



A religious or a social elite?

The Mennonite Brethren in Imperial Russia.

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Who were the Brethren? Why did they emerge in the Russian colonies in the 1860s? Why, when they were initially so unsuccessful in converting most Mennonites to their ideas did their movement survive and eventually grow in membership and importance? These are but some of the many questions one can ask about the place of the Brethren in Russian Mennonite life. To even attempt an answer requires the consideration of all kinds of factors: social, economic, political and ideological; all kinds of influences: external and internal. If there is no end to questions and no final solution to any of the issues, one should not be surprised. Historical interpretation has no finality. So in this paper I will severely limit the focus of my questions and the means to seeking answers, not because I believe that the direction I have followed is either more correct or more meaningful than any other, but because I lack the time or space to be more comprehensive.

My aim is to examine the emergence of the Brethren as a social group within the larger Mennonite community established in Russia by 1860 and its development into a religious community. As such it will concentrate on the nature of Mennonite society and the forms of community which had developed by that date, and attempt to locate the Brethren within these social and community structures. In order to examine the forms of society and community that had developed by 1860, it is first necessary to understand how these had come into being and to realise that Mennonite society was still in a process of transition as part of a larger transformation of Mennonite life in Russia.

At least one Mennonite historian has recently taken me to task for arguing that Mennonite life was transformed in nineteenth Russia. Apparently he prefers to see the massive changes which occurred as

merely a process of 'adaptation'.<sup>1</sup> I wish, however, to re-emphasize my belief that the changes which occurred in Russia were fundamental and to repeat that I believe these changes were just part of a much larger movement in ideas and society which transformed many European societies between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. This larger transformation, involving a transition to capitalism and the emergence of industrial societies and nation states, has been examined from a number of perspectives by historians, political scientists and sociologists.<sup>2</sup> To argue that Mennonite society just adapted to a new environment in Russia, limits our understanding of the broader dynamics and consequences of the changes that occurred and tends to emphasize the distinctiveness of the Mennonite experience at the expense of examining larger influences and connections. Mennonites in Russia undoubtedly did adapt to a whole range of influences, ideas and practices, but the long-term consequence of this adaptation was fundamental and irreversible. The Brethren are but one result of a much larger Mennonite transformation of Mennonite society and ideas in the nineteenth century.

A model of agrarian Mennonite social and communal forms

I wish to begin by proposing a model of Mennonite society and culture and to generate the model over time. As a model it is non-specific and generalised although it assumes a close-knit but small scale agrarian society. The model is not to be confused with any kind of idealised 'Adabaptist' society or community.<sup>3</sup>

Mennonites, ideally, are people who choose to join a community of believers and to participate in its religious life. The choice is marked by baptism. In reality, historically most Mennonites have been a people born into a pre-existing Mennonite community where they have

socialised into a distinct set of life practices and enculturated in the ideals and values of the faith. The process of socialisation and enculturation was far more effective and comprehensive in small scale, cohesive rural communities than it is today in a world where there are more people, more complex social forms and very different modes of communication. What this process of socialisation and enculturation created was a particular kind of person committed to a particular interpretation of the Christian faith. Baptism, however, still involved a degree of personal commitment. On the one hand there was the private covenant between an individual and God to live a life of faith, on the other was the public contract between an individual and a community to live in a specific moral and ethical social environment according to the rules of the community enforced by the accepted forms of discipline in the community. This community was a religious collectivity, a congregation of baptised people.

The congregational-community was the dominant, corporate social institution of Mennonite life. By corporate I mean it was the only social entity which possessed a distinct identity, which persisted through time with precise rules which determined and defined its membership.<sup>4</sup> The domestic groups in which Mennonites were primarily raised, socialised and enculturated, were not corporate groups (although the association of a particular family to a particular farm might produce a corporate category). The domestic group went through a developmental cycle and lacked perpetuity: after marriage a couple lived with their parents, then set up their own household, raised their children who married, lived with them for a time before leaving, and so the cycle began again. The domestic units did not persist through time but were formed, reformed and dissolved. Only family names remained constant in the male line as corporate categories reflecting the

importance of kinship in social life. Otherwise the congregational-community remained the major focus of identity and the main area of corporate community activity.

The congregation marked Mennonites off not only from the larger social world, but also from Mennonites who identified with other congregational-communities. Such Mennonite and non-Mennonite communities were proscribed for ideological reasons. Social communication with outsiders was constrained, social solidarity within the congregational-community was enforced by strict discipline while positive social integration was encouraged between members, continuity of membership being achieved by endogamy. A spirit of egalitarianism prevailed within communities and officials in charge of congregational affairs were the only recognised sources of authority beyond that of heads of household. Even so congregational leaders were chosen by the community and were subject to the baptised members of the congregation assembled at special meetings.

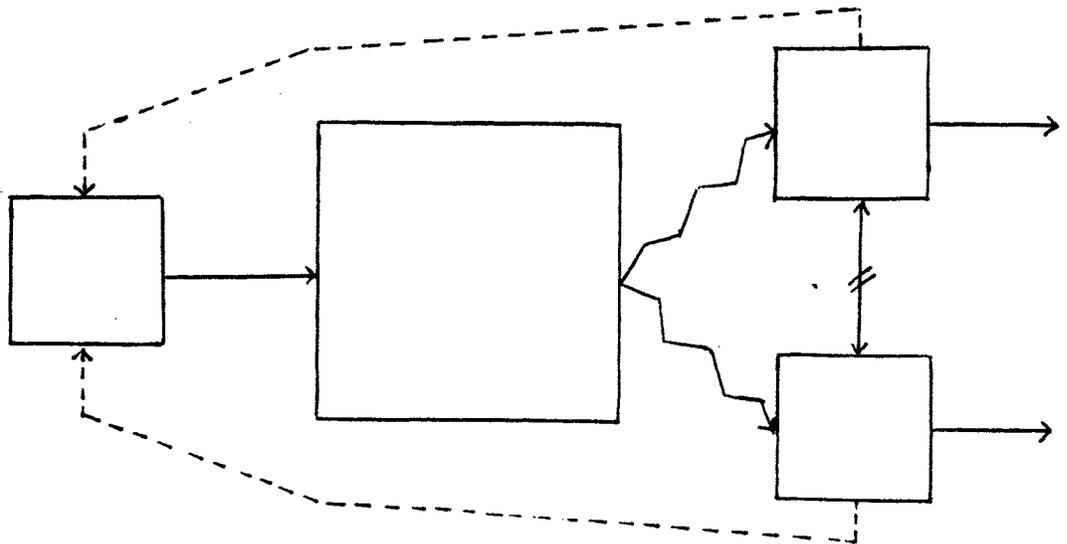
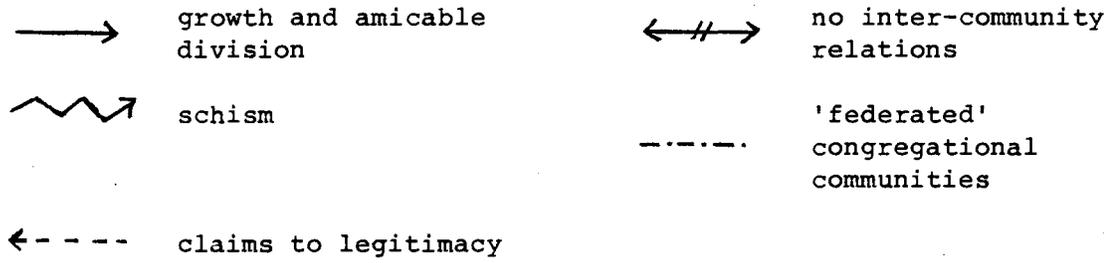
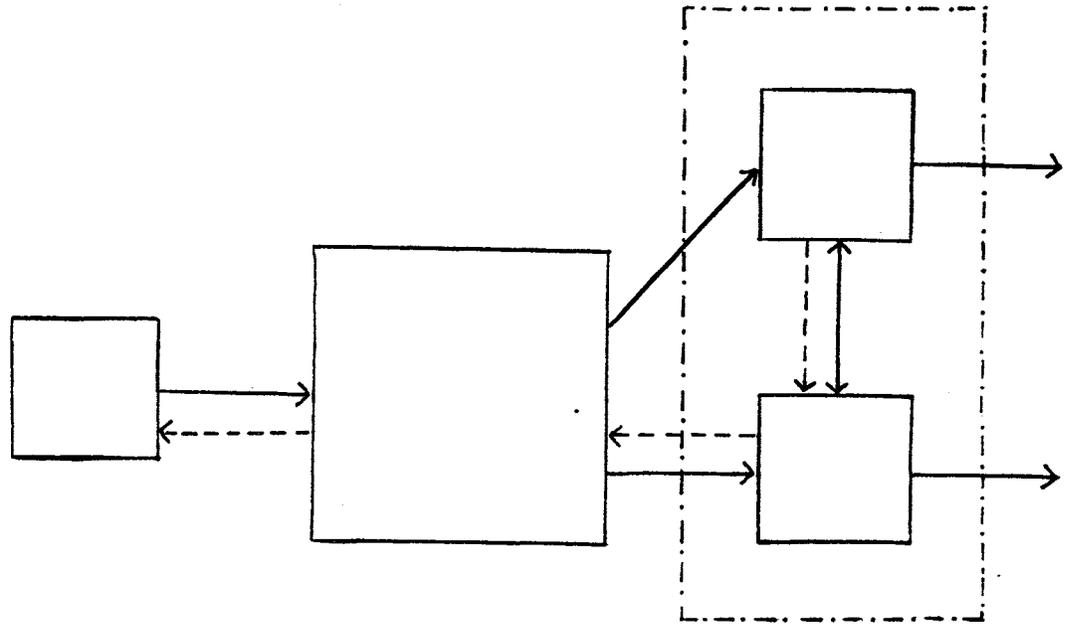
The congregation, because it was coterminous with the community, was both localised in space and limited in size. It was localised because its members had to be able to maintain social relationships at the face to face level, to meet together for worship and to order congregational affairs and maintain discipline. The same demands of community management and maintenance influenced the size of congregations. It would appear that the ideal size was between 200 and 500 members, beyond this communities became unstable while if membership dropped too low, i.e. below 100, the community became difficult to sustain. One major reason for this was that recruitment became difficult if the principle of endogamy was to be maintained.

Given the fecundity of Mennonites, congregational-communities tended to grow rapidly in size even if no new members were recruited.

