Führungen*, 418-421.

179. Cf. B. Unruh in “Defense testimony by B. Unruh for W. Lorenz and H. Brueckner,” 2717. Danzig Pastor Erich Göttner baptized 10 Russian Mennonite resettlers at Camp Neustadt; and Heubuden’s Elder Bruno Ewert baptized 45 in Camp Kulm and Camp Konradstein; Erich Göttner, compiler, *Mitteilungen der ost- und westpreußischen Mennoniten* 4 (Aug. 1944), 8-10, MLA. —https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/V_18/box%207%20Winnipeg/68/.

SS-Obersturmführer Gerhard Wolfrum, who had been commissioned by Lorenz to work directly with Unruh, promised to assist Unruh in all matters and instructed him “to write openly and without reserve about any [Mennonite] difficulties.”¹⁸⁰ But even as Unruh was assuring German authorities of the proper racial registration of the resettlers, and tending to their care and protection,¹⁸¹ he was disappointed with MCC’s treatment of him and its unwillingness to make any debt interest payments, which frustrated Unruh’s negotiations with the German government. In January 1944, as Mennonites were being evacuated from Ukraine and streaming into Germany, Unruh wrote to his *Vereinigung* colleagues:

I received enthusiastic letters from America. Of a debt of three million Reich Marks, two million were canceled, and of the remaining debt, not a single penny has been paid to this day. The Brazilians grumbled: Why doesn’t he get the last million canceled too? That was the last straw! But I believe that it will be possible to cancel it at some point! Bender also wrote me a letter which was not nice. ... I have requested the cancellation of the last million several times, but have been refused, and they cite telegrams from America to their offices. Prof. Bender did not act correctly here, and I am still angry with him today. And when Orié O. Miller was in Berlin on this matter, and I had again applied for the cancellation of the last million, he spoke against this cancellation in my presence. I am bitterly wronged, on the part of my people and from other sides, if it is said that I have not done everything here that was possible.¹⁸²

Why Miller would have opposed the cancellation of the debt is unclear. As he did in 1929, fifteen years later Unruh almost single-handedly leveraged German government agencies, good-will, and resources to provide relief and resettle thousands of Mennonites, while he also labored to maximize the privileges, legal rights, and opportunities of Mennonites as racial Germans within Nazi Germany. He extended this to the practice of faith as well.

By June 1944, the German Province of Warthegau was prepared to approve the articles of incorporation for the “Mennonite Congregational

180. B. Unruh to Gustav Reimer, December 30, 1943, letter, file folder 1943, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

181. Cf. B. Unruh to Vereinigung Executive, Jan. 6, 1943, and idem to Gustav Reimer, December 30, 1943, file folder 1943, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt. Cf. also post-war letter from Roßner to [?] Schirmacher, March 8, 1972, 5. Notably Unruh was a member of the Central Office for Kinship Studies of Germans Abroad (*Hauptstelle für Auslandsdeutsche Sippenkunde*). In this role he was personally acquainted with the head of the Reich Office for Kinship Studies—the office of racial “experts” responsible to adjudicate Aryan descent.

182. B. Unruh, “Grundsätzliches und persönliches an die Vereinigung,” Jan. 25, 1944, 3, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

Church of German Nationality” as submitted by Unruh and legal counsel Gustav Reimer, a member of the Heubuden Mennonite Church. The church’s new vision, the racial composition of its membership, and ultimately its connection to the state were all interconnected. Unruh was full of optimism: “Today we are facing a new Reformation,” he wrote, in which a united Mennonite Congregational Church had a distinctive role to play. It can “exemplify” to the larger Protestant “sister churches” what it means to be both “a true community of faith as well as a pioneer and shock troop (*Stoßgruppe*) for the whole . . . united in prayer, witness, and work in the service of our dear German Volk!”¹⁸³

The constitution of the newly-organized church limited membership to those of “German nationality”—strictly defined in Nazi Germany by blood and Volk. As a matter of principle, Christians of Jewish or Slavic heritage were excluded. Moreover, the Reich Governor (*Reichsstatthalter*) had the freedom to remove a person from denominational leadership for political reasons, thereby restricting the church’s authority to serve as the conscience of the state or to offer a culturally critical expression of the Gospel.¹⁸⁴

