

Mennonitische Vergangenheitsbewältigung: Prussian Mennonites, the Third Reich, and Coming to Terms with a Difficult Past

by James Peter Regier

James Regier is a 2003 Bethel College Graduate. This article is an adaptation of his Social Science Seminar paper. Interest for the topic was inspired by his father, whose family was among those who fled Danzig at the end of the Second World War. James resides in Newton, Kansas.

Before the Second World War, there were some 12,000 Mennonites in Prussia. Shortly after the war's end, there were none. Soviet forces had driven them out, along with millions of other German nationals east of the Oder River, in vengeance for the many atrocities of the German Nazi regime. Surely the Mennonites, of all people who lived east of the Oder River, could have been spared this brutality. Mennonites had traditionally eschewed worldly government, abhorred the ideals of nationalism, and detested militarism, all ideals that fascism brought to the forefront.

It may be surprising, then, to learn that Prussian Mennonites had supported Nazism, embraced nationalism, and served in Germany's armies during the Second World War. Thus, it is rather absurd to view the Prussian Mennonites as innocent victims. However, it is also overly simplistic to condemn them for their support of the Nazi party without thorough examination of surrounding circumstances they faced. In the end, the Mennonites still formed a church of believers, kept adult baptism, and held a separate identity of sorts, but to do so, they sacrificed their traditional ideals of pacifist nonresistance and in-but-not-of-the-world theology.

The Prussian Mennonite embrace of National Socialism did not happen overnight. The Mennonites emerged under the leadership of Menno Simons from the much larger Anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century. The Mennonite Church was characterized as a visible church of believers. The high biblical standards demanded of its members meant that only those deemed mature enough to understand, accept, and follow them were allowed membership. Its confession of faith therefore prohibited further involvement in any official state church, and even denied the authority of the state when the state's commands differed from those found in the Bible. Among other things, Mennonites refused to take up the sword. Not surprisingly, Mennonites did not find favor among secular authorities. Thus, when the Mennonites first arrived in the Vistula Delta during the sixteenth century, they came as religious exiles from Belgium and Holland, where their faith was not accepted. Far from nationalistic, the Mennonites practiced an in-yet-not-of-the-world theology.

However, their ideals of nonresistance proved difficult to maintain when their homeland along the Vistula came under Prussian rule during the first partition of Poland in 1772. At the time, they managed to secure an agreement with King Frederick II, allowing them to avoid military service through paying a military tax, as outlined in a Toleration Edict of 1780. This was followed in 1789 with Frederick William II's Edict Concerning the Future of Mennonites. With this edict came severe restrictions against land acquisition for those who refused military service. The growing economic oppression against Mennonites left many unable to obtain land, and thus doomed them to poverty and an increased desire to emigrate. A door was opened in 1787 when Catherine the Great invited Mennonites to settle in Russia. They went, founding numerous colonies in the Ukraine. ⁽¹⁾

Those who chose to stay in Prussia were subjected to severe economic persecution for their refusal of military service. With the nineteenth century came a much stronger push for nationalism and patriotism

across Europe. Thus, in addition to economic persecution from the government, they experienced verbal persecution from their neighbors, **who referred to them as stateless cowards**. The growing pressures simply did not permit Mennonites to resist and isolate themselves from this movement, and as a result, their theology began to make a gradual shift away from isolation in favor of integration. In their desire to play a more active role as equals in German society, they increased their political activity. Military involvement also increased. No longer simply limiting themselves to paying military taxes, some Mennonites even joined the military in full combatant roles as early as the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. ⁽²⁾

By the time of the German Reich's establishment in 1871, Mennonites had largely given up their nonresistant status, choosing instead to become "good" patriots as their fellow citizens had, and to serve in the Kaiser's armies. However, their military service remained limited to noncombatant roles. ⁽³⁾ The two conflicting Mennonite desires, on the one hand to integrate into Prussian society, and on the other to maintain a separate religious identity, proved incompatible with one another. ⁽⁴⁾ **If the Mennonites were indeed to embrace nationalism, they had to embrace militarism with it, for the two went hand in hand.**

Not only did the Mennonites begin to integrate themselves into the German Reich, **but they began to adopt main-line Protestant theologies as well**. An increasing number of Mennonite pastors were educated at Protestant universities, and intermarriage with Protestants greatly enhanced and expedited this realignment of faith. ⁽⁵⁾ Individual faith identity began to take precedence over community identity, helping to pave the way for military service to become a choice made by individual members. As of November 29, 1886, Article 7 of the Danzig Mennonite Church Constitution was changed to read, **"Whenever the fatherland requires military service, we allow the individual conscience of each member to serve in that form which satisfies him most."** ⁽⁶⁾

