

PRUSSIAN MENNONITES IN THE THIRD REICH AND BEYOND:
THE UNEASY SYNTHESIS OF NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS MYTHS

by

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Abstract

The Mennonite people find their roots in the Swiss Anabaptist movement of the early sixteenth century. Both Catholic and Protestant persecution effectively dispersed the nonconformist, nonresistant Anabaptists throughout Europe in the first decades of the Reformation. A large group settled in the Netherlands, and came to be known as “Mennonites” after their leader, Menno Simons. By the mid-sixteenth century, many Mennonites had emigrated to Prussia, where they were promised military exemption and religious toleration.

This study examines how the longstanding Mennonite tenets of faith, buttressed by specific cultural traditions, were slowly eroded in Prussia through the incorporation of nationalist ideals. The shifts were fuelled by the Mennonites’ desire to secure their place in the German nation-state and to partake in the advantages of cultural, religious and national assimilation. Over time, the Prussian Mennonites relinquished their time-honored beliefs in being “in but not of the world,” in nonresistance, and in not swearing an oath to “anything under heaven or on earth.” These changes became absolutely crucial to the maintenance of the Mennonite community in Prussia under Nazism, when all able-bodied Mennonite men willingly served in the German armed forces.

The Prussian Mennonites succeeded in maintaining their community under National Socialism until the advancing Russian army destroyed it in 1944. The cost, however, was enormous. Just as all Germans face the continual struggle of rebuilding their nation and reforming their national identity, so too are the Mennonites faced with the ongoing challenges of rebuilding their community – physically, emotionally and spiritually. Those positively engaged in this process find themselves inextricably affected and constantly burdened by personal and popular memory, grappling, often unawares, with the politics of their representation. The conclusion to this study examines these responses of dissonance vis-à-vis the lingering questions that face the German Mennonites as they continue to deal with their own unique form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) within the broader German context.

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This project is dedicated to the living memory of Siegfried, who imparted life and love to me in many ways and, together with Erna, equipped me with those things most valuable.

*How woeful it will be for all those who have so easily allowed themselves to be misled into participation in these heroic deeds praised by the world, if they shall hear in Eternity how Hell echoes with the howling of those who – possibly through their own bullets, swords, or spears – were torn away from the time of grace during which they could have repented and been saved.*¹

- Wilhelm Ewert, elder at Obernessau, 1872

Introduction

Attempts to come to terms with Germany's Nazi past have been, and continue to be, very problematic. Intense emotion, grief, and confusion continually affect the German government, communities, and individuals as they endeavor to reflect adequately and appropriately on the Nazi era – in monuments, museums, memorials – and to deal effectively with what Charles Maier has called the “Unmasterable Past.”²

Some have turned their attention toward the Christian churches in Germany during the 1930 and 1940s, wondering how those who considered themselves as the guardians of morality in society could have failed to resist the Nazi *Machtergreifung* and in effectively resisting Nazi policies thereafter. In these inquiries, the free churches in Germany have not received as much attention as the mainline Christian denominations, resulting in the relative obscurity of their history during this period.

The history of the Prussian Mennonite community during the Third Reich falls into this latter category. Descendants of the Frisian and Flemish Mennonites,³ the

¹ The response of Wilhelm Ewert, elder in the Mennonite church at Obernessau, to the declaration by Jakob Mannhardt, elder in the Danzig church, that Mennonites should give up *Wehrlosigkeit* and join in the obligations of all citizens after 1848: John Thiessen, “The First Duty of the Citizen: Mennonite Identity and Military Exemption in Prussia, 1848-77,” in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 72 (1998), pp.182-183.

² Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*, 2nd ed.. (Cambridge, 1997).

³ Christian Neff points out that ‘Flemish’ and ‘Frisian’ were ‘party names’ and were not to be strictly associated with Mennonites in the respective regions. The origin of the differentiation, however, came – when Flemish Mennonites arrived in Friesland after fleeing persecution. The more modest Frisian Mennonites saw them as ‘worldly’. Christian Neff, “Flemish Mennonites” in Bender, H. and Smith, C. Henry (eds.), *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Newton, 1959), Volume II, p.339.

Mennonites in Prussia initially settled in Ducal, or East, Prussia⁴ and in Polish, or West, Prussia⁵ between Danzig and Thorn after fleeing persecution in the Netherlands. This study will be chiefly concerned with these groups, and with the North German and Rhenish Mennonite congregations that joined the Prussian-based *Vereinigung der Mennonitengemeinden* founded in 1886.⁶ Built on the sixteenth century Anabaptist tradition, the foundation of the Mennonite denomination lies in a strict 'two-kingdom theology,' nonconformity, freedom of conscience, refusal to swear an oath to any earthly ruler, or bear arms, and *sola scriptura* (the axiom that Scriptures alone were sufficient in guiding one through life). The Mennonite denomination grew in a context of great insecurity, undergoing persecution and expulsion in many areas of the Holy Roman Empire during the Reformation, as their Mennonite beliefs were inherently incompatible with the established governing political and religious institutions. Over the centuries, this insecurity developed into an endemic feature of Prussian Mennonitism, as its members continued in their struggle for acceptance in the Prussian kingdom. During the Nazi era,

⁴ Duke Albrecht von Hohenzollern created the secular duchy of East Prussia in 1525, after a long dispute with his uncle, Polish King Zygmunt I. The duchy became a haven for heretics in the sixteenth century. The persecuted Anabaptists took advantage of this, especially after 1535, the year of: the Münster uprising; an Anabaptist attack on the Amsterdam city hall; and a similar attack on the Oldeklooster in Friesland. After the Mennonites settled mostly along the Memel River in East Prussia, Bishop Speratus expelled them from the region for not adhering to Prussian church doctrine concerning baptism and communion. This prompted many to move to the Vistula Delta and Danzig during 1543-1547, where King Zygmunt granted them the swampy land. Peter J. Klassen, "Faith and Culture in Conflict: Mennonites in the Vistula Delta," in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 57:3 (1983), p. 197.

⁵ The region west of the Nogat River was ceded to the Polish king, Kazimierz IV, in 1466. The king refused to accept immigrating heretics, particularly as there was a Hanseatic ban on doing so (the consequence of not adhering to the ban was banishment from the Hanseatic League, which would have had dire affect on the economy of the city of Danzig). Klassen, "Faith and Culture" p. 196.

⁶ The *Vereinigung der Mennoniten-Gemeinden im Deutschen Reich* included congregations in East and West Prussia, the Palatinate and Hesse. The *Vereinigung*, founded in Berlin in 1886, was constituted thus: 12 north German congregations, 6 in the Palatinate; since 1934, it included all German Mennonite congregations except for those in the *Verband*. The *Vereinigung* secured its status as public corporation in the early twentieth century. (Emil Haendiges served as president during 1932-53). Ernst Crous "Vereinigung der Mennoniten-Gemeinden im Deutschland" in Bender and Smith, Volume V, p. 812. The *Badisch-Württembergisch-Bayerischer Gemeindeverband* (the *Verband*) was a union of 8 congregations in

the Mennonites compromised their foundational beliefs and synthesized their nonconformist, 'not of the world' Mennonitism with German nationalism. Most Mennonites in Prussia supported the National Socialists and sent all of their able-bodied draft-age men to enlist in the German armed forces during the Second World War.

While the Mennonites today share in the struggles of the broader German nation when coming to terms with this part of their history, they must also deal with the added conundrum of having compromised fundamental tenets of their own Mennonite faith. Like some of their German neighbors, many Mennonites feel that they have been misunderstood and ridiculed for their actions between 1933 and 1945 and have been misrepresented and condemned in both popular and scholarly historical accounts. The popular rendition of the Germans of the Third Reich being a nation of homogenous depravity, according to one Mennonite veteran of the *Luftwaffe*, is the result of "hocus pocus."⁷ To another veteran it is simply "a historical joke."⁸

This study seeks to understand better the community and its actions in the National Socialist era. In this quest, the deep-seated national and religious traditions that served in shaping the Mennonites' lives will be examined – particularly in order to come to an understanding of how German nationalism and nonconformist Anabaptism merged in a collaborative synthesis during the Third Reich.

Competing Myths: Formation of the German Nation-State and Anabaptist Martyrology

The Kyffhäuser monument in Thuringia is perhaps the most powerful national monument that has served in strengthening the notion that history had predestined the

Baden, 5 in Württemberg, 2 in the Palatinate, 4 in Bavaria (totaling 1000 in 1900). Harold Bender, "Badisch-Württembergisch-Bayerischer Gemeindeverband" in Bender and Smith, Volume I, p.485.

⁷ Interview of Walter Regehr by Author, 26 July, 1999 (Winnipeg, MB).

unification of the German people under the mighty Emperor Wilhelm I. A place of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages, the legendary mountain on which the monument rests was believed to be the home of Emperor Friedrich I Barbarossa. Friedrich, or 'Redbeard', was believed to be slumbering within the mountain, waiting for the opportune epoch to awake and emerge – which would be signaled by the sudden departing of the numerous ravens that continually circled the mountain – in order to reunite the German people as he had done during his glorious reign as Holy Roman Emperor in the twelfth century.

After the German victory in the Franco-Prussian war, the myth was resurrected and used by the German military and government in securing Wilhelm's proper place in history.⁹ Indeed, the reason Dr. Westphal, captain in the army and secretary of the German Soldiers' Association, proposed the building of the monument in 1888 was "because Emperor Whitebeard has fulfilled the saga and redeemed Emperor Redbeard."¹⁰ The ravens found a new home, the Monument was erected, and the Soldiers' Association established the "*Kyffhäuserbund der deutschen Landeskriegerverbände*" in 1898¹¹ in order to preserve the monument, the contemporary interpretation of the legend of Redbeard and the memory of the soldiers who fulfilled the legend.

⁸ Interview of Siegfried Bartel by Author, 11 April, 2000 (Agassiz, BC).

⁹ From the political essays and poetry created throughout the nineteenth century, it is evident that not everyone in Germany agreed that the legend of Barbarossa and the Kyffhäuser mountain should be interpreted in such a way as to promote German imperialism. The Burschenschaften, for example, opposed Imperialist nationalists, and expressed their sentiments in a poem that addressed the legend of Redbeard: "Das beste wäre, du bleibst zu Haus, Hier in dem alten Kyffhäuser – Bedenk ich die Sache ganz genau, So brauchen wir gar keinen Kaiser." (It would be best, if you stayed at home, here in the old Kyffhäuser – If I think this over carefully, We do not need a Kaiser). Albrecht Timm, *Der Kyffhäuser im deutschen Geschichtsbild* (Göttingen, 1966), p.19.

¹⁰ Literature obtained at the Kyffhäuser monument.

¹¹ In 1921, a new committee was established to manage the monument, the "Deutschen Reichskriegerbund Kyffhäuser" which became the "NS-Reichskriegerbund Kyffhäuser" after 1933. Timm, p.26.

This official, nationalist interpretation¹² of historical developments successfully bolstered a strong image of the new nation-state. Eric Hobsbawm, however, links the notion of invention to the establishment of new traditions in Germany, claiming that “the real nation can only be recognized *a posteriori*”¹³ and that the standard trappings he identified and associated with modern nationhood served in that process.¹⁴ The new German nation sought to create a sense of identity and continuity with the past.¹⁵ National symbols, monuments and definitions of citizenship were either created or re-construed to serve in defining the nation,¹⁶ with the most unambiguous embodiment of masculinity, militarism, and nationalism being found in the Kyffhäuser Monument (see Figure 1). The main component of the monument is an equestrian statue of Wilhelm I, mounted high above the sculpted image of the awakening Barbarossa. The Kaiser is flanked by the allegorical figures of History and War as he gazes victoriously over the Thuringian plains below. High atop the monument, a crown rests on a vacant throne. Here, there is a clear intent to perpetuate notions of national history, destiny, and unity – all of which were realized through *Blut und Eisen* for the securing of *Blut und Boden* and the foundation of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community).

¹² See Chapter Six of Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York, 1991). Here, Anderson discusses the elitist control of national identity formation, resulting in ‘official nationalism.’

¹³ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*. (Cambridge, 1990), p.9. Also, see John Breuilly, *The Formation of the First German Nation-State, 1800-1871*. (New York: St. Martins, 1996), p.111.

¹⁴ Such as national flags, monuments, national anthems, etc. See Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe 1870-1914” in *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge, 1983), p. 7.

¹⁵ Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing”, p. 267-268.

¹⁶ Examples include: the memorial to Arminius the Cheruscan being nationalized in 1875; the erection of the Niederwald monument on the Rhine to commemorate German unification; the memorial cemetery commemorating the battle of Leipzig (in 1913). Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing”, p.259. After unification, the German government entrenched further the Prussian citizenship laws introduced in 1842, which differentiated between *Staatsangehörigkeit* (formal state membership), *Staatsbürgerschaft* (participatory citizenship) and *Volkszugehörigkeit* (ethnocultural, national membership). Rogers Brubaker *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*. (Cambridge, 1992), p.51.

Naturally, not all Germans shared in the enthusiasm of the new national myth in the late nineteenth century, or in its accompanying “Prussianization” – mostly involving issues related to language and adherence to Protestantism, as witnessed in the *Kulturkampf* and Reich policy vis-à-vis German kingdoms outside of Prussia. In the case of the Prussian Mennonites, German nationalism evoked an ambivalent response. On the positive side, the hard working notions endorsed by the German people, echoing the idea of a nation built on *Blut und Boden*, resonated with them.¹⁷ They were ethnically German, spoke the German language¹⁸ and, although they were part of a free church tradition, most of their ministers were trained in state-run Lutheran universities.¹⁹ In short, they were mostly assimilated in Prussia by the late nineteenth century, desired to partake of all the positive elements of being German and wanted to participate fully in Germany society. On the other hand, as outlined above, the Mennonites wanted to maintain the cultural and religious traditions that gave them a strong sense of group identity and a strong sense of connection with their cherished history. These traditions essentially ran counter to some of the main elements in modern German nationalism and, naturally, were diametrically opposed to the military ethos that was immortalized at the Kyffhäuser Monument.

¹⁷ In “German Mennonites, Economics and the State”, James Lichti links what he calls ‘bread and sweat’ with ‘Blut und Boden’, asserting that “Mennonite stewardship norms did overlap at points with those of National Socialism.” In Calvin Redekop, Victor Krahn and Samuel Steiner (eds.), *Anabaptist/Mennonite Faith and Economics* (New York, 1994), pp.100-107.

¹⁸ The Mennonites maintained their Frisian and Flemish divisions and the Dutch language until 1759. Thereafter, they conducted religious services in High German. Edmund Kizik, “Religious Freedom and the Limits of Social Assimilation: The History of the Mennonites in Danzig and the Vistula Delta Until Their Tragic End after World War II” in Alastair Hamilton, Sjouke Voolstra and Piet Visser (eds.), *From Martyr to Muppy: Mennonite Urban Professionals* (Amsterdam, 1994), p.59.

