

## THE GERMAN BAPTIST MOVEMENT IN VOLHYNIA

by  
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The German Baptist movement in Volhynia, Russia (Ukraine) began in 1858/1859 with the influx of a small, but steady stream of German colonists from Poland. They came largely in search of new economic opportunities and in order to escape religious persecution. Immediately upon arrival they met for worship in the deep primeval forests of Volhynia under the open skies. It was not, however, until 1861, with the emancipation of the Russian serfs, that colonists from Poland and East Prussia began to flood into Volhynia in large numbers, bringing with them their newly-found religious faith and beliefs. Three years later, on May 22, 1864, the first German Baptist church in Volhynia was officially organized in Horstschick with 203 members.



*Horstschick Church built in the early 1900s. Photo 1993*

The Baptist movement in Russia is closely associated with Gottfried F. Alf (1831-1898) and his congregation in Adamowo, Poland. Alf, formerly a staunch Lutheran schoolteacher, was the first Baptist to be baptized in Poland and the first missionary to Russia. In the early 1850s, largely as a result of God's spirit stirring in his heart -- without any human intervention -- he experienced a spiritual awakening, which put him at odds with the Lutheran church. As a result, Alf was dismissed from his teaching position and banished from his home. A few years later, Alf came in contact with some German Baptists in East Prussia, and in 1858 was baptized by immersion by Wilhelm Weist, a Prussian revivalist. In 1861, in spite of many obstacles and much persecution, both from the Lutheran church and civil authorities, Alf established the first German Baptist Church in Adamowo, Poland. A second church was organized that same year in Kicin.

In 1862 a group of 40 Baptists, led by Mathias Kelm, one of Alf's co-workers, migrated to Volhynia. They settled in Sorotschin, near Zhitomir, in Russian Volhynia, in hopes of buying or leasing unimproved land and enjoying greater religious freedom. That same fall Alf made his first missionary journey to Volhynia to encourage *the brethren* and to

spread the Gospel. It was clearly a journey into the wilderness. The settlement was so remote and the roads so bad that it was nearly impossible to get there by horse and wagon. Nevertheless, Alf managed to break through the heavy forest and traverse the deep swamp and meet with Kelm and the settlers. While there he assisted in the division of land and selection of Kelm as the pastor of the immigrant group. By 1863 most of the 300 members of Alf's church in Adamowo had made the 800-kilometer trek to Volhynia as well.



*Gottfried F. Alf*

*Gottfried F. Alf (1831-1898) was an early Baptist trailblazer. He was a native of Congress Poland, then part of the Russian Empire. Alf was progenitor of Baptists in Poland as well as the German Baptist movement in the Russian Empire. He was the first Baptist baptized in Russian Poland and the first native Baptist revivalist and missionary in Russia. Alf was also Russia's first ordained Baptist minister and the first one with theological training. Alf founded the first Baptist churches in Russian Poland and Ukraine.*

*--Dr. Albert W. Wardin*

Alf had hoped to return the following year, but because of imprisonment, the difficulty of obtaining a passport and the dangers of traveling in winter, his trip was delayed until the spring of 1864. At that time he first visited Kelm in Sorotschin, then "...traveled sixteen kilometers to Neudorf where he found his Baptist brethren living under the trees in shelters...as the Children of Israel in the desert"<sup>1</sup>

From there he made his way to Hortschick, where he conducted a number of worship services, led several prayer meetings, held two baptismal services, visited with family and friends, conducted a love feast and even performed a wedding. The main purpose of Alf's trip, however, was the organization of two Baptist congregations, Hortschick on May 19, 1864 and Sorotschin three days later.

The two churches had the distinction of being the first organized Baptist churches in all of Ukraine. Before Alf returned to Poland he was asked to oversee the churches as elder. The wooden structures of both churches, though built over a hundred years ago, have miraculously survived to this day. The church building in Horstschick is now in the hands of the Orthodox Church. The Sorotschin church stands empty after being used as a storage bin for many years.



