

MCC: One Hundred Years Old (Part 1, Origins)

Mennonite Central Committee, the Mennonite relief and development organization that we are all familiar with, turns 100 years old in 2020. MCC was established in 1920 to respond to a famine in the Mennonite colonies in South Russia/Ukraine.

Mennonites first came to South Russia in the 1780s (mainly from Prussia) seeking religious freedom and self-determination. Over a 150-year period they prospered with major colonies of Chortitza (17 villages) and Molotschna (60 villages) with numerous other villages (300+) and smaller colonies throughout Russia. TUMC itself was founded by 'Russian' Mennonites who immigrated to Canada in the 1870s, the 1920s and after WW2.

However, beginning in 1917, Mennonites living in South Russia/Ukraine were suffering due to two major factors:

- the fall of the Czarist government in 1917 and the rise of the Bolshevik party resulting in a civil war from 1918 to 1920 between the 'Reds' and the forces of the former government (the 'Whites'), and
- the void in authority that led to several years of anarchy where robbery, murders and sexual assaults were rampant, and the resulting emergence of a typhoid epidemic.

The civil war raged in the Molotschna colony, with some villages changing hands 10 or 12 times between the White and the Red armies. At the same time, anarchist groups and bandits also roamed through the area, killing, assaulting and robbing, leaving conditions that provoked outbreaks of disease. Often these groups would occupy Mennonite villages for months at a time. Historian Peter Letkemann has estimated that over 1,200 Mennonites were murdered in this period and over 1,400 died due to the Typhoid epidemic.¹ Raids by armies and anarchists took "virtually all moveable assets...including livestock, grain, hay, wagons, food, linens and wood."²

The uncertainty of the time did not allow for proper crop planting or harvesting and was compounded by drought conditions, while farmers also faced heavy taxation by the victorious Bolshevik government. As can be imagined, these conditions sparked a serious famine, where it is estimated that over 800 Mennonites died of starvation.

It was these events that prompted the Mennonites of the Molotschna settlement to establish a "Studienkommission" or a 'study commission' to seek help from North

¹ Peter Letkemann, "Mennonites in the Soviet Inferno, Preservings: December 1998, No. 13, p. 10

² John E. Sharp, My Calling to Fulfill, The Orie O. Miller Story, p. 104

American and European Mennonites for both famine relief and to look at the possibilities of emigration. These men, 2 teachers and 2 businessmen, left Ukraine on January 1, 1920 and travelled through Europe visiting with German and Dutch Mennonites, then arrived in New York on June 13.

They shared stories of the dire struggles of the approximately 100,000 Mennonites in Ukraine and begged for help. In a 1920 presentation to a church group in Elkhart Indiana, commission member A.A. Friesen described the catastrophic conditions in Russia caused by the world war, revolution, civil war, disease and famine. He said, "...some 350 Mennonites had been hanged, shot, burned or killed by the time the delegates had left the Ukraine."³

The Mennonite Church in the United States had already created the Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers focusing on post WW1 relief work in France and the Middle East and a few individual Mennonite groups had provided some aid to their brothers and sisters in Russia (mainly in Siberia).

There were various relief groups forming in the US and, as more and more people heard the reports of the Studienkommission, they became increasingly concerned about their fellow Mennonites in Russia. The Studienkommission asked that a coordinated effort be made by North American Mennonites rather than having to deal with multiple groups. So, the Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers (MC) and the American Russian Mennonites (GC) and the Mennonite Brethren (MB) churches and others, came together at Elkhart, Indiana and reached this accord:

"Resolved, that we, the representatives of the several branches of Mennonites assembled at Elkhart Indiana, this 27th day of July 1920, deem it well and desirable to create a Mennonite Central Committee, whose duty shall be to function with and for, the several relief committees of the Mennonites in taking charge of all gifts for South Russia, to make all purchase of suitable articles for relief work, and to provide for transportation and the equitable distribution of the same."⁴

From this start, many other Mennonite groups who wanted to help in relief work would be invited to a meeting on September 27, 1920, in Chicago, Illinois where Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) held its first official meeting. It has been said that this was the most momentous meeting in North American Mennonite history, and the founding of MCC as the most significant inter-Mennonite organization in Mennonite history.⁵

Efforts in Canada

³ As reported in *My Calling to Fulfill*, Gospel Herald, July 8, 1920

⁴ As reported in *My Calling to Fulfill*, Gospel Herald, August 5, 1920

⁵ *My Calling to Fulfill*, p. 110.