At the conclusion of a lengthy, well-researched, theological essay on baptism in the Mennonite tradition—designed specifically to keep old divisions regarding this ritual from re-appearing in Warthegau—Unruh addressed the “status” of Mennonites in the larger German Volk community, and the holy unity of land, blood, faith, and mission.¹⁸⁵ Not only did Unruh promote a strictly ethnic-based church. In his understanding of the Great Commission Jesus had explicitly commanded his disciples to recognize the Völker (*ethne*) as a central part of their task.¹⁸⁶

Along with a close cooperation with the Nazi state, Unruh promoted a vision of robust and autonomous congregations, marked by a high regard for regular worship, scripture, believers baptism (though not rebaptism), Lord’s Supper, mutual aid, and discipline—in accordance with the Mennonite tradition—all with a broader sense of mission and service and an ecumenical openness. Traditional Mennonite confessions of faith held to a high view of Christ, which, along with the writings of Menno, carried weight in promoting church unity, with the rejection of oath swearing as an especially critical denominational distinctive. Unruh also promoted the proximity of Mennonites in Warthegau to each other by advocating that

183. B. Unruh to Vereinigung Executive (“Zur Einigungsfrage”), Jan. 26, 1944, 10.

184. “Satzung der Mennonitischen Gemeindekirche im Wartheland” (March 1944 Submission), file folder 1944, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

185. B. Unruh, “Ergänzung I zur Einigungsfrage: Zur Taufe,” 6b, Jan. 31, 1944, file folder 1944, Vereinigung Collection, MFSt.

186. B. Unruh, “Ergänzung I zur Einigungsfrage: Zur Taufe,” 2.

German-Russians should be settled in Warthegau on a confessional basis.¹⁸⁷ Despite some complications, Unruh could report to the *Vereinigung* executive that Warthegau Gauleiter Greiser “has firm intentions of giving land to farmers from the eastern zone, and he especially values Mennonite farmers.”¹⁸⁸

Johann Epp, the former Chortitza District mayor (*Rayonchef*), also conflated German identity and faith in a manner that Unruh quoted approvingly to his *Vereinigung* colleagues. According to Unruh, Epp told him:

We all are looking forward to your visit! I hope that you [Unruh] too will be pleased to find among us a large number of true German people! There are outliers everywhere, but I can say that the vast majority among us live, are, and remain German. Nothing can rob us of our sanctuary (*Heiligtum*); we have proven this and will prove it again. None of our current difficulties can hinder us. We have nothing to lose, for we have already lost everything we had. We only have our lives left, and we are ready to give those for the final victory. . . . It is unimaginable, that a godless, demonic, blasphemous power should reign over us. No, no, never, ever.¹⁸⁹

Epp agreed with Unruh’s formulation that they desired to “cling wholeheartedly to their motherland and the Führer who saved them,” and would “do their whole duty in the reconstruction of the Eastern Territories.” Moreover, in the “spirit of their fathers, Mennonites want to live out a simple and practical Christianity of conviction and action in church life.”¹⁹⁰ This language, like that of Unruh’s, resonated both with the language in the Nazi Party platform and with the Mennonite tradition.

In his visits to Resettlement Camps, Unruh repeatedly admonished the brethren

to give evidence of your thanks in convictions, attitudes, and deeds to our Führer, the Reichsführer-SS, the Director and officials of the Ethnic German Liaison Office (*Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*, or VoMi),

187. Gerlach, “Mennonites, Molotschna, and the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*,” 8. Cf. also SS Standartenführer Herbert Hübner, “Schwarzmeerdeutsche kehren heim,” *Ostdeutscher Beobachter* 6, no. 34 (Feb. 4, 1944), 3. <https://www.wbc.poznan.pl/dlibra/publication/125675/edition/134951/content>.

188. B. Unruh, “Bericht über Verhandlungen in Warthegau im März 1944,” March 30, 1944, 6b, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

189. Johann Epp orally to B. Unruh, cited in B. Unruh to Vereinigung Executive, “Vollbericht über die Lagerbesuche,” Jan. 7, 1944, 3, report, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

190. Cf. Johann Epp in Horst Gerlach, *Die Rußlandmennoniten: Ein Volk Unterwegs*, vol. 1, 5th edition (Kirchheimbolanden, Pfalz: Self-published, 2008), 85.

and above all to the district and local camp officials for the marvelous rescue (*wunderbare Rettung*) from the hellish violence of Bolshevism.¹⁹¹

Like most German Mennonites, Unruh was satisfied to follow the biblical admonition to “honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17), yet blind to how the totalitarian order of National Socialism competed with the vocation of the church and its confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, or Führer, of history. Hitler framed himself as a political messiah; his “thousand year empire” was a form of Christian eschatological hope—that God’s redemption of the world would occur through a particular nation or people. German Mennonites, along with Unruh, supported a view of the God-ordained “orders of creation”—namely, a state that honors “positive Christianity,” with the Volk and family having complementary roles alongside the church, whose task it was to preach the Gospel in an apocalyptic struggle against the destructive kingdom of the devil—here defined horrifically as Judeo-Bolshevism.

