

German Protestants in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union

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German church life in Russia has always been characterised by its extreme diaspora situation — both denominationally and ethnically. Outside the Lutheran Baltic provinces — Estonia, Livonia and Courland¹ — there was no real structure to German churches in Russia, and there was always an element of uncertainty inherent in church life. The only significant exception to this was the Mennonites — but even within the German community they formed an isolated ethnic and religious group. Attempts to bring about organisational unity among the churches in the colonists' villages were always suggested to the churches from outside, i.e. by the state.

Before the reign of Catherine II (1762-96), attempts to settle the fertile Volga steppe had failed. In 1762 and 1763 Catherine published manifestos in Europe inviting people to settle in Russia. Free land (30-80 hectares per family), deferred taxation, interest-free loans for purchases, and self-administration were included in the offer. Religious liberty was also guaranteed², and this was an important factor in all the phases of immigration.

There is no doubt that the first settlers along the Volga had the most difficult start in Russia. Many came from Hessen and the Rhineland, areas devastated in Frederick II's Seven-Year War (1756-63). Since Catherine had specifically invited *all* professions to settle in Russia, only some sixty per cent of the immigrants were farmers or farm labourers; about forty per cent were craftsmen or belonged to other stations — including a considerable percentage of unfortunates (discharged soldiers and officers, impoverished gentry, escaped convicts), and others (adventurers, artists, musicians, hairdressers).³ Once in Russia, however, they were all compelled to lead a rural

¹Livonia and Courland correspond approximately to present-day Latvia — *Ed.*

²Article 6.1 of Catherine II's manifesto, 22 July 1763. Quoted in Karl Stumpp, *Die Auswanderung aus Deutschland nach Rußland in den Jahren 1763 bis 1862* (Stuttgart, 1985), pp. 15-16.

³Gerhard Bonwetsch, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien an der Wolga* (Stuttgart, 1919), p. 28.



Pastor Bachmann at a wedding ceremony in Tselinograd.



Baptism family in Prokhladny.
(Photos © Glaube in der 2 Welt.)

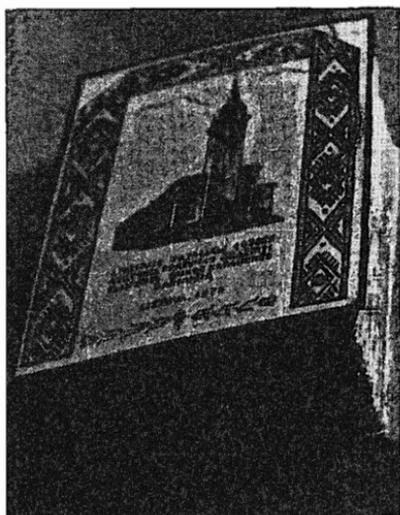
See article on pp. 32-53.



Christmas in Pastor Bachmann's house in Tselinograd.

(Photo © Glaube in der 2 Welt.)

See article on pp. 32-53.



A bound book of petitions for the reopening of the Queen of Peace Church in Klaipeda. Lithuanian Catholic priests have recently submitted further petitions which include the same request.

(Photo © Lithuanian Information Centre.)

See Document on pp. 101-104.



A Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of Warsaw.

(Photo courtesy Gareth Davies.)

See article on pp. 22-31.

existence. If one takes this into account, and then considers further that the colonisation programme was quite inadequately planned on the Russian side (e.g. no building materials — in many cases the immigrants had to live in *zemlyanki* (mud huts) for extended periods), and that the unaccustomed climate and lack of agricultural equipment aggravated the situation to no small extent, it is not surprising that it was a long time before the Volga colonies started to flourish. Raids by the nomad Kirgiz and Kalmyks also hindered successful development: plundering and pillaging, which continued until after 1800, caused the settlers anxiety and alarm. Over the years, some 1,500 settlers were seized and sold in the slave markets of Bukhara and elsewhere. The Volga colonies also suffered extensive devastation during the Pugachov uprising (1773-74). It took three generations before the situation stabilised and a certain degree of prosperity was achieved.

Between 1763 and 1769, some 27,000 Germans settled along the lower Volga to the north and south of Saratov. The settlements were established on a denominational basis. Of the 101 "mother colonies" along the Volga, there were 68 Protestant villages (including four Calvinist and a few mixed Lutheran and Calvinist), and 33 Catholic.⁴ The whole region was divided into 11 Protestant and four Catholic parishes, of which 13 had already built a church by 1771. A further 91 daughter colonies had come into being in the Volga region by 1909, and the number of settlers had risen to 450,000 Protestants and about 150,000 Catholics.

In 1787 Catherine II offered West Prussian Mennonites a special colonisation agreement to establish settlements along the Dnepr in the newly-won territory of southern Ukraine. She also invited more German colonists to the Molochnaya region in southern Russia. Alexander I continued the colonisation programme with his manifesto of 1804, which resulted in a new wave of immigration that continued into the 1860s and brought some 100,000 new settlers into the country.

In contrast to the post-1763 colonisation of the Volga, the second wave of immigrants (to the Black Sea area — present-day Ukraine) had strong religious motives for coming to Russia. Many of the colonists came from south-west Germany — Württemberg, Bavaria, Alsace, Switzerland. Religious unrest among Protestants in Germany

⁴c.f. Hermann Dalton, "Geschichte der Reformierten Kirche in Rußland" (Gotha, 1865), pp. 230-42; Stumpp, *op. cit.*, p. 33; *Die Evangelisch-Lutherischen Gemeinden in Rußland. Eine historisch-statistische Darstellung* (published by the Central Committee of the Benevolent Fund for Evangelical-Lutheran churches in Russia: Vol. 1, St Petersburg, 1909), pp. 110-90; Joseph Aloysius Keßler, *Geschichte der Diözese Tyraspol* (Dickinson, North Dakota, 1930), pp. 278-80. (Keßler was the last Catholic German bishop in Russia before the Revolution.)

intensified when King Frederick I of Württemberg radically changed the liturgy, hymns and church customs in line with the rationalist spirit of the age. Particularly in Württemberg, pietistic groups had long been meeting for their “*Stunde*” (hour) for prayer and Bible reading because they were not satisfied with what was being offered by the established church. The religious revival which swept across Europe at the beginning of the 19th century gave rise to “new pietistic” features in Württemberg and at the same time further intensified the tendency to introversion and isolation. Many of those who were dissatisfied with the state of their church went to Russia in the hope that they might be able to sustain their familiar church there without opposition.