*Sorotschin Church built in 1906-1910, still standing. Photo 1920*

When the Tsar freed the serfs in 1861, many large Polish estates in Volhynia became available to German farmers from East Prussia as well as Poland. Consequently, a group of *Masurs* (Germans who spoke a Polish dialect) from the southern part of East Prussia took immediate steps to explore the possibility of resettling to the area. A committee was sent to investigate. When the committee reported in favor of resettlement, the necessary funds were raised and two large estates were purchased from the Polish landlords.

Michael J. Anuta, whose family was part of the original resettlement to the Zhitomir region writes, “In the summer of 1865, forty covered wagons, drawn by horses, with some 200 people (almost half of the Baptist congregation of Rummy and Ortelsburg) were loaded with what could be transported, along with food for the journey. They left East Prussia for Toporitsche, in the District of Zhitomir; some 600 kilometers easterly over dirt roads, traveling at the rate of about 1—12 kilometers a day. They reached their destination in about seven weeks and assigned the settlers to their several places.”<sup>2</sup>

Czarkowski, an ardent preacher and founder of the Polish Baptist Church in the village of Rummy, was called to serve as their first pastor. In the beginning, the church gathered in private homes and in the spacious dining hall of the palace of a previous land baron. Later, a church building with several hundred seats was built on the main highway running from Zhitomir to Korosten. The church was referred to as “The Church of the Masuren.” Though the Polish tongue was used in worship and in Sunday school, the church was part of the existing German Baptist association of churches at that time. The church frequently became a meeting place for the early settlers who had to travel long distances to see each other.

In 1878 the church became self-supporting. The church continued to grow steadily until around 1887 when a large group of members (nineteen families with eleven little babies) immigrated to POUND, Wisconsin. Others immigrated to Siberia. This significantly

reduced the membership. The church was often without a pastor and kept getting smaller and smaller until it again became a preaching station.

On October 31, 1866 the Germans founded another Baptist church, this one in Neudorf. Originally it was a mission station of Sorotschin but its growth was so rapid that it soon became known as “the mother church.” Over the years the church constructed a number of wooden chapels of ever-increasing size, all of which proved to be too small. In 1905-1907, the congregation built a large sanctuary seating 2,000 people in order to serve its growing membership and many preaching stations. The building still stands today and is used for worship by the *Evangelical-Christian Baptists of Ukraine*.

Eventually, approximately 15 independent or self-sustaining churches were established in Volhynia, stretching all the way from Zhitomir to Rozyszcze, including some 75 preaching points, prayer chapels and house churches. Although the German Baptists never reached a membership of more than 15,000 baptized believers, they were an exceedingly virile and vital force. The growth and significance of the movement was due in part to their evangelistic fervor and revivalist spirit and in part at the expense of the religiously neglected Lutherans.

## **EARLY OPPOSITION**

In the early days the Baptists were considered a sect and encountered much opposition from ecclesiastic leaders, especially from the Orthodox and Lutheran church, from civil authorities and from ordinary citizens. This manifested itself in a misrepresentation of their teachings, disruption of outdoor baptisms, physical and verbal abuse and an attempt to get the government to move against them. In Heimtal, a Lutheran stronghold, the opposition to the Baptists was so strong that on one occasion a *Baptist brother* was chained to a doghouse in an attempt to restrict his evangelistic passion.

The civil authorities likewise sought to restrain the Baptists by taking administrative action against them. There was constant police surveillance and harassment. There were also imposition of fines, imprisonment and sentences of exile. The hardest blow came in May 1877 when the authorities charged three pastors, Karl K. Ondra, Ludwig Nasgowitz and A. Reinhold. Schiewe, and three prominent laymen, for proselytizing among the Russian Orthodox adherents in Volhynia. The men were suddenly and unexpectedly summoned to appear before the Chief of Police in Horoshek.

When they were all assembled, they were told they were prisoners and were to be banished immediately. They were to leave their wives and children, their farms, churches and countrymen without any hope of ever returning or seeing them again. The men were dumbfounded. They had not the slightest idea as to why such severe measures were taken against them. Upon inquiry they were read something to the effect that they were guilty of spreading Baptist views among the Russians. This was absurd, as they had never been forbidden to spread their views among their own countrymen.