Pressure on existing land resources in a locality meant households became geographically dispersed. The congregational-community was placed under pressure and could divide, either by mutual agreement or by schism after a period of discord. When new households were established in new localities it was often possible to establish a new congregational-community by amicable agreement. In an agrarian, pre-industrial environment where communications were limited, the process of amicable separation could be achieved by careful stages which did not threaten the existing systems of organisation and authority. The new, distant set of households were at first subordinated to a mother congregation, but acted as an independent community eventually achieving full independence when they elected their own leaders. If this process was achieved successfully the new congregational-community would often affiliate with the older congregation, recognising its seniority and accepting its authority in specific matters. Such affiliated congregational-communities produced through a process of amicable segmentation (see Figure 1a) while nominally independent, formed a loose federation. In times of crisis the leaders of the groups could co-operate in joint action. Such connections often gave added authority to leaders within and beyond their communities. The opportunity for joint action, however, was rare and everyday life of community members continued to be restricted to their own congregations. In time there was a tendency for each congregation to develop distinctive patterns of social and religious practice which created cultural differences between communities which might later be a cause for conflict.

Conflict, however, was more likely if the local congregation continued to grow in membership without being dispersed or where, even when dispersed, it failed to develop independent organisational and authority structures. Schism then occurred. While schism could

**Figure 1a:** Growth and amicable division of congregational communities



**Figure 1b:** Growth and schism of congregational-communities

occur in congregational-communities for a host of other reasons (ideological differences between members, the enforcement of discipline, arguments over authority, disagreements between kin and affines etc) such problems were often exacerbated by the unwieldy size of the community or its geographical dispersal. Schisms (Figure 1b) created new corporate congregational-communities and the bitterness often associated with the separation of kin and affines created further conflict which persisted over generations. Each community-congregation defended the correctness of its stand and often claimed to be the legitimate inheritor of ideas, practices and forms of authority. At the same time congregational-communities produced through a process of schism often attempted to be more cohesive than those formed through amicable division, marking the boundaries of their distinctiveness off from both non-Mennonites and particularly from other Mennonites whom they eager to disassociate themselves from by developing clear cultural differences between themselves and others.

Community, congregation and pre-industrial Mennonite society in Polish-Prussia

Models may be neat, useful ways of thinking about particular possibilities in human society but the historical sources on such societies always produces very untidy and confusing images. Internally the reproduction of Mennonite society and community has always been subject to a variety of forces. In terms of membership demographic factors have produced structural imbalances while differences over the interpretation of doctrine and practice have resulted in the ideology transferred from generation to generation and individual to individual never being consistant or cohesive. But the primary forces operating against Mennonite society and communities remaining stable and being

able to continue unchanged were less concerned with internally generated contradictions than with external factors. Mennonite connections and interaction with the larger society and community and the impact of this larger world on the internal functioning of Mennonite society and community, has generated a wide range of responses.

The development of Polish-Prussian Mennonite society has been little researched and is poorly understood. This is a major impediment to any understanding of Russian Mennonite society after 1789. Also lacking in recent research, and equally important for any consideration of Russian Mennonite society before 1860, is what happened in Mennonite Prussia during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as Mennonites were subject to Prussian reforms. Many Mennonites continued to migrate to Russia throughout the period 1789-1860, bringing with them new ideas and practices which profoundly influenced Russian Mennonite life. Thus the outline which follows is very impressionistic and selective and needs a great deal more research.

The major focus of Mennonite life in Polish-Prussia was the congregation. The Mennonites, however, were divided into a number of congregations, some affiliated to each other but also divided by doctrinal differences largely associated with "mother" congregations in the Netherlands. By the eighteenth century many of these connections with the Netherlands had weakened and there were signs of possible reconciliation between congregations of different doctrinal backgrounds. But new divisions had also emerged within congregations in Polish-Prussia according to place of settlement, occupational status and forms of authority.

The major doctrinal difference was between the Flemings and the Frisians and each had their own congregations. A small group

of Groningen Old Flemish also existed. Within each doctrinal group were a number of congregational-communities which had mostly been formed by amicable separation and although there had been periods of schismatic segmentation, there had also been reconciliations. The differences between Flemings and Frisians were marked by more than differences in doctrine and practice as with time both had developed social and cultural distinctions. Some of these were the result of attempts to mark differences between the groups, but others were the logical outcome of social isolation in particular localities and association with neighbouring non-Mennonites.

Similar social and cultural differences also emerged within congregations and between congregations affiliated in a loose federation. Royal Prussia was ethnically diverse and Mennonites adapted to local customs, dialects and occupational forms. The expansion of settlement and separation from mother congregational-communities encouraged this cultural-drift in spite of Mennonite separation from the wider world. These changes were more marked in isolated rural areas than in the core areas of initial settlement. At the same time an opposite tendency emerged as those Mennonites settled in or close to urban areas, especially those in Danzig (Gdansk) and Elbing (Elblag), were involved in commercial activities. Mennonites in these areas tended to be more socially differentiated and occupationally diverse than those in rural areas, and these differences were reflected in the greater prosperity of some and the poverty of others.

Within congregational-communities settlement patterns varied. Community may be more a measure of social consciousness and the intensity of social interaction than a mere reflection of physical contiguity, but living close together in individual households undoubtedly assisted congregational solidarity. In some rural areas this was more possible

than others, but in towns it depended on a number of factors. It is clear that in Danzig many Mennonites lived in ghettos on the edge of the city, only a few were rich enough to avoid the burgher's restrictions and owned property in the city. On the other hand the networks established through ties of kinship and marriage allowed a degree of mobility, with young people visiting relations and often assisting in work or child rearing. But by the late eighteenth century the divide between town and country was widening and many Mennonites, unable to take up farming were either moving towards the urban areas or were employed in craft industries, particularly weaving, in the country areas adjacent to towns.

These changes can be attributed to the changing nature of the economy of Polish-Prussia in the eighteenth century, itself a reflection of the political and economic fortunes of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic of which it was a part. During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Danzig and the entire region of Royal Prussia had been affected by the decline in the Polish economy and it was not until the latter half of the eighteenth century that the economy improved.<sup>6</sup> The occupational differences apparent among Mennonites at the time of the first migration to Russia were thus a product both of earlier economic decline and recent improvements.<sup>7</sup>

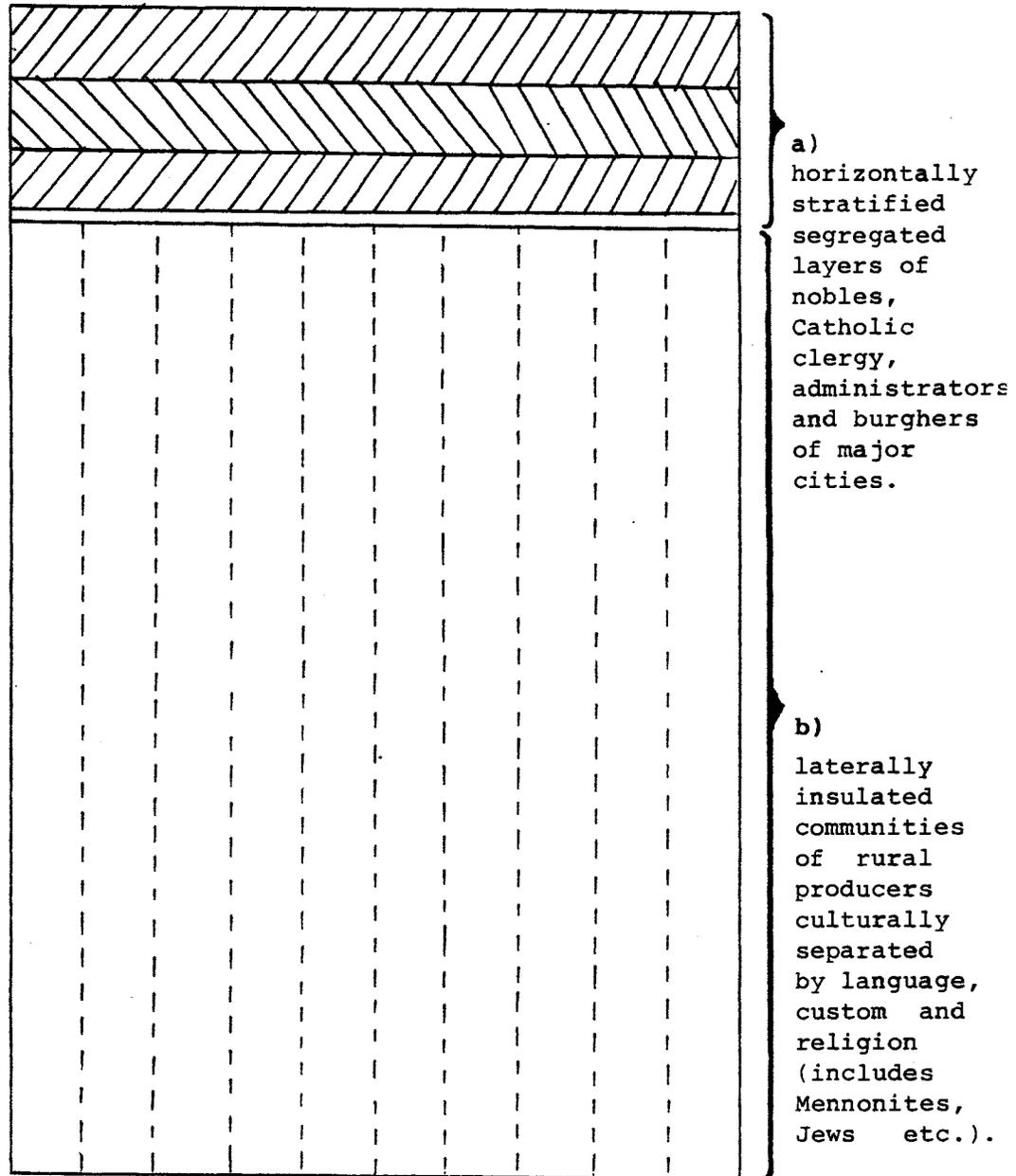
Basically the majority of the population was still based in rural areas, although a number of people were forced to supplement their income by cottage industry. In the towns an urban elite, often associated with trade, had long existed but the real heartland of the communities still lay within the agrarian sphere. Farmers ranked higher than merchants and most leading members of the congregations came from established families who had a tradition of providing religious and community leadership. They sometimes tended to be more aware

of the wider world and better "educated" than the average Mennonite, and married among themselves. No systematic study has been made of Mennonite marriage patterns according to status and occupation but I am certain that interesting correlations could be established in this regard for Mennonite society in Polish-Prussia by the eighteenth century.

In spite of this internal social and regional differentiation in the congregations Mennonites continued to form distinctive communities within the larger pre-industrial society of Polish-Prussia. Their distinctiveness, however, was not unusual at this time. The Polish-Lithuanian Republic was not a nation-state in the modern sense, but an advanced agrarian polity in which only the ruling elite possessed any degree of cultural homogeneity (see Figure 2).<sup>8</sup> The majority of the population subject to these elites were agricultural producers, lacking social or cultural homogeneity, diverse by language, dialect and custom, affiliated to their locality and to a limited range of social networks. Mennonites therefore formed but one section of a complex society vertically differentiated and divided by a range of cultural phenomena.

