

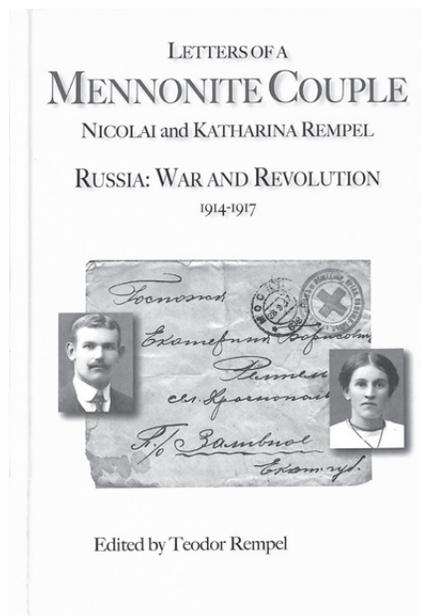
Book Review

Letters of a Mennonite Couple

Edited by Teodor Rempel

Fresno, California: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2014. 246 pages.

Reviewed by Peter Klassen



“Under tsarist rule, Mennonites had established numerous colonies, mostly in south Russia, where they enjoyed religious freedom. The Rempel letters present an intimate overview of how war first threatened and eventually ended this world of tranquility.”

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the Mennonite community that had found a comfortable new home in Russia well over a century earlier suddenly found its way of life challenged with disruptions that would eventually destroy its relatively prosperous and largely self-governing villages. Under tsarist rule, Mennonites had established numerous colonies, mostly in south Russia, where they enjoyed religious freedom. The Rempel letters present an intimate overview of how war first threatened and eventually ended this world of tranquility.

When World War I came, Nicolai Rempel, the twenty-six-year-old husband of Tina and father of three girls, in accordance with his Mennonite faith, chose to enter the Russian army medical corps, rather than the regular army. There he was engaged in caring for the sick and wounded, often noting that not enough could be done to care for these casualties of war. At first, perhaps influenced by unrealistic official projections of eventual victory, he expressed a measure of optimism. In addition, the early letters of this young couple provided an emotional lifeline, where each encouraged the other and found hope in their mutual love. The future offered promise, but gradually the scene changed. In November 1915 he wrote, “all hopes for a change for a better future” had disappeared.

Then when the tsar was forced to abdicate and Kerensky promised reform, Nicolai again allowed

himself to hope for better times. He suggested that an alliance of all Mennonites could help create a new order. No more of “each for himself” but rather “all for one, and one for all.” He was optimistic that, with the tsar gone and Kerensky in, a new day lay ahead. Confidently he wrote, “Socialism will win.” Nicolai was convinced of change, and even joined marchers singing “La Marseillaise.”

Soon the dream was shattered, as civil war broke out. Marauding bandits devastated a number of Mennonite villages, killing many of the inhabitants. Kerensky was soon followed by a new communist regime; Mennonites felt the oppressive, anti-religious rulers destroying their old way of life. Communism had no room for religious beliefs and practices. Mennonites found themselves under religious scrutiny followed by persecution, including prison or exile to Siberia.

Fortunately for Nicolai and his family, emigration was still possible; the family decided to emigrate to Canada, and in 1928 they found a welcoming home and new opportunities in Alberta, Canada.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Klassen is Professor Emeritus at California State University, Fresno. Among his publications are *The Economics of Anabaptism* (1964), *Europe in the Reformation* (1979), *Homeland for Strangers* (1989), and *Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia*, (2009).