It was finally concluded that they were being accused of spreading their religious convictions within the Greek or Orthodox Church. The men pleaded for mercy, but to no avail. Two days later, all six were escorted out of the country, two to Poland and the remaining four to Germany. After three years, the expulsion order was annulled and other pastors and missionaries were allowed to enter Volhynia. But in the meantime, the work suffered and these men and their families were torn asunder.

In 1892, Friedrich A. Mueller, pastor of the Baptist church in Lucinow, was singled out for persecution. He was accused of baptizing two Russians. As a result, he was given two week's notice to get his affairs in order before being exiled to Siberia. Fortunately he was secretly smuggled out of Russia by members of his church and made his way to Western Canada, where he founded the First German Baptist Church in Rabbit Hill, Alberta. Mueller founded many other churches in Alberta, including the East Bittern Lake Baptist Church, four miles west of Camrose, Alberta, which my family, immigrants from the Zhitomir region in Russian Volhynia, attended.

Resistance and persecution of the Baptists continued for years to come. Even after the Russian Toleration Act of 1905, non-Orthodox religious groups still had to guard against proselytizing, though anyone could leave the Russian Orthodox Church and join the religious confession of one's preference. Also, pastors still had to obtain permission to preach outside their registered church buildings and the government still dragged its feet in granting permission to construct new church buildings.

Furthermore, the Russian government continued to regard them as *sectarians* "with presumably dangerous anti-state intentions. In 1910 and 1912, under pressure from Orthodox critics, the Russian government attempted to limit the activities of the Protestant sects and to deprive them and colonists of German origin of the right to buy or rent landed property in the Ukrainian provinces."<sup>3</sup>

Only after Lenin came to power in 1917 were all the religious restrictions removed. However, it was short-lived. By the mid-1920s, the Bolsheviks introduced legislation limiting religious freedom and gradually began to undermine the church and repress the pastors. Emil J. Bonikowski, pastor of the German church in Nowo Rudni, in his autobiography reported, "In April 1926 all clergyman of all religious denominations and churches had to report and were told that no children under eighteen years should be allowed to belong to any church organization, to attend Sunday school, to sing in the choir or to play in the orchestra."<sup>4</sup>

Three years later, in the fall of 1929, Johann J. Fuchs, who followed Bonikowski who had immigrated to Canada, was arrested and sentenced to three years of hard labor in the North for allegedly "aiding and abetting" his son to cross the Polish border. Though his arrest may not have had anything directly to do with the anti-religious spirit of the day, it could not have helped his case. For immediately after that, if not before, all the German Baptist pastors came under constant surveillance by the authorities.<sup>5</sup> The political and religious repression reached its peak in 1937 with the *Great Terror*.

## LEGAL STATUS

The German Baptists did not obtain legal status until 1879. Prior to that they were considered to be an *illegal sect*. But, given their political loyalty, mainline evangelical theology, moral lifestyle and social responsibility, the German Baptists were most likely among the “less harmful sects,” as Samuel J. Nesdoly has suggested of the Russian Baptists in general.<sup>6</sup>

The edict gave them the right to establish their own civil registry of births, marriages and deaths, but it still did not give them the right to proselytize among adherents of the Orthodox Church. This was very disconcerting to the Baptists. They also found many of the administrative regulations imposed on them to be burdensome. This included the calling of pastors, the building of chapels and the registration of churches. Pastors were required to take an oath of allegiance, and gain permission to preach outside their province.

The Lutherans were pleased by the recognition given the Baptists as it relieved them of maintaining the church records of sectarians.

## GERMAN AFFILIATION

The German Baptists in Russia had a strong affiliation with the Baptist movement in Germany. Initially they were members of the Baptist *Bund* or Union in Germany, formed by Johann G. Oncken (1800-1884), the father of continental European Baptists. According to Albert W. Wardin, notable Russian Baptist scholar, “...this provided them with a strong sense of corporate identity, set the standards for faith and practice and provided an agency for cooperative action.”<sup>7</sup>

The association served them well in the early years. But as time went on the Baptists in Russia expressed a need to form their own union. The distance from each other, the difficulty of getting a pass and the differences between the two countries all spoke in favor of forming a separate union in Russia. There also was the fact that “the Russia government looked with disfavor on religious work conducted in the name of foreign organizations.”<sup>8</sup> The arguments pro and con were weighed for several years. Finally in September 1887, the *Union of Baptist Churches in Russia* was formed in Neudorf. Alf was present and was chosen as president.

