

The Case of a Siberian Sect: Mennonites and the Incomplete Transformation of Russia's Religious Structure

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By the early twentieth century, Siberia had been transformed into a frontier region where Russia could flex her imperial muscles. The building of the Trans-Siberian Railway, an undertaking of monumental financial and physical expenditure, facilitated the transportation of the vanguard of Russian imperial power—the Russian Orthodox peasant-settler. A guidebook to the Siberian Railway published by the government's Ministry of Means of Communication makes clear the purpose behind the settler movement: to plant “the flag of Christianity and civilization in Asia.”¹ In the eyes of the state, the only Christian flag worth planting was that of the Russian Orthodox faith. Hungry for land and driven by dreams of new opportunities, Mennonite colonists also joined those journeying to this new frontier. Although no official restrictions existed preventing the relocation of non-Russian or non-Orthodox colonists, the state expressed concern that these colonists would infringe upon its interests. How the state defined these interests is not always apparent. However, it is clear that the Russian state

viewed the spread of sectarianism in Siberia as being contrary to its interests.

Concern over the spread of sectarianism in Siberia by the Russian state increased after the 1905 revolution. As the colonization movement grew in spurts, the Russian monarchy faced a serious crisis of legitimacy. The 1905 revolution nearly toppled the monarchy and to salvage political control, Tsar Nicholas II agreed to implement a number of reforms which fundamentally changed the political, social and religious landscapes of the empire. The introduction, through the October Manifesto, of the concept of “freedom of conscience” and the first attempt to clarify its meaning in April 1906, created the building blocks of Russia’s new religious order. For non-Orthodox Russian sectarian groups, this new order legalized their right to establish religious communities. For Mennonites the aftermath of the 1905 revolution included a government proposal to categorize their faith legally as a sect. Although this legislation never passed, Mennonites continued to fight the government to be recognized as a confession. In reality, by the early twentieth century, the Department of Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Faiths (DDD) of the Ministry of the Interior treated Mennonites as if they legally belonged to a sect. Unfortunately for the DDD, no laws existed to regulate the position of sects derived from foreign faiths, and Mennonites continued to be governed by the same legal statutes as before.

This paper will explore the Mennonites’ lack of integration into Russia’s religious structure before 1905 and the implications of their categorization as a “sect” after 1906. Although this label of “sect” could be (and was) used as a pejorative term to identify religious groups that the government viewed as upsetting the social order of the empire, it also was used as a more neutral legal term to classify and manage smaller groups within the newly developing religious legal structure, which remained unfinished, with its foundations fundamentally unresolved at the end of the empire. The case of Mennonite colonists in Siberia illustrates how both legal and pejorative uses of the term shaped Mennonite interaction with the Russian government and how the incomplete state of Russia’s religious structure placed Mennonite congregations in a nebulous legal position.

Before 1905 the Russian state practised a policy of religious toleration in the regulation of minority faiths in the empire.² As ethnic and religious identities tended to be intertwined, the state recognized that its religious policy of allowing recognized minority groups to practise their faiths could help engender feelings of loyalty to the tsar. Although the state gave tolerated faiths the freedom to practise their religion, it still maintained the privileged position of the Russian Orthodox Church. The state also attempted to incorporate these minority faiths

into the slowly developing system of governance in the empire. As Paul Werth writes,

even before they were explicitly characterized as “foreign” in 1810, non-Orthodox religious institutions were being integrated into the empire’s system of state administration. ... Thus, just as Orthodoxy received its “Spiritual Regulation” in 1721, so Roman Catholicism received a comparable statute in 1769, as did the Evangelical Lutheran and Reformed Churches in 1832, and most of the other recognized confessions later in the 1830s.³

This emphasis on establishing religious hierarchies by the Russian state extended to all minority faiths, not only Christian ones. For example, the state also attempted to integrate Muslim groups through state-sponsored institutions like the Orenburg Assembly.⁴ According to Robert Crews, the integration of foreign faiths into Russia’s administrative structure represented Russia’s transformation into a confessional empire, where “the state [was] committed to backing the construction and implementation of ‘orthodoxy’ within each recognized religious community.”⁵ As the self-proclaimed protector of orthodoxy for foreign religions, the state viewed part of its job as protecting foreign faiths against heresy. This imbued Russian bureaucrats with the authority “to intervene in ... questions of dogma, ritual, and ecclesiastical organization,” and it also implied that the Russian government tended to create religious policy based on the ideological commitment to protect recognized faiths in the empire.⁶ Under this system, the state even viewed other groups proselytizing among Mennonites as unacceptable.⁷

Werth questions the dominance of ideology for government decision making in Crews’ argument. According to Werth, increasingly throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the state trusted and cooperated less with the established religious hierarchies of minority faiths.⁸ Instead of relying on tolerated religious institutions to provide a stable identity for its subjects, the state placed more emphasis on the development of Russia’s “civil order” as the bulwark of the tsarist state.⁹ Within this context, the attitude of the state towards foreign sectarians shifted, as it began to “evaluate the dangers of sects in terms of social, as opposed to religious terms—or ‘harm’ as opposed to ‘heresy’—[which] opened up a space for sects originating in the foreign confessions, as long as their teachings were compatible with the prevailing order.”¹⁰ Clearly proselytizing would be considered harmful, but Werth convincingly points out that many groups recognized by the government could have been accused of proselytizing.¹¹ Werth illuminates many of the complexities attached to the term sectarian and the

pragmatism of the Russian government in dealing with religious dissent within foreign faiths.