Others had already separated from the church — committed Christians who had experienced inner conversion, “rebirth”. These groups were especially willing to emigrate.

The French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, crop failures and religious revivals all helped to create an atmosphere conducive to apocalyptic-eschatological ideas. The mystic Juliane von Krüdener, a long-standing confidante of Tsar Alexander I, referring to Bengel and Jung-Stilling as well as Spener, announced the imminent return of Christ in 1836 — on Mount Ararat in Armenia — and therewith the beginning of the millennium. She forced (and partially financed) the emigration of these visionaries, who from 1817 made their way down the Danube to Russia. Two groups, seriously depleted by illness and epidemics, settled to the north of Odessa, where they founded autonomous Lutheran churches of born-again believers (Hoffnungstal and the villages around Neuhoffnung). A third group (about 450 families) reached the Caucasus and established seven villages near Tiflis and to the south of it (including Helenenthal and Katharinenfeld) — also separated from the Lutheran Church. When 1836 passed without the return of Christ these visionaries came to their senses and as a result there was a measure of reconciliation with the Lutheran Church, although they still formed their own Evangelical-Lutheran synod. Only later (1876 in Hoffnungstal, 1928 in the Caucasus) did they rejoin the Lutheran Church in Russia.

While eight villages (consisting of some 2,000 people) were founded by the Mennonites along the Dnepr (Chortitsa region) after 1788, there was a more significant influx into the Black Sea area, along the River Molochnaya, during the reign of Alexander I, after 1800. Over the period 1802-12 there were approximately 5,000 people, and by 1842 there were about 55,000 Mennonites in forty villages in this area.⁵

⁵ Benjamin H. Unruh, *Die niederländisch-neiderdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18., und 19. Jh.* (Karlsruhe, 1955), p. 230ff.

By 1835 German colonists had established 189 villages in southern Russia and Bessarabia, of which about eighty were Lutheran, 35 Catholic, 56 Mennonite, six Calvinist, three autonomous Lutheran, and a few mixed Lutheran-Calvinist or Lutheran-Catholic.⁶ Round about 1860 there were 130,000 Germans in 214 villages,⁷ and by 1911 this number had quadrupled: in southern Russia (including Bessarabia but excluding the towns) there were about 225,000 German Protestants, 196,000 Catholics and 105,000 Mennonites.⁸

Volhynia and Podolia [western Ukrainian provinces — *Ed.*] were colonised from 1830 onwards, but especially after 1863. The settlers were mainly Germans from Polish territory which had been added to the Russian empire since 1795. In 1862, 5,700 German Protestants settled in Volhynia, with only one pastor.⁹ By 1914 their number had increased to 210,000 (more than five hundred villages), divided into only 11 parishes. Inadequate spiritual provision on the one hand, and proximity to Poland and central Europe on the other (together with the continuing immigration), made Volhynia susceptible to new religious movements which offered the settlers more on a spiritual level than did the established Lutheran Church. Thus, twenty per cent of Germans in Volhynia are thought to have been Baptists before 1914.¹⁰ Adventism also made its first inroads into Russia from Volhynia.

Despite various divisions in the course of the years, the parishes have always been too large: even at the beginning of the 20th century, many Protestant pastors were responsible for the spiritual welfare of more than twenty German villages, whereas German Catholic priests generally had parishes with only three or four congregations. Additionally, the Protestant parishes suffered from a serious shortage of pastors, so that intensive pastoral care was frequently not provided.

Often the pastor was only able to visit each individual colony two or three times a year (and sometimes not even as often as that). Pietistic Brethren groups (see below) tried to fill the spiritual vacuum: they had a strong influence on religious life in the villages — more so in the Black Sea area than along the Volga.

The “*Küsterlehrer*” (sacristan-teacher) was the pastor’s represent-

⁶Stumpp, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-98; Dalton, *op. cit.*, pp. 204-28.

⁷Dalton, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

⁸Johannes Schleuning and others, *Und siehe, wir leben! Der Weg der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche in vier Jahrhunderten* (Erlangen, 1982), p. 66; Keßler, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-85.

⁹Erik Amburger, *Geschichte des Protestantismus in Rußland* (Stuttgart, 1961), p. 80.

¹⁰Irmgard Fleischhauer, *Das Dritte Reich und die Deutschen in der Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart, 1983), p. 12; Schleuning, *op. cit.*, p. 72 gives 250,000 Germans in Volhynia, of whom approximately 50,000 were probably Baptists.

ative, and provided what was often the only education the colonists received in their life. As such, he was *the* spiritual authority in the village. He was appointed by the church and was paid as little as possible. It is hardly surprising that unqualified people often assumed the office of schoolmaster, of *Küsterlehrer*. Lessons suffered not only because of the teacher's lack of qualifications, but also because of the size of classes (four hundred pupils was quite normal in the Volga colonies). In southern Russia, on the other hand, the German villages were much smaller and did not form self-contained settlements, with the result that in the smaller colonies there were often only between twenty and fifty children in school and a teacher could hardly be paid.

The school was specifically a *church* school, with the catechism as the main subject but with some time also given to hymn-singing, reading, writing, and arithmetic. Children attended school between the ages of seven and fourteen (when they were confirmed), but only in winter; in summer they worked in the fields. Under such circumstances academic achievements were not particularly high, and as far as girls were concerned, their parents were satisfied if they could read. (The Bible, hymn book, and Luther's small catechism were often the only teaching materials.) At any rate, every German village had its own school, while the Russian and Ukrainian villages rarely did.

Teachers were trained in so-called "central schools", which existed specifically to train *Küsterlehrer* and "*Schreiber*" (clerks) — German administrators who were also supposed to be able to speak Russian — and for this reason some of the teaching in these schools took place in the Russian language. In most cases the training period was four years.