In Royal Prussia Mennonites were surrounded by a extremely diverse population. Ethnically and linguistically it was complex, with Germanic and Slavic speaking groups, each internally differentiated by other cultural factors including religion (Protestant (Lutheran and Reformed) Catholic, Mennonite and Jews).<sup>9</sup> For a long time the Polish state had been famous for its toleration of the religious affiliations and other differences of its peoples although, as one historian has recently noted, this was more the result of political expediency than moral virtue and there was more a spirit of toleration than real tolerance.<sup>10</sup> In a sense Mennonites were protected and allowed

Figure 2: Advanced Agrarian Polity (after Gellner)



In terms of the pre-partition Polish-Lithuanian Republic.

a reasonable opportunity to practice their faith in the areas of Royal Prussia under the King's protection. Only in Danzig did Mennonites face opposition, but the city, although part of the Republic, was a very different polity from Royal Prussia. A commercial port, ruled by civic burghers mainly of Dutch or German descent of the Lutheran faith, it was a homogenous society, intolerant of outsiders, members of other religions and people with different customs who wished to live in its environs and participate in its economy.<sup>11</sup> In this sense it more closely resembled the industrial societies homogenised within a nation state that were to emerge in the nineteenth century, than the agrarian state of the rest of the Republic.

The political weakness of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic throughout most of the eighteenth century probably assisted Mennonites maintain their congregational-community structures in rural areas. But the partitions of the Republic between 1772 and 1795 forced them to reconsider their place in the larger social and political environment which emerged. The Mennonites were no longer part of a weak agrarian polity but steadily were integrated into a emergent, strong Brandenburg Prussia. The Prussian state was already a Rechtstaat, a state based less on customary privilege and more on the rule of law.<sup>12</sup> Centralised and expansive, the Prussian state demanded the allegiance of all citizens irrespective of language, culture or faith. Ultimately it proved intolerant of such differences and devised ways of reducing or removing those distinctive features of culture which threatened its hegemony. The Mennonites, as pacifists, proved particularly odious to a state concerned with the implementation of a citizen's militia to further its expansionist designs.<sup>13</sup> Mennonites were faced with three choices: to succumb and to surrender their principles, to resist and face the full penalties of the law or to migrate and physically escape their

assimilation into a more homogeneous society. Many chose the latter alternative.

#### Congregation, colony and community in Russia

The leadership of the Prussian congregations had hoped that the Mennonite settlers in Russia would establish a single congregational-community. But the old divisions between Flemings and Frisians proved intractable and separate congregations were founded in Khortitsa. In Molochnaia after 1805, however, a single Flemish congregational-community was established but within a short period a schism resulted with a small group, the Kleine Gemeinde being formed.<sup>14</sup> After 1818 groups of Frisians arrived in the colony with their own ordained leaders. An attempt to unite the Flemings and Frisians, along with members of another immigrant congregation of Groningen Old Flemish persuasion in a common union of congregations within the larger community failed. The larger part of the Flemish community rejected union and other links with non-Mennonite religious organizations and schism resulted.<sup>15</sup> The large Flemish congregational community attempted to dominate affairs in Molochnaia but in the 1840s its leaders came into conflict with the Russian authorities and their chief agent for reform in the colonies, Johann Cornies. The large congregation was forcibly divided into three congregations although for a long period they remained united in spirit. During the 1830s and 40s new migrants arrived in Molochnaia including members of other independent congregations of Groningen Old Flemish who in Russia re-established their congregations and retained separate identities. All, however, aligned themselves with the existing Ohrloff Flemish, Rudnerweide Frisian and Alexanderwohl Groningen Old Flemish union. The complex pattern of congregational-communities

in the three New Russian settlements by 1860 is outlined in Figure 3.

Settlement in New Russia, however, resulted in the establishment of new forms of community unthought of in Polish-Prussia and with little justification in established Mennonite practice. The Mennonites were placed by the Russians in compact settlements, distinct colonies as they were known, and from which non-Mennonites were largely excluded. Within the colonies they were settled in close-knit villages with households built adjacent to one another. These new forms of settlement resulted in Mennonites widening and strengthening their communal attachments as they identified not only with kin, and congregational brethren, but also with fellow villagers who might well be neither kin nor brethren. They also identified with the colony as a whole, although usually with a regional district of the colony centred on a major village in the local area. The strengthening of the Mennonite sense of community in Russia was to have an important influence on the development of cultural life. At the level of social interaction most Mennonites now only associated with Mennonites and the close settlement patterns increased the community's vigil over the ethical and moral conduct of brethren. The authority of congregational leaders was enhanced and strengthened within congregations and outside by contact with other congregational leaders and local civil and government authorities. At the same time it must be admitted the new settlement patterns also increased the potential for social conflict. The close knit households and villages increased social tensions; the authority of the congregational leaders was often resented and the potential for political power seeking between established leaders and potential leaders was made more likely. In the long term, however, the settlement in colonies, the creation of forms of secular civil administration within the settlements and the resulting challenge to congregational

leaders to represent the larger interests of the Mennonite community over their individual congregations was an even greater source of potential conflict.

The Mennonite community as represented by the colony was a community no longer coterminous with a single congregation. In Russian eyes the colony was the major corporate entity in which Mennonites were to live. The colonies had been established by Russian decree and the government provided the special regulations which specified how the community should operate. Over the years these regulations were expanded and elaborated until they covered many aspects of community life, including moral behaviour, which once had been the sole preserve of the congregation.<sup>16</sup> These regulations were enforced at the local level (colony and village) by Mennonites and other Mennonites were also involved in implementing official development policies. The regulations and the development policies were concerned neither with the maintenance of a distinctive Mennonite identity separate from the "world", nor with individual congregational purity, but with the integration of Mennonites into the wider economic and social world emerging in New Russia. Ultimately this implied changing the very fabric of Mennonite society. The Russians recognised the colony as the major political unit of Mennonite life, the village with its Mayors as the local socio-political entity and together they constituted the Mennonite community. The congregations were recognised as important features of Mennonite life, but were viewed primarily as religious groupings whose leaders were to help sustain the wider sense of community expressed through village and colony administrations.<sup>17</sup>

When groups like the Kleine Gemeinde broke away from the main congregation they could neither be forced out of the colony, nor could

they of their own volition move to a new location and establish an entirely separate congregational-community as would have been possible in Prussia. The larger congregational-community were stuck with the Kleine Gemeinde in their midst and the Kleine Gemeinde were forced to associate with other Mennonites. The Russians refused to consider the schism as significant; all Mennonites were Mennonites in their eyes. In the same way later divisions, as well as the immigration of new congregations, were of little concern to the authorities. Although this close entrapment of different congregations within the colonies was often a source of conflict, it also encouraged some members of separate congregations to co-operate and establish a forum for debate. At the same time the size of some individual congregations grew well beyond that of many Polish-Prussian congregations creating new challenges and new strains on the sense of congregational-community. Another result of the Russian creation of the colony-community was that congregational discipline could not always be enforced and sometimes conflicted with official sanctions. Mennonites condemned by their congregational-community could not be expelled from the colony-community, while many official punishments, including the form of punishment, were not recognised by the congregational leaders.

In a sense the colony-community possessed many of the features of a distinct polity. By this I do not mean the much vaunted and misunderstood "right" of Mennonites to "self-government". As I have indicated the hierarchy of civil offices and the regulations they administered were defined by the Russian government, they were not devised by the Mennonites from some mythical Germanic Urkultur. This system of indirect rule suited the Russians and fitted well into the structure of regional and provincial government they developed in New Russia after 1800 as Russia became a nation state in the western European

**Figure 3:** Mennonite congregational-communities in New Russia 1860

Key:

Khortitsa and related colony-communities

- |    |                        |         |                                |
|----|------------------------|---------|--------------------------------|
| 1. | Kronsweide/Kronsgarten | Frisian |                                |
| 2. | Khortitsa              | Flemish | } "Federated"<br>Congregations |
| 3. | Bergthal               | Flemish |                                |

Molochnaia

- |     |                               |                |                                  |  |
|-----|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|--|
| 4.  | Kleine Gemeinde               |                |                                  |  |
| 5.  | Lichtenau-Petershagen         | Flemish        | } "Pure"<br>Flemish              | } Members<br>of the<br>Molochnaia<br>Church<br>Council<br>(f.1851) |
| 6.  | Pordenau                      | Flemish        |                                  |  |
| 7.  | Margenau                      | Flemish        |                                  |  |
| 8.  | Ohrloff-Petershagen-Halbstadt | Flemish        | } "United"<br>Congre-<br>gations |  |
| 9.  | Rudnerweide                   | Frisian        |                                  |  |
| 10. | Alexanderwohl                 | Groningen      | } "United"<br>Congre-<br>gations |  |
| 11. | Waldheim                      | Old<br>Flemish |                                  |  |
| 12. | Gnadenfeld                    |                |                                  |  |

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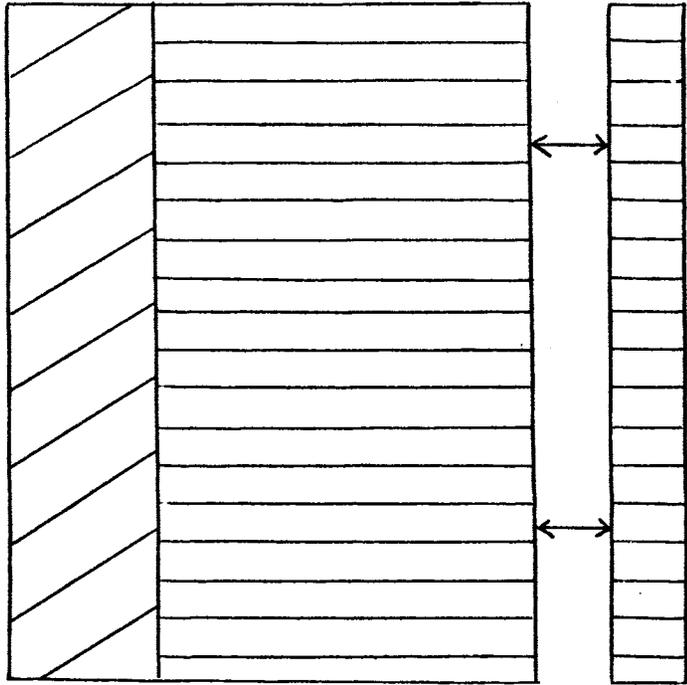
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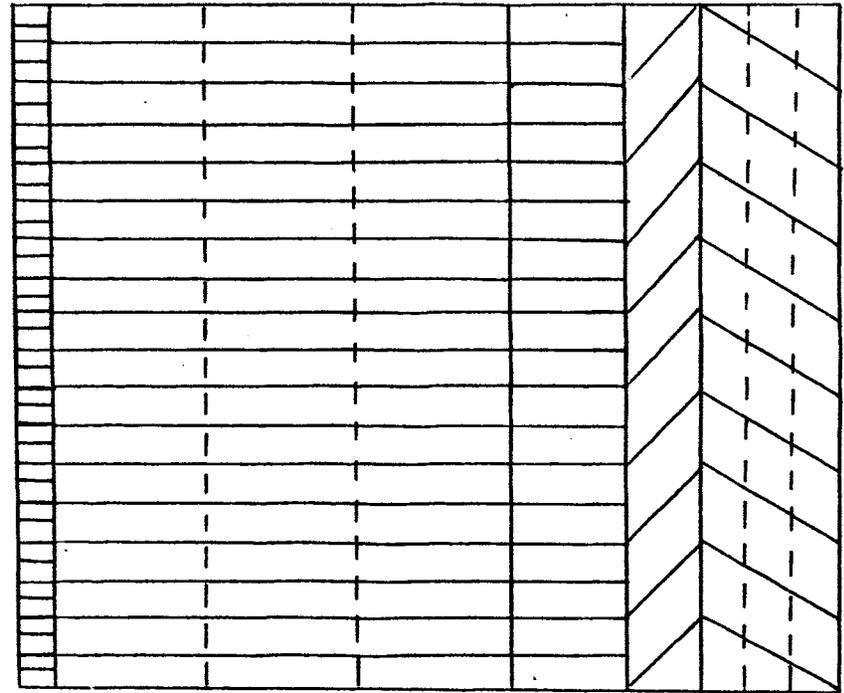
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12.