Not wanting to appear as cowards and face the scorn and ridicule of their neighbors, most Mennonites chose to serve **their Volk und Vaterland (people and fatherland)** actively and fully, no longer limiting themselves to noncombatant roles. While there were certainly individuals who objected, the general movement of Prussian Mennonites toward militarism was solid. It was, after all, with pride that the Mennonite *Vereinigung*, or the conference of Prussian Mennonites, noted that 10% of all Mennonites, numbering approximately 2000, served their country in World War I. Of those 2000, 400 died for their country as "heroes." The break with nonresistance, at least regarding military service, seemed to be complete. ⁽⁷⁾ At this point, there are those who would argue that the Prussian Mennonite Church itself may have ceased to exist had it not been for an increase in pietism and rationalism. These two elements, however, allowed the Prussian Mennonite Church, at least as an institution, to go through a sort of mutation that permitted its survival, even as it abandoned its original values of nonresistance and theology of separation from the world. ⁽⁸⁾

World War I ended in German defeat, and the Treaty of Versailles, written without German representation, shaped the post-war world. Although it was conceived as a treaty to end all conflicts through its attempts to settle questions of nationalism by the creation of nation states, in reality it helped to ensure further conflicts. Not only did it level a tremendous reparation charge on Germany, but it also carved new nation-states out of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Specifically, the Prussian Mennonites saw their homeland of East and West Prussia divided into three separate countries: about a third went to the Free State of Danzig, another third went to Poland, and only one third remained within the German Reich as East Prussia. Not only did this partition result in an administrative problem for the Prussian Mennonite Church, it virtually destroyed the Mennonite farming industry as farmers saw their formerly domestic markets disappear behind international borders with high tariffs, which were largely put in place by the Polish government. ⁽⁹⁾ While farmers, in contrast to the rest of Germany's

population, never found themselves unemployed, their situation was nevertheless poor. Their debts increased and industrialization lessened their significance as a group. These factors would only be worsened with the crash of the stock market in 1929. ⁽¹⁰⁾

The Weimar Republic turned out to be a mixed blessing for the Mennonites. They successfully petitioned the Weimar government for official recognition as an independent, incorporated church. This newly gained status of equality among other religions in Germany offered the Mennonites several benefits, the most tangible of which was an exemption from church taxes. On the other hand, facing their economic difficulties, many felt that the Weimar Republic was really too weak to address the problems confronting the Reich. Moreover, they mourned the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm, under whose reign they had prospered. ⁽¹¹⁾

News flowing in from their coreligionists in Russia added to the distress of the Prussian Mennonites. The Russian Mennonites, many of whom were wealthy farmers, fared rather poorly at the hands of bandits during the Russian Revolution, and later under the Bolsheviks, who were intent on punishing them for their success. Thus, it should be of little surprise that the Prussian Mennonites began to develop very strong anti-communist sentiments. ⁽¹²⁾

In addition to changes in the political and economic climates, there were also changes in theology. Mennonites had developed a more mainstream-Protestant mentality, one in which the state was viewed as the ordained keeper and promoter of God's order in the world. In a Germany without a strong central government, the call came ever louder for such a government to take over. Such a theological development can be shown among Mennonites simply by looking into increased usage of the book of Romans, specifically Romans 13, which calls for Christians to serve and obey the state. ⁽¹³⁾ Perhaps the feeling of the times was best summarized by the 1929 New Year's sermon of Erich Göttner of Danzig:

In the middle of all this ambiguity and uncertainty, which looms over today's economic, political and social life; in the middle of this tangle of conflicting opinions about spirituality, morality, and religion, we go on into the New Year... We find certainty and a sturdy foundation for our life only in the eternal God, who stands over all changes in earthly form and changes of human contemplation. We must ask Him for a way and a direction for the New Year in this so often pathless and aimless time, in which we are in danger of chasing after first this, then that light, a way out of this misery does seem to be promised, be it a new economic or educational program, or be it the emergence of a new philosophical movement. ⁽¹⁴⁾

In other words, misery and hopelessness had reached such a state among the Mennonites that they were willing to embrace anything promising relief as direct divine intervention. Unrest with the Weimar Republic had reached a boiling point. Democracy had proven too weak to serve their needs. Fears of Communism ran rampant amongst Mennonites. As these two options for government were wholly unacceptable, Prussian Mennonites began looking for a third. Thus, they found themselves voting either for the German National Party or for the Nazi Party. ⁽¹⁵⁾