Unfortunately, little research has been done on the organization of Mennonite religious life and its relationship to the Russian government. This makes it difficult to present a complete picture of how this relationship functioned and evolved over time. The 1800 Charter of Privileges recognized the legitimacy of the Mennonite faith by providing Mennonites with “the liberty to practise their religion according to their tenets and customs.”¹² While the government allowed Mennonites to continue their traditional ecclesiastical structure of independent congregations, it did attempt, from time to time, to integrate Mennonites more directly into its developing confessional system. For example, in 1850, the Guardian Committee ordered the Mennonite Molotschna (Molchna) colony to address a wave of religious leadership conflicts and in 1851, the colony officially created an administrative religious body with the mandate of settling religious disputes.¹³ While the Russian government did not force the Mennonites to adopt “Spiritual Regulations” like many of the other recognized faiths, it took the first step towards creating a Mennonite religious hierarchy.

The 1860s schism provides another window into how Mennonites participated in this confessional system and the tension between the state’s ideological commitment to upholding “orthodoxy” that Crews illuminates and the pragmatism that Werth identifies. Both sides of the schism approached the government and presented themselves as remaining true to the teachings of Menno Simons.¹⁴ This seems to indicate an understanding, on the part of the Mennonites, that recognition by the government would be linked to religious fidelity to the “true Mennonite faith.” The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) quickly realized that without a hierarchical body representing the “orthodoxy” of Mennonite belief, it would be difficult to determine which side was legitimate in its claims.¹⁵ Despite this difficulty, countless correspondences took place between various levels of state officials and Mennonite representatives trying to sort out what had happened and what should be done about this schism. This brief example shows that Russia’s religious policy in relation to Mennonites combined an ideological commitment to protecting recognized religious groups from splintering and a pragmatic understanding that as long as new groups failed to cause social harm they could be allowed to practise their faith.¹⁶ It also shows that Mennonites were located on the fringe of Russia’s confessional system. Mennonites preferred this position. Yet, as the Russian state extended its administrative control and Mennonites moved to new locations, Mennonites could no longer hide from the state.

Mennonites’ status under the Russian law illuminates this precarious position of Mennonites. The state included Mennonites in the volume

of the 1896 Russian digest dealing with foreign faiths: "On governing spiritual activities of Christian Protestant Confessions." Mennonites appeared under the heading "A special decree on governing the spiritual activities of some communities of Protestant confessions." The statutes addressing Mennonite religious life were lumped together with those of the Scottish colonists in Karras, Basel colonists in the city of Shush and (German) Baptists. Only two statutes espoused the principles which would regulate the religious life of Mennonites. The first statute (1104) stated: "Mennonites are free to perform their faith according to their ecclesiastical customs and statutes." The second statute (1105) stated: "Mennonite spiritual teachers can perform the duty of their position according to the rules of their confession, as long as they do not interfere in secular or other matters improper for the priesthood."¹⁷ These statutes were based on decrees enacted in 1800 and 1801. Although Mennonites traditionally maintained their own metrical books, the statutes made no mention of this right. It also did not mention the right to build churches, practise their faith in public spaces, or create religious organizations. In fact, the vagueness of these statutes is glaring in comparison to the 646 statutes that govern the Evangelical Lutheran Church which cover a variety of issues from property and church buildings to sacraments and ministers.¹⁸

Reconceptualising the religious policy of its multi-confessional empire turned out to be a difficult task for the Russian state. In the aftermath of the 1905 revolution, Nicholas II's promise of religious freedoms opened up the possibility for people to legally leave the Russian Orthodox Church. Further clarification of these freedoms extended religious rights to sects which broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church. This new environment empowered individuals to follow their personal convictions and confirmed religious pluralism among the population. The Russian Orthodox Church still retained its monopoly on proselytizing and those wanting to change their religious affiliation still had to petition the government to recognize their new identity. This re-conceptualization also had significant implications for those practising non-Orthodox faiths. By articulating a religious policy based on the principle of freedom of conscience, Russia's religious structure for governing foreign faiths also had to be revised.

On October 17, 1906 the state clarified how ethnic Russian sectarians would be treated under this new system. Sectarian groups, previously unrecognized by the state, now had a legal right to their existence as long as they registered their communities and pastors, along with collecting and providing the state with vital statistics on their community. Legal recognition meant that these groups could build churches and establish their religious life.¹⁹ The initial decree only concerned those groups who had separated from the Orthodox

Church such as the Old Believers, Russian Baptists, Molokans, and others. As these groups had previously enjoyed little or no recognition from the state, it was important to create a basic structure to facilitate (and limit) their religious life quickly.²⁰ The decree did not cover the position of apostates from non-Orthodox churches and did not specify which faiths would be recognized as foreign confessions and which would be categorized as sects.

The next stage of restructuring proved to be a monumental undertaking. As Werth notes, the MVD wrote seven draft bills for the Duma in an attempt to fulfill its contradictory purpose, "the introduction of freedom of conscience while maintaining the privileged status of Orthodoxy and the basic elements of the autocratic order."²¹ On February 23, 1907, the MVD proposed a bill to the Russian Duma titled, "On the religious communities of non-Orthodox and different faiths." (*Ob inoslavnykh i inovernykh religioznykh obshchestvykh*). This bill transposed Mennonites and the three other groups found in the same chapter as Mennonites in the 1896 digest into the section titled "Protestant Sects." In fact, they appear in the exact same order as in the 1896 code: Scottish Colonists in Karras, Basel colonists in the city of Shush, Mennonites and Baptists.²² Despite the efforts of the MVD, religious reform stalled and this bill along with the others did not pass into law. Nonetheless, the MVD clearly considered Mennonites to be a sect and as it regulated the religious life of non-Orthodox faiths in the empire, this designation continued.