The new union required that the Russian Baptists establish its own treasury and raise its own funds. But it continued to look to Germany for its ministerial training, church publications, and fraternal relations.



# Der Hausfreund.

Eine Zeitschrift für Gemeinde und Haus. Organ der deutschen Baptisten in Russland.

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Er scheint wöchentlich und kostet mit Zulassung im In- und Auslande jährlich 2.50 Rubl.; halbjährlich 1.30 Rubl. Anzeiger werden berechnet mit 10 Kop. für eine vierpolige Zeitspalte oder deren Raum.

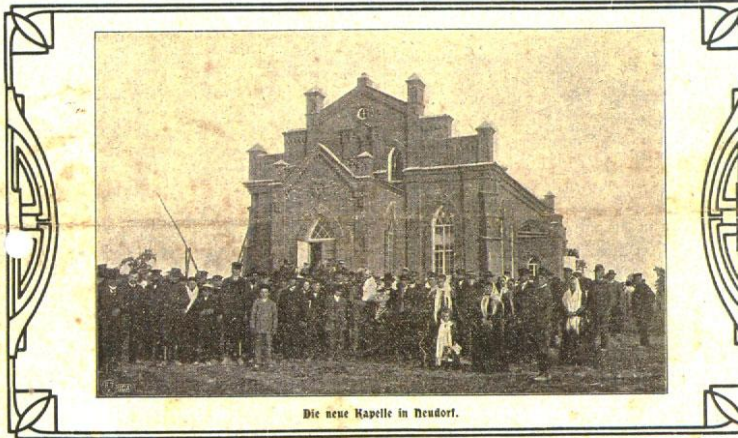
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Die neue Kapelle in Neudorf.

**Sorget nicht!**

Nimmer grüßeln, immer beten,  
Ist der Christen rechtes Tun.  
Das nur reißt aus allen Nöten,  
Räht im Lobe Gottes ruh'n.  
Vor der Schöpfung Einer dachte,  
Lachte liebevoll an mich;  
Dann Er meine Tage machte  
Wunderbar und väterlich.  
Er bedachte was ich werden,  
Wie und wo ich's werden soll;  
Wie zum Himmel ich auf Erden  
Reifen muß, der Gnade voll.  
Was Er dachte, das war richtig;  
Alles Er in Rechnung trug.  
Wenn mein Leben war Ihm wichtig  
Mir zum Lektoren Niemand.

Wie Er dachte, niemand denkt;  
Alles überhaupt Er gang,  
Sein Erkennen nichts beschränkt;  
Wid' verwirrt des Richtpunkts Glanz.  
Soll ich niemand unterstützen  
Wohl — der Weisheit mir bewußt?  
Kann ich dem Erzieher nützen?  
Nein, ich sin'! Nun an die Brust.  
Beten will ich — Er soll denken,  
Beten will ich immerdar;  
Vaters Hand soll alles lenken,  
Soll mich retten in Gefahr.  
Beten nur dem Kinde ziemet,  
Nichtig denken kann nur Er.  
Kindlich Seine Weisheit rühmet  
Fort ein himmlisch leuchtend Stern

*Der Hausfreund was a Baptist periodical for German-speaking Baptists in the Russian Empire. Founded by Julius Hermann in 1890, it was forced to cease publication soon after the outbreak of World War I. The periodical was revived in 1920 as a publication of the German Baptists in Poland and continued until the beginning of World War II. In 1926 Der Familienfreund was circulated among the German Baptists in Russia as a successor to the earlier publication. It ceased to exist in 1928.*

*The photo depicts the dedication of the fourth building of the Neudorf Church in September 1907.*

## BELIEF SYSTEM

The German Baptists held to mainline evangelical Protestantism in their beliefs. They were firmly committed to the authority of God's Word for faith and practice, justification by faith alone, regenerate church membership and believer's baptism by immersion. Their theology was based on the *German Baptist Confession of Faith* adopted by the German Baptist churches in Germany in 1847.<sup>9</sup> Church membership was restricted to baptized believers (immersed) who gave public testimony of faith in Jesus Christ and assent to the *Confession of Faith*.