¹⁹ Diether Goetz Lichdi explains how Mennonite ministers traveled throughout Germany in order to receive theological training in state universities after the Mennonites began to focus on having ‘professional,’ or seminary-trained pastors in the nineteenth century. Leading pastors were: Emil Haendiges, Elbing-Ellerwald, editor of the *Mennonitische Blätter* and chair of *Vereinigung*; Erich Göttner, Danzig; Christian

The counter-myth to the Kyffhäuser legend, which serves as an essential part of Mennonite self-understanding, originates in the Europe-wide Anabaptist movement, or Second Front of the Reformation.²⁰ The collective identity of this group can be traced to the lineage of nonresistant martyrs who were persecuted and killed after the Diet of Speyer in 1529,²¹ which officially outlawed the sect. Thereafter, the Anabaptists, including the converted Dutch priest Menno Simons, were continually on the run throughout the Holy Roman Empire. They were expelled from Aachen, Cologne, Burtscheid and Odenkirchen in the early seventeenth century.²² These experiences established a persecution complex among the Anabaptists, adding an inherent insecurity to the group's self-identity.

In his teachings, Menno considered the use of force to be anachronistic, suitable only for the pre-Christian era, claiming:

Moses and his successors have served their day with their sword of iron, and ... Christ has now given us a new commandment and has girded us with another sword.²³

Driving this strong nonresistant stance was the desire among mainstream Anabaptists to distance themselves from the Anabaptists who were involved in the Peasants War and the

Neff, Weierhof; Benjamin Unruh, the 'Vertreter der Russland Mennoniten'. Diether Goetz Lichdi, *Mennoniten im Dritten Reich: Dokumentation und Deutung* (Weierhof, 1977), p.26-27.

²⁰ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids, 1964) p.11. Adherents of the movement established themselves in Thuringia, Switzerland, Tyrol, Holland and northern Germany.

²¹ In 1529, the Imperial Diet of Speyer, by edict of outlawry effective throughout the Empire, practically eliminated hopes of milder treatment of the persecuted Anabaptists. Executions of Anabaptists were common and numerous. The great leaders of the Anabaptism – Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, George Blaurock, William Reublin, John Brötli, Michael Sattler and Balthasar Hubmaier were all dead by 1529. The original settlers in Prussia had migrated directly from the Dutch Mennonite community, fleeing the Duke of Alva's Blood Council in the mid-sixteenth century. C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* (Newton, 1957), p. 13.

²² Ernst Crous, "Germany," in Bender and Smith, Volume II, p. 490.

²³ Menno Simons, "The Cross of the Saints, c. 1574," in John C. Wenger (ed.), *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c.1496-1561* (Scottsdale, 1956), p. 603.

attempted theocracy at Münster in 1534,²⁴ which earned them the stigma of being *Schwärmer*, or fanatics.²⁵ In “The Cross of the Saints,” Menno claimed: “the Münsterites were seditious and acted contrary to the Word of God... we deny that we are a piece of them.”²⁶ The Anabaptists who adopted his name in 1544, forming the Mennonites, officially accepted the main tenets of the Swiss Anabaptist Schleitheim Confession of 1527.²⁷ They embraced nonresistance, not swearing an oath to any temporal power, belief in the separation of church and state, and they adopted Simon’s insistence on staving off secular influences on the conscience,²⁸ which was to be chiefly guided by the Scriptures alone (*sola scriptura*).²⁹

First published in 1660, Thieleman van Braght’s famous *Martyrer Spiegel der Wehrlosen Christen* (*Martyr’s Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*) consolidated an Anabaptist/Mennonite martyrology that bolstered the movement’s self-defined collective

²⁴ The episode at Münster witnessed Jan Mattijs and his successor Jan van Leiden attempt to forcibly transform the city into the New Jerusalem prophesied in the book of Revelation. The local Catholic bishop, with support of the German princes, laid siege to Münster, and made short order of the ‘theocracy.’ In the end, van Leiden and his cohorts, including Menno Simons’ brother, were killed and his remains, along with those of two other leaders of the movement, were displayed in the *Wiedertäuferkäfige* that were mounted on the Lamberti Kirche in Münster and are currently extant. Smith, pp.44-49.

²⁵ The mainstream Anabaptists managed to stave off this association with fanaticism. They were, however, still seen as very radical and very dangerous, both by the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Reformers alike, particularly as they refused the entrenched coercionism of the establishment which, in their view, was “foreign to the true faith.” The Anabaptists and their radical voluntarism, rejection of the establishment and nonresistance were dubbed *Stäbler* or cane-carriers, much like the Donatists and Waldenses of past epochs. Not merely rebels, these people believed that they were set apart from other denominations that claimed to be Christian. They belonged to the one, true Christian church, and individual conscience, rather than conformity to the ways of the world, served as their guide. Verduin, p.63-65.

²⁶ Menno Simons, “The Cross,” p.602. Also see Harold Bender, *The Anabaptists and Religious Liberty in the Sixteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1970) p.14.

²⁷ Written by Michael Sattler in 1527, the seven points of the Schleitheim Confession addressed proper behavior concerning the following: baptism; excommunication; breaking of bread; separation from the Abomination (evildoers); pastors; nonresistance; and refusal to swear oaths. Lowell Zuck (ed.) *Christianity and Revolution: Radical Christian Testimonies 1520-1650* (Temple University, 1975), p.72.

²⁸ Bender, “The Anabaptists,” p.15.

²⁹ Menno Simons, “The New Birth,” in John C. Wenger (ed.), *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c.1496-1561* (Scottsdale, 1956), p.89.

identity as the “true believers” – complete with moral role-models and heroes.³⁰ In the *Mirror*, van Braght pointed to the fallacious beliefs of Apostolic Succession held by both Protestants and Roman Catholics, claiming that the succession of the true church is found in “the doctrine of the apostles, [which] we believe in our heart, and confess with our mouths.”³¹ The true believers, and subsequently those belonging to the true church, are depicted as those who were baptized upon confession of faith – starting with Jesus Christ, and continuing on to the Anabaptist reformers. Through the *Mirror* and other works,³² Mennonites came to a collective self-understanding as the true successors of the one true church, whose defining characteristic was that of being *wehrlose Christen*.

A History of the Prussian Mennonites, 1535-1933

*If the Lord values a soul more than the whole world, what a pitiable price to pay for decorations, incorporation laws, legal equalization with other denominations, security of property, and the honor of Fatherland and nation – in return to become companions in a work by which hundreds of thousands of souls, in a moment when they are fired by hate and bitterness, are thrown into Eternity. And in this we should help and not rather take up our pilgrim's staff and go to where we are free from such awful doings and where we will gladly be received.*³³

–Wilhelm Ewert, elder at Obernessau, 1872.

³⁰ One classic story that appears in the *Mirror* is that of Dirk Willems. While being pursued by his enemies, the ‘heretic’ Dirk ran over an ice-coated river. A man pursuing him crashed through the ice and cried for help. Dirk, out of love for his enemy, decided to turn back and save the man’s life. He succeeded, but, as a result of his actions, was caught by the other men pursuing him. They, in turn, arrested and executed Dirk as a heretic, despite his good deed. Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martyr's Mirror of the Defenseless Christians* (Kitchener, 1950), p. 716. Historian C. Henry Smith adds that Menno Simons also had numerous legends surrounding his life, many of which include ‘miraculous’ elements that account for Menno’s ability to elude his assailants. Smith, p. 71.

³¹ Van Braght steers the reader away from competing notions of personal Apostolic Succession, and focuses on doctrine. Van Braght, p. 26. Some did not hold this view in the same manner, and continued to focus on Apostolic Succession. This is evident in Ignaz Franz’s Anabaptist hymn, written in 1774: “Lo the apostolic train; join thy sacred name to hallow Prophets swell and glad refrain; and the white-robed martyrs follow; and from morn til set of sun; through the Church the song goes on.” *Grosser Gott wir Loben dich*, Ignaz Franz 1774, from *Te Deum Laudamus*, late fourth century.

³² Other related martyrological accounts include: Hutterite chronicles by Kaspar Braitmichel (1573) and *A History of the Martyrs or True Witnesses to Jesus Christ* (1615). Cornelius Dyck, “The Suffering Church in Anabaptism” in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 59 (1985), p. 7.

³³ The response of Wilhelm Ewert, elder in the Mennonites church at Obernessau, to the declaration by Jakob Mannhardt, elder in the Danzig church, that Mennonites should give up *Wehrlosigkeit* and join in the obligations of all citizens after 1848. Here he is also addressing those Mennonites who wish to emigrate in order to escape the distressing situation. John Thiessen, “The First Duty,” pp. 182-183.

In the remarks quoted above, Wilhelm Ewert was primarily concerned with Mennonite assimilation into Prussian society at a time when the Prussian Mennonite community – which consistently maintained a population of approximately 12 000³⁴ – was faced with the government imposition of laws that threatened some of their cherished beliefs and traditions. The concern was well-warranted, as the Prussian Mennonites, by Ewert's time, had drifted significantly from the beliefs of the original Mennonite settlers in the area, who had been in close contact with Menno Simons and his teachings.³⁵ To be sure, the Prussian Mennonites had accepted the Dutch Mennonite Dordrecht Confession in 1632 – which was based on the earlier Anabaptist confession at Schleithem – and had formed the conservative theological underpinnings of the community.

The original theological foundation of the Prussian Mennonites, however, did not abate the tendency toward a desire to assimilate into Prussian culture, particularly after the Mennonites had endured great hardships during the Reformation. After the Great Elector embraced Pietism, Prussia became a strict “marriage of Pietism and the drill square.”³⁶ By the eighteenth century, both Pietism and Rationalism had made significant inroads in the Prussian Mennonite community through the connections of Palatinate and

³⁴ The Mennonite population in Prussia from the early nineteenth century to 1945 remained between 13 000 (1816) and 10 500 (1945), or approximately 0.02% of the German population. In the 1925 census, there was a total of 13 298 Mennonites in all of Germany, the majority residing in East and Polish Prussia and Danzig. Most migration, except for the Russian exodus in the 1870s, was internal urbanization to Danzig, Berlin, Hamburg/Altona, Crefeld, Neuwied, Cologne, Düsseldorf, etc. Horst Penner, *Die ost- und westpreußischen Mennoniten*. Teil II, (Weierhof, 1978), pp. 241, 267. Also, see Ernst Helmreich, *The German Churches Under Hitler* (Detroit, 1979), p.93.

³⁵ Simons visited the Mennonites of the Vistula Delta in 1548 and in a letter exhorted them to a life of peace amongst themselves, and with those outside the community. “Exhortation to a Church in Prussia, c.1549,” in Wenger, 1030-1035. The connection between Simons the Prussian church is also seen in the fact that Dirk Philips, a close cohort of Simons, served as the first elder of the Danzig Mennonite Church.

³⁶ E. J. Feuchtwanger, *Prussia: Myth and Reality: The Role of Prussia in German History* (London, 1970), p.39.

West Prussian Mennonite ministers,³⁷ and led to fundamental shifts in Mennonite theological orientation.³⁸ The Mennonites, however, did not find accord with the king's "marriage" of their beliefs with the "drill square" – at least for the time being.

While some of the Hohenzollern kings in Prussia proper and some of the Polish kings in Polish Prussia often restricted, persecuted or deported the Mennonites between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, there were also many examples of *privilegia* being extended to the Mennonites in this period, mostly because both kingdoms valued Mennonite contributions to their respective economies and hoped to curb Mennonite emigration.³⁹ After the first partition of Poland in 1772, the Mennonites of East and West Prussia were united under King Friedrich II. Immediately thereafter (1773), the

³⁷ Ernst Crous, "Anabaptism, Pietism, Rationalism and German Mennonites" in Guy Hershberger (ed.) *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold H. Bender* (Scottsdale, 1957), p.241. The dissemination began in the Mennonite seminary at Amsterdam est.1735. Jan Deknatel a key figure there, and pastor in Amsterdam since 1734, enjoyed a close connection with the Moravians and Methodists. Gerhard Tersteegen (Lower Rhine) influenced Prussians at Neuwied and Crefeld. Similarly, Pietism spread amongst notable Mennonite preachers such as Hans van Steen, preacher in Danzig from 1754 and Martin Möllinger, preacher at Mannheim from 1753, and Danzig's Isaak van Duehren (converted in 1772) and Heubuden's Cornelius Regier (converted 1764). Thus, through embracing Pietism – which stressed personal repentance of sin while not sharing the focus on holy living and discipleship found in traditional Mennonite theology – Mennonites gradually emerged from their seclusion, and essentially lost touch with sixteenth century Anabaptism. Crous, "Germany," in Bender and Smith, Volume II, p.493.

³⁸ Crous in Hershberger, p.247-248. The Lutheranism, liberalism and modernism taught in universities found their way into Mennonite congregations. Gustav Kraemer in Crefeld (1903ff), and J.G. Appeldoorn in Emden (1904-16) were prominent representatives of these tendencies. A milder liberalism had appeared earlier in Prussia proper with Carl Herder, pastor at Neuwied 1857-69 and at Elbing in the progressive town congregation in 1869-96 and with Hermann Gottlieb Mannhardt pastor at Danzig from 1879. In general, confessional boundaries had become lax in certain areas. In many cases, such as in Crefeld and Monsheim, Lutheran and Baptist pastors headed Mennonite congregations. Crous, "Germany," in Bender and Smith, Volume II, p.498.

³⁹ See Footnotes 3 and 4. The City of Danzig barred Mennonites from trading in the city in the early sixteenth century. Klassen, "Faith and Culture" p.198. Concessions were offered to the Mennonites in terms of military service and guilds (a charter of liberties was issued in Danzig praising the economic productivity of the Mennonites and granting certain liberties and rights after the Diet of Thorn in 1571). H. G. Mannhardt, "Danzig Mennonite Church" in Bender and Smith, Volume III, p. 9. As Mennonite nonconformity with the world was precisely what allowed them to become the best farmers, artisans, manufacturers, etc., rulers during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, such as Polish King Wladislaus IV, held them in high regard. Horst Penner, "West Prussia" in Bender and Smith, Volume IV, p. 923. Friedrich Wilhelm I, however, expelled the Mennonites from the newly-established Prussian kingdom in 1724. Most established a new life across the Nogat River in Polish Prussia. Klassen, "Faith and Culture," p. 200.

Mennonites sent a delegation to Königsberg, where they successfully petitioned for the protection of their interests, including military exemption.

