“HEIL HITLER”: CHRISTIAN POLITICS

By Alvin Hoover

But Christians should vote...

“Don’t you think it would have been God’s will for the Christians in Germany to vote Hitler out of office so that he couldn’t have committed the acts that he did?” It was several years ago, in the weeks leading up to a closely-watched presidential election, when I overheard a heated discussion about whether Christians should vote. Why didn’t the Christians in Germany band together and vote Hitler out of office?

Should Christians vote? Or does political involvement destroy the nonresistant witness they could have had?

Germany

“Germany was first a language, then an idea, then a nation. Mennonites were first a scripture-listening audience, then a covenanted people, then an international church.”¹ In the 1860s the various German nations were united into one empire by Otto von Bismarck.² Though smaller than the Holy Roman Empire, the Second Reich was more German and more strongly united. Trade and industry were built up. German artists, scientists, and scholars contributed much to the world. Germany was a respected nation. “Made in Germany” was a mark of quality.

The German nation made a treaty with Austria-Hungary in order to protect its borders. In 1914, a Serbian in Bosnia, one of Austria’s colonies, assassinated the Austrian archduke. This prompted Austria to declare war on Serbia. With Germany backing Austria and Russia backing Serbia and the French backing Russia, the whole European continent was at war within one week.

World War I: Defeat

The victor writes the history book. Today we can read in the history books how Germany was the cause of World War I. We can learn how the Germans were threatening the other nations and how they violated peace treaties. Everywhere we look we find how the Germans were in the wrong.

The man at the bottom of the totem pole gets kicked by everyone who walks by. The victors forced Germany to accept total responsibility for the war. Germany had to pay for all the war damages suffered in other countries, a debt it could not possibly pay while rebuilding at home. All colonies were stripped from them and the neighboring countries were given pieces of Germany as they chose, reducing its size by 1/8. These divisions divided neighbors and friends into separate countries. Poland wanted access to the Baltic Sea, so Germany was divided into Germany, East Prussia, and the Free State of Danzig in order to accommodate this request.

Germany’s farmers were forced to give livestock for the farms which the German armies had laid waste. Ships, railcars, locomotives, and other materials were demanded to replace what had been lost in the war. Disarmament was demanded to make sure that Germany would never start another war. The once-proud nation was nothing but the scum of the earth.

¹ John Ruth, in his introduction to “The Story of a Holocaust Survivor.” This meeting was planned by the Swiss Pioneer Preservation Associates and held on December 3, 2010 at the Christian Aid Ministries (CAM) warehouse in Ephrata. All of Swiss Pioneer’s meetings have been recorded and are available from their headquarters at 739 Spruce Rd, New Holland, PA 17557.

² The Volume Library (Nashville, TN: Southwestern/Great American Inc. 2001), Book 13, page 37; Book 26, 44-45.
Mennonites in Germany

With Zurich just to the south and the Netherlands just to the north, the Anabaptists spread into Germany very early. Suffering persecution and then various forms of tolerance from their rulers, the Anabaptists spread over most of Germany. East Friesland was a place of refuge for many years. After the devastation of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), Mennonites were invited to the Palatinate to rebuild the area devastated by war. The Mennonites in East and West Prussia (which this article deals with primarily) had been founded by the Dutch from the Netherlands. Menno Simons had visited these people at least once after 1547.3

One of the Mennonites’ distinctive features was nonresistance. William Penn said about the Mennonites, “They will neither fight nor swear.” This was a well-known distinctive of their religion.

Circumstances were unfriendly in the Old World, and with the various wars that ripped through Europe, William Penn’s promise of a new free country attracted many Mennonites. The main immigration from Europe to Lancaster County started in 1710 until the French and Indian War broke out in 1754. (After the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the immigration to America started again.) From 1788-18704 there was a large emigration from Germany to Russia. These emigrations, often consisting of the more conservative element, weakened the traditional teachings of the Mennonites. After a period of relative tolerance, military service was gradually forced upon the remaining Mennonites. In 1848, a wealthy Mennonite banker, Herman von Beckerath, suggested that in the new Reich there should be no military exemption.5 This began a 100-year emigration out of Prussia.6 So still more of those opposed to military service emigrated. (The 2nd Reich was organized by Otto von Bismarck in 1862-1871.)