As the pastor's representative, the *Küsterlehrer* generally led the church service, but since he was not ordained he was not allowed to preach and had to read a printed sermon. He prepared young people for confirmation and engaged couples for their "wedding test" (an examination of their basic religious knowledge). He baptised babies and buried the dead. He helped the colonists as well as the "*Schulze*"¹¹ (village mayor) with anything needing to be written. When the pastor visited the village, he ratified the baptisms, celebrated Communion, tested candidates for confirmation and first

¹¹ The "*Schulze*", as in Germany, was the elected village mayor. He was subject to the German district administration, the "*Oberschulzenamt*", which consisted of the elected "*Oberschulze*" (chief mayor) and two other elected members. Continuity was maintained by the "*Schreiber*" (clerks) at village level, and the "*Gebietsschreiber*" (district clerks) in the *Oberschulzenamt* — the permanently employed secretaries. Only the *Oberschulzenamt* were subject to Russian administration — the "*Tutelkanzlei*" in Saratov or the "*Fürsorgkomitee*" (welfare committee) in southern Russia.

communicants, and blessed them and new marriages. Generally speaking, time and circumstances did not permit him to step out of the role of distributor of the sacraments and devote himself to pastoral work, and spiritual life in the colonies was rarely stirred up by the pastors.

It was not only the rarity of visits by the pastors, nor revival movements and pietistic traditions that resulted in the colonists often turning to the Brethren and to new religious movements. In many cases it was the pastors themselves who remained distant from their congregations — whether they were Polish priests in the German Catholic villages or Lutheran pastors who, as gentlemen, often looked down on the “uncultured colonists”. The mentality of pastors from Germany distanced them from the farming community, and in human terms they were sometimes not able to meet the hopes placed in them. Only the Calvinists and the autonomous Lutheran parishes experienced less difficulty in finding suitable pastors — who came mainly from Switzerland (the Basel Mission).

The relationship between pastor and parish was also made difficult because in the colonies, apart from their vocational duties, pastors also had to act more or less as “*Sittenwächter*” (guardians of propriety) — controlling especially the activities of young people. Moreover, they were forbidden to engage in any form of social-charitable activity. This caused a further rift between pastor and parish which encouraged the development of a piety not related to the church. This was not the fault of the pastor alone.¹² It was only in the last third of the 19th century that the provision of suitable pastors for the villages became a little easier when — as a result of grants — a reasonable number of colonists’ sons were able to attend the Roman Catholic seminary of the German bishopric of Tiraspol in Saratov, or the Protestant Faculty at the German University of Dorpat, in Estonia.

*The “Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia”
After the 1832 Decree.*

As already stated, in contrast to the Baltic provinces, where there was an established church, elsewhere in the Russian Empire there existed only individual congregations with no overall organisational structure.

Tension between Lutherans and Calvinists was so great that at times the latter would rather turn to a Catholic priest than to the

¹²Gottlieb Beratz, *Die deutschen Kolonien an der unteren Wolga* 2nd ed: (Berlin, 1923), pp. 230-38.

neighbouring Lutheran pastor; cases are known where Lutheran pastors refused to give Communion to Calvinist settlers. There were many issues and problems which could obviously not be solved by the clergy themselves. So many complaints came to the *Tutelkanzlei*¹³ (Tsarist administration) that the "Crown" intervened and made some important decisions.

In 1819 Tsar Alexander I, as *summus episcopus*, ordered the establishment of a church council in Saratov for the Volga colonies and appointed Dr Ignatius Aurelius Feßler as superintendent. Dr Feßler organised a church structure and also helped to bring about salutary coexistence between Lutherans and Calvinists. A year earlier the Tsar had appointed Pastor Böttiger in Odessa as superintendent of a church council that was to be set up for southern Russia. These and other significant changes were thwarted by the 1832 Decree, which was in preparation from 1828 and with regard to which Nicholas I had consulted a commission composed mainly of representatives from the Baltic provinces.

In accordance with the strictly Lutheran denominational format prevalent in the Baltic provinces, a set of purely Lutheran church regulations was established, which did not take into account the fact that the crucifix, the burning of candles, an extended liturgy sung by the pastor and sometimes even the vestments were just as foreign to Lutherans from Württemberg who had been influenced by pietistic tendencies as they were to the Calvinists (approximately 40,000 in 1832), whose interests were supposed to be represented by "Reformed sessions" within the appropriate church council (Consistorium).

The new law made the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia a *state church*, just as the Orthodox Church was. The secular president and spiritual vice-president (General Superintendent) of the Petersburg general Consistorium were appointed by the Tsar, and even the committee members had to be approved by him. The church administrators were paid by the state. The whole church was divided on a regional basis into councils, with six initially allotted to the Baltic provinces (later combined into three), and two (Petersburg and Moscow) for the rest of the Russian Empire. The administration in Moscow and Petersburg was clearly too far away to be able to know about problems in the individual churches along the Volga, in southern Russia, in Volhynia, in the Caucasus or in Siberia.

It is perhaps important to note that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia incorporated *all* Protestants in Russia (1917: 1.1 million Germans, 1.3 million Latvians, 1.1 million Estonians, 0.15 million Finns). But all church leaders until 1917 had been Germans. The theological faculty in Dorpat (Estonia) was German,

¹³See note 11.

and the official language of this church had been German. The church law was a high point for the Baltic provinces: it meant that the peculiar position of the Lutheran Church in Livonia, Estonia and Courland was legally resolved, for even here the dominant Lutheran national church had become no more than a *tolerated* foreign denomination.

In southern Russia, mixed Lutheran-Calvinist churches which had grown together as "Protestant" churches with no particular denominational status were torn apart again by the strongly Lutheran character of the law.

Despite its numerous deficiencies and weaknesses, the church law did in time bring about a feeling of community among Protestants in the Russian Empire.

Common tasks were undertaken through the "Benevolent Fund for Evangelical-Lutheran Churches in Russia" (an enterprise set up in 1858 covering the whole Empire), which made provision for dependants of deceased pastors, and financed the appointments of incumbents for poor churches, the building of churches and schools, theological training for colonists' sons, and the setting up of new parishes.