King Friedrich II's Toleration Edict of 1780 obliged the Mennonites, who were granted citizenship and the privilege of not serving in the army "for all time,"⁴⁰ with the condition that they pay a military tax of 5000 Talers per year to the academy at Kulm for this concession. Those uncomfortable with paying the tax and with King Friedrich's restrictions on landowning rights for Mennonites⁴¹ were finally provided with additional motivation to emigrate. First, Friedrich William II's Edict Concerning the Future of Mennonitism (1789) restricted sharply the opportunity to purchase land and obliged Mennonite landowners to pay the regular church tax required of members of the Lutheran churches⁴² while at the same time it restricted their emigration from Prussia.⁴³ The second motivation to emigrate was found in Catherine the Great's invitation to the Mennonites and others to settle and farm in the Ukraine in 1787.⁴⁴ Many chose to follow their conscience and overcome their circumstances by emigrating to Russia, and those that chose to remain in Prussia were, naturally, obliged to accommodate their beliefs to the demands of the state.

Ernst Crous claims that the Mennonite denomination would have ceased to exist in Prussia in this period had it not been for the continually-expanding influences of Pietism and

⁴⁰ Emil Haendiges, "The Catastrophe of the West Prussian Mennonites," in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24:2 (1950), p. 125.

⁴¹ While Frederick II granted the Mennonites military exemption, they were still subject to Prussian law. Consequentially, if a Mennonite bought land in the Vistula Delta, he would be reducing the potential number of Prussian recruits in the local regiments. Therefore, military exemption was limited to those who owned less than 2100 Hufen of land. Kizik, p.60.

⁴² Klassen, "Faith and Culture," p. 210.

⁴³ In attempts to prevent farmers, artisans, business persons and laborers from leaving the Prussian government denied permission to emigrate, impeded the sale or purchase of land or other possessions and refused to process documents. Mennonite efforts in Berlin in 1787 to expand land-holding rights were overruled, which resulted in many choosing to emigrate. Peter J. Klassen, "Barriers to Emigration from Prussia" in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72 (1998), p. 85.

Rationalism which, he asserts, afforded the Mennonites a philosophical and theological vitality that they were lacking at the time.⁴⁵ With that vitality, however, came drastic alterations to the traditional Mennonite stance of nonresistance, perhaps influenced by the fact that they had gained full citizenship under Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1801.

With the French gaining great influence in Prussia after the Peace of Lunéville in 1801 and the Peace of Amiens in 1803, the Mennonites began to show active, voluntary support for the Prussian military.⁴⁶ This tendency to support the military developed particularly among the Mennonites of western Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century. Crefeld's Mennonite banker and member of the Prussian and Frankfurt parliaments Hermann von Beckerath boldly stated in 1848:

I think myself fortunate in belonging to one of the freest denominations. The time of privileges is gone. The modern state requires equal rights for all citizens, so the Rhenish Mennonites, with only few exceptions, are rendering their military service. Nonresistance with them is no longer an integral part of their creed.⁴⁷

The Mennonites in Prussia, however, were not eager to align themselves with their Rhenish brethren, and opposed the Prussian Constitution of 1848 that proclaimed equal duties for all citizens. West Prussian Mennonites pleaded for toleration of the Mennonite privilege of nonresistance in 1848 and again after King Wilhelm I revoked the military exemption for Mennonites on 18 October, 1867. After the Prussian Mennonites appealed to war minister Waldemar von Roon and Crown Prince Friedrich, Wilhelm agreed to again grant the

⁴⁴ Catherine's 1763 Manifesto invited foreigners to settle in the Ukraine. Through a special emissary, Georg Trappe, the Mennonites in Prussia were specifically invited with the promise of land, military exemption and a list of privileges. Klassen, "Barriers" p. 86.

⁴⁵ Crous, "Anabaptism," in Hershberger, p.241.

⁴⁶ See Feuchtwanger, pp.92-98 for a description of the increase in French presence and control in Prussia. Horst Penner explains how the Mennonites donated 30 000 Talers to King Friedrich III upon his visit to Königsberg in 1806, and in 1810 added 10 000 Talers to the compulsory war tax, and supported the war effort with horses, food, supplies, etc., while excommunicating those that enlisted in the army (revealing the fine line of 'proper' service). Horst Penner, "West Prussia," in Bender and Smith, Volume IV, p. 925.

⁴⁷ Crous, "Germany," in Bender and Smith, Volume II, p.496.

Mennonites alternative service rights in an Order of Cabinet on 3 March, 1868,⁴⁸ and the right for Mennonites to guarantee their loyalty to the crown with a handshake instead of swearing an oath in 1869.⁴⁹

And loyal they were. Upon the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, Danzig minister Jacob Mannhardt⁵⁰ urged his congregation to support the war effort short of bearing arms:

Ein furchtbarer Krieg ist zwischen Frankreich und Deutschland entstanden...also, daß aus allen Städten alt und jung, Männer und Frauen...durch persönlichen Dienst als Krankenpfleger oder durch Geld und Darreichung anderer Gaben, durch Anfertigung von Bekleidungs- und Verbandsgegenständen für die Ausrüstung und Versorgung der ins Feld ausgerückten Scharen und die Pflege und Erquickung von Verwundeten und Erkrankten Sorge zu tragen.⁵¹

While most Prussian Mennonites did not choose to bear arms in this period, their other-worldly focus and two-kingdom theology had certainly undergone great change, as they were now participating fully in the life of the new German nation-state, even while “a legacy was being lost.”⁵²

Article 7 of the Danzig Mennonite Church Constitution of 29 November 1886 provides an excellent example of the transformation of Mennonite traditions. It states: “Whenever the fatherland requires military service we allow the individual conscience of each member to serve in that form which satisfies him most.”⁵³ According to Menno Simons’ teachings, the ideal condition that allowed for the liberty of individual conscience required

⁴⁸ Thiessen, “The First Duty,” p.170.

⁴⁹ Emil Haendiges, *Historisches Memorandum zur Wehrlosigkeit der Mennoniten* (Weierhof, 1951), pp. 11-26.

⁵⁰ See Jakob Mannhardt, “Können und dürfen wir Mennoniten der von dem Staate geforderten Wehrpflicht genügen?” in *Mennonitische Blätter* August (1872), pp. 41-43 for a more comprehensive account of Mannhardt’s views on Mennonite involvement in war.

⁵¹ (A terrible war has developed between France and Germany. Therefore, men and women, young and old, from all cities...are needed to serve as nurses, or through money or offering other gifts by which we can make up for the slander and prejudice and offer equipment to care for those in the field, and supply and care and concern for those who are injured). Lichdi, “Dritten Reich,” p.23.

⁵² Klassen, “Faith and Culture” p. 203.

⁵³ Haendiges, “Catastrophe,” p.126

that the state refrain from interfering in church affairs⁵⁴ and that, after acceptance of faith, obedience – to a monolithic understanding of “the fruits of the faith”⁵⁵ – was to supersede the freedom of individual conscience. Here, enjoying toleration in the Second Reich, the Mennonites in Prussia *voluntarily* abandoned the collective “right path” of the Christian as defined by Simons. While maintaining their foundational principle of individual conscience, they redefined Simons’ teachings and abandoned their collective understanding of the same, as physical proximity came to supersede the biblical mandate to “love thy neighbor” in a universal sense.⁵⁶

Indeed, by World War I the notion of non-resistance was virtually non-existent among the Prussian Mennonites. In 1915 H.G. Mannhardt (Danzig elder 1879-1927) wrote “*Taten und Helden*”, in which he claimed:

Doch was reden wir von der Zukunft, während doch die Gegenwart alle unsere Gedanken für sich fordert? Wir können jetzt nicht zusammenkommen ohne unserer kämpfenden und blutenden und besonders unserer gefallenen Brüder zu gedenken. Taten und Helden hat die Not uns geboren... Als Schiller einst von Vaterland und Freiheit singen wollte, mußte er seine Helden jenseits der deutschen Grenzen suchen oder im fernen Altertum. heute würde er das nicht tun... Gott gebe uns jetzt und künftig, im Kriege wie im Frieden, was wir dazu bedürfen: Taten und Helden!⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ron Fraser asserts: “for Menno, the state, in refraining from interference within the church, [provides] the circumstances for a faith based on liberty of conscience.” Ron Fraser, *Christian Freedom in the Theology of Menno Simons*. (Vancouver, 1986), p.32.

⁵⁵ See Menno Simons, “The New Birth,” pp.89, 96. Also, see Fraser, p.125.

⁵⁶ Interview of Diether Goetz Lichdi by Author, 6 June, 2000 (Heilbronn, Germany). Also, see Crous, “Germany,” in Bender and Smith, Volume II, p. 496. While making the transition into military service, the South German Mennonite Conference published a leaflet *Warnungen und Winke für die Militärzeit* (Kaiserlautern, 1908), encouraging Mennonites to partake of all of the good things that the service had to offer, and warned against the tendency to lose faith while in the army, and adopting the military’s mandate to hate the enemy.

⁵⁷ (Why do we talk about the future, when the present requires all of our attention? We cannot meet now without thanking our fighting and injured and particularly our fallen brothers. The distress has given birth to actions and heroes... When Schiller once wanted to sing about the Fatherland and freedom, he had to look for heroes beyond the German border or in distant history. Today that will not be the case... God, gives us now and in the future, in war as in peacetime, that which we require: actions and heroes!), H. G. Mannhardt, *Taten und Helden*, (Danzig, 1915), p.15, 19. Examples of a major shift in thought abound in this period. Paul Schowalter reveals how the Kaiser influenced the Mennonites in a Reichstag speech, in which he called on Germans to “Knie nieder vor Gott und bittet ihn um Hilfe für unser braves Heer” (Kneel low before God and ask him to help our brave Army). Schowalter also describes the reflections of a Mennonite woman who lost her son in battle: “Gott gab ihn uns, wir gaben ihn dem Vaterland.” (God gave him to us, we gave him to the Fatherland). Paul Schowalter, *Nationalismus und Krieg in den Augen der deutschen Mennoniten im 19 und 20 Jahrhundert* (Weierhof, 1976), Unpublished Paper, pp.50, 52. Diether

Of the 114 Mennonites who were drafted into the German army in First World War, seventy-four bore arms, while twenty-two were involved in military training and eighteen worked in mental hospitals as *Sanitäter*.⁵⁸

The Versailles settlement divided the provinces of East and West Prussia into the Free City of Danzig, part of Poland, and East Prussia. As a result, the Mennonite congregations in the Vistula Delta were relegated to three different political administrations.⁵⁹ Mennonites under German administration appealed to the Weimar Constitution and successfully gained the status of a public corporation, establishing their denomination as an equal among others in Germany. While remaining religious outsiders in Germany,⁶⁰ the Mennonites were no longer required to pay the state church tax for the first time since 1789.⁶¹

Goetz Lichdi explains how one Mennonite preacher claimed: "Gott, der Herr, führt unser ganzes Volk jetzt besondere Wege nach seinem heilsamen Plan... er hat unsere Kriegslage so geschaffen, daß wir nur danken können." (God, the Lord, leads our whole people in special ways according to his heavenly plan... he developed our involvement in the war, and for that we can only thank him). Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," p. 24

⁵⁸ Diether Goetz Lichdi asserts that "Es schient als ob die pietistisch geprägten Gemeinden im Elsaß und in Westpreussen die relative meistens Mitglieder hatten, die von der Vergünstigung der Kabinettsordre Gebrauch machten." (It appears as though the more Pietist-minded congregations in Alsace and West Prussia, compared to the other members of the Mennonite churches, were the ones that made use of the privilege afforded by the Order of Cabinet). Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," p. 22. Siegfried Bartel, once a captain in the *Wehrmacht*, attests to personal experiences that illustrate these shifts in thinking among Mennonites in Prussia. His mother's diary, written throughout the First World War, is full of references to God's hand being on the German nation in war. Siegfried reflects: "The Mennonites were becoming very nationalistic in their thinking. This was a result of them having embraced the Pietist movement, which was Lutheran based. [My mother] gave me the name Siegfried Wilhelm. You couldn't be more patriotic than that...the Kaiser's name on top of the Siegfried." Interview of Siegfried Bartel.

⁵⁹ Most congregations were assigned to the Free State of Danzig, including: Danzig, Neunhuben, Fürstenwerder, Heubuden, Ladekopp, Orlofferfelde, Rosenort, and Tiegenhagen. Those assigned to East Prussia: Elbing-Ellerswald, Thiensdorf-Markushof and Tragheimerweide. Those in Poland: Thorn, Kulm, Graudenz, Obernessau, Schönsee, Montau-Gruppe. Penner, "Ost-West," p.104-105.

⁶⁰ In 1925, 95% of the German population belonged to either the Roman Catholic or Protestant Land Churches. Ernst Helmreich explains how those from the "more esoteric sects" were restricted in teaching religion in schools, from speaking at public gatherings, and in gaining access to cemeteries. Helmreich, p.94.

⁶¹ In 1874 a Prussian law allowed Mennonite congregations to incorporate. After 1924 Gustav Reimer, in a series of lawsuits, liberated the Mennonites of Prussia proper from the obligation of paying taxes to the Protestant established church." Crous, "Germany," in Bender and Smith, Volume II, p. 497. Diether Goetz Lichdi explains: "They didn't have to pay any fees to the Protestant Church... actually since 1928... there was a trial in Leipzig due to the constitution, it was challenged... the court ruled in favor of the West

The disruption of the Prussian community after the war, however, devastated the highly developed agriculture and cattle industry, in which the Mennonites lost their principal markets for their products, and were forced to pay the high tariffs imposed by the Poles which became increasingly difficult due to the deflated postwar economy. Additionally, Germans and Poles competed for privileges in the Free State of Danzig,⁶² and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and Stalin's collectivization of farmland in the early 1930s left thousands of Mennonites homeless, stripped of all they owned or dead in Ukraine. The aggregate effects of these developments, accompanied by the Reich government sending six million Marks of aid to Russian Mennonites in 1929, led most Prussian Mennonites to adopt a strong anti-Bolshevist and anti-Polish stance, and bolstered their support for the Right.⁶³

According to Emil Haendiges: "this difficult economic situation should be considered if we want to understand why Mennonite farmers joined the National Socialists in the Free State of Danzig."⁶⁴ One Mennonite man who lived in Neuteicherhinterfeld recalled:

We would try anything to get back into the Fatherland. Therefore, we were all in favor of organizations that went into that direction. We were politically involved as Mennonites, very much so.⁶⁵

Danzig pastor Erich Göttner expressed some of his sentiments at the end of 1929, while looking forward to more positive experiences in the decade ahead:

Prussian Mennonites due to the constitution...So actually, the Weimar constitution was the final point in the equalizing of Mennonites as citizens." Interview of Diether Goetz Lichdi.

⁶² Haendiges, "Catastrophe," p.126.

⁶³ When 10 000 Russian (Ukrainian) Mennonite peasants demonstrated against government policies concerning them in 1929, the German government sent six million marks in their aid. This solidified the German nation's loyalty to the Mennonite people in the minds of that community. At the Second Mennonite World Conference in Danzig in 1930, the prevalent fear of Stalin's activity among Mennonites in Russia, coupled with this benevolent aid from the German government, led to increased national loyalties among Mennonites and sympathy for the National Socialists, and their "anti-Bolshevist" campaign. James Lichti, "The German Mennonite Response to the Dissolution of the Rhoen-Bruderhof" in *Mennonite Life* June (1991) p.12.

