



Dr. Peter Wiebe, director of the Omsk Museum of Regional Studies
(Photo Credit: Paul Toews)



Dr. Tatiana Smirnova, Professor of Ethnography at F. M. Dostoyevsky Omsk State University (Photo Credit: Paul Toews)

representatives from Mennonite communities in Siberia, Germany and Canada were in attendance.

The papers written by the Russian scholars were largely drawn from materials of state archival institutions. Both the Tsarist government and the Soviets kept many records on foreign peoples and differing confessional communities. Scholars in search of the Mennonite story have discovered an abundance of materials in many different regional and central archival agencies in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The papers written by North American scholars were based more on family materials, memoirs and interviews with Siberian Mennonite emigrants to the West or their descendants.

The discussions, while ranging from the initial beginnings of the Mennonite presence in Siberian and Asiatic Russia to the present, centered on the long Soviet period. Aileen Friesen, a member of the North American organizing committee, in a press release for the Mennonite media summarized parts of the conference in the following way: "The majority of conference presentations addressed the experiences of Mennonites during the Soviet period. A number of Russian scholars utilized archival sources from the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, to uncover the treatment and the responses of Mennonites to the state's repressive policies.... The atmosphere of repression and uncertainty influenced the relationship between Mennonites, Baptists and Evangelicals in Siberia."

Scholars from the former Soviet Union are increasingly finding it more difficult to access archival sources that were readily available to researchers in the 1990s. Fortunately, the collaborative work of the Fresno Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies with the Russian Academy of Science has published many documents and thus ensured their widespread availability.

The Russian Mennonite communities of Siberia and North America are both diaspora settlements from European Russia. Both shared a common history into the late nineteenth and/or early part of the twentieth century. Since then, their histories have diverged and yet there remain many commonalities. It is a bit surprising that the post-Soviet period, which again permitted contact between the two diasporas, has not produced a more sustained relationship between them. The organizers of the conference hope that the contacts growing out of this academic event may foster stronger relationships and more exchanges in the future.

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