A large number of Lutheran institutions (Evangelical hospitals in Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa; charitable undertakings in Sarata, Großliebenthal and Beideck, Talovka) run by Protestant nursing sisters, and the existence of a wide-spread Protestant press, bear witness to the growing inner strength of this church.

The decades before the Revolution were characterised by intervention by the state, whose policy of russification led to what became a practically total ban on the use of the German language, even from the pulpit, when the First World War broke out. German pastors were exiled to Siberia in large numbers; 120,000 Germans living in Volhynia¹⁴ were forcibly resettled away from the front lines.

The Brethren Movement

The Brethren movement became characteristic not only of the Evangelicals, but of all denominations in the German colonies. Advocates of the Württemberg *Stunde* brought the pre-conditions for the Brethren movement to Russia. The lack of spiritual provision for the villages brought new members to the Brethren meetings, who became "brothers" and "sisters" when they experienced revival, conversion and a spiritual rebirth. The Bible became the sole guiding

¹⁴Amburger, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

principle in their lives. A lively faith and deep piety led to a rejection of theology and science. Although they were often mocked by or suffered hostility from their church environment, they contributed a great deal to moral development in the colonies in so far as the Evangelical pastor was able to integrate them into church life.

Three preachers of revival who helped to advance the cause of the *Stunde* in the colonies were Johannes (1824-48) and Karl Bonekemper (1865-76), and Eduard Wüst (1843-59), pastor of the autonomous Lutheran church of Neuhoffnung. The latter had a considerable influence even among the Mennonite churches.

The Brethren movement reached the Volga from the German settlements in southern Russia. Initial steps in this direction had, however, already been taken at the end of the 18th century when Moravian Brethren from Sarepta (see below) established Brethren circles in the Volga villages, until they were expelled by the Lutheran pastors.

Despite the tensions between the Brethren and the official church, Lutheran Brethren did not leave their church. Among the Mennonites, on the other hand, the Brethren movement led to a deep split and eventually provided a basis for the Baptist movement in the German villages. Finally, it should not be forgotten that the *Stunde* and the Brethren movement provided a strong impetus for the development of an autochthonous Russian-Ukrainian Baptist movement (“*Stundismus*”).

The Moravian Brethren Colony of Sarepta.

In 1764 the Moravian Brethren from the Herrnhut Brüder-Gemeinde (founded by Count Zinzendorf (1722)) established the colony of Sarepta near Tsarytsyn (Volgograd), 250 kilometres south of the other Volga colonies. It enjoyed more extensive privileges than the other Volga villages. The actual aim of the colony — the mission to the Kalmuks — had to be given up fairly quickly. Pillaging by nomads, but also the Pugachov rebellion, hit Sarepta harder than the other German villages and held back its economic development so severely that the colonists were forced to concentrate on economic survival, which was only made possible by assistance from the Tsar and from Herrnhut. [German territory where the Moravians took refuge when they fled the Czech lands after the counter-reformation — *Ed.*] Sarepta became known for its mustard, tobacco, and a special blue linen (*sarpinka*); it also developed as a spa town. These desperate efforts naturally required the help of outsiders who were not members of the Moravian Brethren community. This gradually led to the

decline of spiritual life, and eventually to the secularisation of the colony: in 1892 Herrnhut recalled the last Brethren who were still active in Sarepta.

Although from the point of view of the Moravian Brethren this episode was a failure, great blessings extended from Sarepta to the German colonies along the Volga, and later to the villages in southern Russia too. Many Volga villages came into contact with the Brethren movement through the Moravian Brethren, and this made them open to the later movement spreading from the German villages of southern Russia. Sarepta's greatest contribution consisted in providing pastors (mainly Calvinist) — 18 up till 1820 — for the colonies, and advice on spiritual matters right into the 19th century. Sarepta's primary and secondary schools (for boys *and* girls) were well-known, and even Russian dignitaries tried to send their children to school there, although this was of course forbidden by law. Many Lutheran pastors also sent their children — and especially their daughters — to school in Sarepta.

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Pre-revolutionary statistics on the denominations, which can only be taken as a guide and are at times contradictory, give a figure of some 1.6 to 1.8 million Germans in Russia in 1914, of whom 1.1 million belonged to the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia.¹⁵ This figure includes some 100,000 Calvinists.¹⁶ The number of Catholics was somewhere between 350,000 and 400,000.¹⁷ They formed about one third of the German population along the Volga and almost half of the German population around the Black Sea, but were hardly represented in any other German settlements or in the towns. The third largest group among the Germans in Russia were the Mennonites¹⁸ with their villages along the Dnepr (Chortitsa) and in Tavriya (along the Molochnaya river).¹⁹ The Baptist movement

¹⁵Theophil Meyer (ed.), *Luthers Erbe in Rußland* (Moscow, 1918), p. 2. This is a commemoration published in connection with the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the Reformation. Meyer was the last bishop of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia.

¹⁶In the Volga villages alone there were over 80,000. See *Die Evangelisch-Lutherischen Gemeinden in Rußland*, pp. 110-87. Dalton, *op. cit.*, gives an estimate of 42,000 Calvinists among the Germans along the Volga and in the Black Sea area in 1860.

¹⁷Keßler, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-84.

¹⁸Gerd Stricker, "Mennonites in Russia and in the Soviet Union", *RCL* Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 293-314.

¹⁹The Molochnaya is a small river north of the Sea of Azov. The principal town is Molochansk. The German central villages were Prischib (Lutheran) and Halbstadt (Mennonite), present-day Molochansk.

played a part in the colonies from the 1860s onwards, but statistics are very hard to come by since it often came into being in Mennonite villages.²⁰ There may have been a total of about 70,000 German Baptists in Russia in 1914.

From the October Revolution to 1941

The October Revolution of 1917 brought about a completely new situation for all religious communities. The Decree on the "Separation of Church and State", along with other laws, initially paralysed the churches, for their governing bodies had to a considerable extent been composed of government officials; expropriation deprived them of much of their income; and the ban on religious instruction challenged the church with the need to present the catechism in new ways, which were later completely prohibited.

