

COSTLY ALLIANCES

Revolutionary Russia (1917-1922)

Although individual Mennonites were swept into every movement in Russian Civil War, the greater Mennonite community tended to sympathize first with the German invaders and subsequently with the White Army. The Germans helped the Mennonites regain their seized property, restored law and order, and encouraged the men to defend their own communities. The White Army worked to restore the Tsarist order under which the Mennonites had gained their wealth and prospered. The White Army also supported the Orthodox Church, and was the most religion-friendly of all the factions.

Under German and White occupations, some wealthy Mennonites participated in reclaiming property “redistributed” by Petlura bandits and Bolshevik supporters. Their fingering of offenders and property thieves resulted in executions, something that the Bolsheviks and Makhnovists did not forget. When they took power, they extracted their revenge.

Revolutionaries were attempting to right the social inequalities of hundreds of years. Since first the Germans and then the Whites were defeated, these were costly alliances that left the Mennonite communities alienated from the Bolsheviks and the Makhnovites, both of which had widespread support among the peasantry.

The Makhnovites disliked the Mennonites for their wealth and resistance to redistribution of their property. Near Makhno’s hometown of Gulyai-Polye was the wealthy Schonfeld region, containing some of the most prosperous estates in the region. Several people owned cars and had drivers, and one man bought a private airplane. This display of wealth due to a century of special privileges did not sit well with many Russians, some of whom had worked for these foreigners.

The Mennonites’ religious character and wealth made them special enemies of the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks immediately began to stamp out religion once they seized power. And the Mennonite colonies were a picture of working democracy in the heart of the greatest socialist experiment. Consequently, the communists secularized all their institutions, collectivized their property, and redistributed their wealth as quickly as possible. The owners of factories and estates were persecuted and exiled.



The German Army, allied with the Austro-Hungarian Army, entered Ukraine in April, 1918, and occupied the region until November, 1918. The Germans helped the Mennonites reclaim stolen property, armed them, and encouraged them to defend themselves against other warring factions, inciting the wrath of the Bolsheviks and Makhnovists.



The White Army represented different groups in Russia who were opposed to Bolshevism, including liberals, the intelligensia, supporters of Tsarism, and Orthodox Christianity. It opposed national movements in favor of a united Russia. General Denikin, was one leader in Ukraine whose forces many Mennonites fought in at one time.



The Red (Bolshevik) Army, led by Vladimir Lenin, fought to establish communism. They sought to redistribute wealth among the peasant and working classes, send the wealthy to Siberia, collectivize industry, dismantle religion, and form a new social order. They were successful, and the Soviet Union emerged.



The Yellow Army represented the Ukrainian People’s Republic, which proclaimed its independence on January 25, 1918. It was led by Symon Petlyura and his Directorate. This movement had a short existence, and was defeated in 1921. Ukraine would not be independent again until 1992.



The Black Army, led by Nestor Makhno, was an anarchist group who wanted to do away with governments and redistribute wealth in society. They were known for their banditry and cruelty.



The Green Army, comprised of armed peasants, fought to protect their communities from the endless requisitioning of their goods. Their strength was at most 40,000.