Of the Mennonites that remained in Germany, most were rapidly losing their nonresistance. In 1867, the conference of Offenthal confessed nonresistance as part of the creed, but ruled, “How each congregation and each young man will indeed prove our old Mennonite nonresistance, in order to satisfy his own conscience and the demands of the authorities, we leave to the judgment of each of them.” In this way they tried to save the principle and at the same time abandon it.7

In World War I, 2,000 Mennonites served in the German army. Four hundred of them died in the war. In one of the old Mennonite churches, there is a memorial to these soldiers inscribed with the verse, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”8

Should Christians vote? Are we innocent if our hero is somebody else’s murderer?

Depression

After the surrender of World War I, Germany set up a government known as the Weimar Republic. It was a period of terrible unrest. While the Republic was successful in staving off a revolution for a decade, things were not going well.

The Prussian Mennonites, many of them being farmers, were hit hard by the depression following World War I. Having to sell their products at a very low cost to Germany’s former enemies was not popular with anyone. Also, with Poland’s demanded access to the Baltic Sea and the creation of the Free City of Danzig and East Prussia, some of the Mennonites living in Prussia had to cross three international borders just to get to church. Former domestic markets now

5 Gameo, “Germany.”
6 Prussia was at the northeastern edge of Germany. The Prussians pleaded for a compromise and were granted the right to non-combatant service. This was not acceptable to all and many emigrated. Many times those emigrating were the more conservative ones; thus the original Mennonite principles were gradually weakened in the old settlements.
8 John Ruth in introduction to “Holocaust Survivor.”
lay behind international borders with high tariffs.\(^9\)

In 1910, the German Mark was approximately equal in value to the American dollar. Between 1910 and 1920, there was a gradually sneaking inflation. Germany financed the Great War from 1914 to 1918 and lost. As the victors demanded payment, Germany printed more money to pay its bills. Inflation went rampant.

The mark lost its value rapidly. Lifetime savings were wiped out in less than three years. Fritz Heuser told the story how his uncle had saved a respectable sum of money for his old age. He distributed it among four different banks, so his wealth would not appear so obvious. It lost all value and he cried like a baby.\(^10\)

As the money lost its value, it was printed in larger and larger denominations. People could not wait two weeks for their pay. There were daily and even hourly price increases. Finally factories were paying their workers twice a day. The wives would come to the factory to collect their husbands’ pay and spend it before it lost even more value. There was so much money to count that the workers responsible for paying did not count precisely, and just handed over packs of money.\(^11\)

A Mennonite banker, Heinrich Rinck, pitied his friends who came for their money but could scarcely buy anything. Since he lived near the border, he helped convert their money to French money. This was against the law, and he finally suffered a mental breakdown because of his role in this.\(^12\)

It was in this era that a man took a wheelbarrow-load of money to the grocery store. He left it outside while he went in to see if there was anything he could buy with the amount he had. When he came back outside, he found the wheelbarrow stolen and the money dumped in a pile.

Finally in November 1923, the money was declared worthless. The once-esteemed currency was worth less than the paper it was printed on. The depression that swept around the world in the 1930s worsened an already bad situation in Germany. With no work, no market, and no economy, conditions were at a very low ebb. Was there anything the rulers could do about the situation? Current leaders get blamed for current events. The people were ready for change.

Should Christians vote? Or should we pray for our leaders and leave it at that? Should we lobby for privileges? Or should we plead for mercy and leave the rest in God’s hands?

**Heil Hitler\(^13\): Saviour of Germany**

A total of forty different political parties each claimed their own party to be the solution to Germany’s problems, and the people grew more confused than ever.\(^14\) The Weimar Republic was attacked mainly by three opposing groups within Germany. The monarchists wished to restore the empire. The communists wanted a dictatorship like Russia. The Nazis wanted a dictatorship and a new kingdom, *der Dritten Reich*. They wanted to discard the highly unpopular Treaty of Versailles and put Germany back on its feet. With the stock market crash in 1929, it was evident that even in the USA, capitalism had weaknesses. Any support for the democratic Weimar Republic deteriorated further.\(^15\)

The liberal politicians preferred communism. But the Mennonites knew too much about communism. There were not so distant cousins in Russia who had suffered much under communism. Due to hard work and thrift, many of the Russian Mennonites, while not extremely affluent by our standards, were literate and owned land—which was considerably better than the poor peasants.\(^16\) When the communists took over, they punished them for owning more than the others.

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\(^10\) Fritz Heuser, as related by Amos B. Hoover.