Frustrated at the possibility of being categorized as a sect, Mennonites sent representatives to discuss the designation with officials of the DDD in March 1910. At subsequent meetings with the director of the DDD, A. Kharusin, and his associate, Nikolai Pavlov, both men made clear that Mennonites needed to form a more formal ecclesiastical structure which could speak for the broader religious community.²³ This response seems to indicate that the decision to classify Mennonites as a sect stemmed in large part from the fact that by the standard of the confessional system built in the Russia empire, their ecclesiastical structure resembled that of a sect. This interaction appears to call into question somewhat Werth's contention that the state increasingly looked to cooperate less with religious hierarchies in the late nineteenth century. To be classified as a confession and to speak for the community seemed to require a hierarchy, according to the state.

Without a doubt, the prospect of being classified as sectarians terrified Mennonite leaders in the Russian empire and they fought vehemently to be categorized as a confession. Mennonites grounded part of their argument for "confession" status on their position within the Russian legal structure. Although mention of the Privilegium did appear in these arguments, they also referred repeatedly to the

1896 Russian digest which placed Mennonites under the chapter dealing with Protestant confessions.²⁴ Since the state had categorized Mennonites legally as a confession in the past, Mennonites concluded this status should continue into the future. Highlighting the legal, as opposed to historical, basis for their confessional status demonstrates that Mennonite leadership recognized the changing language of the Russian state, where governance according to a legal order took on greater importance.

Scholars of Mennonite history tend to approach this restructuring from two points of view: the reaction of the Mennonite community and the negative impact this designation would have on Mennonites. Mennonite historiography has presented a nuanced view of the great effort and struggle of Mennonites to present a united front to the Russian state.²⁵ Presenting a united front meant that Mennonites had to accept a traditional ecclesiastical structure and old divisions between the Mennonite Brethren and Old Mennonites had to be overcome. Although Mennonite leaders made strides towards cooperation between congregations, old distrusts and stereotypes still remained. For instance, some Mennonites continued to accuse the Mennonite Brethren of being Baptists in disguise.²⁶

Another interpretation presented in the literature focuses on the negative effects this designation would have on Mennonites' religious life. For example, in his book on Mennonites and the Duma, Terry Martin writes, "Such a designation implied considerable disadvantage under current legislation and so was an ominous development. For instance, it would hardly be possible for the Mennonites to keep their military exemption as a sect."²⁷ Abraham Friesen also raises this possibility that the Russian government decided to categorize Mennonites as a sect in order to "automatically eliminate their special privileges."²⁸ Considering that the original 1875 statute confirming Mennonite exemption from military service referred to Mennonites as a "sect," it is not clear why being designated a sect would negate this privilege especially since the Privilegium confirmed by Paul I did not refer to Mennonites as a confession. Mennonites' privilege of alternative service also was not mentioned in the statutes regulating Mennonite faith. It had its own statute.²⁹ This does not mean that the Russian government was not considering revoking Mennonite alternative service in the early twentieth century. The exemption of Mennonites provided other groups in the empire with pacifist leanings, in particular the newly recognized Russian sectarian groups, with a concrete example of the government making an exception on the basis of religious belief. Even if the government granted Mennonites the status of a confession, this issue would not disappear, especially in the belligerent international environment of the early twentieth century.

In fact, the notion that this categorization would have restricted the legal rights of Mennonite religious communities has not been established through documentation. It appears that Mennonite scholars have assumed this categorization would equal a restriction of rights because Mennonites themselves believed this to be the case. In fact, as Abraham Friesen notes, the head of the Duma committee on religion, P. W. Kamenskii, stated that Mennonites would not lose their privileges under the designation of sect.³⁰ This does not mean that restrictions would not have happened; however, a careful study of the proposed legal changes by the MVD and their implications for Mennonites needs to be conducted. Nor can it be established that being classified as a confession would have protected the rights of Mennonites in this environment. For example, recent scholarship on Catholicism in late imperial Russia describes the difficulties and discrimination faced by Catholics after the collapse of the initiative to reform Russia's religious policy.³¹ In other words, the lack of a structure to support the concept of freedom of conscience affected all non-Orthodox groups in the empire. I would argue that it was the slow death of the MVD's initiative to create this structure that truly placed Mennonites in a precarious position. With the label of "sectarians" attached to Mennonites and without clear guidelines establishing their interaction with government officials, Mennonites faced an uncertain environment in which their rights and obligations were not clear.

The Implications of the Term *Sect*: A Case Study of Mennonites in Siberia

Siberia offers an important entry into the Russian government's view of Mennonites as a religious group and Mennonites' understanding of their obligations to the government. As colonists who left their former communities behind, Mennonites had to build new economic, social, educational and religious lives in Siberia. This inevitably caused them to come into contact with state officials. Without any previous experience with Mennonites, Russian officials struggled to determine the legal place of these colonists in Russia's incomplete religious system after 1905. The setting of Siberia provides an alternative perspective on Mennonite life in the empire to compare and contrast with the experiences of Mennonites in Southern Russia which dominates English-language Mennonite historiography.

The context of imperial expansion illuminates a second reason which makes the Siberian case so crucial for understanding the government's view of Mennonites. The building of the Trans-Siberian Railway and the settlement of millions of peasants in Siberia constitutes one of

the largest projects of the imperial state. Siberia offered an abundance of resources, particularly arable land and minerals, and provided the state with an outlet for the land crisis in European Russia. Many elites in the Russian empire viewed colonization, like their European counterparts, as a means of bringing “progress and civilization” to primitive regions.³² Yet the arrival of millions of peasant settlers to Siberia caused grave concerns as to whether or not this population would represent the superiority of Russian culture, religion and nationality or instead illuminate Russia’s economic and social backwardness.³³ The participation of German colonists in the movement fuelled fears that Siberia would become a site of German domination as opposed to Russian civilization. Also, as Russia transported its version of civilization to the Siberian frontier, it faced strikes, demonstrations, assassinations of government officials and peasant uprisings in European Russia. Thus, Siberia simultaneously became a symbol of the strength of Russia as a modernizing empire and a focus for the anxieties attached to the wave of change that modernization created in its wake.

