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The German Mennonite Response to the Dissolution of the Rhoen-Bruderhof

by James Irvin Lichti

"Expulsion of Mennonites from Germany"

On April 22, 1937, a Swiss Catholic paper, the *Basler Nachrichten*, ran a short article entitled "Expulsion of Mennonites from Germany." This article appeared during Hitler's fourth year in power. The paper reported the arrival in Holland of 31 German Mennonites who had been expelled from Germany

because—in accordance with their convictions—they did not want to perform military service. Also, they have consistently refused to employ the Hitler greeting. A few days ago Gestapo detachments appeared, occupied the community buildings and took their occupants to the Dutch border. . . . (Emphasis in original)

The report's details were largely reliable: on April 14, 1937, a small religious community had been disbanded by the Gestapo. It identified with the Anabaptist tradition and was known as the Rhoen-Bruderhof, the Rhoen being a rather impoverished rural area lying about midway between Frankfurt and Berlin. One detail missed by the *Basler Nachrichten* was that community doctrines also rejected private property; on this basis, the Rhoen-Bruderhof came under government suspicion both as "pacifists" and as "communists." However, it was not an oversight, but a specific error which caught the attention of German Mennonite leadership: the Rhoen-Bruderhof's affiliation was Hutterite rather than Mennonite. The *Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden*, in which the majority of German Mennonite congregations were represented,¹ was anxious to make clear that "no Mennonites had been expelled from Germany," and that there was no affiliation between German Mennonites and the Rhoen-Bruderhof. This re-

sponse, in turn, troubled Dutch Mennonites, who had taken in the expelled German Hutterites upon their arrival in the Netherlands: Didn't the *Vereinigung's* response to the dissolution of the Rhoen-Bruderhof constitute the abandonment of a sister denomination?

In taking on this question, the fundamental issue is understanding how German Mennonites and German Hutterites, both based in the Anabaptist tradition, pursued opposing forms of "accommodation" to life under National Socialism.² In addition, the *Vereinigung's* response to the dissolution of the Rhoen-Bruderhof provides an unusual opportunity to contrast the "individual" and "institutional" responses to National Socialism. However, a look at the initial responses of *Vereinigung* leaders seems to present a more complex picture. Of the three leaders most directly involved at that point, Benjamin Unruh pressed for distance right away, which fell in line with his own uncritical regard for the Third Reich. The remaining two, Christian Neff and Emil Haendiges, assumed positions surprisingly at odds with their respective perspectives. Despite the diversity of response among church leadership, the *Vereinigung's* response to the *Basler Nachrichten* fell in line with the overall pattern of German Mennonite accommodation to the Third Reich. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this happened in the very process of policy formation: what finally allowed for policy determination was a selective reliance on principles from the Mennonite tradition. These principles legitimized a position which "protected" the German Mennonite reputation under the Third Reich and maintained an uncritical stance toward the Gestapo action against the Rhoen-Bruderhof.

German Mennonite perception of the Rhoen-Bruderhof

When Hitler was appointed chancellor on January 30, 1933, German Mennonites reacted "just like their fellow Germans: they were relieved and cheered Hitler and his Brownshirts with great hope."³ The Rhoen-Bruderhof, on the other hand, faced the moment as a solemn call to decision. Upon hearing the news, the community's leader, Eberhard Arnold (1883-1935), called his followers together and announced that the time had come for each of them to choose their life's direction: either accommodation to the new state or non-conformity in the context of a community of commitment.⁴

This commitment initially brought together Eberhard Arnold and Emmy van Hollander (1884-1980), who became his wife. They met in 1907; both were from respectable bourgeois backgrounds, and were influenced by two rather different movements: pietistic revivalism, which gave expression to their devout faith, and the German Youth Movement, which questioned the normative basis of bourgeois German life. World War I drew the couple into circles of religious pacifists and religious socialists; with the coming of peace, they joined with others who were questioning private property, and seeking alternatives to conventional economic, political and religious institutions. This particular wing of the post-World War I German Youth Movement, called the "communitarian" movement,⁵ enthusiastically embraced German folk culture, but fundamentally challenged the cornerstones of German middle-class society.

The movement aroused some curiosity among German Mennonite youth, but those who became actively engaged

were transplanted Russian Mennonites. Hans Klassen and Johannes Harder were examples. Klassen founded a Quaker commune in Thuringia, the "Neu-Sonnenfelder"; but since moving to Germany his contacts had been with progressive Baptists rather than German Mennonites. Similarly, Johannes Harder's contacts with German Mennonites remained rather marginal. He was the only Mennonite to live at the community founded by Eberhard and Emmy Arnold in 1920. Harder stayed at the Rhoen-Bruderhof off and on between 1925 and 1928. Toward the end of his life, Harder kept a few photos on the wall of his study of individuals critical to his intellectual and spiritual development. Eberhard Arnold was among these; but despite this, Harder could not quite bring himself to join the Rhoen-Bruderhof.⁶

Eberhard and Emmy's community developed an increasing awareness of the links between their own goals and the doctrines of the 16th century Hutterites. They attempted outreach to German Mennonites, and met with a mixture of sympathy, admiration and skepticism.