\(^11\) Ibid.

\(^12\) Heinrich Rinck, as related by Amos B. Hoover. Amos had visited Heinrich in 1969.

\(^13\) As Adolf Hitler grew in popularity, the common “Hello” and “Goodbye” greetings in Germany were replaced with “Heil Hitler.” “Heil Hitler” is often translated as “Hail Hitler.” The word “Heil” also means salvation or redemption.


\(^15\) The World Book Encyclopedia (Chicago, Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1960); “Germany.” Also Regier, 4.

\(^16\) There was a small percentage of Mennonites who were wealthy by our standards. According to Peter Dyck, 2.8% of the Mennonites had 75% of the Mennonite wealth. It is the author’s opinion that most of the stories we read about pre-Communist Russia deal with this 2% of the
Many were sent to Siberia and were never heard of again. Many times the secret police would take a father without warning.

One thing the Mennonites were convinced of: Germany needed a new leader, but they did not under any circumstances want communism. While some were concerned about the Nazis, the overwhelming majority of the Mennonites voted for the “politically conservative” candidate named Adolf Hitler.\textsuperscript{17} When the Nazis came to power, large numbers of Mennonites joined the party and a number were entrusted with responsible positions. Many viewed this trend as a check against the radical elements of the party.\textsuperscript{18}

Hitler moved quickly and in less than a year after he was elected chancellor in 1933, he became dictator. His men quickly rounded up all the communists (and other political adversaries) and sent them to concentration camps where they were imprisoned and often killed. Thus the fear of communism was laid to rest.\textsuperscript{19}

Hitler preached nationalism. He told the people that the German race was a superior race. They would make a new nation. The \textit{Dritten Reich} would be superior to the former kingdoms and even stronger than the first Reich, the Holy Roman Empire.

When Hitler came to power, farming debts were cancelled and agricultural imports stopped. Suddenly the farmers were part of a privileged class. Hitler put Germany back to work. Where before there was dreadful hopelessness, there was new hope. Before, the unemployment pension did not cover bare necessities; now there was work and bread. Before, begging was beyond control and crime was rampant; now social misery was averted. Among other things, Hitler restricted labor unions. He banned all political parties, thus bringing the endless and fruitless squabbles to a halt. The Volkswagen was invented—a car for the common folk. The trains were running on time again. The economy was rolling. The people felt safer and could breathe freely again. The future was bright.\textsuperscript{20}

Hitler promised to re-unify Germany. The Germans who had found themselves donated to surrounding countries at the Treaty of Versailles were ready. The Mennonites, particularly of Prussia, were impressed. Perhaps the church could be re-unified if they all lived in one country again. On September 10, 1933, the Mennonites of East and West Prussia sent an official greeting to Imperial Chancellor Adolf Hitler. “Those gathered here today at the meeting of the Conference of East and West Prussian Mennonites in Tiegenhagen within the Free City of Danzig, feel with deep gratitude the great uplifting that God gave our people through your strength of will, and pledge, for our part, joyful cooperation in the building of our Fatherland from the power of the Gospel, faithfully from the Motto of our fathers: Other foundation can no man lay, other than that which is already laid, Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{21}
An official response from Hitler thanked the Prussian Mennonites for their “true spirit and readiness to co-operate.”22 While not all Mennonites were happy with Hitler, this is the era in which we find letters written to family who had left Germany, saying things like, “We thank God daily for our Führer...” He had done so much for them and for all Germany.

The Mennonite paper, *Mennonitisches Blätter*, encouraged military service, calling Mennonites to “lay their life down for their friends,”23 promoting the old, non-Mennonite idea that “even the most pious cannot remain in peace if the evil neighbors don’t permit it.”24 Some Mennonites chose noncombatant service. Many Mennonites who served in the German forces claim to have remained “Wehrlos im Herzen” (defenseless in the hearts). Thus there were Mennonites who had served on the front who could claim, “I am glad that I did not have to kill anyone in the war,” or “I myself was undeservingly lucky in the war, and did not need to fire upon any person.”25

When Hitler annexed Austria in 1938 and Poland in 1939, the Mennonite communities were finally reunited as one nation under one government and were seemingly economically secure. The Prussian Mennonites praised the reunification as nothing short of the merciful will of God. They noted: “Our German peoples have endured unspeakable difficulties under the Polish yoke during its twenty year foreign rule. The most difficult at the end. Then God, the Lord helped them through the hand of our Führer and freed them. We thank our Führer for this act of liberation.”26

Should Christians vote? Our church ruling reads, “Voting is left to the discretion of a brother, but members are not to take part in political solicitations.” After all, in the days of the one-room public school, voting for or serving on the local school board was considered a public office where the force of the law was not used. Frequently we are admonished that our political involvement should be on our knees as we pray for our rulers. Many times I have failed in this.