⁶⁴ Haendiges, "Catastrophe," p.126.

⁶⁵ Interview of Walter Regehr.

Mitten in all der Unklarheit und Ungewissheit, die über dem heutigen wirtschaftlichen politischen, gesellschaftlichen Leben liegt...ein[er] Weg aus der Not zu verheißen scheint, sei es ein neues Wirtschafts- oder Erziehungsprogramm, sei es eine neu auftauchende Weltanschauungsbewegung.⁶⁶

Therefore, when Mennonites went to the polls in the early 1930s, they “voted either middle of the road, German National or National Socialist.”⁶⁷ The conditions were in place for the eventual co-opting of Mennonites in the Third Reich.

Prussian Mennonites in the Third Reich

We resist neither the emperor, the king, nor any authority in that to which they are called of God; but we are ready to obey to the death in all things that are not contrary to God and His Word.

-Addressing the 'lords and princes' in "The Foundation of Christian Doctrine" – Menno Simons, 1539

Christ says, Let your light shine before men. Paul says, Be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom you shine as lights in the world (Phil. 2:15).

-'The Signs by Which Both Churches may be Known' in "Reply to Gellius Faber" – Menno Simons, 1554

When Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, he prophesied, in an interview with Bishop Berning of Osnabrück, that “the Protestants will...reject me.”⁶⁸ This realization came from Hitler’s clear understanding, which he shared with Martin Bormann, “that National Socialism and Christianity are irreconcilable.”⁶⁹ In commenting on religion in Germany in 1933 during a conversation with Danzig Nazi leader Hermann Rausching, Hitler referred to Christianity as a “Jewish Christ-creed with...effeminate pity-ethics...[a] Jewish swindle. It will not make us free. A German Church, or German Christianity, is distortion. One is either a German or a Christian...you can’t be both.”⁷⁰ In correspondence with Nazi supporter Dietrich Eckart in

⁶⁶ (In the midst of all the confusion and uncertainty which dominates the current economic, political and social situation...a way out of the misery does seem to be promised, either through a new social and educational program or through a newly emerging ideological movement.) Goertz, p.64. See Lichdi, “Dritten Reich,” pp.41-43 for similar anti-Weimar sentiments, as well as anti-Bolshevik comments made by Mennonite pastors and laity alike.

⁶⁷ Interview of Horst Gerlach by Author, 8 June, 2000 (Weierhof, Germany).

⁶⁸ John Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches* (Vancouver, 1997), p.26.

⁶⁹ “Bormann’s Circular on the Relationship of National Socialism and Christianity,” in Conway, p.383.

⁷⁰ John Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* (Kitchener, 1999). p. 28-29.

1924, Hitler wrote, “by their fruits ye shall know them, Puritans, Anabaptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, those are the juiciest ones. In each of them sits the Jewish maggot.”⁷¹

What seemed obvious to the Nazi leader eluded most Christians in Germany, including the Mennonites. Hitler’s prophetic counterpart can be found in Palatinate Mennonite Ethelbert Stauffer. In his 1933 publication, *Täuferium und Märtyrertheologie*,⁷² Stauffer entrenched further the theology of martyrdom chronicled by van Braght. In it, Stauffer argues that the Mennonite relationship with nonresistance was to be understood in an apocalyptic sense, claiming that “Satan will be overcome only by...nonresistant suffering...which would serve a very great purpose...in ushering in a new aeon.”⁷³ Appealing to examples of the early Anabaptists, Stauffer concluded that the Anabaptist theology of martyrdom would not allow for a retreat into inward religion and pure spiritualism, but would require “the testimony of theological realism to which God is more real than anything called world...as martyrdom is actually victory over the victor.”⁷⁴ In short, this theology of martyrdom served as a theology of history, with a “final directive toward the narrow path of renouncing the world and accepting conflicts and death, if need be.”⁷⁵

Stauffer’s theological reflection did not find fertile spiritual ground among the leading figures in the Prussian Mennonite *Vereinigung*, who were eager to stress the antithesis to his work. The conference’s official position vis-à-vis the new regime was drafted in a telegram that was sent to Hitler in September 1933. It read:

⁷¹ Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism* (New York, 1966), p.331, quoted in Thiesen, p.29. Thiesen asserts that Hitler condemned pacifists, as he connected them with international socialism, p.29.

⁷² This article appeared in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 3 (1933), pp.545-598, and was translated into English: Ethelbert Stauffer, “The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom,” in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (1945), pp.179-214.

⁷³ Stauffer, p.204.

⁷⁴ Stauffer, p.205.

⁷⁵ Robert Friedmann, “Theology of Martyrdom” in Bender and Smith, Volume III, p.520.

Die heute zu Tiegenhagen im Freistaate Danzig tagende Konferenz der Ost und Westpreussischen Mennoniten empfindet mit dieser 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.⁷⁶

Hitler replied:

Für die mir in Ihrer Zuschrift zum Ausdruck gebrachte treue Gesinnung und Ihre Bereitwilligkeit, am Aufbau des Deutschen Reiches mitzuarbeiten spreche ich Ihnen meinen aufrichtigen Dank aus.⁷⁷

Evidently, by 1933 both the German national myth and the Mennonite martyrological understanding of its legendary past were re-molded and adapted to life in contemporary Germany, as both made use of “old models for new purposes.”⁷⁸ On 9 April, 1933, the Nazis laid claim to the Kyffhäuser monument, the legacy, and the *Reichskriegerbund*.⁷⁹ Most Mennonites, by this date, had aligned themselves with the Nazi movement largely because of their perceived victimization under the Versailles settlement, and due to the anti-Bolshevist sentiment emanating from the martyrdom of their brothers in Russia. With the loss of German territory after World War One, circumstance once again warranted the re-emergence of Redbeard in order to complete the task of uniting all *Volksdeutsche* in the German Reich – including the Mennonites inhabiting Prussian territories on the eastern side of the “Polish

⁷⁶ (The conference of the East and West Prussian Mennonites meeting today in Tiegenhagen in the Free State of Danzig is grateful for the great uplift which God has given our people through your strength of will and also pledges its enthusiastic willingness to cooperate with the building of our Fatherland with the strength of the Gospel, true to the motto of our Fathers: on other ground can no man lay a foundation than Jesus Christ). Emil Haendiges, “Bericht über die 4. Allgemeine Westpreussen Konferenz in Tiegenhagen am 10. September 1933” in *Mennonitische Blätter* October (1933), p. 101.

⁷⁷ (The content of your letter reveals true loyalty to me and your readiness for the cooperation with the construction of the German Reich, and I extend my sincere thanks). Ibid.

⁷⁸ Hobsbawm “Inventions of Traditions” p.5. The Free State of Danzig, while administered by the League of Nations, held free elections. The Nazis gained a great following in the city and its environs in the 1930s, as well as in West Prussia. See John Brown Mason, *The Danzig Dilemma: A Study in Peacemaking by Compromise* (Oxford, 1946), pp.61-76

⁷⁹ The *Reichskriegerbund* was the successor of the *Landeskriegerverbände*. See Karl Führer’s “Der Deutsche Reichskriegerbund Kyffhäuser 1930-1934: Politik, Ideologie und Funktion eines ‘unpolitischen’ Verbandes” in *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 2:36 (1984), pp.57-76 for an excellent account of how the non-partisan *Reichskriegerbund* came to fall under the control of the National Socialists. To the

Corridor,” whose yearning for landholding reforms and new markets for their crops had been realized under National Socialism. Mennonite farmers of Danzig were able to sell their crops in German markets and gain higher prices for their farming products.⁸⁰ Many experienced farmers were also spared both the loss of their farm and the burden of paying high rates on farm mortgages. Siegfried Bartel explains:

This is the main question that I am getting: ‘how could it happen, that Mennonites accepted Hitler’s regime?’ And I think there you have to realize that in west Prussia, at least 80% were farmers. And in the dirty 30s, they were losing their farms left and right. And then came Hitler, and on the very first day, not one farmer had to leave their farm anymore. A commission was set up, and said, “show me your debts.” The commission would analyze each farmer’s situation and then say, ‘you can only pay so much’ and the rest of the debt was wiped out by law.⁸¹

The synthesis of the two legends can best be seen in the numerous nationalist letters and articles written by professional pastors of the Prussian Mennonite congregations,⁸² which were printed in the *Vereinigung’s* newspaper, the *Mennonitische Blätter*. The *Blätter*, edited by Emil Haendiges, printed an article entitled *Mennonit und Wehrwille* in May, 1934, the conclusion to which reads:

Der Christ wird dieser Pflicht gern genügen. Denn sie ist eine christliche Pflicht... Wir müssen als Christen und Mennoniten die Waffe tragen, nicht, weil uns eine böse Obrigkeit dazu zwingt... sondern weil wir als diesseitsbejahende Christen unser Volk lieben.

The article continues, quoting Hitler:

chagrin of many in the association, new ‘black ravens’ (SS) were circling about the monument after 9 April, 1933, and installed a memorial to those who had died in the Hitler movement.

⁸⁰ Haendiges, “Catastrophe,” p.125.

⁸¹ Interview of Siegfried Bartel. Diether Goetz Lichdi explains that, after the Nazi seizure of power, “*Die rasche unszenierte ‘Brechung der Zinknechtschaft und das Erbhofgesetz – Höhepunkte der ‘Blut und Boden’ Politik – kamen auch den mennonitischen Bauern zugute.*” (The immediate breaking of the tenancy landholding system, and the laws of land inheritance – high points of the ‘bloods and soil’ politics – also benefited Mennonite farmers), Diether Goetz Lichdi, *Über Zürich und Witmarsum nach Addis Ababa. Die Mennoniten in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Maxdorf, 1983), p.162

⁸² As mentioned above, lay-pastoring had been superseded by university-trained pastors in the nineteenth century. Most were between 21-34 years of age, and exuded the tendency among the youth to get caught up in nationalist interpretations of God and nation. Many, naturally, adapted the Lutheran interpretation of Romans 13, and submitted the church to the state. Diether Goetz Lichdi, . “Römer 13 und das Staatsverständnis der Mennoniten um 1933” in *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 32 (1980), pp.77-78.

Heldische Tugenden sind die Erhaltungskraft unseres Volkes.⁸³

The June, 1934 edition expounded on the new constitution of the Prussian Mennonite church:

In der neuen Verfassung, die sich die Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden am 11. Juni 1934 gegeben hat, ist das Prinzip der Wehrlosigkeit aufgegeben⁸⁴

These unsolicited attempts to align the Mennonites positively with the National Socialist regime, it is significant to note, were printed *before* the announcement of German plans for rearmament and universal conscription in 1935.

Perhaps the episode that most effectively revealed the attitudes of the Mennonite community toward their history and the new regime was found in the *Vereinigung's* response to the dissolution of a Hutterite colony, and deportation of its members from Germany in 1936. After a Swiss newspaper, the *Basler Nachrichten*, printed an article entitled "*Deutsche Mennoniten ausgewiesen*," the head pastors of the *Vereinigung* and the south German Mennonite *Verband* joined in publishing "*eine notwendige Berichtigung*." The article revealed the insecurity that the Mennonites had developed through centuries of marginalization and deportation in Europe, and their desire to differentiate and disassociate themselves from the Hutterites, who had fallen into disrepute with the Nazis for their "Bolshevik-like" communal living and their nonresistant stance. The article boldly stated:

Die Bruderhöfer gehörten weder der Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden noch einem anderen Verband unserer deutschen mennonitischen Freikirche an.⁸⁵

⁸³ (The Christian would agree to this duty, for it is a Christian duty... we must as Christians and Mennonites take arms, not because a wicked authority forces us to...but as Christians living in the world we love the German people [and quotes Hitler]: heroic virtue is the strong preservation of our people). Dirk Cattepoel, "Mennonit und Wehrwille" in *Mennonitische Blätter*, May (1934), p.44.

⁸⁴ (Under the new conditions, as of 11 June, 1934, the German Mennonite Conferences have given up the principle of nonresistance). Neff, C., Haendiges, E., Braun, A., "Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden: Eine notwendige Berichtigung" in *Mennonitische Blätter*, June (1937), p.6.

⁸⁵ (The Bruderhöfer belonged neither to the Union of German Mennonites, nor to any other organization of our German Mennonite Free Church). Neff, Haendiges and Braun, p.72. Also, see Lichti, "The Mennonite Response," pp. 10-17.

While complying with the new regime, the Mennonites did display great concern over the preservation of their institutions. Generally, the *Vereinigung* was pleased with the official government endorsement of “positive Christianity,” only opposing the official attempts to impose the *Gleichschaltung* principle on all German Churches under *Reichsbischof* Ludwig Müller, whom Hitler appointed in 1933. In August, 1933, Danzig pastor Erich Göttner expressed the Mennonite stance vis-à-vis the *Deutsche Christen* – a sect of nationalist, racist Protestants that originally emerged in Thuringia and Berlin in the late 1920s. While not wanting to agitate the group, which originally found favor with the Nazis, the Mennonites were not, at the same time, willing to throw their lot in with them. Mennonite response to a lecture given by *Deutsche Christen* pastor Kuptsch (of Riesenburg, Prussia) entitled “*Vom Dritten Reich zur Dritten Kirche*,” was printed in the *Blätter* in September, 1933. A bold section highlighted in the middle of the article read: “*Hände weg vom Deutschen Freikirchentum! Hände weg vom Deutschen Mennonitentum.*”⁸⁶ Similarly, Emil Haendiges reinforced the Mennonite stance against the movement after *Deutsche Christen* member Reinhold Krause’s scandalous sermon at the Berlin Sportpalace in 1933, in which Krause attacked the Old Testament and the Jewish roots of Christianity.⁸⁷ While wanting to adapt to present trends in coordination of institutions – minus the creation of a *Reichskirche* – the

⁸⁶ (Hands off our German free-church tradition; hands off our German Mennonite tradition). Emil Haendiges, “Zur Kirchenfrage der Mennoniten” in *Mennonitische Blätter*, September (1933), p.86. This was in response to Kuptsch’s statement that, “Die verschiedenen Sekten und Kirchengemeinschaften müssen beseitigt werden, um Platz für die Glaubensgemeinschaft zu erhalten!” (Different sects and church communities must be eliminated in order to make room for the for the development of the belief community) printed in the *Elbinger Zeitung*, 11 August, 1933.