Another reason for hesitation was that Rhoen-Bruderhof outreach took the form of an urgent plea for assistance with its desperate financial condition. This issue appears to have become the unfortunate focus of the relationship between German Mennonites and the Rhoen-Bruderhof. To their credit, German Mennonites provided occasional limited assistance to the Rhoen-Bruderhof even when German Mennonites were themselves under considerable financial strain; such assistance was extended even during the weeks preceding the Gestapo's dissolution of the community. This support was motivated not only by sympathy—by 1937, the community was maintaining itself under near-starvation conditions—but also on respect. There was a very real ambivalence in the German Mennonite regard for the Rhoen-Bruderhof.

The Rhoen-Bruderhof then turned to the Hutterian Brethren of North America. Here they also met with caution; but Eberhard was eventually invited to visit the North American Hutterian communities, and he was received as a fresh voice of inspiration. Affiliation was agreed upon by December 1930. The Rhoen-Bruderhof went about making the necessary adjustments: some were easy, such as exchanging their



Eberhard and Emmy Arnold in 1921.

folksy "youth-movement" outfits for the rather similar Hutterite garb; others were more difficult, such as dispensing with folk dancing and musical instruments—or Eberhard Arnold giving up his cigars.

The Rhoen-Bruderhof and the Third Reich

Eberhard's initial assessment of Hitler soon proved itself accurate. Increasingly, Third Reich policies interfered with Rhoen-Bruderhof community life. The responses of the Rhoen-Bruderhof and German Mennonites both lie in a deeply-held German Protestant respect for worldly authority. This respect is more explicit in the Lutheran tradition, but not without basis in German Mennonite tradition. The Rhoen-Bruderhof exercised this respect with an awareness of the fundamental distance between

Hutterite doctrine and National Socialist ideology.

This distance was expressed in Rhoen-Bruderhof literature, which spoke out against militarism, private property, and idolizing German "folk identity." Distribution of such literature was blocked by the Nazi regime, and the Rhoen-Bruderhof attempted to continue distribution in neighboring German-language countries. During the spring and summer after Hitler came to power, the Gestapo inspected the community regularly and then stormed the Bruderhof in November with 120 agents in a fruitless search for weapons. A month later, the Third Reich insisted that the Bruderhof's school include Nazi propaganda in its curriculum. To circumvent this, the community immediately shuttled its children off to Liechtenstein, where a daughter community, the Alm-Bruderhof, was established. With the

introduction of conscription in 1935, draft-age men were also removed to this location. Advised by the Liechtenstein government that it was not in a position to shelter draft-age Germans indefinitely, a second daughter community, the Cotswold-Bruderhof, was established in England. This was the ultimate destination of members of the Rhoen-Bruderhof following their expulsion in 1937.

It may seem surprising that the Rhoen-Bruderhof remained in Germany at all after Hitler came to power. This was, in fact, an on-going question in the community. In the end, they felt it important that their attempt at a Christ-centered community remain. With this orientation, strategies of accommodation drew the line at principle; in a fundamental sense, the Rhoen-Bruderhof would have lost its reason for being if it had prioritized self-preservation above preservation of principle.

German Mennonites under the Third Reich

The fundamental conflict between Bruderhof doctrine and National Socialist ideology clearly identified "which side" German Hutterites were on; were German Mennonites, then, simply on the "other" side? German Mennonites were a less homogeneous community, encompassing a broader diversity of positions on issues of faith. Any generalizations on the German Mennonite response to the Third Reich must be qualified, since individual German Mennonites indeed responded differently to the rise of National Socialism. But if we vest German Mennonite institutions with the responsibility of speaking for their constituency, a pattern of accommodation to the Third Reich becomes apparent. This pattern is clearest in the *Vereinigung*.

The need for the *Vereinigung* to accommodate to the Third Reich indicates a distance between the German Mennonite and National Socialist positions. The Nazi regime placed demands on all German institutions and forced each to decide where it would "draw the line." The *Vereinigung* responded in a manner similar to most German denominations: their pattern of accommodation operated within the framework of preserving institutional independence. National Socialist goals included government "co-ordination" (*Gleichschaltung*) of all German institutions. Virtually all German churches resisted the regime's



Benjamin H. Unruh in about 1930.

efforts in this direction with consistency and a good measure of success.

On the other hand, the record of these same denominations on speaking out against Nazi racism and militarism is disturbingly weak. The Third Reich's "respect" for the relative autonomy of the German churches was based on the strict condition that they confine themselves to concerns related to the "hereafter," leaving the management of "this life" to National Socialist leadership. On the whole, German churches were prepared to meet this condition. In so doing, they indeed parted with a good measure of autonomy. With this in mind, the German churches' resistance to National Socialist "co-ordination" becomes difficult to evaluate: was this "resistance" based on the content of their faith or on an institutional "survival instinct"? This is a question to keep in mind in considering the different responses of German Mennonite leaders to the dissolution of Rhoen-Bruderhof and the relationship between these responses and the eventual institutional response by the *Vereinigung*.