When the Nazis did come to power in 1933, farming debts were immediately canceled, and all agricultural imports were stopped, thus placing German farmers into a privileged class. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Fears of communism were laid to rest as Nazi stormtroopers swept Communists off the streets and into concentration camps. ⁽¹⁷⁾ Additionally, the *Vereinigung* saw hope for reunification, as the NSDAP promised to put the German Reich back together again. As a result, Hitler and the Nazis enjoyed initial popularity among the Mennonites. The Mennonites of East and West Prussia sent an official greeting to the new *Reichskanzler* (Imperial Chancellor) Adolf Hitler on September 10, 1933:

Those gathered here today at the meeting of the Conference of East and West Prussian Mennonites in

Tiegenhagen within the Free City of Danzig, feel with deep gratitude the great uplifting that God gave our people through your strength of will, and pledge, for our part, joyful cooperation in the building of our Fatherland from the power of the Gospel, faithfully from the Motto of our fathers: Other foundation can no man lay, other than that which is already laid, Jesus Christ.⁽¹⁸⁾

This statement revealed a major contradiction in the Mennonite support for the Nazi party. The Bible verse, I Corinthians 3:11, which could perhaps be considered the corner stone of the Mennonite faith, clearly indicates that all things must have Jesus as their foundation. Yet even in these early stages, there were strong signs of the Nazis rapidly developing into a totalitarian government, with the *Führer* as its foundation. Nevertheless, in the light of hardships faced in the Weimar Republic, often criticized for its weakness and impotence, Prussian Mennonites welcomed the Nazis' efficiency and effectiveness, even with evidence of totalitarian tendencies.⁽¹⁹⁾

An official response from Hitler thanked the Prussian Mennonites for their "true spirit and readiness to cooperate."⁽²⁰⁾ It is important to note, though, that this sort of enthusiastic support for Hitler was not universal for the Mennonites throughout Germany. His policies found much stronger support within the *Vereinigung* of Prussia than they did among the *Verband* of South Germany.⁽²¹⁾

There was a strong spiritual aspect to the support of the Nazi Party in the beginning. The Mennonites had been searching for a several things: an improved farming economy, a stronger central government, and the permanent prevention of communism. Adolf Hitler offered a comprehensive solution. However, it was evident, even in these early times of celebration, that Hitler's policies could, in fact, be quite detrimental to the existence of the Mennonite church. Trouble began in March of 1933, when the 29 Protestant *Staatskirchen* (state churches) were amalgamated into one *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (DEK), or German Evangelical Church. All church activities were to come directly under the control of the *Reichsbischof* (Imperial Bishop) under the *Führerprinzip*, or the idea that all activities should be centrally structured under *Reich* leadership.⁽²²⁾ The *Reichsbischof* was answerable directly to Hitler.⁽²³⁾

At this point, amalgamation was limited to the state churches, but there were plans to encompass the *Freikirchen*, or free churches as well. If this happened, it would include the Mennonites. Even before the DEK was established, the *Evangelische Kirchen* were drawing members from among the Mennonites, thus thinning their ranks. An indication of the level of threat to Mennonite existence, the Mennonite Church of Danzig faced the possibility of having to integrate into the *Evangelische Kirche* even before the laws forming the DEK were passed.⁽²⁴⁾ While the Mennonites did show their support for the NSDAP, full integration remained absolutely out of the question for them. In an article in the September, 1933 edition of the *Mennonitische Blätter*, Emil Händiges of Prussia clarified the Mennonite stance as follows "Hands off the German free churches! Hands off the German Mennonites!"⁽²⁵⁾

In a desperate attempt to preserve Mennonite identity against the threat of this new amalgamation, the Mennonites of East Prussia, Danzig, and the Rhine came together in an attempt to show, through unity, that "we are not fringe sects, but that we take the current situation seriously." Under their proposal, the independently operating Mennonite churches would merge into the new *Deutsche Mennonitische Gemeindekirche*, or German Mennonite Congregational Church, which was to have one common confession of faith. A common confession was viewed as vital to maintain a separate existence within the Third Reich.⁽²⁶⁾

The unification of all Mennonite congregations proved impossible because there were too many internal differences. The congregations in the north proved more nationalist, whereas the southern congregations were more pious. Thus, attempts at unification and finding a common confession of faith

resulted in failure.⁽²⁷⁾ The Mennonite church's institutional existence, however, never came directly under threat from the NSDAP. After consolidating the state churches, the assimilation of the free churches into the DEK became unnecessary. The Mennonites' status as a "fringe sect" had, in fact saved them, as it made them too small for any real concern from the *Reich*.⁽²⁸⁾