Unruh affirmed Christ as the one who has a claim over all of life, but he did not articulate clearly how this might be in tension with competing claims of authority from Hitler and National Socialism over the totality of life. To be sure, Unruh was aware that Menno Simons and other early Anabaptists had critical theological insights on questions related to church and the state; but he made no effort to call Mennonites in the Third Reich to live a “cruciform” life.¹⁹²

MCC AND POST-WAR REFUGEE CRISIS

After the war’s end in Europe in May 1945, some 10,000 of the roughly 35,000 naturalized Soviet Mennonites found themselves in the western zone of occupied Germany—most of them homeless. In July 1945 Unruh made the first of two submissions to the Office of Military Government United States explaining in English the situation of the Mennonites from

191. B. Unruh to SS-Obersturmführer Dr. Wolfrum, Jan. 1944, report Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

192. Cf. Christian Neff, “Die heilsgeschichtliche Entwicklung der Gemeinde Gottes im Laufe der Zeit,” in *GBl* 68, no. 10 (May 15, 1937), 48f.: “The burning centre of the religious battle presently that arouses emotions especially in my German home (*Heimat*) is the question of church in its relation to the state. It could have been solved for all times 400 years ago if one could have agreed to follow the fundamental principle of the Anabaptists. ... The church of God on earth has always been cruciform (*Kreuzgemeinde*). ... Menno Simons always pointed to this, that the church of God is and remains a church of the cross, with which its true and actual essence is recognized. We begin to see and feel something of this truth in recent times. The events taking place in Russia and Spain [regularly highlighted in Hitler’s speeches] display this in the harshest and most frightening light” (*ibid.*, 49). The lack of application to his own context is stunning.

the Soviet Union, and petitioning that they not be returned to the Soviet Union but be allowed to immigrate to their relatives in other countries.¹⁹³

From the perspective of MCC's European director Peter J. Dyck, however, Unruh's involvement in the matter threatened to scuttle MCC's own effort to address the refugee question. Dyck regarded Unruh as a liability in MCC's negotiations with British and American occupation forces, thanks to his close relationship to the Nazis. In a memorandum of July 25, 1945, Dyck informed the MCC executive committee about the crisis around German naturalization:

[Many] of our people have had to accept the Volksdeutsche Ansiedler Pass in 1943. . . . [Our] friend Prof. Unruh insists all our people to be *gute Deutsche* [good Germans] . . . [I]f the military authorities happen to come to this same conclusion [i.e., that Mennonites from the Soviet Union had willingly accepted German citizenship], which they have not, then we may as well pack our suitcases and go home because there will be no emigration for quite some time.¹⁹⁴

As the naturalization documents make abundantly clear, however, Unruh's claim that they did so voluntarily was much closer to the truth than Dyck's.¹⁹⁵ On November 1, Unruh submitted another petition to occupation forces, knowing that his strategy of highlighting German naturalization was at odds with Dyck's. Because American Mennonites, in Unruh's eyes, were "slow" to mobilize,¹⁹⁶ he asked his friend Abraham Braun in his capacity as treasurer and secretary of the *Vereinigung* to issue a temporary certificate confirming that Unruh was both an honorary member of the *Vereinigung* executive, and also a "representative of the Mennonite Central Committee of Akron, Penn., USA."¹⁹⁷ Such a document would authorize Unruh to travel freely through the occupied military zone for ecclesial purposes of finding refugees and building up the church community.¹⁹⁸ MCC representative C. F. Klassen apparently recommended that lists of Russian Mennonite refugees be centralized in

193. B. Unruh to the Vereinigung Executive, Dec. 28, 1945, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

194. Peter J. Dyck, "Memorandum on Mennonite Refugees in Germany, 25 July 1945," MCC CPS and other Correspondence 1945-47, file 30, MCC-A.

195. Cf. *Einwandererzentrale* (Central Immigration Office) naturalization files, National Archives Collection Microfilm Publication A3342, Series EWZ, Washington, DC.