Benjamin Unruh: "They want to misuse our Mennonite name abroad"

When Hitler came to power in 1933, Benjamin Unruh was at the height of his influence within the international Mennonite community. Born in the Crimea in 1881, Unruh received his "licentiate in theology" in Church History from the University of Basel in 1907 and then

returned to Russia to teach German and religion at the *Kommerzschule* in Halbstadt. After the Russian Revolution, Unruh was in the four-member "study commission" that visited European and North American Mennonites in 1920 to explore emigration options for Russian Mennonites. Although various conferences were interested in helping, there was firm resistance to a cooperative, "inter-Mennonite" effort. Yet this is precisely what the Russian Mennonite study commission insisted upon, and it is their insistence that led to the founding of Mennonite Central Committee in that year. One of Benjamin Unruh's ongoing "causes" was to challenge the barriers blocking inter-Mennonite cooperation and communication.

After the study-commission's tour, Unruh remained in the west. He settled in the southern German city of Karlsruhe and became the *Vertrauensmann* for thousands of Russian Mennonites making their way out of the Soviet Union. No other person played as central a role in their resettlement. Unruh's own gifts were especially well suited to the tasks of dealing with officials, promoting cooperation, and raising the necessary funds. His ready rhetorical skills combined humor, affability, optimism, and a "childlike" relationship to his faith.⁷ He was perhaps at the zenith of his visibility at the Second Mennonite World Conference in Danzig/Gdańsk. The year was 1930, and the central concern was the devastating impact of Stalin's collectivization program on Russian Mennonites. At the Conference, Unruh argued that the key concern was not the incompatible economic structure advanced by the Soviet Union, but the regime's violation of the "historic Mennonite principle of freedom of conscience."⁸

Considering Unruh's life focus, a sympathy for National Socialism would not be surprising. In the late 1920s, Hitler began reworking his Party's image to attract a broader electoral base. This involved a stronger appeal to Christian sentiment, an easing of anti-semitic rhetoric, and an emphasis on anti-Bolshevik slogans. All of this heightened National Socialism's receptivity among Mennonites.

In addition, the German Mennonite sense of ownership in the German people was heightened by a "media event" in 1929. That October, 13,000 destitute German peasants—"refugees" of Stalin's rural collectivization program—

converged upon Moscow. Ten thousand of these were Russian Mennonite. Their plight became a "cause" of the German press and elicited a concrete response. The German government designated six million marks towards their departure for the west, with Reichspresident Hindenburg personally contributing 200,000 marks, and the German public sending in one million marks. For German Mennonites, this linked anti-Bolshevism with an unprecedented sense that the German nation now stood behind Mennonites. As Christian Neff put it,

This is singular in the history of our own "kindred nation" (*Brudervolk*) that assistance comes to us from the outside. We have always had to rely on assistance from within our brotherhood.⁹

Neff sent Unruh the *Basler Nachrichten* article. Neff also included an article from the Dutch Mennonite paper, *Zondagsbode*, which reflected considerable sympathy for the German Hutterites. Unruh felt that the newspaper's reference to the Rhoen-Bruderhof as Mennonite was the work of Dutch Mennonites, who had intentionally promoted that association:

In my estimation, the *Vereinigung* should stick its neck out and present a very clear explanation to officials and authorities and before the public! They now want to misuse our Mennonite name abroad in the fight against National Socialism.

He went on to decry the confusion that could result from association with "Arnold-ish experiments."¹⁰

Unruh voiced similar opinions in his response to an inquiry from the German Foreign Office. He described the Swiss and Dutch articles as "clearly written with propagandizing and agitational intention" and elaborated on German Mennonite devotion to the fatherland. He cited their willing sacrifice in the Great War, the early involvement of many "*als sehr fruehe Kaempfer*" (as very happy fighters) in the National Socialist Party, and the full integration of Mennonite youth into Hitler organizations.

Unruh did qualify his position by informing the German Foreign Office of his denomination's unconditional support for "freedom of conscience." But in contrast to the situation of Russian Mennonites under Stalinism, this was not the "key issue" in regard to the situation of German Hutterites under Hitlerism. Instead, German Mennonites "must guard themselves against those

who think they can use our name in vain for the transparent purpose of criticizing measures undertaken by the German authorities."¹¹

The German press emphasized the "misrepresentation" of the Third Reich in the foreign press. By using this approach to the *Basler Nachrichten's* error, Unruh played into the hands of the regime's propaganda strategy. The principle that was central to his position on the Russian Mennonites under Stalin—freedom of conscience—receded into the background, and a concern for "accuracy in the foreign press" dominated the foreground. But at the same time that he defended the Third Reich, he also defended the domestic reputation of Mennonites under the Third Reich. Guiding his response was not intimidation from without, but intimidation from within. Although he was oblivious to the fact, Unruh yielded to the demands for conformity imposed by the totalitarian state. Prior to 1933, Unruh would have been less anxious to press the distinction between German Mennonites and the Rhoen-Bruderhof. As a Mennonite historian, he had written highly of Hutterian history and would more likely have been amused than angered by a confusion of the two. But the National Socialist preoccupation with who was "inside" and who was "outside" the *Volksgemeinschaft* put a new twist on the distinction between Mennonites and Hutterites. The new national ideology had channeled Unruh's response. Unruh was arguably respond-



Emil Händiges in about 1952.

ing from a position of intimidation. In defending the Third Reich against foreign misrepresentation, he also effectively defended the domestic reputation of Mennonites under the Third Reich.

