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In 1539, the founder of the Mennonite religion, Menno Simons, penned the words “through much tribulation, you must enter the kingdom of God.” In reference to both Mennonite theology and their historical experience, Leonard G. Friesen highlights this theme in his monograph *Mennonites in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union: Through Much Tribulation*. In this fastidiously detailed and well-researched synthetic account, Friesen presents the first comprehensive history of Mennonites in what would become the Russian Empire and Soviet Union from the sixteenth century to 1989. Though the book is dense, as a book covering four hundred years of history must be, Friesen’s engaging writing style and clear organization makes the material approachable to those less familiar with Mennonite history than he.

Friesen organizes the book chronologically into three parts: “Mennonite Origins,” “Mennonites in Imperial Russia,” and “Mennonites in the Soviet Era.” The first section, “Mennonite Origins,” outlines the transformations of the political, social, and theological landscape of Europe during the period of the Reformation. Friesen guides the reader through the birth of the Anabaptist movement as reformers disillusioned with the Catholic Church argued that faith is nothing without Christ-like action. These reformers, led by the actions of Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurok, confirmed their commitment to a life guided by Christ and the scriptures with a re-baptism, or Anabaptism, to this theology. The author then outlines the transition of Dutch Anabaptists to Polish Mennonites, beginning with an introduction to Simons, the founder of the faith. Simons developed a doctrine that highlighted the role of the believer at odds with the sinning society, the role of the church being the study and love of the scriptures, and the role of the state as the arbiter between believers. The fierce persecution of Mennonites across Europe, specifically in the Spanish
Netherlands, drove the community to immigrate to Poland during the eighteenth century. With this migration to Poland, Friesen argues, the Mennonite identity transformed in three ways: economically, they were able to secure and cultivate the Polish lowlands; politically, they were granted military exemption and freedom of worship; and socially, they were less religiously nonconformist as they integrated into Polish political and economic society. They became, as Friesen terms it, “obedient heretics” (p. 60).

The second part of Friesen’s work studies the Mennonite experience in imperial Russia. This section begins with another immigration, that of Mennonites from Poland to “New Russia,” or the Black Sea steppe. Friesen presents the motivations for this movement as both a push and a pull: Mennonites were pushed out of Poland due to its partition and subsequent annexation by the Prussian Empire, while Catherine II pulled them to the Black Sea steppe region of the Russian Empire. Catherine II was motivated to settle the newly acquired region and urged Mennonite migration by providing religious freedom, military exemption, and self-government. Friesen then explores the establishment of the first two Mennonite settlements in the region, Chortitza and Molotschna, and the influence of the imperial reforms of the 1860s on Mennonite society. Responding to this change, the Mennonite community sought external arbitration from the imperial authorities rather than resolving the conflicts internally, pointing, Friesen argues, to a lack of civil and ecclesiastical coherence across the community. Friesen posits that it is worth looking at these changes in conjunction rather than individually, as they reflect broader changes of late nineteenth-century Russia. Additionally, their resolution led to the gradual consolidation and codification of the Mennonite as a unique, independent religion integrated into the administrative structures of the Russian Empire. Friesen closes this section with a discussion of the imperial shift in “identity” as indicated by nationality, rather than religion, which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. Though Mennonites remained loyal to the empire, this shift led Mennonites to be identified as German, which became increasingly divisive with the onset of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution.

The monograph closes with the experience of Mennonites in the Soviet Union. This section is especially relevant to Mennonite historiography as Friesen’s work is one of the first to study the Mennonites who remained in the Black Sea steppe region after the collapse of the Russian Empire rather than focusing on those who immigrated to western Europe and North America. Friesen focuses on the period from 1917 through World War II and argues that, as during the imperial period, Mennonites integrated into the Soviet bureaucratic system to protect their own interests. This acculturation into the Soviet socialist system threatened three markers of their identity: Mennonite institutions and exemptions; the role of the church and church leadership in communities; and the destruction of family units by the removal of men from their homes, often as the target of Stalinist dekulakization campaigns. With the onset of the Second World War, Soviet authorities sought to relocate Mennonites to the Soviet interior, fearing the potential for Mennonite-Nazi cooperation due to the community’s German roots. Thus, much of the population was forcefully relocated or fled into Germany during the Nazi occupation. Friesen posits that the experience of Mennonites after Joseph Stalin was like that of other Christian faiths in the Soviet Union. There was a renaissance of religious practice after the death of Stalin as authorities allowed controlled worship and families were reunited as authorities dismantled the gulag system. Though Nikita Khrushchev’s resurfing anti-religious campaign of the late 1950s limited religious practice, it also led to the consolidation and eventual institutionalization of the Mennonite faith as a religious organization under Leonid Brezhnev. That said, it was not until 1985 that Mennonites, as well as other religious communit-
ies in the Soviet Union, gained full religious freedom.

I agree with Friesen in his assessment that this work is ultimately a reflection of the methods that Mennonites engaged with secularism and the emergence of the nation-state, a process that, though initially occurring in secular society around them, ultimately required their active participation. Due to its synthetic nature, this book does not include any direct archival research, but its extensive bibliography includes published collections of primary material and reflects the author's multilingual research capabilities.

Friesen dedicates most of his historiographic discussion to the field of Mennonite scholarship. He carefully balances arguments by leading scholars, such as James Urry and John R. Staples.[1] Only in the final section on the Soviet period does Friesen enter discussion with scholars of the Russian Empire or Soviet Union, such as Terry Martin and Sheila Fitzpatrick, but his discourse on this period lacks scholarship concerning religion.[2] His discussion reminds me of Emily B. Baran’s work on the Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Soviet Union, Dissent on the Margins: How Soviet Jehovah’s Witnesses Defied Communism and Lived to Preach about It (2014), as they also shared a history of non-Russian origin, minority faith, and requests for military exemption; it is disappointing to see such supportive scholarship go without note. Likewise, Friesen misses an opportunity to build on his engagement with the historiography of modernization. He cites Charles Taylor (A Secular Age [2007]), Hannah Arendt (The Human Condition [1988]), and Konrad Jarausch (Out of Ashes: A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century [2015]), all within lines of each other in his introduction as he argues that the Mennonite identity has been determined by and in response to the modernizing world around it. Though one can accept the validity of this argument, recognizing the political, social, and economic transitions from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century, Friesen does not carry this discussion beyond the introduction.

In summary, Mennonites in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union is an engaging and informative journey through the intricacies of Mennonite history and historiography, specifically that of eastern Europe, and should prove to be a useful resource to a reader familiar with the nuances of the subject.

Notes


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