Khortitsa

Bergthal



Molochnaia



Flemish



Frisian



Groningen Old  
Flemish



Kleine Gemeinde

sense. In this regard the oft-made claim that the Mennonites constituted "a state within a state" needs qualification. The point I wish to emphasise, however, is that the agro-polities established at the colony level before 1860 bear a striking resemblance to the forms of agrarian states outlined above for Polish-Prussia (compare Figures 2 and 3). The comparison is more than just a product of how the diagrams have been drawn. Like the culturally diverse polities of pre-industrial Europe, the colonies were divided vertically by congregations which represented more than just differences in doctrine and practice. The congregational-communities in Molochnaia were divided also by cultural differences, their members often spoke different dialects, wore different dress and had very different views on many subjects such as education, domestic organization etc. Usually these differences were the result of the varied backgrounds of members and a reflection of their different histories before migration to Russia. The differences between the three Groningen Old Flemish congregational-communities centered respectively on Alexanderwohl, Waldheim and Gnadenfeld in the Molochnaia are a good example of cultural differentiation between groups of the same congregational background. All had experienced very different settlement patterns before migrating to Russia and maintained their distinctiveness in the colony by establishing separate congregations.

But in one significant way the colony-communities differed in structure from established pre-industrial agrarian polities: there was no clearly demarcated, homogeneous ruling strata above the vertically differentiated heterogeneous congregational-communities. This is not to deny that Mennonite society was not differentiated, but that no large group of non-congregational affiliated Mennonites controlling

the polity-like colony existed. The social differentiation of Mennonite society occurred within congregations but created new alliances across congregations. These horizontal distinctions heralded the emergence of new forms of society and community in Mennonite Russia: an industrial society in a commonwealth of Mennonite communities in which congregational affiliations were no longer as important as in the past.

The social differentiation in Mennonite life and the emergence of industrial society

The social and occupational differences between Mennonites which had developed in Polish-Prussia were in part transferred to Russia. But in the colonies, at least initially, a levelling of many of these differences occurred. In part this was due to the fact that most Mennonites attempted to take up farming, using their artisan or entrepreneurial skills merely to supplement their incomes. The pioneer conditions of early settlement also meant that Mennonites faced similar difficult conditions and were forced to co-operate closely, strengthening the sense of community. In the long-term, however, the frontier environment provided an impetus to social differentiation as Mennonites responded to the immense opportunities afforded by New Russian conditions. Some Mennonites took entrepreneurial risks and amassed fortunes, others drew on existing skills and developed them to suit new conditions and even the average farmer eventually became richer than his forebears or contemporaries in Prussia. Not all the differences; however, were manifested in wealth as a variety of occupational distinctions were either maintained or developed in Russia. The colonies were not just political entities

they were also distinct economic worlds with their own economic infrastructures of craft and service industries. At the same time the expansion of the administrative functions of the colonies demanded more trained officials which resulted in the development of schooling. Education became another factor in social differentiation. All these differences were accentuated by the rising population of the colonies caused by a high birth rate and continued migration. Differences of wealth, occupation and education became more clearly defined and a section of the community with restricted access to the essential skills required for social success emerged: impoverished, lacking land, good jobs and education.

The forces which influenced the emergence of these social differences were varied. At first they were the result of Mennonite initiatives, but increasingly after 1820 they were the result of specific <sup>Russian</sup> ~~Mennonite~~ policies organized and implemented at the local level by Mennonites. There was a conscious attempt to alter Mennonite society even though the resulting consequences of the policies could not have been known to its prime movers.

The leading figure in these changes was the Molochnaia Mennonite Johann Cornies.<sup>18</sup> Cornies directed the Agricultural Union, an organization which began as a kind of Ministry of Agricultural Development, widened its scope to one of Economic Development and eventually became a Ministry of Cultural and Economic Development in the 1840s, subordinating even the colony administration to its control. Little notice was taken of the vertical congregational divisions in the colonies except where they could be used to facilitate the policies of the Union. Congregational leaders who opposed the Union's plans were removed; congregations were divided into manageable

regional units; formal procedures were initiated to regulate inter-congregational affairs and to mediate disputes. As such the Union became the modernizing arm of the Russian state in the colonies taking on the features of a reformist agency in the community.

Cornies reinforced the trend towards making the colony a separate economic entity which at the same time was integrated into the larger economic environment developing in New Russia. This had profound social consequences for the community. At the core of each colony was to be a society of independent, efficient farmers who would respond to market conditions. They were to be serviced by local artisans and tradesmen, and assisted by a cadre of efficient, trained bureaucrats. Crucial to Cornies' plans was the reform of the educational system, which in hindsight can now be seen as essential in the formation of a modern industrial society.<sup>19</sup>

Until Cornies' Union took over the educational institutions in Molochnaia, schools had been controlled by the congregations and local authorities. Even before the Union intervened, however, there are clear indications that education had become more regularized and standardized in the colony in response to the demands for trained administrators by the Russian government. What Cornies did was to "secularize" education and complete this process. As the nineteenth century progressed culture became something school-transmitted rather than something transmitted by the congregations or in the household. While the socialization and enculturation of the young was still into a Mennonite environment, there is a sense it was broader. The generalised education provided Mennonites with the skills and ability, if they wished, to be socially mobile. They could shake off not only old community ties but also,

as individuals, seek their own way in the world free of kin and the occupations of their ancestors. Their intellectual horizons were also widened and if the social world of farm and village were seen as parochial and constraining so were the established ideas of the congregational leaders. On the other hand they still felt tied to the Mennonite world but increasingly to a broader vision of the Mennonite community which they were to serve as teachers, administrators and businessmen and, beyond the Mennonite community, they were to serve the Russian nation state of which they were loyal citizens.

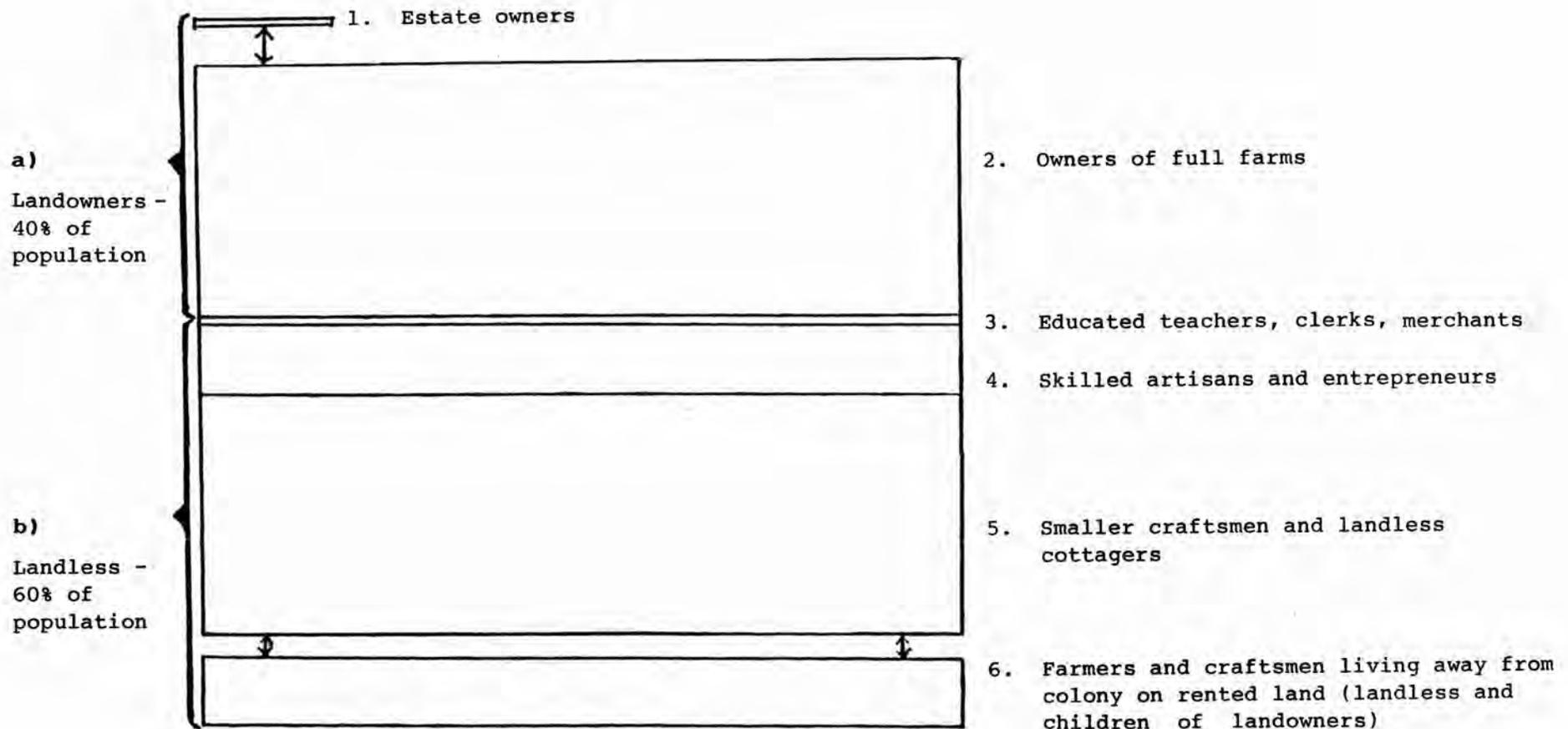
By 1860, however, such attitudes were still confined to a very small minority of the population, and not all the people affected had experienced the influence of new social forms in Russia. The emergence of industrial societies was occurring in association with the formation of nation states elsewhere in Europe, most markedly in Prussia. Indeed the Prussian Mennonites had been subjected to the forces of change earlier and more profoundly than their Russian brethren. As "German" speakers the Mennonites in West Prussia and Danzig were subjected to Prussianization from the time of the partitions. Although the process was interrupted by the Napoleonic wars and by shifts in policy, Prussianization increased steadily during the first half of the nineteenth century. One of the major forces leading to the integration of Mennonites into the larger society was education which socialised children into the ideals and values of the Prussian state and urged them to seek a role in the emergent industrial society. At the same time the Mennonite sense of constituting a separate community weakened in Prussia. The process of rapprochement between separated Mennonite congregations, which

had begun in the late eighteenth century but which had been reversed in the early Russian settlements, intensified in Prussia during the first half of the nineteenth century. The vertical differences between congregations declined to insignificance, regional differences were overcome by increased communication while the horizontal distinctions between individual Mennonites on the basis of wealth, occupation and education increased.