The Mennonites wanted to maintain their own identity, but found it increasingly difficult to do so within the background of the Third Reich. Certainly the dissolution of a Hutterite colony and deportation of its members from Germany in 1936 for their "Bolshevist-like" tendencies of communal living inspired fear that similar action could be taken against the Mennonites if they did not watch their step. The Hutterites, after all, had their roots in the same Anabaptist movement as the Mennonites. The *Vereinigung* of the north and the *Verband* of the south thus joined together in publishing a general Mennonite denial of any association with the Hutterites: "The Hutterites belonged neither to the *Vereinigung* of German Mennonite Churches, nor to any other organization within our Free German Mennonite Church."⁽²⁹⁾

Additional challenges came with the issue of military involvement. The Anabaptist movement has historically been plagued with lack of acceptance and intolerance from the surrounding community and government. The Prussian Mennonites had long tried to integrate into and gain acceptance within the German community, an attempt that led to splits and fissures among the Mennonites themselves. One can only imagine the wounds that must have been awakened in 1935, when NSDAP administrator Reinhard Heydrich made the following observation:

The Mennonites stand with the other Christian churches in rejecting National Socialist ideas on race and instead emphasize our spiritual community above the people's community. But beyond that, however, this sect stands for pacifism and against the swearing of oaths, in conscious contradiction to National Socialism. After careful analysis, the participants in this Sect cannot, at the same time, belong to the SS-family.⁽³⁰⁾

While there was certainly legitimacy to the arguments regarding opposition to oaths and Nazi race policies, both of which will be addressed later, Heydrich's ideas about Mennonite objection to military service were outdated. Some 2,000 Mennonites had already served during the First World War, and 400 died in active combat duty. The views expressed by Pastor Kraemer of Krefeld, that the Sermon on the Mount applied to individuals and did not be extend to the state, also promoted the old, non-Mennonite idea that "even the most pious cannot remain in peace if the evil neighbors don't permit it."⁽³¹⁾ Thus, the *Vereinigung* of Mennonites had decided already in 1933 that calls to military service would not be resisted, and that Mennonites would no longer seek special privileges in this matter.⁽³²⁾ As recorded by the June 1934 edition of the *Mennonitische Blätter*, military nonresistance was officially erased from the Mennonite confession.⁽³³⁾

As a result, no Prussian Mennonite refused the call to serve. Mennonite boys wore their German uniforms with pride and viewed the service of their country as an honorable duty.⁽³⁴⁾ In the Mennonite church of Heubuden, for example, out of a congregation of about 2,500, some 200-250 young men fought in uniform.⁽³⁵⁾ Mennonites fully supported the war, with the *Mennonitische Blätter* extolling the virtues of the German armies, and praising God for their victories in the battlefields.⁽³⁶⁾

Mennonites abandoned *Wehrlosigkeit*, or defenselessness, as a principle, if not as a concept. Many Mennonites who served in the German forces claim to have remained *Wehrlos im Herzen*, or defenseless in their hearts. On the one hand, they wanted to see Germany's success in the war, and they wanted to defend their homeland, but they maintained a strong belief that the fifth Commandment should apply to wartime, as well. Thus, a certain Mr. Fuchs of Neudorferhof, who served in the

German military on the eastern front, could make the following claim in a 1959 interview: "I am glad that I did not have to kill anyone in the war."⁽³⁷⁾ These claims were matched by the humbler claim from a Mr. Suttor of Ingoldstadt, "I myself was undeservingly lucky in the war, and did not need to fire upon any person."⁽³⁸⁾

At least from an official stance, *Wehrlosigkeit* was given up for the duration of the Second World War. Actions and statements of the *Vereinigung* during the Nazi years provided clear indication that they abandoned the concept of being in-yet-not-of-the-world in favor of nationalism. *Wehrlosigkeit* had not been a necessary part of the Mennonite confession of faith since the formation of the German Reich in the late nineteenth century. The idea of complete and total conformity to the state was new with the 1940 declaration of the *Vereinigung*: "The Conference will not do anything that would even have the faintest appearance of opposing the policies of our leader."⁽³⁹⁾

Despite this confession, the Mennonite church remained determined to preserve its own identity. Not everything within the confession of faith was rewritten to conform to the wishes of the Third Reich. One example of a policy compromise worked out by the *Vereinigung* was the oath. The problem became serious in 1937 and 1938 when the Nazis no longer accepted a simple affirmation from those registering with the Reich for military service.⁽⁴⁰⁾ A simple substitution resolved the problem. "*Ich schwöre*," or "I swear," was replaced with "*Ich gelobe*," or "I solemnly promise."⁽⁴¹⁾ The Mennonites were thereby able to preserve their stance against the swearing of oaths while still fitting in with the Third Reich. Some, however, viewed this achievement as dark irony:

It sounds like--certainly unintentional--irony, that one would, in these circumstances, make such a request to permit leaving a call to God out of a vow. In fact, it would seem that God himself would thereby be taken out of play. Instead of raising the hand to swear, which nevertheless could have been a reminder of the three-in-one God, one wants to raise his hand only in German greeting. That here one would appeal for freedom of conscience forces one to allow one's own conscience to be bound to the *Führer*. Here, the refusal to swear an oath had become a farce.⁽⁴²⁾

This view of the situation had some merit. The opposition to the oath offered no real opposition to the Nazi government. While it technically changed the loyalty statements to affirmations as opposed to oaths, it made no practical difference. Such a change, which represented opposition on a religious level, yet offered none on a political level, represented no threat to the Nazi agenda, and was therefore easily permissible.⁽⁴³⁾

Although officially there was no Mennonite resistance to the policies of the Nazi regime, it is important to note that there were individuals who refused to obey all policies, a clear example of which can be found in the failure among many Mennonites to carry out racist policies. Pastor Göttner of Danzig referred to these movements as "demonic" in one of his sermons, warning that, "Through this dogma of the divinity of blood as a spiritual driving force, the origin of souls is ignored. God is not only the creator of races, but the lord over all creation."⁽⁴⁴⁾

Not only did their theology view such racism as wrong, but on a more practical level, the Mennonites had developed good business relationships with the Jews of Prussia. Many Mennonites relied on Jews to market their crops and supply them with implements. Additionally, Mennonites visited the Jews as trusted doctors, lawyers, and merchants who often offered the Mennonites better deals than their competition.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The remarks of *Landrat* Walter Neufeld offer clarification:

There was generally no anti-Semitism among the Mennonites. However, there was maybe a certain anti-Zionism, that is to say, a fear that Judaism could strive for world domination. But the Mennonite churches did not preach against the Jews either. If the Mennonites were anti-Semitic, we would not

have dealt with the partially Jewish owned Anker and Sedig Firm.⁽⁴⁶⁾

The anti-Semitic ideals of the Nazis were simply insufficient to convince the Mennonites that their trusted business colleagues were inferior. Furthermore, seeing Jewish persecution concerned many Mennonites.⁽⁴⁷⁾ There are many stories that demonstrate Mennonite refusal to accept racist policies of the Third Reich, from offering services banned to Jews under law to verbally rebuking vigilante mobs who harassed Jews and looted their homes and businesses. Many Mennonites had Jewish inmates from the Stutthof concentration camp working on their farms under relatively favorable conditions.⁽⁴⁸⁾ This position of outrage and resistance would only be strengthened with the events of the *Reichskristallnacht* on 9 November, 1938, during which SS and SA forces, along with members of the *Hitlerjugend*, or Hitler Youth, ransacked Jewish owned businesses, homes, and synagogues. As with many other Germans, these events "opened the eyes of many Mennonites."⁽⁴⁹⁾

It should be noted, however, that Mennonites would only help Jews if it did not put their own lives in jeopardy. Thus, there was neither open deviation from mainstream German Protestant views regarding Jews, nor direct action against the Nazi policy through protests or other resistance. Mennonite assistance to Jews was only offered in such a framework that it would not draw negative attention to them and thereby threaten their existence individually or as a community.

In return, the Third Reich left the religious structure and worship of the Mennonites largely undisturbed. Congregational activity continued more or less normally. Although the Gestapo checked on the content of sermons on a regular basis, they canceled no service. Church attendance remained fairly constant, and the congregations held their numbers with few exceptions, those being through marriages or through necessity because of joining the NSDAP.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The Mennonite value of service remained strong throughout, with numerous examples of Mennonites not only helping Jews, but bombing victims and the hungry as well, as evidenced by generous support for the *Brüder in Not*, or Brothers in Need service organization.⁽⁵¹⁾

In order to strengthen unity and community within Germany, Mennonites initiated the *Deutscher Mennonitentag*, which was an annual one-day meeting for Mennonites from all over Germany from 1935 to 1940. One of the *Mennonitentag*'s greatest achievements was the establishment of the *Mennonitische Jugendwarte* newsletter under the editorship of Walter Fellmann, pastor of the Monsheim-Obersülzen congregation. The *Mennonitische Jugendwarte* was distributed among Mennonite youth groups and offered discussion and insight in a calm, measured manner to the questions of the day.⁽⁵²⁾