Emil Haendiges: "There are little flags that rise up . . . to show us where a priceless treasure has sunken"

As influential as Unruh was, the response to the *Basler Nachrichten* was to come from the chair of the *Vereinigung*, Emil Haendiges. Born in 1881 in Worms, Haendiges was raised in a Baptist household. In accord with his father's wishes, he initially pursued a career in business, but found this unfulfilling. At the encouragement of his mother's family—who were Palatine Mennonite—he entered the ministry. Haendiges completed his theological studies in 1912, and began as secretary and travelling pastor for the Conference of South German Mennonites, an association of congregations founded at the urging of Christian Neff and reaching from the French Alsace in the west through the Palatinate and Baden to Bavaria in the east. In 1918, Haendiges accepted the position at the Ibersheim-Eppstein-Ludwigshafen congregation, not far from his hometown. In 1923, he responded to a call from the Elbing congregation, which moved him from the "Swiss Mennonite" base of the Rheinland/Palatinate to the "Dutch Mennonite" base of West Prussia (today part of Poland). He remained in Elbing until the end of World War II.

This new location exposed Haendiges to one of the most deeply resented consequences of the Versailles Treaty. The treaty had been imposed upon Germany at the close of World War I and was a target of all conservative German press and political parties. In fostering this resentment, they promoted the national mood that led to Hitler's electoral gains in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Quite by chance, the treaty's territorial changes had hit German Mennonites particularly hard: one out of three German Mennonites suddenly found that their citizenship had changed. Congregations that were formerly united under the German Empire now found themselves in either the Weimar Republic, France, the Free City of Danzig, or a resurrected Poland. The situation was most troubling in Haendiges' new home

of West Prussia, where the Mennonite population was divided between three different political entities. When Haendiges accepted editorship of the *Vereinigung's* monthly, *Mennonitische Blaetter*, in 1927, he used his opening editorial to voice his own resentment at the divisive impact of the Versailles Treaty on German Mennonite fellowship and communication.¹² He was hardly alone in these sentiments.

This situation increased Mennonite vulnerability to National Socialist rhetoric. Hitler combined resentment over the World War I settlement with anti-Slavic racism—modulating his emphasis in accord with his audience—by demanding the extension of German *Lebensraum* (living space) in the east. Hitler's own aims involved more than a restoration of the German Empire's former borders, but he was selective with how he phrased his aims. His audiences, in turn, were selective in focusing in on what they wanted to hear. On the surface of things, Mennonites probably would have endorsed only a conservative rendering of Hitler's foreign policy goals, but at a deeper and less aware level many also welcomed the hope, and perhaps even the "thrill," offered by Hitler's fanatical militancy. And when Hitler finally did invade Poland in September 1939, there was militancy in Haendiges' tone:

Our German ethnic communities (*Volksgruppen*) suffered unspeakable difficulties under the Polish yoke during twenty years of foreign domination. The worst at the very end. Then God, our Lord, helped them through the hand of our Fuehrer and set them free. We thank our Fuehrer for his feat of liberation!¹³

Haendiges was among those German Mennonites who had fallen, to a significant degree, under the sway of Nazism's appeal, and a number of his editorials could attest to this opinion. Curiously, this did not guide his response to the dissolution of the Bruderhof. Instead, he was the German Mennonite leader most resistant to "clarifying" the *Basler Nachrichten's* error:

It is infinitely difficult for me to release something to the public along these lines because in spite of everything, this has to do with a group of our own Mennonite lineage. . . . It is beyond me that "German Mennonites" now back away from these "Brothers in Need," that no one wants to risk *his* name in this context, and then identify it as "the place of the Chair of the *Vereinigung*" to draw the



Christian Neff.

line here out of the fear of what could happen. . . . With all their shortcomings, the brothers are suffering for a principle for which our forefathers also suffered, but which we have renounced. "There are little flags that rise up from the surface of the ocean to show us where a priceless treasure has sunken."¹⁴

Haendiges' position was significantly shaped by his talks with Emmy Arnold at the 1936 Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam. As was characteristic of German Mennonite leaders, Haendiges was very "people oriented," and Emmy Arnold's warmth, piety, and profound commitment made a strong impression. Widowed in 1935, she and fellow Rhoen-Bruderhof members had been living under conditions of extreme poverty. Ironically, it was the founder of Mennonite World Conference, Christian Neff, who would dissuade Haendiges from his position of solidarity.

Christian Neff: "In the Pursuit of Truth"

Born in 1863, Christian Neff became one in a long line of Palatine Mennonite ministers in his family. By 1937 he celebrated his fiftieth year as pastor of the Weierhof congregation with a striking list of church accomplishments to his name. Addressed as "Vater Neff," he enjoyed a remarkably uniform respect among divergent German Mennonite circles.