The Baptists considered the ordinances of baptism and communion to be symbolic rather than sacramental. Baptism usually took place on Pentecost Sunday in a pond or river near the church. It was a beautiful sight. The pastor led the procession, followed by the brass band and the candidates dressed in white. The congregation sang as they marched. Sometimes baptisms were conducted in the dead of winter by chopping a hole in the ice.

In times of persecution believers were often baptized in the dead of night. After the baptism the newly baptized believers returned to the church for *the laying on of hands*, their first communion and welcoming into the membership. Often two or three churches joined together for a mass baptism with all of the pastors from the nearby churches participating.



*Typical baptismal service, Eduard A. Hornbacher, pastor, 1941-1943*

Communion was likewise restricted to baptized (immersed) believers. It was observed on the first Sunday of each month. It was called *Church Sunday* when all the believers from the nearby mission stations and preaching points gathered in the central church to observe the Lord's Supper. Since the main pastor was in charge, he was always back home from his itinerant travels in time for the service. Often a *love feast* (a fellowship or communal meal similar to that observed by the early church as described in I Corinthians 11:33,34) was held in connection with the observance of communion. Love feasts were also held in conjunction with ordination services, musical festivals, association meetings, annual church business meetings, and sometimes at weddings.

All German Baptist churches in Russia adhered to the motto of the German Baptists churches in Germany and Eastern Europe which read, *Ein Herr, Ein Glaube, Eine Taufe* (One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism), based on Ephesians 4:5. The motto was usually blazed in bold letters on the wall in the front of every central church. According to Wardin, "In so doing, the Baptists, like the earlier Anabaptists, Mennonites and members of the Church of the Brethren, repudiated the territorial churches of the day with their infant baptism, sacramentalism (including baptismal regeneration), and a mixed membership of regenerate and unregenerate."<sup>10</sup>

The Baptists practiced a congregational form of church government with decisions made by majority rule. They followed the continental German Baptist practice of establishing central churches with numerous mission stations or preaching points until they had grown in size and maturity. Congregations often waited many years before gaining the status of an independent church. Each congregation was autonomous, but held together by an



association. Pastors from the central churches served as itinerant preachers at the various mission stations and preaching points, often traveling many miles, by horse and wagon, in order to strengthen the churches, and to establish new ones. In their absence, an elder (*Altester*), did the preaching back home, and for all practical purposes, presided over the affairs of the church. Frequently the office of the elder and that of the preacher was united in one person. Baptism and communion was administered either by the elders or the preachers. One of the most enduring elders was Christoph R. Baier, who served as elder of the Neudorf church for over half a century.

Pastors, elders and deacons were selected by the membership on the basis of biblical qualifications as found in the New Testament. All pastors were ordained and many were theologically trained. In the early years they attended the ten-month missions training course in Hamburg founded by Oncken. The school later led to the establishment of a seminary in 1880. After the turn of the century, many pastors received their theological training at the seminary in Lodz, Poland (1910-1912) and Odessa, South Russia (1928-1930). A few made their way to America where they attended the *German Academy* in the Rochester Baptist Seminary in Rochester, New York. Virtually all pastors lived off a small piece of land owned by the church and a small stipend. Members of the church worked the land for the pastor. A parsonage was usually provided.

The Baptists were fervent evangelists; some would even say militant. They proudly adopted Oncken's slogan, "Every Baptist a missionary." Pastors endured many hardships, privations and self-sacrifice to a degree almost unknown today in order spread the Gospel. Many even traveled to Siberia and Central Asia to start new churches. Colporteurs, likewise, traveled long distances over poor roads in the worst kinds of weather to distribute Bibles and Gospel tracts.

