

Mennonite German Soldiers: Nation, Religion, and Family in the Prussian East, 1772-1880
Mark Jantzen, University of Notre Dame Press, 2010

Dutch Mennonite refugees journeyed east to Poland beginning in the 16th Century to escape persecution at the hands of the ruling Spanish authorities. By 1770 some twelve thousand had settled in Poland/Prussia, along the Vistula Delta and in the free city of, Danzig (now Gdansk). Here they enjoyed religious freedom and were either accepted or tolerated depending on time and place. They were a religious minority nearly as numerous as Jews. With the engineering skills they brought with them, they successfully reclaimed land and built dikes, drained the sea and marshland, and established agriculture just as they had done in The Netherlands years before. Other Mennonites were urban dwellers who were artisans and endeavored to engage in trade. Danzig had been active in the Hanseatic League for centuries and was still a strong commercial center in northern Europe. However, whether in farming or trade, Mennonites were restricted mainly due to their being subjects rather than citizens. Why? They were neither Catholic nor Lutheran, therefore their religious beliefs and practices were suspect, and they refused to bear arms.

After the 1772 Partition of Poland, *“Frederick II centralized political power to a degree unthinkable in the old Polish Commonwealth.”* (page 23) Until then Mennonite leaders were able to negotiate with local princes and landowners and more or less hold their own. However, there were always tensions, not only with rulers, but also with their Lutheran and Catholic neighbors whose sons were subject to the draft and often became casualties in battle while Mennonite sons stayed home and helped their fathers prosper. From early on, Mennonites were required (or usually freely offered) to pay large sums of money as a substitute for military service. The nearby Culm Military Institute was a chief recipient of these funds. In other ways Mennonites tried to prove their worth as desirable, productive citizens. Economically, it could not be disputed that they were assets to their country. Continuing with the above quote from p. 23: *“Under his (Frederick’s) direction this centralized government turned to the task of resource extraction, a process of deciding who must contribute what to the state. This . . . forced the Mennonites of the Vistula Delta for the first time to respond to uniform state pressure. . . . a clear break for them from the patchwork of restrictions enforced by local landowners or church officials in the Polish Commonwealth. Prussian efforts at state building sought to coerce Mennonites into the military, restricted their property rights, prompted emigration, extracted new taxes, and regulated marriage patterns. In short, the pressure on Mennonites varied in approach over time but remained relentless in application.”*

However, one of the many things I discovered in reading Jantzen’s book was the sincere and persistent efforts on the part of the various political authorities in both the former Poland and Prussia right up until the time of Bismarck’s Reich in 1867 to recognize and accommodate to the demands of this Mennonite minority. For centuries Mennonites believed and practiced a lifestyle giving priority and loyalty to their faith and church, over allegiance to government, state, or empire. Nearly all their non-Mennonite, Christian neighbors and rulers of course had it the other way around. Competent Elders represented Mennonites, traveling near and far, often to Berlin, to plea for tolerance and exemption privileges. They courted and lobbied politicians who were often successful in pleading their cause. They may have been the quiet in the land, but not in the halls of the legislature or offices of important leaders/rulers. Few rulers and law makers in the region had not heard of the Mennonites in Prussia; this was true of Mennonites in N. Germany (e.g. Krefeld) and The Netherlands as well.

However, as time marched on more than one Mennonite businessman, politician or church leader would argue that in view of the freedom and economic opportunities bestowed on them by the benevolent Prussian government, Mennonites should opt for full citizenship including military service. Changes in political institutions were beginning to take hold. A more representative, democratic assembly had sufficient clout to place limits on the effective power of the long established autocratic royalty. And parallel trends followed in the politics of Mennonite churches. The laity could influence and somewhat

mitigate the decision making voice of the elders. Both the civic and religious leaders' ability to speak authoritatively for their people was diminished over time. By the 1870s the degree of Mennonite participation as citizens of the state, including whether or not to answer the call to military conscription was left increasingly to the youth themselves and their families, rather than to simply follow the church discipline and tradition as interpreted and applied by elders and the church ministry. For more than two centuries it had been assumed by the Mennonite body and most political leaders that the Elders spoke for their members, and unless the youth had been unfaithful to the church requirements, he would be exempted from military duty of any sort.

Another weakness was disunity among the elders. Some favored compromise with the cultural mainstream and demands of the state while others favored adherence to long held traditions based on convictions not to bear arms, and to follow the Scriptural imperative to love enemies. Others were riding the fence. Thus, the Mennonite church in Prussia lost its peace and nonresistance position largely due to the failure of its leadership to resist the seductive and often overt pressures of the German culture and Prussian state to conform to the principle that allegiance to the state must come first, and one's faith and church affiliation second. No longer could the youth protest the draft by claiming exemption based on his church's teaching and practice. His church left him to stand by himself. Individualism had replaced a cardinal, historic Anabaptist tenet – community. *“Mennonites demonstrably made individual choices about a topic traditionally settled by communal action. This individual activism shattered traditional elder authority and traditional understandings of ecclesiastical loyalty and identity.”* (p. 211) I hasten to add that many Mennonites and most members of one large congregation did not yield, held to the peace position, and emigrated to Russia, or the United States. Unfortunately, those who went to Russia encountered similar political changes and faced the same choices all over again.

“By 1867 military exemption as a legal option ended. . . . In 1874 the ‘Mennonite Law’ revoked the edict of 1789 lifting most restrictions on Mennonites. For the Mennonites it became clear that their options were to accommodate or to emigrate.” (Victor Kliwer, Winnipeg, book review of Jantzen's book in the Mennonite Historian of June, 2012, page 12)

I learned so much from reading this book. It encompasses more than Mennonite history. One sees the rise of nationalism which led to the militarization of the modern German state; views the reshaping of the country of Poland over time; and gains illuminating insights into 18th and 19th Century European history. About ten years ago I was introduced to Mennonite Polish history by Peter Klassen from Fresno, while touring Poland. My wife, Tina Klassen, has a Russian Mennonite heritage. So I have been fascinated by the Dutch/Prussian/Russian story and yearned to learn more. Jantzen's book is a gem. Its scholarship is outstanding. The Appendix consists of nine documents dating from 1780-1874. Document I is the *Mennonite Charter of Privileges* (1780). Document 7 concerns the Affirmation to be given by Mennonites in place of the Oath. The linkage of land ownership and how that relates to marriage, as spelled out in these documents, was logical to the governing authorities, yet deemed unfair and discriminatory from the viewpoint of most Mennonites. There are 58 pages of footnotes to the ten chapters, and an extensive bibliography (24 pages) at the back of the book.

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Nov. 13, 2012