The *Jugendwarte* was published as a direct response to the *Hitlerjugend*, or Hitler Youth, an organization that Mennonite leadership feared was encroaching on Mennonite interests.⁽⁵³⁾ These suspicions were not unfounded. The *Hitlerjugend* lured many youth away from churches. Hitler's intent was all too clear: "I can't break the Church over [my] knee. It has to be left to rot like a gangrenous limb... but the healthy youth belong to us."⁽⁵⁴⁾ The *Mennonitische Jugendwarte* organized and kept the youth in the church. In so doing, Mennonites were able to maintain and secure an identity separate from the DEK, thwarting Hitler's wishes without offering punishable resistance.⁽⁵⁵⁾

As distinct as the Mennonite identity may have appeared on paper, it was not quite so easy to distinguish in reality. The official Mennonite stances, as published in the *Mennonitische Blätter*, continued to support the Third Reich, and to encourage military service, calling for Mennonites to "lay their life down for their friends."⁽⁵⁶⁾ The German armies and war effort were strongly praised by the *Vereinigung* in 1938 with the *Anschluß* of Austria, and in 1939 after Germany's conquest of Poland, allowing the Free City of Danzig's assimilation into the Reich. Finally reunited as one nation under one

government and seemingly economically secure, the Prussian Mennonites praised this reunification as nothing short of the merciful will of God. As Emil Händiges, of the *Vereinigung* noted:

Our German peoples have endured unspeakable difficulties under the Polish yoke during its twenty-year foreign rule. The most difficult at the end. Then God, the Lord, helped them through the hand of our *Führer* and freed them. We thank our *Führer* for this act of liberation. ⁽⁵⁷⁾

The *Blätter* printed similar articles after victories in France, and government advertisements and propaganda supporting the war effort became commonplace. References to the Book of Revelation and analogies to the apocalypse appeared with increasing frequency. Although forcibly discontinued by the Nazis for publishing an anti-war Christmas sermon in 1941, the South German Mennonite newspaper, *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten* also printed numerous articles pointing to a German victory as predicted in Revelation. ⁽⁵⁸⁾

With the invasion of the Soviet Union, the tide turned. Realizing the difficulties experienced by German forces, Ukrainian Mennonites began to evacuate and resettle with their coreligionists in the Vistula Delta as early as 1943, and continuing into 1945. ⁽⁵⁹⁾ The Prussian Mennonites could not keep their homes for much longer, either. Starting in late 1944, and continuing for the next few years immediately thereafter, some eight million Germans, including all Mennonites, were evacuated or expelled from their homes in the areas east of the Oder River. ⁽⁶⁰⁾

Thanks to the help of agencies such as the Mennonite Central Committee, the Prussian Mennonites were largely able to rebuild from their total loss faced at the end of the Second World War. However, their former Prussian homeland, along with their many fallen coreligionists, remains a bitter memory. As a result, Mennonite theology returned its focus to suffering and martyrdom. Having lost so much at the end seems to have allowed Mennonites to focus on their tremendous losses and avoid addressing the tougher issues of their Nazi support and service in German armies. In reemphasizing martyrdom, some Mennonites hid from their past and therefore did not come to terms with it. ⁽⁶¹⁾

Emil Händiges offered his public repentance at the Fourth Mennonite World Conference in 1948. Referring to such Anabaptist and Mennonite founders as Conrad Grebel, Thomas Müntzer, and Menno Simons, Händiges recalled that the movement had, among other things, been founded on a dogma of nonresistance. ⁽⁶²⁾ He showed the eventual movement away from this stance, in the end concluding that it was a series of flawed decisions based upon gradual adaptation to governmental requirement. Recalling the compromise offered to Mennonites by the Prussian government on March 3, 1868, he requested the newly formed federal government to once again offer everyone the privilege to conscientiously refuse combatant military service. ⁽⁶³⁾

It seems then, that the biggest flaw of the Mennonites was not any immediate error. Instead, it was the natural consequence of years of gradual theological adaptations and compromises to better fit within the German community. When National Socialism came, the Mennonites no longer had the capacity to resist. Since 1945, martyrdom and nonresistance has returned to German Mennonite theology. At the same time, Germany as a whole has attempted to distance itself from its past through a greater embrace of social democracy and pacifism. This seems to have produced an environment that appears somewhat better suited to allow German Mennonites to hold on to their important aspects of theology while still actively participating as citizens. Therefore, German Mennonites do indeed seem to have gained a new sense of purpose, and are able to find acceptance among their neighbors without having to compromise their principles.