Neff's background might well have led to an affinity for German nationalism. He possessed vivid childhood

memories of the Franco-Prussian War, and recalled his excitement at seeing Wilhelm I, the German Empire's first Kaiser, at the Ludwigshafen train station. While a student in Berlin, he enthusiastically attended Heinrich von Treitschke's lectures on Germany. Treitschke is credited with helping to fan German nationalism. Neff was also deeply impressed when he heard Bismarck address the Reichstag. He described it as "an historically significant moment of my life."¹⁵ During Neff's childhood years, Bismarck waged three successful wars, which led to the founding of the German Empire in 1871.

While all of this had a lasting impact on the boy's imagination, the grown man's writings were not significantly swayed by nationalism. His style appealed more to reflection than sentiment. Lacking Unruh's speaking skills, Neff compensated by carefully composing all his sermons and addresses in advance; the result was a more finely reasoned presentation, "a crystalline clarity, an austere structure, altogether a linguistic mastery."¹⁶ His focus remained squarely on the welfare of the Mennonite community, and he was not wont to confuse matters of faith with the fate of the German *Volk* community, as many other German Mennonite writers of the period did.

In founding Mennonite World Conference, Neff combined two of his prime interests: fostering international contact among Mennonites, and promoting Mennonite history. At Neff's initiative, the first Mennonite World Conference took place in Zurich on January 25, 1925, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the first adult baptism. He remained convener of Mennonite World Conference until his death in 1946.

As convener, Neff demonstrated a respect for Mennonites with doctrinal positions different from his own. An example of this was nonresistance. In preparing for the Third Mennonite World Conference of 1936, Dutch and American Mennonite leaders felt it imperative that the peace issue be raised. One reason for this was anxiety over the impact of Nazism's militarism in Germany: *Mennonitische Blaetter* had published sufficient content sympathetic to the new regime to raise eyebrows abroad. But the question remained as to whether attention to the peace issue would be self-defeating. Neff understood the integral position of nonresis-

tance in the faith of many foreign Mennonites and would not question the raising of an issue close to the heart of an important part of the "brotherhood." This perspective was apparently not shared by most German Mennonites. They had largely distanced themselves from nonresistance over the course of the 19th century, although congregations still supported the minority who served as non-combatants in World War I. But when Hitler became chancellor, various church organs were quick to draw a line between German Mennonites and nonresistance. Strongly formulated statements emphasized that German Mennonites would no longer request "special privileges" related to military service. Although these statements said that the final decision remained a matter of individual conscience, they made it clear that church support would stop where conflict with government policy began. These statements appeared with an unwarranted urgency, since conscription was not introduced for another two years.

Among the few defending those with nonresistant principles in *Mennonitische Blaetter* was Christian Neff:

I only want to say this: I affirm military service. . . . But I regret that there is so little understanding left in our circles for the question of nonresistance. Even though we have given up the strict principle of nonresistance . . . we should nonetheless . . . stand up for those who reject bearing arms and reject war based on a crisis of conscience. . . .¹⁷

Despite Neff's openness and readiness to broach the peace issue at the 1936 World Conference, he was less open to the attendance of Rhoen-Bruderhof members at that same World Conference. He wrote to a Dutch Mennonite pastor that there had been "absolutely no mention" of inviting the Rhoen-Bruderhof at the joint preparatory meetings, and that if there had been, he would have certainly voiced his reservations, "although it goes without saying that that would have not been along the lines of an outright objection."¹⁸ But he here conjectured in retrospect. It is difficult to determine whether this would have been his opinion prior to World Conference or whether it reflected his consternation at the consequence of Emil Haendiges' encounter with Emmy Arnold.

Neff responded to Haendiges' misgivings immediately:

Just between you and me, Brother Haendiges, I would like to say that I do not share your emotion-based perspective on this matter. This is simply a matter of setting the facts straight, which seems necessary simply in the pursuit of truth; . . . As always, our sympathies are with the brothers [of the Bruderhof]. But we . . . decided against a connection with them on principle.¹⁹

In apparent acquiescence, Haendiges wrote the *Basler Nachrichten*. Responding to the article's small headline, "Expulsion of Mennonites from Germany," he emphasized that "no Mennonites have been expelled from Germany." But was the central concern here "clarification," or what seemed to engage the bulk of Haendiges' letter: a distancing from principles that would impair the domestic reputation of German Mennonites?

The same question surfaced in the article Neff prepared for Mennonite periodicals. Entitled "A Necessary Correction," Neff's initial draft began by presenting the foreign press's inaccurate use of "Mennonite," and then went on to stress the distinctions between German Mennonites and German Hutterites:

Particularly this point—the rejection of military service—identifies a significant difference, even contrast between the members of the Bruderhof and German Mennonites of today. . . .

We have a high esteem of the members of the Bruderhof and their upstanding, genuine Christian convictions, but reject—along with their position on military service—their religiously based communist institution.