The separation of the now autonomous Baltic provinces deprived the Germans in Russia not only of their spiritual centre, but also of the University of Dorpat, with the result that theological training became a vital issue for the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia.²¹ In 1920 church leaders attempted to meet the demands of the time by introducing "temporary measures", but changing circumstances — civil war, famine — brought these attempts to nothing. Although the real target of the Bolsheviks' anti-religious measures was the Orthodox Church, they also affected the other denominations to a lesser degree (appropriation by the state of clergy dwellings, denial of ration cards to priests, denial of the vote, continuous persecution).

The New Economic Policy brought some relief to the churches for a time. Thus the Evangelical-Lutheran Church was permitted to hold a General Synod in 1924 (the first in its ninety-year history), which granted more rights to congregations and also to *non-German* Lutherans (in 1918, approximately 900,000 Germans, 150,000 Finns, 120,000 Estonians and 70,000 Latvians belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia). The new governing body was a so-called High Consistory ("*Oberkirchenrat*") composed of the General Superintendents — later Bishops — of Moscow (Theophil Meyer) and Petrograd (Arthur Malmgren) as well as a non-German bishop (at first the Finnish Bishop Palsa), and two laymen.

As a result of the more conciliatory attitude of the Soviet authorities

²⁰ Volhynia, with between 40,000 and 50,000 Baptists (see Schleuning, *op. cit.*, p. 72), on account of its proximity to the West and its late colonisation by Germans from Russian Poland as well as from the German Empire — particularly after 1860 — is an exception, since many immigrants were already Baptists.

²¹ Amburger, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

on the one hand, and international interest on the other (the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia became a member of the Lutheran World Congress in 1923), a seminary was opened in Petrograd in 1925 — the so-called “Theological College”. It existed until 1934, but after 1930 regular instruction was no longer possible: tutors were arrested, as were candidates and graduates. Of the 57 pastors who trained over a period of four years, only a few were able to fulfil their ministry for any length of time — sooner or later they disappeared into the camps, were forbidden to pursue their vocation, or were forced to flee.

The 1929 Decree on Religious Associations, in conjunction with the campaign of enforced collectivisation and the Atheist Five-Year Plan (commencing in 1928) put an end to all institutional church life in the Soviet Union. Alongside the mass arrests of clergy, churches and chapels were systematically closed on various pretexts.

The following statistics may help to clarify the situation: for the 204 Lutheran parishes in the USSR there were 189 pastors in 1917 (figures refer to the end of the year in each case); in 1924 there were 81 (reduction due to imprisonment and the so-called “flight of priests”); in 1929 there were 90 (increase due to graduates from the seminary); in 1932 there were 64; in 1933, 60; in 1934, 34; in 1935, 23; in 1936, 10; in 1937, none or perhaps just one.²² Bishop Meyer died in 1934 and no successor was permitted. After international intervention, Bishop Malmgren was allowed to leave the Soviet Union in 1936. In the following years, the Stalinist terror destroyed not only all external manifestations of religious life, but also in part the life of faith within families, where any expression of religion was concealed for fear of arrest.

The German attack on the USSR in 1941 ushered in the end of the traditional German colony in Russia. The exception was the Ukraine, along the right bank of the Dnepr, where, between 1941 and 1944, after the rapid German advance, church life was able to develop again, although this should be qualified by adding that normal spiritual support, provided by army chaplains, was available only during the military administration. Under the civil administration, the religious communities were made more conscious of National Socialist church policy in various ways — for example, the Russian German churches were not permitted to appoint any pastors. After the Russian offensive of 1943, the German settlers fled to the *Warthegau* or along the Elbe, where at last religion could be practised freely.²³

²² Wilhelm Kahle, *Geschichte der evangelisch-lutherischen Gemeinden in der Sowjetunion, 1917-1938* (Leiden, 1974), pp. 67-143, 587-88.

²³ The flight of some 350,000 Ukrainian Germans, accompanying the retreat of the German army after 1943 into the *Warthegau* (the Poznań region, now in Poland) is known as the “long trek”. Most of the fugitives were overtaken by the Red Army in the

*The Difficulties of Church Life for Germans in the USSR
After 1941*

The deportation of Germans following the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 made no real impact on their religious life: its institutional manifestation, for the most part, had already been destroyed in the 1930s. Faith only survived, albeit secretly, in families who knew more absolutely and more uncompromisingly than others that they were in Christ's service (these families often tended to be Brethren).

Little is known about corporate religious life in the *trudarmiya* (forced labour camp). For those placed under *kommendantura*,²⁴ the situation varied according to whether they were in barracks in the far north (e.g. the women lumberjacks), or on *kolkhozy*, or in towns in Central Asia. In spite of the great risk of being discovered, and the draconian punishments threatened for religious meetings, prayer groups sprang up nearly everywhere, some of which reached astonishing sizes, and most even managed to provide religious instruction for children. Physical, emotional and spiritual needs brought together people who were accustomed to praying, and enabled them to forget their denominational divisions: Lutherans, Calvinists, Mennonites of all types, Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals — and many Catholics too — put into practice a Russian-German "ecumenism of the first hour" after 1941. Birthdays, anniversaries, and other similar occasions, as well as visiting the sick, all served as pretexts for meetings in the case of checks. Over a period of time, funerals, which were rarely disturbed by the authorities, became occasions for an open display of religious life, even taking on the role of missionary meetings.

These multi-denominational home prayer groups were mainly composed of women, since most able-bodied men were in labour camps. If there were no older men available, the women assumed leadership. From the start, these prayer groups had a Brethren-pietistic character, and this facilitated collaboration between the

Warthegau in 1945. Some managed to flee as far as the Elbe before being overtaken by Soviet troops. About 100,000 settled in the West but many of them were discovered by Soviet search parties and were handed over to the Soviet Union by the British and American military authorities. They were promptly "repatriated" — i.e. sent to join the other Germans in Siberia and Central Asia. See note 24.