The significance of these Prussian trends for the Russian situation, especially in Molochnaia, should not be underestimated. Not only were many Russian colonists in constant contact with their Prussian brethren, but many Prussian Mennonites also emigrated to Russia between 1820 and 1850, singularly or in groups. These new settlers had already experienced the forces of transformation from an agrarian, pre-industrial society into an industrial society, had a different sense of community and congregation from many Russian Mennonites and the skill, or at least the will, to seek for a new order.

By 1860 Mennonite society (see Figure 4 for Molochnaia) was in a transitional state with old ideas of congregational-community and the proper social status derived from experience of agrarian society of brethren still strongly represented. Indeed many of these attitudes had been strengthened by the counter-reaction which occurred in the political sphere following Cornies' death in 1848. In line with the priorities of an agrarian society the possession of land and the life of a farmer were seen as the ideal. Land gave power and status and most of the farmers were old and conservative, raised and socialized in the older cultural environment. But the division of the Mennonite colonies into landowners and landless

**Figure 4:** Social structure, occupation, status and Landholding, Molochnaia 1860.



obscures more critical social divisions.

The landless were far from being a homogeneous group.<sup>20</sup> Their ranks included the children of landowners who lacked capital to establish their own farms, craftsmen and artisans and their children, some rich others poor, businessmen and other entrepreneurs, school teachers, administrative clerks and finally very impoverished groups who had never owned land and who existed on the margins of Mennonite society. The leaders of the landless came mainly from the elite landless: artisans, craftsmen, teachers and clerks, many of whom were either recent immigrants who had been encouraged by Cornies' policies to migrate to New Russia during the 1830s and 40s, or people educated in the reformed schools during the Cornies era. It was obvious to these people, as it had been to Cornies, that the number of landless would increase as the population grew and the availability of land in the colonies decreased. While the leaders of the landless were motivated by a number of factors to become involved in the cause of the landless, ranging from self-interest to deeply felt moral indignation, their actions had obvious political motives. In the spirit of reaction which set in after 1848 conservative forces dominated by the landowners controlled civil affairs. The landowners controlled not only wealth but through their possession of land, political power and influence in congregations. People without land had no voice in village and colony affairs. But in the post-Crimean war economy of New Russia there was money to be made not only from agriculture but also from trade, milling and the production of goods. The elite businessmen and artisans, the teachers and clerks were frustrated in their claims to status in a community dominated by landowners and supported by archaic views which attributed

high status to farmers and looked down upon businessmen, tradespeople and educated individuals. The mobility of these new groups, socially and physically, was also severely restricted by such attitudes leading to discord and frustration. Below the elite, however, lay a mass of poor landless, lacking social consciousness, whom the Russian government obviously recognised as 'Mennonite'. If they could be mobilised the political control of the conservative farming landowners could be overcome and the new elites could assume their rightful place in community affairs.

The important point to realize is that these social differences cut across the differences in congregations. Members of each social group were located in each congregation and their social contacts, especially among the landless elite, created a sense of horizontal solidarity across congregations at the expense of vertical congregational-community ties. While exact figures are unavailable, it is also obvious that not all these social differences were equally distributed through all congregations. The largest numbers of landowning farmers were to be found in the older, more established Flemish congregations. Although these congregations contained a large number of poor landless the other, more recently settled congregations contained a higher proportion of skilled, educated landless, some of whom had been born, if not brought up in Prussia. The Frisian congregation particularly appears to have contained large villages with, presumably, a number of landless.<sup>21</sup> The Ohrloff Flemish congregation, Cornies' own community, contained a number of educated landless who were to play a leading role in the landless struggle as part of that congregational-community's larger programme to regain control of the colony-community during the 1860s. Political

differences in the Molochnaia by 1860 therefore tended to correspond more to social differences than to congregational divisions. At the same time these social differences also began to correspond to differences in world view, including religious attitudes and allegiances which again linked people of different congregational affiliation but of similar social status in common religious concerns and practices.

The social background of the Brethren: leaders and supporters

Most of the early leaders of the Molochnaia Brethren had already been involved for some years in a number of groupings active in social and religious affairs in the colony. These included religious study groups associated with particular congregations, especially Gnadenfeld, school reform movements, missionary support groups and other unofficial bodies. Membership of these groupings often overlapped, but the one we know most about was the informal circle associated with the Evangelical Separatist revival preacher, Eduard Wüst. The Wüst brethren, as they were known, supported the ideas and activities of Wüst and included non-Mennonites. From the nucleus of this group appeared many of the key figures of the two new community groups to emerge in Molochnaia in the 1860s, the Brethren and the Templars (Table 1).<sup>22</sup>

Twentyeight members of the Wüst brethren can be identified by name of whom eleven were later to become Brethren and seven Templars. The dates of seventeen can be ascertained and the majority would have been in their 30s during the 1850s when the brethren were active. It is also clear that a number had been born outside Russia,

Name	Place of residence	Congregation	date of birth	date of immigration	occupation	Comments
August Lenzmann	Gnadenfeld	GnGOF	1823	1836	farmer/Elder	NC
Bengamin Lange	Gnadenfeld	GnGOF	c.1800	1836	Minister/teacher	NC (sons joined the Tm)
Wilhelm Lange	Gnadenfeld	GnGOF		1836	Minister/teacher	NC (Br to Benjamin)
Wilhelm Bartel	Gnadenfeld/Berdiansk	GnGOF	1820-30?	1830s	merchant	M Br - see Table 3
David Hausknecht	Gnadenfeld	Fr?			teacher	Tm
Jacob Buhler	Prangenu/Berdiansk	Fr	c.1830		merchant/miller	died 1855
Bernhard Buhler	Prangenu/Berdiansk	Fr GnGOF	1834		merchant/miller	M Br
Nikolai Schmidt	Steinbach	Fl *GnGOF	1815		Minister/estate owner	Tm
Johann Schmidt	Steinbach	Fl *GnGOF			estate owner	Tm
Heinrich Schmidt	Pastwa	GnGOF				NC?
Abraham Matthies	Rudnerweide	Fr	c.1820		merchant	NC
Dietrich Dick	Rudnerweide	Fr	1809		merchant	Tm
Jacob Bekker	Rudnerweide	Fr *GnGOF	1828	1836	teacher	M Br - See Table 2
Abraham Weibe	Rudnerweide	Fr *GnGOF			merchant	Tm
Johann Classen	Liebenau	Fr?*GnGOF	1820	c.1820	merchant	M Br - See Table 2
Heinrich Hüberr	Liebenau	Fl (Ohl)a	1810		farmer/miller	M Br - See Table 2
Andraes Flaming	Schardau	Fr *GnGOF?	1825		Minister/farmer?	NC? Brother to M Br - See Table 2
Benjamin Janz	Grossweide	Fl *GnGOF				M Br
Abraham Braun	Grossweide	Fl			teacher/miller	NC
Abraham Cornelson	Grossweide/Elisabethal	Fr	1826		teacher	M Br - See Table 2
Peter Siemens	Konteniusfeld	Fl (Ohl)	1828		teacher/miller	M Br
Peter Dick	Pordenau	Fr			merchant	Tm
Abraham Dick	Pordenau	Fr			merchant	Tm
Leonhard Sudermann	Berdiansk	Fl	1821	1841	merchant	NC but later linked to Gr
Hermann Sudermann	Berdiansk	Fl	1814	1839	merchant	NC
Jakob Reimer	Felsental/Gnadenfeld	Fr *GnGOF	1817		teacher	M Br - See Table 3
Abraham Peters	Ladekopp	Fl?	1826	1839?	teacher?	M Br - See Table 2
Christian Schmidt		Lutheran	1833		carpenter	M Br Became important leader

**TABLE 1: Members of the Wüst brethren.**

Notes: GnGOF (Gnadenfeld Groningen Old Flemish); Fr (Frisian); Fl (Flemish); Ohl (Ohrloff); WGOF (Waldheim Groningen Old Flemish); NC (no change); Tm (Templar); M Br (Mennonite Brethren); \*Indicates a change in Congregation; c. (circa).

mainly in Prussia, had migrated as children or as adults and thus had direct or indirect experience of a social and community system different from that which had developed in Russia. The occupations of most can also be identified. Ten were merchants or entrepreneurs, eleven were teachers or had attended secondary school and received instruction to the level where they could teach or become clerks. Others were involved in milling, a major area of entrepreneurial speculation in the boom conditions following the Crimean War. At least three were wealthy, independent landowners. Only two could be described as colony-farmers and both had received a secondary education.