Before Neff's article was published, he revised the last sentence, substituting "life in common" for "communist." This initial word choice used National Socialist vocabulary to describe a Hutterite principle, perhaps signaling where Neff's concern was in fact directed. Although entitled "a necessary correction," the effect of Neff's article was a distancing of German Mennonites from principles or ideologies that were taboo under the Third Reich.

This had been a part of Unruh's original agenda, which was then countered by Haendiges' "call for solidarity." On the surface, Neff seemed to be striking a middle ground of sorts. In stressing "the pursuit of the truth," Neff had shifted the focus by alluding to a historic Mennonite principle: that "our 'aye' be an aye and our 'nay' be a nay" (Matthew 5:37). The principle of rejecting the oath prompted

a commitment to an uncompromised honesty, and this commitment proved more durable among German Mennonites than the principle of nonresistance. When Hitler revived conscription in 1935, considerable efforts were made to secure for Mennonite youth the option of "pledging" rather than "swearing" their loyalty to the *Fuehrer*.²⁰

Neff could have stressed or incorporated other principles, such as "freedom of conscience," but Unruh had already modeled a selective emphasis on this principle, lending it "center stage" in reference to Russian Mennonites under Stalin, but shifting it toward the background in reference to German Hutterites under Hitler. The positioning of the principle appears gauged by just how self-evident the "brotherhood" of the targeted population might be. It receded with the Rhoen-Bruderhof and disappeared even from the background with the frequent and concurrent sentencing of Jehovah's Witnesses to concentration camps for rejection of military service. Nor did Mennonites raise the freedom of conscience issue in regard to the growing number of regulations, directives, and prohibitions placed upon the Jewish population.

Neither Haendiges, Unruh, nor Neff denied or concealed their admiration for the piety and commitment of Rhoen-Bruderhof members. At the same time, they did not explicitly object to the Gestapo action which dissolved that community. They settled for "clarifying" the situation, allowing "honesty" to outrank "solidarity," and ultimately effecting Unruh's original agenda: an explicit distancing of German Mennonites from the Rhoen-Bruderhof.

When principle colludes with accommodation: the dynamics guiding policy creation

Neff was so focused on the principle of "clarification" that he lost sight of the role he was playing. It was as if he were "playing into the hands" of an insidious institutional dynamic within the church structure guiding policy toward institutional self-preservation. This dynamic generally characterizes human institutions. In the case of the Rhoen-Bruderhof, "self-preservation" was outranked by principle, because the principles they would have had to abandon to survive would have destroyed their reason for existence. And when the Rhoen-Bruderhof was then dis-

solved, Neff believed he was acting in accord with the principle of "uncompromised honesty," but what in effect occurred was a selective reliance on principle which then legitimized a policy that served institutional and community self-preservation.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect here is how leadership remained unaware of the dynamics at play. These were masked by the relative complexity of German Mennonite church leaders' initial response. They did not respond like robots, reacting reflexively to the whims of the totalitarian state; instead, they challenged each other in an apparently open exchange of opinion. There was at least some potential for the policy to have taken on a different form. But it did not. The institutional position which emerged fell in line with the pattern of institutional accommodation that was seeking to "find a place" for German Mennonites within the context of the Third Reich. The fact that a potential for irregularity existed helped to maintain the illusion that they were responding "freely" and on the basis of principle and overshadowed the role played by (1) intimidation by the state and (2) fundamental dynamics of institutional self-preservation.

There is always a line which cannot be crossed, i.e., where accommodation would undercut the institution's very reason for being. For the Rhoen-Bruderhof, nonresistance, community of goods, and adoption of Nazi cultural forms, such as the "Heil Hitler!" greeting, constituted such lines, while for German Mennonites and most German churches the most critical line was resisting government coordination and maintaining institutional autonomy. Unfortunately, the line drawn by Mennonites fueled the dynamics guiding institutional self-preservation, thus falling in line with the mindset guiding the *Vereinigung's* response to the dissolution of the Rhoen-Bruderhof. One of the "blindnesses" on the agenda seeking institutional autonomy was concessions made in preserving the form of autonomy.

There is nothing surprising in reliance on tradition in pursuing institutional self-preservation. Doctrine and tradition are part of the institutional structure, and either might be employed—selectively—to defend the overall institution. As a result of a selective reliance on tradition, certain principles become emphasized while others are

suppressed or fade into the background. This dynamic of response continued during the escalation of the Rhoen-Bruderhof controversy. Dutch Mennonites accused German Mennonites of indeed neglecting the principle of "freedom of conscience," and of failing to demonstrate sufficient solidarity with a sister denomination. At this point, collusion with the Gestapo deepened. The Third Reich chose to distance itself from the more convoluted issue of religious principle, suppressing the Gestapo's primary motive and promoting an entirely different basis for the Rhoen-Bruderhof's dissolution: the Hutterites were accused of gross financial mismanagement, for which the government seized the community's property in the interest of its creditors. German Mennonites contradicted the Rhoen-Bruderhof's own account and aligned with the regime's position: the stigma associated with poor management joined with Mennonite stewardship norms to provide a legitimizing basis for the Gestapo's account.²¹ In this manner, a selective reliance on religious tradition placed a legitimizing stamp on church policies which either ignored, sidestepped, or even colluded with Third Reich policy.

