

John B. Toews and Paul Toews, editors

All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union (1923-1927): Minutes, Reports, Correspondence
Translated by John B. Toews, Walter Regehr, Olga Shmakina. 417 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

Revolution, civil war, banditry, crop failure, typhus, famine: the post World War I years had brought unmitigated disaster to Mennonites living in Russia. In 1920, North American Mennonites responded by creating the Mennonite Central Committee, which under the designation American Mennonite Relief managed to ease the sufferings of Russian Mennonites (and others), especially in the Ukraine. Then the Leninist government in Moscow, finally acknowledging the famine plaguing much of Russia, made some temporary concessions to the free market. The situation improved markedly. Nonetheless, Mennonites were facing the stark question: should they stay in Russia and hope for the best? or leave while emigration is still possible? In response, two very different organizations were established: the Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage (*Verband der Bürger Holländischer Herkunft VBHH*) in 1922; and the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union (*All-Russischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verband AMLV*) in 1923.

Documents emanating from the VBHH have already appeared in book form, the result of a collaboration between cousins Paul and John B. Toews. Paul taught at Ukraine's Zaporizhzhye State University from 2003-4 and again from 2004-5. During those years he spent some time in the state archives in St. Petersburg and Moscow (he also married Russia Intourist guide Olga Shmakina in 2005), discovering a collection of AMLV files in Moscow. Toews arranged for the microfilming of these documents, which then found a home in Mennonite archives in Fresno, Winnipeg and Abbotsford. Before Paul's death in 2015, he worked with John B. and others to translate, edit, and publish those documents. The resulting hardcover book also includes some superb writing by John on the historical events leading up to the AMLV.

The VBHH and AMLV shared some common goals but their perspectives were quite different. The first, the Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage, was guided by B.B. Janz, a realist who foresaw the impending disaster for Mennonites in the Soviet Union. However, though the name of the Union pointedly avoided the use of the word "Mennonite," Janz was profoundly dedicated to the maintenance of the Mennonite community. Superficially, the VBHH dedicated itself to famine relief and exemption for Mennonites from military service. Its deeper objective, though, may have been to assist with the emigration of as many Mennonites as possible from Russia. In his persistent negotiations with Moscow, Janz insisted that "removing the surplus population" would alleviate economic difficulties in Russia (7).

Meanwhile, among founding members of the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union, emigration was also counselled by many, but a greater optimism prevailed. John B. Toews writes, "A researcher delving into the many surviving records of Mennonite interaction with early Bolshevism may be astounded at the sheer audacity of one of the smallest minorities in the vast Soviet Empire. Were Mennonite negotiators ignorant of the radical ideological premises that undergirded Bolshevism? Did pride in their obvious agricultural accomplishments blind them to the fact that this trump card of the past could hardly be played in the new setting?" (5-6)

In the case of the AMLV, this question might receive a partial answer in the character of the Union's leader, Peter F. Froese. Froese, an immensely persistent and skilled negotiator who took advantage of good relationships with the few real Soviet idealists still in power, was

optimistic that Mennonites could cooperate with a Communist regime. He had a tolerance for socialist ideas and believed that Mennonites might safely, if only partially, assimilate into the new Soviet state. Froese, who married a Russian woman, later wrote, "The tasks that faced us were obvious: unification, emigration, reconstruction. It was clear to us that many had lost hope for a continuing existence with human dignity in Russia and wished to emigrate. It was clear to us that an emigration of everyone was impossible and that we would need to undertake the reconstruction of our economic life. We did not know what lay ahead. At this point the future did not appear hopeless and we saw some employment possibilities" (13).

After a series of complicated and indeed dangerous negotiations, a constitution for the AMLV was finally approved by the Soviet authorities. The first assembly of delegates met in 1923. The Statute of the Union speaks to such issues as education and promotion of agriculture; the establishment of agricultural implement and machinery factories; communal welfare, including insurance; sales and the securing of capital; membership rights and duties; assets; and conditions of liquidation of the AMLV. The liquidation, in fact, was not long in coming. In 1927 the Union was declared illegal and its leaders arrested. Peter F. Froese spent nine and a half years in prison and two more in a prison camp. Against the odds, he survived, and died of cancer in Germany in 1957.

The documents of the AMLV, John B. Toews points out, are prosaic, business-like, and impersonal, in stark contrast to the files of the VBHH, which vividly describe the suffering and passion of the era. What then, asks Toews, is good reason for the editing and translation of these AMLV documents? The book's epilogue describing the brutal imprisonment of Froese and his colleagues might provide an answer. Toews writes, "In contrast to ideological theories as to how the world should be run, [AMLV] Union supporters demonstrated an admirable tenacity in promoting an agricultural system that had worked in the past. In the end they could not cope with the transient policy fluctuations of the new regime. Perhaps a collection of this sort constitutes a tribute to principled men and women who, in many cases, paid for their courage and audacity in the prison camps of the 1930s" (10).

This book can be accessed in the MHSBC office library and can be loaned out at Columbia Bible Institute.