**Heil Hitler: Saviour of South America**

Even though Hitler promised freedom of religion for all groups, not all was well. He quickly combined all the state churches into one German Evangelical Church. The head of this church was directly answerable to Hitler. For a while, it looked like the free churches, including the Mennonites, would be consolidated as well. This was out of the question in their eyes.27

In addition, Hitler started *Hitlerjugend*, which lured many youth away from churches. His intent was all too clear: “I can’t break the Church over my knee. It has to be left to rot like a gangrenous limb, but the healthy youth belong to us.” In response, the Mennonites established a newsletter, the *Mennonitische Jugendwarte*, which offered discussion and insight in a calm, measured manner to the questions of the day.28

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Translation: The content of your letter reveals true loyalty to me and your readiness for the cooperation with the construction of the German Reich, and I extend my sincere thanks.


24 Regier, 8. Schroeder, 29. Der Bergpredigt... (ist für die) Familie und genenüber christlich Gesinnten geboten sein; eine Regel für die Reiche dieser Welt, ihre Politik, ihre Selbstbehauptung ist es nicht. Das alte Volkslied behält sein Recht, dass der Frömmste nicht im Frieden bleiben kann, wenn es dem bösem Nachbarn mich gefällt.

Translation: The sermon on the mount (is for) the family and Christian-minded people and not for kingdoms and their politics and self assertion in this world. The old song is still true that the pious cannot remain in peace if a hostile neighbor is not willing.

25 Regier, 9. Schroeder, 32-33. Various writers assert that not one Mennonite refused the call to serve in the army. To put this into perspective, we must remember that to refuse was to choose concentration camp. The book *Nonresistance Under Test: Compiled Edition* (E. J. Swalm; Nappanee, IN; EV Publishing House) on page 215 notes that there were many Germans who chose concentration camp (though it does not say whether they were Mennonites). Samuel Gerber in “The Mennonites of Switzerland and France 1936-1948” (*Proceedings of the Fourth Mennonite World Conference; Akron, PA; Mennonite Central Committee, 1950*) notes that some Swiss Mennonites used controversial means to avoid the draft. It is quite possible that some German Mennonites may have done the same. Unfortunately most Mennonites chose the compromising route of noncombatant service. There were also many who obeyed outwardly but did not actually shoot people. Alas, some chose to serve their country fully with no restrictions of any kind.


27 Regier, 6-7.

Not all Christians had apostatized. There was a small group led by Eberhold Arnold, known as the Bruderhof, that tried to hold to Christ’s teaching. The Nazis were alarmed at this sect which practiced communal living (which the Nazis interpreted as communist) and also refused military service. The Mennonites, already fearing that their own existence as a group would be challenged, issued a statement saying, “The Bruderhof belonged neither to the Vereinigung [Union] of German Mennonite Churches, nor to any other organization within our Free German Mennonite Church.”

The Bruderhof colony was first raided and then expelled from Germany in 1936-37. After fleeing to England via Liechtenstein, they found that neither England, nor Canada, nor the USA would accept them. In 1940-41, the MCC assisted them in settling in the Paragayan Chaco, close to Fernheim, a settlement of Old Colony Mennonites which MCC was already helping. (These Old Colony Mennonites had fled Russia and, since Germany, the USA, and Canada did not want them, MCC helped them settle in the Chaco in 1930.)

Even here, thousands of miles from their native Germany, the Bruderhof found that pro-Nazi feelings among the Mennonites ran high. Pioneering in the Chaco was rough. Known to some as the “Green Hell,” many of the familiar crops did not grow. Russian farming practices did not work. Wells were dug under dangerous conditions (because of the sandy soil), and about a third were salt water. The only well available at first was so slow that a boy was stationed at the bottom with a cup to catch the trickle of water and fill the bucket. Unaccustomed to the new climate, environment, and food, the Old Colony Mennonites had suffered a typhoid epidemic and many died shortly after their arrival.