Sectarianism is one example of an anxiety attached to colonization by the Russian state. This anxiety permeated all realms of official life, from the Tsar down to officials on the ground. After reading about the spread of sectarianism in Siberia, Tsar Nicholas II wrote, “one is gripped by horror.”³⁴ The loosely supervised movement of millions of peasants to Siberia contributed to this anxiety. The state viewed the colonization movement as one of the main contributing factors to the growth of sectarianism in the region. As the state tended to equate Russian Orthodox belief with political loyalty to the regime, the growth of sectarianism in Siberia caused consternation among officials who worried that sectarians would destabilize Russia’s imperial project in the region. These officials based their concern partially on the idea that Russian sectarians lost their connection to Russian culture and became more like Germans in the values they espoused. In late imperial Russia, the state increasingly viewed German values, or “Germanness” as detrimental to the development of the empire.

A series of correspondences between the Governor General of the Steppe, E. O. Schmidt and officials in St. Petersburg illustrates the political weight that sectarianism carried with the Russian government. Correspondence from these levels of government illuminates an intense preoccupation with how these “foreign values” would influence Russian peasants in Siberia and affect Russia’s future development. Yet it also shows a commitment by the MVD to collect facts before initiating action and demonstrates how firmly the DDD protected its mandate to regulate the religious lives of those under its umbrella according to the laws of the empire. Despite this commitment to upholding the laws, the responses of both the Governor-General and

the DDD illustrate the politicized nature of religion in the post-1905 environment. In this environment, Mennonites were caught in a web of uncertainty as the label of “sectarians” raised suspicion among government officials by associating Mennonites with groups deemed unsavoury, but legal, by the Russian state.

In 1910 Governor-General Schmidt submitted a report about the spread of sectarianism in his region. According to Schmidt, Baptists, Adventists, Shundists, Molokans and Mennonites preached their faiths among the Russian Orthodox settlers. Notably, Schmidt did not qualify these groups ethnically; as enemies of Holy Orthodox Russia through their alleged proselytizing, it appears their ethnicities did not matter. Travelling through his region convinced Schmidt that a problem existed and it was caused by two main factors: the inadequate resources of the Russian Orthodox Church and the legal recognition of sectarian groups. In terms of the resources of the Church, a lack of churches and properly trained priests and missionaries to anchor the settlers in their faith helped to ripen the field for sectarian propaganda.³⁵

The importance Schmidt attached to the religious identity of Russian settlers illustrates the continued significance of the Russian Orthodox faith to membership in the Russian nation. For Schmidt the concept of freedom of conscience clearly had no place in Russian religious policy. As made clear by his report, Schmidt believed that sectarianism weakened the Russian state. He wrote, “This danger to Russian Orthodoxy and the Russian state is too great. How is it possible to keep quiet about this and wait for further collapse and falling away of the Russian peasant from his Orthodox Mother church, from this religion which for centuries bonded him in one body and one soul, creating the power, greatness and glory of Russia.”³⁶ Officials like Schmidt struggled to envision the empire as a place where people of different religious values and practices could be loyal to the state. In his eyes, the success of the colonization movement and the future development of Russia depended firmly on protecting the interests of Russian Orthodox settlers.³⁷

In response to the Governor General’s anxiety over sectarianism, the Prime Minister of Russia, P.A. Stolypin, sent Collegiate Councillor A. Kologrivov to the region to investigate and submit a report to the MVD.³⁸ Kologrivov travelled through Akmolinsk and Semipalatinsk regions producing a thorough report which assessed the claims of Schmidt and the condition of Russian Orthodoxy in Siberia. Expanding on many of the themes raised by Schmidt, Kologrivov shared the same perspective that sectarianism was not purely a religious matter; rather it was an issue affecting the future development of the state. Like Schmidt, Kologrivov also linked fidelity to the Russian Orthodox faith to political reliability and with membership in the national community.

Russians who left the Orthodox Church also, according to Kologrivov, gradually lost their Russian ethnicity.

Mennonites made a brief and quite unspectacular appearance in Kologrivov's lengthy report. As Schmidt had accused Mennonites of participating in aggressive propaganda, Kologrivov had the task of assessing the social harm posed by Mennonites in Siberia. Yet, while categorizing Mennonites as splintered from Lutheranism,³⁹ Kologrivov described Mennonites as having little interaction with the Russian Orthodox population. Kologrivov's brief assessment of Mennonites shows one way in which Mennonites could be categorized by the government.⁴⁰ First, he made no mention of a relationship between Mennonites and Baptists. Second, he did not ethnically qualify Mennonites by referring to them as German and finally, he investigated and repudiated Schmidt's labelling of Mennonites as trouble makers. What he did not refute, however, was the categorization of Mennonites as a sect. Nonetheless, it is clear that Mennonites could simultaneously be legally classified as a sect and not pose a political threat to the government or a social threat to their Russian Orthodox neighbours.

