

Toews, John B. and Toews, Paul, editors. *Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine (1922–1927). Mennonite and Soviet Documents*. Published by the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2011. 515 pp. \$35.00.

Book review by Henry Neufeld

What happens when an ethno religious group feels its way of life threatened? For over a century, Mennonites in Ukraine had considerable independence in managing their own villages, churches, schools, and communities. Now this almost utopian way of life was threatened by a new Soviet regime.

When threatened, groups often organize themselves. They meet, plan, discuss, strategize, appoint leaders, and negotiate. Following the October 1917 revolution in Russia, Mennonites did all of that. They sought to adapt to a new system without losing their identity. And they prayed. They prayed because the world as they knew it was beginning to collapse. They needed a strategy for survival.

They discussed key issues including the future of their children's education, the threat of military conscription, the loss of farmland, the need for fire insurance, the possibility of emigration, and the threat to their independence by an increasingly intrusive regime. And they organized so they could speak to the new government with one voice.

They called their new organization "The All Russia Mennonite Congress". When seeking government registration, in a country that claimed to be considerate of ethnic groups, they ran into a roadblock.

Soviet officials informed the Mennonites that the new Russian regime followed the principle of separation of church and state. Since "Mennonite" signified a religion and represented counter revolutionary thinking, it was unacceptable. A compromise was quickly reached: the group would be called the "Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine" (*Verband Bürger Holländischer Herkunft*), often simply referred to as the "Union".

This volume traces the work of the Union in the early to mid-1920s. It is a rich compilation of documents from Ukrainian and Russian archives, as well as from North American sources. Remarkably, the Union charter provided Mennonites with more power than any comparable group in Russia and was allowed to function with no Communist member on its Board.

The Soviets wanted to integrate the Union with the Soviet co-op system; this was constantly resisted by the Mennonites. The state said: "The union has not yet done any good ... they represent a closed community" (259). The Union was seen, not inaccurately, as opposing sovietization.

Initially I approached this book with some skepticism; archival material does not usually hold much interest for me. Then I began reading and was fascinated by what I found – intriguing details about those years and fascinating original documents.

Primary sources are fundamental to historians, and these documents, enhanced by introductory essays in each section by the editors, are rich in detail and new insights. For instance, the Mennonite Congress meeting in 1918 has lengthy debates about socialism and Christianity. "B.H. Unruh explains that Christianity has no direct relationship with any economic system, either socialist or capitalist" (29).

The Mennonite Congress is concerned about education; teachers should receive an adequate salary with periodic wage increases, cost of living increases, pensions, and leave for

further studies. There is a debate about whether arithmetic should be taught in Russian or German.

There are clear statements about non-resistance: “Mennonites see it as a holy duty to serve the fatherland, but without the shedding of blood” (36). B. B. Janz, the leader of the group, promotes non-resistance at a Congress meeting and is questioned: “What of the brothers who hold a different conviction?” (101) Janz demands that the group affirm non-resistance, or he will resign. Unanimously the group affirms the principle, and Janz remains as their leader – a crucial point in Ukrainian Mennonite history.

### *Starvation and Emigration.*

Emigration and the feeding of starving Mennonites became major issues. Janz saw “... the sallow pale faces, the farm boys running after a cat or a dog for a meal ...” (115). At one meal, horse cutlets were served. Food reserves were seized or consumed, including seed grains.

Emigration was seen as an option because of starvation, limits on school instruction, land restrictions, military service, and the undermining of faith. Janz was persistent in seeking visas from officials in Moscow.

The barriers Janz faced were enormous: finding a country that would accept Mennonites, getting Soviet permission to leave, and the complex logistics of moving thousands of people. Janz’s pleas to North American Mennonites reflect his desperation when faced with pressure for action from the Mennonite colonies.

Janz’s efforts to get aid from North America and Europe intensified. In 1925 he wrote his American brothers: “Give these destitute people a new life” (492). And in a prophetic comment: “The days will come when the consequences of your action will appear much more important than now” (492).

For five years Janz was, in effect, the Mennonite director of emigration. He was in constant demand from Mennonites seeking his advice, even as he carried on negotiations with authorities in Moscow; extensive travel kept him away from home. “For four years she [my wife] has borne the burden and heat of day alone” (501).

As the Union neared its state enforced end, Janz speculated about his future. “... [E]verything seems dark as night. What pathway shall I walk? How shall I feed my family? What work will I have in the future?” (504)

This remarkable collection of original source material is a major contribution to the study of one of the darkest periods of Mennonite history. The Mennonites of that era faced bandits, a new and hostile government, loss of farmland, famine, a demanding 5-Year Plan, and a threat to an insular way of life. The documents describe, from various perspectives, the plight and the increasingly limited options available.

This book is a valuable addition to the writings about this turbulent time in Mennonite history; it is also an impressive tribute to B.B. Janz, a man of faith and vision who doggedly persisted in his efforts to save his people.

*This book is for sale at the Mennonite Historical Society office.*