Notes

1. Steven Mark Schroeder, "Prussian Mennonites in the Third Reich and Beyond: The Uneasy Synthesis of National and Religious Myths" (Master's Thesis: University of British Columbia, 2001), 10.
2. Schroeder, "Prussian Mennonites," 11.
3. Diether Goetz Lichdi, "The Story of Nazism and its Reception by German Mennonites," *Mennonite Life* 36, no. 1 (April 1981), 25.
4. Schroeder, "Prussian Mennonites," 27.
5. Lichdi., "Nazism," 26.
6. Emil Händiges, "Catastrophe of the West Prussian Mennonites," in *Proceedings of the Fourth Mennonite World Conference, Goshen, Indiana, and North Newton, Kansas, August 3-10, 1948* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1950), 126.
7. Lichdi, "Nazism," 26.
8. Schroeder, "Prussian Mennonites," 10.
9. Ibid., 13.
10. Lichdi. "Nazism," 28.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 27.
14. Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "Nationale Erhebung und Religiöser Niedergang," *Mennonitsche Geschichtsblätter* 31 (1974): 63-64. Original text from Erich Göttner (All translations are my own): "Mitten in all der Unklarheit und Ungewissheit, die über dem heutigen wirtschaftlichen, politischen, gesellschaftlichen Leben liegt, die auf geistlichem, sittlichem, religiösem Gebiete miteinander ringen, gehen wir in das neue Jahr hinein... Gewissheit, festen Grund für unser Leben finden wir nur bei dem ewigen Gott, der über allem Wandel irdischer Formen, allem Wechsel menschlicher Anschauung steht. Ihn müssen wir um Weg und Ziel für das neue Jahr bitten in dieser oft so weglosen und ziellosen Zeit, in der wir bald diesem, bald jenem Lichte nachzulaufen in Gefahr sind, das uns einen Weg aus der not zu verheißten scheint, sei es ein neues Wirtschafts- oder Erziehungsprogramm, sei es eine neue auftauchende Weltanschauungsbewegung."
15. Schroeder, "Prussian Mennonites," 14.
16. Lichdi, "Nazism." 25.
17. Ibid., 26.
18. Goertz, "Nationale Erhebung," 64. "Die heute zu Tiegenghagen im Freistaate Danzig tagende Konferenz der Ost- und Westpreußischen Mennoniten empfindet mit tiefer Dankbarkeit die gewaltige Erhebung, die Gott durch Ihre tatkraft unserem Volk geschenkt hat und gelobt auch ihrerseits freudige Mitarbeit am Aufbau unseres Vaterlandes aus den kräften des Evangeliums heraus, getreu dem Wahlspruch unserer Väter: Einen andern Grund kann niemand legen außer dem, der gelegt ist, welcher ist Jesus Christus."
19. Ibid., 65.
20. Lichdi, "Nazism," 28.

21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 26.
23. Goertz, "National Erhebung," 68.
24. Ibid., 72.
25. Emil Händiges, "Zur Kirchen Frage der Mennoniten," *Mennonitische Blätter* 81, no. 9 (September 1933): 86. Original quotation "Hände weg vom Deutschen Freikirchentum! Hände weg vom Deutschen Mennoniten!"
26. Emil Händiges. "Zur Kirchen Frage," 115. "Wir sind keine Winkelsekte, sondern wir nehmen die heutige Lage ernst."
27. Goertz, "National Erhebung," 70.
28. Lichdi, "Nazism," 26.
29. Schroeder, "Prussian Mennonites," 18. Original Quotation: "Die Bruderhöfer gehörten weder der Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden noch einem anderen Verband unserer deutschen mennonitischen Freikirche an."
30. Goertz, "Nationale Erhebung," 61. "Die Ablehnung des nationalsozialistischen Rassegedankens und die Hervorhebung der Gemeinschaft des Evangeliums gegenüber der Volksgemeinschaft haben die Mennoniten mit den christlichen Kirchen gemeinsam. Darüber hinaus steht diese Sekte jedoch durch ihre pazifistische und eidesgegnerische Einstellung in bewusstem Gegensatz zum Nationalsozialismus. Nach hiesiger Einsicht können daher Anhänger dieser Sekte nicht gleichzeitig Angehörige der SS-Sippengemeinschaft sein."
31. Gustav Kraemer, *Wir und Unsere Volksgemeinschaft* (Krefeld: Consistorium der Mennonitengemeinde Krefeld. 1938), 18. "...daß der Frömmste nicht im Frieden bleiben kann, wenn es dem bösen Nachbarn nicht gefällt."
32. Lichdi, "Nazism." 28.
33. Emil Händiges, "Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden: Eine Notwendige Berichtigung," *Mennonitische Blätter* 81, No. 6 (June 1934): 6.
34. Goertz, "Nationale Erhebung," 71.
35. Bruno Ewert, "Four Centuries of Prussian Mennonites," *Mennonite Life* 3, No. 2 (April 1948): 16.
36. Schroeder, "Prussian Mennonites," 25.
37. Diether Götz Lichdi, *Mennoniten im Dritten Reich: Dokumentation und Deutung*, (Weierhof, Germany: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1977), 137. Original quotation: "Ich bin froh, daß ich im Krieg niemand zu töten brauchte."
38. Ibid. "Selbst hatte ich im Krieg unverdientes Glück und brauchte auf keinen Menschen zu schießen."
39. Goertz. "National Erhebung" 84. Original quotation: "Die Konferenz wird nichts tun, was den Anschein eines Huches gegen die Politik unseres Führers enthält."
40. Händiges, "Catastrophe," 4.
41. Goertz, "National Erhebung," 77.
42. Ibid. Heinold Fast: "Es klingt wie--sicher unbeabsichtigte---Ironie, wenn man in diesem Zusammenhang den Antrag stellte, die Anrufung Gottes im Gelöbnis weglassen zu dürfen. Tatsächlich

