

Mennonite-Polish Studies Association Newsletter



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Mennonites and the Holocaust – March 16 and 17, 2018

The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association in conjunction with Bethel and Hesston Colleges is sponsoring a conference on Mennonites and the Holocaust. Registration for this event is now open at mla.bethelks.edu/MennosandHolocaust. Historians from Ukraine, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, and the United States will be presenting. The keynote speaker will be Doris Bergen, Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of Toronto. On the evening of March 16 the 1935 Nazi propaganda film, *Friesennot*, will be screened. It features a fictitious German village under siege in the Soviet Union that includes aspects of Mennonite theology and culture. The German Federal Film Archive in Berlin has made a copy of this otherwise restricted film available for the conference and the organizers have arranged for subtitles to be shown with it.

The call for papers for the conference included this statement about its aims: “The history of Mennonites as victims of violence in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly on the territory of the Soviet Union, and as relief workers during and after the Second World War has been studied by historians and preserved by many family histories. This commemorative and celebratory history, however, hardly captures the full extent of

Mennonite views and actions related to nationalism, race, war, and survival. It also ignores extensive Mennonite pockets of sympathy for Nazi ideals of racial purity and among some in the diaspora an exuberant identification with Germany that have also long been noted. Now in the last decade an emerging body of research has documented Mennonite involvement as perpetrators in the Holocaust in ways that have not been widely known or discussed. A wider view of Mennonite interactions with Jews, Germans, Ukrainians, Roma, *Volksdeutsche*, and other groups as well as with state actors is therefore now necessary. This conference aims to document, publicize, and analyze Mennonite attitudes, environments, and interactions with others in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s that shaped their responses to and engagement with Nazi ideology and the events of the Holocaust.”

Sesquicentennial of Prussian Mennonites Coming Under the Draft

One hundred and fifty years ago Prussian Mennonites were finally subjected to the draft, fifty-seven years later than most other Prussians. As part of this process on October 17 and 18, 1867, they were dragged into a raucous parliamentary debate over the draft in the most important German parliament of the day. In addition to parliamentary debates, a

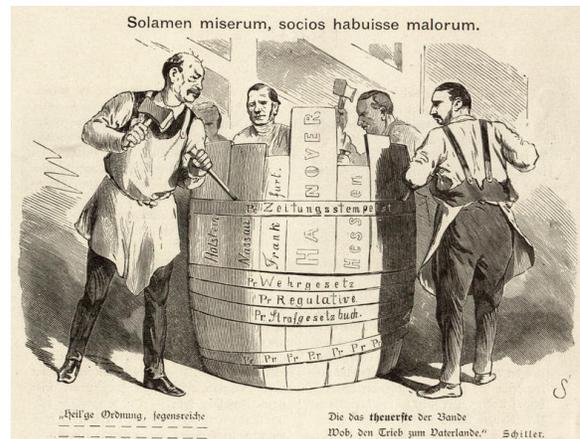
Mennonite delegation lobbied politicians in Berlin in late October. The law was signed into effect on November 9, 1867, which we report on here. After that, the Mennonite question was debated twice in the Prussian House of Lords in February, 1868, the same delegation returned in conjunction with those debates for another round of lobbying, including a meeting with King William I, and they were granted, and for the most part accepted, non-combatant status on March 3, 1868. A series of blog entries to mark these sesquicentennial events has been and will be posted on *Anabaptist Historians*, enter the search term “sesquicentennial” at <https://anabaptisthistorians.org> to read them all.



Wilhelm I

On November 9, 1867, William I, King of Prussia, signed the military service law of the North German Confederation in his capacity

as Confederation head of state. He was also commander-in-chief of the combined military services. Mennonites were now subject to the draft with no obvious alternative outside of emigration. The parliament and the government had both agreed that religious freedom did not extend to the duty of military service since equality before the law was a more important principle. In addition, many leaders saw military service as an issue on which nation unity between the peoples of the different German states could be built. A caricature of Prussian and North German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, in the satirical newspaper *Kladderadatsch* under the Latin title that roughly translates “misery loves company” showed Bismarck as a cooper making a cask out of the “boards” of the former German states. They would be bound together by common laws mostly of Prussian origin, including the Prussian Military Service Law (*Wehrgesetz*). Mennonites were thus caught up in a much larger project of nation building on the foundations of culture, militarism, and nationalism that they only dimly understood.¹



Kladderadatsch cartoon

¹For a general overview, see Mark Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers: Nation, Religion, and Family in the Prussian East, 1772-1880* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press,

The signing day itself did not play a role in the Mennonites' initial reaction. Peter Bartel's account of the efforts of five rural Vistula Delta elders to maintain an exemption does not mention the date at all, jumping from their departure from Berlin on October 25 after their initial lobbying effort failed to February 17, 1868, when their local representative in parliament, Wilhelm von Brauchitsch, alerted them to the need to return to Berlin to try lobbying again.² The next post on February 20 will take up their efforts. There are indications that the traditionalist Mennonites did not fully understand the law-making process under the relatively new constitution of 1850 for Prussia or the one written just that year for the North German Confederation.³ The date is also not mentioned in H.G. Mannhardt's account of these events published in 1919 where he noted instead failed petition efforts of November 4 and December 26.⁴

