

# Ethnic German Cavalry Regiment “Halbstadt”: A Mennonite Story

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It is incumbent upon historians of the Mennonite experience, and its theologians, to understand and explore how internalized community commitments like non-resistance were expressed, held in abeyance, or lost in conditions of extreme repression and testing. When German armies entered the Soviet Union in 1941, they found ethnic Germans including Mennonites in Ukraine to be broken and cowed. This essay explores the dismissal or absence of one defining pillar of the Mennonite faith tradition—non-resistance—among Mennonites in Ukraine while under Nazi German occupation.

In 1942 some 500 to 675 Mennonite young men from the historic Mennonite settlement of Molochna (renamed “Halbstadt District”) became members of the Ethnic German Cavalry Unit, which by April 1943 was absorbed into the SS (Schutzstaffel).<sup>1</sup> The first section of this paper will introduce and offer background on the arrival of German forces in Ukraine in 1941. A second section traces the key steps in the cavalry’s creation, its establishment in the larger Halbstadt District, and its deployments, based on archival materials and military records. A third section documents the SS curriculum and pedagogy for ethnic German cavalry members in Ukraine, not only in ridership and combat skills, but also a catechesis and spiritual mentorship into the SS worldview. The scope of this paper will be the occupation period from the fall of 1941 to the evacuation of

the ethnic German population from the Black Sea region in September 1943 and the regiment's dismantling by April 1944.

The reader should be aware that two of my uncles were members of the Ethnic German Cavalry Unit / Regiment Halbstadt, as were others from the Canadian immigrant congregation of my youth, including a minister. These stories were not hidden,<sup>2</sup> though most families and congregations like my own did not or were unable to discuss openly their trauma, loss, and failure, or to research the story in a larger context. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term "Mennonite" broadly to include those who because of significant familial, social, cultural, or theological ties and experience identified, or were identified by others, as Mennonite.<sup>3</sup>

Almost all cavalry members were born in the post-revolutionary Bolshevik era. Church elders, ministers, deacons, and most middle-aged Mennonite fathers in the Molochna settlement area had been exiled or executed.<sup>4</sup> Special Operations Group (Einsatzgruppe) D observed a pattern in the ethnic German communities: with church leadership banished, "morals unquestionably declined. However, the main reason is that a large proportion of the fathers have also been banished, and the mothers cannot cope properly with their adolescent boys."<sup>5</sup> With few exceptions, those who joined the cavalry had seen their mothers overworked, largely removed from the home, and terrorized. They themselves had survived the famine (the Holodomor) in extreme material poverty and had been repeatedly told they were "enemies of the state." Mennonites who would become cavalry members were not baptized church members; they were not of age when the last elders were abducted and had at best a lingering memory of church. Yet as young children almost all would have learned simple prayers and children's hymns, and many would have memorized some Bible stories.<sup>6</sup> Congregational life, including worship, mutual aid, and faith instruction, had, however, been systematically dismantled by circa 1933. None of the cavalry members would have had the training, tools, leisure, memory, guidance, or confidence needed to reflect biblically or theologically qua Mennonites on non-resistance, the oath, or aspects of Nazi ideology. And according to the chronicler of the Molochna village of Wernersdorf, if there was any lingering commitment to non-resistance among Russian Mennonites, it had come "to an end" with conscription for the Red Army's invasion of Finland in 1939.<sup>7</sup> The Mennonite community in Ukraine in August 1941 was a broken community of broken people, physically, mentally, and spiritually.

If Mennonites in Ukraine were predominantly innocent victims of Stalinist repression, with the German occupation they were immediately protected as *Volksdeutsche* or "ethnic Germans." This

category was defined by German racial ideologues as “people of German blood living abroad who have become resident there and possess the citizenship of the host country. The prerequisite is that they commit themselves to the German ethnic and cultural community by their own will.”<sup>8</sup> The Nazi occupation paper *Ukraine Post* offered ethnic Germans a vivid imaginary for new self-definition, reminding them week after week that they were part of a lived, transnational “community bound by blood and destiny,” in whom “racial forces” teemed within to “create and shape its own distinct language, custom, etc.”<sup>9</sup> Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler was uniquely protective of the Halbstadt population and had plans for its regiment as an elitist Germanic order of “racially” superior men in the quest for expanded German *Lebensraum* in the east.<sup>10</sup>

With this new privileged position, Mennonites became observers of Nazi Germany’s crimes against humanity in Ukraine. In some cases, however, Mennonites became cooperative participants in the Nazi regime’s occupation, and were complicit, with various degrees of awareness and consent, in its terror. This moral trap was most explicit and perilous for the young Mennonite men who were to become members of the Ethnic German Cavalry Unit / Regiment Halbstadt (Molochna).

### Arrival of German Forces

On June 22, 1941 Hitler’s armies invaded the Soviet Union, bringing the Führer’s “campaign of peace” in the form of a lightning war (*Blitzkrieg*) “for the security of Europe and therewith the salvation of all.”<sup>11</sup> Germany’s immediate aim was hardly peace, but rather to occupy most of the European territory of the USSR in order to secure enough oil, grain, and human labour to dominate Europe and defeat England. Germany could not be “blockade-proof” or secure as a world power without Ukraine’s resources.<sup>12</sup>

Rightly fearing sympathy for Germany, between August 28 and October 22, 1941, Moscow adopted eight resolutions for the deportation of all Soviet Germans from the western regions of the USSR to Kazakhstan and Siberia. This included a resolution “on resettling” the 63,000 Germans living in Zaporizhzhia Oblast—the province in which the older Ukrainian Mennonite settlements were located.<sup>13</sup> The decrees assumed that the entire German population was guilty of hiding spies and diversionists, “thousands, and tens of thousands” in the Volga Territory alone.<sup>14</sup>

Before the rushed mass evacuation of Molochna, 2 to 3 percent of the population had already been arrested by the secret police to

pre-empt resistance and remove those who might instigate disruption on the long journey east.<sup>15</sup> Forty-eight percent of those arrested were born after 1914, i.e., between fifteen and twenty-seven years old, and most were charged generically as “socially dangerous elements,” or for “anti-Social agitation.”<sup>16</sup> Other charges included: “has a repressed brother”; “father was repressed by the NKVD in 1937”; “is a fugitive from a *kulak* family”; “has relatives abroad”; “displayed anti-Soviet attitude and praised Germany”; “is dissatisfied with the existing Soviet system”; “brothers remained in the German occupied territory”; “family member of a traitor to the homeland”; “has a father [or other family member] who moved to the side of the German troops,” etc.

The Soviet “German Operation” saw 31,320 or about half of the ethnic Germans in Zaporizhzhia Oblast deported, with 20,475 from the Molochna (Halbstadt) District alone.<sup>17</sup> More than half of the total of 840,058 Soviet Germans from the European territories of the Soviet Union were brought “like livestock” to the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic and the others to Siberia.<sup>18</sup> An estimated 55,000 of 100,000 Soviet Mennonites were deported eastward or otherwise removed from their homes.<sup>19</sup> Despite two decades of ideological influence, the regime concluded that this people group was entirely “comprised of enemies of the Soviet Union.”<sup>20</sup> Ethnic Germans, however, had been under a news embargo for years and had no prior knowledge of Hitler or National Socialism other than what they had heard from Soviet press propaganda.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Mennonites were quietly hopeful for liberation from the devil they knew—Stalin. Katie Dirks Friesen, whose brother would later become a cavalry member, recalled that “we knew the Germans were advancing rapidly and that city after city was being captured. Deep inside that made us happy but we dared not show or share our feelings.”<sup>22</sup> Their hope was based on community memory of German consular assistance in the large-scale flight and emigration of Mennonites in 1929, as well as on the delivery of famine relief packages from abroad via Germany.<sup>23</sup>

According to Horst Gerlach, there were “dozens” of West Prussian Mennonites in the 60th Motorized Division and the Panzer Group Kleist, which were involved in the heavy air and tank battle that liberated Molochna from Soviet control in October 1941.<sup>24</sup> The German victory in Melitopol and Molochna was completed on Monday, October 6, 1941. The German military was disappointed to find an ethnic German population much smaller than anticipated. For example, it was thought that there would be 53,000 Crimean ethnic Germans to form the base for a fully Germanized peninsula, but Crimea had been entirely cleansed of this population group.<sup>25</sup>

The Black Sea region came under the German military administration of Army Group South (Heeresgebiet Süd). The SS-based Ethnic German Liaison Office (Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, VoMi) under Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler in his role as Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of German Nationhood (Reichskommissariat für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums, RKFDV), was responsible for the larger German settlement areas. These settlement areas were divided into district commandos, each with their own commander.<sup>26</sup> The VoMi SS-Special Command R (Russia) was led by SS-Gruppenführer Horst Hoffmeyer, under SS-Obergruppenführer Werner Lorenz (VoMi director). The key tasks of the district VoMi commandos were to register the German population, secure and distribute food and clothing, and establish a health care system, as well as German kindergartens, schools, and even a teacher training college. Later this would also include self-defence units.<sup>27</sup>

The SS-Special Command R (Russia) made the following external assessment of the Mennonite settlements within the first month of occupation:

In most settlement villages, a large portion of men are missing. . . . Russians displaced the families who were evacuated. . . . The houses originate from Tsarist times and are in poor condition. The Germans have made no significant repairs so as not to be considered "bourgeois" and then be deported or imprisoned. . . . The farm buildings (barns, tool shops, granaries) are seriously neglected due to the forced labour in the collective. . . . All of them, women, men and even adolescents, must work from early morning until nightfall; . . . especially the women are overworked. . . . Even today, the Mennonites out of all ethnic Germans make the best physical and spiritual impression. . . . The racial picture is to some extent excellent, generally good. Things German are genuinely adhered to. . . . The attitude toward Bolshevism is one of bitter rejection. Nevertheless, the Bolshevik era had an outward effect on the Germans. This is especially manifest in the conduct of the youth.<sup>28</sup>

Some months later another German officer, Sonderführer Schäfer, who had spent three weeks travelling throughout the Molochna as an agricultural specialist, wrote to Molochna-born Pastor Abraham Braun in Germany:

You will be surprised, dear friend, that I write to you that Mennonitism is dead. But it is so. So far I have only heard that a Mennonite in Chortitza has started church services again. . . . The Mennonites were systematically shot, deported, and resettled as the strongest ethnic German group. . . . I have the impression that they are the most psychologically broken, since they were more tormented than other Germans, who adapted more easily to the given circumstances.<sup>29</sup>

Another German described the Mennonites in Molochna as a cowed population: “Every individual initiative in them has been killed or stifled, because to be an individual is to be suspect, in danger of being reported. They hesitate to express any private opinions, fearing . . . spies are still at work.”<sup>30</sup>

Most importantly in the memory of survivors, the German occupation brought an immediate cessation of fear and a feeling of freedom, which included the freedom of religious expression. On October 12, 1941, the first Sunday after the arrival of the Germans in Molochna, a worship service was organized at the hospital in the central village of Gnadenfeld, led by an army chaplain. Mennonites who were committed communists or had been informants were apparently among the first to convert: “There were great revivals. . . . Some who had sinned greatly during the communist period purified themselves [from sin] and asked for forgiveness.”<sup>31</sup> While denunciations in some Mennonite villages are well documented,<sup>32</sup> Eduard Reimer, a later member of the cavalry unit, suggests that the opposite was the case in the Mennonite villages.

The names of such informers were kept secret. . . . People had a good idea who had denounced whom, but later when our village was occupied by German forces and there was excellent opportunity to take revenge on them, it was not done. Nor, to my knowledge, did this happen in other Mennonite villages. The [other] German villages, Lutherans and Catholics, reacted differently and quite a few of the former denouncers were shot.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the brokenness of the Mennonite community, leading German ethnographer Professor Walter Kuhn was impressed with the unique ethos of the Mennonites he examined.<sup>34</sup> In the closed German colonies, Kuhn hoped to find a more original and authentic German life unblemished by industrialization and urbanization. For over a decade his research had focused on the capacity of a racial type (*Stammesart*), and the “biological energies” of German ethnic peoplehood (*Volkstum*) in particular, to be preserved in migration, and reconstructed “from fresh root” in a new geographic context. Kuhn’s research agenda complemented the National Socialist goal of “an ethnically separable and racially homogenous state.”<sup>35</sup>

Surprisingly perhaps, Kuhn was impressed by the Mennonite “principle of lay-priesthood.” A number of older or disabled ministers who had been ordained “just prior to the Bolshevik era” were still alive, and others were being newly elected. Kuhn was also impressed with the sophistication of these ministers which he ranked as “quite high,” and with the number of hymnals, sermon resources, concordances, and other materials for worship that could be

salvaged from "the ground, attics, etc.," all carefully hidden for over a decade. The women who had sung in the church a decade earlier "simply resumed the old tradition," and the young adult and teen girls "inserted themselves into their rows as trainees."<sup>36</sup>

Kuhn was, however, concerned about those between fifteen and twenty-five years of age who had been trained for a society without God (*Gottlosentum*). Another German observer had a similar concern. In his view, the young Mennonite was no longer religious but paid no homage to the Bolshevik worldview either. Rather, "he is inclined toward liberalism and nationalism. What concerns him above all is the present and the immediate future." In their "thinking and ideas" the youth have "detached themselves almost completely from the tradition."<sup>37</sup> These would be the recruits for the self-defence cavalry unit.