⁸⁷ Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*. (Chapel Hill, 1996), p.17. Emil Haendiges wrote: “Wie berechtigt unsere Zurückhaltung gegenüber den Deutsche Christen gewesen ist, haben die traurigen Vorgänge in der von den Deutsche Christen abgehaltenen Versammlung im Sportpalast zu Berlin am 13/11/33 in erschreckender Weise offenbart. Es bleibt betrüblich, wie es zu solchen Kundgebungen überhaupt hat kommen können.” (We restrained ourselves in our relations with the German Christians, up to their sad and frightening meeting in the sport palace in Berlin on 13/11/33. It

Vereinigung proposed the notion of uniting all German Mennonites in the “*Deutsche Mennonitische Gemeindekirche*.”⁸⁸ After pastors drafted a “*Große Bekenntnis*,” published in the *Verband's Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten* in 1934,⁸⁹ the enterprise ultimately failed, particularly as the more conservative *Verband* found significant incongruity with the theological views of the *Vereinigung*.

These theological differences, however, did not hinder the *Vereinigung's* mandate to protect their cherished free church traditions. Like their German Protestant brethren in the Confessing Church⁹⁰ – who had established themselves solely in opposition to the theological distortions of the *Deutsche Christen* and Nazi intentions of a *Gleichschaltung* of Christian churches – the Prussian Mennonites have been wrongly credited with resisting the Nazis.

Hans-Jürgen Goertz explains:

Der Widerstand gegen die Deutschen Christen nährte in den westpreussischen Mennoniten offensichtlich die Illusion, dem Erbe der Väter, der Trennung von Kirche und Staate, auch unter den Bedingungen des nationalsozialistischen Regimes treu bleiben zu können, ohne mit diesem zu kollidieren.⁹¹

Horst Gerlach adds that, while the Mennonites shared similar doctrinal concerns with the Confessing Church, they actually ended up “fighting the Protestant Church, [rather than] the

remains troublesome that they are able to hold these demonstrations.) Emil Haendiges, “Zur Kirchenfrage der Mennoniten” in *Mennonitische Blätter*, December (1933), p.114.

⁸⁸ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “Nationale Erhebung und religiöser Niedergang” in *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 26 (1974), p.68. The union did not take place, according to Ernst Crous, due to theological disagreements between the *Vereinigung* and the *Verband*. Some congregations were rationalist, others Pietist. Crous “*Vereinigung*” in Bender and Smith, Volume IV, p.812. Crous, “Germany,” in Bender and Smith, Volume II, p. 486.

⁸⁹ See “Die bevorstehende Vereinigung aller Mennonitengemeinden im Deutschen Reich” in *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten*, February (1934), pp.12-13.

⁹⁰ The *Bekennende Kirche*, led by Karl Barth and Martin Niemöller, drafted the six-point Barmen Declaration in 1934. The Confessing Church and the Declaration were created in order to counter the new theological distortions of the *Deutsche Christen* through upholding traditional Protestant interpretations of the Bible. See Hubert Locke (ed.) *The Church Confronts the Nazi: Barmen Then and Now* (New York, 1984), pp.19-25. Mennonite ministers Crous, Haendiges, Hege, Fellmann and Quiring all made contact with the Confessing Church. Lichdi, “Dritten Reich,” pp.85-87.

⁹¹ (The resistance against the German Christians fed the illusion, that the West Prussian Mennonite legacy of separation of church and state was faithfully maintained under the National Socialist regime). Goertz, p.74.

Nazis,” as their political views were much more conservative “than those of Barth and the others.”⁹² Essentially, both Goertz and Gerlach assert that the Mennonites failed to maintain their traditional two-kingdom theology, and found themselves in a compromising situation as a legitimate free church, positioning themselves politically and theologically somewhere between the established *Landeskirchen* and the *Deutsche Christen* – which, ironically, served to worsen the very problem of isolation they desired to lessen.

In the attempts to strengthen the sense of community, Mennonites established a *Deutscher Mennonitentag*, a day on which Mennonites nation-wide would gather annually, and did so during 1935-1940.⁹³ Like their German neighbors, Mennonites considered youth as a central component of both community and nation. Growing out of youth groups established in the 1920s, Mennonite youth groups, called the *Jugendwart*, were established under the leadership of Ernst Fellmann in 1935 in order to counter the influence of the Hitler Youth on young people⁹⁴ – and for good reason, as Hitler held views such as those he expressed in 1941: “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.”⁹⁵ The *Jugendwart* published a newspaper, *Die Mennonitische Jugendwarte*, in which the Mennonite youth commonly printed reserved criticisms of political and social life in Germany.⁹⁶ Like the *Vereinigung’s* reaction to the theology of the *Deutsche Christen*, Fellmann was primarily concerned that the

⁹² Interview of Horst Gerlach.

⁹³ Diether Goetz Lichdi, “National Socialism,” in Cornelius Dyck and Dennis Martin (eds.) *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, 1990), Volume V, p.617.

⁹⁴ Lichdi, “Dritten Reich,” p.168.

⁹⁵ Adolf Hitler, *Table Talk* A. Bullock (ed.) (London, 1953), entry for 13 December 1941, in Conway, p.15.

⁹⁶ Diether Goetz Lichdi explains: “Die MJW (Mennonitische Jugendwart) beschäftigt sich 1932 bis 1935 intensiv mit den Zeitfragen. Die Sprache ist ruhig und massvoll, (During 1932-1935, the MJW was intensively occupied with the questions of the day. The language was calm and moderate), “Dritten Reich,” p.36. Also, a group of young adults formed a *Rundbrief-Gemeinschaft* which was used to question and discuss issues of faith, nonresistance and National Socialist ideology (which was discontinued by the Gestapo in 1937).

Mennonite youth would not be led astray by the "*Irrungen und Wirrungen der Zeit*" and encouraged them to remain strong in the struggle for "right belief."⁹⁷ Therefore, with the Mennonites having successfully staved off association with the Hutterites, the *Gleichschaltung* of the German churches and the failed attempt to coordinate all Mennonite churches in one denomination, they accomplished what James Lichti has rightly emphasized as the primary goal of the majority: "[to resist] government coordination and [to maintain] institutional autonomy."⁹⁸

During 1933-1945, Mennonite congregational life continued in its accustomed manner⁹⁹ and enjoyed the toleration of the National Socialist government. A reason for this can be attributed to the Mennonites having found favor in the eyes of Adolf Hitler and *Reichsführer* of the SS Heinrich Himmler. Horst Gerlach explains that, after meeting with *Landrat* Walter Neufeldt, Hitler exclaimed: "Future founders of religions should take Mennonite traits as examples!"¹⁰⁰ Himmler was similarly impressed with the Mennonites, and actually brought greetings to Benjamin Unruh in Prussia from the Mennonites he had visited while in former Russian territories.¹⁰¹ Horst Gerlach concludes: "basically if most of those

⁹⁷ Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," p.36.

⁹⁸ Lichti, "Mennonite Response," p.16.

⁹⁹ "Worship services were held with nearly full attendance, communion was celebrated; younger sisters and brothers were taken in to the congregation through baptism and deacons, preachers and elders were elected and consecrated for their respective tasks." Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," pp. 114-117.

¹⁰⁰ Horst Gerlach, "The Final Years of Mennonites in East and West Prussia 1943-45" in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* April (1992), p.240.

¹⁰¹ After his visit to Ukraine in 1942, Himmler told Unruh: "Ich bin in der Ukraine gewesen und habe mir die Leute dort angesehen. Ihre Mennoniten jedoch sind die Besten." (I was in the Ukraine and visited the people there. Their Mennonites, however, were the best ones). Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," p.141. Lichdi asserts: "es wird deutlich daß Benjamin Unruh als Vertreter der russländischen Gemeinden auftrat, aber zugleich damit auch die Anliegen der Gemeinden im Reich vertreten hat." (it becomes clear that Benjamin Unruh served as deputy of the Russian community, but at the same time thereby also served as their representative to the German Reich), Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," p.141. Unruh saw Hitler as having had a positive relationship with Germany. In 1938, he stated that Hitler was "als ein deutscher Wilhelm von Oranien, Wilhelm Tell und als ein Washington erscheinen." (Hitler appeared as a German William of Orange, William Tell and as a Washington), Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," p.141. Himmler had a part in

who were in higher positions were on their side, it is logical that they did not suffer persecution.”¹⁰²

Officially, the Prussian Mennonites encouraged positive relations with the Reich government, and officially expressed their support for the regime. In 1940, the West Prussian Mennonite Conference declared that “*Die Konferenz wird nichts tun, was den Anschein eines Hauches gegen die Politik unseres Führers enthält.*”¹⁰³ Some, however, were uncomfortable with Nazi racial politics. Ladekopp’s Mennonite minister, Gerhard Thiessen, preached a sermon that was very critical of the government in 1937.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Christian Neff, leader of the south German Mennonite *Verband*, had become wary of the Nazi regime by 1937, declaring in a letter to Emil Haendiges: “*Ich sehe sehr skeptisch in die Zukunft.*”¹⁰⁵ Danzig’s minister, Erich Göttner, considered Nazi racism as “*dämonisch*”¹⁰⁶ and warned against the antisemitic teaching of the Nazis.

Most Mennonites did not share the Nazis’ antisemitic ideology and enjoyed positive relationships with the Jews of West Prussia, who were primarily doctors, lawyers, and merchants. Many Mennonites were deeply concerned over the plight of the Jews in Germany, were alarmed when Nazi racism turned violent, and made considerable efforts to assist Jewish people wherever possible. Diether Goetz Lichdi asserts that “*die Reichskristallnacht hat vielen Mennoniten die Augen geöffnet.*”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, there are many examples of the outrage

supplying the Ukrainian Mennonites with the means to flee their homes as the Russian army encroached on their homeland in 1943-1944. See Frank Epp, *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona, 1962).

¹⁰² Gerlach, “Final Years,” p.241

¹⁰³ (The conference will not do anything that gives even the faintest appearance of opposition to the policy of our leader), Goertz, p.84.

¹⁰⁴ Lichdi, “Addis Ababa,” p. 164.

¹⁰⁵ (I am very skeptical about the future), Lichdi, “Dritten Reich,” p.97.

¹⁰⁶ Lichdi, “Dritten Reich,” p.98. Göttner was already concerned about the political changes in Germany in 1932. See Göttner, “Die völkische Religiosität in der Gegenwart” *Mennonitische Blätter*, May (1932), p.12.

¹⁰⁷ (Kristallnacht opened the eyes of Mennonites), Lichdi, “Dritten Reich,” p.153.

that Mennonites felt concerning the events of 9 November, 1938. Many had established good working relations with the Jews, and were angered by their mistreatment. Lichdi asserts that Mennonites helped the Jews, albeit some more than others. Adolf Hahn, for example, had just become Bürgermeister of Albisheim in 1938. When he attempted to stop the looting and destruction of Jewish businesses that night, the racist thugs turned to him and bellowed:

“*Mach, daß du heimkommst, sonst kommen wir noch zu dir.*”¹⁰⁸ Hahn returned home, and found two Jewish women who had come to him for protection from the angry mob. He found a home for them, and stationed an armed guard outside of their home for protection.¹⁰⁹

Among many other similar accounts is that of *Landrat* Walter Neufeldt who, like many Prussian Mennonites, acquired Jewish inmates from Stutthof concentration camp to work on his farm. According to Horst Gerlach, these prisoners were able to work without guards, and were allowed to eat dinners provided by their Mennonite hosts.¹¹⁰ While not deviating from traditional Protestant theology pertaining to the Jews,¹¹¹ or providing significant protest or resistance to the Nazis’ antisemitic measures,¹¹² the Mennonites did offer assistance to the

¹⁰⁸ (You had better return home, or we will come to your house!), Lichdi, “Dritten Reich,” p.153.

¹⁰⁹ See Diether Goetz Lichdi “Dritten Reich” pp.149-158 for numerous examples of Mennonite people that abhorred the ill-treatment of Jews during the Nazi era.

¹¹⁰ See Diether Goetz Lichdi “Dritten Reich” pp.240-246 for numerous examples of Mennonites who hosted Jewish workers that were imprisoned in Stutthof.

¹¹¹ The *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten* printed theological reflections on the Jews during 1933-1937. In March, 1937, the article “Das auserwählte Volk” appeared in which the author claimed: “Die Juden sind jetzt in keiner Weise mehr das ‘auserwählte Volk.’ Gott hat sie einst für einen ganz bestimmten geschichtlichen Beruf auserwählt. Aber dieser Beruf ist längst erfüllt.” (The Jews are no longer the chosen race of God. At one time, God had chosen them for a specific historical purpose. But that purpose has long since been fulfilled), *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten*, March (1937), p.23.

¹¹² Hans-Jürgen Goertz explains how the Mennonites shared very similar concerns with the Confessing Church which did effectively address Nazi terrorization: “Wie schwierig es war, gegen die Verfolgungen im eigenen Lande zu protestieren, zeigt die zaghafte Zurückhaltung der Bekennenden Kirche, die es offiziell kaum zu einem Protest gegen die Verfolgung von Juden, Sozialdemokraten und Kommunisten durch das Nazi-Regime brachte — (How difficult it was to protest against persecution in one’s own country, the timid restraint of the Confessing Church offered no protest against the persecution of Jews, the social democrats and the communists), Goertz, p. 76.

Jews. For the most part, however, they maintained their focus on surviving – both individually and communally – in the Third Reich.

After German remilitarization and the introduction of universal conscription in 1935, the Mennonites of Prussia once again faced the challenges of serving in the military. Nazi administrator Reinhard Heydrich recognized an inherent incompatibility between Mennonitism and Nazi ideology, and questioned the ability of the Mennonites to serve as good *Weltanschauungskriegern*. Awakening old wounds of insecurity among the Mennonite people, Heydrich stated that, because of their focus on the “*Gemeinschaft des Evangeliums*” with their “*pazifistische und eidesgegenerische Einstellung*” – rather than focusing on the German “*Volksgemeinschaft*” – Mennonites could not be “*gleichzeitig Angehörige der SS-Sippengemeinschaft.*”¹¹³ Contrary to Heydrich’s accurate, yet outdated insights, some Mennonites did join the SS¹¹⁴ and not one able-bodied Mennonite man of draft age in all of Germany refused conscription.

As discussed above, this was made possible through the gradual processes of assimilation into Prussian life. Pastor Kraemer of Danzig published a timely and telling booklet in 1938, titled “*Wir und unsere Volksgemeinschaft.*” In it, Kraemer emphasized:

Der Bergpredigt... [ist für die] Familie und gegenüber christlich Gesinnten geboten sein; eine Regel für die Reiche dieser Welt, ihre Politik, ihre Selbstbehauptung ist es nicht.

and stressed:

Das alte Volkslied behält sein Recht, daß der Frömmste nicht im Frieden bleiben kann, wenn es dem bösen Nachbarn nicht gefällt.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ (“Community of the gospel” with their “pacifist and oath-opposing position” – rather than focusing on the German “people’s community” - Mennonites were “not at the same able to be members of the SS family). Friedrich Zipfel, *Kirchenkampf in Deutschland 1933-1945* (Berlin, 1965) p.206.

¹¹⁴ Goertz, p.62.