Worship in the Baptist services was lively and evangelistic and preaching was central. Worshippers kneeled for prayer upon entering the sanctuary and also during the pastoral prayer. Music played an important role in Baptist congregational worship. Each family had a copy of the German hymnal, *Die Glaubensstimme* (The Voice of Belief), which they carried to and from church. The men sat on the right side and the women and the children sat on the left. Most churches had a *Gesangchor* (singing choir) and *Posaunenchor* (brass orchestra), and a choir of stringed instruments. The churches often banded together for music festivals. In June 1908, the area Baptists held a *Posaunenfest* (Brass Band Festival) in Neudorf with Josef Ittermann, one of the most gifted musicians of his day, directing. There were over 5,000 in attendance. Ittermann was also instrumental in conducting many music workshops and personally training numerous musical directors. Most churches, even the small house churches, had Sunday schools, youth societies, and various training programs.



Posaunenchor (Brass Band) Neudorf, ca. 1920, Josef Ittermann, director

## GODLY LIFESTYLE

Upon profession of faith and baptism, members were expected to live godly and exemplary lives. They were either “in” or “out,” based on a strict moral and spiritual code. Following the classical Germanic tendency for *ordnung* (order), believers were admonished to consistently read the Bible, pray, have family devotions, witness, regularly attend church, tell the truth, be good neighbors, live Godly lives, and be loyal citizens -- paying their taxes and obeying the laws of the land, except those contrary to the law of God.

Members of the Baptist faith were also expected to keep themselves “unspotted” from the world and to adhere to a rather rigorous moral code, such as abstinence from drinking (except beer and wine, though some Baptists frowned on growing *hops* as a commodity crop for beer), swearing, smoking, dancing, card-playing, movie going (kino) and other worldly amusements. Sexual immorality, mixed marriages (between believers and unbelievers) and divorce, were especially frowned upon and subject to church discipline. Divorce and remarriage of the innocent party was only permitted in the event of adultery and abandonment.

There is historical evidence to show that the Baptists, in general, lived up to these ideals. Alf reported that in 1862 when he visited a Baptist settlement in Sorotschin, he noted a surprising degree of order. There was no public quarreling and fighting or loitering, as was so prevalent among the worldly crowd. The Russian government, likewise, recognized the fact that the Baptists lived orderly and exemplary lives. In a turn of the century document found in the archives, I learned that the Neudorf church contained a wall inscription, both in Russian and German, designed to show that the German Baptists were law-abiding citizens and respected the government. It read, *Fear God and Honor the Tsar*. The same report stated that it appeared that the condition of the spiritual life among the Baptists was better than that of other religious groups. The government was especially

impressed with the fact that there were “no poor among them, because they take care of them.”

However not all German Baptists lived up to the high moral and spiritual standards set by the church. Failure to do so resulted in church discipline, often leading to exclusion from membership. Some would say that the leaders went too far, sometimes excluding members on what seemed like trivia. My aunt, Adina Renz, tells of an incident that took place when her brother, Heinrich Mueller, was married in 1924. When the jubilant bridal party left Federowka on their way to the church in Neudorf for the wedding, several participants pulled out a bottle of *Vodka* and passed it around for everyone to take a sip. In their attempt to have a little fun, they even pretended to give a sip of the spirited drink to their brightly decorated horses. When it came to the attention of the deacons, the entire bridal party was summoned to appear before the deacons to give an account of themselves. Following a grueling examination, the guilty parties were swiftly and sternly excluded from membership. Only after public repentance before the whole church were they reinstated.<sup>11</sup>

## **MISSION PROJECTS**

The Baptists in Volhynia were very missionary-minded. In addition to their own local church reports and missionary and educational efforts, including construction of chapels, they supported a wide variety of other mission projects. These included a street ministry in Riga, a soldier’s mission, a tract society, a Sunday school missionary, and a deaconess home, which was founded in 1904 in Lodz. They also gave funds for famine relief, seminary training, a treasury for aged ministers, widows and orphans, and a children’s home in Lodz. Some also contributed to foreign missions in Cameroon and India. In addition, they supported missions for Poles, Russians, Jews, and Siberians. It is no wonder that an article on giving in one of the issues of *Der Hausfreund* carried the title, “Yet Again an Collection!”<sup>12</sup>