Most older Mennonites seemed to agree that the Almighty God was working through the Führer on their behalf, and their hope was now Hitler's success. The new ideological worldview of Nazi Germany would make the distinction between German and religious salvation extraordinarily difficult to discern, especially for a younger generation for whom everything was new. In the months ahead, two newspapers, public addresses, and training for teachers, administrators, and self-defence units emphasized that in the National Socialist worldview, "custom and morality are not determined by religion, but by race," and that Christianity has and must adapt itself to the existential "Germanic feeling of life" (*Lebensgefühl*), and to its sense of propriety and morality, not the reverse. This unique "sense of morality" was not Mennonite specific, but rather "lives within the Germanic race." This was especially compelling for Mennonite young adults, who were also reassured that National Socialism supported "practical Christianity," and that its ultimate purpose was to unify, strengthen, and empower the *Volk* for "such great deeds as demonstrated by this war."<sup>38</sup> This confusion would only grow, especially as the oldest young men were groomed and trained for the Waffen-SS. Mennonite memoirs recall a hope and desire to live amicably with Russian, Ukrainian, and Jewish neighbours as they had done, more or less, for generations, but this vision like so much else would be challenged under German occupation.

### Creation of the Cavalry Unit

Hoffmeyer's VoMi Special Command R (Russia) was headquartered in Romanian territory at Landau, Transnistria. Himmler designated the ethnic German settlement area of Halbstadt in Ukraine,

with its 98 villages and 30,179 ethnic Germans (mostly Mennonite as well as Lutheran and Catholic villages), a district commando.<sup>39</sup> In December 1941, Hoffmeyer appointed SS-Sturmbannführer Hermann Roßner to lead the VoMi's Special Operations Unit (Einsatzgruppe) Halbstadt (as *Gebietshauptmann*) in the region still under military administration.

Born in 1908 in Berlin, Roßner was thirty-two years old when he arrived in Halbstadt.<sup>40</sup> Roßner had been a Nazi Party member since 1929, when at age twenty-one he also became a member of the SA (Sturmabteilung, or "stormtroopers"), a paramilitary arm of the Nazi party. He transferred to the SS in 1930 and rose to the rank of *Sturmbannführer* (major) in 1938. Roßner identified as *gottgläubig* or "god-believing,"<sup>41</sup> a Nazi category for those who had left the church and who embraced a type of providence and Germanic creed compatible with the Nazi regime. Roßner had shown leadership and success in the VoMi resettlement of ethnic Germans from Galicia and Volhynia in 1939, which included some smaller Mennonite groups. The SS-Special Command R (Russia) team in Halbstadt under Roßner included Waffen-SS doctors with equipment from the medical offices of the Waffen-SS, a pharmacy with Waffen-SS staff, and agricultural specialists. Roßner was also responsible to procure supplies and clothing for the ethnic Germans in his district and establish schools.<sup>42</sup> He gained Mennonite trust and would soon be responsible for recruiting and overseeing training for an ethnic German self-defence cavalry unit for Halbstadt. After one year, Roßner was promoted to Obersturmbannführer, or lieutenant colonel, by Himmler upon recommendation of SS-Oberführer Hoffmeyer.

The beginnings of the Halbstadt self-defence cavalry unit were exceptionally modest. As early as the end of November 1941, the 32nd Support (*Betreuungs*) Command of the SS was stationed in the central district village of Gnadenfeld and set up a home guard in each village. "All able-bodied men in each village were therefore provided with arms. In Gnadenfeld these men had to present themselves every Saturday for military training by a designated SS member," according to a former Gnadenfeld mayor, Walter Jansen.<sup>43</sup>

The training began part-time and without serious compulsion. Members had no uniforms and were often given no more than a swastika armband and offered some limited rifle drills during the week. A primary task in fall 1941 was simply to harvest the fields, guard district animals and food supplies from theft, deliver sensitive VoMi mail on horseback, be alert to unknown persons entering their villages, etc. A few individual Mennonites volunteered early with the First Waffen-SS Division "*Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*," which was involved in brutal battles around Kharkiv and Kursk.<sup>44</sup>

After the German army had successfully occupied the Donbas region of south Ukraine and declared it "cleared of Jews" in March 1942,<sup>45</sup> Generaloberst von Kleist temporarily pulled back the military operational area to the vicinity of Halbstadt. He strongly requested the VoMi to gather Halbstadt's young men into mounted formations to be deployed as combat troops in an emergency. Unlike Chortitza, Halbstadt was in a military administrative area and only briefly under civil administration. Roßner informed Hoffmeyer of these events, who with VoMi director Lorenz "immediately saw the possibility of using these cavalry squadrons as 'self-protection formations'" under the VoMi's control.<sup>46</sup> By the end of the month, Roßner had created four squadrons located in Waldheim, Gnadenfeld, Halbstadt, and Prischib, the first three comprised almost exclusively of Mennonites. The SS-Special Command R (South) had trained more than 12,500 ethnic German militia men in twenty-seven self-defence training schools over the preceding months.<sup>47</sup> Himmler agreed with the plan and in April 1942 ordered that they not be removed from the district as regular soldiers:

First, I forbid that the three Ethnic German Cavalry Squadrons be taken out of the District of Halbstadt; second, these cavalry squadrons are to be immediately placed under the command of the Higher SS and Police Leader (Russia [South]) / SS-Obergruppenführer Prützmann. They are not under the control of the army.<sup>48</sup>

Prützmann was directly answerable to Himmler for all internal security matters in Ukraine, particularly all anti-partisan activities. According to Roßner, Himmler's direction

gave us the guarantee that the few men who had not been abducted by the Soviets would remain in the German settlement area and were thereby withdrawn from all possible Reich Germans: no army, no *Abwehr* or SD [military or SS intelligence], and no civil administration could drag away the few individual men as interpreters and so on in all directions and remove them from their families.<sup>49</sup>

In agreement with the Reichsführer-SS, training personnel would be provided by the Waffen-SS together with the VoMi commanding officers; Roßner in turn organized "the necessary food, clothing, and equipment from the army, mostly in Taganrok."<sup>50</sup> The plan was important to Himmler's own vision for redeveloping self-defence policing. For some time, Himmler had been in competition with the army for recruits for his rival elite Waffen-SS security force. Moreover, as Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of German Nationhood, it was important for Himmler to secure the small number

of males remaining in the settlement areas to fulfill his larger vision of elite SS soldier-farmers (*Wehrbauern*) and fortified agricultural communities for Germany's eastern borders and in occupied territories at the conclusion of the war.<sup>51</sup>

On March 14, 1942, the males in the Mennonite villages were called together by their respective mayors and informed that the German military was "calling for volunteers to be trained and then stationed in [their] area as guards."<sup>52</sup> Not many volunteered, which confused and angered authorities, who found the ethnic Germans in Ukraine "seemingly ungrateful and unmotivated, wanting only to have their farms reprivatized."<sup>53</sup>

The first letter from the *Obersturmführer* (first lieutenant), a man named Specht, went to our Mayor Rehan. Among other things, he asked reproachfully how we could care so little for the Germans who had liberated us from Communism that only four men had volunteered to serve with the protective police force. The mayor responded by organizing an assembly, and within a week the number of volunteers rose to roughly twenty-four men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, even though only a few old men and three young men remained in Schönsee, a village of eight or nine hundred inhabitants.<sup>54</sup>

In the next days the Ethnic German Cavalry Unit (*Abteilung*) Halbstadt was established. Eduard (Abram) Reimer and five other Liebenau village eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds registered at the Nachtigal house in Waldheim, where the SS-Support Command had a station. Other Liebenau residents recall that eighteen registered "mostly of their own free will,"<sup>55</sup> and nineteen registered from Wernersdorf.<sup>56</sup> "No one was screened or asked about their health. Everyone was accepted for duty."<sup>57</sup> In Klippenfeld, only six ethnic German men remained in the village, including seventeen-year-old Gerhard Thiessen, who said he was compelled to enlist.<sup>58</sup>

In the sixteen villages in the southeastern quarter of the old Molochna settlement area, all the men in the home guard were required to present themselves in Gnadenfeld. About 150 of the "most suitable men" were chosen; Franz Bräul, brother Heinrich Bräul, cousin Aron Bräul Jr., and friend Heinrich Rempel registered from Marienthal, for example.<sup>59</sup> Albert Dahl's older brothers in Marienthal were not chosen, but those who were "volunteered immediately and with pride," Dahl recalled.<sup>60</sup> Nine volunteered from the immediately adjacent village of Pordenau.<sup>61</sup> In this context, Otto Dirks of Gnadenfeld recalled, some Mennonite young women were also approached by superior German officers for roles, including as "temporary or substitute wives to officers who . . . needed comfort and emotional support."<sup>62</sup>

The Gnadenfeld squadron was not as large as those of Waldheim, Halbstadt, and Prischib because its surrounding villages had fewer men; "most had been taken by the Soviets."<sup>63</sup> In Gnadenfeld they were housed in their former high school residence, which was converted into a barrack. Once a guardroom and kitchen were in place and bedding provided, the unit was handed over to a lieutenant and two sergeants from the German forces for leadership and training.<sup>64</sup>

In total, Roßner successfully recruited as many as seven hundred for the cavalry unit.<sup>65</sup> The uniforms, weapons, and equipment provided by the army were largely seized from captured Soviets. While squadron members received Soviet cavalry rifles and daggers for close combat, "we were only lightly armed compared to other German troop units."<sup>66</sup> Teachers, area officials, and older men were released from assuming these roles, but many also volunteered for related jobs. According to Reimer,

the thirty to forty-years-olds came simply to defy the old regime, e.g., as a master-at-arms, or to help with the distribution of uniforms or office work, or as craftsmen such as shoemakers, tailors, forage masters, and blacksmiths. The comradeship was exceptional; the feeling of belonging together among Mennonites was still alive. Never was a word spoken about conscientious objection; after all, everyone had joined voluntarily and probably felt obliged to contribute their part to the liberation. . . . Everyone wanted to wear the German uniform and no one had any compunction about violating the Mennonite principle of non-resistance.<sup>67</sup>

The 1942 report by Prof. Kuhn suggested Mennonites were generally willing to cooperate: "Even the seniors no longer clung . . . to their doctrines and dogmas, but rather showed themselves completely open to new ideas. Above all, the principles of rejecting sword and oath have in every practical sense fallen away. Non-resistance was already given up . . . in the revolutionary battles," a reference to the self-defence formations of 1918–20. In the Mennonite Chortitza area, Kuhn claimed that "almost 600 have voluntarily enlisted in the German armed forces. And it is not as if the seniors stand disapprovingly on the sidelines. Because German soldiers risked their own lives to liberate them, they recognize fully that from now on they may no longer stand apart as non-resistant."<sup>68</sup>

Ignorance mixed with compelling propaganda and some intimidation ensured that the call to service would be well received by youth who were "completely disillusioned by Stalin's methods."<sup>69</sup> They were full of hope that the war would soon end and that their loved ones would return, yet also realistic about the consequences of non-compliance. The 1942 May Day address by Reich Commissar for Ukraine Erich Koch gives an example of the rhetoric used to

encourage and even compel obedience, sacrifice, and tenacity as the only appropriate expression of gratitude:

The Führer and his brave soldiers liberated you from Bolshevik slavery. . . . Let May 1st be a sign of future rebuilding, the turning point to a new age. . . . Stalin brought you blood and tears, the Germans brought you freedom . . . where true social justice reigns. May 1st should mean for you the mobilization of all forces for the defeat of Bolshevism. . . . Your labour has been liberated; thank the Führer with your industriousness, obedience, and tenacious willingness to rebuild.<sup>70</sup>

However, where encouragement failed, threats and bribes did not, including giving private farms as rewards to those “who have proven themselves as fellow fighters alongside the German and allied soldiers in the fight against [local] partisan bandits.”<sup>71</sup> SS-Obergruppenführer Lorenz “expressly stated that those who were registered on the German People’s List and who attempted to shirk military service should be severely punished.”<sup>72</sup> Notably, after the war, Lorenz, who had become a friend to Mennonites and especially to leader Benjamin H. Unruh in Germany, was convicted for “forcibly inducting” *Volksdeutsche* under his supervision into the Order Police (Ordnungspolizei) forces, as well as into the Waffen-SS to fight “against their own country.”<sup>73</sup>

