

*Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine (1922-1927), Mennonite and Soviet Documents.* Edited by John B. Toews and Paul Toews and translated by John B. Toews, Walter Regehr and Olga Shmakina (Fresno, CA: Center of Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2011).

Book review by guest writer Harvey Dyck

This excellent volume of sources translated from the German and Russian should attract a wide readership of Mennonites and others interested in the Soviet Mennonite story during the 1920s. It was a time when Mennonites emerged shell-shocked from the terror-filled civil war of 1919 to 1921, briefly regained their voice, and then set about desperately to chart a future course for themselves. To spearhead the rebuilding and adaptation of ravaged villages to changing economic and ideological times, Mennonites in 1922, with grudging Soviet state support, founded a purely Mennonite institution, "The Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine".

The Union, a state-chartered producer and consumer cooperative, was popularly known as the *Menno Verband*. Chaired by the astute and devoted Benjamin Jantz and restricted in its membership to Mennonites, it had representatives in each village. Until it was harshly liquidated by authorities in 1927, it functioned through sub-committees, annual congresses and regional administrations. During its prime the *Verband* played a prominent role in the shaping of all facets of Mennonite public life and commanded the loyalty of the vast majority of Mennonites. The large number of documents in this volume witness to the Soviet preoccupation, indeed obsession, with the *Verband* and the tiny ethno-cultural minority of Mennonites that it served.

Among its many functions, the *Verband* pioneered and organized the early stages of what would become the immigration to Canada of about a fifth of all Soviet Mennonites. This dramatic, consequential and largely successful initiative was seen by Soviet officials as an act of gross disloyalty on the part of the Soviet Mennonite community. At the same time, the *Verband* tried to carve out a future for those Mennonites who voluntarily or of necessity remained behind in the Soviet Union. Supplying clinics with medical supplies and village teachers with food, it established networks of stores that had vanished in Mennonite villages. To diversify and intensify agriculture for farmers who had been divested of fully half their land, it pushed for the development of pork, cow-calf, dairy and butter operations. These would become models of cooperative enterprise and sources of considerable income.

During its heyday, the *Verband* even extended its reach into post-secondary education, founding and subsidizing the operations of several short-lived schools of agriculture. Of longer endurance, it created and ran oil presses, grist and flour mills. However, what aroused the particular ire of state and Party officials at all levels to the top of the Communist hierarchy in Kiev and Moscow, were *Verband* initiatives to negotiate broader "political" matters with the regime collectively on behalf of all Mennonites. Among them were such hotly contested issues as the distribution of land, alternative service for conscientious objectors, and prohibitions on the teaching of religion to children and youth. The overall *Verband* objective, pursued with great courage, was, as best possible, to wall off Mennonite society from Communist ideological penetration.

Eventually, Soviet leaders, obsessed with the relative success of the *Verband* in obstructing the "sovietization" of Mennonite society, became deeply troubled that this achievement might embolden other ethnic and ethno-religious groups to follow the Mennonite lead. They concluded that the *Verband* was fundamentally a religious organization "masquerading" as a cooperative. This analysis led to the momentous decision by senior state

and Party organs – reaching all the way to Kiev and Moscow – to liquidate the *Verband* in root and branch, a decision executed with great severity in 1927.

This action had a tragic sequel. In 1933, a period beyond the chronological limits of this book, the Soviet secret police, in a first wave of arrests of Mennonites, apprehended around 100 onetime Mennonite leaders, the bulk of whom had played active roles in the *Verband*. Brutally interrogated over many months, most were forced to falsely confess that the *Verband* had gone underground after its liquidation and was now conspiring with German fascism in support of its plans to conquer the Soviet Union. Virtually all arrestees were sentenced to long periods at hard labour in the Gulag from which most never returned.

The novelty and value of this collection is its breadth and bifocal Mennonite and Soviet perspective. Three quarters of documents in this book are in German and of Mennonite origin; one quarter are in Russian, and of Soviet origin. Emeritus professor John B. Toews, a distinguished historian of the Russian and Soviet Mennonite experience, has compiled, edited and translated the German-language documents of this volume (Walter Regehr helped with translations). Over a period of many years, Professor Toews scoured private and public archives in Germany, Canada and the United States in search of the key German sources published in this volume. His arresting finds consist of often dramatic and poignant letters, memoirs, reports, minutes of meetings, *Verband* congresses and much else.

The Soviet documents, compiled and edited by Paul Toews and translated by Olga Shmakina, are similarly revealing. Olga Shmakina, an accomplished interpreter and translator for Intourist and familiar to Mennonite tour groups in Ukraine, is experienced in the use of Soviet archives. Paul Toews, a prominent historian of American Mennonite history and a popular lecturer on Mennonite-related themes on bus and river tours in Ukraine, broadened his interests and passion to embrace the Soviet Mennonite experience which he also studied in Soviet archives. Often frank and routinely marked "secret", these Soviet sources consist chiefly of correspondence, minutes of meetings, and memoranda of Soviet state and Party officials, some at logger-heads with one another about how to manage the "Mennonite problem". A number of sources are copies of documents found in central Soviet archives, but the bulk have been taken from a volume of sources on the *Verband* compiled and edited by V.I. Marochko, a member of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences and a specialist on the history of Soviet Ukrainian cooperatives. Regrettably, missing in this volume are key documents from the Zaporozhe State Archive (in which Marochko never worked), contained in a large microfilm collection readily accessible through the BC Mennonite Historical Society.

The invaluable sources in this collection are well organized in eight sections that follow a handful of key subjects: the turmoil and chance encounters that surrounded the founding of the *Verband*; the establishment of the *Verband*; the work of the organization as reflected in the revealing minutes of its congresses; Soviet perspectives on the origins and work of the *Verband*; the forcible integration of the *Verband*, and its affiliates, into the Soviet cooperative network in 1926-1927; and the role of the *Verband* in the emigration of large numbers of Soviet Mennonites.

Given the *Verband*'s sorry end, the reader might well ask whether its founders had not been on a predictably suicidal course from the beginning. Why then had they persisted? In their defence one might well argue that in 1922, and through until the late 1920s, the future of the Soviet Union was still anything but certain. The USSR's position within the world seemed in doubt and Soviet leaders, in sharp conflict with one another, pursued conflicting objectives. Under these conditions, many *Verband* leaders may well have thought that their mission was to

bravely keep Communist influence at bay while keeping open the future for themselves and their ethno-religious community until such time as the Soviet Union collapsed or the Soviet leadership fundamentally moderated its ideology and programs. The observer might well keep this question in mind while reading these intriguing documents.

*Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine* can be purchased at the office of the Mennonite Historical Society.