Now with Hitler transforming Germany, the Old Colony Mennonites watched with great interest. Many of them felt that if Hitler were successful, there might be an opportunity for them to return to Germany. The Old Colony Mennonites allowed the Bruderhof to use the Fernheim Colony meetinghouse. Here they found Hitler’s portrait displayed at the front right above the pulpit. (The Bruderhof lived with the Old Colony Mennonites in Fernheim for two months, before relocating to Primavera in eastern Paraguay.)

Should Christians vote? Do we really know the man we are voting for? Or do we know only what the news media wants us to know?

**Heil Hitler: Saviour of Russia**

Between 1788 and 1863, Mennonites settled in Russia. They were initially invited by Catherine the Great, who promised military exemption, the right to have their own schools, and maintain their own language “to all eternity.” *All eternity* lasted about 100 years. In 1917, before World War I had really ended, the Russian Revolution came—a war between the Bolsheviks (communists) and the Czarists. As the armies fought, they moved back and forth across the Ukraine where many Mennonites lived, causing extreme hardship. Finally the Bolsheviks won and Vladimir Lenin nationalized all the land, meaning he took it from the owners. In 1922, by starting his New Economic Policy (NEP), he tricked them into thinking he was backing off his agenda. But in 1927, his successor, Joseph Stalin, was back at it. Anyone who opposed him was sent to Siberia. Landowners, pastors, and anyone acknowledging God was particularly suspect. With harsh working conditions, very little food, and improper clothing, the survival rate of those sent to Siberia was less than 1 in 10.

In 1939, Russia signed a non-aggression agreement with Germany, promising that neither side would fight the other.

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29 Shroeder, 22. Die Bruderhöfer gehörten weder der Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden noch einem anderen Verband unserer deutschen mennonitischen Freikirche an.
31 Gameo, “Frontier.” I first heard this term used by Peter Dyck when the Swiss Pioneers planned a meeting at the CAM warehouse in Ephrata, PA on March 17, 2005. The meeting was named “From Riches to Rags—and Exodus.” A report of that meeting appeared in the Home Messenger in three installments from June through August 2005.
32 Gameo, “Paraguay,” “Fernheim.”
33 Barth, No Lasting Home, 46.
34 Dyck, “Riches to Rags” (I think some of this info could probably also be found in his book *Up From the Rubble.*) Gameo, “Russia.”
In June 1941, Hitler ignored his treaty and attacked Russia in a surprise attack. For about six weeks, Hitler pushed deep into Russia as the Reds (Russian Army) fled before him. The Russian Mennonites welcomed the Germans as their liberators. Once again they planted their own fields. They could still speak German and felt quite at home with these foreigners. Young men admired their liberators and many joined the army to fight for their fatherland.

When the Russians started to push back Hitler’s army, the Mennonites realized that they had been trying to leave Russia for many years. Now was their chance. Ahead of the retreating army, 35,000 Mennonites fled into Germany.35

Should Christians vote? Does it sanctify the politicians when Christians are involved in politics? Or does it destroy all chance for a nonresistant witness?

**Heil Hitler: Defeat**

But how could they? Today we ask, “How could any Christian have supported Hitler? Why, he killed six million Jews and nine million other unwanted.” Few knew and fewer believed the extent of Hitler’s atrocities. Even after the war, when faced with overwhelming evidence of genocide, many Germans refused to believe the reports. Many Germans rather believed that those reports were a farce invented by the Allies to justify the Allied invasion and make Hitler look bad. They could not believe that such a good Führer as Hitler would have done so wickedly.

(To their credit, while publicly supporting the Führer, many Mennonites privately helped their Jewish neighbors. Whether offering services that were forbidden by law or doing business with them or rebuking those who were harassing them or providing aid through their organization Brüder in Not (Brothers in Need), they tried to do what they could without jeopardizing their own lives.36)

The victor writes the history book again. Today we know all about Hitler’s crimes. We can read how the Germans really weren’t thinking when they voted Hitler in.37 We fail to consider that while Hitler may have been the most zealous, neither anti-Semitism nor nationalism were unique to Hitler or Germany. And we convince ourselves that had we been in Germany in 1932, we would have voted Hitler out of power.