After three months of infantry and cavalry training as a protective guard troop for the German settlement area, the Ethnic German Cavalry Unit Halbstadt was sworn in at a solemn evening ceremony in Halbstadt in June 1942. Eduard Reimer was captivated:

In the middle of the squadron a bonfire was burning. Youth groups from Halbstadt and surrounding area sang: “Flame upward, . . . Shining glow, behold, in song together we swear by the flame altars, to be Germans, to be Germans!” The oath was recited by a superior officer and we recruits repeated the words of this oath. The solemnity of the swearing-in ceremony left an almost holy impression on me, and likely with the other comrades as well.<sup>74</sup>

The ceremony had required elements, including the following oath: “As a bearer of German blood, I swear allegiance to you, Adolf Hitler, as leader of all Germans, until death, and I am willing to do my best and to render unconditional obedience to all my superiors for the good of all Germans, so help me God.”<sup>75</sup> As “voluntary” recruits for the Reich, Germany no longer considered them Soviet citizens committing treason, but officially “stateless” and on the way to naturalization as German citizens.<sup>76</sup> Lorenz confirmed again with

Himmler that the squadrons should not be removed from the area for use by the armed forces.<sup>77</sup>

During the summer months of 1942, recruits understood themselves as Wehrmacht soldiers while under SS police training.<sup>78</sup> Between June and August 1942, the third squadron (Waldheim) was deployed to the Mariupol area in a largely uneventful coastal protection assignment on the Sea of Azov.<sup>79</sup> Over these months their sense of purpose and enthusiasm, however, waned: "Our Waldheim squadron had to drill almost to exhaustion. Apparently, they still did not know what to do with us."<sup>80</sup> For a time the Rostow and Grunau support detachments were also subordinate to the operation in Halbstadt.<sup>81</sup>

In early October the SS-Polizeiführer in Dnipropetrovsk asked if the Halbstadt cavalry unit could or should be involved in some anti-partisan security. A decision was made by Prützmann's office that the unit was not properly trained or equipped for armed deployment, and that the men and horses should rather be used to bring in the harvest.<sup>82</sup> In these weeks, the larger Battle of Stalingrad, 850 kilometres east of Halbstadt, was on the front page of almost every issue of the *Deutsche Ukraine-Zeitung*, typically with a small propaganda article accompanied by a picture—for example, of burnt-out Soviet tanks, infantry soldiers looking upon the utterly destroyed city, or civilians left hungry by the Bolsheviks—and editorials on the "lunacy" of those still defending the "last bastions of Bolshevism."<sup>83</sup>

In the week prior to the celebrated visit of the Reichsführer to Halbstadt on October 31 and November 1, 1942, the weekly occupation newspaper *Ukraine Post* framed the event as a celebration of liberty, German destiny, and as an invitation into Hitler's totalitarian movement:

With the victory of the German military, the *Volksdeutsche* in Ukraine . . . are free, and are in contact once again with the great German community of destiny and *Volk*, in which they will be granted the space they have earned through tenacious perseverance. A new phase of life begins, for they are not only under the protection of the greater German Reich, but are also growing back into their *Volk*, from whose circle their ancestors once came. The *Volksdeutsche* in Ukraine will also be brought into the sphere of influence of Adolf Hitler's movement, which for years has been more than a political party.<sup>84</sup>

Three predominantly Mennonite cavalry squadrons participated in the military review and parade.<sup>85</sup> In the large and impressive ceremony, the newly minted equestrian unit pledged loyalty to the German Führer and the new Fatherland.

Here Himmler promised Mennonites preferential treatment regarding religious practice, school texts, materials, and clothing from the Waffen-SS supplies, which arrived soon after his visit. "I am happy that I can give attention to this positive duty, in addition to many other duties in the middle of a terrible war," Himmler told the largely Mennonite crowd.<sup>86</sup> Importantly, Himmler also promised his hearers that they would be compensated according to their assets as of August 1, 1914, a promise they would cling to and repeat to officials until the end of the war.<sup>87</sup>

Margaret (Janzen) Bergen recalled the moment when Himmler's car entered their Molochna village and he requested a conversation with a Siberian labour camp survivor. Himmler entered their small family home, where her father "was very pleased that he could tell him all about it." Himmler awarded Margaret's sister with travel to Germany and free education.<sup>88</sup> This vote of confidence was significant, for generally Himmler and his settlement specialists were disappointed by many of the German villages they visited: "The human material was hardly convincing from a 'racial' standpoint, the men being suited for a 'self-defence' unit at best."<sup>89</sup>

At the time of Himmler's visit, the Halbstadt squadrons were comprised of 575 men and approximately 644 horses.<sup>90</sup> Despite photographs of Himmler's entourage with a small number of smartly uniformed young riders, reports indicate that as a whole their uniforms were "motley, their weapons and equipment extremely inadequate, and their training also completely deficient."<sup>91</sup> Himmler, however, gave the cavalry unit the designation of "regiment," and approved the appointment of an experienced SS commander with background in ethnic German work (*Volkstumsarbeit*).

The Halbstadt Ethnic German Calvary Regiment's training was now placed directly under the authority of Higher SS and Police Leader (HSSPF) Russia (South) Prützmann, though the closest co-operation with the VoMi and Roßner was expected. Roßner recalled that with the removal of the regiment from the army and thus also from his direct influence, "one of my tasks now seemed to me to be completed."<sup>92</sup>

At this time some 28,000 ethnic Germans lived in Halbstadt District, geographically a larger district than the former Mennonite Molochna colony. The number included only 3,500 men, "of which only ca. 1,000 [were] fit for military service."<sup>93</sup> More than 50 percent of the latter were in the cavalry regiment, most of whom were between the ages of sixteen and twenty. The new trainers from the Protection Police (Schutzpolizei) did not, however, impress the young Mennonite soldiers. The former were much older urban mounted police officers or bureaucrats with little or no battlefield

experience, according to Reimer, and "particularly boring" in their methods.<sup>94</sup> Cavalry members spent approximately ten hours per day in riding and weapons training and they were generally poorly housed and poorly fed.<sup>95</sup>

### Anti-Partisan Deployment

In November 1942 until the new year, one of Halbstadt's squadrons was taken from training for a temporary, tactical mission. The 4th Squadron (Gnadenfeld) was deployed to guard railroad lines and bridges and to engage saboteurs under Oberfeldkommandantur (OFK) Donez in the Don Bend near Slowjansk, 350 kilometres north-east of Halbstadt. In September, OFK Donez, under the command of Army Group B, had already planned to employ the Halbstadt Ethnic German Cavalry Division together with other regiments and battalions in combatting partisans, but only after the division, or at least one of its squadrons, was fully equipped and trained. OFK Donez was responsible for policing between the Don and Donets Rivers as far south as the Sea of Azov,<sup>96</sup> and the railway line to Mariupol was particularly important for coal supply. An October 9 memo specifically noted that OFK Donez was "without the 24th squadron of the Halbstadt Ethnic German Cavalry Division, which is still undergoing training." The need had been deemed urgent for some time. In addition to the rail line,

power plants and transformer stations must be secured. They are particularly susceptible to sabotage and are key for the entire coal production. The failure of even just one plant cannot be compensated for due to the lack of any energy reserves. In addition to these tasks of ongoing security, intervention forces must be available to be deployed if objects are attacked or larger bandit groups are detected.<sup>97</sup>

The first-time deployment of the under-trained Gnadenfeld squadron developed into a costly experiment, as one squadron member recounted:

After some back and forth the squadron managed to retake Slowjansk, . . . cutting off communication. A later reinforced Soviet offensive forced a headlong retreat by the squadron from the city. The fleeing horsemen were thought to be Cossacks and were consequently fired upon with heavy artillery from the main German line. Many of our boys died here while others were missing and scattered. After this tragic event the 4th Squadron was wiped out. In time the scattered ones were found again.<sup>98</sup>

Reimer also recalled that local Cossack units in southern Ukraine “were used mainly in the struggle against partisans partly because of their traditional know-how and partly because of their fierce hatred of the Soviets.”<sup>99</sup> One of the “scattered boys” was Franz F. Bräul of Marienthal, who was injured and hospitalized at the German Army Hospital at Dnipropetrovsk from November 13, 1942, to January 10, 1943.<sup>100</sup> He was listed as a “member of a cavalry squadron” associated with “an SS-troop” (they were not considered an official SS regiment before March 1943).<sup>101</sup> Two news items from the *Deutsche Ukraine-Zeitung* point to events in this area in which the Gnadenfeld squadron was active:

(November 20, 1942) Not far from the battle line in the central region of the eastern front, formations of the German Wehrmacht and police cleansed large, forested areas of scattered soldiers and Bolshevik gangs with a surprisingly powerful thrust. The gangs had carried out acts of sabotage from their hiding places and terrorized the local population by looting and pillaging. In purging the gang-occupied villages, 138 bandits were killed. . . . Countless bunkers were destroyed, including a workshop for the production of mines.<sup>102</sup>

(November 24, 1942) The Soviet attacks in the Don River Bend are from a northern direction and apparently have the operational goal of gaining back the Don Bend region and to threaten the German position on the Volga River knee with a flanking manoeuvre.<sup>103</sup>

Heinrich C. Dirks was a member of the squadron and when home on furlough “had many gruesome stories to tell,” his sister recalled, “and he was quite fortunate to still be alive”:

Once on the front he had been so close to the Russian lines that he had to crawl to safety on his stomach with his horse obediently following him. He had clearly heard the Russian shouts of confidence and victory. On another occasion he had seen many rooms stacked full of the bodies of German soldiers. Because the ground had been frozen, they had not received a burial.<sup>104</sup>

Otto Dirks of Gnadenfeld recalled the “interesting stories about fighting the partisans” told by his older cousin, Jacob Dörksen, who was temporarily staying at their home:

One time they had discovered a large underground hideout. “You wouldn’t believe what we found there,” he said. “Many bags of flour, meat, fruit, vegetables and other groceries, as well as wines and liquors and of course weapons and ammunitions and even extensive sleeping and living quarters.” And of course they would have to flush them out and destroy them.<sup>105</sup>

This memory confirms that the cavalry squadron was involved in actively searching for and killing partisans. Because of their heavy losses, this squadron was merged into the 3rd (Waldheim) Cavalry Squadron in early 1943.

The role of the Gnadenfeld squadron was likely limited and without great success. Several hundred Germans under Prützmann and the HSSPF Russia (South) and Ukraine were awarded an Iron Cross, 2nd Class, for anti-partisan warfare (*Bandenbekämpfung*) between March 1943 and 1945.<sup>106</sup> However, there are no traditional Mennonite names on the lists, no familiar Mennonite village names for recipients' place of birth, and no names of known Halbstadt regiment officers.

Years later Roßner could not recall the "severe losses and apparently senseless and irresponsible deployment of a [Gnadenfeld] squadron in the winter of [1942–] 1943." While not directly responsible for the squadrons after November 1, 1942, he noted, "given my convictions and attitude at the time, I should have resisted the deployment, raged about its consequences, and taken action against those responsible. How could I forget all of that?"<sup>107</sup>

On November 30, 1942, a memo from Himmler's Commando Staff reminded Prützmann's office that "since the ethnic Germans who make up the squadrons are largely the last men remaining, the Reichsminister-SS has ordered that they must remain in the area."<sup>108</sup> It is unclear if Himmler was specifically informed of the losses at Slowjansk, but four days later he sent a strongly worded missive to Prützmann: "I forbid altogether the inclusion of ethnic Germans into the Wehrmacht in General Commissariat Dnepropetrovsk. Should the attempt be made, I must be informed immediately. In this case I will go all the way to the Führer."<sup>109</sup>

By the end of January 1943, the cavalry regiment came under the leadership of Wolf von Craaß (Craas, Graß, Gras). A sample training plan for an ethnic German SS-cavalry regiment for the week of March 28 to April 3, 1943, offers a window on the work overseen by von Craaß: training in the use of pistols, machine guns, grenades and grenade launchers; close combat training; riding training; silent movement at night; use of terrain to protect against armoured vehicles; etc.<sup>110</sup> Von Craaß's relationship with Roßner as district leader and with cavalry members was strained from the start. On March 18, 1943, Roßner reluctantly agreed to von Craaß's plan to remove the squadrons from the German villages and instead use an abandoned Soviet torpedo factory in the neighbouring Ukrainian town of Tokmak for centralized barracks.<sup>111</sup> Right next to the factory, von Craaß had a house renovated for himself. As Reimer recalled,

the simple Russian house was turned into a mansion like we had never seen before. . . . Moreover, he had three riding horses brought from home, as well as a carriage, an Opel-Admiral automobile, and a girl-friend from the Reich too. As if the Reichsbahn had nothing else to transport at the time than such luxury.<sup>112</sup>

