

HEIN ♦ A Red Army Soldier & the Great Purge

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

A Red Army Soldier

Hein was looking for a way to support his mother and five siblings so they would not starve, having just barely survived the famine. In 1934, he enlisted in the Red Army and became a soldier, along with a friend from Nieder-Chortitza. The State had been applying pressure on Mennonites to join the armed forces, and some did, although it was a departure from Mennonite pacifism. At least joining the military did not require Communist Party membership. In 1941, only 49% of enlisted soldiers were Party members, although all of the officers had to be.

As a soldier in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Hein was stationed in Dnjepropetrovsk (today, Dnipro), an important Soviet industrial and military base. When he came home in his uniform, he got quite a few looks from the girls. His army career was short-lived, however, due to forces beyond his control.

The Great Purge (1936-38)

In 1936, Stalin decided to cleanse the country of traitors, and the Great Purge began, starting within the army. It was a frightening time. Vast numbers of people were suddenly arrested, accused of crimes they hadn't committed, and executed or exiled.



Red Army recruits receiving training on rifles, 1930s.



Hein enlisted in the Red Army in 1934, but became one of the first victims of Stalin's Purges. In 1936, he was falsely accused of treason, tortured, and sent to Siberia.

Hein and his friend were the first ones arrested from Nieder-Chortitza. They were charged with treason for listening to a German radio station. Hein and his friend *did* have a radio, but they had been listening to music on it, nothing political; neither of them was even interested in politics. Both were interrogated and ordered to sign a confession. Hein's friend did, and the NKVD promptly executed him, but Hein refused to sign, even though he was tortured at length. He told his captors, "You will kill me, regardless of whether or not I sign this confession, so I won't sign it." His torture and imprisonment continued for months. He woke up one morning in his cell and didn't know who he was or where he was. When he looked in the mirror, he saw that his hair had turned white! Eventually, Hein Dyck, at 23 years old, was sentenced to hard labor in Siberia for life, and sent to the Gulag.