## **CHURCH PUBLICATIONS**

The Volhynian Baptists had access to a variety of church publications from Germany to assist them in their growth and development. Among the most important was the general informational periodical, *Der Hausfreund* (The House Friend), *Die Jugend-Warte* (The Youth Beacon), a monthly youth magazine and an illustrated paper for children, *Unseren Lieblingen* (Our Favorites), as well as a Christian calendar, *Die Jahres-Warte* (The Year’s Beacon). In addition, many pastors subscribed to the sermons of Charles Spurgeon, the renowned British theologian and preacher, which had been translated into German.

## **CONCLUSION**

With the outbreak of World War I, the German Baptists in Volhynia (as well as all Germans in the area) were deported on short notice, most with only two week’s notice, to Siberia and Central Asia. The primary motivation was the Soviet Union’s fear of “fascist” collaboration. Some Russians even alleged that the Germans were already

carrying on espionage for Germany behind Russian lines. During this time the government forbade the use of the German language, pastors were arrested and imprisoned and/or exiled, *Der Hausfreund* ceased to exist and the churches were closed.

When the Germans gradually returned at the end of the war, they found their homes, churches and villages ravaged by the war and the Galicians, who had been resettled to the area. Some were too disheartened to begin again and chose to move on to Germany. But the majority remained, reclaimed their buildings with the help of the German army, and set about the task of rebuilding their lives. In the next two decades they made a modest degree of recovery and soon the Baptist movement was thriving once again. This, in spite of the lack of workers, literature and finances, and the restricted travel of itinerate pastors due to the civil war. In 1922 there was a spiritual awakening in Volhynia that resulted in numerous conversions and baptisms, which gave a strong impetus to the movement.

In May 1925, after the *All-Ukrainian Union of Association of Baptists* was formed, the German Baptist section was given permission to publish its own religious periodical, open a seminary, issue a new hymnal and print calendars. In the latter part of September 1925, the German Baptists held their first and only General Conference in Odessa. Enthusiasm ran high. The leaders made ambitious plans for church growth and advancement, with the appointment of Daniel J. Pritzkau as evangelist-at-large. Clearly God was at work. By the end of the following year, there were 12 independent churches, 69 preaching stations, 49 choral groups, 14 youth groups and nine orchestras. The membership of baptized believers was 4,958. In addition, an estimated 10,750 men and women, including children, were involved in the life and blood of the church.



*Delegates to the All-Ukrainian Baptist Union, Odessa, November 1925*

But their success was short-lived. Less than a year later the Communist government attempted to root out religious belief by restricting church activities, especially those for children under 18 years of age, levying high taxes on pastors and limiting the use of



church buildings. During this time the plight of the German Baptists came to the attention of the *General Missionary Society of German Baptists of North America*, which sponsored an immigration program. As a result approximately 1,000 German Baptists from Volhynia immigrated to Western Canada.

In 1928 the German Baptists in Volhynia failed to gain permission to hold a second General Conference and *Der Familienfreund* (Friend of the Family), successor to *Der Hausfreund*, was forced to cease publication. Stalin's program of collectivization impoverished the German Baptists and brought severe suffering on the people. The repression, likewise, caused the German Baptists to become uneasy with each other and generally to become fearful of the future. The heaviest blow came in October 1930 when the GPU (Secret Police) arrested the three members of the executive branch of the German Baptist Union, Daniel W. Braun, G. P. Welias and R. J. Zimmerman and closed the doors to the seminary in Odessa. That for all practical purposes was the beginning of the end for the German Baptists.

The *Great Famine* in 1932-1933 brought further suffering on the German Baptists in Russian Volhynia, as it did on all religious groups. It wasn't long before pastors and church members were arrested and exiled or shot. By 1934 all, but one of the Baptist churches was closed. In 1937, during the *Great Terror*, many more German Baptists were arrested and shot. Three years later, in January 1940, the Baptist work in Polish Volhynia came to an abrupt halt with the resettlement of the Germans to Occupied Poland.