Despite this exoneration of Mennonites, both Schmidt and Kologrivov raised an issue which had a direct relation to Mennonites: pacifism. They expressed concern that sectarians would promote a position of pacifism among the Russian peasantry, which would leave Russia vulnerable. As Heather Coleman has shown, the issue of pacifism posed difficulties for Baptists, as they struggled "with the dilemma of reconciling the values of their earthly community with those of their spiritual one."⁴¹ Although Russian Baptists as a collective never officially adopted a position of pacifism, this stance still resonated among Baptist believers. Under these conditions, the privilege of alternative service bestowed upon the Mennonites by the Russian state offered other groups with pacifist leanings an example of the state making an exception on basis of religious belief.⁴² Notably, neither official mentioned the commitment of Mennonites to pacifism or their special deal with the Russian state.⁴³

They also identified the current legal structure governing religious life as problematic. Schmidt argued that sectarians used their legal status to assure the Russian peasants of their legitimacy. In other words, the laws did not restrict the spread of sectarianism, but rather helped to promote it. Schmidt alleged that Baptists used their new legal status to deceive Russian Orthodox peasants into believing that the Russian state supported the Baptist faith. Since many peasants in Siberia lived without access to churches or priests, they easily became victims of Baptist propaganda.⁴⁴ In contrast Kologrivov identified the vagueness of the laws and confusion among local religious and government officials as how to implement them as contributing to the

success of sectarian groups.⁴⁵ Kologrivov also recognized the role of local leaders in aiding sectarians, as they appeared to be unaware of which legal rights applied. For instance when asked by his village to curtail the actions of the newly arrived sectarians, one village elder responded, "... sectarians have permission from the Governor General of the Steppes to preach the word of God throughout Siberia ..."⁴⁶ These types of misunderstandings illustrate a greater problem in the Russian empire, an absence of a common understanding, interpretation or even knowledge of Russian law. The movement of various non-Orthodox as well as non-Russian groups made the task of governing Siberia even more complicated.

As various government officials encountered Mennonites in their administrative territories, they struggled to determine which religious laws applied to Mennonites and which did not. For instance the 1906 decree required Russian sectarian groups to register their congregations with the state. Yet these regulations did not apply to Mennonite religious communities. Using petitions by Mennonites and correspondences by various levels of the government about Mennonite religious organization, I will now explore how the label of "sectarian" shaped state policy towards Mennonites and how it affected the way Mennonites presented themselves to the authorities. My main source is Russian archival documents included in Peter Vibe's collection. Although they represent only a small sample of the materials available in the archives, they allow us a glimpse into the complex post-1905 religious environment where relationships between religious communities and the state were in flux.⁴⁷ Instead of presenting a comprehensive picture of Siberian Mennonites' interaction with the Russian state, my purpose is to initiate an exploration of how this incomplete system operated on the ground.

Russian scholar I. V. Cherkaz'ianova has illuminated elements of this confusion created by the sectarian label for the opening of Mennonite schools in Siberia. According to Cherkaz'ianova, local authorities mistakenly understood this sectarian label as prohibiting the activities of Mennonites and other sects derived from non-Orthodox faiths. Referring to these laws on sectarians, local officials denied permission to Mennonites to open their own schools. They also attempted to deny Mennonites the use of schools for worship services which caused many problems as church members lived quite a distance away and holding meeting in schools helped them to stay connected to their community and rituals. Despite these restrictions, Mennonites managed to open schools, as demonstrated by the fact that thirty five out of fifty four officially registered German schools in Western Siberia were Mennonite.⁴⁸ Cherkaz'ianova's research demonstrates the interconnectedness of Mennonite community and religious life in Siberia and the influence

that this sectarian label had on Mennonite existence beyond church life. Yet, it does not offer a complete picture of how the sectarian label influenced decision making on the part of the state officials and how Mennonites' nebulous legal position created an environment where they could legally practice their faith and have their own ministers, but their church communities themselves lacked legal statutes.

Mennonites in Siberia wasted no time in organizing their religious life. Both Old Church Mennonites and the Mennonite Brethren established congregations in their new homeland. Similar to developments in Ukraine, Mennonites in Siberia appear to have organized (or attempted to organize) into larger religious communities, some even with official ties back to Ukraine. For example, the Chunaevsk (Tchunayev) congregation began in 1899 as a branch of the Rückenau congregation in Molotschna. In 1907 a decision at a conference of Mennonite Brethren officially recognized Chunaevsk as an independent congregation. This decision established the Chunaevsk Mennonite Brethren congregation of Western Siberia⁴⁹ which had branches in Kremlevka, Friesenov, Margenau and Mikhailovka.

While this congregation received official approval from the Mennonite Brethren in Molotschna, it did not seek official approval by the state. Mennonites simply continued to practise their faith. In 1910 the Governor of Akmolinsk sent a report to the DDD which described this unauthorized Mennonite congregation based on the information he had received from a district official. The report showed the type of issues the government wished to be informed about: the origins of the congregation, the names of the ministers, the number of members and the meeting location of the congregation. The Governor shared this information with the DDD reporting that the congregation had originated out of a 1907 meeting in Molotschna of representatives of the parishes of the Mennonite Brethren. Jacob Wiens served as the leader of the congregation, which had 382 members. The congregation met in a building which also housed the primary school.⁵⁰ It seems highly unlikely that this local official could provide such a detailed report without the cooperation of representatives of the community. This interaction between state officials and Mennonites must have influenced Mennonite communities to seek state recognition, as in 1911-12, the Chunaevsk congregation attempted to register. This attempt was unsuccessful.⁵¹

In the same year that the government discovered the Chunaevsk congregation, Wilhelm Giesbrecht and Jacob Fast submitted an application to the Governor of Tobol'sk, Dmitrii von Gagman about their Kremlevka branch of the Chunaevsk congregation. They provided the Governor with types of information about their branch similar to what the district official collected about Chunaevsk: the locations of

their religious meetings and the names of their minister. While they did not request registration directly, they emphasized the legal right of their congregation to exist by referring to statutes 1104 and 1105 of the 1896 Russian digest and a 1909 directive by the MVD.⁵² Notably, these Mennonite ministers abstained from referring to Mennonites' historic privileges contained in the Privilegium. Instead they chose to claim religious rights by referring to a recent legal document.