²⁴ *Trudarmiya* (labouring army): the whole able-bodied population — men between the ages of 16 and sixty, and women too as long as they did not have any children under 14 years old — were sent to these forced labour camps. The compulsory places of exile for old people and women with children were called *kommendantura* — *kolkhozy* and industrial towns in Central Asia and Siberia. They lived freely in the towns and villages designated, but had to report regularly (weekly at first) to the local NKVD commander.

various denominations. Very few Bibles and hymn books survived the deportation: everything had to be written down by hand from memory. Even today, church life would be inconceivable without the circulation of handwritten texts because there is not enough spiritual literature available. For example, even in officially permitted (“registered”) Baptist churches — which are in a relatively good position — it is still customary for each verse to be read out before it is sung, since there are no hymn books.

After the end of the war the situation improved a little for Germans in labour camps and under *kommendantura*. Prayer meetings grew in number and size. Of course, one of the reasons for this was that the camps and settlements had been filled with “repatriated” Germans from the *Warthegau*. In the early 1950s, the deported Germans experienced revival on an unprecedented scale — like the earlier revivals among the German colonies in Russia, which resulted in thousands of people being converted and joining the Brethren communities. After almost a decade, the women handed back their positions of leadership in the churches to the men.

The relaxation of pressure and growth of meetings, and probably also the increasing influence of the men, gave rise again to matters of principle; in particular, the old issue of infant or adult baptism, on which even the Brethren are divided, led to petty jealousies, quarrels, and finally to splits. Lutherans, for example, were already accusing Baptists and Mennonite-Brethren of “fishing in our ponds”, taking their members away. The “ecumenism of the first hour” had disintegrated; denominational boundaries came into their own again.

The amnesty of 1955²⁵ led to the mass migration of Germans from the Arctic zone to Central Asia and western Siberia, areas to which many Germans had been deported in 1941. In nearly every case this was by no means an unplanned flight but a deliberate reunion with one’s family and former neighbours. For those with religious ties, it also meant a reunion with their particular church fellowship, which the women had already set up in Central Asia. When the migration from the Arctic zone was over, a certain degree of stability was achieved on the religious front. When today one considers the colourful picture of German religious life in Alma-Ata, Karaganda, Novosibirsk, Frunze, etc. (which received fresh impetus at that time), one can only marvel at the development.

Within the churches there were — and still are — widely differing views of the situation. Many thought that by continuing to exist

²⁵The Amnesty for Germans in the Soviet Union was one of the results (along with the release of the last German prisoners of war) achieved by Dr Konrad Adenauer, the first German Federal Chancellor, when he visited Moscow in 1955.

illegally the preservation of their inner freedom amidst a Soviet-atheistic environment of constant persecution would be guaranteed. Others considered this to be a dead end: in order to develop a thriving church life it was, in their view, necessary to be registered officially — registration being the prerequisite for opening a prayer house — and this would at the same time bring to an end persecution of the church and its members. They felt that the church could not attain inner peace in the state of constant shuttling flux between toleration and persecution to which a church existing illegally is inevitably condemned.

In 1957 the Lutheran Pastor Eugen Bachmann succeeded, once he had drawn together the various Lutheran groups in the town, in registering a German Lutheran church with the authorities in Akmolinsk (Tselinograd). The church erected a prayer house with accommodation for the pastor — everything seemed to be in order. But a propaganda campaign was unleashed in the press against the pastor, time and again the church building was closed on various pretexts, the membership came under strict control and the pastor himself was harassed, blackmailed and provoked. He was no longer permitted to go and visit German churches as he had many times in the past (even as far afield as the Komi ASSR): he was only allowed to work in Tselinograd. He had to display notices on the church door reading “No young people under 18 years old”. In order not to have the church’s registration revoked, Bachmann found himself compelled to make compromises which whole sections of the congregation, particularly the Brethren, were not willing to accept.

The new Religious Decree of 1975 for the RSFSR (in common with those for the other Soviet republics) makes the position of the registered churches even more complicated. It is the most restrictive law on religion in Soviet history. Basically, every form of corporate work is forbidden — only the actual “cult observance” is specifically allowed. The appropriate authorities have to be informed of baptisms, weddings, and other church activities, and also given the names and addresses of godparents or witnesses. The pastor (“cult servant”) is an employee of the church leadership (“executive organ”), of which he is not allowed to be a member. The three members of this body can be rejected by the plenipotentiary for religious affairs, and people of his choice (called “spies” or “traitors”) can be put in their place. Even for the little that is guaranteed in the Decree, there is no legal entitlement (e.g. to registration).²⁶ Thus the life of registered

²⁶ Thus only a very few German churches were able to register before the 1970s, although many illegal churches had sought registration — not only with the legally required *dvadsatka* (“twenty”), but often with hundreds of signatures. The Lutheran churches in Alma-Ata and Semipalatinsk, for example, spent seven to ten years requesting permission to register before it was finally granted.

churches is subject to numerous controls, limitations, inducements and oppression, even though there are many flourishing registered churches where this is not always perceptible.

There was no opportunity, however, for German churches to gain experience of registration even after a precedent had been set in Tselinograd: no other German churches were permitted to register until after 1967 — and then only sporadically. Between these registrations came Khrushchev's religious persecution (1959-64).

A number of churches ("Beichtkreise") were established on the short term in the Baltic republics in the 1960s, and in the Moldavian SSR in the 1970s, when a total of some 30,000 to 50,000 Russian-Germans who wanted to emigrate moved into these areas so that they could more easily leave for West Germany.

Since about 1975, there have been no problems in registering German churches — if anything, the authorities are positively encouraging it — which is a fundamental change in Soviet policy on the registration of German churches. By permitting German churches to register, the authorities hope to counteract the "emigration psychosis" and quell discontent. This tendency is documented by statistics given in 1984 by V. A. Kuroyedov, who was then Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs: between 1977 and 1983, 810 religious communities were registered in the whole of the USSR, while 1,035 lost their registration. Of the newly registered communities, 33 were Orthodox, forty Catholic, 69 Muslim and no less than 129 German Lutheran.²⁷

The authorities have become more liberal towards German churches in recent years not only with regard to registration: it appears to be possible to have more in the way of church activities than used to be the case — although this varies from region to region. Thus many churches are able to develop their youth work in relative freedom (for Soviet circumstances), although the "executive organ" and "cult servant" have to turn a blind eye to these activities, since they could at any time be called to account for such developments. By permitting a limited degree of freedom, the authorities hope to persuade German parishes which have *not* yet registered²⁸ to do so — in order to gain more extensive control. This is probably also the reason why, for a number of years, German Mennonite churches have been allowed to register autonomously, although from the point of view of their beliefs they should have been registered as member churches of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists. Whereas

²⁷ Vladimir A. Kuroyedov, *Religiya i tserkov v sovetskom obshchestve* (Moscow, 1984), p. 144.