How to forgive and not forget?

We can analyze the context sufficiently to understand why the German Mennonite leaders took the positions they did. But is this sufficient? Recent controversy among German historians of the Third Reich has challenged the empathetic approach of "historicism," i.e., of understanding a historic period by promoting "identification" with those living during that period. In understanding German social life under the Third Reich, a focus on "identification" and "empathy" tends to shift the compelling moral issues raised by Nazi crimes into the background. In denominational history, the historicist emphasis can result in apologetics rather than reflection, self-justification rather than self-examination.

At the same time, the attention placed here on "individual" German Mennonites under the Third Reich also draws attention to one aspect of the "brokenness" characterizing our attitude toward German Mennonites after the war. Christian Neff was less touched by this, since he did not live to experience the

post-war era; in addition, his response to the dissolution of the Rhoen-Bruderhof is more of an aberration from a critical distance that was stronger than that evidenced by most other German Mennonite leaders. Emil Haendiges' call for solidarity was also an aberration; at the Fourth Mennonite World Conference in 1948, he publicly repented his uncritical response to Nazism, forthrightly "prostrating" himself before the gathering in a manner seldom demonstrated by those in positions of institutional authority. In this he presented a model to emulate. Of the three men, perhaps the heaviest cloud would remain over Benjamin Unruh, and here the failure of the international Mennonite community is clarified: we have failed to make a place for a man whose contribution has been enormous, because he "allied" himself with a movement that has captured the 20th century imagination as the incarnation of evil. And there was indeed a basis for Nazism having caught our imagination in that manner.

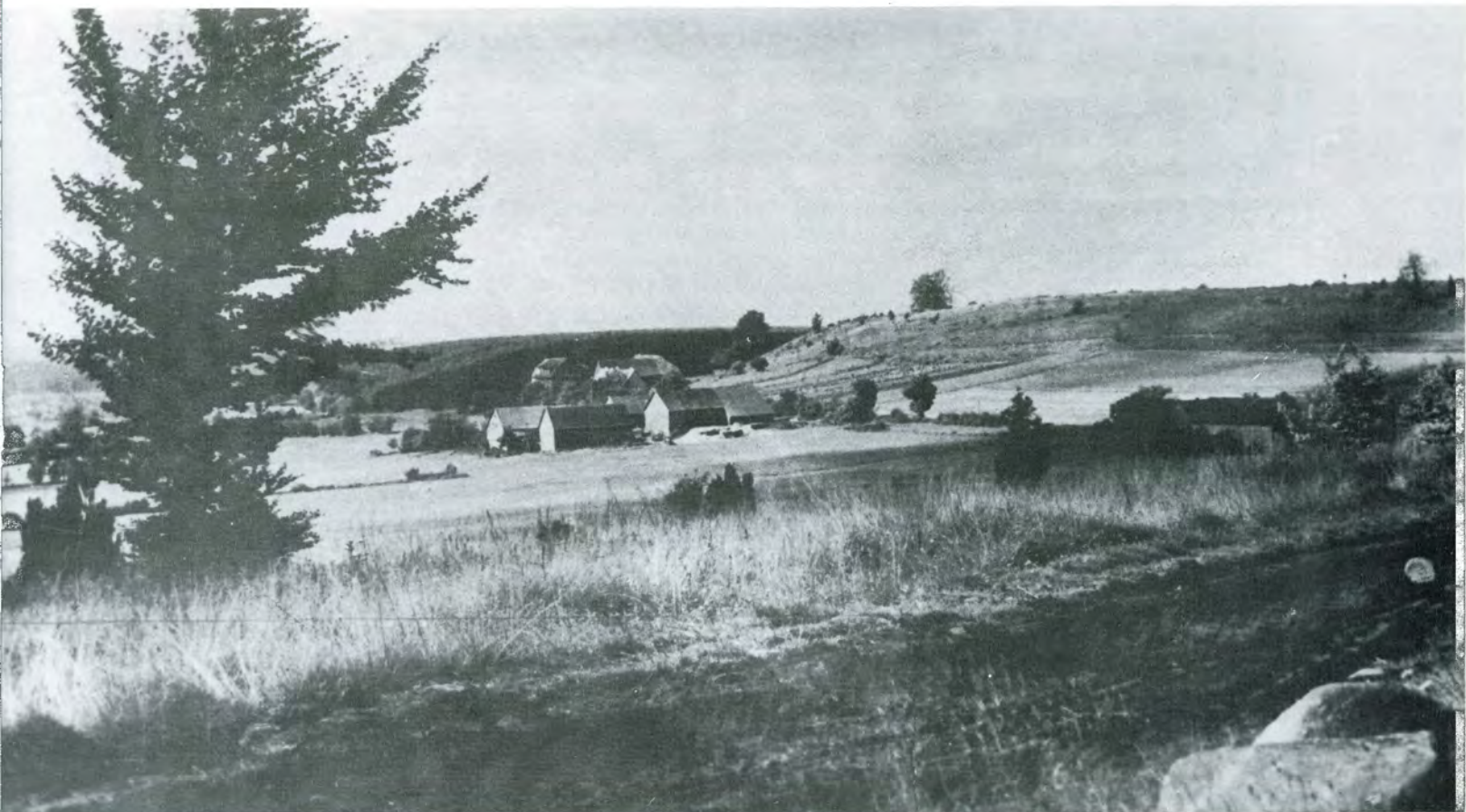
Many stood by Unruh, for both good and bad reasons. For those of us with a more critical perspective, it is not simply a question of whether or not to "stand by" such an individual, but neither do we have a coherent alternative. Perhaps it refers to a fundamental tension that has no clear resolution. As always, we are called to forgive, and forgive we must as a part of our own declaration of faith; but it is with equal conviction that we dare not forget. Have we really learned how to do both at the same time?