The confusion of the Governor over receiving this information from Mennonites can be gleaned by the fact that he sent two requests, one to the district police of Tiukalinsk for information about this community and the other to the DDD. The report by the district police contained general information about the Mennonite members of the congregation and attempted to provide an overview of the broader organization. As for the congregation, the district police noted that all members were German colonists from various places in European Russia. To the question of whether the police had known about the Mennonite congregation, the response was simply no, as the congregation up until this time had not existed.⁵³

In fact the Kremlevka congregation arose well before 1910. Already by 1905, Mennonites from Kremlevka and other neighbouring villages were meeting at the school for worship under the leadership of Wilhelm Giesbrecht.⁵⁴ This indicates that Mennonites deemed it unnecessary to inform the state about their religious community. Under the conditions of colonization, as hoards of migrants arrived in Siberia, it is not surprising that local officials had a difficult time keeping track of every small settlement. Even though these congregations were built along the Trans-Siberian Railway, interaction with local officials appears to have been somewhat limited.

In addition to seeking information from the police, the Governor sent a message to the Department of Spiritual Affairs. In November 1911, the DDD responded to the Governor of Tobol'sk about the possibility of opening a branch of the Chunaevsk Mennonite congregation in Kremlevka. The DDD reported that according to statutes 1104 and 1105 of Russian law, Mennonites had the right to practise their faith and to have their own preachers. Nonetheless, since the law of 1906 referred only to sectarians who left Orthodoxy, Mennonites could not be registered under this law. The government planned to establish laws for the certification (*legalizatsiia*) of sectarian congregations from non-Orthodox faiths, but had not yet completed this legislation. The report stipulated that "colonies or communities of Mennonites enjoy the right of freely satisfying their religious needs, however, even if they call themselves 'congregations' they cannot be recognized as congregations which have the right of legal entities."⁵⁵ Nonetheless, the practice of having Mennonite ministers in charge of the metrical

books would continue, although these books would have to be confirmed by district officials. The report was signed by the director of the DDD, A. Kharuzin, and by A. Kologrivov.⁵⁶ As this document makes clear, once the government passed new legislation dealing with sectarians from established foreign faiths, Mennonites would be placed in this category. It also shows the nebulous legal position of Mennonites as sectarians without a legal structure in place to guide the government and Mennonites as to the protocols for establishing their religious communities. The state recognized the legal right of Mennonites to practise their faith, but their congregations could not have the legal rights vested in apostates from the Orthodox Church. Illustrating the contradictions of this system, Mennonite congregations belonging to the Orlov Mennonite Church Fellowship were able to register in Tomsk province as individual congregations between 1912 and 1913.⁵⁷

The law distinguished between Mennonites who had converted from Orthodoxy and Mennonites who had “converted” from non-Orthodox faiths. In 1917 the DDD explained to the Akmolinsk Oblast Commissar how registration of Mennonite religious communities worked. Those Orthodox believers who had converted to the Mennonite faith fell under the decrees of October 17, 1906 and had the right to form and register as Mennonite congregations. A congregation of former Orthodox in Voronezh province was given as an example of such a situation. These congregations, however, did not have the right to receive privileges granted to “German colonists of the Mennonite faith” such as exemption from military service. The government justified this distinction between the groups through the following logic: “Just as leaving the Orthodox faith cannot give rise to a restriction in rights, so it cannot serve as the basis for any privilege.”⁵⁸ Hence, the legal rights of Mennonites depended on whether or not they were former members of the Orthodox Church. Also, this case shows that the DDD did not consider the designation of German Mennonites as a sect as influencing their privilege to alternative military service.

Cases of Russians converting to the Mennonite faith happened in only very small numbers and the relationship between these native Russian-speaking “Mennonites” and German-speaking Mennonite communities has not been explored by scholars. Nonetheless, the archival evidence seems to indicate that conversion did happen. A report breaking down the population of the empire according to faith and native language lists the existence of 217 native Russian-speaking Mennonite males and 269 females and 33,291 native-speaking German Mennonite men and 32,626 women.⁵⁹ The appearance of Mennonites in reports on sectarians in the Omsk diocesan newspaper, *Omskie Eparkhal'nye Vedomosti*, also seems to confirm the existence of these converts. The number of Mennonites referred to in these reports does

not correspond to the number of German-speaking Mennonites in the area. For example, in a 1905 report on sectarianism in Omsk diocese, the number of Mennonites listed was twelve people.⁶⁰ Considering that Omsk diocese contained many Mennonite communities, this is either a reference to “Russian” Mennonites or a gross underestimation of the number of German Mennonites. Unfortunately this point cannot be confirmed as the report gives no indication of the ethnic background of the sectarians.

Mennonites’ nebulous legal position made them vulnerable, but not powerless, in their interactions with government officials. It also appeared to establish a dynamic between the two groups where Mennonites attempted to figure out what was expected of them and government officials attempted to determine the proper response to Mennonite religious organizations. In 1914 the Governor of Akmolinsk, A. N. Neverov, issued a directive removing the right of Jacob Huebert to maintain the metrical book and also removing the official stamp (*pechat’*) of the church. Control over the book was to be transferred to district officials as Mennonite spiritual leaders were not officially recognized and therefore not officially established in their positions by the government.⁶¹ In 1916 with a new Governor in place, the Chunaevsk congregation petitioned to have Jacob Huebert recognized as their spiritual leader. Huebert had already held the position of elder in the congregation since 1913.⁶² This appears to be an attempt to regain the metrical book and stamp. The Governor wished to be informed by the DDD how he should register Huebert, considering that no laws existed for such an act. He added background information on the congregation, reiterating that the congregation had been approved at a general meeting of the parishes of the Mennonite Brethren.⁶³ The repetition of this fact, both by Mennonites and various government officials, seems to indicate that it provided a sense of legitimacy in the eyes of the government.