²⁸ At Christmas 1985, Superintendent Harald Kalniņš reported that he knew of 490 Lutheran churches (both registered and unregistered); in the summer of 1985 he spoke of a total of 450 Lutheran churches, of which 222 were then registered.

previously registration was basically only possible for a large association with a central hierarchical leadership (Orthodox, Baptists; Catholics in Lithuania and Latvia), the authorities now often dispense with the need for this sort of structure if a church will only come out into the open.

On the other hand, Catholics in Asia (mostly multi-national) and purely German churches (Lutherans, Church Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren) are only allowed to register autonomously, as separate bodies — they are not allowed to form an umbrella organisation.²⁹ With regard to the Catholics, this is because they are the most uncomfortable church for Soviet ideologists; the Lutherans are not allowed to unite because the Soviet authorities want at all costs to avoid any supra-regional associations of Germans, and do not want to set a precedent by allowing church organisations.

Despite a certain degree of accommodation by the Soviet authorities on a regional basis, it is also part of today's totally contradictory picture that at the same time there are registered churches which are breaking apart because of the policy of destruction from within carried out by KGB-directed church members, church leaders, and sometimes even pastors.

The problem of theological training varies in intensity for the individual denominations. Baptists, Mennonites, Adventists, and Pentecostals have always chosen their pastors from their own ranks; out of necessity the Lutherans are also doing this now — but even from the ranks of the Lutheran Brethren there are calls for a theological training centre to nurture spiritual authority and thereby avoid the danger of becoming a sect. Catholics occasionally send Germans to study at the seminaries in Riga (Latvia), or Kaunas (Lithuania).

Finally, the progressive loss of the German language among the younger generation poses problems for the German churches in the Soviet Union — which seriously undermines their sense of identity and even calls into question their survival.

There are currently about 2 million Germans in the USSR.³⁰ Thus, numerically, they are the fourteenth nation in the USSR. There are more Germans in the USSR than Estonians or Latvians, who have their own republics, and more Germans than Tatars or Komis, who live in autonomous regions. Until 1941, the Germans in Russia were almost exclusively farmers or lived in the country, but now more than fifty per cent of them are town-dwellers in Kazakhstan, Turkmen-

²⁹Such as an "Evangelical-Lutheran Church for Germans in the Soviet Union", a "Conference of German Mennonites" or a "Conference of Autonomous Mennonite-Brethren".

³⁰1979 census.

istan, Uzbekistan and western Siberia. While the 1955 Amnesty had allowed the deported Germans to leave the Arctic zone, it did not permit them to settle in the European part of the USSR. In 1964 the Germans were cleared of the charge that had given rise to their deportation, namely that they were fifth-columnists who had supported Hitler's invasion of the USSR. The deportation of the Germans was now declared to have been an arbitrary action by Stalin. Yet despite their rehabilitation, the Germans did not receive permission to return to their former settlements. This was given in a secret decree of 1972, which only a few came to know about. Even so, there are a few Germans living in the area of the old Volga settlements again. Most Germans have grown accustomed to their new homes, of course, and have no intention of going back — especially since only the old people remember the former settlements. In this respect, alleged plans³¹ to create an autonomous area for Germans are now probably too late. Perhaps just a small number of all the Germans in the USSR would resettle there.

The young Germans in the Soviet Union now speak only a little German,³² and then not High German, but their regional dialects (that of Niederhessen for the Volga Germans; Swabian for the Black Sea Germans; and a mixture of dialects). Even where a large percentage of the population is German, as is the case in many towns, Germans are not allowed to have their own school. There are directives, of course, that German lessons should be provided in schools for those whose mother tongue it is and whose parents request it, providing there is a certain minimum number (ten pupils); but these directives are often deliberately obstructed by the regional or local administration, or unwittingly neglected. The hours allowed are far too few (a maximum of three to four hours a week, and only one to two hours a week in the higher classes); and German lessons for Germans are often transferred to lunchtime or the afternoon, so the pupils are not motivated. Because of very small print-runs, there are hardly any text books. Most German pupils only have the opportunity to learn German as a foreign language — as it is taught to Kazakhs or Russians. What is learned is minimal, and often the result is just frustration. The few German pupils who live near schools where German is taught as a main foreign language (with a high number of German lessons) are fortunate, as are those who live near special schools, where, as well as German language lessons, various other

³¹ *Dziennik Polski*, London, quoted in *Deutscher Ostdienst* of 7 February 1986, noted that the possibility of creating an autonomous region for Germans in western Siberia (centred around Slavgorod) was receiving official consideration.

³² Of all those who claim German nationality, only 57 per cent speak German as their first language. The rest can speak only a limited amount of German — and the younger they are, the more this amount decreases.

subjects are taught in German (in some cities). Generally speaking, however, parents have at best the opportunity of fighting for German lessons.

German Lutheran Churches in the USSR

The fresh start made by German Lutherans in the USSR after 1941 would have been inconceivable without the Brethren communities, who (unlike the Mennonite-Brethren) broke away from their mother church in only a few instances. This explains the Brethren features of Lutheran church life among the Germans in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, significant impetus for post-1941 developments also came from the Lutheran tradition: in 1957 Pastor Eugen Bachmann of Tselinograd was able to register a German church for the first time since 1941; Pastor Arthur Pfeiffer of Moscow organised the provision of spiritual literature for the churches which were still illegal, and tried, without success, to effect organisational unity between the Estonian Lutheran Church and the German Lutherans in Russia; Pastors Johannes Schlundt (who served in Prokhladny, Caucasus, 1970-73), Bachmann and Pfeiffer undertook lengthy, dangerous journeys to minister to the scattered churches; they also gave theological instruction to those preachers chosen by the churches whom they considered to be gifted, and ordained them as pastors.

