

The Status of an Ethnic Minority in Eurasia: The Mennonites and Their Relation with the Netherlands, Germany and Russia

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Introduction

Work of the Frisian Academy and the research group on Phonetics and Ethnolinguistics at Groningen University is devoted to the study of minority problems in Europe and the Russian Federation. The primary interest of the Frisian Academy lies in the domain of history, literature and culture related to the West-Frisian language, an autochthonous minority language in the Netherlands with more than 300,000 speakers. Users of its nearest relatives, the East- and North-Frisian languages in Germany, are less numerous, and these languages are included into the list of endangered languages of Europe. In 2004 this list increased significantly after the extension of the European Union with new member states in Central and Eastern Europe. Further eastwards, a large number of endangered languages also can be found in the Russian Federation. This contribution deals with projects related to the users of these lesser-used and endangered languages in Eurasia. As a case study we consider the ethno-religious group of the Russian Mennonites. Their history, language, and culture will be described as a particular case of the German ethnic minority in Siberia with specific rights resulting from the legal rules (comparable to aspects of a 'status law') in the German Federal Republic.

I. Background Information

In the Frisian Academy, the Mercator-Education project group has been established with the principal goal of acquiring, storing, and disseminating

information on minority language education in the European region.¹ This group successfully implemented a computerised database containing bibliographic data and information about people and organisations involved in this subject. The Mercator regional dossiers provide descriptive information about minority languages in a specific region of the European Union. The information available, such as characteristics of the educational system and recent educational policies, can serve several purposes. It is used by policy makers, researchers, teachers, students, and journalists to assess the ongoing developments in European minority languages and serves as a first orientation towards further research as well as a source of ideas for enhancing educational tools in their own region. Recently the Mercator group received a special grant for the creation of a virtual library with scientific material on minority and endangered language communities.

At present, an inventory of the languages in the new states of the European Union is being completed, and it shows explicitly the position of ethnic minorities, which in some places can give rise to serious political problems. In the former Soviet Union our future Mercator activities include only the Baltic countries, but it is also important to collect information on the Russian Federation. This is where the historical and linguistic links of various language groups across the eastern border of the European Union, such as Uralic languages like Finnish and Hungarian, play a role in our activities. They show that European culture has many links with Russia. One of these links is illustrated by the case of the Siberian Mennonites.

During a fieldwork trip in 1992, our research group visited the newly formed German National Region in southwest Siberia, near the border with Kazakhstan, where many of the small villages scattered around the steppe have German-sounding names, such as Gnadenheim, Schönsee, Rosenwald, and Blumenort. Since this is an area populated mainly by Mennonites, here you can find people with names like Henritj, Klaus, and Mariitje and surnames like Friizen, Koop, Klaassen, and Ditj. The first day of our stay one of the villagers greeted us with the words: ‘Gndaach, wii zene uk fon Holaunt’—‘Hello, we are from Holland, too’. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Mennonites living in this part of Russia have been quite isolated from the other Mennonites in the country, and in

¹ Further information is available at <<http://fa.knaw.nl/mercator-education.org>>.

Soviet times it had been very difficult for them to find any reliable information about the history of their own countrymen. They might know that their ancestors came from the Ukraine, but there the certainty ended. Some people do remember, however, that their history is linked with Poland, Germany, Holland, and Friesland. Most Mennonites in the former Soviet Union are officially considered to be Germans, but a minority claims to be Dutch. Others regard 'Mennonite' not as an ethno-religious denomination, but rather as a nationality. In a few cases people told us they were Frisians. The language they speak there, Mennonite Plautdiitsch, which means 'Low German' in their own language, is the descendant of Low German dialects that differ considerably from the High German dialects spoken by their neighbours, often people who have been deported from the former Volga German Republic. The absence of a common language, which leads to mutual misunderstanding, was the reason why the Mennonites were never considered to be 'real Germans' by the (other) Germans, but they were always treated as a special group; this is also the way they saw themselves. The Soviet authorities considered the Mennonites to be just as German as the other more than two million so-called 'Volksdeutsche' (ethnic Germans) in the former Soviet Union and refused to accept their historical, ethnic, and other differences.

At the beginning of World War II, the Germans living in the European part of the Soviet Union not occupied by the Nazis were deported to Siberia. Mennonites over the age of 15 also were deported to labour camps where many of them perished of starvation and exhaustion. After the war, the ethnic Germans of the Soviet Union were still labelled as traitors and enemies of the Soviet people, and until 1955 they did not have the same civil rights as other Soviet citizens. Unofficially, this discrimination continued well into the 1980s. This meant that deported Germans were not allowed to return to their homes, seldom had access to higher education, and were generally subjected to discriminatory treatment by local authorities. At the beginning of the war, the Mennonites tried to prove that they were of Dutch descent rather than German, but this 'Holländerei' was ridiculed and for most Mennonites labour camps and deportation were inevitable. Only those who already lived in Siberia could return to their homes a few years after the war. Their freedom of movement, however, was very limited until 1955, and

they were not even allowed to visit relatives in the next village without written consent from local authorities.² It was hazardous to speak German in public outside the German villages. This, of course, is another reason why the Mennonites repeatedly stated explicitly that they were not Germans.

