

Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen, Eds. *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*

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In recent years a wave of interest has emerged from international Mennonite circles regarding the actions of Mennonites during the Holocaust. Since 2015 there have been a series of academic conferences and publications. The present volume grew out of a 2018 conference at Bethel College in Kansas and marks a milestone of Mennonite reckoning with the past. It also makes a significant contribution to Holocaust studies through its transnational and micro-historical approaches.

The introduction, “Neighbours, Killers, Enablers, Witnesses,” captures the primary goals of the volume—to show the breadth of Mennonite experiences and actions during the Holocaust, to situate Mennonites as active, rather than passive subjects in this history, and to highlight their proximity to persecution and violence. Following the introduction, the editors include an excerpt from an unpublished manuscript by the late Gerhard Rempel, a historian of Mennonite background who specialized in the history of Nazi Germany. In a brief introduction to the chapter, Doris Bergen contextualizes Rempel’s early efforts to write about Mennonite complicity during the Holocaust, highlighting both his ground-breaking findings and methodological shortcomings. The remaining eleven chapters are broadly chronological. Chapters by James Lichti, Imanuel Baumann, and Arnold Neufeldt-Fast address German Mennonite theology and social structures that shaped the community’s response to the rise of Nazism. Chapters by Pieter Post and Alle Hoekema address the Dutch Mennonite community, and chapters by Colin Neufeldt, Dmytro Myeshkov, and Aileen Friesen address Mennonites in wartime eastern Europe. The final three chapters by Erika Weidemann, Hans Werner, and Steven Schroeder address issues of justice, memory, and responsibility in the postwar period.

There were approximately 185,000 Mennonites in Europe in 1939, many of whom had ties to Mennonite communities in North and South America. The largest groups were in Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Russia and additional communities were found in Germany, the Netherlands, and France. Readers may be surprised to learn

that a commitment to non-violence, for which the Mennonites are known, was not central to European Mennonite identity at this time. Dutch Mennonites had been serving in the military since the French Revolution and most German Mennonites accepted military service starting in the 1870s (initially as non-combatants, and by World War I, as regular soldiers). Therefore, Mennonites were not targeted collectively by the Nazi regime for refusing military service.

There were several elements that made Mennonites distinctive among other Christian churches in the 1930s and 40s. The most consequential particularity is the decentralized nature of the Mennonite organizational structure. Mennonites do not have an ecclesiastical hierarchy that historians can consult to understand official Mennonite positions on issues. Instead, as the authors in this volume have done, researchers must analyze individuals and local communities, utilizing diaries, letters, sermons, postwar testimony, interviews, and memoirs written by farmers, teachers, and theologians. Many of the contributors do a superb job of layering these types of sources on top of German and Soviet archival records—and, in a few cases, Jewish sources. As a result, we learn more about the experiences of ordinary people than we might from studies of other churches in this period. One example is a collection of writings from a group of German Mennonite youth who circulated a notebook among themselves, each adding a contribution. Another noteworthy source is the introspective postwar memoir of Anna Sudermann, an educated woman from the Mennonite colony of Chortitza in Soviet Ukraine.

A second particularity of Mennonites in relation to Holocaust history is their generations-long presence in eastern Europe as a German-speaking minority. This placed Mennonites in a somewhat precarious but ultimately privileged position under German occupation. Nazi ideologues saw Mennonites as a sort of proto-Ethnic German community (*Volksdeutsche*), of the sort they hoped would populate the *Lebensraum* (living space) of the East. A 1935 Nazi film *Friesennot* (Frisians in Peril) reinforced for German audiences the idea of noble Mennonites living in the Soviet Union juxtaposed with their enemies, the Bolsheviks, portrayed with unambiguous antisemitic overtones. Indeed, in most cases, Mennonites living in German-occupied territories were designated as Ethnic Germans and benefited from that status; some were given businesses and homes appropriated from recently deported Jews. Others signed up to work as translators for the Wehrmacht and a few joined the SS. The Mennonite community living near Gdańsk/Danzig found itself in close proximity to the Stutthof concentration camp and some Mennonites were involved in running the camp and utilized camp inmates as forced laborers.

Despite these particularities, readers familiar with the history of Christian churches during the Holocaust will recognize several aspects of the Mennonite experience as being analogous to that of the Protestant and Catholic churches. Mennonite sources discuss both friendly relations and shared communal life with Jews before the war and negative stereotypes about Jews. Antisemitism was a factor in shaping Mennonites' actions but so was greed, opportunism, the disruption of norms, and the brutalizing effects of the war. There are documented cases of Mennonites rescuing Jews in the Netherlands, resulting in at least 40 Mennonites who have been honored as Righteous Among the Nations. Yet it seems that in most

cases Mennonite identity was not central to the rescue, just as most Christian rescuers cite general compassion rather than specific religious motivations for their actions. Running parallel to the so-called Nazi ratline, in which the Vatican helped war criminals evade justice through emigration assistance, there is evidence that suggests the Mennonite Central Committee (the North American-based relief service and peace agency of several Anabaptist bodies) helped at least a few individuals tainted by Nazi affiliation to immigrate to Canada after the war.

This is a deeply personal volume; it is written as a work of scholarship but is also written for Mennonites themselves. Compared to many other Protestant traditions, Mennonites seem to have a particular fondness of and dedication to the historical study of their tradition. The editors and authors acknowledge throughout the volume that this history is painful; several authors have written about the complicity of their own families or their relatives' communities. Such unflinching efforts to uncover, analyze, disseminate, and discuss the actions of one's own religious community during the Holocaust are to be commended. The development of Jewish-Christian relations since 1945 has shown that an honest reckoning with the past is a necessary first step for Christians and Jews to generate a new kind of relationship.