However, these men did not always exhibit the human and vocational qualities needed, which put even more of a strain on the already tense relationship between Church Lutherans and Lutheran Brethren (the latter, who saw themselves as the "chosen", often looked down on the "worldly" Church Lutherans), particularly as the newly ordained pastors came mostly from the ranks of the Brethren.

Both traditions have their own form of church life: Church Lutherans celebrate their Sunday service (which generally lasts two hours) according to the old liturgy.³³ During the service, ordained pastors preach a sermon or lay preachers read a prepared sermon.³⁴ The sacraments — baptism and communion — are supposed to be administered by ordained pastors, as are sermons and confirmation, but as there are currently only about sixty pastors for 490 German Lutheran churches (registered and unregistered), it has not been

³³This comprehensive liturgy was part of the 1832 church decree. Naturally it has been modified slightly (and excludes intercessions for the royal family).

³⁴Printed sermons from the 18th and 19th centuries are preferred (e.g. Brastberger, Modersohn).

possible to establish hard and fast rules. In many churches, communion is still distributed to Lutherans and Calvinists in different ways: Lutherans receive the consecrated wafer and wine while kneeling, whereas Reformed believers stand to receive unleavened bread and wine. The sermon is always the focal point. Lutheran Brethren hold their "meetings" after the service, and also on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when they sing Brethren hymns and three or four brothers "bring the word" (preach on Bible passages they have selected themselves and appeal for repentance and conversion).

Church youth work, officially not permitted, is generally undertaken in the choir, which provides a framework for all the charitable and social work which the churches carry out illegally.

Since the Lutheran churches generally adhere uncompromisingly to the language of the Reformer, there are serious difficulties with the younger generation who still know only a little German: many young people drift away to the Evangelical Christians and Baptists, who have strong Mennonite German sections in the German settlements, are very active with regard to mission, offer an attractive youth programme, and, while encouraging the use of German, do not oppose the use of Russian. The Pentecostals too are making inroads among the Lutherans in this way.

The Lutheran World Federation declared its interest in the German Lutherans in Russia many years ago and, with the permission of the Soviet authorities, has been able to send Bibles, hymn books and copies of the liturgy to these churches on a number of occasions. In 1980 they finally succeeded in gaining official recognition of Senior Pastor Harald Kalniņš from Riga as Superintendent of the German Lutheran churches in the USSR. He had been allowed to visit the German churches periodically since the death or emigration between 1972 and 1973 of the last three pastors who had received theological training. However, Kalniņš has no right of jurisdiction: he is allowed to visit his churches from time to time; but he was not allowed to participate in the 1984 Congress of the Lutheran World Federation in Budapest. He ordains preachers as pastors, instructs churches, settles disputes, and distributes books received — which obviously benefit only the registered churches. There are just sixty ordained pastors available (with no theological training as such) for the approximately 225 registered German Lutheran churches (11 of these in the area of the old Volga colonies). Kalniņš is not allowed to ordain any pastors for the approximately 275 unregistered churches.³⁵

³⁵Wilhelm Kahle, *Die lutherischen Kirchen und Gemeinden in der Sowjetunion seit 1938/1940* (Gütersloh, 1985), p. 213.

To the present day there are hopes that the German Lutheran Church in Russia will one day be allowed to have its own church organisation headed by a bishop (Kalniņš). At the end of 1985, however, there were various indications that the Soviet authorities might want to bypass Kalniņš; and were considering a union between the Germans in Russia and the Lutheran Church of Estonia or Latvia. The leadership of both these churches is sceptical about such plans — after all, with at least 150,000 to 200,000 *active* members and probably some three hundred registered churches soon, the German Lutheran Church in Russia is much larger than the Estonian and Latvian Lutheran Churches combined.

Such a union would at least ease the problem of theological training: German Lutherans from Russia would be able to study at the theological institutes in Tallinn or Riga, something which has so far not been possible because there is no overlapping German church organisation.

Prospects

It is still possible to talk of church life among the Germans in the USSR. The religious communities were, and continue to be, the only institutions with a broad influence which deliberately resist russification and see the preservation of the German language and a national identity as their responsibility. For all of them, the question as to whether they will be able to preserve their national and denominational identity if the German language is lost is growing more pressing. Most Lutherans and Mennonites reply to this question with a blunt negative, for in many cases their churches are threatened with depopulation, whereas churches like the Baptists and Mennonite-Brethren, who allow the coexistence of both languages, can point with pride to flourishing youth work.

It is argued that the churches of all denominations should switch quickly to using Russian in their services, before they lose their young people. Those who have studied the situation carefully are very sceptical about such generalised advice offered from a distance: if the Mennonite-Brethren switched to Russian they would encounter in the Russian and Ukrainian Evangelical Christians and Baptists a denomination closely related to their own with regard to dogma and theology, and with an already established identity as a church, so that, as is already evident, they would lose their specific Mennonite identity. For the German Catholics in Russia, the national element has never been as important as it has for the Lutherans, for example, so the loss of the German language would not trouble the basis of faith

of German Catholics to the same extent. It is quite different for the Lutherans who, to a large extent, feel bound to the language of the Reformer and to a Germanic way of life: for them it would mean introducing something totally new, foreign even, into Russian spirituality, and in the process purging everything specifically German. What is to be feared, according to insiders, is that if the Russian language were adopted, many German Lutheran families would lose not only their language but also their denomination, and fall prey to the religious indifference widespread in the USSR — or that they would turn to the established church of the Evangelical Christians and Baptists or even to the Pentecostals.

On the other hand, more recent studies have shown that even when Germans in Russia do lose the German language, they still preserve their national identity — and that this offers a possibility for resisting the general programme of russification and similar attempts by the state to level everything out, and for encouraging the preservation of their separate identity.

The religious communities have made a considerable contribution towards preserving the German language and a sense of national identity. But it is clear that they will not be able to do this for much longer without any institutions to attract a German-speaking intelligentsia and leadership, and this applies to the theological sphere as well. Without far-reaching Soviet concessions on linguistic and cultural encouragement of the German minority in the USSR, painful developments — from a religious point of view too — will be inevitable.

Translated from German by G. Ablitt