It is clear that none of the Wüst brethren belonged to the poor landless, although many lacked land, and that landowning colony-farmers were under-represented. The brethren therefore, belonged largely to that minority group of educated, landless, upwardly mobile group, excluded from colony and congregational affairs. This is not to say that many were inactive in their congregations and communities, only that they did not receive popular support and social recognition. Most lived or came from the eastern villages of the colony, where major new settlement had occurred only since 1820. They were mostly members of the Frisian and Groningen Old Flemish congregations. Many had changed their congregational affiliation within the United congregations, a move which had been eased and legitimised during Cornies' rule to reduce inter-congregational conflict. As individuals they had chosen to associate with the congregation which professed a more 'active' religiosity often associated with pietist and evangelical tendencies - Gnadenfeld. Their membership of a particular social group was thereby strengthened

Name	Place of residence	Congregation	date of birth	date of immigration	occupation	Comments
Abraham Cornelsen	Elisabethtal	Fr	1826		teacher	left brother 1862
Cornelius Wiens	Elisabethtal	Fr?				banned 1864 moved to Kuban
Isaak Koop	Elisabethtal	Fr?	1817	before 1860		
Abraham Wiens	Elisabethtal	Fr?				
Franz Klassen	Elisabethtal	Fr?				Deacon 1860-61
Martin Klassen	Lichtfelde	FR?	1821?	1841?		banned 1862
Abraham Wiens	Lichtfelde	Fr				
Daniel Hoop(Hoppe)	Schardau	Fr?	1823	1854	Son of tailor	excommunicated 1861 put out 1862?
August Strauss	Schardau	Fr?	before 1820	1840s		left Brethren? Moved to Crime
Jakob Bekker (Becker)	Rudnerweide	Fr	1828	1836	teacher?	leader 1861-2 extremists
Isaak (Johann) Regehr	Pastwa	Fr?	c1830			put out 1862?
Andraes Voth	Pastwa	Fr?			teacher	moved to Crimea 1863
Jakob Wall	Pastwa	Fr?				put out 1862
Heinrich Hübert	Liebenau	Ohl.Flem.	1810		farmer/ miller	
Johann Classen	Liebenau	Gn GOF	1820	c1820	teacher/merchant	
Diedrich Classen	Mariental	Gn GOF		c1830		nephew of Johann
Peter Stobbe	Ladekopp	Ohl.Flem?		c1839?		
Abraham Peters	Ladekopp	Flem?	1826	c1839		banned 1864 later Deacon Kuban

TABLE 2: The Eighteen Signatories to the Brethren Secession Document January 6th 1860

Name	Place of residence	Congregation	date of birth	date of immigration	occupation	Comments
David Classen	Ladekopp	GnGOF?		1820s?		brother of Johann Classen
Simon Harms	Leibenau	Fr				married H. Hübert's daughter - moved to Kuban
Gottlieb Strauss	Waldheim	WGOF?		1830s		
Friedrich Strauss	Waldheim	WGOF?		1830s		to Kuban
Johann Strauss (1)	Waldheim	WGOF?		1830s		to Kuban
Johann Strauss (2)	Waldheim	WGOF?		1830s		
David Doerksen	Waldheim	WGOF?		1830s		to Kuban
Jakob Reimer	Gnadenfeld	GnGOF (prev. Fr)	1817		Estate owner	
Heinrich Bartel	Gnadenfeld/ Berdiansk	GnGOF	1830- c1840	1830s	merchant/ miller	Deacon 1860-1 involved in troubles
Bernhard Penner	Gnadenfeld	GnGOF	c1830-40			later Adventist
Benjamin Bekker	Rudnerweide	Fr	1832?	1836		younger brother to Jakob Bekker
Abraham Regehr	Rudnerweide	Fr				
Wilhelm Bartel	Gnadenfeld/	GnGOF	1820-30?	1830s?	merchant/ miller	elder brother to Heinrich left 1862
Heinrich Flaming	Schardau	Fr		1830s?		to Kuban
Jakob Kroeker	Lichtfelde	Fr				

TABLE 3: The Fifteen Additional Signatories of Brethren in Letter to Ohrloff March 19th 1860

by their ties with a progressive congregation and, given their social networks, it is not surprising to find some linked through ties of marriage.

Of the eighteen signatories to the original Brethren secession document, five can be identified as former Wüst Brethren (compare Tables 1 and 2).<sup>23</sup> If the fifteen additional names attached to the document the Brethren sent to the Ohrloff congregation in March 1860 (see Table 3)<sup>24</sup> are added, the number of former Wüst brethren is increased by two. Who were the other twenty-six Brethren who formed the "core" of the initial Brethren secession?

Although much detail is missing, the picture already drawn for the Wüst brethren members is repeated for this group of early Brethren. In terms of education and occupation those that can be identified show many similarities with the brethren. If anything a younger generation is now represented, three at least were unmarried in 1860 (Bernhard Penner, Heinrich Bartel and Benjamin Bekker). Again a number, perhaps as many as half, were born outside Russia usually in Prussia. They largely lived in or came from the eastern villages, and from a group of particular villages (see Tables 2 and 3). This undoubtedly reflects links of kinship and marriage. Surprisingly many were members, or former members, of the Frisian congregation and those who were still members of this congregation were banned after secession. Otherwise they were members of the Gnadenfeld or Ohrloff Flemish congregation with the possible inclusion of some Groningen Old Flemish from Waldheim (although some Waldheim villagers may have been members of the Gnadenfeld congregation, again after transfer).

The Khortitsa Brethren who emerged after 1862 are more difficult

to identify, although their leaders show strikingly similar social backgrounds to the Molochnaia leaders. Abraham Unger for instance was a wagon maker and entrepreneur; Heinrich Neufeld was a silk manufacturer and entrepreneur. There are also a good selection of teachers or well educated clerks and minor administrators represented. The links with the Frisians are also strong. But Khortitsa was not as strongly differentiated in terms of culture and society as Molochnaia.<sup>25</sup>

This analysis of the social background of the early Brethren confirms and extends the recent repudiation of earlier arguments that the Brethren were associated with the poor landless and the call for land reform in the 1860s.<sup>26</sup> While many of the early Brethren were landless, they were not necessarily poor, indeed quite the contrary. And none were involved in the land reform movement. The argument that the emergence of the Brethren can be seen as a social protest movement against social deprivation and injustice can therefore be rejected. On the other hand the Brethren can be considered as a socially disadvantaged group but only in terms of their membership of a larger social group sensitive to their position in a community which failed to recognise their status and skills and denied them a proper role in civil and religious affairs. But what of the new members either baptised into the movement or who supported the activities of the Brethren during the early years of turmoil between 1861 and 1865? Were these people of the same social background and status as the early Brethren? Or did they include people from the ranks of the poorer landless?

From all the sources available I have only been able to identify by name fiftysix people associated with the Molochnaia Brethren between

1860 and 1865 in addition to the thirtythree identified in Tables 2 and 3. All but one are male.<sup>27</sup> I have identified thirtysix people for Khortitsa, all male. In terms of their ages, occupations and other details there is very little information although more teachers and merchants appear in the lists. By January 1861, 102 adults had been baptised in Molochnaia and between 1860 and 1865 between 260 and 299 people were baptised.<sup>28</sup> Some were Khortitsa Mennonites baptised in Molochnaia although between 1862 and 1866, 202 people were baptised in Khortitsa, 116 in 1862 alone. But a number of the early Molochnaia Brethren never submitted to baptism and left the movement early; a number baptised between 1860 and 1865 also left or were excommunicated during the periods of internal strife and never returned. By 1865 there were probably only about 100 members in Molochnaia, with others obviously in the Kuban. Even so the numbers of Brethren are minute in terms of the total population.<sup>29</sup> In 1860 Molochnaia's population was almost 20,000, Khortitsa's almost 10,000. But were there more supporters and sympathizers than members, especially before 1865? Who attended Brethren meetings, especially when they involved popular forms of worship?

The evidence is unfortunately equivocal. Some of the early reports on Brethren meetings, however, do indicate that they were held outside the colony where landless Mennonites were renting or share-cropping land previously inhabited by Nogai Tartars who had migrated to Turkey following the Crimean War. Some Brethren had moved to these areas to escape persecution in the colony. It would be understandable if people, settled away from the colony, often alienated from the established institutions of community life in

their congregations and villages, were attracted to the services of the Brethren with their less formal structures of worship.<sup>30</sup> To raise this type of issue, however, involves the consideration of other aspects of the early Brethren, in particular their relation to the existing society and community forms and their vision of a new religious brotherhood.

Fellowship and congregation among the Brethren and the emergent Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia

The individuals who drew up the secessionist document of January 1860 referred to themselves on more than one occasion as a 'fellowship of believers' (Gemeinschaft der Gläubigen); only in their March address to the Ohrloff congregation did they refer to themselves as a congregation (Geme<sup>e</sup>inde). The idea that they were a fellowship, a new kind of religious grouping, suited their earlier experience in select religious gatherings, their criticisms of existing community structures and their hope for a new sense of religious community. They felt they were all members of a select group who individually had experienced a new sense of faith and personal salvation (they had been 'born again') who ought to be allowed to meet together 'to strengthen the faith of true believers' and hold communion separately from the unregenerate in the community. Their attempts to establish an exclusive fellowship, marked by the holding of a separate communion service within the body of their own congregations, had failed. At the time of secession all their energies were focused on the act of communion as the focus of the fellowship of existing members, rather than on the act of baptism as marking the gateway to membership of the new community of believers as was later to be the case. Beyond the need to secure exclusive, separate fellowship in communion

services, very little thought seems to have been given by the early Brethren as to the exact form their new grouping should take.

I In contrast, their view of the existing Mennonite community was clear and condemnatory. They referred to the community as the Mennonite Brotherhood (Brüderschaft), a grouping which was not religious. It was a category defined neither by God nor by Mennonite tradition but by government decree:

We have [in our criticisms] the entire Mennonite brotherhood (ganze Mennonitenbrüderschaft) in mind, because the supreme authorities (hohen Obrigkeit) consider it one true brotherhood (wahre Brüderschaft).<sup>31</sup>

This brotherhood was decadent, corrupt and full of unrepentent sinners. The 'churches' (Kirchen) and their leaders no longer enforced the discipline needed to maintain a true fellowship of believers. The brotherhood (read colony-community) had lost its direction (sense of congregational-community) and therefore forms.

The majority of the colonists and their leaders (civil and religious) saw things somewhat differently. The Brethren were not a new religious fellowship, but a dangerous 'society' (Gesellschaft), a term with political connotations at this period suggesting a conspirational cell. When the religious emphasis of the Brethren could no longer be denied, their opponants adopted the equally political term 'sect' (Sekte) and argued that the secessionists disregarded established congregational and basic Mennonite principles.<sup>32</sup>

The Brethren's separation was quite unlike earlier Mennonite group divisions (see Figure 1). Their members were drawn from a number of different congregations rather than a single religious

group; they were all lay people and no ordained religious leader provided them with legitimate authority to constitute a new congregation. In many ways they could be seen (in modern parlance) as a sectarian movement in the Mennonite colony-community and within congregational-communities rather than a schism of an existing congregation.<sup>33</sup> As such they not only threatened existing authority and community structures, but also contravened established practices. The Mennonite authorities had good reason to fear such sectarian movements given the disturbances caused by similar groups outside the colony, especially among certain renegades from Wüst's congregation at this period.<sup>34</sup>

If the Brethren only had a very vague idea of the kind of community they wished to establish, they were soon forced to organize themselves into a more formal grouping. The opposition of the Mennonite establishment and actual persecution and widespread intimidation of individual members at the local level forced them into action, while at the same time supporters and sympathisers within the colony and in the Russian administration urged them to organize themselves into an acceptable religious group. The need to secure official recognition forced the Brethren to conform more closely to established Mennonite forms than perhaps had originally been intended and created tensions which contributed to the conflicts and confrontations which plagued the Brethren movement between 1860 and 1865.

The community organizations and practices which the Brethren attempted to establish were therefore a compromise between fulfilling the original ideals of the secessionists, catering to the demands of new members who joined the movement and conforming to Mennonite

ideals in order to maintain the support of sympathisers and gain official recognition.

