

# A MENNONITE MILITIA

Revolutionary Russia (1918-1919)

World War I and the Russian Civil War caused unprecedented chaos and social upheaval in central Ukraine. Multiple armies occupied the Mennonite villages and requisitioned provisions, and when they departed, roving bandits attacked the people, killing property owners and seizing whatever they wanted. Law and order broke down completely. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and in 1918, Mennonite men broke with 400 years of historic pacifism and took up arms to defend their property and their families.

**Establishment of the *Selbstschutz*.** The Mennonites in the large and wealthy Molotschna colony across the Dnieper River from Chortitza, who had the most to lose from the terrorist attacks, were the first to form a militia. They called it *Selbstschutz*, which means “self-defense unit.” The first members of the Self-Defense Units were sons of wealthy landowners who hoped to defend their property and reclaim their seized lands. Several villages in Molotschna recruited militia members by offering to pay them.

The Chortitza *Selbstschutz* was set up at the end of 1918. Jacob Niebuhr and Jacob Martin Dueck were its leaders. The militia was to include all Mennonite males 20-35 years of age. “Given the terror suffered in previous months, and the uncertain future, many youths listened to the siren voices to defend our lives and property with arms. As one who succumbed,” David Rempel, who joined the Nieder-Chortitza *Selbstschutz*, writes, “I think

revenge motivated many Mennonite youths (sometimes encouraged by our elders), hoping to punish the 'stupid peasant,' who with impunity had robbed us of our hard-won belongings.”

**Breaking With Pacifism.** Breaking with a long tradition of pacifism caused consternation for the Mennonite communities. Community leaders from both colonies met in Lichtenau, Molotschna to discuss the morality of the *Selbstschutz* from June 30 to July 2, 1918. Some felt that pacifism was still the best way; others felt that non-resistance was not a viable option given the circumstances; and still others felt that it should be a matter of private conscience, decided by local congregations. In the end, the conference offered a bland statement that effectually allowed each person room for individual conscience on the matter.

**Alliances.** The Mennonites wanted a return to law and order above all else, and both the Austro-German Army and the White Army promised stability. The Germans were willing to help Mennonites regain their seized property, and the White Army worked to restore the former Tsarist order. The Mennonites had been well-treated and prospered under the Tsarist regime.

During German occupation (April to November, 1918), the Germans openly armed and trained *Selbstschutz* units in the Molotschna, Chortitza, Nikolaipol, and Sagrafovka colonies.

In Nieder-Chortitza, the German Army dispensed two wagonloads of rifles, ammunition, hand grenades,

**The historically pacifist Mennonite men formed Self-Defense militias during the Russian Civil War.** This is the Self-Defense Unit from the villages of Blumenort, Tiege, and Ohrloff in 1918. Many of these men were hunted down and massacred by the Makhno bandits late in 1919.



# A MENNONITE MILITIA

Revolutionary Russia (1918-1919)

and even one machine gun. David Rempel took a rifle that day, along with his brother Heinrich. He recalls, "The Nieder-Chortitza *Selbstschutz* was never cohesive, nor organized enough to march and shoot targets, much less consider how to behave in a real conflict." However, one local man, 29-year old Abram Löwen, empowered by the *Selbstschutz*, viewed himself as defender of Nieder-Chortitza. He killed four travelers he suspected of being Makhnovist bandits, and at least one other bandit, bringing Makhno vengeance upon his village and his own violent death.

The Molotschna *Selbstschutz* proved to be the only one of any military significance. By winter of 1918-19, it consisted of 2700 infantry and 300 cavalry. It was comprised not just of German Mennonites, but also of German Catholics and German Lutherans as well.

**Military Actions.** In October, 1918, Austro-German forces and "German colonists" burned down the pro-Makhnovist village of Bolshe-Mikholaivka and killed many of its inhabitants. And on December 6, 1918, the

Molotschna *Selbstschutz* joined the White Army in fighting Makhnovite forces at Chernigovka. It held a front against Makhno's forces at Blumenthal, 20 miles north of Molotschna, for several months. In early March, 1919, Makhno's Army and the Red Army together defeated the *Selbstschutz*, which then withdrew and disbanded.

**Retaliation.** Once the Black Army gained control of the area, Makhno carried out a long campaign of retribution against German-Mennonite colonies and estates. The Molotschna Mennonites suffered continual Makhno raids and terror between March and July 1919. The Black Army crossed the Dnieper River in October, 1919, and occupied the Chortitza colony between October and December, 1919. It conducted a series of horrific massacres during these two months. In the end, looking at the sorrow and destruction that taking up arms had caused the Mennonite community, Mennonite leaders declared that the *Selbstschutz* had been a "grave mistake."

---

**A look at the Enemy...the Makhno Bandits.** This group of anarchists were what caused the Mennonites to form their Self-Defense Units. They were a mixed lot...part bandits who raped and murdered innocent people, and ALSO people deeply disenfranchised. The same Tsarist regime that had favored the Mennonites for a century and a half, letting the Mennonites grow wealthy under protected privileges, made the Russian peasants around them illiterate and dirt poor.