Perhaps the whole situation was best summed up by Regier: “It seems then, that the biggest flaw of the Mennonites was not any immediate error. Instead, it was the natural consequence of years of gradual theological adaptations and compromises to better fit within the German community. When National Socialism came, the Mennonites no longer had the capacity to resist.”38

Should Christians vote? For Mennonites in Germany, voting for the lesser evil ended at last in embarrassment, defeat, and finally public apology:39

“The great catastrophe broke in upon us. Although not entirely unforeseen, it proved to be sudden and desperately destructive. This experience has brought to a conclusion, at least as far as the human mind can see, the 400-year-old history and existence of our East and West Prussian congregations. The catastrophe presents itself as a mighty judgment from God. To whom does it apply? Is it for our people and our government? Behind the masses one can easily hide himself. One can also make it easier by universalizing our answer and replying, ‘We all are sinners and come short of the glory of God.’ But judgment begins with the house of God. Does it begin with you? No, it begins with me. The pain and grief of guilt pierces deeply into our soul, but we should not hesitate to acknowledge the cause of it all and to lament with the prophet: ‘The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning. The

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35 Dyck, Gameo, “Russia.” Of these 35,000 who fled west before the retreating German army, it is estimated that 23,000 were captured and forcibly repatriated by Russia. These recaptured Mennonites were mostly exiled to Siberia. About 12,000 of the refugees who had fled west managed to go on to Canada and primarily Paraguay. See Up From the Rubble and Henry’s Red Sea.


37 World Book, “Adolf Hitler.”

38 Regier, 13.

39 Some Mennonites apologized. Schroeder asserts that most of the Mennonites never really repented of their part in the war, focusing instead on the suffering and loss they experienced at the end of the war: loss of family members, property, and homeland. Schroeder, 40-41.
crown is fallen from our head: woe unto us, that we have sinned!’ (Lam. 5:15, 16) The warning should be heeded by all. ‘Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God’ (I Pet. 5:6). And our united determination and decision according to Hosea 6:1 should be, ‘Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for He hath torn, and He will heal us; He hath smitten, and He will bind us up…”

Should Christians vote? Or is Christian involvement in politics a dangerous road on a slippery slope? Should Christians vote? Or will political involvement destroy our Christian nonresistant witness?

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40 Haendiges, “Catastrophe of the West Prussian Mennonites.” Haendiges was a minister in the Elbing Mennonite Church in East Prussia and one of the editors of the Mennonitische Blätter.

In the May 1939 issue of this magazine, Haendiges wrote a glowing tribute to Adolf Hitler on his 50th birthday.
CAPTIONS:

Some people dream of being millionaires. Above are shown (in reduced size) a 10 million mark bill and a 500 million mark bill, both printed in 1923. These were barely worth the paper they were printed on. Notice also the postage stamps for 200 million, 500 million, and 10 billion.

Sometimes an envelope needed to be covered with such stamps to get enough postage to send it. I have never seen such an envelope personally, although I was given a copy of one with 750 billion Marks of postage. Remember, only a few years earlier, the Mark was approximately equal to the American dollar. At this same time a letter could be sent in the US for 3 cents.
Surely those wicked Nazis were committed atheists. Wrong! Many considered themselves Christians. In fact the belt buckles worn by the Nazi soldiers proclaimed, “God with us!”

The Old Colony Mennonites allowed the refugee Bruderhof to gather in their meetinghouse at Fernheim Colony. Above the pulpit, the Bruderhof found a portrait of Adolf Hitler. Above that was a banner with a favorite Nazi slogan, “Community good before private good.” Pioneering in Paraguay was rough, but those who had fled Nazi Germany were convinced, “Rather hookworm than hooked cross! (swastika)” (Barth, No Lasting Home, 47.)

Photo credit: Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas ID # 2007-0189
“And the place thereof shall know it no more.” After 400 years of Mennonites living in Prussia, the destruction of their homeland was severe and final. Those who could flee, did. At the Fourth Mennonite World Conference in 1948, Emil Händiges described their plight, “Do you ask, ‘What is a refugee?’ The answer would be, ‘A refugee is a second-class person who is in everybody’s way.’” Those who did not flee were either killed or horribly mistreated by the Russians so that not a single Mennonite was left in Prussia.

Peter Dyck’s January 1959 article “Only Memory and Monuments” in Mennonite Life describes the fate of the Mennonite churches. Seven had completely disappeared, two were still standing but in terrible disrepair, three were used by the Catholics, two were granaries (including Furstenwerder shown here before and after the war), and one was living quarters for a peasant family and also a shed for feed.

Photo credit: Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas ID # 2003-0144