ließ man damit Gott selber aus dem Spiel. Statt die Hand zum Schwur zu erheben, was immerhin noch eine Erinnerung an den Dreieinigen Gott hätte sein können, wollte man die Hand zum deutschen Gruß heben. Indem man sich im Schlußsatz auf die Freiheit des Gewissens berief, beantragte man, das eigene Gewissen an den Führer binden zu dürfen. Hier war die Eidesverweigerung zur Farce geworden."

43. Ibid.

44. Lichdi, *Dritten Reich*, 98. Göttner: "Bei diesem Dogma von der Göttlichkeit der blutmäßig, seelischen Triebkräfte, der seelischen Erbanlagen wird außer Acht gelassen, daß Gott nicht nur der Schöpfer der Rasse ist, sondern auch der Herr über diese Schöpfungsordnung."

45. Lichdi. *Dritten Reich*. 149.

46. Lichdi, *Dritten Reich*, 150. "Unter den Mennoniten gab es im allgemeinen keinen Antisemitismus, wohl aber eine Art Antizionismus, also eine Furcht, das Weltjudentum könne die Weltherrschaft anstreben. Es wurde in den mennonitischen Kirchen auch nicht gegen die Juden gepredigt... Wären die Mennoniten Antisemiten gewesen, dann hätten sie mit der teilweise jüdischen Firma Anker und Seedig gar nicht gehandelt..." Numerous additional examples of good relationships between Mennonites and Jews and Mennonite outrage over treatment of Jews can be found p. 149-148.

47. Schroeder, "Prussian Mennonites," 22.

48. For numerous accounts of Jewish Stutthof prisoners working on Mennonite farms, refer to Lichti, *Dritten Reich*, 240-246.

49. Ibid., 153. "Die Reichskristallnacht hat vielen Mennoniten die Augen geöffnet."

50. Emil Händiges, "Catastrophe," 5.

51. Lichdi, "Nazism," 29.

52. Lichdi, *Dritten Reich*, 36.

53. Ibid., 168.

54. Adolf Hitler, *Table Talk*. A Bullock, ed., (London 1953), entry for 13 December 1941. Cited in: Schroeder, "Prussian Mennonites," 20.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid., 24.

57. Emil Händiges, "Zur Heimkehr der bestreiten Volksgenossen ins Reich" *Mennonitische Blätter* 86, no. 10-11 (October/November 1939.): 65. "Unsagbar Schweres haben unsere deutschen Volksgruppen unter dem polnischen Joch während zwanzigjähriger Fremdherrschaft erduldet. Das Schwerste zuletzt. Da half ihnen Gott, der Herr, durch die Hand unseres Führers und machte sie frei. Wir danken unserm Führer für seine Befreiungstat!"

58. Schroeder, "Prussian Mennonites," 26.

59. Steven Mark Schroeder, "Mennonite-Nazi Collaboration and Coming to Terms with the Past: European Mennonites and the MCC, 1945-1950" (Unpublished, in possession of author 2003), 1.

60. Peter J. Dyck, "Only Memory and Monuments," *Mennonite Life* 16, no. 2 (January 1959): 20.

61. Ibid., 5.

62. Emil Händiges, *Historisches Memorandum zur Wehrlosigkeit der Mennoniten*, (Weierhof: Mennonitische Geschichtsverein 1951), 1.

63. Ibid., 26. "nicht nur für uns, sondern für alle in unseren Deutschen Vaterlande.... Niemand darf

gegen sein Gewissen zum Kriegsdienst mit der Waffe gezwungen werden."

Copyright © Bethel College

Last updated: 29 March 2004

[Contact Mennonite Life](#)