196. B. Unruh to Abraham Braun, Nov. 24, 1945, letter, Abraham Braun Correspondence, 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

197. Abraham Braun, "Zeugnis," Nov. 19, 1945, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

198. Abraham Braun to B. Unruh, Nov. 19, 1945, 1, letter, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

Unruh's office,¹⁹⁹ and for Unruh "to direct the headquarters" of the Russian Mennonite refugee search from his Karlsruhe office.²⁰⁰ In a meeting with Abraham Braun in December, both Klassen and Unruh thought it would be dangerous to underestimate the importance of naturalization of the Soviet Mennonite seeking resettlement, as American Mennonites "seem inclined to do." The minutes add that "it is a known fact that . . . naturalization has already protected many of Russian-German families from deportation back to Russia."²⁰¹

The churches should make every effort—with or without formal agreements—to avoid the forced repatriation [to the USSR] of ethnic Germans who have returned "home" [to Germany]—that they should, by one means or another, remain in the motherland [Germany], regain their full citizenship here, and possibly unite with their relatives overseas or be resettled, for example, in a colony in Africa. These farmers should in no way be held responsible for any errors, follies, sins, or complications in the political field, but seen as apolitical, highly qualified settlers.²⁰²

Unruh always felt that his relationship with MCC was too vague. They had paid him a small stipend for years, which he felt was neither adequate to support his family nor fair for the work he was doing on behalf of his Russian Mennonites "brethren." While Unruh had been an official representative of CMBC for some years, he also felt free to fly the flag of MCC as he had deemed useful for the post-war cause. In 1945 Unruh petitioned to retrieve his large archive of Mennonite-related primary documents—35 crates brought to an underground shelter in Thüringen in the closing months of the war with other materials from the Karlsruhe Technical University—for example, as "files belonging to an American aid organization, the Mennonite Central Committee."²⁰³

Dyck advised against working with Unruh, or working with him only with great caution. Nevertheless, MCC was slow to cut ties with Unruh. In September 1946 Dyck wrote that it may be possible that Unruh could "render our Cause some service, but we need to remember that he is a German to the core and therefore is not in a position to handle matters

199. B. Unruh, transcript of meeting with Abraham Braun (Vereinigung Secretary) Dec. 12-13, 1945; for content of submissions, cf. B. Unruh to Vereinigung Executive, Dec. 28, 1945, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

200. B. Unruh to the Vereinigung and Verband, Dec. 19, 1945, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

201. B. Unruh, transcript of meeting with Abraham Braun, Dec. 12-13, 1945.

202. B. Unruh to the Vereinigung Executive, Dec. 28, 1945, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

203. B. Unruh to the Vereinigung Executive, Dec. 19, 1945, Abraham Braun Correspondence 1930, 1940, 1944-45, Benjamin Unruh Collection, MFSt.

which are also the concern of the British and American occupational forces."²⁰⁴

MCC PENSION

After MCC Director Peter J. Dyck had successfully shepherded 2,303 Soviet Mennonite refugees to Paraguay in 1947, and raised new monies for MCC's resettlement efforts on a tour of congregations across the U.S. and Canada,²⁰⁵ MCC charged Harold Bender with the task of convincing Unruh to accept a small pension along with a promise to withdraw from all MCC activity. Bender and Klassen proposed a pension of 500 Marks per month, starting January 1, 1949, of which 100 Marks was designated for continued research and writing. The plan was for 400 Marks to come from North America—possibly half from the Canadian Board of Mennonite Colonization—and another 100 Marks from the German Mennonite churches.²⁰⁶

MCC was forced to act quickly. Unruh had volunteered to testify at the War Crimes Tribunal on December 17, 1947, on behalf of Werner Lorenz and Heinz Brückner, administrator of the Ethnic German Liaison Office (VoMi). During the war years, Unruh had negotiated directly with Lorenz Brückner. Both, Unruh testified, "were very cooperative," respectful, and promised Mennonites "all possible support."²⁰⁷ Lorenz had been appointed by Himmler to lead the VoMi and later helped to arrange the meeting between Unruh and Himmler. Specifically, Lorenz was responsible for the "Germanization" of the occupied territories in Ukraine and the resettlement of ethnic Germans. What Unruh did not want to understand or admit was that VoMi's efforts "served the ultimate objective of the Third Reich—the creation of a new racial order in which Germans would rule over others."²⁰⁸

Two weeks after the trial an anonymous non-Mennonite Russian-German refugee wrote a damning letter against Unruh. The writer castigated MCC for "supporting and employing a man who is out of place in the eyes of all true friends of peace and those who oppose Nazism here." Unruh's "National Socialist past is heavily incriminating," the

204. Peter J. Dyck, "Mennonite Refugees in Germany as on Sept. 5, 1946," report, folder MCC CPS and other Correspondence 1945-47, file 30, MCC-A,

205. See Peter J. Dyck and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up from the Rubble* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1991), 250f.; *Lethbridge Herald* (Aug. 21, 1947), 5.

