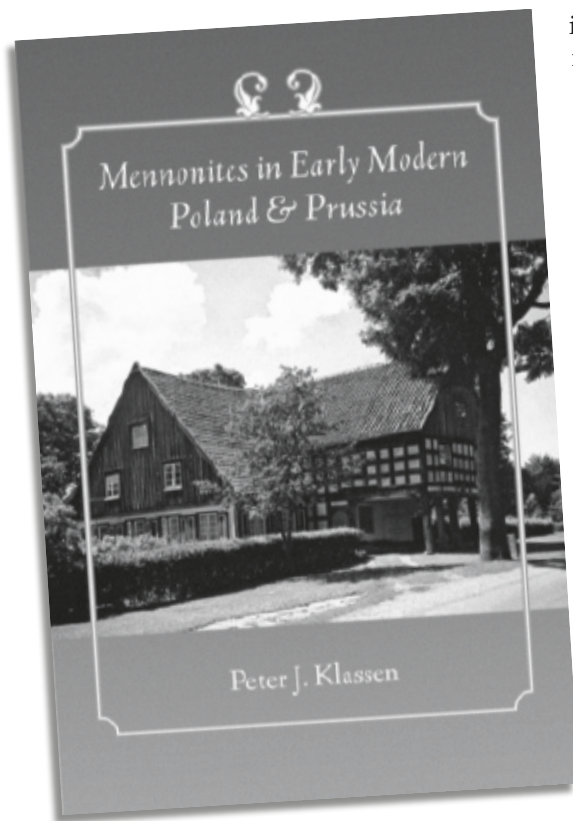


B O O K R E V I E W

Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia

by Sam Myovich



Peter James Klassen's latest work is published by Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

The story of the Mennonite migrations into the Vistula Delta is grounded in the religious and humanist ideals that emerged in the Renaissance and Reformation in Northern and Central Europe. The westward movement of these predominantly Flemish and Frisian Anabaptists into lands of the Polish Crown forged a vital cultural and economic network connecting Danzig, Amsterdam, and Warsaw. As the beneficiaries of the toleration practices that emerged in both the Netherlands and Poland, the Mennonites and their story are part of the big picture of European integration and supranational identity. There are important lessons here, and Peter J. Klassen, professor emeritus at California State University, Fresno, teaches them masterfully.

There would be no story of Vistula Mennonites without the practice of religious tolerance that grew out of the Polish Renaissance and Reformation--topics that have too often been neglected in western historiography. In one of the early and most powerful sections, Klassen examines the Polish context for religious toleration that became encoded in the Confederation of Warsaw resolution of the Polish parliament in

1573. This document surely ranks among those core statements that establish our modern notion of freedom of conscience. Indeed, Klassen traces a direct influence of the Confederation of Warsaw on France's decision to stop persecuting Huguenots, and its indirect influence on the Fourth of July Declaration of Independence by British colonists in North America. The indirect influence of the Confederation of Warsaw on the founding principles of the United States came via the 1579 Union of Utrecht in the Netherlands. It would not be unreasonable to conclude that the revolutionary religious toleration that emerged in the Netherlands and US had diffused westward from the Polish crown lands.

To be sure, the actual practice of tolerance was not consistently applied in the Polish-Lithuanian lands, especially as Poland faced increasing pressure from the rising military power of absolute monarchs on its borders and the internal disarray that resulted in Poland's ultimate disappearance from the political maps of Europe from 1795 to 1919. It was not unnatural, but probably unwise, for Poland to attempt to face external threats by creating a sense of unity founded on the renewed power of the Roman Catholic Church that emerged during the Counterreformation. Despite the increased for-

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eign pressure and domestic conflict, the Polish king and parliament never rescinded the Confederation of Warsaw. Consequently, Mennonites were able to successfully appeal to that law, even in the worst of Poland's hard times.

While establishing the importance of the Confederation of Warsaw for the general toleration of Mennonites in the Vistula lands, it was the decisive authority of local officials that determined the conditions under which settlement was allowed at particular times and places. The local officials included virtually autonomous Polish nobles, bishops, other representatives of ecclesiastical institutions, and city councils. Klassen portrays a Mennonite community whose rights to reside in the Vistula lands were constantly being challenged but consistently being upheld as a result of support by powerful institutions and individuals. The Mennonites had, after all, generated a great variety of new wealth that benefitted the Vistula region as a whole and helped link that region to vital trade with Amsterdam. At various key points in the three centuries of Mennonite residence in Polish lands, we see effective appeals to the Polish King and Dutch merchants for assistance against efforts of local authorities to deny their presence.

The Mennonites thus represented a transnational community bearing witness to both the tolerant humanism of the Renaissance and the spiritual and economic vitality of a group operating on the principals of mutual aid. The initial source of Mennonite wealth derived from the adaptation of hydrological engineering practices learned in the Netherlands. The regional agriculture benefitted as cities like Danzig and El-

bing developed rich markets for both the farm produce and rural handicrafts of the Mennonites. Increasingly, Mennonites became integrated into the urban life of the region through their crafts and involvement in trade, finance and culture.

Despite the fact that most of the urban settlements along the Vistula were politically linked to the Polish crown, the cities themselves were linguistically German and thus predominantly Lutheran. While the Mennonites were at least as likely to face discrimination by German-speaking Lutherans as by Polish-speaking Catholics, it was only natural that over time the Mennonites would adopt German as the predominant language of their communities due

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to the proximity of the Dutch dialects to German and the practicality of speaking the dominant language of the region. This transition to German occurred over a few decades in the second half of the eighteenth century. The move toward German, however, appears to have also been influenced by the incorporation of other German-speaking Anabaptists from Switzerland, Moravia, and Bavaria. The Mennonite settlements in the Vistula lands thus provided something of a magnet for other dissident religious groups closely associated with Mennonite ideas. In the final analysis, the core questions of Mennonite identity were religious questions. It is to these core questions that Klassen turns time and again in an extraordinarily insightful way.

In the course of the three centuries that Klassen examines, new notions about the state, the nation, the nature of political authority, and the role of the individual emerged. These new concepts drove deep wedges into the Mennonite communities, particularly after the Prussian annexation of the Polish crown lands of Royal Prussia and Danzig. The large standing armies that emerged in Europe on the eve of the Napoleonic wars brought the question of military service to the forefront of Mennonite identity concerns. The subsequent decision of many Mennonites to move to Catherine's Russia in the face of enlistment pressures from Prussian kings is a well-established part of the Mennonite story.

The wars and revolutions of the twentieth century have caused Europeans to reexamine the notions of state and nation that have

defined modernity. The emergence of the European Union today is at least in part an effort to define a new modernity. The history of the Mennonites and the Polish Renaissance provide great material for envisioning this new Europe. Peter Klassen has given us much to think about. He answers many important questions. He raises many more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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