In the spring and summer months of 1920, Canadians were also organizing to help their suffering brothers and sisters in Ukraine. Representatives of the Studienkommission came in August 1920 and similar to what was done in the U. S., requested that Canadians organize themselves into one body. On October 18, 1920, 14 men from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba gathered in Regina to form a Central Committee for Canada, which was authorized it to "...get into touch with the Central Committee of the United States for united action in this work."⁶

The American committee welcomed cooperation with Canadian Mennonites. Thus, while not officially joining with the American MCC, Canadians began to work together with the organization in various ways. Money was gathered. In December 1920, there was an auction in Herbert, Saskatchewan that raised \$1,100 (This has been recognized as the very first MCC Relief Sale in Canada) and that same month the Canadian committee sent \$7,000 to the American organization. By 1927, MCC in the U.S. had received donations of \$57,000 from Canadian Mennonites.

Meanwhile, Mennonite churches in Ontario were already organized and in early 1918 had established the Non-Resistant Relief Organization, headed by L.J. Burkholder of Markham. It included the Ontario Conference of the "Old" Mennonite Church, the Old Order Mennonites, the Brethren in Christ and the Mennonite Brethren in Christ. Within a few months they had raised \$80,000 which they presented to the federal government for relief toward war sufferers in Europe. Sewing circles also began to provide clothing and bandages to war refugees.

The First MCC Workers sent

On September 20, 1920, the first three MCC workers left for Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey) with Orie O. Miller as the unit director, to establish working policies for the new organization. Orie Miller was a young Goshen College business grad from Indiana who had already volunteered with the Mennonite Relief Commission in 1919 to serve in Beirut under the Near East Relief organization (NER). He was joined by Arthur Slagel another Goshen grad and Clayton Kratz, a Goshen student. In Constantinople, Miller used his previous experience in Beirut to find lodging, secure warehouses and make connections with other agencies. In addition, visas and various permissions and travel permits were obtained. While Slagel remained in Constantinople, helping to assemble relief shipments bound for Russia, Miller and Kratz travelled via Crimea (on an American warship) to the Mennonite colonies, reaching Halbstadt, Molotschna on October 13, 1920.⁷ They learned of the horrific conditions and talked with the local Relief Committees establishing needs and forming plans.

⁶ Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada, A History*, p. 27

⁷ The Orie O. Miller Diary, 1920-21, p. 58

However, the civil war was still raging in the Mennonite areas, with a remnant of the White Army under General Wrangel still holding a portion of the Molotschna. The Wrangel government welcomed the relief efforts of the American Mennonites, but it was feared that a victory for the Reds would close the door. Despite appearances that a White defeat was imminent, the MCC workers pressed on, but were unable to reach the other major Mennonite area of Chortitza, due to the fighting. They only got as far as Schoenweise on the east side of the Dnieper River.

Kratz and Miller then parted ways. Kratz was to stay and begin preparations for the relief effort while Miller would return to organizing in Constantinople. It was the last time Miller saw Kratz. Kratz thought that his American citizenship would protect him from harm, but this was not to be. The story is that after the Red victory, he was arrested, released but then disappeared again. Despite many efforts by local and American Mennonites, as well as the Quakers, he was never seen again.

Miller was just able to slip back out to Sevastopol, Crimea before the Red Army's ultimate victory.

In general, some good preparation work was done but MCC's first efforts at relief for Russian Mennonites had failed due to the Red Army victory and no aid permitted to reach the Mennonite villages. However, Miller had met Mennonite leaders in many communities and had arranged for the distribution of relief supplies to South Russia, but at this point, MCC could only help Mennonite and other refugees who had made it to Constantinople. Miller left to return to America on February 9, 1921, knowing that Clayton Kratz was still unaccounted for.

In Part 2, we will see the efforts of MCC to find another avenue into Soviet Russia as the famine conditions worsened with the 1921 drought. Note this report from C.F. Klassen, MCC worker, who witnessed the following:

“Villages entirely deserted, the thatched straw roofs of stables and houses taken down to feed the cow or the horse, flight from the village with the refugees dying in large numbers along the roadside. The starving people clinging desperately to life, prolonging their miserable existence by eating the seeds of weeds, the bark of trees, chaff or straw, gophers, rats, crows, cats, dogs, the carcasses of animals starved to death—anything to sustain life. Multitudes of refugees straggling along the roadways begging at each house for a morsel of bread.”⁸

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⁸ P.C. Hiebert and Orie O. Miller, *Feeding the Hungry: Russia Famine, 1919-1925*, p. 188