The fact that the Plautdiitsch language was an important factor for their ethnic identity was often used to prove that their status differed from Germans'. Some Mennonites insisted that their language was a Dutch rather than a German dialect; others even called it Frisian. Since Mennonite history started in the Netherlands and many of the first Mennonites came from areas in the North and East of the country, it must be possible, so it was thought, to find linguistic ties with the Netherlands proving the Dutch character of the language.³ For a good understanding, the historical background of the Mennonites as an ethno-religious group will be given, followed by details about their language and their present day legal situation in relationship to the ethnic Germans and minorities in Germany.⁴

II. Some History

In the beginning of the 16th century, growing discontent with the Catholic Church led to the foundation of a number of new religious movements. The most well known of the reformers were Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. In the same period Menno Simons from the small village of Wytmarsum in Friesland worked as a representative of the Anabaptist movement. He gathered a number of people around him, many of whom were fugitives from more southern parts of the Netherlands, but also from Germany and

² No less threatening was the hostile attitude of many of the neighbouring Russians, who had been brainwashed to believe that all Germans, including the Mennonites, were collaborators and fascists.

³ Some Dutch joined these efforts and wrote about 'Dutch in the Russian steppe' or words to the same extent. In any case, the status of this ethnic group is strongly related to the language use.

⁴ General information on the Mennonites can be found in: Horst Penner, Horst Gerlach und Horst Quiring, *Weltweite Bruderschaft* (Weierhof, 1984); Reuben Epp, *The Story of Low German and Plautdiitsch. Tracing a Language Across the Globe* (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1993).

Switzerland. During the following years, Menno Simons and his disciples first found refuge in the town of Groningen, where he was appointed as their leader in 1537. This was soon followed by forced emigration eastwards to Eastern Friesland. From there, many of the Mennonites, as they were now called, moved on to Western Prussia and into the Vistula delta area near Danzig (Gdańsk in present day Poland). In the late Middle Ages, many people from the western parts of Germany, but also from the Netherlands, had settled here as the first non-Slavonic colonists. Danzig was a Hanseatic town and had many contacts with the Netherlands.

The Mennonites, who preferred living in seclusion from the outside world and who earned their living as farmers, found an environment that reminded them very much of the northern regions of the Netherlands and Germany they had just left. The settlers were not a homogeneous group, and they spoke different languages and dialects: Low Franconian, Low Saxon, and Frisian. In their new country, they settled among people who spoke various Low German dialects, which must have sounded rather familiar to them. Dutch was preserved as the language used in church for over two centuries (until the end of the 18th century), and religious literature for the Mennonites was printed in the Netherlands. For everyday communication, though, the local dialects of the area were soon adopted.

The Polish state did not interfere much with the lives of the emigrants, and until the first Polish Partition in 1772 the Mennonites were allowed to live according to their own principles. When, as a result of this Partition, the area around Danzig became part of Prussia, the situation deteriorated significantly. Their refusal to bear arms brought the Mennonites into serious conflict with the authorities,⁵ and once again emigration seemed the only alternative. In 1789, a first group of settlers set off for the southern parts of Russia. They were invited by Catherine the Great, who needed farmers for the parts of southern Russia recently conquered from the Ottoman Empire. After the second Partition of Poland in 1793, the remaining parts of the Danzig area were incorporated into the Prussian State. In 1803 a second group of Mennonites left the Vistula area for Southern Russia.

A major setback for the Mennonites was the abolition of their privileges in the 1870s and the growing Russification policy of the tsarist

⁵ One of their principles was pacifism, in addition to their belief that people should be baptised at an adult age (which is also the origin of their Dutch name 'Doopsgezinden').

government, which resulted in a large-scale emigration to Canada and the United States. The founding of new colonies continued nevertheless, and after 1910 a group of settlers left for Siberia in search for fertile land. They founded colonies in the Orenburg region, the Kulunda Steppe near the border with Kazakhstan, and even as far as the Amur region. After the Russian revolution of 1917, a second emigration started, which soon came to an end when the authorities closed the borders of the new Soviet Union. In the late 1920s, a group of Mennonites did manage to emigrate from the Soviet Union, where the situation was getting more and more unbearable for them. After the emigration of the 1920s had ended, mass deportation of Mennonites to Siberia started in the 1930s. At the beginning of World War II, all ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union faced labour camps and deportation. When the German armies retreated, most Soviet Germans from the occupied parts of the country followed them, either because they were forced to or because they feared retaliation by the Soviet government.⁶

For the Mennonites in the Soviet Union, the situation improved somewhat after Stalin's death in 1953, but it took many years before emigration again became a possible alternative. The colonies in the Ukraine had disappeared, and most Mennonites now could be found in Siberia and Kazakhstan. Only in a few areas in southwest Siberia did Mennonites still live in ethnically homogeneous villages, while in most other parts of the country they were scattered among many other nationalities. When Gorbachev's reforms opened the country's borders and West Germany's liberal immigration policy for ethnic Germans made it possible for the Mennonites to leave Russia, mass emigration started. Since 1986 well over 50 per cent of the Mennonites in the former Soviet Union have emigrated. In the villages in the Altai Region we visited in 1992 and 1993, almost 100 per cent of the population was Mennonite, but now in most villages they are a minority. The newcomers are mainly Russians and Russified Germans—including a few Mennonites—who fled the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and

⁶ The Allies, failing to understand the situation in the USSR, repatriated most Soviet Germans to the Soviet Union after the war, allowing only a small number to emigrate to other countries. Some Mennonites managed to join family in North America, but most were refused entrance to Canada and the United States, and they eventually found refuge in Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil.

