

Part 1 - Why Did the German Mennonites Become Nazis?

Why would the descendants of Swiss and Dutch Anabaptist martyrs identify themselves with one of the most evil regimes in human history? A very good question. The short answer: God has no grandchildren.

The story begins with the compiler of the *Martyrs Mirror*. In the 1600's Thielman J. van Braught (Netherlands) noticed that a number of the grandchildren of the martyrs had not adopted the faith of their grandparents. He thought that a book which told the stories of grandparents' costly discipleship just might inspire/motivate/encourage the erring grandchildren to consider the genuine faith of their forebearers for themselves. After all, descendants possess the genetics of their ancestors. Human beings receive part of their own identity from those who preceded them.

It didn't work. The grandchildren were on to "more important" things such as making money and blooming with the Dutch Golden Age (1588-1672). Moreover, they were also into politics. The times had changed. Martyrs were admirable for those earlier times but other pressing opportunities awaited attention. The former issues were different from contemporary issues.

But old ideas do not die quickly. Nonresistance was at the center of the Two Kingdom Gospel. Thus, it took one hundred years to lose nonresistant principles, one at a time. Each old principle was replaced by a more "enlightened" concept. The older generation passed off the scene one by one. It takes time to adopt new and better ideas. It takes time for adjustment to radical new ideas such as the Enlightenment.

And Dualism. Wholeness needed to be replaced with religious Dualism, the kind of Dualism which only dealt with inner, personal issues. Personal sins, bad personal habits, poor personal attitudes; all needed to be dealt with. Conversion was an inner experience. And of course, a better education was necessary. Logical thinking could correct much sloppy thinking. Conversion and education assured the converted and educated that all was well. The outer dimensions of Wholeness were no longer important.

The 1800s ended with the progressive brand-new, bright, compelling Prussian culture! Smart uniforms, brisk band music, and perfectly synchronized marching. Much more interesting than *gelassenheit* and age-old discipleship. Jesus' teaching was boring and unattractive. For Mennonites on the southeast coast of the Baltic, Sea, obedience to the Prussian sights and sounds trumped faith in the Unseen. Times were changing. The progressive times excited the young and newly liberated. Those who could not adapt would be left behind. Who could be so stuck in the past to not see progress for what it is?

And then World War 1 happened. By 1914 the loss of non-resistance was largely complete. One hundred years had erased the non-resistance. Jesus was replaced with German. German was the new heady ideal. The German Volk!

Several thousand young Mennonite men donned the German uniform in the interest of the German cause! And as could be expected, some losses happened - about four hundred Mennonite soldiers fell on the battlefield, in addition to those wounded or taken prisoner. But at last the Mennonites were being included in the culture which for generations had held them at arms-length. They were being assimilated!

Even though Germany lost in World War 1 and even though it was saddled with huge war reparations, the Mennonite German spirit remained unbroken. Even though the Mennonites had suffered the German economic collapse along with their German neighbors, the German Mennonites held their heads high. A new name was in the air - Adolf Hitler! Adolf Hitler was a man with answers. He provided agricultural solutions, political solutions, and even religious solutions! He was the man of the hour!

Stalin had made life difficult for the German Mennonite relatives in the Ukraine and Russia. The German Mennonites were smitten with the humanitarian needs to the East. They sent relief for their relatives stuck in Communist territory. Stalin was a rock-solid communist; Adolf Hitler considered Communism the German enemy. How fortunate they were to have a wonderful leader like the Fuhrer compared to the terrible Joseph Stalin!

And then they received wonderful news - they were Aryan without even trying! Because the German government had made life hard for Mennonites who married outside the Mennonite fold, the German Mennonites married almost entirely among themselves. The result? Pure Aryan blood. When the Nazi party discovered this, the German Mennonites were held up as the ideal. They basked in the praise!

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. The Mennonite Nazis swept into Poland along with their German Volk neighbors. Not a single German Mennonite refused conscription into the German Nazi army. In the opposite direction, on the western front, German Mennonites were willing to fight and kill French and Dutch Mennonites.

They also helped with the concentration camps. One of them, Stutthof, located in Mennonite territory near Danzig, included Mennonite management. The concentration camp slaves worked for Mennonite overlords, some of which treated the slaves inhumanely. Some former Mennonites actually participated in killing Jews. The Jews were an inferior race.

From pulpit and press the German Mennonites lauded Adolf Hitler, his ideas, and his military efforts. A man ought to be willing to lay down his life for his friends. Jesus Christ had come in the form of Adolf Hitler! And then, in June of 1941, the Nazis attacked the evil Soviet Union. The German Mennonites in the Soviet Union were jubilant with the presence of the Nazi army. Everything would turn out satisfactorily after all.

But then the Russian army turned the Nazis back at the battle of Stalingrad. When the retreating Nazi army finally got back as far as the German Mennonite villages, the German Mennonites decided to join the German retreat. When they had the perfect chance to leave evil Russia, why would they stay? And so, thousands of Soviet German Mennonites headed back to Germany having no particular destination. One goal - get out of Russia!

When the German Nazi army surrendered to the Allies, what were the German Mennonites to do? Their savior had turned out not to be the Savior. When the full extent of the Nazi atrocities were made known to the world, what could the German Mennonites say? They were caught on the horns of a dilemma of their own making. Fifty years later, in 1995, some of them officially acknowledged their sin of joining the Nazi cause. A greater number of the German Mennonites remained unrepentant. Above the pulpit of Nazi-sympathizing Mennonite church in Paraguay, a picture of Adolf Hitler remained. Hitler was still the Savior. From martyr to Nazi - and Nazi it would remain.

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