

Paul Toews with Aileen Friesen, *The Russian Mennonite Story: The Heritage Cruise Lectures*. Winnipeg: Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies, 2018. Pp. xiv + 106. Softcover, \$39.00.

The Russian Mennonite Story is a coffee table book of lectures, essays, and photos. Longstanding Mennonite historian Paul Toews (1940-2015) presented these lectures during the Mennonite Heritage Cruises on the Dnieper River, Ukraine, from 1995 to 2010. Aileen Friesen, another Mennonite historian, edited the lectures and added introductory and concluding essays. Friesen also selected large, vivid photographs, which comprise nearly half the book. Although the lectures were written for Mennonite “pilgrims” exploring the land of their parents and grandparents, the authors transcend the role of tour guides by offering astute historical analysis.

Toews’ lectures are titled “Power and Promise,” “Pathos and Tragedy,” and “Paradox and Irony.” In the first, he gives an account of Mennonites in south Russia before the First World War. He traces their economic, political, religious, intellectual, and cultural developments, concluding with their remarkable prosperity in 1914, when the “Mennonite Commonwealth” appeared poised to play a major role in Russia. In the second lecture, Toews shows

how Mennonite fortunes plummeted during the Russian civil war, the early Soviet era, and the Second World War. After this stark contrast, Toews concludes his lecture series by conceiving of the reversal in Mennonite fortunes in terms of irony. He features many ironies, including those associated with the Mennonites' migrations, German identity, and pacifism. Other ironies describe the post-Soviet resurgence of a Mennonite presence in Ukraine, and the recent Russian and Ukrainian interest in Mennonites.

Friesen's introduction and conclusion contextualize these lectures. In the first instance she introduces the Heritage Cruises, and in the conclusion she describes ten topics that are underrepresented in Mennonite historiography and deserving of further research. These include the role of Mennonite settlers in Russian colonialism, Mennonite relationships with their neighbours and the Russian state, Mennonite women, Mennonite engagement with German nationalism and Nazism, and Mennonite life under the Soviets. Toews' lectures provide launching points for these topics and more, including Mennonite spiritualities.

Toews is both an effective tour guide and contemporary historian. As guide, he tells his audience about their history, but enlivens that history with stories of individuals. As historian, he reaches beyond a simplistic memory of a vibrant, then tragic, Mennonite story. He expands that memory by showing that Mennonites were part of larger movements and trends. These include, among many others, large-scale migrations to south Russia, the widespread pursuit in Europe of nationalist identity, and the German military's presence in Russia during the First World War. Moreover, Mennonites were not hapless victims after that war. Instead, they remained consistently active participants in the developments swirling around them, responding with choices that influenced their lives and the lives of others. For pilgrims, tempted to do homage to their heritage, this may be Toews' most significant contribution.

Friesen's selection of photographs for the book is also significant. Many are of full-page size and have a clarity rarely seen in books of Mennonite history. The contrasts between prosperous children perched on a front porch or on a rocking horse, and those in deprivation are especially poignant (xiv, 2, 3). The contrast in dress among Mennonite students before and after the Bolshevik Revolution is similarly striking (46). Friesen also includes period maps and paintings. The visuals provide an emotional impact, and underline Toews' historiographic approach—as in the photos of Red Cross workers (43, 73), most of whom were likely not Mennonites.

In his lectures for tourists, Toews is evocative and selective rather than comprehensive (although he provides many details en route). Toews provides neither footnotes nor many details about the sources for his work, although Friesen does add a bibliography representing relatively recent scholarship. Readers may wonder why Toews omitted certain salient details, such as the fact that Clayton Kratz, sent in 1920 by the fledgling Mennonite Central Committee to help bring famine relief to the Mennonites in the Soviet Union, disappeared without a trace. However, such omissions can be forgiven in light of Toews' intended audience.

This book belongs in the living rooms of armchair-pilgrims, whether pursuing their roots or learning about Mennonites for the first time. If they pay attention, however, they will find that the authors do not rehearse standard Mennonite history augmented by gripping stories. Instead, the authors expand the readers' horizons. Thus, as moving as this book may be, its aim is not primarily lament, but insight, honesty, and agency—plus further research. This book therefore also belongs in the libraries of scholars.

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