

TO STAY OR TO LEAVE?

New Freedoms in the Soviet Union, and a Window to Leave, 1923-26



Between 1923 and 1926, 21,000 German Mennonites from the Soviet Union emigrated to Canada. They sought religious freedom and economic opportunity, which they believed they had lost in the Soviet Union. After 1926, the opportunity to leave the Soviet Union ended.



The first group of Russian-Mennonite immigrants meet their sponsors in Ontario in 1924.

The chaotic wave of revolution seemed to have spent its energy by the mid-1920s. For many Mennonites living along the banks of the Dnieper River, a level of normality resurfaced in the Ukrainian countryside. Although the initial years of the Soviet regime had been characterized by brutal civil war, anarchy, and fierce requisitioning called “war communism,” the lenient New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921 to 1928 allowed the Mennonites to return to a modified pre-revolution lifestyle, farming their own land with relative freedom.

Under the NEP, some of the landless poor, like the Dyck family, received parcels of land from the government that had been seized from other landholders. The government eased its tight control in the countryside and allowed the peasants more freedom for private ownership and initiative. The Dyck family and others like them grew enough crops on their land to feed their family, and sold their excess for profit across the Dnieper River in Zaporozhia. The NEP allowed a moderate prosperity to emerge while opposition to the regime waned. These liberties would not last beyond 1928.

No one was sure how the future would play out under the Soviet government. Many Mennonites chose to leave the Soviet Union, remembering the chaos and privations of the Russian Civil War. During the early 1920s, approximately 21,000 Mennonites emigrated from the Soviet Union to Canada. Some families left and others stayed, both hoping for the best hand in the “great lottery” of life. Immigrating was not possible for the poorest families, such as the Dycks. “It was certainly not evident at that time who had drawn the shortest straw,” wrote Herbert Hamm, who left with his family in 1926.

Bringing little with them, the Mennonite emigrants incurred huge debts to bring their families to Canada. Fares were expensive; adults paid \$125, and families sometimes had 10 children to transport across the ocean, and railway tickets had to be bought from the Canadian Pacific Railway on the other side. Ministers vouched for the emigrants, who had no collateral on their loans. In Canada, they were able to buy land for \$1, and start farming on the Canadian prairies, just as the Great Depression began. In Canada, they faced racism for being “Germans”, and school children were called “Nazis” in the 1930s. But the Mennonites determined to learn English and to succeed in Canada, and they did.

All throughout the 1920s, the Bolsheviks were waiting for socialist world revolution. Various high-ranking Party members, including Leon Trotsky, Gregory Zinoviev, Nikolai Bukharin, and Joseph Stalin, fought for control and debated the future of Soviet communism. By 1927, Party leaders reached the conclusion that world revolution was not likely to occur soon, and they feared losing the advances they had gained between 1917 and 1921. They also saw that Soviet Russia must rely exclusively upon its own resources for economic expansion, and not depend on other socialist countries. In 1928, Stalin gained control of the Party. He saw only two alternatives for the future of the Soviet Union: “forward” to socialism or “backward” to capitalism. He chose the former, and the Party embarked on a course of crash collectivization and industrialization, using systematic terror to accomplish his program.

The next decade in Soviet history would determine conclusively that the Mennonites who left the Soviet Union in the 1920s were, by far, the more fortunate.