If the original secession had been a break with established practices, the organization of community structures and practices remained innovatory, often radically opposed to established Mennonite forms. The religious services, with their use of Low German, dancing and the playing of musical instruments contrasted strongly with the use of High German and the dour assemblies of the established congregations.<sup>35</sup> The eagerness to proselytize and attract members shifted the emphasis away from the exclusive fellowship meeting to hold communion services, to public acts of baptism expressing the promise of a new faith. The immersary form of baptism adopted also helped to mark the Brethren and their community from the established congregations.<sup>36</sup> The need to appoint recognised and legitimate leaders led to the election of ministers in May 1860 according to normal democratic Mennonite practice. But in their secession document the Brethren had argued that leaders could be chosen by 'true believers' or 'without human assistance', by God as were the apostles and prophets. The latter point was undoubtedly intended to justify the Brethren's secession without the legitimation of ordained leaders. In time, however, this belief, combined with the egalitarian ethos and a disregard for established practices, resulted in the emergence of dictatorial individuals like Gerhard Wieler, Jakob Bekker and Heinrich Neufeld who exercised arbitrary power in totally undemocratic ways. In time all was confusion among the Brethren; community, in organization and practice, became chaotic, almost anarchic in character, with strong hierarchical leaders combined with general disorder and lack of direction among a confused following.

The crisis was resolved by the strong measures revealed in the June Reforms of 1865. While some of the Brethren innovations were retained, the general trend was to establish a congregational structure with clear authority structures combined with a conservative social ethic which in many ways resembled that of the established congregations. The new form of baptism was confirmed, but candidates were carefully screened for their fitness for the elect fellowship and the number of new baptisms dropped sharply; between 1866 and 1871 only 97 candidates were baptised (only 19 a year on average) compared with almost 300 between 1860 and 1865. The wilder excesses of religious worship were strictly proscribed although the use of Low German survived for a longer period. The religious leadership was to be elected and to be subject to the same checks and balances in the exercise of authority as operated in established Mennonite congregations. The re-establishment of such authority structures was one of the features many objected to in the Reform; the original fellowship of believers was being institutionalized with new leaders, a new elite, many of them not members of the original movement.<sup>37</sup>

But the Brethren did not become just another congregation in the colony-community of Molochnaia or Khortitsa. If all the original fellowship had, as originally intended, moved to the Kuban, they may well have formed a distinct congregation which did not emphasize its 'Mennonite' nature so clearly.<sup>38</sup> If the Khortitsa Brethren had kept reorganizing themselves along Baptist lines they may too have moved away from the Mennonite camp. But the decision of some Brethren to stay in the colonies and the threat of military service in the 1870s forced the Brethren to maintain their identity as a distinct religious group, but within the larger Mennonite

community and thus secure their right to remain settlers in the community and to do alternative service. This required a degree of close co-operation between the different Brethren groups scattered usually as a minority in different settlements often with slightly different ideas and practices. A new form of centralised organization emerged in the form of the General Conferences first held in 1872.<sup>39</sup>

This reorganization of the Brethren helped renew their efforts to proselytize within the Mennonite community, to act out a sectarian role within the brotherhood. A new wave of conversions began in the 1870s with eighty baptisms alone in Molochnaia in 1876. At the same time small cells of Brethren emerged in the new daughter settlements established elsewhere in New Russia at this period in colonies otherwise founded as cohesive single congregational-communities. Who were these new converts? The evidence at present is again unclear but I suspect that many came from the same type of socio-economic groups with educated individuals that the original Brethren had emerged from and who continued to dominate the movement after 1865. This would merely have been a reassertion of the Brethren's social elitism in line with the religious elitism of their movement and continued to reflect the social differentiation which was developing in the Mennonite community.

But the entire Mennonite sense of community was also undergoing a transformation. The internal cultural and religious differences between congregations continued to decline. Congregations became localised and the movement of individuals between the older established congregations became easier. One indication of this was a weakening of barriers to marriage between members of different congregations. The major divide was now between the older congregations as a whole

(the 'Church Mennonites' as they were known) and the Brethren, who were viewed by the majority as a small, select minority of religious zealots.<sup>40</sup> Just as a broader sense of religious community emerged beyond the localised congregation so a wider sense of being Mennonite united the settlements separated by geography and history. In Russia the colony-communities were now linked into a broader Commonwealth of congregations and settlements. The emergence of the Mennonite Commonwealth was given added impetus by changes in the attitude of the Russian government to the Mennonites as a distinct religious and cultural community. From a period of active encouragement to their continuance before 1850 the official attitude shifted steadily from one of indifference during the period of great reforms of the 1860s and early 1870s to open hostility from the 1880s onwards. Russia was becoming a modern nation state dominated by the Great Russians and like other European nations was increasingly intolerant of groups maintaining their cultural distinctiveness. The state was becoming the major corporate group in society.<sup>41</sup> Threatened by this trend and the possibility of assimilation Mennonites began to unite to maintain and sustain their identity and the social and cultural institutions upon which this identity depended. The response was bureaucratic. New organizations were created to maintain educational institutions and to manage the Forestry Service, linking Mennonites of different social, cultural and religious backgrounds.

In a sense the Mennonite Commonwealth resembled a new nation state in the industrial world just as the old colony-congregation had resembled an advanced agrarian state. At the level of the Commonwealth-community it was culturally homogeneous while internally it was a society horizontally differentiated by status, occupation

and wealth. The various institutional organizations and boards acted as an internal bureaucracy to control essential services for the community's continuance while religious conferences and the development of better communications through publishing books and newspapers united distant groups.

The Brethren, as a minority within the Mennonite community, had pioneered many of these trends. Their small size made them vulnerable while their membership, scattered through different settlements, was difficult to organize and maintain. The organization of general conferences, Bible meetings, faith conferences and the provision of itinerant preachers helped sustain the scattered flock and maintain homogeneity. The pioneer work in publishing by Abraham Kroeker after 1897 is well known, starting with almanacs, progressing to books and newspapers. In a sense the Brethren were the first group among the Mennonites to clearly reflect the sense of changing society and community in the wider Mennonite world in their own religious organization, confirming their initial response to the emergent, industrial society.

### Conclusion

It is perhaps best if I not only state clearly what I have been attempting to argue in this paper, but also what I am not saying. I am presenting is different from many other opinions on the Brethren movement. My aim has been to re-examine the forms of community and society which had developed in Russia before 1860, that is to establish the social background from which the early leaders and membership of the Brethren emerged. At the same time forms of society and community which existed and in some ways which were criticized by

the Brethren can be contrasted with the Brethren's own attempts to organize a religious community.

I am not claiming that the new forms of society and community developing in Russia by 1860 caused the Brethren to emerge. Unfortunately much of the literature on the early Brethren is full of teleological arguments which state, or at least strongly suggest, that the Brethren were the logical and necessary outcome of a number of prior conditions in the Mennonite community. Certainly this is the received folk tradition among many Mennonites. Arguments such as the "spiritual decline" of Mennonite religious life in Russia caused the Brethren to emerge, or the low level of moral life, or the loss of an "original" Anabaptist emphasis of a "church voluntary in ... membership, non-resistance, the separation of church and state, and evangelism" caused the secession. Somehow Mennonite religious life had become "institutionalized" and the Brethren, like some strong tonic or worse, like radical surgeons, were required to "effect a cure".<sup>42</sup>

One reason for this propensity for teleological arguments lies in the nature of the documents upon which all our interpretations must depend. Mennonite historians have far too easily accepted that the rhetoric of the early Brethren and their supporters corresponded to the actual condition of Mennonite society and the state of religious life in Russia by 1860. The primary sources in the "histories" were collected to justify the act of secession, to see it as inevitable and in many ways "correct". I say, "in many ways" because ever since P.M. Friesen there has been a sneaking suspicion that the secession need not have occurred and indeed should not have occurred, although this is always qualified with the apology

that its effects in the long-run justified the early precipitate actions of the Brethren. The entire Mennonite community benefited because the Brethren 'caused' a religious revival and spiritual renewal. Historians ought also to be very wary of such arguments; religious life by 1860 was rich and varied in Russia and the Brethren movement was but one aspect of a complex picture.

I am not arguing that particular events cannot be related to prior conditions, indeed that is the point of this paper - the social background of the Brethren and their experience of Mennonite social and community life was an important pre-condition of the Brethren's emergence. But these pre-conditions do not govern the actual actions of those involved in any direct causative sense. There are also many other pre-conditions involved in the emergence of the Brethren which I have not discussed here, such as the concept of the person, the rise of individualism, the role of education in expanding world views, the influence of foreign literature and people of other religious backgrounds etc.<sup>43</sup> All these are equally important to understanding the background to the Brethren but again they did not cause the Brethren to emerge. The emergence of the Brethren can only be explained as a contingent set of circumstances in terms of the actions of a specific group of people reacting to a situation at a particular point in time. The Brethren only began to exist as Brethren once the secession document was signed and the rest, as they say, is history.

It follows that my attempt to identify the social backgrounds of the early Brethren does not imply that, given a particular social grouping, a new religious movement will emerge. In fact only a very small fraction of the social group I have identified with the

Brethren was ever involved in the movement, although, in terms of the entire population this group was over-represented. This, however, proves nothing. Such information needs further interpretation, new questions such as why these people, what were their experiences, hopes, aspirations, visions which made them different from other Mennonites.

And when I suggest that the later Brethren "pioneered" many of the more integrative and "modern" aspects of community and religious practices I do not mean to imply that where the Brethren led, others followed. The Brethren merely manifested, in a clearer and more succinct form, a trend apparent in the larger community as Mennonites came to terms with the rapidly changing social, economic and political atmosphere of late nineteenth century Russia.

Such considerations raise the important question of how important is an understanding of the Brethren for an understanding of the wider Russian Mennonite experience? In terms of the emergence of the Brethren it is now clear that the Brethren were not such a radical break with the religious or social world which existed before 1860 as has often been argued. The simple picture of a Mennonite flock lost in a spiritual wilderness, existing in isolation, ignorance and darkness awaiting the shepherd Brethren to bring them light and renewal, cannot be sustained. Nor can the Brethren be seen as the only bearers of progress and social conscience later in the nineteenth century; indeed they were often rigid in their adherence to religious principles and a disruptive factor in the larger Mennonite community. On the other hand they were a presence to be reckoned with. And that reckoning continues to provide a challenge to anyone interested in the Russian Mennonite experience after 1860.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Harvey L. Dyck, "Russian Servitor and Mennonite Hero: Light and Shadow in Images of Johann Cornies", JMS 2 (1984), 24.
2. For a good recent review of such approaches with (yet another) reformulation see R.J. Holton, The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism (London, Macmillan, 1985).
3. Of necessity, however, the model draws from the 'practice' of actual Mennonite agrarian communities, rather than on sets of 'ideals'.
4. For a discussion of the principles of corporateness, a concept derived from H.S. Maine, see M.G. Smith, Corporations and Society (London: Duckworth, 1974) especially 254-57.
5. These figures are guesstimates. It has been shown that the size constraints on small-scale agrarian societies are critical, see A. Forge, "Normative Factors in the Settlement Size of Neolithic Cultivators (New Guinea)", in Peter J. Ucko et al eds, Man, Settlement and Urbanism (London: Duckworth, 1972) 363-76. Interestingly there is the case of Hutterite communities where the principles of corporate communalism are much more clearly defined in social relations and social interaction than in Mennonite communities. When Hutterite communities reach a population of 130 to 150 they tend to divide, John A. Hostetler, Hutterite Society (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 186.

