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NATALIIA VENHER

Doctor of Historical Sciences, Associate Professor,
Professor of World History Department, Oles Honchar Dnipro National University
(Dnipro, Ukraine),
Research Associate,
Department of History, University of Winnipeg (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada)
n.venger@uwinnipeg.ca
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8898-5734>

RETHINKING RUSSIAN COLONIALISM IN SOUTHERN UKRAINE: A METHODOLOGICAL READING OF JOHN R. STAPLES' STUDY ON JOHANN CORNIES

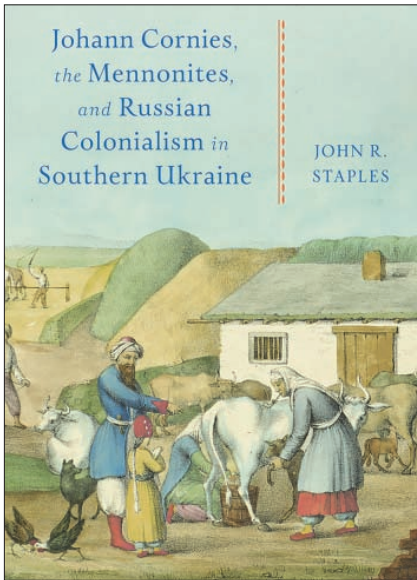
The **aim** of this review is to introduce the book by the American historian J. Staples¹ to Ukrainian readers and scholars. The study examines Johann Cornies, one of the leading figures of the Mennonite colonies established on Ukrainian lands in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Cornies's life and activities formed an integral part of the broader history of Ukraine during this period. It is emphasized that a key feature of Staples's research is his effort to interpret the region's history through the concept of settler colonialism — a framework that has previously been applied mainly to the history of states on the American continent.

Keywords: *American historiography on Ukraine, colonization of Ukraine, settler colonialism, Mennonites, Molochna colonies, Khortytsia colonies, Protestantism, Russian imperialism.*

¹ Staples, J.R. *Johann Cornies, the Mennonites, and the Russian Colonialism in Southern Ukraine*. University of Toronto Press, 2024. 344 p.

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Discussions over the interpretation of history constitute an integral part of the contemporary Russo-Ukrainian war. In this context, history — even when it concerns a relatively distant past — functions not only as an object of scholarly analysis but also as a field of ideological confrontation. These debates involve not only representatives of the historical schools of the countries engaged in the war, but also Western scholars, whose interpretations of the history of Ukraine and Ukrainian lands at various stages of their development reveal a wide spectrum of positions — ranging from the reproduction of imperial narratives to the recognition of Ukraine’s historical subjectivity and the uniqueness of the Ukrainian experience. This review introduces the last book by the American historian Prof. John Staples (State University of New York at Fredonia) [1—4], who consistently adopts a pro-Ukrainian position and acknowledges the specificity of Ukraine’s historical development. This monograph received an honorable mention for the 2024 Pritsak Book Prize, sponsored by Harvard Ukrainian Studies and awarded by ASEES 2.

The book addresses one of the key themes of Protestantism in Ukrainian lands — the history of Mennonite colonies and the personality of their principal leader, Johann Cornies (1789—1848). The study covers the events of the first half of the 19th century, a period of active colonization of southern Ukrainian lands, and offers a detailed analysis of the role of Mennonite colonies in the socio-economic development of the region. Particular attention is devoted to Johann Cornies as the leader of the colonies. Cornies remained, in formal terms, an ordinary colonist and never held a post within the imperial bureaucracy. Operating within the same structural constraints as other colonists, he attained considerable wealth and influence, residing in Orlovo village (not far from Zaporizhzhia), which was one of the most important Mennonite settlements in the Molochna region. Despite an existing body of historiography on Mennonite colonization, Cornies’s figure remains highly contested both within the history of the colonies and in the broader context of regional history — a fact that lends this work particular scholarly relevance. Thus, this work represents quite a rare case in which an American historian addresses Ukrainian readers with an analysis of an important episode in our history, thereby enriching our understanding of the past. It provides a balanced and objective analysis of the issue based on archival sources from the Ukrainian and Russian Federation’s archives, as well as Mennonite community materials.

In recent years, the name of Johann Cornies has appeared with increasing frequency in publications issued by the University of Toronto Press. Over the past decade, two sub-

² You can find the complete list of award winners on the website ASEES (<https://asees.org/news/2024-asees-prize-winners-announced/#0>).

stantial collections of Cornies's letters and papers have been published, edited by John R. Staples, Harvey L. Dyck, and Ingrid I. Epp [2; 3]. Against this backdrop, the appearance of John R. Staples's *Johann Cornies, the Mennonites, and Russian Colonialism in Southern Ukraine* is both timely and conceptually coherent. The book is devoted to the central figure of these earlier source publications while simultaneously extending their interpretive and analytical framework.