Their training facilities had at least one armed vehicle with a mounted machine gun, which von Craaß had readied one evening with hand grenades when he feared a mutiny by his very angry regiment!<sup>113</sup> Few of the Reich German officers had an understanding of “the basic personal qualities” needed to work cross-culturally with ethnic Germans, as Roßner later recalled. “An ongoing dispute with various Reich German authorities” overshadowed all his activity, he recalled. “Many Reich Germans had to be repeatedly reminded that these were *Germans* for whom we were working and told about their fate and accomplishments.”<sup>114</sup>

The renovations of the factory in Tokmak were done by local non-German craftsmen. Reimer explicitly noted that the workers were not prisoners, though he and a few other members of the regiment were responsible to monitor (*überwachen*) the workers and relay instructions in Russian.<sup>115</sup> Other Soviet prisoners, however, were used for agricultural field work. By March 1943, all of the squadrons were merged into one unit under the Waffen-SS, rearmed, given new uniforms and new names for ranks, and “the ‘SS-greeting’ or German greeting for us now became obligatory.”<sup>116</sup> The cavalry members were prepared to take commands and even to kill without many questions asked. Isaak Regehr (Waldheim unit) recalled how they rode along a field road and a Ukrainian or Russian tried to walk past the horsemen:

The squadron leader stopped and questioned the man about who he was and where he was going. The man carried no weapon or any other incriminating or suspicious materials. Nevertheless, the man was ordered to get to the back of the cavalry line and face the ditch. He then was shot from the back by one of the men. His body was simply shoved into the ditch.<sup>117</sup>

On occasion the squadrons were also used to enact revenge on old Russian neighbours, even for crimes committed a quarter century ago:

How we [ethnic] Germans handled or exploited these [new] privileges was up to the individuals themselves. Certainly there was also a desire for revenge among some of us [Mennonites], but I am not aware of any major assaults against the Russian population. A one-armed man from the neighbouring Russian village was picked up by us (I was present

myself) and handed over to the Germans in Waldheim, where he hanged himself in his cell. This man is said to have committed crimes against our people during the revolutionary period, i.e., at a time when I was not yet born.<sup>118</sup>

At least two attempts were made to poison members of the cavalry regiment by local partisans. In one case when coffee was made with rainwater collected from the roof of the accommodation, "poison had been sprinkled on the roof." In another case in Halbstadt Roßner and at least seven others "suddenly had severe lead poisoning," which was diagnosed by Mennonite medical doctor Ivan Klassen. The attempt on Roßner's life required him to be taken to a military hospital in Berlin.<sup>119</sup> In similar cases in other parts of Ukraine, costly revenge actions were typically ordered on adjacent villages.<sup>120</sup> In Eduard Reimer's recollections, however, "there were no partisans in our district," though he concedes that the overbearing conduct of German Reich agricultural directors "could have led many Russians into the underground resistance."<sup>121</sup> Some threats came from above; the nearby Zaporizhzhia to Melitopol rail line was vulnerable to nighttime bombing, and on April 4, 1942, four bombs were "dropped" on the Prischib Station.<sup>122</sup> SS-Special Command R also warned about camouflaged Soviet Russian explosives dropped by planes behind the front, including pocket watches and cigarette packages that exploded when opened.<sup>123</sup> Himmler's tug-of-war with the Wehrmacht over the regiment continued as Germany began to lose advantage in the war. In April 1943, Hoffmeyer received news that the 19th Panzer Division (Wehrmacht) was sent fifty men and horses from the Halbstadt regiment's 4th squadron for support in Artemowsk (Bakhmut). Hoffmeyer intervened immediately to inform division leadership that by order of the Reichsführer-SS, these squadrons were not to leave the Halbstadt area without Himmler's explicit and personal permission.<sup>124</sup>

On most Sundays cavalry members were free to go home with weapons.<sup>125</sup> One night when the combined Gnadenfeld/Waldheim squadron was on furlough, the entire contingent with horses and equipment stayed in Marienthal, and Franz Bräul and brother Heinrich were responsible for the logistics. Brother Walter, then fourteen years old, remembered being awestruck by the event and by their strong and beautiful horses. Otto Dirks also recalled the visit by his cousin and Gnadenfeld squadron member Jacob Dörksen: "He brought home his beautiful brown horse with a new saddle and gave me rides on it. He was very proud of his horse and smartly dressed uniform and [of] his important role."<sup>126</sup> All the young boys "were fascinated with anything to do with the soldiers and war, from

rifles and weapons to motorcycles, tanks and trucks going through.”<sup>127</sup> Spring planting was a priority for the occupation forces, and in the spring of 1943, as in the previous year, 210 of the 565 cavalry men with 420 horses (of 635) were in their villages, released for five weeks to assist with the cultivation and planting of approximately 3,000 hectares.<sup>128</sup>

### SS Worldview Training

Commanders of SS-cavalry regiments were regularly coached and even ordered by the *Brigadeführer* to become father, teacher, commander, and chaplain to their soldiers. Surviving 1943 correspondence from two *Brigadeführer* of the 8th SS-Cavalry Division “Florian Geyer,” into which the Halbstadt Regiment was integrated, offered clear instructions for commanders working with ethnic German SS-cavalry regiments, whether from Croatia, Hungary, or Ukraine. While that category was very large and diverse, it is the umbrella for understanding the Halbstadt regiment.

In summer 1943, the Halbstadt Regiment was visited by a Waffen-SS *Brigadeführer* (unnamed) looking for cavalry men prepared to enter the larger “Florian Geyer” Division. In their indoor riding arena on the former torpedo factory grounds in Tokmak, “a select cavalry troop paraded . . . before this high-ranking visitor.” Reimer proudly recalled that he “was one of the selected horsemen.”<sup>129</sup>

While Eduard Reimer’s memoirs have limited detail, they do offer regular examples not only of rigorous training, but also of SS discipline and practices, like the lance corporal who practiced songs with the squadron,<sup>130</sup> and their nightly group ritual of singing the SS-loyalty song. Reimer recalled how the popular patriotic song began, “If all others become unfaithful, we will remain loyal,” and how it “made a deep impression on us soldiers.” The song’s three verses were sung in their entirety nightly, solemnly and “standing completely still.”<sup>131</sup> The nineteenth-century folk song, which emphasizes loyalty and faithfulness in adversity, became part of the Nazi German youth movement and was adopted by the SS: “Comrades of our youth, you are a picture of a better time, that consecrates us to manly virtue and a death for love’s sake. . . . We will never break our word, never become knaves. We will preach and speak of the Holy German Empire.”<sup>132</sup> The singing, comradeship evenings, and slogans were parts of a more comprehensive ideological, formational training for which the SS was known, to make each recruit a convinced “SS-man.”

The correspondence of SS-Brigadeführer Fritz Freitag and SS-Gruppenführer Hermann Fegelein (both with the "Florian Geyer" division in 1942–1943, the latter Hitler's brother-in-law) to their regiment commanders has largely survived and offers a reliable guide for sketching the ideological or worldview training of the Mennonites in the Ethnic German Cavalry Regiment Halbstadt. Freitag was a meticulous coach to his commanders, connecting their daily actions with their men to the larger ideology of the SS. In one of his special reminders in April 1943, Freitag wrote each of his unit commanders that Reichsführer-SS Himmler "attaches the greatest importance" to "constant ideological instruction" and that unit commanders and staff "must always work for the welfare of the mind and soul of their men."<sup>133</sup> Earlier that same month he reminded the same leaders that "ideological education has only one purpose during war, namely, to strengthen the resilience of mind and soul. That unit leaders must be a constant influence on our men is crucial if the troops are to be fully reliable."<sup>134</sup>

Freitag displayed great affinity to the large numbers of ethnic Germans in his cavalry division; they in particular needed "constant" worldview education and training. Notably, he told unit commanders that this was inhibited if the ethnic German soldiers "do not see a role model in the leader or if they are treated unjustly or even harassingly."<sup>135</sup> He pointed out that because of their different histories, the Reich German could let a racial insult slide, while the ethnic German would be psychologically demoralized. Freitag reminded his regiment leaders, "our ethnic Germans have proven that they can fight and die bravely, so they also have a right to decent treatment."

Again in his April 5, 1943, missive, Freitag wrote that despite a certain indifference or stubbornness, "these ethnic Germans have proven themselves over many generations as colonizers and pioneers of German culture in the East, who they are, and what they are capable of achieving. They only want to be treated and handled properly, i.e., not to be judged as Germans of inferior rank." From the memoirs of Eduard Reimer, this seemed to be their problem with von Craaß, for whom they soon lost respect. Reimer was, however, "thankful to God" that he also experienced other commanding officers who embodied the SS-ideal, "who were role models and comrades to me."<sup>136</sup> Freitag emphasized that a good commander must be concerned to strengthen the self-confidence of the ethnic German and "to bring them to the point where one can appeal more and more to their honour." This education "must be a continuous effort in which a good example is decisive." The ultimate purpose of the educational efforts is "to free the ethnic Germans from mental

burdens and disappointments and to educate them to become good comrades and uncompromising fighters.”<sup>137</sup>

Ultimately, Freitag wanted all SS-Cavalry commanders to offer their men care as counsellors and mentors, even when formal instruction was not possible, for example, by having debates in small groups. In these more intimate circles, catchwords were to be discussed: “concepts such as honour, loyalty, comradeship, inviolability of property, etc., are to be explained in detail to the ethnic German, and cowardice, giving up one’s own weapon, etc., are to be denounced.”<sup>138</sup>

Notably, SS celebrations for Christmas and Easter were deliberately non-religious and anti-Christian, though leaders were to be careful not to offend ethnic German sensibilities. While the SS rituals were not substitute religious or mystical practices, they were powerful “liturgical,” performative practices steeped in apparent ancient Germanic feasts and German *Volk* history. The psychological-spiritual care of Waffen-SS soldiers as well as their ceremonies were conducted without chaplains, which helped to distinguish them from the Wehrmacht.<sup>139</sup> Freitag’s recommendations for Easter with ethnic German cavalry men give some indication of how SS leadership worked to draw ethnic German squadron members into a new Germanic worldview:<sup>140</sup>

**Organization of celebrations.** The special feast days and holidays of the German people are not intended to give the men days off duty merely as a change from their daily routine, but to celebrate them in a German-cultural-popular [*volkstümliche*] manner. . . . Our men, and first and foremost again the ethnic Germans, expect to be spoken to about the meaning and significance of these festivals.

**Easter.** . . . The church was not able to eradicate the old Germanic customs. Instead, another meaning was attributed to them. Easter was made into the Jewish “Passover” festival. The awakening of nature became the resurrection of the crucified founder of the church. In this context it must be said that the church among the ethnic Germans is to be spoken of as a peoples’ [*Volks-*] church, which has earned great merit for the preservation of German peoplehood [*Volkstum*]. This also explains in part why our ethnic Germans are still very attached to their church. . . . It is an obligation of the unit leader to deal with these questions thoroughly and until the men are convinced of the correctness of our position.<sup>141</sup>

These quasi-religious initiation rituals of the SS, including its liturgies, oaths, singing, celebrations, teaching, and mentoring activities, became ersatz religious experiences and guidance for those Mennonites who had never had pastors, and whose fathers had been

arrested, shot, or exiled some years earlier. Participation of SS men in these celebrations was lived corporate identity, which helped bind its men emotionally and foster belief in the SS-mission.

The priority of worldview training was more than a personal interest to Freitag. The larger pedagogical coaching, the SS-publication of booklets and magazines, the requirements for a small library on worldview matters and SS principles, and weekly lesson plans all indicate how important worldview training was to SS leadership. Freitag required his regiment commanders, for example, to plan for lectures, readings, and lessons on the same weekly timetable as other aspects of soldiering were taught.<sup>142</sup> It was essential for Freitag, no less for Himmler, that ethnic German SS-men had a firm grasp of the historic and current "struggle of destiny in the east," with a proper understanding of "blood and soil" (*Blut und Boden*):<sup>143</sup> "It should be brought to the [SS-] men in a simple way and become common property of their thought." In the present war, National Socialist Germany was not only securing Europe "against Bolshevik plans of world domination," but bringing a new solution for the construction of the East, "which will make this war the last one in Europe." SS-men were to understand that in the struggle for existence, the weak "must give way to the healthy and strong, and that applied to the life of peoples, our people have the moral right to expand their living space and, if necessary, to fight for it." While that was the larger picture, the SS-man, however, "only needs to know the positive." They can be assured that peace will come with the "friendly solidarity [of peoples] under voluntary recognition of the claim to leadership by the strongest people [Volk] and recognition of the Reich as the ordering force." This would have been new and perhaps attractive to the Mennonite young men. They could relate more naturally, however, to the SS emphasis on the historic struggle of Germans in eastern Europe as one of *Blut und Boden*, and of their own story as one of strong population growth, successful agricultural pioneering, and search for land expansion. "This does not mean that one cannot also be peace-loving, but only as far as one's own honour and concern for living space [*Lebensraum*] allow." National Socialist Germany understood the necessity of "preserving German blood in the East," and the SS-men and their families already had a dignified place in that vision.