November 9 is mentioned in the executive order of March 3, 1868, that will mark the end of this series of posts. This order created a special category of noncombatant for Mennonites in the Prussian army. It noted that the law went into effect on November 9, so after that time Mennonites would have had reason to note the date. The first major Mennonite newspaper article to speak approvingly of the law was published in August 1868 and erroneously dated the entire

parliamentary debate and royal signing all to that particular day.⁵

German historians, of course, will not be surprised to hear that after 1919 mention of November 9 is highlighted by some Mennonites. In addition to the imposition of the draft dating from this day in 1867, five other major events of modern Germany history fall on this day, making it the most important non-holiday on the German calendar. Also less noticed at the time was the first event, the execution in 1848 of Robert Blum, an important leader of the Frankfurt National Assembly in Vienna. The second event was a naval mutiny and Social Democratic revolution in 1918 that toppled the Imperial government two days before the armistice ending World War I went into effect. In response to what they considered the ignominy of that event, Nazis staged first a failed revolution on that date in 1923 and then instigated a massive Jewish pogrom known as Kristallnacht in 1938. The Berlin Wall was forced open by demonstrators in 1989, signaling the end of Communist rule in East Germany and paving the way for German unification in 1991. The overabundance of history on this day prevented it from becoming a new holiday, so that October 3, the date of formal unification, is the official holiday marking events of 1989.⁶

The first time H. G. Mannhardt wrote about these events after the end of the Great War he did the equivalent of italicizing the date November 9, 1867.⁷ His earlier article was

2010), 191-218.

²Peter Bartel, "Beschreibung der persönliche Bemühung der fünf Aeltesten bei den Hohen und Allerhöchsten Staatsmännern in Berlin um Wiederheraushelfung aus dem Reichsgesetz, worin der Reichstag uns Mennoniten am 9. November 1867 versetzt hat," *Christlicher Gemeinde-Kalender* 29 (1920), 72.

³H. G. Mannhardt, "Zur Entstehung und Geschichte der königl. Kabinettsordre von 3. März 1868, betreffend den Herresdienst der Mennoniten," *Christlicher Gemeinde-Kalender* 28 (1919), 100-102, Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers*, 196-200.

⁴H. G. Mannhardt, "Zur Entstehung," 100-101.

⁵Available in English at <https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-70/article/the-resolution-of-november-9-1867-by-the-north-ger/>.

See also my accompanying introduction at

<https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-70/article/a-comparative-analysis-of-church-conflict-an-intro/>.

⁶<http://www.bpb.de/politik/hintergrund-aktuell/69545/der-9-november-09-11-2012>

⁷H. G. Mannhardt's *The Danzig Mennonite Church: Its Origin and History from 1569-1919*, trans. Viktor G. Doerksen, ed. Mark Jantzen and John Thiesen (North Newton, Kansas: Bethel College, 2007), 198.

Announcements

- A recently published e-Book tells stories in English and Low German that are set in Danzig. This is an opportunity to brush up your Low German and travel in your imagination back to the Vistula Delta. <http://www.plautdietsch-copre.ca/books>

- German Mennonite Working Group on Poland (Mennonitischer Arbeitskreis Polen)

Our sister organization in Germany hosted a tour to Poland in summer. For the most part this was coordinated with a sister organization in the Netherlands, Doopsgezinde Stichting Nederland-Polen. They started in Torun in the south, where Mennonite architect and sculptor Wilhelm von der Blocke worked. Across the river and a little to the west in Obernessau/Wielka Nieszawka they held a German-Dutch church service in the former Mennonite church. The Ethnography Museum in Torun is opening a branch in this village that features reconstructions of Mennonite farm buildings and houses. The term *Hollanders* is more widely known than Mennonite in Poland since there were many Dutch settlers here in the early modern period. As elsewhere, however, the Mennonites were the main group to maintain a separate identity, so by the nineteenth century the only "Hollanders" one could identify were Mennonites. The Polish title of the museum is *Olenderski Park Etnograficzny w Wielkiej Nieszawce*, they have a Facebook page for those who wish to practice their Polish.

The second stop on the trip was in Danzig/Gdansk where the local history club out in Tiegenhof/Nowy Dwor Gdanski had organized a small conference known as the Eighth International Mennonite Meeting. In Gdansk they were also able to meet and

worship in the former Mennonite Church building there.

A somewhat unusual end of the trip was a visit to the Polish parts of the former East Prussia, where there is not much Mennonite history, but a lot of beautiful nature and historic small towns. For a full report of their trip in German, see

<https://www.mennonitischerarbeitskreispole.n.de/startseite-home/map-reiseberichte-2/>

- Tours to Poland

Mark Jantzen is leading another student travel group for his History of East Central Europe. Mennonite connections on this tour include visiting the former Mennonite church building in Gdansk together with a local group of Polish students who are majoring in American Studies in the University of Gdansk. They will also swing by the castle in Marienburg/Malbork and visit the Vistula Delta Museum in Tiegenhof/Nowy Dwor Gdanski. Their tour guide there will be Lukasz Kepski, the vice-president of the local history club.

The Mennonite-Polish Studies Association is organizing a tour to Poland this summer, June 29-July 11. The tour is already full, but if things go well, look for an announcement via email in early fall about a return tour in 2019 or 2020. If you receive this newsletter in the mail and want to know about this offer, please send your email to jthiesen@bethelks.edu.

We are not aware of any other tours being planned for Poland in 2018, but note that John Sharp of Hesston College plans on leading a group for *Tourmagination* May 27-June 6, 2019.

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