

About this Dutch Anabaptist Cultural Group
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The cultural group associated with the Netherlandic, or "Russian", Mennonites was born during the tumultuous period of the Anabaptist Movement in the early 16th century, stemming from the Protestant Reformation in the Lowland countries of western Europe. Viewed on a 21st century map this region encompasses parts of northern France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and parts of the Rhine River basin in western Germany. Foundational political and religious principles evolved as this Mennonite group established its identity: freedom of religion; separation of Church and State; exemption from military service; adult baptism; and disintermediation of the Clergy.

The Anabaptist movement posed a serious threat to the Church of Rome and the Holy Roman Empire. Fervent, violent attempts were made to stamp out the movement, driving congregants underground or sweeping them northward as the Inquisition sought out, captured and murdered Anabaptist heretics. The Mennonites fled through the northern territories of the Netherlands and into safer regions, such as the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth and the city of Danzig, where some religious toleration existed.

Danzig became a hub of Mennonite settlement, and other centers emerged, particularly in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, as the community expanded. Until the late 18th century these Mennonites were able to live according to their principles and succeed. In the latter half of the 18th century European political tensions and conflicts led to the partitioning and eventual dissolution of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth and some the most important privileges enjoyed by the Mennonites were lost, among them the unfettered right to acquire land and exemption from military service.

In the last years of the 18th century Imperial Russia, under Catherine the Great, began a program to encourage settlement by foreigners in the vast, western regions she had recently annexed. The Mennonite community regarded this as a salvation and carved out a new life on the steppes along the Dneiper River, beginning in the last decade of the 18th century.

For nearly a century these Mennonites lived in this region, the ancestral home of the Ukrainian people, able to abide by their principles. However, political encroachment on their systems of education and governance and threats to their deeply held principles caused a new migration, this time to North America. Many Mennonites came to Canada. They arrived in three waves, in the 1870s, 1890s and finally, following the upheaval of World War I, the Russian Revolution and the Ukrainian War of Independence, the 1920s.