Despite its apparent generic clarity, the book resists easy classification within a single scholarly format. While the study is unquestionably biographical in nature, it presents the life of its protagonist in close relation to the history of the state and the region, thereby offering a multi-layered account of imperial policy, regional social and economic dynamics, and the life of Mennonite colonies as an integral component of the population of southern Ukraine during the period of its economic and political incorporation into the empire. In this sense, the monograph can be described as a "biography against the backdrop of an era," although this formulation, to some extent, applies to every serious biographical study. John Staples's book offers a conceptually rich analysis that systematically engages key theoretical frameworks of contemporary historiography, including Russian imperialism and settled colonialism as its manifestation, Protestantism (Mennonitism, Pietism), cameralism, absolutism, Susan Smith-Peter's notion of the "era of small reforms," as well as questions concerning the role of personality in historical processes. It is precisely this analytical depth that makes the work significant not only for specialists in Mennonite and Ukrainian history but also for scholars whose research focuses on the history of Eastern Europe. Russian Empire and Protestantism. From this perspective, the book is likely to attract attention and serve as an essential tool primarily for historians working on issues of imperial governance, regional incorporation, and colonial practices both at the Eastern European borderlands and in a broader global context.

The fact that the portrait of the southern Ukrainian lands is embedded within the conceptual framework of settler colonialism is particularly significant for scholars who continue to engage with the legacies of Soviet, post-Soviet, and contemporary Russian historiography, where the very concept of colonialism, when applied to imperial policy, remains largely rejected or marginalized. In this context, Staples's study stands out as especially important: he is among the first historians to consistently situate both the history of the region and the figure of Johann Cornies within the analytical framework of settled colonialism. It is striking how convincing and methodologically productive this approach proves to be when applied to the historical material of southern Ukraine within the Russian Empire.

This framework is evident at every stage of the policies applied to Mennonite and other settlements. As recognized in the literature, settled colonialism is not an act or event but a prolonged process characterized by several key features. First, it involves the deliberate relocation and establishment of settler communities in peripheral territories in order to consolidate control over them and to displace the autochthonous population. Second, it entails the sustained transformation of local resources and landscapes to serve the needs of settlers and imperial interests. Third, it includes the institutionalization of new social and economic structures, such as the creation of autonomous or semi-autonomous communities integrated into broader systems of imperial governance. Finally, settled colonialism

presupposes long-term interaction between settlers and local populations, encompassing the exchange of knowledge, cultural influence, and competition over resources, which together shape distinctive local social dynamics [6; 7]. Thus, the value of this book lies in providing a Mennonite case, which permits a deeper look at the evolution of colonial policy during the reigns of Alexander I and Nicholas I, as well as the transformation of politics during the early nationalism period (after 1831, when the concept of Official Nationality by S. Uvarov was implemented in the policy). Mennonites came to New Russia as representatives of the Russian colonial state, and they were expected to create a model community that would “civilize” Russia’s new colonial possessions. Although they were Russian colonists, they were not Russian and Orthodox. That is why, as the state changed its colonial policies, the Mennonite community found itself forced to defend its own cultural identity. In this sense, they were not merely colonists (settlers with privileges) but also colonial subjects. Through them, the Russian colonial enterprise is portrayed from both an insider’s and an outsider’s perspective on government policy.

It is important to note that, in this context, the author also brings key characteristics of other actors of the period to light. He constructs portraits of ministers (P.D. Kiselev, D.A. Miliutin), regional statesmen, administrators, and even scholars (Samuel Contenius, A.M. Fadeev, E. von Hahn, I.N. Inzov, Christian Steven, P.I. Keppen), with whom Johann Cornies communicated and whose activities proved significant for the development of the Ukrainian gubernias.

In the author’s analysis, Johann Cornies’s biography emerges as the product of the combined influence of multiple factors: his religious worldview (Mennonitism, Pietism), the impact of spiritual teachers (for instance, Daniel Schlatter), family circumstances, and his own developed understanding of service to God, the community (which is fundamentally important in the Mennonite context), and — perhaps to a lesser extent — to the state. The latter was not primary for Cornies: he fulfilled his obligations by acting according to the principle of “here and now,” approaching tasks pragmatically and responding to concrete goals and specific situations. As a result, the reader is presented with a kind of psychological analysis of a decision-making process shaped by a complex and often contradictory religious environment in the colonies, in which Cornies frequently found himself at a crossroads and was compelled to make measured, pragmatic choices. These decisions directly affected both his personal career and the future of the community as a whole.

Staples structures Cornies’s biography by delineating distinct stages of his career: a key leader of the Mennonite Settlement Commission and head of the Wool Improvement Society (1818—1828); head of the Forestry Society (1828—1834); leader of the Mennonites’ Agricultural Society (since 1836); and, in the final stage of his life, a direct agent of the state (after 1838). His career is situated by the author within successive phases of colonization, understood as a long and multilayered process of the 18th and 19th centuries. In Staples’ interpretation, colonization is not merely an act of resettlement but a constellation of processes of adaptation and acculturation, imbued with particular events and historical meaning.