206. MCC Executive Committee Minutes, Aug. 3, 1948, no. 16, p. 3, MCC-A.

207. "Defense testimony by B. H. von Unruh for Werner Lorenz and Heinz Brueckner," Dec. 17, 1947, 2716.

208. Valdis O. Lumans, *Hitler's Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933-1945* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina, 1993), 262.

writer claimed, a fact that Unruh “tries to hide and deny in clever ways.”²⁰⁹ The writer presented fourteen examples to make his point, including that Unruh was a supporting member of the SS and wore his SS pin in public. He alleged that Unruh “worked closely with the so-called Reichsführer Himmler,” and gave “many lectures on National Socialist topics during the war.” Moreover, the writer alleged, Unruh was known to have “prayed for Adolf Hitler many times in public Mennonite worship services” and “still professes his support for National Socialism before like-minded compatriots.” The writer had some knowledge of the honorary doctorate awarded to Unruh in 1937, and claimed it was granted only upon the instigation of the National Socialist Party. He also knew that Unruh has been barred from teaching at the Technical University of Karlsruhe because of his Nazi past.²¹⁰ The writer concluded that because Unruh was an unrepentant beneficiary of National Socialism, he “should not represent any relief work done in the ‘name of Christ’”—the MCC motto.

Bender “dealt with Brother Unruh as kindly as possible,” and compelled him to agree to MCC’s pension conditions, though Unruh strenuously objected “and several years of unpleasantness ensued.”²¹¹ In 1955 Unruh expressed hope with the Soviet release of German civilians and POWs: “Imagine dear Harold,” he wrote to Bender, “what this means! . . . Our people are *naturalized Germans*. I was blamed for encouraging this. I did it with good consideration and with prayer! And now *success* seems to come in an unexpected way.”²¹² With this development Unruh petitioned Bender and MCC for an increase in his pension.²¹³ Unruh argued that he was ineligible for a pension from the Karlsruhe Technical University not because of his Nazi past, but because he did not hold an academic chair at the university. He was not appointed to a chair at the time, he said, because he had refused to deny his Christian faith.

I have never denied the Christian and Mennonite confession. If I had registered as *gottgläubig* at the [Karlsruhe] Technical University, they

209. V. Lommel to the president of the Mennonite Aid Organization [H. S. Bender, MCC], Jan. 1, 1949, letter, MH1/278, box 25, folder 7, L Miscellaneous, Harold S. Bender Collection, GC-A. My thanks to James Urry for pointing me to this piece.

210. See Unruh’s personnel file at the Technische Hochschule Karlsruhe, Universitätsarchiv Karlsruhe, S499, Schrank 2a, Fach 24 (copy at MLA). In a letter date May 10, 1940, University Rector Rudolf Weigel strongly praised Unruh’s National Socialist leanings and worldview in a letter of support to the minister of Culture and Education in Baden; Weigel sought to name Unruh to an academic chair in the Faculty of General Studies.

211. Keim, *Harold S. Bender*, 394f. Cf. MCC Executive Committee Minutes, Aug. 3, 1948, no. 16, p. 3; and Dec. 30, 1948, no. 19, 5, MCC-A.

212. B. Unruh to H. S. Bender, Oct. 23, 1955, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

213. MCC Executive Committee Minutes, Dec. 16-17, 1955, no. 34, MCC-A.

would have showered me with money. That did not occur to me! They wanted me to revoke my textbook for religious education (Raguda, Halbstadt) because of the Old Testament. I responded: "I would rather sweep up horse droppings in the street than *deny* my Christian faith."²¹⁴

Unruh appealed to his achievements on behalf of all Mennonites, but he was especially angry with Peter J. Dyck's equally bold and dubious claim that it was through Dyck's efforts that thousands of Mennonites had been rescued from Soviet repatriation.