By May 1917, the Russian monarchy had collapsed, a Provisional Government was established and Jacob Huebert still wanted his right to keep his congregation’s metrical book and to use of the congregation stamp reinstated. In a report, the Commissar of Akmolinsk Oblast’ reviewed the case for the DDD, including Huebert’s petition to have his former duties returned. The Commissar requested to know, in light of the Provisional Government’s March 20th decision to repeal national and denominational limitations, if Mennonites were supposed to be registered and under what conditions they could keep their own metrical books and have their own stamp.⁶⁴

Despite the regime change, the DDD remained fully in charge of determining the interpretation of religious policy. It reiterated that laws for Mennonites who separated from a non-Orthodox faith could

not be registered under the 1906 law dealing with Old Believers and sectarians who left the Russian Orthodox Church. As for the metrical book and congregation stamp, those Mennonite communities which already had them should be allowed to continue this practice and the government should not interfere.⁶⁵ It is not clear from the documents whether Huebert received the congregation's metrical book or stamp back; however, his continued efforts to regain these symbols of congregational autonomy indicate their importance in the eyes of Mennonite religious communities.

Conclusion

The term sectarian caused a dilemma for the Russian government. On the one hand, the Russian government showed immense concern over the spread of sectarianism, specifically among the Russian population. The government viewed these groups as carrying and promoting values that could destabilize the autocracy. On the other, it was a legal term that was being integrated into the legitimate religious system in the 1905-17 period. The case of Mennonite colonists in Siberia illustrates how both definitions shaped Mennonite interaction with the Russian government and how the incomplete state of Russia's religious structure placed Mennonite congregations into a nebulous legal position. The full reasoning behind the decision of the Department of Spiritual Affairs to classify Mennonites as a sect is not entirely clear. Nonetheless, one contributing factor was the decentralized nature of the Mennonite congregational system. The absence of laws regulating the religious life of sectarians who had splintered from non-Orthodox confessions meant that Mennonites had no real place in this new system. This situation caused problems for Mennonites as new colonists to Siberia, as Mennonites seemed to not know what was expected of them, and local officials were unsure of how to treat them. The anti-German rhetoric found in Siberia during colonization and in the war-time environment after 1914 added another layer of complexity to the position of Mennonites. The label "Germans" and the perceived link by the government between German-ness and sectarianism cast suspicion on groups like the Mennonites. Despite this suspicion, the Department of Spiritual Affairs continued to reiterate the right of Mennonites to practise their faith in Siberia, although in this new religious environment, government involvement in defining the parameters of this right appears to be certain.

Notes

- ¹ A. I. Dmitriev-Mamonov and A. F. Zdziarskii, *Guide to the Great Siberian Railway (1900)* (New York: Drake, 1972), 50-51.
- ² Peter Waldron, "Religious Toleration in Late Imperial Russia" in *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*, eds. Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 103-19.
- ³ Paul Werth, "Schism Once Removed: Sects, State Authority, and Meanings of Religious Toleration in Imperial Russia" in *Imperial Rule*, eds. Alexei Miller and Alfred J. Rieber (New York: CEU Press, 2004), 84.
- ⁴ Robert Crews, "Empire and the Confessional State: Islam and Religious Politics in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *The American Historical Review* 108 (February 2003): 56-57.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.
- ⁷ Werth, "Schism Once Removed," 105. In footnote 63, Werth refers to this position of the Russian state, citing RGIA, f.381, op.8, d.3707, ll.76ob-77.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 95-96.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 97.
- ¹² The Charter is translated in James Urry *None but Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia, 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989), 282-84.
- ¹³ Urry, *None but Saints*, 174.
- ¹⁴ P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, trans. J. B Toews, et al. (Fresno CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren, 1978), 245.
- ¹⁵ John Toews, ed *The Story of the Early Mennonite Brethren: Reflections of a Lutheran Churchman* (Winnipeg MB: Kindred Productions, 2002), 137.
- ¹⁶ For more on the involvement of the Russian state in the Mennonite schism see, Aileen Friesen, *Religious Policy in the Russian Borderlands: The 1860s Mennonite Schism*, M. A thesis, University of Alberta, 2007.
- ¹⁷ *Svod Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* vol.11 (St.Petersburg, 1896), 108.
- ¹⁸ *Svod Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* vol.11 (St.Petersburg, 1896), 26-87.
- ¹⁹ Heather Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 33.
- ²⁰ Peter Waldron, "Religious Reform after 1905: Old Believers and the Orthodox Church" *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 20 (1987): 120.
- ²¹ Paul Werth, "Toward 'Freedom of Conscience': Catholicism, Law, and the Contours of Religious Liberty in Late Imperial Russia," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, no. 4 (2006): 850.
- ²² Zakonoproekt, "Ob inoslavnykh i inovernykh religioznykh obshchestvskh," in M. Radwan, *Katolicheskaia tserkov' nakanune revoliutsii 1917 goda* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 2003), 236.
- ²³ Abraham Friesen, *In Defense of Privilege* (Winnipeg MB: Kindred Productions, 2006), 135.
- ²⁴ Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, 630-32.
- ²⁵ See Abe Dueck, "Mennonites, the Russian State and the Crisis of Brethren and Old Church Relations in Russia, 1910-1918," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69, no. 4 (October 1995): 453-85; Abe Dueck, "Mennonite Churches and Religious Developments in Russia 1850-1914" in *Mennonites in Russia, 1788-1988: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz*, ed. John Friesen (Winnipeg MB: CMBC Publications,

