

MCC: One Hundred Years Old (Part 2, Russian Famine Relief)

Part One of this series covered the founding of MCC as a united Mennonite relief organization in response to the famine in the Mennonite villages in South Russia, but ended with the disappointment of the new organization being shut out of Russia due to the Bolshevik Red Army victory of 1920. The task was now to find another way to reach the starving masses in the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, the situation in Ukraine worsened. Bolshevik taxes, which included large payments of grain and food, had started to take a toll. And, by the fall of 1920, the sporadic drought became widespread over south Ukraine. All fall and winter there was practically no rain. By March 1921, it had become so dry that the grain planted in the fall was being blown out by the roots. Continued dry weather made it impossible to grow any spring crops. In one area, there was a little rain on Easter day, then again several weeks later, but then not a drop until August 5.

There was no pasture for livestock, and little other feed. The stock went into winter quarters in bad condition. Many a horse, the last his owner had, became too weak to leave the stall, dropping where he stood. The cows that were kept alive produced little milk until into the summer.¹ Famine was all around and people in southern Russia were crying out for help.

On his way back to the U.S. through Europe in 1921, MCC worker Orie Miller met with some Quaker officials who informed him that both British and American aid was getting into Russia through the Latvian port of Riga. The new MCC now pivoted in that direction. Early in 1921 Alvin J. Miller, a Goshen grad from Grantsville, Maryland, who had been with the war reconstruction service in France and had served MCC in Constantinople, was appointed by MCC as director of relief work in Soviet Russia.

Working through American relief organizations and Quaker contacts, Miller arrived in Moscow on August 27, 1921, and began difficult negotiations with the new Soviet government and with (future American President) Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration (ARA)². On October 1, 1921 MCC signed a contract that permitted MCC to operate under the ARA, as American Mennonite Relief (AMR), setting out the terms of the work MCC would do.

Miller also had to negotiate a separate contract with the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic at Kharkov, Ukraine. That agreement was signed on October 20, 1921. Dutch

¹ P.C. Hiebert and Orie O. Miller, *Feeding the Hungry: Russia Famine, 1919-1925*, p. 205

² The ARA was established in February 1919 as the agency designated by President Woodrow Wilson to administer the relief measures authorized by a Congressional appropriation of \$100,000,000. From 1919 to 1923, offices of the ARA were established in the US, and major cities of Europe, the Near East, and Soviet Russia. ARA Russian relief was initiated in August 1921 under an agreement with the Soviet government.

Mennonites were now also involved. During this time, Miller connected with B.B. Janz of the Molotschna who provided valuable on-the-ground advice and was to survey the villages in the Mennonite areas about specific needs in each.

A key part of the MCC contract stipulated that the AMR would feed and clothe all people, not just Mennonites, which was viewed favorably by the Soviet governments. MCC also included a clause indicating that help would be given “to the needy civilian population” thus including the parents and other adults, while the previous ARA contract stated that supplies were intended only for the children and the sick.

The contracts with the Soviet Russian and Ukrainian governments had the following clauses:

- AMR staff had freedom to organize local committees and freedom of movement, as well as free transportation to be provided by government for food and other aid.
- Relief was to be provided to the entire needy population regardless of race, religion or social status.
- AMR was not to engage in political activities.
- AMR was not to exceed 15 foreign workers in its efforts but expansion to 20 permitted if relief in Northern areas was also undertaken.
- No duties were to be charged on supplies imported and no supplies would be confiscated or requisitioned by the government for other uses.

The AMR organization proposed to assist starving Mennonites and Russians by opening centers for supplementary feeding in villages and by providing supplies for children’s homes, civilian hospitals, and the needy civilian population.

By November 1921, the famine was really on. When the people had no more bread, their only recourse was to exchange some of their clothing, their furniture or their farming implements for food. Desperately, leaves, bark, corn-stalks, ‘kurai’ (a thistle) were ground into flour. Cats, dogs, crows, gophers, even dead horses and cattle were eaten. As Miller said as he travelled into those areas: “Here we were introduced to starvation conditions, but I shall not take time to describe the harrowing scenes.”³ The central MCC headquarters for all of Ukraine was in Aleksandrovsk (Zaporizhia).