In 1941 to 1943, when the German army occupied Ukraine, the religious life of the German Baptists in Russian Volhynia was revived. Several established churches were reopened, including Neudorf and Zhitomir, and several new preaching points were established. Eduard A. Hornbacher, who returned from five years in Soviet labor camps just prior to the German invasion, deserves much of the credit for the spiritual awakening that took place in the Zhitomir region. During the two-year course of his ministry, he conducted many revivals and baptized over 400 people, some of which are still living to this day. But on November 11, 1943, with the retreat of the German army and the evacuation of the German people, the German Baptist work was destroyed a second time; this time for good, thus ending their 80-year history in Volhynia. Today there are no German Baptists in Ukraine. The movement has disappeared completely from official historiography.

#### **SOURCE NOTES**

Much of the material in this article comes from my own research which was published in my book, *In the Midst of Wolves: A History of German Baptists in Volhynia, Russia, 1863-1943*, 328 pages, (2000). In preparation for the book, I scoured the German periodicals *Der Hausfreund* (ca. 1889-1914) and *Der Familienfreund* (1926-1928) from beginning to end for primary information. I also availed myself of the writings of Dr. Albert W. Wardin, Jr. professor emeritus of Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee, who is an authority on Baptists in Russia. I am deeply indebted to him for his book, *Evangelical Sectarianism in the Russian Empire and the USSR: A Bibliographical Guide.* His one article alone, *Baptists (German) in Russia and USSR* was worth the whole book and was especially helpful in giving me a broad framework for the Baptist work.

His most recent book, *Gottfried F. Alf, Pioneer of the Baptist movement in Poland*, 2003, provided additional fodder for the article.

There are four other works by German Baptist authors that deserve attention for anyone wishing to dig into primary sources. They are *Geschichte der Baptisten in Polen*, (1932) by Eduard Kupsch, *Geschichte der Deutschen Baptisten in Polen von 1858-1945* (1973) by Robert L. Kluttig, *Hundert Jahre Deustcher Baptismus in Russland* by Edward A. Hornbacher (typed ms., 1969), and *The Story of a Preacher from Russia* (typed ms. 1951) by Emil J. Bonikowski.

## ENDNOTES

1. Wardin, Albert W. Jr. *Gottfried F. Alf: Pioneer of the Baptist Movement in Poland*, 2003, p. 78.
2. Anuta, Michael J., *The Beautiful People Czudnochowski*, 2000, p. 16.
3. Zhuk, Sergei I, *Russia's Lost Reformation*, 2004, p.401.
4. Bonikowski, Emil J. *The Story of a Preacher From Russia*, typed mss, 1951, p. 74.
5. See Gottfried K. Wessel's book, *Samotajewo*, 1998, p.109 for an eye-witness account of the Bolshevik crackdown on the German Baptist pastors.
6. From an article by Samuel J. Nesyoly entitled, *Baptists in Tsarist Russia*, in Wardin's book, *Evangelical Sectarianism in the Russian Empire and the USSR: A Bibliographical Guide* p. 207.
7. Wardin, *Evangelical Sectarianism in the Russian Empire and the USSR: A Bibliographical Guide*, p. 194.
8. Ibid.
9. *The German Baptist Confession of Faith* was a very detailed doctrinal statement. It was initially drawn up in 1837 by Johann G. Oncken, Julius Kobner, and G. W. Lehman, the famous "Clover-leaf" theologians of German Baptist history and presented to the German churches and pastors. However, it was not officially adopted until 1847. For an English translation of the confession, see *Baptist Confessions of Faith* by W. J. McGlothlin, 1911, p.330-354.
10. From an article by Albert W. Wardin, entitled, *Mennonite Brethren and German Baptists in Russia: Affinities and Dissimilarities* in the book *Mennonites and Baptists: A continuing Conversation by Paul Toews*, p. 98.
11. From a conversation with Adina Rentz (88), Andernach, Germany, in 1998, who was a member of the Neudorf church until 1932.
12. Wardin, *Evangelical Sectarianism in the Russian Empire and the USSR: A Bibliographical Guide*, pp. 195-196.

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