- 1989), 149-81; Friesen, *In Defense of Privilege*; James Urry *Mennonites, Politics and People* (Winnipeg MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2006).
- 26 Urry, *Mennonites, Politics and People*, 125.
- 27 Terry Martin, *The Mennonites and the Russian State Duma, 1905-1914* (Seattle: Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, 1996), 40.
- 28 Friesen, *In Defense of Privilege*, 132.
- 29 Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii (henceforward PSZ) second series, vol. 50, no.54568 (April 8, 1875). Notably, subsequent clarifications of the law do not use the term "sect." See PSZ, third series, vol. 2, no. 914 (25 May 1882); PSZ, third series, vol. 3, no. 1316 (19 January 1883), PSZ third series, vol. 5, no. 2924 (May 7, 1885).
- 30 Friesen, *In Defense of Privilege*, 136.
- 31 Werth, "Toward 'Freedom of Conscience'," 855.
- 32 Willard Sunderland, "The 'Colonization Question': Visions of Colonization in Late Imperial Russia" *Jahrbuecher fuer Osteuropas* 48 (2000): 217.
- 33 Jeff Sahadeo makes a similar argument with regards to Russian settlers in Tashkent in *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent: 1865-1923* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).
- 34 Coleman, *Russian Baptists*, 92.
- 35 RGIA, f.821, op.133, d.289, ll.2,4.
- 36 RGIA, f.821, op.133, d.289, l.3.
- 37 Schmidt also recommended that Orthodox and sectarian colonists be settled in different areas. See P. P. Vibe, *Nemetskie Kolonii v Sibiri: Sotsial'no-Ekonomicheskii Aspekt*, (Omsk, 2007), 35.
- 38 RGIA, f.821, op.133, d.289, l.6.
- 39 RGIA, f.821, op.133, d.289, l.19.
- 40 I am not sure if Kologrivov had ever encountered Mennonites before this trip. Nonetheless, he encountered them again in Moscow as he attended and reported on the Congress of Evangelical Christians in 1912 for the Ministry of Internal Affairs. See RGIA f.821, op.150, d.452.
- 41 Coleman, *Russian Baptists*, 120.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 A Russian Orthodox missionary priest, Mikhail Orlov, noted that although German Mennonites in a particular village played a role in the promotion of false teachings among the Orthodox population when they visited the village mill by inundating new arrivals with questions about icons, the baptism of children and other issues, they refrained from promoting pacifism. Mikhail, Orlov, "Iz raporta vr. i.d eparkhial'nago missionera protoiereia Mikhaila Orlova," *Omskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 5 (1913), 39.
- 44 RGIA f.821, op.133, d.289, l.4.
- 45 RGIA f.821, op.133, d.289, ll.44-44ob.
- 46 RGIA, f.821, op.133, d.289, l.31.
- 47 P. P. Vibe, *Nemtsy v Sibiri: sbornik dokumentov i materialov po istorii nemtsev v Sibiri 1895-1917* (Omsk, 2000).
- 48 I. V. Cherkaz'ianova, "Dorevolutsionnaia mennonitskaia shkola Sibiri," accessed February 10, 2011, <http://krotov.info/history/20/1900/1900mennonity.htm>.
- 49 Piotr Epp, *100 let pod krovom Vsevyshnego* (Omsk, Samenkron, 2007), 93.
- 50 RGIA, f.821, op.133, d.1010, ll.232-233ob, quoted in Vibe, *Nemtsy v Sibiri*, 162-63.
- 51 Epp, 96.
- 52 RGIA, f.821, op.133, d.1010, ll.228-228ob, quoted in Vibe, *Nemtsy v Sibiri*, 151-52.
- 53 RGIA, f.821, op.133, d.1010, ll.226-227, quoted in Vibe, *Nemtsy v Sibiri*, 152-53.
- 54 I. V. Cherkaz'ianova, "Dukhovnaia zhizn' nemtsev v Sibiri" in *Istoriia i Etnografiia nemtsev v Sibiri* ed. P. P. Vibe (Omsk, 2009), 188.
- 55 RGIA, f.821, op.133, d.1010, ll.232-233ob, quoted in Vibe, *Nemtsy v Sibiri*, 162-63.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ I. V. Cherkaz'ianova "Dukhovnaia zhizn' nemtsev v Sibiri," 190. She also states that the first Mennonite congregation was able to register in 1907. The name of the congregation or a citation is not provided. See page 188.

⁵⁸ RGIA f.1291 op.84, d.319, ll.119-120, quoted in Vibe, *Nemtsy v Sibiri*, 314-16.

⁵⁹ RGIA f. 821, op.10, d.1123, ll.15ob-16. Although the document does not include a date, most likely this information was put together from the 1897 empire-wide Russian census (excluding Finland).

⁶⁰ "Otchetniia svedeniia o sostoianii sektantva" *Omskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 13-14, (1905), 35.

⁶¹ RGIA f.821, op.133, d.319 l.118, quoted in Vibe, *Nemtsy v Sibiri*, 307-308.

⁶² Epp, 95.

⁶³ RGIA f.821, op.133, d.319, ll.121-121ob, quoted Vibe, *Nemtsy v Sibiri*, 278-79.

⁶⁴ RGIA f.821, op.133, d.319, l.118, quoted in Vibe, *Nemtsy v Sibiri*, 307-309.

⁶⁵ RGIA f.1291 op.84, d.319, ll.119-120, quoted in Vibe, *Nemtsy v Sibiri*, 314-16.