

Leonard G. Friesen, editor. *Minority Report: Mennonite Identities in Imperial Russia and Soviet Ukraine Reconsidered, 1789-1945*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2018. 338 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

“We need to understand more how and why Mennonite colonists once identified so closely with the empire, the landscape, and the peoples of southern Ukraine. For the history to be told is not simply for the benefit of German Mennonites but also for all who care for the history of our common homeland. All of us need to know and love it, and to remember that nothing passes without a trace. And may there be peace on earth.” (Ukrainian scholar Svetlana Bobyleva 56)

In his introduction to this book of essays, Leonard Friesen argues that the study of Russian Mennonite history has often been overshadowed by commonplaces derived from in-group sources, that is, from Mennonites themselves. These commonplaces are only partially true. For example, writes Friesen, the catastrophe of the Bolshevik Revolution has been perceived as inevitable, the result of widespread abuse of the poor in which Mennonites participated. On the contrary, he writes, the Russian empire in 1913 was probably doing quite well and was poised for economic takeoff. Another commonplace, the wholesale victimization of Mennonites by the totalitarian Soviet state, also conceals a darker truth – that a number of Mennonites themselves participated in the atrocities of that regime.

This book of essays edited by Wilfrid Laurier University historian Leonard Friesen seeks to tweak historical understandings of Mennonite identity and self-identity in Imperial Russia and the USSR. The volume includes nine studies authored by both North Americans and Ukrainians. In the appendix, Friesen explains how this came about: via a series of events both strange and coincidental. The Department of World History at Dnipropetrovsk State University (DSU), a place of thriving scholarship and study in the 1990s, was focused on Germany and its story. The breakup of the Soviet Union, however, was precipitating a national Ukrainian debate on the identity of Ukraine itself, and scholars began looking at ethnic groups that had helped shaped the country. The focus changed inward, away from studies on Germany to German ethnicities that had once dwelt in Ukraine and, rather oddly, it shifted significantly to the Mennonite story.

And then Harvey Dyck appeared on the scene. Dyck, who taught at the University of Toronto, was in Ukraine researching new historical material on Mennonites that had resulted from the opening up of state archives. He encountered Ukrainian scholar Nataliya Venger who was studying Mennonite history, read a paper she had written on the topic, and realized he had landed in the middle of something unexpected: Mennonite studies at DSU.

The dynamic Professor Dyck then went into action, organizing a museum exhibit on Ukrainian Mennonites, arranging for the raising of two monuments to the Mennonite heritage in Ukraine, and coordinating a Mennonite studies conference that took place in the industrial city of Zaporizhzhia in 1999. Dyck was aided in his efforts by individuals involved in the Mennonite Heritage Cruises that began in 1994; these included Walter and Marina Unger, Olga Shmakina, and the late Paul Toews.

Each of the essays in *Minority Report* contains provocative or even controversial observations on the Ukrainian Mennonite story.

* In her study of the founding of the Mennonite colony of Borozenko, historian Svetlana Bobyleva (DSU) describes the profound distinctiveness of Mennonite farmers, who worked their

own land alongside their hired workers but refused to rent property to the locals. This was utterly contrary to the arrangement that had existed between Russian aristocrats and their peasants, resulting in resentment against the “German interlopers.” Mennonites were farming more like Europeans than Russians.

* American scholar John Staples revises the common perceptions of the great Mennonite organizer Johann Cornies. It has often been argued that Cornies was deeply resented for his “secularist” reforms. Not so, argues Staples; in fact, these reforms were generally regarded as legitimate. Mennonites were beginning to perceive themselves as a people who were an important component of the Russian state. Cornies himself, writes Staples, was not secularist but influenced by Pietism.

* Irina Cherkazianova, who received her doctorate in St. Petersburg where she now lives, traces the trajectory of Mennonite education in the Russian empire. Until the 1830s, Mennonite schools were nearly entirely independent; from then until the 1880s, the Russian language was introduced into the curriculum as the empire modernized. Mennonites generally compromised with the state’s efforts at assimilation. After the unification of Germany in 1871, however, anti-German sentiment increased to the point that many Mennonites welcomed the overthrow of the aristocracy in 1917.

* DSU graduate Oksana Beznosova argues that Mennonites in Russia were conflicted from the start, engaged in a dance between religious and secular authority. The individuals who founded the Mennonite Brethren church in 1860, she says, were often landless but also frequently educated and upwardly mobile. By the 1890s Mennonites had transitioned from an isolated community to a church within a multi-ethnic empire.

* Nataliya Venger, historian at DSU, spotlights the Russian suspicion and envy of Mennonite entrepreneurs who made good. Mennonite businessmen learned how to lobby and influence politicians, but anti-German opinion mounted in the late nineteenth century – there were even rumours of anti-German pogroms, although that never came about. During World War I, Mennonite entrepreneurs manufactured war materials in order to avoid the confiscation of their factories; the church never objected.

* John B. Toews writes an engaging profile of Abraham A. Friesen, a principal delegate in the Russian Mennonites’ Study Commission that travelled North America in the 1920s to investigate possibilities for emigration. A.A. Friesen advocated the adoption of the Russian language: “We can no longer be the quiet in the land,” he wrote. When he arrived in the United States, he was disheartened by American Mennonite disunity, and remarked that he might prefer living among mainstream Americans. Friesen’s urbanity may have been characteristic of many Russian Mennonites.

* Alberta scholar Colin Neufeldt writes that by 1928-9, hundreds of Mennonites sat on local soviets. Their reasons for this were varied: employment in a troubled time; security for their families; the increasing difficulty of emigration; fear; and outright ambition. Working for the state often ended in disaster, as members of soviets were themselves purged in the Stalinist terror.

* Alexander Beznosov, now teaching in Moscow, writes of the Soviets’ staggering incompetence that was the partial cause of the great famine in 1930s Ukraine. The new Nazi regime in Germany offered aid to “Germans” living in the USSR; the German aid fund was multi-faith and included Jews in its governing structure. German Russians were ultimately doomed and hopelessly tainted by this effort. The Soviets soon denied that there was a famine at all.

Mennonites received some help from relatives abroad, but that may have contributed to Soviet suspicion: the arrest rate of Mennonites was ten times the national average.

* In his essay on the Second World War, DSU scholar Viktor K. Klets contends that neither the Soviets nor Germans regarded Mennonites as a separate people. Some Mennonites collaborated with the Germans when their army invaded in 1941 but mostly the attitude was passive acceptance. Remarkably, a few Mennonites opposed the German occupation. The Germans, says Klets, were over-confident, convinced that German ethnic groups in Ukraine would automatically support them. Mennonites had long ceased to feel German: when they fled to Germany in 1943, they were perceived by German nationals as aliens.

Leonard Friesen writes: I am the child of immigrants, and so have always lived my life conscious of being caught between vastly different lands. Thus, though born in Canada, Canada is but a small part of my identity. It is also no surprise that I have been fascinated by the past from an early age. It was always a land of mystery for me, one that I always knew held the answers to questions I wanted to engage: who was I, what was my community, and how did my world come to be? On a more mundane level I received a PhD from the University of Toronto in 1989 after extensive graduate studies in a country that no longer exists (the Soviet Union, and Leningrad/St. Petersburg above all). I have been at Laurier since 1994 and I have seen the History Department at this university develop into a remarkably strong unit in that time. www.wlu.ca