As the author argues, Cornies’s unique experiences, ambitions, and insights made him both an insider and an outsider to the Mennonite community, the Russian state,

and the Western world. The case of Johann Cornies illustrates how Russian colonialism interacted with local elites: although the authorities could be remarkably tolerant toward them, this tolerance — as the so called Warkentin Affair showed off — had clear limits. Over time, Cornies established himself as the undisputed representative of state authority within the settlement. He was the first to recognize that the Mennonites could not easily disengage from the state; the only viable alternative was creative engagement that could preserve the most important Mennonite rights (*Privileges*) while advancing the state's primary objectives.

Over the course of his long and progressive career, Cornies implemented a series of major projects aimed at improving and modernizing the colonies and the region, all with a forward-looking perspective. These included the creation of the Wool Improvement Society; the collection of information on the Nogais Tatars, Doukhobors, and Molokans, who were close neighbors of the Mennonites. He initiated an education reform, including the establishment of a secular school with compulsory instruction in the state language. He also initiated programs in forestry and potato cultivation, introduced innovative agricultural techniques within the colonies and his own estates, including experimentation with a wide variety of new crops and a four-field crop rotation system. Cornies organized a training program for adolescents from nearby Ukrainian and Nogai settlements, teaching them agriculture and crafts as part of efforts to “civilize” his Nogai neighbors. Additionally, he oversaw the establishment of a crafts Mennonite village near Halbstadt (Molochansk) and provided expert advice on efforts to reform the Kalmyk Tatar community. Together, these initiatives demonstrate Cornies's role not only as a practical reformer but also as a forward-thinking agent of regional development and intercultural engagement. The combination of increasing the amount of land planted with grain and increasing the average yield from that land meant that by the end of the 1840s, the Molochnaia Mennonites were some of the most productive farmers in the empire. He used these accomplishments to justify Mennonite privileges.

Even the very list of projects demonstrates Cornies's boundless energy. He did not limit himself to the territory of the Molochna colonies; he was also involved in state affairs beyond Molochna. He was tasked with conducting a general survey of peasant conditions in the Caucasus, the Astrakhan guberniya, and the Sarepta Moravian Brethren settlement, as well as in the daughter Mennonite colonies (after 1830). Toward the end of his life (died in 1848), Cornies's responsibilities expanded beyond the Molochna settlement to include the Bergthal daughter settlement and the Khortytsia group of settlements, as well as the surrounding Slavic, Nogai, and Jewish populations. He was also at the forefront of initiatives to create mixed Jewish-Mennonite agricultural villages in New Russia.

In presenting the history of the region and the country through the prism of Cornies's life and being fully aware both of the scale of his subject and the contested nature of the related scholarly issues, Staples does not provide a definitive conclusion in a final chapter of his monograph. Although he is convinced that his interpretation of Cornies's biography is sound, he acknowledges that it can be debated by other scholars, for example, the Mennonite historiography. In this respect, he consciously leaves space for further inquiry and, by outlining a broader range of questions, essentially passes the baton to other researchers,

possibly including members of the Mennonite historiographical community. This approach reflects the author's intellectual honesty and scholarly courage, lending the work particular persuasiveness while giving the subject under study both dynamism and prospect.

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Наталія ВЕНГЕР

докторка історичних наук, доцентка,
професорка кафедри всесвітньої історії,
Дніпровський національний університет імені Олеся Гончара (м. Дніпро, Україна),
наукова співробітниця,
кафедра історії, Університет Вінніпегу (Вінніпег, Манітоба, Канада)

ПЕРЕОСМИСЛЮЮЧИ РОСІЙСЬКИЙ КОЛОНІАЛІЗМ НА ПІВДНІ УКРАЇНИ: МЕТОДОЛОГІЧНЕ ПРОЧИТАННЯ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ДЖОНА Р. СТЕЙПЛАСА, ПРИСВЯЧЕНЕ ДІЯЛЬНОСТІ ЙОГАННА КОРНІСА

Мета публікації — презентувати українським читачам і науковцям книгу американського історика Дж. Стейпласа. Дослідження присвячене Йоганну Корнісу, одному з лідерів менонітських колоній, що були засновані на українських землях наприкінці XVIII — на початку XIX ст. Життя та діяльність Корніса справили значний вплив на розвиток України у цей період. Особливо підкреслюється, що ключовою рисою дослідження Дж. Стейпласа є його прагнення інтерпретувати історію регіону через концепт так званого переселенського колоніалізму, який раніше застосовувався здебільшого до інтерпретації історії США та Канади.

Ключові слова: українські студії в американській історіографії, колонізація України, переселенський колоніалізм, меноніти, Молочанські колонії, Хортицькі колонії, протестантизм, російський імперіалізм.