¹¹⁵ (The sermon on the mount [is for] the family and Christian-minded people and not for kingdoms and their politics and self-assertion in this world [and stressed that] the old song is still true that the pious cannot remain in peace if a hostile neighbor is not willing). Kraemer, *Wir und Unsere Volksgemeinschaft* (Crefeld, 1938) p.18.

Fuelling these shifts in the traditional nonresistant stance among Mennonites was their desire, like that of Menno Simons, to sever their association with the legacy of the Münster uprising. According to Horst Gerlach, this association continued to appear in encyclopedias and in German university curricula. “My uncle was told that the Mennonites were very peculiar,” Gerlach recalls. “[Land] Church papers published derogatory articles about the Mennonites, associating them with the Münsterites,” which frustrated his uncle and Emil Haendiges.¹¹⁶ Therefore, Mennonites shared a desire to rehabilitate the *Schwärmer* legacy, and to fend off the association of Mennonites with “*die Feigen*” who were, traditionally, “*vaterlandlos*.”¹¹⁷

With the Mennonites having fully assimilated into German society and culture, and with the abandonment of nonresistance, the last vestige of traditional Mennonite faith – the issue of the oath – remained to be legally resolved. This did indeed take place, as the War Ministry, in line with traditional Hohenzollern agreements, granted the Mennonites the privilege of saying “*Ich gelobe*” instead of “*Ich schwöre*” after signing a designated form to the effect, and accepted a handshake in lieu of swearing the oath (see Figures 2a and 2b).¹¹⁸

With their main concerns alleviated, the Mennonites joined the *Wehrmacht* and *Luftwaffe* in great numbers. The *Blätter* continued to print articles extolling the regime and praising God for German political and military victories. As seen above, the Mennonites had given up their position of nonresistance in 1934. The *Blätter* celebrated the *Anschluß* of

¹¹⁶ Interview of Horst Gerlach.

¹¹⁷ Lichdi, “Dritten Reich,” p.65.

¹¹⁸ (“I pledge/vow” instead of “I swear”). Goertz, p.77. See Figures 2a and 2b for copies of the original form used by the East and West Prussian Mennonite communities. This form made it possible for Mennonite men of draft age to sign up for this privilege prior to their arrival at the recruitment office. — Also, see Haendiges, “Catastrophe,” p.126. Ernst Helmreich explains how Martin Bormann was more concerned about the issue of the oath, and did not resolve his disapproval of the exemption until 1938. Helmreich, p.382.

Austria in its April 1938 edition and, in March 1939, ran an article encouraging Mennonites to “Lay their life down for their friends.” The newspaper also dutifully commemorated Hitler’s fiftieth birthday with an article in May, 1939. Horst Penner explains the development of a historical sentiment in Prussia, connecting the heroes of the Teutonic Knights in the *Jungdeutschen Orden*. He explains:

diese späten Nachfahren des Ordens hatten nur ein Ziel: Die Rückkehr ins deutsche Vaterland. In Aufmärschen in ihren graugrünen Windjacken warben sie für ihr Ziel...da sah man auch manches mennonitische Gesicht unter den Marschierern.¹¹⁹

Marianne Regehr, who lived in Ladekopp as a girl in 1939, recalls how the Mennonites longed to be re-united with Germany, and spoke of *Heim ins Reich*. “You are willing to take the good with the bad,” she reflects, “especially when you want something bad enough.”¹²⁰ After war broke out, and Danzig was reunited with Germany in September, 1939, the *Blätter*, accompanied with a suitable theological lesson on Romans 13, printed a prayer of thanks for “God’s victory” in having eliminated the “unnatural border” separating the *Volksdeutsche*:

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!¹²¹

God was also credited for the German victory over France and, prophetically, amazement was expressed at how the next generation of Germans would wonder at the

¹¹⁹ (these late descendants of the Teutonic Order had only one target: Returning to the German Fatherland. They marched around in their grey-green coats and recruited for their movement. One could also find some Mennonite faces amongst those that marched). Penner, “Ost-west” p.107.

¹²⁰ Marianne Regehr, a young girl at the time, mentioned that the common sentiment among Prussians, including the Mennonites, was to be reunited with the Fatherland, as they considered their home to be in Germany, and their goal as *Heim ins Reich*. Interview of Marianne Regehr by Author, 26 July, 1999 (Winnipeg, MB).

¹²¹ (Our German ethnic communities suffered unspeakable difficulties under the Polish yoke during twenty years of foreign domination. The worst at the very end. Then God, our Lord, helped them through the hand of our Führer and set them free. We thank our Führer for his feat of liberation!) Emil Haendiges, “Zur Heimkehr der bestreiten Volksgenossen ins Reich” in *Mennonitische Blätter* October/November (1939), p.65.

victories of the German army. By 1941, Mennonite newspapers were regularly printing government advertisements aimed at recruiting support for the war effort, and the *Blätter* continued to credit God for German victories in the field.

While the *Vereinigung* officially extolled the regime and the war, not all Mennonites in Prussia shared in the excitement. Examples of resistance or open critical opposition to the regime among the Prussian Mennonites are hard to find, but some examples of noncompliance do exist. Christian Neff, for example, re-kindled his skeptical outlook first expressed in 1937, and earned the *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten* a forced discontinuation of publication after it printed his well-known anti-war Christmas sermon in January, 1941. It should be noted, however, that Neff's son was drafted in 1941, which may have influenced the pastor's views on the war that was raging at the time.¹²² In addition to the authorities finding little success after encouraging individuals to withdraw their membership from the churches in Germany,¹²³ Hermann Epp, a pastor in West Prussia, was sent to a concentration camp for his noncompliance with the government.¹²⁴ Diether Goetz Lichdi explains that many Mennonites followed in the ways of their forefathers who chose alternative service after being drafted into the German armed forces during the First World War:

Es sind zahlreiche Einzelfälle bekannt, die die Meinung unterstreichen, daß vielen Mennoniten im Feld die alte Wehrlosigkeit bewußt war und daß sie versuchten, ihr Gewissen rein zu erhalten.

¹²² Diether Goetz Lichdi questioned Neff's apparent leaning toward nonresistance, asserting that he was more concerned over the German loss of 13 000 young men in the French campaign, and 18 000 in the Polish campaign. Neff realized that his own son, who was drafted in 1941, could be among the next to die in battle. This indeed came to pass, as his son was killed in action in 1944. Interview of Diether Goetz Lichdi.

¹²³ From 1937 on, "those who were Party members were urged to withdraw from the church, although on the whole and particularly in comparison with conditions in the Catholic and Protestant Church, this attempt was without any success. Despite the most severe pressure, only ten out of 500 members withdrew from our [Mennonite] church in Crefeld." Interview of Diether Goetz Lichdi. Horst Penner explains how Cornelius Janssen, a government official in the Großes Werder (1939-42) did not leave his church after being pressured to do so. Penner, "Ost-west" p.137.

¹²⁴ Interview with Siegfried Bartel.

Sie wollten nicht auf Menschen schießen. Deshalb meldeten sich viele zu den Sanitätsabteilungen oder den technischen Diensten...[oder] Kraftfahrer, Feldküchenfahrer, usw.¹²⁵

It is clear that the Mennonites had succeeded in achieving good standing in the German Reich. More than tolerated, they were allowed to maintain a personal Mennonitism, and were accommodated in areas of mild contention. Both the Nazi government and the Mennonites eyed each other cautiously yet respectfully, and chose to disagree silently on points that mattered little to the overall goals of each respective group.

The German and Mennonite myths, synthesized among the Mennonite men in the reality of war, served in bolstering enthusiasm for one final offensive military campaign in 1941-1942, the suitably named Operation Barbarossa. Horst Gerlach recalled how, at the outset of the battle, his school teacher had applied the apocalyptic account in the biblical book of Revelation to the impending final victory of the Germans in the Second World War.¹²⁶ Similarly, the *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten* began in the early 1940s to print articles with eschatological and apocalyptic overtones pointing to a German triumph.¹²⁷

As is well known, reality proved quite the opposite. On 20 October, 1944, the Red Army took Nemmersdorf in East Prussia, and committed heinous crimes against the civilian population there.¹²⁸ The stories and fear of similar treatment reached the Mennonites in West Prussia and Danzig, as did the Red Army in January 1945. While the majority of Mennonites managed to escape with their lives, those unable to escape via ships in the Danzig harbor were subject to great mistreatment from pillaging, rape and murder to being taken away on trains

¹²⁵ (Many Mennonite men at the front desired to maintain the old defenseless position, and to keep their conscience pure in this regard. They did not want to shoot people. They would choose positions as medics, technical personnel, chauffeurs, army kitchen drivers, etc.). Lichdi asserts that most who chose these positions were of the more pietistic, or Flemish men that originally emigrated to West Prussia, Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," p.136.

¹²⁶ Interview of Horst Gerlach.

¹²⁷ Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," p.98.

¹²⁸ See E.G. Lass, *Die Flucht: Ostpreussen 1944-1945* (Bad Neuheim, 1964).

destined for work camps in the Gulag.¹²⁹ In the wake of defeat, “*Taten und Helden*” was re-appropriated to those who suffered for their faith, while the soldiers to whom the essay was addressed in 1938 – after all of the violence they meted out and sacrifices they encountered – were marginalized as greater concerns came to bear on the Mennonite community.

Aftermath

The history of the Prussian Mennonites has revealed the proclivity of that community to work toward a synthesis of their time-honored religious traditions with the prevailing national ethos. This is seen most clearly in the Mennonite community’s encounter with National Socialism, when the specific national (German) and religious (Mennonite) mythologies colluded with one another often in inconspicuous tandem, gradually amalgamating from the early 1930s until reaching complete harmony when the most durable Mennonite tradition was fully compromised and the majority of eligible Mennonites bore arms at the front in 1939. By this time, each respective myth’s overarching ethos – for one: to remain separate from the world; to conform only to the will of God; not to swear an oath to any temporal ruler; and to maintain nonresistance; and the other: to demand conformity; to demand loyalty through administering an oath; to conquer and subdue the world forcibly in its leaders’ name – found compatibility with the other, and worked together toward realizing what were perceived to be the synonymous goals of God and nation.

The desire to belong in Prussia led the Mennonites into a pattern of compromise. Communal insecurity – born out of persecution, deportation and legal restrictions on

¹²⁹See Horst Gerlach’s personal account of his experience in a Siberian work camp in *Nightmare in Red*

property, churches, and the like over the centuries – resulted in numerous emigrations. Those who chose to remain in Prussia continued to appeal for greater rights and, while not necessarily accepting the state impositions outright – as seen in continual delegations pleading the Mennonite case before the government – found that their fundamental Mennonite tenets of faith were necessarily compromised over time.

Like Menno Simons and the early mainstream Anabaptists, the Prussian Mennonites labored in their desire to ameliorate their image through overcoming the onerous Münster legacy. The difference lies in that, while Simons chose to strengthen the peace position, the Prussian Mennonites followed the lead of their south German brethren, and chose to return to military service. Hans-Jürgen Goertz asserts that:

die Mennoniten mit dem nationalsozialistischen Staat bereits so stark identifizierten, daß sie in den Leidenden Märtyrern nicht mehr die späten Brüder ihrer täuferischen Väter erkannten¹³⁰

According to Horst Gerlach, the Prussian Mennonites were familiar with the *Martyr's Mirror* but chose the inverse of Simons' interpretation of military service, and believed the legends had their place in past epochs.¹³¹ Goertz explains the shift as follows:

Die 'nationale Erhebung' kam den Bedürfnissen und Anstrengungen der Mennoniten, nach langer Fremdexistenz endlich auch gesellschaftlich voll integriert zu werden, ohne die konfessionelle Sonderexistenz aufgeben zu müssen, stark entgegen. So kann man ohne weiteres sagen, dass die Politisierung des konfessionellen Rückbezugs einem gesellschaftlichen und wirtschaftlichen Impuls gefolgt ist, der die Färbung der faschistischen Ideologie angenommen hatte.¹³²

Peter Klassen asserts that the Mennonites were “unwilling to distinguish between [their] own interests and those perceived desirable for the state. National goals and priorities

(Freeman, 1995).

¹³⁰ (the Mennonites had identified so strongly with the National Socialist state at this time that they were no longer associated with their suffering martyred Anabaptist forefathers). Goertz, p.76.

¹³¹ Interview of Horst Gerlach.

¹³² (The 'rise of the nation' validated the efforts of the Mennonites, after a history of being foreigners in Germany, to finally integrate fully without relinquishing their unique confessional beliefs. Thus one can say that their political and confessional reflex followed a social and economic impulse, which adopted the fascist ideology of the day), Goertz, p.82.

were defined by the state and accepted by the church.” Klassen rightly points to the issue of the oath in concluding: “Perhaps this was fittingly symbolic of a situation where a form was accepted as a substitute for an essence that had been lost.”¹³³

The processes of Mennonite assimilation and conjunction with the Prussian state involved multifarious elements. It is clear from the available literature and from oral histories, that the Mennonites initially supported the National Socialists because their policies favored farmers. These farmers lived on the other side of the “Polish Corridor” and held the sentiment of “*Heim ins Reich*.” Additionally, Pietism and Rationalism served in the gradual weakening of fundamental Mennonite principles throughout the nineteenth century. With leadership from Lutheran and Baptist-trained pastors who encouraged church-state cooperation, the Mennonites, one of the few Christian denominations founded on a theology of radical nonconformity and nonresistance, were left without a substantial theological vehicle for resisting the regime.

The liberalism found in the language of the Danzig Mennonite Church Constitution of 1886 gave the appearance of maintaining Mennonite theology. In fact, the conscience, which Simons insisted be kept unadulterated amidst secular influences,¹³⁴ was individualized in order for the Mennonites to maintain the principle in appearance. The foundational tenet of conscience, originally based on communal adherence, was reduced to personal choice and immediate physical proximity, thus diluting the very *raison d' être* of the original Mennonite denomination. Diether Goetz Lichdi summarizes another way Mennonites maintained the appearances of past belief:

¹³³ Klassen, “Faith and Culture,” p.205.

Sie wollen den alten individualistischen Nonkonformismus auch dem Dritten Reich nicht opfern. Die Gemeinden werden nicht gleichgeschaltet, das Führerprinzip nicht eingeführt.¹³⁵

Lichdi continues:

Sie beginnen die Spannung des Lebens 'in der Welt' aber nicht 'von der Welt' unter endzeitlichen Gesichtspunkten zu sehen. Sie nehmen mehr und mehr auf Jesus als den wahren Führer Bezug...so sehr sie sich der staatsbürgerlichen Verpflichtung bewußt waren, so wenig sie sich sozial diskriminieren wollten, so sehr achteten sie auch die Gewissensnot einzelner und waren sich des täuferischen Erbes bewußt.¹³⁶

In short, the Prussian Mennonites struggled to maintain both participatory citizenship (*Staatsbürgerschaft*) and their traditional beliefs.

