Mark Jantzen. *Mennonite German Soldiers: Nation, Religion, and Family in the Prussian East, 1772-1880*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. 370 pp. Reviewed by Robert Martens.

In 1814, Karl August von Hardenberg, Prussia's chief minister, remarked on the reluctance of German Mennonites to participate in the military. "One can expect," he wrote, "that both the Rhineland and Prussian Mennonites will eventually realize the error and inhumanity of their principles, in part as the older generation which has the stronger conscience on this issue dies out, in part as their own preachers become convinced of the need for improvement...." (94). Hardenberg's prediction was correct, although the process perhaps took longer than he imagined. Over one hundred years, German Mennonites gradually relinquished their opposition to military involvement. It was a protracted exercise of "push and pull," in which nationalism was both imposed from above and desired from below. There were deep divisions both among the Mennonites and in government on the issue. At the heart of the matter was the rise of the German state, of democracy and individual rights – but also of war, which was equated with the new order. By 1888, Mennonites declared that their "love of the fatherland is as holy a feeling as for any other German" (15).

The history of Russian Mennonites has been thoroughly documented, but the story of those who remained behind in Germany is less well known. In his meticulously researched book, *Mennonite German Soldiers*, Mark Jantzen does a superb job of filling the gap. When the first Polish Partition took place in 1772, Mennonites formerly living under Polish authority suddenly found themselves under the jurisdiction of an incipient Prussian state that prioritized the military. Many Mennonites chose to emigrate to Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great. Some, however, stayed behind, choosing to argue for military exemption in their homeland. It would be a difficult and complex struggle. A Charter of Privileges was granted to Mennonites in 1780, but military exemption was coupled with severe property restrictions. A religiously intolerant state was using a carrot and stick approach: the implication was that service in the military would result in the lifting of property restrictions.

The push and pull continued over decades, and initially Mennonite elders, who negotiated for their community, were enormously empowered. In the momentous Edict of 1789, provisions for the Mennonite "sect" took precedence over general law. Military exemption was permitted only if a communal tax were paid to the authorities. Children of mixed marriages were not allowed to be raised as Mennonite. Mennonites were prohibited from purchasing non Mennonite properties. Taxes to the official Lutheran Church were enforced. The Declaration of 1801 then made the choice for Mennonites explicit: either join the military, or face restrictions on property. It was a choice between increasing poverty or increasing enlistment. The most bigoted government representatives considered Mennonites "apostate," and considered that the state would lose nothing if these "sectarians" chose to emigrate, as they "belong together with Jews to the unique group of persons who live without working" (76).

Then the Napoleonic wars intervened, and a catastrophic Prussian defeat by the French. Popular support for the state and the military was quickly coalescing, and Mennonites felt the pressure. Nonetheless, many of the elders stood firm, even as the French threat was only miles away. "The Mennonite theology on display here, although

deeply offensive to their neighbours, was no abstraction and directly challenged the massive appeals being made to convince men to accept military service" (97). The surrender of Napoleon and restoration of the Prussian monarchy did not, however, decrease the pressure on Mennonites to conform. This was the time of a new nation, a cohering German identity, a nation at arms. A newspaper editorialized that "Although the teaching of the Mennonites is not anti-biblical, it is definitely *anti-Prussian*" (105). Liberal reform, with its ideals of democracy and individual responsibility, was also fiercely militaristic. Mennonites preferred to deal with the old system in which a king made personal decisions based on petitions of communities or estates; political conservatives, in their battle with liberals, often strategically supported Mennonites in their struggles for exemption.

The next decades saw gradual Mennonite capitulation. In 1826 a law was passed in which military exemption was granted on the basis of income tax; this sharply decreased the power of Mennonite elders, who had previously collected a tax communally. Younger Mennonites, increasingly individualized, yearned for greater participation in the greater Prussian society, and by 1830 most of the sharp Mennonite distinctives had nearly disappeared. In fact, the congregation at Krefeld in western Prussia had long been leading the way towards mainstream integration. Mennonites there had developed a booming cloth industry, and the immensely rich von der Leyen family was at the forefront. Well before the Napoleonic wars, the Krefeld church had dropped its opposition to military service, intermarriage, and the oath, and no longer practised the ban. When the provincial government there imposed specific oath restrictions on Mennonites, one of the van der Leyens complained to the State Ministry that the law "was a decisive step toward separating Mennonites from the bourgeoisie and making them equal to the Jews" (112).

Integration with the state seemed unstoppable. Soon the first salaried Mennonite ministers made their appearance. Education was being used as a state tool for mass mobilization. Mennonites were also cooperating with mainstream Protestants, particularly neopietists, in missions projects, acculturating them even further. In the 1840s a prominent Rhineland liberal, Hermann von Beckerath, vociferously attacked the notion of Mennonite privilege; ironically, he was himself a Mennonite. Beckerath prioritized the nation over religion, describing nationalism as a spiritual force. For Mennonites, writes Jantzen, "[R]eligious feeling directed toward the nation was an important element of nationalism's appeal" (151). Other liberal Mennonites led the way, notably Carl Harder, who denounced ritual as stale tradition and downplayed the significance of nonresistance; and Wilhelm Mannhardt, who glorified the emerging Reich with his study of German folk tales.

Mennonites had grown prosperous, and the young were restless. During the rise of the consummate politician and eventual chancellor Bismarck, the warlike German state became an integral part of the new way of life. When in 1867 military exemption was finally universally denied, there was little dissent from the majority of Mennonites. A few stragglers emigrated to the United States, and those who continued to petition for special dispensations from government pledged that they were willing to serve in the military as noncombatants. Many Mennonites now became "vocal supporters of Prussia during the subsequent war with France" (232). In the 1880s a stage production of *Der Mennonit*, a play by the then renowned (and now forgotten) Ernst von Wildenbruch, was mounted in

Berlin. The play cast Mennonites as villains, traitors to the ideals of defence, nation, and purity. The Mennonite reaction was to proclaim their own patriotism and attempt to block the production from being performed.

"During the 1870s," writes Jantzen, "the hundred-year project of the Prussian state to create Mennonite soldiers was brought to a successful conclusion.... [T]he sense of relief and satisfaction at finally being allowed into the German nation was palpable" (247). In 1879 the Mennonite congregation at Fürstenwerder applied for corporation rights, affirming that although "every war is a great evil that results from sin," it was now a Christian duty to defend the preservation of the state (249). When the Danzig congregation applied for corporation rights just a few years later in 1886, it made similar statements but downgraded war to a "terrible misfortune" (250). Yet some ambivalence lingered. Mennonites still perceived themselves as a distinct community dedicated to adult baptism, separation of church and state, refusal of the oath, and localized authority based on decisions by free believers. And when the great writer Theodor Fontane wrote his novel *Quitt*, he used Mennonite characters as ideal types symbolizing simplicity, order, and peace. Mennonites had integrated, but the alliance was uneasy. The German state never adapted well to minorities in its midst. The perception endured of Mennonites, and of other minority groups, as alien to the nation.

Mennonite German Soldiers is available for purchase at the Mennonite Historical Society Archives.