Kyrgyzstan. This migration process endangers the further use of the Plautdiitsch language, which will probably soon cease to exist in Siberia. The language was still very much alive when we were in Siberia in 1992 and made many recordings during our fieldwork expedition.

III. The Plautdiitsch Language and Other Endangered Languages in Russia

Language is considered to be an important factor when determining the ethnic identity of a specific group. The language used today in Mennonite communities all over the world is a descendant of West Prussian varieties of Low German. The two-century isolation in a non-German speaking environment has resulted not only in a considerable amount of loanwords from the surrounding languages, but also in a somewhat different and partly accelerated development of a few elements already present in the Vistula delta dialects. The resemblance between Plautdiitsch and Dutch, or rather the Low Saxon dialects as spoken in the province of Groningen in the Netherlands, sometimes used to 'prove' the non-German origin of Plautdiitsch, are often exaggerated.⁷ During our fieldwork in Siberia we made recordings of the Plautdiitsch language and found many cases of code switching between Plautdiitsch and Russian. We also recorded their folk songs and found similarities with the songs in northwest Europe, in particular in Groningen.⁸

The increased emigration to Germany has left many Mennonite villages more Russified than decades of Soviet policy could accomplish. The Plautdiitsch speakers who chose to stay found it more and more difficult to provide their children with a Plautdiitsch speaking environment, and in the long run it is to be feared that the language will lose ground to Russian. In Germany, the children of Russian Mennonite immigrants will almost certainly only have passive knowledge of Plautdiitsch. It is a pity that a language, which managed to survive

⁷ In reality, the existing resemblance shows the close relations between Low German dialects in general, not between Plautdiitsch and the Low Saxon dialects spoken in the Netherlands in particular.

⁸ Tjeerd de Graaf and Rogier Nieuweboer, 'The Language of the West Siberian Mennonites', *RASK: Internationalt tidsskrift for sprog og kommunikation* (1994), p. 47.

centuries of isolation and many years of prohibition, should now disappear where it has long had its most speakers—in Siberia. We considered it an important task to record this disappearing Siberian Plautdiitsch language and to describe it as precisely as possible. This work resulted in the Groningen dissertation by Rogier Nieuweboer, who did fieldwork in the so-called ‘Nemetskii Raion’ (German District) of Siberia.⁹

Plautdiitsch can be considered to be one of the world’s endangered languages. In the Russian Federation many examples of languages can be found in the same situation of endangerment. Some of them are the main topic of our research program. During other fieldwork expeditions to Sakhalin and Northern Yakutia we studied similar processes of language shift and language death for the aboriginal populations of the Russian Federation.¹⁰ It is a very important task for the linguistic community to record the last speakers of these languages with good equipment and to use these recordings for further description of those languages. These recordings can be used together with the acoustic data, which have been collected since the use of the phonograph at the beginning of the 20th century made it possible to record the spoken word. In many sound archives throughout the world such recordings are stored, in particular in the archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which is located in the Pushkinskii Dom in St. Petersburg.¹¹

Our aim is to reconstruct the old recordings in these archives and to use the data obtained for the study of language, music, and folklore of the peoples of Russia. In our joint projects with research groups in St. Petersburg, we used the data collected by the famous scholar archiving Germanic dialects, Zhirmunski (in German Schirmunski), who also wrote

⁹ Rogier Nieuweboer, *The Altai Dialect of Plautdiitsch: West-Siberian Mennonite Low German* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Groningen, 1996; Munich, 1999).

¹⁰ Tjeerd de Graaf, ‘The Small Languages of Sakhalin’, *International Journal on the Sociology of Languages* 94 (1992), pp. 185–200; Tjeerd de Graaf, ‘Language Minorities in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)’ in *Ethnological Study of the Herders in Siberia* (Nagoya, 1996), pp. 165–179. Information on our projects related to the languages of Russia can also be found at the web site <<http://www.let.rug.nl/~degraaf>>.

¹¹ Tjeerd de Graaf, ‘The Reconstruction of Acoustic Data and the Study of Language Minorities in Russia’ in Brunon Synak and Tomasz Wicherkiewicz (eds.), *Language Minorities and Minority Languages. Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Minority Languages, Gdansk, July 1996* (Gdańsk, 1997), pp. 115–130.

on the Plautdiitsch language in the early 20th century.¹² Additionally, we found interesting data on Yiddish (the language of the Russian Jews), dialects of Russian, and many of the Siberian aboriginal languages, which are endangered.

At present we are involved in a research program called *Voices from Tundra and Taiga*, which is related to the endangered languages of the Russian north. The historical data of these languages in sound archives have been reconstructed and recorded on CD, together with written field notes. In combination with the results of modern fieldwork, the collection of these data is important for the preparation of language descriptions, grammars, dictionaries, and edited collections of oral and written literature. This can be used to develop teaching materials, in particular for the younger members of certain ethnic groups who have insufficient knowledge of their native language and to make them aware of their heritage.¹³

IV. The Ethnic Identity of the Mennonites: German or Dutch?

Whether the Mennonites are considered ethnic Germans or not has had important consequences regarding their status in the former Soviet Union and in present day Russia. As described before, during and after the war all ethnic Germans were considered as potential enemies and fascists, and they suffered from the repression, as did other German communities in Eastern Europe. Many of them were expelled to Siberia and did not survive the hardships during the deportation and in the labour camps. Some of the Mennonites tried to escape this fate by declaring that they had another ethnic identity, but in most cases this did not change their fate. In interviews with Mennonites in Siberia, many stories about their tragic history and suffering were recorded.¹⁴

¹² Viktor M. Schirmunski, *Deutsche Mundartkunde: Vergleichende Laut- und Formenlehre der deutschen Mundarte* (Berlin, 1962).