6. See Norman Davies, God's Playground: A History of Poland Volume 1: the Origins to 1795 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 256-92.
7. On the wide range of occupations see the Prussian survey of 1772 reproduced in K.H. Ludwig, Zur Besiedlung des Weichseldeltas durch die Mennoniten (Marburg, 1961).
8. The diagram and these ideas are derived in part from Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) especially Chapter 2 "Culture in Agrarian Society".
9. See William W. Hagen, Germans, Poles, and Jews: The Nationality Conflict in the Prussian East, 1772-1914 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), Chapter 1 "The Nationalities in the Eighteenth-Century Polish Commonwealth".
10. Davies, God's Playground, 199-200.
11. See the comments of Peter J. Klassen, "Faith and Culture in Conflict: Mennonites in the Vistula Delta" MQR LVII (1983), 194-200.
12. See Marc Raeff, The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia 1600-1800 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

13. See Gerhard Oestreich, "Army Organization in the German Territories from 1500 to 1800" in his Neostoicism and the Early Modern State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 238-9.
14. For various interpretations of this schism and the Kleine Gemeinde Al Reimer, "Klaas Reimer: Rebel Conservative, Radical Traditionalist" JMS 3 (1985), 108-17, Delbert F. Plett, The Golden Years: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Russia (Steinbach: D.F.P. Publications, 1985) and James Urry, "All That Glisters . . . : Delbert Plett and the Place of the Kleine Gemeinde in Russian Mennonite History" JMS 4 (1986).
15. For a reconsideration of these events see my "'Servants from Far': Mennonites and the Pan-Evangelical Impulse in Early Nineteenth Century Russia" MQR (forthcoming)
16. For a list of these regulations see T. Hummel, 100 Jahre Erbhofrecht der deutschen Kolonisten in Russland (Berlin: Reichnahrstand Verlag, 1936).
17. It is clear that many Russian officials tended to view the congregations as parishes and part of a larger consistorial system as existed for Protestant and Catholic 'foreign' colonists.
18. On Cornies see the classical study by David H. Epp, Johann Cornies: Zuege aus seinein Leben und Wirken (Steinbach: Echo Verlag, 1946) and for other interpretations Dyck, "Russian Servitor and Mennonite Hero".

19. See Gellner, Nations and Nationalism, 28-9, 35-8.
  
20. The landowners should also not be seen as a homogeneous group; some were artisans and businessmen who had invested in land while others, educated in the higher schools, shared many of the opinions and values of the landless elites. The landowners did not constitute a separate class. The major sources on the landless struggle remain A. Klaus, Unsere Kolonien: Studien und Materialien zur Geschichte und Statistik der ausländischen Kolonisation in Russland (Odessa, 1887) and Franz Isaak, Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten (Halbstadt, H.J. Braun, 1908).
  
21. Based on a consideration of population figures of the period 1830-1860 for Molochnaia villages derived from Russian archival sources provided by David G. Rempel and published sources in F. Matthai, Die deutschen Ansiedlungen in Russland (Leipzig: Hermann Fries, 1866) 92-5.
  
22. Information derived from the following sources, J. Prinz, Die Kolonien der Brüdergemeinde (Moscow, 1898), A. Kroeker, Pfarrer Eduard Wüst, der grosse Erweckungsprediger in den deutschen Kolonien Südrusslands (Hillsboro, Kan: Central Publishing House, 1903), P.M. Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910) (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), Heinrich Sawatzky, Templer Mennonitischer Herkunft (Winnipeg: Echo Verlag, 1955).

23. Information from sources in note 23 with the addition of Jacob P. Bekker, Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church (Hillsboro, Kan: Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest).
24. See Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood, 239-40; the document in Bekker, Origin, 59-61 misses out one name. (there were two Johann Strauss') and gives only 32 signatories. See Mennonitische Blätter (Feb. 1863), 13 for confirmation of the 33 names.
25. At present I have only been able to identify 36 Khortitsa Brethren in the period 1862 to 1865 and very little on their ages, settlements and occupation. More work needs to be done on this matter and it is hoped that a better picture of their social background will eventually emerge.
26. The strongest claim for this was made by Adolf Ehrt, Das Mennonitentum in Russland von seiner Einwanderung bis zur Gegenwart (Langensalza, J. Betz, 1932), 59 and was refuted by Peter Braun in his review of Ehrt's book ("Einige Zurechtstellungen zu Dr. A. Ehrts Das Mennonitentum in Russland", Mennonitische Blätter (May, 1932), 53-55). But for a long time it remained an easy explanation for many (see Cornelius Krahn, "Some social attitudes of the Mennonites of Russia", MQR IX (1935), 173. John A. Toews (A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches), 51-2 refutes these arguments (although he is incorrect to state that in the eastern Molochnaia villages the landless problem was not as acute as in the western settlements); see also Peter

J. Klassen, "The Historiography of the Birth of the Mennonite Brethren Church", in *Abr. Friesen ed. P.M. Friesen and his history: understanding Mennonite Brethren beginnings.* (Winnipeg, The Christian Press, 1979)

27. There are indications in the documents presented by Friesen that women played an important part in the early Brethren movement but alas, as in so many other areas of our documentation on Russian Mennonite life, they are not named and thus are difficult to place in the pattern of events.
28. Friesen (Mennonite Brotherhood, 285, 290, 314, 316-17, 320, 468-9, 489, 500, 1009-137) gives different figures for different periods and it is difficult to be exact. However, it is clear that he was working directly from a list of baptismal candidates and it is a pity he did not give us the names and the numbers.
29. This may explain why, where contemporary diaries have been consulted, the Brethren have not loomed large in peoples' minds. See John B. Toews "A Russian Mennonite: the Diary of Dietrich Gaeddert (1860-1876)", Mennonite Life 33 (1978), 14.
30. The whole issue of Classen's success in securing the promise of land in the Kuban may also have been a significant factor in Brethren support, but there is little on this matter in the documents.
31. Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood, 231; I have adjusted the translation a little with reference to the German original. It should be noted that the Brethren did not single any specific congregation out for criticism but were condemning the general community and the

reference to the Russian authorities was presented with suitable deference. This reflects the experience of some members in drawing up "official" documents. Unfortunately the general criticism<sup>s</sup> were interpreted as specific criticisms and weakened the Brethren's support base. Contrary to what is suggested in some later accounts there is no reference to the grouping of Elders in the Church Council in this document, although this became the centre of opposition to the Brethren (minus the Ohrloff and Kleine Gemeinde congregations).

32. The period after the 1848 Revolutions in Europe saw an increase in official suspicion of new groupings in Russia, including religious groups, and such attitudes had only begun to change after 1856. The charge of being a 'sect' was intended to link the Brethren with disruptive religious movements among Orthodox, Lutheran and Catholic subjects at this period which were a cause of official concern.
33. Contrast the division of the Brethren with that of the Templars where the Templars claimed to be (at least initially) a schism of the Gradenfeld congregation with legitimating ministers (Isaak, Molotschnaer Mennoniten, 239-41).
34. Although hinted at in Friesen, Bekker and Isaak there disturbances are clearly discussed in Prinz, Die Kolonien.

35. These activities have usually been interpreted as an abnormal deviation and never part of the real intentions of the founders, just one of the many teleological explanations that cloud interpretations of the early Brethren (see Conclusion below). For an attempt to reassess these activities see Harry Loewen, "Echoes of Drumbeats: The Movement of Exuberance among the Mennonite Brethren", JMS 3 (1985), 118-27.
36. Peter Klassen ("The Historiography", 124) has criticized me for this argument but even if it was not the intention of the Brethren to mark their differences, it was certainly one major result of their action and baptism was the major marker of differences for years to come.
37. On objections in Molochnaia and Khortitsa see Friesen Mennonite Brotherhood, 460-1; business meetings were called 'Babylonian'! The new elite, men like Daniel Fast, Jakob Janz and later Abraham Schellenberg, were all highly educated individuals with links to the Ohrloff congregation. Indeed the key role of converts from the Ohrloff congregation needs more research, see Friesen, Mennonite Brotherhood, 424-25, 545, 546 and Heinrich Janzen in J.B. Toews, ed. and trans., "The Early Mennonite Brethren: Some Outside Views", MQR, LVIII (1984), 116-21. On Schellenberg see A.H. Unruh, Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Brudergemeinde 1860-1954 (Winnipeg, The Christian Press, 1955), 135-37.
38. It is interesting to speculate why, even after going to the Kuban,

so many Brethren returned to Molochnaia and Khortitsa. Many, as we have seen, were not farmers and not built for the pioneer life. Besides, as many were also merchants, tradesman etc. they needed to exist in the prosperous Mennonite colony in order to live.

39. J. B. Toews has recently made much the same point although the exact nature of Khortitsa's connections with the Baptists, the threat of military service and the maintenance of "Mennonite" identity needs to be more closely investigated; Toews, "Brethren and Old Church Relations in Pre-World War I Russia: Setting the Stage for Canada", JMS 2 (1984), 47.
40. For instance see the comments of David H. Epp in 1910 quoted in Toews, "The Early Mennonite Brethren", 121-3 where he details the Brethren's maintenance of exclusiveness in contrast to the minor "ecclesiastical practices" between the Church Mennonites who otherwise co-operated as one.
41. In a sense the Mennonite Commonwealth was not a corporate group in the terms of the definition offered above. In a modern industrial society there is no major corporate social group except the nation state.
42. These quotations have been chosen at random and are not intended to condemn the other approaches of those concerned; they are in order from J.A. Toews, 'A History, 19, J.B. Toews 'Early Mennonite Brethren', 84, Klassen, "The Historiography", 127. See also similar

comments in J.B. Toews, 'The Russian Origin of Mennonite Brethren: Some Observations' in P. Toews ed. Pilgrims and Strangers: Essays in Mennonite Brethren History (Fresno, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1977).

43. I have discussed some of these factors elsewhere, see my "John Melville and the Mennonites: A British Evangelist in South Russia 1837-c1875", MQR LIV (1980) 305-22 and "'The Snares of Reason': Changing Mennonite attitudes to Knowledge in Nineteenth Century Russia", Comparative Studies in Society and History 25 (1983), 306-22.