³ P.C. Hiebert and Orié O. Miller, *Feeding the Hungry: Russia Famine, 1919-1925*, p. 207

About 34,000 people lived in the 60 Mennonite villages in the Molotschna, the largest colony, with another 30,000 in 97 villages in the other settlements. Of these 64,000, about three quarters were Mennonites.⁴

Continuing government delays, transportation challenges, freezing temperatures and massive snowfalls, crime and other problems were getting in the way of the relief effort. Often supplies were transported from railway sidings to village warehouses through drifting snow by horse drawn sleighs. There were shortages of horses; and it took about three of those horses—half-starved as they were—to pull the load one well-fed horse could have handled. During the first spring months of 1922 the roads were almost impassable.⁵

So, it was not until Christmas 1921 that the first food was delivered to Mennonite settlements on the Volga River and not until March 1922 that food reached South Russia, more than 2 years after the Constantinople failure. The first relief kitchen opened in the village of Rosenthal, Chortitza colony on March 16, 1922. In the main towns of the Molotschna colony: Halbstadt on March 20 and Gnadenfeld on March 25. By May 1922, the AMR was feeding between 24,000 and 25,000 persons daily in South Russia in 140 kitchens and by August the number of daily feedings reached 40,000. The feeding kitchens continued in operation through the summer of 1924.

As Arthur Slagel wrote: “On March 16 the first meal was given in the Chortitza village kitchen. The children came, with their plates and spoons, received their portions and sat down to eat. And how they did eat! It was a sight worth all the effort it had cost—the many months of waiting and planning to do actual relief work in Russia.”⁶

Local villagers helped run the kitchens. Each village had a 3 person committee who organized the kitchens that were set up, usually in the village school building. This kitchen was supplied with one or more large iron kettles and for bread or biscuit baking, large brick ovens were built. The necessary benches, tables and chairs were usually borrowed or cheaply constructed.

Once per day at 11:00 am villagers would receive 1 piece of bread and 2 servings of cocoa, and once or twice weekly; beans or rice or corn grits with sugar and milk. Committees had to decide who was needy enough to receive the aid. For instance, if a family had two horses or two cows no aid was given, as it was determined that the extra animal could have been sold or slaughtered and food obtained. Lists of eligible people were made, and carefully checked for attendance to avoid ‘repeaters’.

⁴ Ibid, p. 212

⁵ Ibid, p. 21

⁶ Ibid, p. 215

The feeding priorities were:

1. Children under fifteen, adults over sixty, and the sick.
2. Nursing and expectant mothers.
3. Women between fifteen and sixty, not in group 2.
4. Men between fifteen and sixty.

The first three groups were fed most of the time. By June 1922, there was enough reserve in the AMR warehouses making it possible to feed the neediest men as well. Workers and committee members received two rations per day.

As Slagel recalled, “On one occasion, a group of boys who were just enjoying their noon-day meal were asked which kind of American food they liked the best. For a moment they looked at each other and at the questioner with bewilderment, then replied in a chorus, ‘Everything!’”⁷

One meal a day was not much, but the food was of good quality and so well prepared that it brought the color back into the faces of the children. Children began to gain weight.

Food Drafts

In addition to the feeding service, MCC also distributed food packets sent by Americans directly to their relatives and friends in Russia. Many Russian Mennonites appealed to any and all North American Mennonites so as to receive a package.

The content of the \$10 food-remittance package was: 49 lbs of white flour; 25 lbs of rice; 15 lbs of sugar; 10 lbs of lard or an equal amount of bacon; 3 lbs of tea; and twenty tins of condensed milk. The packages were delivered from early 1922 until the spring of 1923 and totaled well over \$200,000 in value.⁸

Clothing

Kitchen feeding in Russia reached its crest in June 1922, but the need for clothing became more urgent from that time. The clothing the people had from better days was wearing out, and new supplies were not available—and many had been exchanging clothing for food, which was the greater immediate need.

The poorest had practically nothing left to wear. In some areas, 20 to 25% of the Mennonite children were going about stark naked; while adults had only tatters and rags that hung from their bodies.