¹³ Tjeerd de Graaf, 'Voices from Tundra and Taiga: Endangered Languages in Russian on the Internet' in *Conference Handbook on Endangered Languages* (Kyoto, 2002), pp. 57–79.

¹⁴ Nieuweboer, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

In the Siberian journal *Neues Leben*, we found an interesting discussion from 1982 between some representatives of the Mennonite community in Russia on their ethnic background. Excerpts from this publication have been reproduced in the following passages. This discussion on the Mennonite ethnic identity is mainly based on the position of their language, Plautdiitsch. The authors refer to a Russian book written about the Russian Mennonites from a Marxist-Leninist point of view and based on atheist principles.¹⁵

DEUTSCHE ODER HOLLÄNDER?

Die Geschichte der Mennoniten, wie sie in manchen Büchern dargestellt wird, bietet ein verworrenes Bild. Leider ist dieses Kapitel der europäischen Geschichte nur wenig erforscht. Wissenschaftler, die sich mit dem Mennonitentum befassen, vertreten verschiedene Meinungen hinsichtlich der nationalen Abstammung der Mennoniten und der Herkunft ihrer Sprache. Abhandlungen, in denen diese Probleme vom marxistisch-leninistischen Standpunkt aus behandelt werden, sind rar. Mit um so größerem Interesse las ich das Buch 'Die Mennoniten' von Aleksei Ipatov, das im Verlag 'Nauka' erschienen ist.

Zum Objekt seiner Forschungen hat der Verfasser jenen Zweig des Mennonitentums gewählt, der sich, von der niederländischen Mutterbasis losgetrennt, in Polen und dann in Rußland eingewurzelt hatte. Ipatovs Buch enthält umfangreiches Tatsachenmaterial, das nach dem Studium einer großen Zahl von Quellen zusammengetragen wurde. Die Entwicklung der Mennoniten zu einer ethnographischen und konfessionellen Gemeinschaft wird von Aleksei Ipatov im engen Zusammenhang mit der Geschichte der Niederlande, Deutschlands, Polens und Rußlands betrachtet. Der Verfasser weist die irdische Herkunft der mennonitischen Sitten und Bräuche nach, von denen einige bis heute erhalten geblieben sind, und—was besonders wichtig ist—macht Vorschläge zur Verbesserung der atheistischen Erziehung.

Als großes Verdienst des Autors ist seine Kritik an der sogenannten Verdeutschungskonzeption zu bewerten. Unter den Argumenten, die von den Anhängern dieser Konzeption ins Feld

¹⁵ Aleksei Ipatov, *Mennonity: Voprosy formirovaniia i evolutsii etnokonfessional'noi obshchnosti* [*Mennonites: Problems of the formation and evolution of an ethnoconfessional community*] (Moscow, 1978).

geführt werden, trifft man wohl am häufigsten die Behauptung an, daß Mennonitendialekte dem Plattdeutschen (Niedersächsischen) verwandt seien. Aleksei Ipatov beruft sich auf den bekannten Sprachwissenschaftler Viktor Schirmunski, der festgestellt hat, daß Mennonitendialekte zum niederfränkischen Zweig der germanischen Sprachen gehören und sich vom Plattdeutsch (Niedersächsisch) unterscheiden. Meinerseits möchte ich hinzufügen, daß jeder Mennonit, der seine Mundart beherrscht, den Unterschied zwischen Mennonitendialekten und dem Plattdeutschen gut kennt. Die Mennonitendialekte gehören zum niederfränkischen Zweig der westgermanischen Gruppe der germanischen Sprachfamilie genauso wie Holländisch. Man kann mit Fug und Recht behaupten, daß die Mennonitendialekte zwar eigenartige, aber doch Dialekte der holländischen Sprache sind.

Aleksei Ipatov stimmt mit den Forschern nicht überein, die meinen, daß die Mennoniten rein niederländischer Herkunft sind. Es gibt tatsächlich keinen Grund, dies zu behaupten. Das bedeutet aber keineswegs, daß man die Mennoniten nicht als Holländer bezeichnen kann. Wohl jedes europäische Volk stellt, historisch gesehen, eine Mischung aus verschiedenen Stämmen und Völkerschaften dar. Aleksei Ipatov vertritt die Auffassung, daß sich die Mennonitengemeinschaft aus Flamen, Holländern, Friesen und Niedersachsen herausgebildet hat. Es sei hier daran erinnert, daß das niederländische Volk aus Niederfranken, Friesen und Niedersachsen entstand. Was aber die Flamen betrifft, unterschieden sie sich nur wenig von den Holländern.

Die Nachkommen der mennonitischen Einwanderer, die in der UdSSR leben, zählen sich meistens zu den Holländern. Mein Großvater und mein Urgroßvater waren einfache Bauern wie die meisten Mennoniten und wahrscheinlich auch meine anderen Vorfahren, aber sie wußten, wie unser Familienname entstand und was er im Niederländischen bedeutete. Sie wußten sogar, wie unser Urahn, der aus den Niederlanden stammte, zuerst hieß, bis er einen mennonitischen Namen bekommen hatte.