Like a pseudo-spiritual director, Freitag's required readings for study and discussion also included the SS-booklet "On Racial Policy,"<sup>144</sup> which spoke of the "parasitic nature" of Jews, and the rationale for their eradication: "Europe will have defeated this threat only when the last Jew has left our part of the planet. The Führer's words at the beginning of the war will be fulfilled: The German

people will not be destroyed in this war, but rather the Jew.” While hundreds of thousands of Jews in Ukraine had been killed, and with most areas deemed “free of Jews” (*Judenfrei*) nine to twelve months before the formation of the Halbstadt Regiment, this SS-principle was unambiguous and apparently compelling for the Halbstadt Regiment as well. Isaak Regehr recalled that they “meted out ‘justice’ against ‘undesirable’ persons and those suspected of being partisans. . . . It was considered an honour to fight for Germany against its enemies and to obey the German Führer.”<sup>145</sup> All German propaganda materials in the east conflated the terms “Bolsheviks,” “partisans,” and “Jews,” which animated the category of “undesirables.”

Having cast off years of communist worldview training, and without the benefit of any significant “biblical worldview” training, the SS-worldview instructors made their call to “conversion and discipleship” attractive and worthy of sacrifice for young Mennonite men in Ukraine.

### Trek Security and Dismantling of the Regiment

Because Halbstadt Mennonites lived in proximity to the front, they were among the first to hear rumours of rebellion and to witness the “unraveling” of German power.<sup>146</sup> As early as February 24, 1943, Himmler had ordered, and then after twenty-four hours retracted, the immediate evacuation of the entire ethnic German population of the Halbstadt District to the Galicia region west of the Dnieper.<sup>147</sup> SS-Obergruppenführer Lorenz secretly continued detailed planning for the eventuality of resettlement.<sup>148</sup> As plans developed, on June 15 Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories Alfred Rosenberg and Reich Commissioner of the Ukraine Erich Koch returned to Halbstadt for an open-air, mass rally of the Nazi Party. According to German occupation press, “thousands of Volks-German farmers, and especially women, arrived on foot or wagon to greet these co-workers of the Führer. Many Volks-German boys and girls were in the uniforms of the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls.”<sup>149</sup> Rosenberg promised that they would soon become naturalized citizens of the German Reich, “but now we stand amid a great struggle which demands the entire strength of the nation, including the ethnic German forces, for this new Reich. *We fight under one flag.*”<sup>150</sup> The German *Wochenschau* newsreel was on site and filmed the ethnic Germans present with Rosenberg. On the fairgrounds the Ethnic German Cavalry Regiment Halbstadt was specially filmed mounting and dismounting their horses. “We

had practiced for a long time for a flawless performance," Eduard Reimer recalled.<sup>151</sup>

As the summer progressed, more and more tanks and trucks moved through Halbstadt, and there appeared to be more airplanes overhead as well. By the end of August the villages were full of army personnel; explosions were occasionally heard in the distance, and it became clear that the military situation had turned solidly in favour of the USSR: "From individual soldiers who had been at the front we heard stories that weren't reported in the newspapers or on the radio; namely, that the campaign was no longer advancing, but rather retreating."<sup>152</sup> With the military retreat, on August 27, 1943, Commander of the Waffen-SS Russia (South) and Ukraine Treuenfeld repeated Himmler's order to the General of the Army Group South Rear Area, Erich Friderici: "The Ethnic German Cavalry Unit stationed in Tokmak (Halbstadt) is under the command of the Reichsführer-SS [Himmler]" and "may not take any orders from any armed forces agency [Wehrmachtstelle] without my express permission."<sup>153</sup>

On September 9, 1943, Cavalry squadron members were informed of the Soviet advance and told they would be riding into battle again.<sup>154</sup> That same day the entire Halbstadt population was also ordered to prepare for evacuation. Cavalry squadrons were co-responsible to confiscate horses and wagons, sometimes with force:

We were loaded onto trucks in groups of up to thirty men and dropped off in units of three men in the Russian villages. . . . The population was already in a panic. They had heard that the front was moving back towards them. . . . Some took their horses from the fields and tried to hide them. Others refused to stop when ordered to halt. A few warning shots fired in the air helped us to restore order.<sup>155</sup>

On September 15, 1943, Prützmann reported to Himmler that at midnight September 12, the Halbstadt District was fully evacuated. The Gnadenfeld trek (group) had 5,890 persons, the Orloff trek 4,109 persons, and the Prischib trek about 7,000 persons; 5,100 ethnic Germans from Melitopol were added on September 15. Prützmann reported that "the Ethnic German Cavalry Regiment is responsible for the security of the treks," with a route crossing the Dnieper at Kachovka towards Berislav;<sup>156</sup> by September 22, all had reached the "expanded Kronau settlement area" (*Kreisgebiet Alexanderstadt*) near the former Mennonite settlement of Sagradovka, where all expected to be resettled long term.<sup>157</sup> As late as October 13, Himmler expected the "Low Germans from the Halbstadt District" to remain in this area as one of multiple ethnic German "settlement pearls,"<sup>158</sup> strategic military strongholds and buffers on the eastern edge of the

territory under German governance in which the cavalry regiment would play an important future role.

There were few partisan threats in this phase, though feed and wagon wheels were taken from Ukrainian villages en route. In this period one cavalry member broke down and took his own life: "Under the influence of alcohol, heat, and humiliation, the young man put his gun to his temples and fired. He was apparently buried under a manure pile. In the German army self-mutilation let alone suicide was considered cowardice."<sup>159</sup> Their roundly despised leader von Craaß also left the regiment on October 10.

As the Soviet Red Army advanced and threatened to cross the Dnieper, the treks started up again on October 24; Himmler decided that the "Low Germans from Halbstadt" were to be relocated in the Kamenets-Podolsk region. "Danger was so very near, and the majority of *Volksdeutsche* were evacuated almost under the cannon-fire of the Russians."<sup>160</sup> Despite competition with military for road use, with hopes of good weather, Prützmann expected the trek could be completed in three to six weeks;<sup>161</sup> the cavalry regiment stationed in Alexanderstadt resumed its protective role again. By November 16, however, Prützmann reported to Himmler "severe signs of fatigue" among the re-settlers, "exacerbated by three days of snow and bad weather and the associated groundless road conditions, heavy horse losses, increasing illnesses."<sup>162</sup>

The regiment was almost immediately involved in anti-partisan warfare; two significant battles are known. In his November 16 report, Prützmann told Himmler that a mayor and two women from the Halbstadt District were murdered in nighttime partisan attacks. The "difficulties" in the town and forests of Gaissin (Haisyn), however, were "cleared up effectively" by the self-defence regiment, the report stated, without detailing the retaliatory acts. The same report assured the Reichsführer that "despite all signs of fatigue, there is a desire among ethnic Germans to leave Russia as quickly as possible . . . and to continue to the border of the Reich territory under the direct protection of the Reich. The attitude and mood of the ethnic German population is good, especially those from the Halbstadt District."<sup>163</sup> The Gaissin event is not mentioned by Eduard Reimer, but three Gnadenfeld trek diaries note that a thirteen-year-old girl was killed by partisans, that she was hit by shrapnel, and that "others" were shot as well.<sup>164</sup>

Between Christmas 1943 and New Year's Day, the regiment was active in a second major retaliatory, anti-partisan attack. Reimer was with an advance commando to prepare lodgings in another town, but upon return he learned that his comrades had razed three villages—"dirty work," which they only did with reluctance:

There was a depressed mood among the comrades. . . . But orders were orders. Shirking, if at all possible, was considered cowardice and cowardice was the greatest disgrace for a soldier in war. No one cares about your conscience; a man must be tough.<sup>165</sup>

Their SS education had aimed to create in them an "attitude" allowing them to cope with the tasks assigned to them in the "everyday life of war" and in the "dirty work" of murder. "Every SS man was to be sure of his way, his doings, his attitude."<sup>166</sup>

By December 15, 1943, 22,400 Halbstadt District Low Germans had been brought to the Kamenets-Podolsk region for the duration of the winter and registered as four groups: Halbstadt (town), Waldheim, Gnadenfeld, and Ohrloff. Another 20,000 from Prischib, Gronau, and Melitopol were housed in the Podolia region for the winter.<sup>167</sup> In the new year, with some furlough to visit family on the trek, the regiment remained intact until their people were transferred by train from the Polish border area to Warthegau (German-annexed Poland). With their primary task completed, the regiment rode to Krakow, Poland, where it was disbanded in April 1944.<sup>168</sup>

On May 4, 1944, 180 men from the Halbstadt Cavalry regiment were seconded in Warsaw to the 8th SS-Cavalry Division "Florian Geyer."<sup>169</sup> The group first stayed in Warsaw for ten days and was then sent in box cars through Moravia and Pressburg (Bratislava) to the division's new headquarters at Frankenstadt (Baja) on the Danube. They were housed in Szeged, near the present Hungarian border with Serbia and Croatia.<sup>170</sup> Jews of the region had been ghettoized a month earlier. Approximately 8,200 Jews were deported from Baja to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp in Upper Silesia with two transports that left on May 28 and June 18 respectively;<sup>171</sup> another 3,000 Jews from the immediate vicinity of Szeged were also sent to Auschwitz, and a smaller group was erroneously sent to Austria. Whether Mennonites from the Halbstadt regiment participated in these roundups is unknown; their proximity to the actions, however, is clear.

The larger "Florian Geyer" division had approximately 13,000 men in 1944; forty percent of the division was comprised of soldiers from various ethnic German groups outside of the Reich. The Waffen-SS Panzer divisions were equipped "above average," which increased their combat power. Because of their privileged equipment, they "were deployed to all hot spots, which in turn had an impact on the elitist self-image of these SS units."<sup>172</sup> In October and November 1944, nine (mostly) former Halbstadt District Waffen-SS Cavalry members were awarded the Iron Cross, 2nd Class. The criterion for the award is a single act of bravery in the face of the

enemy, or actions that were clearly above and beyond the call of duty. Franz Bräul (b. 1922), a *Sturmmann* and medic in a “Florian Geyer” Division armoured vehicle reconnaissance unit, for example, was awarded the Iron Cross for pulling his wounded commanding officer out of the line of fire.<sup>173</sup>

There was a certain irony for Mennonite boys to carry the “Geyer” name.<sup>174</sup> Florian Geyer was a radical leader during the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation who joined with Thomas Müntzer, connected with early Anabaptists, and was adopted by the Nazis as a Germanic precursor of the Führer. While Anabaptist leaders associated with Menno Simons refused to take up arms, Florian Geyer established a cavalry company to fight with Thomas Müntzer in his end-time aspirations of a “Thousand-Year Reich.”<sup>175</sup> In 1944, “our morale was still very high,” as Hans Fast recalled, and “no one thought that within a year almost all of us would be wiped out.”<sup>176</sup> Of the hundred men who were part of the original Gnadenfeld cavalry squadron in 1942, some 60 percent fell or were still listed as missing in battle in 1949.<sup>177</sup>

It is unknown how many explicitly fought for the SS-vision of a new humanity. Some fought the Soviets to avenge the death of their fathers, but that seemed to be the exception, according to Eduard Reimer:

I remember one young man [who] . . . boasted about having killed several Soviet soldiers during the war. Like many others, he too had lost his father in the 1930s and when he joined the German army revenge against communism was a strong motive. “I have avenged the suffering and death of my father tenfold,” he told us with satisfaction. I will never forget the fire of hate that still burned in his eyes. I remember several other young Mennonites who expressed similar sentiments.<sup>178</sup>

While some felt proud to obey Hitler at first, it was Eduard Reimer’s observation that in their common misery on the front, little more remained than “a strong feeling of belonging together.” Reimer concluded:

It has been noted that for many Mennonites their faith is the unifying force. For our generation this could hardly have been the case. We had received hardly any religious training and were largely ignorant of the tenets of our faith and in addition were generally quite indifferent to them. We knew only what we had been taught or told by our parents and that as a rule was not much. Most of our fathers had been taken from us when we were small. . . . Our parents had been prevented from teaching us and from setting a Christian example for us. We had grown up in crushing poverty and in an atmosphere of fear and oppression. In school and society we had been encouraged to dissociate ourselves from the

ethical and religious values of our parents and to embrace atheistic materialism. We had no faith which could unite us. But our common misery and our common feeling of being lost and betrayed served as a strong unifying factor.<sup>179</sup>

One chronicler of this era has aptly referred to these young men as "the lost generation."<sup>180</sup> If Stalin's systematic dismantling of the Mennonite community had successfully robbed this "lost generation" of childhood innocence and stability rooted in faith-shaping experiences, Reimer also acknowledges that it was Hitler who dealt the final blow. The "liturgies" of the SS and its mentors demanded everything while removing men from their families, involving them in unspeakable conspiracies and atrocities, and preparing them for meaningless death. They did not wear the Wehrmacht belt with "God with us" ("Gott mit uns") on the buckle; theirs had the vacuous SS slogan, "My Honour is Loyalty" ("Meine Ehre heisst Treue"). The object of their loyalty, the deliverance promised by the German Reich, proved to bring only misery, disorientation, and betrayal.

