

Wilhelm Mannhardt, *The Military Exemption of the Mennonites of Provincial Prussia*. (1863) Trans. Anthony Epp. Eds. Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen. Additional translation by Abraham Friesen. North Newton, Kans.: Bethel College, 2013. Pp. 395. Softcover.

With this informative study, *The Military Service Exemption of the Mennonites of Provincial Prussia*, replete with numerous contemporary documents, the reader is presented a probing analysis of how the Mennonite community in that region responded to an expansionist, militaristic political leadership determined to assert its growing international prominence and power. This excellent translation by Anthony Epp of Wilhelm Mannhardt's "Die Wehrfreiheit der Altpreussischen Mennoniten," is greatly enhanced by Mark Jantzen's highly informative introduction. In addition to Jantzen, John Thiesen and Abraham Friesen have added clarifying footnotes and corrections.

Mannhardt examined the "Old Prussian Mennonites" in this historical overview of the long struggle Mennonites in Prussia waged to maintain their peace position. Many Mennonites in other parts of Germany had already largely abandoned their traditional peace position by the latter part of the eighteenth century. Although Mannhardt himself did not agree with those who held to nonresistance, he carefully outlined the various efforts made by Mennonites to support their country without joining the military. Under the earlier Polish regime, Mennonites had usually been able to offer alternative service instead of serving in the military forces. Prussian rulers, however, as well as a number of Mennonite leaders in areas that had never been under Polish rule, called for united military service for the country.

Certainly the most wide-spread toleration of Mennonite in this region occurred when Mennonites here were still under Polish rule. As Mannhardt notes, Polish monarchs and local authorities granted extensive liberties to Mennonites. This included exemption from military service, although some Polish authorities barred Mennonites from settling in specific areas.

One of the most remarkable instances where a Polish king granted sweeping privileges to Mennonites was the "Charter of Privileges," issued by King Władislaw IV in 1642. After listing the rights given Mennonites by his predecessors, he declared his full support of these privileges. Polish monarchs repeatedly confirmed similar positions.

With the division of Poland among Prussia, Russia and Austria late in the eighteenth century, however, the situation in former Polish lands now under Prussian rule changed. Most Mennonites in Poland now came under the Prussian crown. In a remarkably conciliatory decree, the new regime of Frederick II assured a Mennonite delegation that "they would be free from personal recruitment." Gradually, however, the military ambitions of the king and his successors led to a protracted struggle between the Prussian rulers and Mennonites who wished to maintain their peace position. In their review of this quest, the editors have provided an incisive analysis demonstrating that Mannhardt is sometimes overly generous in his interpretation of action taken by Prussian authorities.

In his enlightening introduction, Professor Jantzen has examined the Mennonite peace position during and after the Reformation, and shows how it lost considerable support as the German nation became increasingly unified and centralized. With the partitions of Poland, however, large areas that had been part of Poland now came under Prussian rule; Mennonites here soon found that the strong German central government expected all citizens to be willing participants in the defense of the nation. The peace position of the Mennonite community came under increasingly heavy pressure.

Since the beginning of their coming to this region in the mid-sixteenth century, Mennonites had been able to retain their beliefs and practices, although sometimes authorities in parts of the then-Polish state barred Mennonite settlers. At the same time, other parts of the country welcomed the Mennonites and allowed them to practice their faith. As a consequence, numerous Mennonite communities arose, especially in the Vistula delta. Sometimes they were required to explain their beliefs, as when early in the seventeenth century the Polish king ordered a special interrogation

of Mennonite leaders in the Danzig region. The examination occurred, and the king declared himself satisfied with the responses given by the Mennonite leaders. For the next century and a half, Mennonites were free to practice their faith, including the maintenance of their peace position.

With the dismemberment of Poland by Prussia, Russia and Austria in the latter part of the eighteenth century, however, the scene changed dramatically. Most of the places where Mennonites lived now came under Prussian rule, and it soon became apparent that the rather relaxed rule of Polish kings had been superseded by firm, more demanding Prussian control. Now, as Mannhardt clearly shows, a long tug-of-war began. How might Mennonites remain loyal citizens, yet retain some semblance of their peace beliefs and continue to enjoy some of the concessions that had been granted by earlier Polish rulers? Repeated meetings between Mennonites and government authorities demonstrated that these agreements no longer had any validity. Although different rulers sometimes made limited concessions to Mennonites, allowing Mennonites to provide financial contributions in lieu of military service, the expectation that Mennonites were subject to the usual military obligations became increasingly evident, especially under the successors of Frederick II.

For a number of Mennonites the question of military service proved to be a strong motivating factor for those who chose to move to Russia, beginning in the latter part of the eighteenth century, so that the Mennonite population in Russia soon exceeded that in Prussia. Others chose to emigrate to America. For those who remained in Prussia, negotiations with government officials continued, but with limited success. And by the time of the outbreak of World War I, the change in Mennonite views on war was reflected when the pastor of the Danzig Mennonite church was chosen to give a public address calling on all citizens to come to the defense of their country. By that time, few Mennonites in the region still held to the traditional peace position.

The editors of this informative volume have greatly improved the original text. They have added numerous informative footnotes, clarifying the text, and sometimes actually correcting it. They have thus given the reader a very informative and readable translation of an important study.

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