Einen unwiderlegbaren Beweis der niederländischen Herkunft der Mennoniten, die nach Rußland eingewandert sind, erbrachte der niederländische Wissenschaftler J.S. Postma, ein guter Kenner der Mennonitengeschichte. Wie die von ihm angestellte etymologische Analyse der Familiennamen der Mennoniten, die in Polen lebten, ergab,

wiesen 500 von 567 Familiennamen die niederländische Herkunft ihrer Träger aus. Das heißt: Rund 88 Prozent der Mennoniten waren Niederländer und nicht bloß die ersten Nachfolger von Menno Simons. Die Muttersprache der Mennoniten ist also eine Mundart des Niederländischen; ihrer Herkunft nach sind die Mennoniten, die in der UdSSR leben, Niederländer. Die Verdeutschungskonzeption ist demnach als wissenschaftlich haltlos anzusehen.

Harold Redekop, Ingenieur, Perm

Reacting to the invitation of the journal, several readers of *Neues Leben* wrote their comments on this topic, and it is most interesting to read their contrasting opinions in the following letters to the editor. The first author states that each Soviet citizen can choose his own nationality/ethnic identity.¹⁶ In reality the situation in the Soviet Union was not as liberal as it is stated here, but in many cases a person could change his/her nationality, indicated as the ‘piaty punkt’ (fifth point) in his/her passport.¹⁷ We met Siberian Mennonites who during and after the World War II had as nationality ‘Gollandskii’ (Dutch) and replaced this by ‘Nemetskii’ (German) in order to obtain an immigration visa for Germany.¹⁸ In many cases the ethnic identity of recent immigrants to Germany (and also to Israel, where similar situations could occur) can be disputed. Here follows the reaction on the foregoing article by an inhabitant with Mennonite background from Vladimir in the Russian Federation.

WORUM GEHT ES EIGENTLICH ?

Ich las mit einigem Staunen den Beitrag von Harold Redekop ‘Deutsche oder Holländer?’ Ein durchaus fragwürdiges Buch von Aleksei Ipatov veranlaßte Redekop zum Votum für das Holländertum. Was die Erhaltung des deutschen Sprachgutes betrifft, das von der mennonitschen Bevölkerung vor der Einwanderung nach Rußland,

¹⁶ In the German text one can read that in the Soviet Union ‘each Soviet citizen has the freedom to choose his nationality independently and without any pressure’.

¹⁷ This is also due to the fact that there were no fixed criteria for determining the nationality of a person in the Soviet Union.

¹⁸ In the Netherlands a similar immigration policy would be impossible.

dann in Rußland und jetzt in der UdSSR immerzu gepflegt wurde und gepflegt wird, so meint Redekop, daß, 'die Niederländer, die in der UdSSR leben, Deutsch studieren sollten' (also gewissermaßen als Fremdsprache). Die Anerkennung der holländischen Herkunft der Mennoniten, so Redekop, solle der Massennarbeit unter der mennonitischen Bevölkerung und speziell der atheistischen Erziehung zuträglich sein.

Aleksei Ipatov behauptet in seinem Buch, daß die Sowjetbürger mennonitischer Herkunft keine Deutschen seien. Vielmehr bestehe hier eine 'nationale Unbestimmtheit', man müsse die Mennoniten in den Rang einer besonderen nationalen Gruppe erheben, die den Holländern näher stehe, als den Deutschen usw. Worum geht es eigentlich? Die Frage, inwieweit holländische oder deutsche Einflüsse im Plattdeutschen der Mennoniten vertreten sind, sollte von den Philologen beantwortet werden. Für die praktische Massennarbeit unter der mennonitischen Bevölkerung ist die Bedeutung dieses Problems gleich Null. **Es steht jedem Sowjetbürger frei, seine Nationalität selbständig und ohne jeden Zwang zu wählen** [boldface added—the author].

Der Verfasser dieser Zuschrift wurde in einer Dorfschullehrerfamilie geboren, die auf mennonitische Tradition großen Wert legte. Ein ganzes Jahrzehnt hat er dem Studium des vor der Revolution erschienenen mennonitischen Schrifttums gewidmet. Aus seiner Feder stammen sogar einige Bücher zu diesem Thema. Er fühlt sich daher berechtigt, den irrigen Behauptungen Redekops entgegenzutreten.

Nachweisbar sprachen alle Mennoniten schon vor ihrer Ansiedlung in Rußland und später Plattdeutsch, in den Schulen und beim Gottesdienst wurde aber Hochdeutsch gesprochen. Die Amtsgeschäfte in den Schulzenräten der Dörfer wurden in deutscher Sprache abgewickelt.

Das Schrifttum der Mennoniten wurde in deutscher Sprache verfaßt. Die mennonitischen Buchhandlungen führten nur deutsche Bücher. Als man in den letzten Jahrzehnten des vorigen Jahrhunderts damit begann, junge Mennoniten, Stipendiaten der Mittelschule und Söhnchen reicher Eltern, zur Weiterbildung ins Ausland zu schicken, da waren Hochschulen Deutschlands und der Schweiz das Ziel.