Memoirs note that it was simply "taken for granted that Mennonites would have to serve in the German army, and many did."<sup>181</sup> Land and future opportunities were promised to those young men who assisted "in the battle against Bolshevik bandits and plunderers,"<sup>182</sup> which was surely an incentive for young men who felt responsible for their widowed mothers. However, it is debatable how free and informed these young men were to choose to serve; they did not have the liberty, language, or training in the tradition to reflect on their actions with experienced mentors. Arguably, their most significant formation had happened under SS leadership. Even Reimer had trouble articulating these issues. "We admired all things German uncritically and were unable to distinguish between good and bad. We had been under the Communist whip too long," he wrote.<sup>183</sup> "I was of course very enthusiastic about the Germans' leadership, their achievements, and bravery."<sup>184</sup>

Years later, a decommissioned Mennonite soldier and teacher, Hans Rempel, who became a Mennonite pastor and elder in Paraguay, wrote of his experience and post-war vision, emphasizing "the fact that the peace witness of our Mennonite people was indeed heavily assaulted. In the storm and stress of this terrible time it was also widely *forgotten*. But it was not eradicated; our people recall it, and they are asking about it again."<sup>185</sup> Rempel's language is communal and he refers to the *religious community's* ability or inability as a whole to embody the peace witness of the biblical story. His account is free of judgment on those young men who were plucked from their families and villages and thrown into the war. But it is a

*confession* that the church was under heavy attack, and in the confusion and with few agents of memory, lost its direction, and impossible things were done. Authentic faith could perhaps be birthed here with nothing more than Christ's last words, uttered while hanging half-dead on a wooden military cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>186</sup>

I remember as a child going into my grandmother's bedroom in Canada and seeing her son Peter Bräul's German military photograph on the nightstand, seventeen years old, proud and handsome. Peter and brothers Franz and Heinrich, who were cavalry members, became senseless offerings to the gods of war and nationalism. This was a part of my grandmother's life she could not talk about. But Hans Rempel was her pastor, and he could. In the time of most extreme crisis, there was perhaps what might be called a "stubborn loyalty" amongst Mennonites stretching from eastern and western Europe across the ocean to North and South America. Where one part of the church's community became seriously impaired, fallen and defeated, the other parts mobilized decisively to "save" and collectively demonstrate the community's longer witness. Perhaps authentic Christian witness from a Mennonite perspective is, in the end, less dependent on the perfection of individual lives than on the larger community of witness and confession that together carries, validates, and stubbornly authenticates that witness.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This rough estimate for 1942 is based on recollections from the unit's first trainer, Hermann Roßner (letter to Horst Wilke, Nov. 16, 1972, p. 2, Bундесархив [hereafter BA], N-756/151/a), and from Wolfgang Vopersal's research summary folder (BA, N-756/256/a), and assumes that three-quarters of the total unit strength came from predominantly Mennonite villages. From a report dated Mar. 7, 1943, the regiment had 565 riders and 635 horses total, after significant losses to one predominantly Mennonite squadron. Reiter-Regiment Halbstadt to Höherer SS-und Polizeiführer [Kiev], Mar. 7, 1943, in Höherer SS-und Polizeiführer Russland-Süd 1942–1943, box 3, Vojenský ústřední archiv, Prague, Czech Republic (hereafter HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA). I am grateful to Benjamin Goossen for generously sharing scans of this folder from the Prague Archives.
- <sup>2</sup> E.g., Hans Fast and Anne Giesbrecht Fast, *Two Lives, One Faith. The Memoirs of Anne Giesbrecht Fast and Hans Fast* (Waterloo, ON: self-pub., 2006); Horst Gerlach, "Mennonites, the Molotschna, and the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* in the Second World War," trans. John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite Life* 41, no. 3 (Sept. 1986), 6; Jakob Rempel, "Gottes Führungen vor meiner Einwanderung," *Der Bote*, Oct. 5, 1983, 8–9; and G. and M. Cornies, "Zum Buch vom Frank H. Epp," *Der Bote*, May 21, 1963. Also on this topic, see Benjamin

Goossen, "Mennonites and the Waffen-SS," *Anabaptist Historians*, June 20, 2019, <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2019/06/20/mennonites-and-the-waffen-ss/>. Thanks to James Urry for reading this manuscript in advance and for sharing the unpublished essay by Gerhard Rempel, "No Hoofbeats of Humility: The *Reiterschwadronen* of Halbstadt, 1942–1945." I am especially thankful to Harold Thiessen (Toronto) whose family shares this story with my own, and who has shared materials and ideas with me along the way.

An important source for this essay is the memoir of Eduard Reimer, published in translation as Eduard Allert [pseud.], "The Lost Generation," in *The Lost Generation and other Stories*, ed. Gerhard Lohrenz, 9–128 (Steinbach, MB: self-pub., 1982), 9–128. The translation omits some difficult details and statements. I will normally offer my own translation of the German "Memoir" (n.d.), from Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA), Winnipeg, Gerhard Lohrenz Fonds, vol. 3333, file 63. In "Lost Generation" (p. 59) the translator states that Reimer/Allert changed his name from Jakob to Eduard, while in the manuscript (p. 57), Reimer writes that he changed his name from Abram to Eduard.

<sup>3</sup> Here I follow the model outlined by Doris L. Bergen, Mark Jantzen, and John D. Thiesen, "Neighbours, Killers, Enablers, Witnesses: The Many Roles of Mennonites in the Holocaust," in *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, ed. Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 12–17.

<sup>4</sup> See Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, "A New Examination of the 'Great Terror' in Molotschna, 1937–1938," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 95, no. 4 (Oct. 2021): 415–58.

<sup>5</sup> Chef des Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, "Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 106," Oct. 7, 1941, BA, R58/218, sheet 72.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Harry Loewen, *Between Worlds: Reflections of a Soviet-Born Canadian Mennonite* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2006), 99–100; and many other memoirs.

<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Lucy Braun, "Wernersdorf, 1900–1943. Kurz zusammengefasste Ereignisse dieser Jahre," <https://media.chortitza.org/pdf/kb/wernd1.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> "Notizbuch der Gegenwart," *Ukraine Post*, Nov. 7, 1942, 6.

<sup>9</sup> "Gemeinschaft des Blutes," *Ukraine Post*, Feb. 6, 1943, 4. No author given.

<sup>10</sup> See Daniel Kuppel, "Das Echo unserer Taten": *Die Praxis der weltanschaulichen Erziehung in der SS* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Adolf Hitler on June 22, 1941, in *Der Großdeutsche Freiheitskampf: Reden Adolf Hitlers*, ed. Philipp Bouhler, vol. 3 (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP Eber, 1943), 61. Cf. James E. Casteel, "The Russian Germans in the Interwar German National Imaginary," *Central European History* 40, no. 3 (Sept. 2007): 464.

<sup>12</sup> See Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Unknown Eastern Front: The Wehrmacht and Hitler's Foreign Soldiers* (New York: Tauris, 2012), 201.

<sup>13</sup> J. Otto Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937–1949* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), 39.

<sup>14</sup> Ingeborg Fleischhauer, "'Unternehmen Barbarossa' und die Zwangsumsiedlung der Deutschen in der UdSSR," *Vierteljahrsshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 30, no. 2 (Apr. 1982): 312.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Alfred Eisfeld and Victor Herdt, *Deportation, Sondersiedlung, Arbeitsarmee: Deutsche in der Sowjetunion 1941 bis 1956* (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> The calculation and examples are based on a sample of 240 Mennonites arrested the first week of September 1941. See *Reabilitovani istoriieiu. Zaporizka oblast* [Rehabilitated history: Zaporizhia region], 6 vols. (Zaporizhia: Dniprovskej Metalurg, 2004–13), <https://www.reabit.org.ua/books/zp/>.

<sup>17</sup> Report, BA, NS19/2656, sheet 21.

<sup>18</sup> In Eisfeld and Herdt, *Deportation, Sondersiedlung, Arbeitsarmee*, 138, doc. 137. Cf. Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR*, 41–43; and J. Otto Pohl, Eric J. Schmaltz, and Ronald J. Vossler, “In Our Hearts We Felt the Sentence of Death: Ethnic German Recollections of Mass Violence in the USSR, 1928–48,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 2–3 (June–Sept. 2009): 329–30.

<sup>19</sup> Marlene Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 29. Peter Letkemann suggests that the number of forced Mennonite deportations at this time was about 25,000. Letkemann, “Mennonites in the Soviet Inferno, 1917–1956,” *Preservings*, no. 13 (Dec. 1998), 11. John N. Klassen estimates approximately 62,000 deportations. Klassen, “Mennonites in Russia and Their Migrations,” in *Testing Faith and Tradition: Global Mennonite History Series: Europe*, ed. John A. Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 211.

<sup>20</sup> Viktor Krieger, “Patriots or Traitors? The Soviet Government and the German Russians after the Attack on the USSR by National Socialist Germany,” in *Russian-German Special Relations in the Twentieth Century: A Closed Chapter?*, ed. Karl Schlögel (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 146.

<sup>21</sup> H. Loewen, *Between Worlds*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Katie Friesen, *Into the Unknown* (Steinbach, MB: self-pub., 1986), 35.

<sup>23</sup> See Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, “Benjamin Unruh, Nazism, and MCC,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 96, no. 2 (Apr. 2022): 157–205.

<sup>24</sup> Horst Gerlach, *Die Russlandmennoniten: Ein Volk Unterwegs*, vol. 1, 5th ed. (Kirchheimbolanden [Pfalz]: self-pub., 2008), 90.

<sup>25</sup> Fleischhauer, “‘Unternehmen Barbarossa’ und die Zwangsumsiedlung,” 308.

<sup>26</sup> Andrej Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord: Die Einsatzgruppe D in der südlichen Sowjetunion 1941–1943* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003), 279.

<sup>27</sup> Hermann Roßner to Horst Wilke, Nov. 16, 1972, BA, N-756/151/a.

<sup>28</sup> Sonderkommando Russland, “German Affairs in the Area of Kriwoi-Rog, Saporoshje, Dnipropropetrovsk, in the District of Melitopol and in the District of Mariupol. Preliminary Statement, in Particular the Mennonite Settlements,” Nov. 1, 1941, trans. Allen E. Konrad (minor edits), Deutsches Ausland-Institut, film T-81/606/5396845–854, [http://www.blackseagr.org/pdfs/konrad/Mennonite Settlements in Melitopol and Mariupol Districts.pdf](http://www.blackseagr.org/pdfs/konrad/Mennonite%20Settlements%20in%20Melitopol%20and%20Mariupol%20Districts.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Sonderführer Schäfer to Abram Braum, May 6, 1942, Christian Neff Collection, folder “Briefwechsel 1942,” Mennonitische Forschungsstelle Weierhof.

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, “Zwischen Odessa and Perekop in den ersten Monaten des deutsche-russischen Krieges,” *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch 1949*, quoted in Anne Konrad, *Red Quarter Moon: A Search for Family in the Shadow of Stalin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 151.

<sup>31</sup> Helene Dueck, *Durch Trübsal und Not* (Winnipeg: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995), 45.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Einlage—see Heinrich Bergen, ed., *Einlage: Chronik des Dorfes Kitschkas, 1789–1943* (Saskatoon, SK: self-pub., 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Allert [Reimer], “Lost Generation,” 28. In Klippenfeld similar dynamics were at play: “My grandmother wanted my father (Gerhard J. Thiessen, a

member of the *Schwadron*), to denounce a man in their village (an Alexander Dyck) who had informed on her husband, my grandfather Johann Thiessen which led to his arrest in 1937 and exile and later execution in 1938. My father refused to do it as he did not want this man's death on his conscience." Email from Harold Thiessen to author, Sept. 27, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Kuhn, "Die mennonitische Altkolonie Chortitza in der Ukraine," off-print from *Deutsche Monatsheften* 9 (19) (Sept./Oct./Nov. 1942): 1–40, <https://media.chortitza.org/pdf/pdf/vpetk271.pdf>. For an overview of Kuhn's scholarship, see Alexander Pinwinkler, "Walter Kuhn (1903–1983) und der Bielitzer 'Wandervogel e.V.' Historisch-volkskundliche 'Sprachinsel forsichung' zwischen völkischem Pathos und politischer Indienstnahme," *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 105, no. 1 (2009): 29–51. Between 1948 and 1950, Cornelius Krahn, the director of the Bethel College Historical Library and editor of *Mennonite Life*, corresponded frequently with Kuhn. See Walter Kuhn Papers, Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College (hereafter MLA), I, box 14.