One of your authorized [MCC] representatives was with me and asked me how many had been brought to Germany. I [Unruh]: "We were able to resettle 35,000." He [Dyck]: "*We!* –Are you an SS man?" I gave him a piece of my mind. Then I gave him a folder with 8,000 names, soon there would be 10,000. He then told me verbally and in writing that it was because of *his* effort. I was silent. Harold, that was very unpleasant. He was always a contrarian. . . . All the slander was a lie.²¹⁵

Moreover, Unruh reminded Bender that Dyck had falsely insisted that Russian Mennonites had become naturalized Germans under duress.²¹⁶ Instead, Unruh understood MCC's post-war refugee work as a continuation and culmination of his own achievements. The 10,000 Mennonites in the western zone after the war were there only because of his efforts with the Nazi regime to legitimize them as Germans—without which MCC would have had no one to save. Unruh was always concerned about his historical legacy, happily claiming the title of the "Moses of Russian Mennonites," that Himmler had once given him. Now, it seemed, Peter J. Dyck had assumed that mantle.

MCC did not speculate on Unruh's conclusion or offer him a new assignment.²¹⁷

In 1957 MCC offered a further one-time gift to cover Unruh's publication debt for his book on the origin and background of Prussian Mennonites. "It was not easy to take the \$2,500 from our hard-pressed relief funds in Canada and USA," Bender wrote. "We did it out of love for

214. B. Unruh to H. S. Bender, Nov. 8, 1955, letter, HM1-278 Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A; reference to B. Unruh, *Leitfaden für den Religionsunterricht. Teil 1: Altes Testament* (Halbstadt: Raguda, 1913).

215. B. Unruh to H. S. Bender, Nov. 8, 1955, letter, HM1-278 Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

216. B. Unruh to H. S. Bender, Nov. 8, 1955, letter, HM1-278 Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

217. Cf. H. S. Bender to B. Unruh, Oct. 29, 1955, HM1-278 Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A; MCC Executive Committee Minutes, Dec. 16-17, 1955, no. 33.

you and in view of our many years of fruitful cooperation.”²¹⁸ Unruh’s historiography—still heavily used for Russian Mennonite genealogy—was dismissed by Dutch Mennonite scholars as rooted in pro-German, Nazi-era kinship research.²¹⁹

Finally, in 1958 Unruh’s daughter requested a 65% increase in her father’s MCC pension. “We recall the fact that through the efforts of our father alone, Mennonites were relieved of some 2.5 million marks which the German Reich had credited for the care of the Russian Mennonites.”²²⁰ While Unruh’s negotiations with the German government in this regard were truly remarkable, the MCC Executive rejected the petition, though it remained “deeply appreciative of the services rendered in times past by Brother Unruh.”²²¹

UNRUH’S LEGACY AND MCC

Benjamin H. Unruh died in 1959. The *Mennonite Encyclopedia* entry on Unruh, written by Bender, briefly noted that Unruh worked for MCC “in immigration to Paraguay 1930-1933.” On the one hand, the statement clearly underplayed Unruh’s magnitude; he was a tireless advocate for his people who remains a towering figure in the history of Russian Mennonites, especially in Paraguay and Brazil. On the other hand, Bender’s entry said almost nothing about how Unruh’s advocacy for and humanitarian efforts on behalf Mennonites from the Soviet Union were inextricably intertwined with his strident support for the Nazi regime and its objectives. An examination of those troubling complexities—which Bender knew better than anyone—are critical for assessing how MCC’s humanitarian efforts with Soviet Mennonites were entangled with National Socialism and its legacy.

In his own work Unruh regularly pointed out the need for robust archival research for a full accounting of the tumultuous events of the twentieth century in which he played a role. Though much has been lost or destroyed, we have used Unruh’s surviving letters and reports

218. H. S. Bender (using MCC letterhead) to Unruh, July 3, 1957, letter, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

219. Cf. H. S. Bender to B. Unruh, Oct. 29, 1955, and B. Unruh to H. S. Bender, Nov. 3, 1955, letters, HM1-278 Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A. Cf. also Nanne van der Zijpp, book review: *Die niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, by Benjamin H. Unruh, *MQR* 33 (April 1959), 159.

220. Olga Unruh to Willis Detweiler (copy to H. S. Bender), MCC Executive, Nov. 1, 1958, letter, HM1-278 Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

221. MCC Executive Committee Minutes, Nov. 29, 1958, no. 10, pp. 2-3, MCC-A; also William T. Snyder (MCC) to Olga Unruh, Feb. 11, 1959, HM1-278, Harold S. Bender Collection, box 60, folder 54, GC-A.

archived in three continents to better understand the roots of Unruh's pro-German Mennonite orientation, to document his growing pro-Nazism in the 1930s, and to trace his explicit promotion of its racial goals. A fresh reading of those materials also helps to better address related themes in the larger Russian Mennonite community which embraced his leadership.