Leonard Verduin has associated coercion with corruption in religious history.¹³⁷

In this case, however, the Mennonites voluntarily accepted a coercive regime and lost their essential conscience and voluntarist focus. Therefore, the claim that Anabaptists ushered in "the beginning of modern individual, non-ecclesiastical culture"¹³⁸ finds ample support in late-nineteenth century Prussia. Eventually, the liberal, individualized theology of the Mennonites was combined with conservative political views, allowing for the synthesis of Mennonite faith and German nationalism – a process that Cornelius Dyck has credited with the Mennonite loss of "cosmic dualism," leaving them impotent "against the satanic spiritual realm."¹³⁹ This impotence, wrought by their choices and resulting from their insignificant population in the Reich, was recognized by the Nazi

¹³⁴ Bender, "The Anabaptists," p.15.

¹³⁵ (They did not want to sacrifice the old notion of individual nonconformity in the Third Reich. Also, the church community did not wish to 'coordinate' according to the *Führerprinzip*), Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," p.167.

¹³⁶ (They began to see the tension of living 'in the world' but not 'of the world' in an apocalyptic sense. They increasingly regarded Jesus as the one true leader and protector in trouble [though] they very much desired to participate in German social and political life, and desired to avoid social discrimination they still wanted to identify themselves as followers of conscience, in the way of their Anabaptist forefathers). Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," pp.169-170.

¹³⁷ Verduin p.92.

¹³⁸ Ernst Troeltsch asserts that modern individualism eventually "replace[d] the old state-church – compulsory culture. It [was] at first a purely religious idea, which then became secularized and overlaid with rationalistic, skeptical and utilitarian idea of toleration" Ernst Troeltsch "Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der Modernen Welt" (Munich, 1911) in Bender, "Anabaptists," p.4.

government that found favor with the Mennonite way of life, and did not perceive the group as posing a threat to the national ethos.

Interested in guarding the historical record of the Prussian Mennonites from falsity – much like Emil Haendiges in 1934 – Hans-Jürgen Goertz responded to a misrepresentation of Mennonites in print. After Hans Rothfels placed the Mennonites alongside the Quakers and Jehovah's Witnesses as resisters of the Nazi regime, Goertz stated: "*dieser ehrenvollen Einordnung der Mennoniten in den Widerstand gegen das nationalsozialistische Regime nicht zustimmen.*"¹⁴⁰ It would appear, in both of these cases that outsiders had assumed, both at the time and afterward, that the Mennonites would have acted very differently under National Socialism – that they would have resisted.

There were, however, grave consequences for the Mennonite collaboration with National Socialism. In the wake of Redbeard's failed mission came the destruction of all that bore his name. Rather than having their insecure fears of being expelled from Germany by the Nazis realized, Prussian Mennonites found a much worse fate at the hands of the advancing Soviet army. By summer, 1945, the Prussian Mennonites lost their 400-year domicile in the region, including their ancestral homes, and approximately ten per cent of their community,¹⁴¹ with the survivors forced to flee to western Germany. After arriving there, thousands chose to emigrate to Canada, the United States, Uruguay or Paraguay through assistance from the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC, a relief organization established in 1920 whose main function was to care for the worldwide Mennonite community), while many others established new homes in Germany. In the end, the legendary myth of Barbarossa was shattered in the

¹³⁹ Dyck, p.17.

¹⁴⁰ (it is not correct to have the Mennonites honored as resisters of the National Socialists), Goertz, p.61.

¹⁴¹ It remains unknown how many Mennonites were drafted, killed in action, killed in the flight from Prussia, and how many deaths were civilian or military, etc. Lichdi, "Dritten Reich," p.135.

resultant massive loss of life, mass displacement and political division of the German people after the war. The symbolism of the defeat of the German army in this final eastern offensive has far-reaching implications for both the Mennonite community and the German nation, as both were afforded great cause for personal and communal reflection.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung

While there have always been divergent views on nonresistance in the community, Mennonite historian C. Henry Smith rightly points out that Mennonite principles have always “forbade any fellowship with a movement that might require the use of force in gaining its objective, laudable though the goal might be.”¹⁴² Indeed, the peace that came after the war did not effectively free the Prussian Mennonites from the spiritual mire in which they were steeped. After the Nazi atrocities became fully known to the public in 1945, international condemnation left those on the losing side with little hope for understanding or rehabilitation in the eyes of the victors. The Mennonites found themselves battling the demon of their own creation in the stark realization of having compromised their fundamental tenets of faith and, through personal, communal and national reflection, came to a fuller realization of their alliance with one of the most evil regimes in human history.

A partial result of this alliance, and of having been a part of a group of armed men who “lived by the sword and died by the sword,” included the death of their 400-year old ancestral homeland in East and West Prussia. T. D. Regehr has boldly asserted that “there has always been some suggestion that, at least in part, [the Mennonites]

¹⁴² Smith, p.18.

contributed to that disaster.”¹⁴³ To several MCC and United Nations administrators who arrived in Germany to assist those affected by the war in 1945, many Mennonites seemed “to lack an appropriate sense of contrition...they seemed more concerned about what they had lost than what they had done during the war.”¹⁴⁴ Peter Klassen has offered a more nuanced approach, and asks: “did the Mennonites fashion the instruments of their own destruction?”¹⁴⁵

Understandably, repentance has not been widespread among the Mennonites. Two exceptions include Emil Haendiges and Siegfried Bartel. Haendiges publicly repented after the war at the Fourth Mennonite World Conference in 1948, and completely changed his views on nonresistance. He called for the privilege, not just for Mennonites, “*sondern für alle in unserem Deutschen Vaterlande*” to refuse military service on the basis of conscience. In his view: “*Niemand darf gegen sein Gewissen zum Kriegsdienst mit der Waffe gezwungen werden,*”¹⁴⁶ a position that was adopted into the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949.

Siegfried Bartel converted to pacifism following the war after “re-thinking Jesus teaching.” Bartel has said that his guilt comes from being in the war, not for being a German captain in the *Wehrmacht*, which is something that many, in his experience, seem to want him to repent for. For the most part, Bartel’s autobiography – in which he condemns all forms of violence – has not evoked much positive response from the Prussian Mennonites, since, he

¹⁴³ Regehr, T.D., “Polish and Prussian Mennonite Displaced Persons, 1944-50” in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, April (1992), p.266.

¹⁴⁴ Regehr, p.266.

¹⁴⁵ Klassen, “Faith and Culture,” p.196.

¹⁴⁶ (for all people in Germany...no one should be forced to go into military service and bear arms against his conscience), Haendiges, “Historisches,” p.26. This was published after the promulgation of the Basic Law in 1949. However, Mennonite historians Horst Gerlach and Diether Goetz Lichdi insist that Haendiges’ views on these matters had direct influence on the related clause that appears in the Basic Law.

says “most of them are not quite willing to think it through in regards of their own experiences in the war...they take the view... [that they] couldn’t help it.”¹⁴⁷

Canadian Mennonite Walter Quiring, who authored numerous pro-Nazi articles in *Der Bote* during 1933-1945, wrote a letter to a fellow Mennonite in 1953. In it, Quiring confessed: “The German people let themselves be deceived by Hitler. I also. The German people today realize their error. I also,” and concludes, altering the former Nazi slogan concerning the Jews, “Hitler was the misfortune of the German people.”¹⁴⁸

Some Mennonites remain skeptical of such changes of heart. Mennonite minister Diether Goetz Lichdi comments:

[Some Mennonites] repent because the other Mennonites in the Allied countries have heard their governments say that the Germans are war criminals; they really lack proper theological reflection. My view is that the Mennonites were guilty because they couldn’t overcome the temptation of Nazism.¹⁴⁹

Indeed, the majority have not recognized the need for repentance of any kind. This is mostly because the Prussian Mennonites do not believe that they abandoned the nonresistant stance, and because of the great misfortune that was meted out on their community in the last months of the war. One Mennonite veteran of the *Luftwaffe* insists that he remained “*wehrlos* in his heart” while serving his country. Diether Goetz Lichdi confirmed this sentiment among German Mennonites today. Referring to nonresistance and Mennonite faith, he commented: “The younger ones would agree with it and the older ones would say – we always practiced it! They always practiced ‘*Wehrlosigkeit* in their hearts.’”¹⁵⁰

The fact that many people in Germany endured great hardship and death for choosing to remain true to their religious and political convictions – such as the Hutterites and

¹⁴⁷ Interview of Siegfried Bartel.

¹⁴⁸ Letter from W. Quiring to B.B. Janz, B.B. Janz papers, CMBSF, Winnipeg, quoted in Thiesen, p.226.

¹⁴⁹ Interview of Diether Goetz Lichdi.

¹⁵⁰ Interview of Diether Goetz Lichdi.

Jehovah's Witnesses, for example – stands in contrast to the Prussian Mennonite experience under Nazism, and their maintenance of *Wehrlosigkeit*, but only to an extent. In a way, the Mennonites *did* stay true to their convictions as they were at the time. After adapting and assimilating into Prussian society over the centuries, the Mennonites had altered some of their foundational tenets of faith. When confronted with an ideology that was incompatible with Christianity under the pressures of dictatorship, their adapted version of Mennonite faith had been purged of any content that could have been utilized in opposition to the government, and proved to be rather inconsequential in impeding the rise of National Socialism in Germany.

Naturally, the German people continue to deal with their very problematic Nazi past. In the processes of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past), monuments, museums and memorials have been erected to encourage appropriate reflection on the unparalleled aggression meted out, in many different ways, on the majority of Europeans during the Nazi era. While the efforts have taken praiseworthy forms, many endeavors lack meaningful substance as the creators of memorials to Nazi atrocities are burdened with the obscurity of intent. Perhaps this is the result of the controversial nature of the phenomena that are represented, and the understandable desire for the German people – most of whom are relatives of people who lived in Nazi Germany, many of whom were involved in the crimes of the regime – to focus on the positive rebuilding of their physical, social and spiritual nation. Indeed, the ambivalence and confusion over the Nazi past are evident in a wide range of memorials, from the

high-profile Neue Wache in downtown Berlin, to those erected in villages scattered throughout Germany (see Figure 3).¹⁵¹

Similarly, the Mennonite people have attempted to come to terms with their past as well. In addition to the concerns and confusion they share with their German neighbors, the Mennonites face the added conundrum of having compromised the fundamental tenets of their faith. The history of the Prussian Mennonites in the Third Reich has revealed that nationalism, communal and personal expediency seemed to blind the Mennonites to the dangerous and anti-Christian ideology of the Nazis. Most did not recognize that the regime was inherently anti-Christian and, if they did, they no longer possessed a theology that could counter it. The reflection, or lack of it, seems to leave the Prussian Mennonites with similar ambivalent feelings and a confusing legacy, much like those found in memorials throughout Germany. The Mennonites, too, love their country, are defensive of their involvement in the war, and continue to live with the grief of their losses while quietly extolling those who suffered for taking a radical stance against Nazism. They have also erected a memorial of their own in Weierhof in memory of those who died in the flight from their homes in Prussia during 1944-1945. The monument is inscribed to "*Den Toten der fernen Heimat.*" Ironically, a verse from the book of Revelation is printed down the middle of the cross, which serves as the memorial itself (see Figure 4).¹⁵² Instead of the apocalyptic myths having been realized in the *Wehrmacht's* victory in the east – as prophesied by Horst Gerlach's schoolteacher – the

¹⁵¹ The Neue Wache is a memorial to those who suffered unjustly and died in Europe while under the control of totalitarianism. This confusion over who is represented in the memorial finds its counterpart in Bockenheim, where "*Der Ehre*" of the soldier is juxtaposed with lists of fallen soldiers from both world wars, and those who had resisted the tyranny of the National Socialists to the point of death.

¹⁵² Across the horizontal beam of the cross-shaped memorial: "*den Toten der fernen Heimat*" (the dead from the far-off homeland) and down the vertical beam: "*Gott wird abwischen alle Tränen von Ihren Augen und der Tod wird nicht mehr sein noch Leid noch Geschrei noch Schmerzen wird mehr sein denn das erste ist vergangen.*" (God will wipe away every tear from their eyes and the dead will experience no more mourning, or crying or pain; the first things have passed away). Revelation 21:4

biblical verses served to comfort those who had lost family and loved ones in the wake of its catastrophic defeat.

Prussian Mennonites have also attempted to deal with the cognitive and theological dissonance inherent in their history. According to the collected accounts of Diether Goetz Lichdi, many Mennonite women working in hospitals in Prussia decided, on account of their Christian faith, to lay down their lives for those in their care. Nurse Helene Hamm of Marienburg, for example, was raped and killed by Russian soldiers after choosing not to join the fleeing German expedition in 1944 in order to tend to the sick and war-wounded in the hospital. Here again, even amidst the violence of war – in which Prussian Mennonite men fully participated – there were a number of Mennonites who considered the bravery and sacrifice of the likes of Helene to be a continuation of the *Wehrlosen Christen* legacy of martyrdom,¹⁵³ and rightly so. However, to focus on the suffering, particularly female suffering,¹⁵⁴ tends to diminish communal responsibility for the German aggression, which ultimately brought about Helene's tragic end, and simultaneously promotes vindication through victimization.

The mainline Protestant churches, despite the repeated criticism that they have been motivated by outside political pressures,¹⁵⁵ have attempted to come to terms with their actions during the Nazi era as well. The leaders of the *Land* churches, mostly those involved in the Confessing Church, banded together after the war to “establish greater

¹⁵³ Penner, “Ost- west,” p.145.

¹⁵⁴ Doris Bergen asserts that the “appropriation of women's experiences for political ends, to legitimate claims of male loss and innocence” prevails in postwar ethnic German historiography. “Mourning, Mass Death, and the Gray Zone: The Ethnic Germans of Eastern Europe and the Second World War,” in *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End*. (Charlottesville, 2000), p. 181.

¹⁵⁵ John Conway asserts that the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt was made voluntarily after the war, although an expedient element did exist. Those repenting were interested in ecumenical and international dialogue and, among many, including Martin Niemöller, were prominent figures in the establishment of the

unity among the Protestants within Germany and in the world at large,¹⁵⁶ by forming the Provisional Council for the Evangelical Church in Germany in 1945. When the Provisional Council convened in Stuttgart in October, 1945, a delegation from the World Council of Churches joined the gathering. At the meeting, pastor Martin Niemöller delivered a public statement of repentance on behalf of the German Protestant Churches for their actions in the war. The statement, which came to be known as the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, declared:

With great anguish we state: through us inestimable suffering was inflicted on many peoples and lands...we have fought for long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the spirit that found horrible expression in the National Socialist regime of force, but we accuse ourselves for not witnessing more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously and for not loving more ardently.¹⁵⁷

Those doing the repenting were part of a small, radical minority, and their actions caused great alarm and condemnatory reaction from many Christians in Germany.¹⁵⁸ On the positive side, however, these men and particularly the Stuttgart Declaration spearheaded the German *Schuldfrage*, both within and outside the church.¹⁵⁹

World Council of Churches in Geneva in 1947. See John Conway, "How Shall the Nations Repent? The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt," in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 38:4 (October) 1987.