Die vorherrschende Ideologie des Mennonitentums hatte eine unverkennbare deutschnationalistische Prägung, mit allen Anzeichen chauvinistischer Überheblichkeit und Verachtung gegenüber Nichtdeutschen. Man kann sich davon leicht überzeugen, wenn man die mennonitischen Wochenschriften ('Friedensstimme', das Organ der Brüdergemeinden, 'Botschafter', das Organ der Kirchengemeinden) durchblättert.

Als dann das Gesetz vom 2. Februar 1915 über die Liquidierung des deutschen Grundbesitzes erschien, da begann ein Possenspiel, das später den Spottnamen 'Holländerei' erhielt. Um der Enteignung zu entgehen, färbte man die Mennoniten in Holländer um. Mühevoll versuchten eigens dazu herangezogene 'Philologen' im Plattdeutschen Spuren des Holländischen nachzuweisen, aber mit wenig Erfolg. Außer Vor- und Familiennamen ließen sich nur spärliche Reste des Holländischen nachweisen.

Meine Urgroßmutter trug den Familienamen Schapansky, mein Schulfreund hieß Sawadsky, und es gibt noch ein gutes Dutzend anderer polnischer Familiennamen unter den Mennoniten. Ein Beweis mehr dafür, daß die Vorfahren der Mennoniten bei ihren mehrfachen Umsiedlungen (aus den Niederlanden in verschiedene Gebiete des nordwestlichen Deutschland und darauf in das Gebiet am unteren Stromlauf der Weichsel) vielfachen sprachlichen und anderen Assimilationsprozessen ausgesetzt waren.

Nach Beendigung des Bürgerkrieges erfolgte dann die Neuerstehung der 'Holländerei'. Um dem Einfluß von Partei und Sowjetmacht auf die mennonitischen Massen entgegenzuwirken, proklamierte die mennonitische Führungsschicht 1922 aufs neue ihre holländische Herkunft, indem sie den 'Verband der Bürger holländischer Herkunft' gründete. Auch hier waren die Absichten durchsichtig. In mennonitischer Mitte gab es bedeutend weniger Proletarier und Parteimitglieder als bei den anderen Sowjetdeutschen. Unter Berufung auf die sowjetische Nationalitätenpolitik wollte man sich isoliert halten, damit die Klein- und Mittelbauern unter der Fuchtel der Dorfprotzen und Prediger verblieben.

Die zweite Auflage der 'Holländerei' schlug vollkommen fehl. Namentlich die heranwachsende Generation verwarf diese Mache aufs entschiedenste. Die sozialen Umgestaltungen auf dem Lande hatten zur Folge, daß die Vormacht der Großbauern und Prediger in den

deutsch-mennonitischen Siedlungen gebrochen wurde. Mit ihr geriet natürlich auch die 'Holländerei' in Vergessenheit.

In Anfangs-, Mittel- und Hochschulen lernten und lernen sowjetdeutsche Kinder und Jugendliche einmütig zusammen. Niemals tauchten dabei irgendwelche 'Probleme' auf, die auf die angebliche 'ethnographische mennonitische Eigenart' zurückzuführen wären. Als Dozent der Deutschen Pädagogischen Hochschule Odessa und häufiger Besucher vieler Schulen mit gemischter Zusammensetzung der Studenten bzw. Schüler ('Mennoniten' und 'Nichtmennoniten') kann ich dies nachdrücklich bestätigen. Mit der Vernichtung der Vormacht der Großbauern und Prediger schwand auch die Entfremdung gegenüber der nichtdeutschen Bevölkerung.

Die Diskussion, die durch den Beitrag 'Deutsche oder Holländer?' eingeleitet wurde, steht in keinerlei Beziehung zu den Problemen der politischen Massenarbeit und speziell der atheistischen Erziehung. **Wie schon erwähnt, steht es in unserem Lande jedem frei, seine Nationalität zu wählen.** Wenn mein Kollege aus Perm demnächst im Paßamt seine holländische Herkunft vermerken lassen will, so darf er das auch ohne historische Spinnereien vollziehen. Viel Gefolgschaft wird er nicht haben, denn die Werktätigen deutschmennonitischer Abstammung sind überall, an allen Fronten unseres gewaltigen Aufbauwerks Schulter an Schulter mit Vertretern von über hundert Nationalitäten der Sowjetunion im Einsatz, ohne sich um deren und die eigene Herkunft zu scheren.

Professor David Penner, Wladimir

The final ideological remarks are in contradiction with later historical developments, especially after 1990, which have shown that the ethnic identity and origin of large groups of people in the former Soviet Union form a very important topic since it can give rise to great political tensions and dramatic developments. The Mennonites also had to choose, and many of them could use their German identity in order to leave the country for Germany. This turned out to be a tragedy for the villages and provinces they left behind in Siberia as well as from a linguistic point of view. The following article in *Neues Leben* from a reader in the

Mennonite community in Tokmak¹⁹ (Kyrgyzstan) gives further arguments to support the fact that Mennonites should be considered as parts of the ethnic Germans:

EIN ERFUNDENES THEMA

Der Beitrag ‘Deutsche oder Holländer?’ von Harold Redekop darf meiner Meinung nach nicht als Stellungnahme des Autors—so war es aber gedacht—zum Inhalt der ‘Mennoniten’ von Ipatov angesehen werden. Erstens klammert Redekop viele von Ipatov angeschnittene Fragen aus. Er beschränkt sich auf eine allgemeine Einschätzung des Buches, und dieses heißt noch nicht Stellung nehmen. Zweitens, Ipatov geht es vor allem um die Herausbildung einer ‘ethnischen und konfessionellen Gemeinschaft’ bei den Mennoniten, die er als ‘ethnisch-konfessionelles Phänomen’ bezeichnet. Das ‘holländische Problem’ dagegen, so wie es bei Redekop angeschnitten wird, hat er überhaupt nicht berührt. ‘Deutsche oder Holländer?’ ist somit ein erfundenes Thema, das nicht im Zusammenhang mit Ipatovs ‘Mennoniten’ behandelt wird.