⁷ Ibid, p. 216

⁸ Ibid, p. 279

A report of these conditions was sent to America and as a result, packages of clothing were gathered from all parts of the U.S. and Canada, and in the fall of 1922 a large shipment of clothing was on its way. This included over 7,000 pairs of footwear; 5,372 overcoats; 8,824 adult and 17,297 pieces of children's underwear; 4,886 waist shirts; 3,936 skirts; 1,169 shawls; 6,896 men's shirts; 35 fur coats; 36 straw hats; 20,310 girls' and children's dresses; 27,924 pieces for children under 5; 1,111 double and 1,596 single blankets and comforters, etc.; 14,614 spools of thread.⁹

These goods were sorted for use and distributed according to need. In addition, Mennonites in North America could also send \$20 clothing remittances which included cloth and material to sew new garments.

Tractors and Farm Animals

MCC workers soon recognized it was not enough to clothe and feed people, they also wanted to help people feed themselves. The food kitchens relieved the most pressing need but the prospects for the future were gloomy, with starvation conditions likely worsening. In some areas the rain had been sufficient for growing a crop, while in many others it had been very dry. MCC realized that relief operations would need to be continued for at least another year.

Reconstruction work was needed. Farmers needed horses, cattle, seed wheat and working capital. The soil had been poorly worked for several years because of a lack of horses, so MCC determined that a number of tractors should be sent from America in time for summer plowing for wheat.

On June 26, 1922 MCC purchased 25 Fordson tractors and gang plows with twelve inch shares, together with necessary spare parts. This shipment left New York on July 24, 1922 for Odessa, and then shipment from Odessa to the Mennonite colonies was provided by the Soviet authorities according to the contract. G. G. Hiebert, of Reedley, California, an experienced farmer, was appointed by the Central Committee to take charge of the tractor work in Russia. The first plowing began on September 15 and was extremely successful to the degree that 25 additional tractors were sent in December.

MCC also purchased horses and brought them to the villages and sold them at cost plus the expense of transportation. According to records 203 horses were procured at a total cost of \$10,554. Another form of relief work consisted in providing sheep, which were sold to the villagers on credit, in order that they might spin wool and weave clothing. In 1924, 139 sheep valued at \$350 were provided.

⁹ Ibid, p. 266

By fall of 1923, Ukraine experienced a good harvest, which enabled MCC to slowly begin to pull out of the region at that time. Incredibly, it was a surprisingly small number of about 15 Americans (and two Dutch Mennonites) who were involved in organizing, delivering and distributing all of this aid in Russia.

American totals for relief provided was \$1.2 million with a contribution by Canadian Mennonites of \$57,000. There does not appear to be a comprehensive total of the number of people fed or an estimate of how many were saved.

Epilogue

The primary source used to compile this article is the comprehensive report issued by MCC in 1929: *Feeding the Hungry, Russia Famine 1919-1925*, with various authors but edited by P.C. Hiebert and Ori O. Miller. On a personal note, in an interview I did with my grandmother (who was a newly-wed in the Molotschna village of Klippenfeld at that time, with two infants) she told me, "...we were saved by the "Amerikanische Küche" (American Kitchen).

Here is the conclusion found at the end of the 'Feeding the Hungry' Report, appropriately repeated at the 100th anniversary of this organization:

"The American Mennonite Relief in Russia and Constantinople is the first successful undertaking of the several branches of the Mennonites as a body. This common work has pleased many, and has proved so efficient and satisfactory in its general results that it is but natural that there is a desire, expressed from many sources, to continue cooperative work along these lines where experience has proved its practicability.

The Central Committee has therefore taken preliminary steps to continue the organization for relief work on a cooperative basis. The following article is the product of their prayerful reflections upon ways and means to utilize past experiences in providing for future emergencies. May the Lord lead us aright in all matters, and teach us to think less of self, more of others, and most of Him."¹⁰

[Part 3 of this series on the 100th Anniversary of MCC features profiles of 4 key MCC founders/relief workers during the Russian famine.]

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¹⁰ Ibid, p. 415