¹⁵⁶ Helmreich, p.418.

¹⁵⁷ Text of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, in Helmreich, p.421.

¹⁵⁸ John Conway asserts: "There can be no doubt...that, when the Declaration was first issued, such attitudes [of exaggerated nationalism] were both widespread and strongly held by the majority of Protestants, both clergy and laity. But to the more radical minority, who supported it, the statement was a belated attempt to come to terms with their own mistakes, an act of conscious self-criticism for attitudes and actions which had involved their church and their nation in unprecedented ethical disasters." Conway, "Nations Repent," p. 597.

¹⁵⁹ Helmreich notes that Karl Jaspers gave a series of lectures in the winter semester of 1945-1946 on the question of German guilt in relation to the war at the University of Heidelberg. Helmreich, p.421. John Conway points out that the Declaration was significant in four distinct ways: 1.it marked the first public acknowledgement by a major social organization of the complicity of Germans in the misdeeds of the Nazi regime, and the need for a public acceptance of guilt; 2.it hindered the growth or recurrence of any exculpatory mythology, such as the notorious 'Stab-in-the-back' legend of 1918; 3.it opened the way for a wholly new and much more creative relationship between the German Protestant churches and their counterparts abroad; 4. It saw the beginning of a long and often painful assessment of the Church's responsibility towards political events in their society, and an abandonment of old ideas about the subordination of Lutherans to the powers of the State. "The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt and its

The Mennonites, too, share in this desire for rehabilitation. As seen above, the Mennonites, much like their counterparts in the mainline Protestant sects in Germany, were more interested in protecting their institutions and traditions than propagating a potent Christian testimony in the Third Reich. Perhaps the two were seen as one and the same. While continuing in the tendency to take care of their own, refugee congregations of the former Danzig-West Prussia area are represented in the broader German Mennonite community by a ministerial committee called the *Ältestenausschuss der Konferenz der west- und ostpreussischen Mennonitengemeinden*.¹⁶⁰ After the war, North American volunteers in the MCC sent money and supplies to aid their Mennonite brethren in Germany. Those who were able to validate their Mennonite identity adequately would receive the aid.

In terms of the historical record, most Mennonite veterans desire that the past be re-written in such a way that the Germans, and the Mennonites, are treated more fairly. And understandably so. Indeed, many Mennonites, and others, feel that historical objectivity has been sidelined in much of the historiography produced on the people and period in question. Unlike Ethelbert Stauffer's declaration – that martyrs achieve “victory over the victors” – the Mennonites, martyrs and otherwise in this case, have been forced into quiet, personal reflection as the losers of an unjustly motivated and executed war. The resulting tragic emplotment of their history has served to objectify “the German” in popular and scholarly accounts of the 1933-1945 era, in justifying the actions

“Ecumenical Impact,” Unpublished Paper in John S. Conway Research Collection, D804.3C443, File 1, RRAR2, (Vancouver, 1985).

¹⁶⁰ Crous, “Germany,” in Bender and Smith, Volume II, p.486.

of the Allies between 1945-1950,¹⁶¹ and in fostering anachronistic adaptations of Nazism in contemporary society.

On the other hand, significant reflection and criticism are certainly appropriate and are the duty of theologians, scholars and those otherwise involved in the events of this period. Indeed, denominational authenticity and credibility must be restored if the Mennonites intend to sustain respect in the German nation and throughout the world. Some efforts have been made in this direction. In striving toward reconciliation with the Polish people, former members of the Prussian Mennonite community who had moved to Hamburg after the war initiated a joint Mennonite-Polish Camp of Atonement, which was erected at Stutthof in 1973.¹⁶²

The efforts at Stutthof are not entirely unique. The negative experiences many Mennonites endured during wartime served as the catalyst for a re-evaluation of their time-honored traditions of nonresistance and nonconformity. Many came to realize that nonresistance, in its traditional form, was more irresponsible than anything else, leading many Mennonites to convert from their passive, secluded peace stance to nonviolent social action and radical peacemaking. Now willing to pay the "ultimate sacrifice" after joining the "corps" in working toward bringing peace to troubled areas, Mennonites were able to pour their energies into positive social and structural change. For example, Klaus Froese, son of a *Wehrmacht* soldier from West Prussia, moved to Crete in 1946 in order to help rebuild what

¹⁶¹See James Bacque, *Crimes and Mercies: The Fate of German Civilians Under Allied Occupation 1944-1950*. (Toronto, 1997).

¹⁶²Kazimierz Mezynski, "The German Mennonites on their way to reconciliation with Poland" in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 1976, (50), pp.288-9.

German soldiers had destroyed in the war and legally claimed Conscientious Objector status under the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1950.¹⁶³

Mennonites around the world also learned a great deal from their experiences during the Second World War. Having eliminated the traditional Mennonite two-kingdom theology, new groups, mostly emanating from MCC, began to organize and move into service all around the world. Christian Peacemaking Teams, the Mennonite Conciliation Service and the International Conciliation Service, for example, began to focus on the prevention of violence and on empowering people to regain ownership of their respective situations in troubled areas of the world. The new form of peacebuilding, which has replaced the passive nonresistance of old, has furnished contemporary Mennonites with an “enormous transformative potential for the future interactions of the global community.”¹⁶⁴

Perhaps the resurgence of *Wehrlosigkeit* can be described as a return to the familiar for the Mennonites – a form *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that focuses on real and lasting positive change after the Mennonites had witnessed, and indeed participated in the opposite during the war. The martyrology of the Mennonites has not disappeared either. A. A. Toews and John Horsch – both writing after the Second World War – include the Anabaptist legends in their historical accounts of the Mennonite people in Europe, revealing the proclivity for Mennonites, like their German brethren, to focus on the victimization and suffering they experienced in the war.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Interview of Klaus Froese by Author, 17 June, 2000 (Hannover, Germany).

¹⁶⁴ Cynthia Sampson and John Paul Lederach (eds.). *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacemaking*, (Oxford, 2000), p.255.

¹⁶⁵ A.A. Toews' *Mennonite Martyrs: 1920-1940*, and John Horsch's *The Mennonites of Europe* primarily expound upon Mennonite suffering in Ukraine. Doris Bergen also addresses the martyrological focus in the extant historiography on the *Volksdeutschen*, Bergen, “Mourning,” p.181.

We have seen the re-appropriation of both national and religious myths – both used for new purposes – after 1933. To be sure, the militarism and nationalism that constitutes the Kyffhäuser legacy and monument were made palatable to the Mennonites through the gradual, centuries-long processes of assimilation into Prussian society. After the war, both the German nation and the Mennonites have reflected on their disturbing past. The German nation and government have conducted an about-face since 1945, and have focused on limiting ultra-conservative or neo-fascist movements and, in recent years, have very actively promoted liberal social democracy in Germany as part of its *Leitkultur*. German Mennonites, too, have promoted the opposite of what they practiced in the Second World War, and have once again embraced the national political ethos and accompanying *Leitkultur*. With a new, more agreeable tandem established for both sides, the Mennonites have once again found a vital *raison d' être* for peacebuilding that resembles the old, having again re-modeled their old legends for new purposes.

Still, the Nazi era continues to loom over the German nation, and the Mennonites within it, as they continue to struggle – both separately and in conjunction – in the hope of someday coming to terms with their very problematic history. Today, Whitebeard continues to gaze silently over the Thuringian plains from his monument – maintained as a relic of Germania's colored past – while the German Mennonite community continues to thrive in an uneasy peace with itself and the larger community.

Figure 1



The Kyffhäuser Monument in Thuringia
(Source: Photo by Author)

Figure 2a

Mitteilungsblatt
 der Konferenz
 der Ost- und Westpreussischen
 Mennonitengemeinden
 betreffend
die Verpflichtung der Mennoniten
an Eidesstatt
bei Eintritt in den Heeresdienst.

Herausgegeben vom Ältesten-Ausschuß.

Auf Grund der Lehre Jesu Christi in Matth. 5, 34—37 verbietet das mennonitische Bekenntnis schlechthin und ohne Ausnahme die Ableistung eines förmlichen Eides und gestattet seinen Bekennern nur eine feierliche Versicherung bzw. ein feierliches Versprechen mit „Ja“ und Handschlag.

Diese religiösen Grundsätze der Mennoniten hat die Preussische Regierung seither in der Gesetzgebung berücksichtigt. Bezüglich der in das Heer eintretenden Mennoniten heißt es in dem Befehl vom 17. Dezember 1801 in § 2:

„Bei der Einziehung zum Kriegsdienst soll der kantonspflichtige Mennonit, in Rücksicht seiner Glaubensbegriffe, mit der Ableistung eines Eides verschont und die erforderliche Zusage von ihm mittelst Handschlages angenommen werden.“

Die Anwendbarkeit dieses Befehles auch für die Zukunft wird vom Kriegsministerium in einem Erlaß vom 28. Januar 1869 (135.12 A 1 a) an den Vorstand der Mennonitengemeinde in Danzig bestätigt, wenn es hier heißt:

„Was schließlich die Form der Dienstverpflichtung angeht, so besteht § 2 der Deklaration vom 17. Dezember 1801 noch in Kraft und sind demnach diejenigen Mennoniten, welche in den Militärdienst eintreten, von der Eidesleistung entbunden und mittelst Handschlages zur Fahne zu verpflichten.“

Auf Grund einer Eingabe der „Vereinigung der Mennonitengemeinden im Deutschen Reich“ vom 15. März 1935 an das Reichskriegsministerium, in der die Bitte ausgesprochen war, die Sonderstellung der Mennoniten in der Eidesfrage auch bei der Neuregelung der Wehrpflicht zu berücksichtigen, ist folgende Entscheidung ergangen:

**The form used by Mennonites in lieu of swearing an oath to the German
 government upon conscription after 1935, pages 1 and 2**
 (Source: Mennonitische Forschungsteile, Weierhof, Germany)

Figure 2b

Der Reichskriegsminister
u. Oberbefehlshaber der Wehrmacht
Nr. 5167/35 J I b. Berlin W 35, den 26. 9. 35.

Betr.: Eidesformel für Soldaten mennonitischen Glaubens.

An die
Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden,
a. S. des Herrn Dr. Claus

Berlin - Sieglitz
Lauenburgerstr. 7.

Auf Ihre Anfrage vom 17. 9. 35 wird Ihnen mitgeteilt, daß Mennoniten auf besonderen Antrag durch folgendes Gelöbnis in die Hand des Vorgesetzten an Stelle des Eides gebunden werden:

Gelöbnis!

„Ich gelobe, daß ich dem Führer des Deutschen Reiches und Volkes Adolf Hitler, dem Obersten Befehlshaber der Wehrmacht, unbedingten Gehorsam leisten und als tapferer Soldat bereit sein will, jederzeit für dieses Gelöbnis mein Leben einzusetzen.“

J. A.
(gez) Foertsch.

U t t e f t.

Es wird hiermit bescheinigt, daß

.....
Mitglied der unterzeichneten Mennonitengemeinde ist. Wir beantragen, gemäß Erlass des Herrn Reichskriegsministers und Oberbefehlshabers der Wehrmacht vom 26. September 1935 (Nr. 5167-35 J I b), ihn an Stelle des Eides durch das für Mennoniten vorgeschriebene Gelöbnis zu verpflichten.

....., den

Der Vorstand

der Mennonitengemeinde

RECHENKUNDE WILLY HANCK, BARMEN

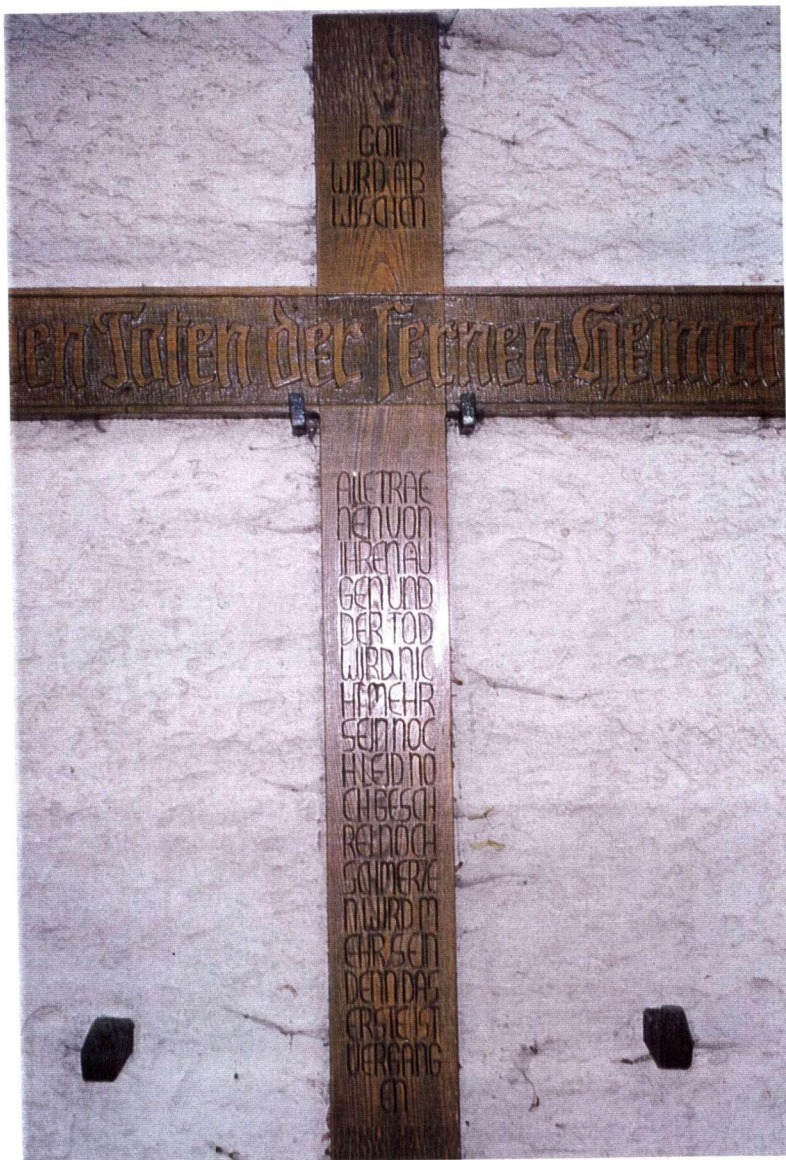
The form used by Mennonites in lieu of swearing an oath to the German government upon conscription after 1935, pages 3 and 4
(Source: Mennonitische Forschungstelle, Weierhof, Germany)

Figure 3



World War Two memorial at Bockenheim
 (Source: Photo by Author)

Figure 4



The memorial erected at Weierhof to the Prussian Mennonites who perished during the Second World War
(Source: Photo by Author)

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