<sup>35</sup> Pinwinkler, "Walter Kuhn (1903–1983)," 44, 45.

<sup>36</sup> Kuhn, "Die mennonitische Altkolonie Chortitza in der Ukraine," 39.

<sup>37</sup> Hans Rempel, "Die Endphase in der Geschichte unserer Siedlungen in der Ukraine," in *Mennonitische Märtyrer der jüngsten Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart*, ed. A. Töws, vol. 2 (North Clearbrook, BC: self-pub., 1954), 422–23.

<sup>38</sup> "Die 25 Punkte," *Ukraine Post*, Mar. 13, 1943, 6; the article is a commentary on the Nazi Party platform policy no. 24 on religion, part of a series written for *Volksdeutsche* in Ukraine. The quote is from Alfred Rosenberg.

<sup>39</sup> "Zusammenstellung der erfaßten Volksdeutschen im Reichskommissariat Ukraine, Transnistrien und Heeresgebiet sowie der vom Sonderkommando 'R' der Volksdeutschen Mittelstelle aufgebauten kulturellen und wirtschaftlichen Einrichtungen," 1943, BA, NS19/2656, sheet 9. An additional 3,296 ethnic Germans closer to the war front were relocated to Halbstadt.

<sup>40</sup> Hermann Roßner's CIA file, Berlin Document Centre, [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/ROSSNER%2C%20HERMANN\\_0003.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/ROSSNER%2C%20HERMANN_0003.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 7. Himmler left the Catholic Church in 1936.

<sup>42</sup> Hermann Roßner to Wolfgang Voperal, Nov. 2, 1983, BA, N-756/151/a.

<sup>43</sup> Walter Jansen and Linda Jansen, *Our Stories*, trans. and ed. Walfried Jansen (Winnipeg: self-pub., 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Eduard Reimer speaks of his brother in this division. Reimer, "Memoir," 69.

<sup>45</sup> Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges, 1938–1942* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981), 192. See also Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, "Mennonites, German Occupation, and the Elimination of Jews in Ukraine," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 98, no. 1 (Jan. 2024): 9–40.

<sup>46</sup> Ingeborg Fleischhauer, *Das Dritte Reich und die Deutschen in der Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1983), 144.

<sup>47</sup> Eric C. Steinhardt, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 166.

<sup>48</sup> Heinrich Himmler to Werner Lorenz, Apr. 10, 1942, Einsatz volksdeutscher Reiterschwadron im Gebiet von Halbstadt, BA, NS19/2385.

<sup>49</sup> Hermann Roßner to [?] Schirmacher, Mar. 8, 1972, 4, BA, N-756/256/a.

<sup>50</sup> Roßner to Schirmacher, Mar. 8, 1972, 4.

<sup>51</sup> “Berufssoldaten von morgen,” *Deutsche Ukraine-Zeitung* (hereafter DUZ), Feb. 14, 1943, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Allert [Reimer], “Lost Generation,” 49–50; cf. W. Jansen and L. Jansen, *Our Stories*, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Renate Bridenthal, “Germans from Russia: The Political Network of a Double Diaspora,” in *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness*, ed. Krista O’Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy Reagin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 200.

<sup>54</sup> Hans Fast, in Fast and Fast, *Two Lives, One Faith*, 62; lightly edited.

<sup>55</sup> Jacob Abram Rempel, “Liebenau in späteren Jahren,” *Mennonitische Rundschau*, Aug. 26, 1981, 17.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Letkemann, “Molotschna Villages” (Wernersdorf) (draft document, in author’s possession).

<sup>57</sup> E. Reimer, “Memoir,” 59–60; cf. Allert [Reimer], “Lost Generation,” 50.

<sup>58</sup> Gerhard Thiessen correspondence, in Letkemann, “Molotschna Villages” (Klippenfeld).

<sup>59</sup> Reimer, “Memoir,” 58–59. On Heinrich Rempel, see Selma Kornelsen Hooge and Anna Goossen Kornelsen, *Life Before Canada* (Abbotsford, BC: self-pub., 2018), 57.

<sup>60</sup> Albert Dahl, interview by author, St. Catharines, ON, July 26, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Letkemann, “Molotschna Villages.”

<sup>62</sup> Otto Dirks, *Memories that Shape the Future: An Autobiography* (self-pub., n.d.), 29.

<sup>63</sup> E. Reimer, “Memoir,” 60.

<sup>64</sup> W. Jansen and L. Jansen, *Our Stories*, 42. For the Gnadenfeld unit, Jansen mentions SS Senior Storm Leader Wendorf, SS Lieutenant Batehner, and SS Senior Squad Leader Buss. *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>65</sup> H. Roßner to H. Wilke, Nov. 16, 1972, 2.

<sup>66</sup> E. Reimer, “Memoir,” 60.

<sup>67</sup> E. Reimer, “Memoir,” 59–60; cf. Allert [Reimer], “Lost Generation,” 50.

<sup>68</sup> Kuhn, “Die mennonitische Altkolonie Chortitza in der Ukraine,” 39.

<sup>69</sup> Dorothy Siebert, *Whatever It Takes*, 2nd ed. (Winnipeg: Kindred, 2004), 31.

<sup>70</sup> E. Koch, “Freiheitstag im Schutz der Deutschen Waffen,” DUZ, May 1, 1942, 1. Koch’s address added the claim that Stalin was “a servant of Jews,” and the reminder that the *Volksdeutsche* have a “duty against Bolshevism.”

<sup>71</sup> “Belohnte Mithilfe bei der Bandenbekämpfung,” DUZ, May 14, 1942, 3.

<sup>72</sup> *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals*, vol. 5 (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1950), 145. The German People’s List (Deutsche Volksliste) grouped inhabitants according to Nazi desirability criteria; those in the highest category were later eligible for citizenship and required to give military service. The “undesirable” majority was ranked for depravation, slave labour or extermination.

<sup>73</sup> See the defence testimony by B. H. von Unruh for Werner Lorenz and Heinz Brueckner, Dec. 17, 1947, “The RuSHA Case,” US National Archives Collection of World War II War Crimes Records (RG 238), Case VIII (“The RuSHA Case”), mimeographed transcript, 2714–30, MLA, SA 1, file 184, [https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/sa\\_1\\_184/](https://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/sa_1_184/). For verdict, see *Trials of War Criminals*, 5:147.

<sup>74</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 63–64; cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 53. "Flamme empor" is a patriotic folksong by Johann Christian Nonne (1814).

<sup>75</sup> For required elements of ceremony, see "Rundanweisung Nr. 17," Jan. 20, 1942, BA, R59/66, sheet 125.

<sup>76</sup> Eleven months later, with a decree promulgated by Hitler on May 19, 1943, foreigners of German descent in the Waffen-SS or Wehrmacht automatically acquired German citizenship. "Erlaß des Führers über den Erwerb der deutschen Staatsangehörigkeit durch Einstellung in die deutsche Wehrmacht, die Waffen-SS, die deutsche Polizei oder die Organisation Todt, vom 19. Mai 1943," *Reichsgesetzblatt* I, no. 54 (1943): 315; cited in internal communication within the 8th Cavalry Division in 1943 and 1944—e.g., BA, RH7/2479, sheets 115c and 102.

<sup>77</sup> Werner Lorenz to Heinrich Himmler, June 5, 1942, Einsatz volksdeutscher Reiterschwadron im Gebiet von Halbstadt, BA, NS19/2385.

<sup>78</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 86.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. E. Reimer, "Memoir," 68; Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 54.

<sup>80</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 71.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Gerlach, *Rußlandmennoniten* 1:93; based on an interview with Roßner.

<sup>82</sup> SSPF Dnipropetrovsk to HSSPF-RS, Kiev, Oct. 4, 1942, and response, Oct. 10, 1943, HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA.

<sup>83</sup> E.g., "Die verblutende Sowjetarmee: Stalingrads Verteidigung—'eine Wahnsinnstat,'" *DUZ*, Oct. 1, 1942, 1.

<sup>84</sup> "Die 25 Punkte," *Ukraine Post*, Oct. 3, 1942, 6.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. H. Roßner to H. Wilke, Nov. 16, 1972. This visit occurred as German forces waged larger battles at Stalingrad and the Volga and Don River regions. See summary of events for Oct. 31 in *Ukraine Post*, Nov. 7, 1942, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Gerlach, "Mennonites, the Molotschna, and the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*," 6.

<sup>87</sup> Horst Hoffmeyer, "Die Lage der Russlanddeutschen im Warthegau," June 1944, files of the Personnel Office of the Reichsführer-SS, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), T-175, film 72, 2588975–83, 975.

<sup>88</sup> "Margaret Bergen Interview," Mennonite Heritage Museum, 2015, YouTube video, 0:58–2:50, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2A2M8PLU\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2A2M8PLU_s).

<sup>89</sup> Müller, *Unknown Eastern Front*, 205.

<sup>90</sup> HSSPF-RS Kiev to Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS, Nov. 30, 1942, HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA.

<sup>91</sup> HSSPF-RS Kiev to Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS, Nov. 30, 1942, HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA.

<sup>92</sup> Roßner to Schirmacher, Mar. 8, 1972. On Himmler's visit to Halbstadt, see Gerlach, "Mennonites, the Molotschna, and the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*"; and Goossen, "Mennonites and the Waffen-SS."

<sup>93</sup> HSSPF-RS Kiev to Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS, Nov. 30, 1942, HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA.

<sup>94</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 71; cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 57; and W. Jansen and L. Jansen, *Our Stories*, 42.

<sup>95</sup> Volksdeutsche Reiter-Abteilung to the Generalkommissariat Hauptabteilung E. u. L., Dnipropetrovsk, Nov. 7, 1942, HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA.

<sup>96</sup> Oberfeldkommandantur Donez, re Gebiet der OFK Donez, Sept. 5, 1942, BA, RH22/87, sheet 63.

<sup>97</sup> OFK Donez to Befehlshaber Heeresgebiet B, re Sicherungskräfte, Oct. 9, 1942, BA, RH22/87, sheet 79.

<sup>98</sup> W. Jansen and L. Jansen, *Our Stories*, 44. See also Roßner to Schirmacher, Mar. 8, 1972; E. Reimer, "Memoir," 73; and Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 58.

<sup>99</sup> Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 50, 58;

<sup>100</sup> Franz F. Bräul, ID no. 5262, Kavallerie-Ausbildungs- und Ersatz-Abteilung, "Deutsche Dienststellung für die Benachrichtigung der nächsten Angehörigen von Gefallenen der ehemaligen deutschen Wehrmacht," letter to author, Feb. 22, 2008.

<sup>101</sup> See Prützmann to SS-Command Staff, Apr. 7, 1943, HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA

<sup>102</sup> "Erfolgreicher Kampf gegen sowjetische Banden," DUZ, Nov. 20, 1942, 1. The date given is Oct. 19; this is either an embargoed article or a typographical error.

<sup>103</sup> "Der neue Offensivversuch der Sowjets," DUZ, Nov. 24, 1942, 2.

<sup>104</sup> K. Friesen, *Into the Unknown*, 47.

<sup>105</sup> O. Dirks, *Memories that Shape the Future*, 28.

<sup>106</sup> See the HSSPF-R awards lists (Iron Cross, 2nd Class) for *Bandenbekämpfung*: "Der Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer Russland-Süd Kampfgruppe Prützmann, March 1943–May 1945," BA, RH7/2452.

<sup>107</sup> Roßner to Schirmacher, Mar. 8, 1972, 3–4; Roßner to Wilke, Nov. 16, 1972, BA, N-756/151/a.

<sup>108</sup> HSSPF-RS Kiev to Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS, Nov. 30, 1942, HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA.

<sup>109</sup> Reichsführer-SS Himmler to SS-Obergruppenführer Prützmann, HSSPF Kiev, Dec. 4, 1942, HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA.

<sup>110</sup> Freitag to SS Cav. Division, Ia/VI, Apr. 5, 1943 (Special Instructions for Worldview Training), BA, RS 3-8/80.

<sup>111</sup> Roßner to Volksdeutscher Reiter-Regiment Halbstadt, Mar. 18, 1943, in HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA.

<sup>112</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 73–74; see also Roßner to Wilke, Nov. 16, 1972.

<sup>113</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 77; Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 61.