Leider interpretiert Harold Redekop die von ihm angeführten Zitate etwas frei, was unweigerlich zu Sinnentstellungen führen mußte. Postmas etymologische Analysen der mennonitischen Familiennamen ergaben zum Beispiel, daß 500 von 567 Familiennamen niederländischer Herkunft sind. HERKUNFT und nichts weiter! Redekop folgert aber kategorisch: ‘88 Prozent der Mennoniten waren Holländer’ und übersieht dabei, daß Postma zum Gesagten hinzufügt: ‘15 bis 20 Prozent der Mennoniten sind herkömmlich aus Niedersachsen und Ostfriesland’, das heißt, aus deutschen Landen, wo ‘holländische’ Namen ebenfalls keine Seltenheit waren und sind.

Hören wir mal zu, was Peter Martin Friesen, der sich viele Jahre mit der Geschichte der Mennoniten in Rußland befaßte, über die Herkunft der Mennoniten und deren Familiennamen zu sagen hat: ‘Menno hat seine Gemeinden nicht allein in Friesland, Groningen, Holland, Brabant und an der Ostsee (bis Riga!), sondern auch in Deutschland... Pfalz, Elsaß, in Bayern, Schwaben (Württemberg und Baden), in der Schweiz, in Österreich, Mähren usw. gesammelt. Und weiter zur Auswanderung von 13 deutschen Mennonitenfamilien aus

¹⁹ One of the most Southern settlements of Mennonites in the former Soviet Union.

Krefeld nach Amerika (1632): ‘...deren Namen uns aber fast ausnahmslos echt holländisch dünkten.’ Hierzu einige Beispiele: Siemens, zweimal Isaak, Dirk usw.—Holländische Namen ...deutscher Mennoniten! Und dieses an denselben Orten im Süden Deutschlands, wo ‘... Menno seine Gemeinden gesammelt hat’. Die meisten Forscher einigen sich darüber, daß Holländer unter den Mennoniten überwiegen. Aber 51 Prozent ist auch eine Mehrheit. Hätte sich das Deutsche als Schul-, Amts- und Kirchensprache durchsetzen können, wenn das deutsche Element in mennonitischer Mitte, nach Redekop, weniger als 12 Prozent betragen hätte?

Laut Peter Friesen sind im Zeitraum von 1874 (d. h. nach Einführung der Militärpflicht für die deutsch-mennonitische Bevölkerung) bis 1910 aus Rußland nach Amerika rund 40.000 Mennoniten ausgewandert. Niemanden aus ihrer Mitte fiel ein, sich Holländer zu nennen. Die schnurgerade Verkündigung Redekops, daß mehr als die Hälfte der Mennoniten, die in der Sowjetunion leben, sich zum Holländertum bekennen, ist unbegründet und entspricht nicht der Wirklichkeit.

Die mennonitische Gemeinde Tokmak zählt 210 Mitglieder, mit nicht getauften Familienangehörigen etwa 500. Schätzungsweise leben hier genauso viele Deutsche, deren Vorfahren Mennoniten waren. Insgesamt also rund 1000 Mann. Laut Volkszählung, wo doch jedermann seine nationale Zugehörigkeit frei und ungestört bekennen darf, leben in Tokmak 6—sage und schreibe—SECHS Holländer. Dieses macht 0.6 Prozent der Gesamtzahl der gläubigen und nichtgläubigen Bürger mennonitischer Herkunft.

Die ‘Holländerfrage’ verlor in unserem Lande schon längst ihre Aktualität. Aber irgendwo im Unterbewußtsein einer geringen Minderheit glimmt das holländische Feuerchen immer noch. Das kommt vom Nichtwissen um die geschichtlichen Tatsachen.

Cornelius Heinrichs, Tokmak, Kirgisien

In order to avoid the growing ethnic tensions in the Central Asian Republics, the Mennonite community of Tokmak in Kyrgyzstan has in the meantime ceased to exist. Most of its members have left, partly to the Russian Federation, but the majority went to Germany.

V. The Status of Ethnic Germans and their Emigration to Germany

As soon as the emigration of ethnic Germans to Germany became possible, particularly after Perestroika, many of them took this opportunity to depart for the country of their ancestors. According to the 1989 census, the total number of ethnic Germans in the former Soviet Union numbered over two million (2,038,341 to be exact). Most of them lived in Kazakhstan (957,518) and in the Russian Federation (842,295), with smaller numbers in other republics, e.g. in Kyrgyzstan (101,309), Uzbekistan (39,809), Ukraine (37,849), Tajikistan (32,671), Moldova (7,335), and Belarus (3,517).²⁰ Most of these people have since left their homeland and the majority immigrated to Germany. Special laws, such as the so-called ‘Bundesvertriebenengesetz’²¹ have also contributed to this wave of emigration. It was originally intended for German refugees from Eastern Europe (so-called ‘Volksdeutsche’), but it later was amended to include the multitude of ethnic Germans who could come later, the so-called ‘Spätaussiedler’, legally defined as follows:

§ 4 Spätaussiedler

(1) Spätaussiedler ist in der Regel ein deutscher Volkszugehöriger, der die Republiken der ehemaligen Sowjetunion, Estland, Lettland oder Litauen nach dem 31. Dezember 1992 im Wege des Aufnahmeverfahrens verlassen und innerhalb von sechs Monaten im Geltungsbereich des Gesetzes seinen ständigen Aufenthalt genommen hat, wenn er zuvor

1. seit dem 8. Mai 1945 oder
2. nach seiner Vertreibung oder der Vertreibung eines Elternteils seit dem 31. März 1952 oder
3. seit seiner Geburt, wenn er vor dem 1. Januar 1993 geboren ist und

²⁰ Alfred Eisfeld, *Die Russland-Deutschen. Studienbuchreihe der Stiftung Ostdeutsche Kulturrat*. Band 2. (Munich, 1999), p. 161.

²¹ In the related German documentation this Federal Law for Refugees from 1993 is described as: Bundesvertriebenengesetz 1993 (BVFG), in der Fassung der Bekanntmachung vom 2. Juni 1993, BGBl. I 829, zuletzt geändert durch das Gesetz zur Sanierung des Bundeshaushalts (Haushaltssanierungsgesetz—HSanG—) vom 22.12.1999.

von einer Person abstammt, die die Stichtagsvoraussetzung des 8. Mai 1945 nach Nummer 1 oder des 31. März 1952 nach Nummer 2 erfüllt, es sei denn, daß Eltern oder Voreltern ihren Wohnsitz erst nach dem 31. März 1952 in die Aussiedlungsgebiete verlegt haben, seinen Wohnsitz in den Aussiedlungsgebieten hatte.

(2) Spätaussiedler ist auch ein deutscher Volkszugehöriger aus den Aussiedlungsgebieten des § 1 Abs. 2 Nr. 3 außer den in Absatz 1 genannten Staaten, der die übrigen Voraussetzungen des Absatzes 1 erfüllt und glaubhaft macht, daß er am 31. Dezember 1992 oder danach Benachteiligungen oder Nachwirkungen früherer Benachteiligungen auf Grund deutscher Volkszugehörigkeit unterlag.

These ethnic Germans were given the opportunity to immigrate to Germany at a later stage and profit from various privileges and special rights. This consequence of the German law can be compared to the special benefits provided by the Hungarian Status Law and granted to Hungarians living in countries other than Hungary when visiting Hungary temporarily. In Hungary they would be eligible for the same rights as Hungarian citizens to cultural, educational, and social benefits and grants provided by the Republic of Hungary.

The aim of the Hungarian Status Law, of course, is different in the sense that it is focused on the fact that Hungarians in the neighbouring countries stay in their homeland. The German law is providing special benefits for those Germans who come to Germany and stay there. In the last decade, the number of Germans who left the former Soviet Union for Germany has been very large and is illustrated by the following figures for the numbers of 'German' immigrants: 147,320 in 1991, 195,576 in 1992, 207,347 in 1993, 213,214 in 1994, and 209,409 in 1995.²² After their arrival in Germany, most of them have been granted German citizenship and the law provides special benefits, such as illustrated by the following paragraph of the law:

²² Eisfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

§ 9 Hilfen

(1) Spätaussiedler können erhalten

1. eine einmalige Überbrückungshilfe des Bundes,
2. ein Einrichtungsdarlehen mit einem Zuschuß für zurückgelassenen Hausrat und
3. einen Ausgleich für Kosten der Aussiedlung. Das Nähere bestimmt der Bundesminister des Innern durch Richtlinien

(2) Spätaussiedler aus der ehemaligen UdSSR, die vor dem 1. April 1956 geboren sind, erhalten zum Ausgleich für den erlittenen Gewahrsam auf Antrag eine pauschale Eingliederungshilfe in Höhe von 4000 Deutsche Mark Sie beträgt bei Personen im Sinne des Satzes 1, die vor dem 1 Januar 1946 geboren sind, 6000 Deutsche Mark.

Unfortunately the German government did not foresee the problems that would arise for the German state in absorbing so many incoming ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In the last years they have altered their policy in order to cope with this influx of ethnic Germans. It has become more difficult to apply for entry into Germany, particularly since the knowledge of the German language has become one of the prerequisites.

For ethnic Germans in the Russian Federation, measures have also been taken with financial support from the German government. To mention one such measure, in the vicinity of St. Petersburg, housing projects have been constructed for ‘German’ refugees from the Central Asian republics. When we visited one of these settlements in summer 2003, it appeared that none of the people we met there spoke any German, and several of the inhabitants showed a mixed Kazakh background. This situation illustrates the tragedy of the existing situation for many of the participants in this exodus. Despite the documents in which their German ethnic identity is stated in black on white, in many cases they are not officially accepted as real Germans. In Germany many of them are known as ‘Russkie’ (Russians), and their integration into German society will be a tremendous challenge. This also holds for many of the Siberian Mennonite.

At the other end of this episode, the country they abandoned in Siberia in order to come to Germany is feeling the strain of lost manpower.

This refers especially to the homeland they left—their villages in Siberia—and the loss of economic potential these places suffer, in particular because of the emigration of the industrious Mennonites.