<sup>114</sup> Roßner interview in Gerlach, *Die Russlandmennoniten*, 1:94; and Roßner to Schirmacher, Mar. 8, 1972, 5.

<sup>115</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 73.

<sup>116</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 75; cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 60.

<sup>117</sup> Harry Loewen, ed., *Road to Freedom: Mennonites Escape the Land of Suffering* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2000), 110.

<sup>118</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 55; cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 48.

<sup>119</sup> Roßner to Schirmacher, Mar. 8, 1972, 4.

<sup>120</sup> For comparison, see press release from the Commander of the Security Police and the SD in Dnepropetrovsk on Dec. 19, 1942: "A number of hostages were shot as atonement for the murder committed on 28. 10. 1942 of the German agricultural leader Richard Spiekermann"; see also a supporting appeal to Ukrainians. *Dzin*, Dec. 23, 1942, 4, 1. In another Ukrainian village in which a German *Wehrmacht* officer was killed in July 1942, the SD and Gendarmerie executed 116 residents in retaliation. Higher SS- and Police Leader's report for July 1942, Aug. 9, 1942, BA, R70-Sowjetunion/18, sheet 101.

<sup>121</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 70; cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 57. There was at least one Mennonite woman who became an underground supporter of a partisan group: Anna Petrovna Wiens, born 1918 in Kleefeld, Molochna; see *Reabilitovani istoriiieiu. Zaporizka oblast*, 3:210–215.

<sup>122</sup> Army Group South, Report, Apr. 11, 1942, RH22/299, sheet 95.

<sup>123</sup> Sonderkommando R, "Rundanweisung Nr. 64," Aug. 1942, BA, R59/66, sheet 63.

<sup>124</sup> Hoffmeyer to 19th Panzer Division, Apr. 6, 1943, HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA.

<sup>125</sup> See Jacob A. Neufeld, *Tiefenwege: Erfahrungen und Erlebnisse von Russland-Mennoniten in zwei Jahrzehnten bis 1949* (Virgil, ON: Niagara, 1958), 100; and Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 51. Cf. Jeffrey Fowler, *Axis Cavalry in World War II* (Wellingborough, UK: Osprey, 2001).

<sup>126</sup> O. Dirks, *Memories that Shape the Future*, 28.

<sup>127</sup> Hooge and Kornelsen, *Life Before Canada*, 57.

<sup>128</sup> From March 26 to April 30, 1943. "Frühjahrsbestellungseinsatz des Volksdeutschen Reiterregiments," Craaß to Prützmann, May 3, 1943. On regiment size, letter, Mar. 7, 1943, in HSSPF-RS 1942–43, box 3, VÚA. Similarly, because of weather conditions the previous April, orders were also given to each village to work day and night, including Sundays, to ensure all fields were planted; resistance would be treated as "sabotage." See "Frühjahrsbestellung," in "Rundanweisung Nr. 33," Apr. 7, 1942, BA, R59/66, sheet 100.

<sup>129</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 74. Likely SS-Brigadeführer Bittrich is the officer noted. Cf. SS-Gruppenführer u. Generalleutnant der Waffen-SS Jüttner to Feglein, May 7, 1942, BA, RS 3-8/79, sheet 28.

<sup>130</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 77; cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 61.

<sup>131</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 76; cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 60.

<sup>132</sup> The song was written by Max von Schenkendorf in 1814. E. Reimer cites the final verse in his "Memoir," 76.

<sup>133</sup> Fritz Freitag, "Special Instructions for the Working Area of Abt VI No.1," to SS-Cav. Division VI, Apr. 22, 1943, BA, RS 3-8/73/b.

<sup>134</sup> Fritz Freitag to SS Cav. Division, Ia/VI, Apr. 5, 1943 (Special Instructions for Worldview Training), BA, RS 3-8/80.

<sup>135</sup> Freitag, "Special Instructions for the Working Area of Abt VI No.1," to SS-Cav. Division VI, Apr. 22, 1943.

<sup>136</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 78, cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 61.

<sup>137</sup> Freitag to SS Cav. Division, Ia/VI, Apr. 5, 1943 (Special Instructions for Worldview Training). For other similar sample lessons: "Stoffsammlung für die weltanschauliche Erziehung, Juli 1942–Sep. 1942" (SS-Kavallerie Division Florian Geyer), BA, RS 3-8/16.

<sup>138</sup> Fritz Freitag, SS Cav. Division, Ia, 170/43 Training Guidelines, Feb. 12, 1943, 6, BA, RS 3-8/68.

<sup>139</sup> Allert [Reimer], "The Lost Generation," 71–72; Daniel Kuppel, *Das Echo unserer Taten*, 10. For sample "homilies," see Wilhelm Bittrich, SS-Kav. Division Kommandeur, Dec. 19, 1942, BA, RS 3-8/58.

<sup>140</sup> Freitag, "Special Instructions for the Working Area of Abt VI No.1," to SS-Cav. Division VI, Apr. 22, 1943.

<sup>141</sup> Kuppel, *Das Echo unserer Taten*, 4, 25.

<sup>142</sup> Fritz Freitag, SS-Cav. Division IIa, Divisions-Tagesbehl Nr. 10/43, Mar. 22, 1943, BA, RS 3-8/72.

<sup>143</sup> For this paragraph, see Freitag to SS Cav. Division, Ia/VI, Apr. 5, 1943 (Special Instructions for Worldview Training). See also booklets noted in next footnote.

<sup>144</sup> Der Reichsführer SS/SS-Hauptamt, *Rassenpolitik* (Berlin, 1943). Other required booklets published by the SS-Education Office (*Schulungsamt*) included: *Grenzkampf Ost*; *Die Sicherung Europas*; *SS-Mann und Blutsfrage*; *Die Sowjet-Union: Raum und Völker*; as well as the *SS-Leithefte*.

<sup>145</sup> H. Loewen, *Road to Freedom*, 110.

<sup>146</sup> Doris L. Bergen, "The *Volksdeutsche* of Eastern Europe and the Collapse of the Nazi Empire, 1944–1945," in *The Impact of Nazism: New Perspectives on the Third Reich and Its Legacy*, ed. Alan E. Steinweis and Daniel E. Rogers (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 102.

<sup>147</sup> Himmler to Stabshauptamt beim Reichskommissar für die Festigung Deutschen Volkstums, Feb. 24, 1943, BA, NS19/3869, sheet 21; Prützmann to Himmler, Mar. 1943, BA, NS19/2656, sheet 33.

<sup>148</sup> Valdis O. Lumans, *Hitler's Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 250.

<sup>149</sup> "Der Ruf des Reiches an die Volksdeutschen am Schwarzmeer," *DUZ*, June 16, 1943, 1.

<sup>150</sup> "Reichsleiter Rosenberg besuchte die Schwarzmeerdeutschen. Die Partei nimmt die Volksdeutschen in ihre Obhut," *Deutsche Bug-Zeitung*, June 22, 1943, 3.

<sup>151</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 74; cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 59.

<sup>152</sup> Fast and Fast, *Two Lives, One Faith*, 67; similarly, Hooge and Kornelsen, *Life Before Canada*, 59.

<sup>153</sup> Karl Fischer von Treuenfeld to Erich Friderici, Aug. 27, 1943, telegraph, BA, RH22/116, sheet 22. Von Treuenfeld reviewed the regiment in Tomak on August 26 as well on August 9. Kriegstagebuch, Befehlshaber der Waffen-SS Rußland-Süd und Ukraine, June 21, 1943–November 7, 1943, RS6/4, sheets 21 and 26.

<sup>154</sup> The commander of Heeresgruppe Süd ordered the evacuation of ethnic Germans and troops east of the Dnieper on September 7. See memo from Kampfkommandant Räumungsdiktator Kiew, Sept. 7, 1943, BA, RS6/4, sheet 30.

<sup>155</sup> Fast and Fast, *Two Lives, One Faith*, 67; see also E. Reimer, "Memoir," 81–82.

<sup>156</sup> Prützmann to Himmler, Stand der Volksdeutschen Umsiedlung, Sept. 15, 1943, BA, NS19/2656, sheet 73.

<sup>157</sup> See Kinkelin to SS-Obergruppenführer G. Berger, Stand der Aussiedlung, Sept. 22, 1943, BA, NS19/2656, sheet 75.

<sup>158</sup> Prützmann to Himmler, Volksdeutsche Siedlungsperlen, Oct. 13, 1943, BA, NS19/2656, sheet 78.

<sup>159</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 83; cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generations," 62–63.

<sup>160</sup> Gerhard Lohrenz, *Lose Blätter*, vol. 3 (Winnipeg: self-pub., 1976), 108.

<sup>161</sup> Prützmann to Himmler, Volksdeutsche Trecks aus Raum Alexanderstadt-Gronau, Oct. 26, 1943, BA, NS19/2656, sheet 86.

<sup>162</sup> Prützmann to Himmler, Volksdeutsche Trecks, Nov. 16, 1943, BA, NS19/2656, sheet 92.

<sup>163</sup> Feldkommandostelle to Reichsführer-SS, re volksdeutsche Treks, Nov. 16, 1943, BA, NS19/2656, sheet 92.

<sup>164</sup> See J. Neufeld, *Tiefenwege*, 150; K. Friesen, *Into the Unknown*, 65; and Anna Bergen, "Evil Days in Molotschna: Memoir," trans. Elisabeth Kliewer

(Winnipeg, 1992), 16 (copy in author's possession; originally published in *Mennonitische Rundschau*, Feb. 6 to Apr. 6, 1952).

<sup>165</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 92–93; cf. Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 67.

<sup>166</sup> Kuppel, *Das Echo unserer Taten*, 4.

<sup>167</sup> "Übersicht über die Herkunft und den jetzigen Aufenthalt der Volksdeutschen nach dem Stand v. 15.12.43," BA, RS69/215, sheet 20.

<sup>168</sup> See Fast and Fast, *Two Lives, One Faith*, 75.

<sup>169</sup> In September 1944, 300 men from the former regiment were sent to the 12th SS-Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" in France, and finally in October 1944 another 200 men to "Florian Geyer." Rossner to Wilke, Nov. 16, 1972, 2.

<sup>170</sup> Fast and Fast, *Two Lives, One Faith*, 70. Hans Fast gives the final destination as the nearby city of Szegzad. *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>171</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), s. vv. "Baja" and "Szeged."

<sup>172</sup> Kuppel, *Das Echo unserer Taten*, 17.

<sup>173</sup> Military record for Franz F. Bräul, ID no. 5262, Kavallerie-Ausbildungs- und Ersatz-Abteilung. Other Mennonite award recipients: Peter Kliewer, b. Nov. 26, 1922, Rudnerweide; Jakob Epp, b. Nov. 21, 1921, Burwalde; Jakob Klein, b. Apr. 15, 1924, Kleefeld; Peter Friesen, b. June 23, 1925, Schönhorst; Gerhard Steffan, b. Oct. 11, 1922, Wernersdorf; Johann Braun, b. April 2, 1921, Wernersdorf; Franz Wiens, b. Jan. 17, 1924, Rosenort; Johann Pätkau, b. Aug. 20, 1915, Neuenburg. 8th SS-Cavalry-Division "Florian Geyer," Oct. 1942 to Nov. 1944, awards lists, BA, RH7/2479. Many were at the rank of *Sturmann*, designated for SA and SS men who had served at least six months in the organization and had demonstrated basic abilities and competence.

<sup>174</sup> Deutsche Dienststelle für die Benachrichtigung der nächsten Angehörigen to author, re Franz Bräul, letter, Feb. 22, 2008.

<sup>175</sup> See Reinhard Langhans, *Thomas-Müntzer-Rezeption während des "Dritten Reiches"* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).

<sup>176</sup> Fast and Fast, *Two Lives, One Faith*, 75.

<sup>177</sup> M. Epp, *Women without Men*, 35.

<sup>178</sup> H. Loewen, *Between Worlds*, 115.

<sup>179</sup> Allert [Reimer], "Lost Generation," 70. Lohrenz offers here a loose paraphrase of the original; cf. Reimer, "Memoir," 99–100.

<sup>180</sup> Lohrenz, *Lost Generation*, 6–7.

<sup>181</sup> H. Loewen, *Road to Freedom*, 31, with reference to Lohrenz, *Lost Generation*.

<sup>182</sup> "Belohnte Mithilfe bei der Bandenbekämpfung," DUZ, May 14, 1942, 3.

<sup>183</sup> Allert [Reimer], "The Lost Generation," 46.

<sup>184</sup> E. Reimer, "Memoir," 75; cf. Allert [Reimer], "The Lost Generation," 60.

<sup>185</sup> Hans Rempel, *Waffen der Wehrlosen: Ersatzdienst der Mennoniten in der UdSSR* (Winnipeg: CMBC, 1980), 147–48 (my emphasis).

<sup>186</sup> Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46.