ENDNOTES

¹In addition to the *Vereinigung* there was the *Verband deutscher Mennonitengemeinden*, which was composed of German Mennonite congregations, most of which were located east of the Rhine in what is today Baden Wuerttemberg and Bavaria. These congregations should be examined separately, as they are distinguished by a stronger emphasis on pietism and a greater readiness to maintain distance from mainstream German culture. In addition, the *Konferenz sueddeutscher Mennoniten* linked south German congregations in the *Vereinigung* and the *Verband* with Alsatian Mennonite congregations.

²A striking contrast between German Mennonite and "German Hutterite" responses to the Third Reich was made by Hans-Juergen Goertz in "Nationale Erhebung und religioeser Niedergang: Missglueckte Aneignung des tauferischen Leitbildes im Dritten Reich," (*Umstrittenes Taaufertum 1525-1975*, edited by Hans-Juergen Goertz (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), p. 279. See also Dieter Goetz Lichdi, "The Story of Nazism and its Reception by German Mennonites," *Mennonite Life*, March 1981, pp. 24-31.

³Dieter Goetz Lichdi, *Ueber Zuerich und Wit-*



marshum nach Addis Abba: *Die Mennoniten in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Maxdorf: Agape Verlage, 1983), p. 162.

⁴Interview with Herbert Sorgius, ex-Rhoen-Bruderhof member, January 29, 1986, near Rotenburg, Germany. I have paraphrased Sorgius remarks; he recalled Arnold as telling his community members they must choose "either this way, or that way."

⁵This term draws on Ulrich Linse, *Zurueck, O Mensch, zur Mutter Erde: Landkommunen in Deutschland 1890-1933* (Munich: dtv, 1983).

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 268ff; Johannes Harder interview, Schluechtern, Germany, December 13, 1986.

⁷See Abraham Braun's obituary for Unruh in *Mennonitischer Gemeinde-Kalender*, 1961, pp. 16-24.

⁸*Mennonitische Welt-Hilfs-Konferenz vom 31. August bis 3. September 1930 in Danzig*, edited by Christian Neff (Karlsruhe: Verlag Heinrich Schneider, 1930), pp. 83-86.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 19-20; *Mennonitische Blaetter*, December 1929, p. 106; John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets & Mennonites* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1982), p. 133. The German government's funds enabled about 5,500 of the refugees to get to the west.

¹⁰Unruh to Pastor Kraemer, Krefeld, 30.4.37. *Geschaeftsfuehrung binder*, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Weierhof.

¹¹Unruh to die Kulturabteilung des Auswaertigen Amtes, z.H. des Herrn Legationsrats Dr. Kundt, 5.6.37. *Geschaeftsfuehrung binder*, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Weierhof.

¹²Introductory article by Emil Haendiges as the new editor, *Mennonitische Blaetter*, January 1927, p. 1.

¹³Emil Haendiges, "Zur Heimkehr der befreiten Volksgenossen ins Reich," *Mennonitische Blaetter*, October/November 1939, p. 65.

¹⁴Haendiges to Neff, Unruh, Crous and Braun, 5.10.37. *Geschaeftsfuehrung binder*, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Weierhof.

¹⁵See Paul Schowalter's obituary of Christian Neff, *Gemeinde-Kalender* 1951, pp. 17-21.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷Christian Neff, "Menno Simons in seiner Bedeutung fuer die Gegenwart," *Mennonitische Blaetter*, September 1935, p. 69.

¹⁸Neff to Gorter (a Dutch Mennonite leader), 7.24.37. Neff Correspondence files, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Weierhof.

¹⁹Neff to Haendiges, 5.19.37; note was included with a draft of "Eine notwendige Berichtigung," which explained the German Mennonite position and was published in the June 1937 issue of *Mennonitische Blaetter*. Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Weierhof.

²⁰Dieter Goetz Lichdi, *Mennoniten im Dritten Reich. Dokumentation und Deutung* (Weierhof: Schriftenreihe des Mennonitischen Geschichtsvereins Nr. 9, 1977), p. 87-92.

²¹Here I am only discussing the initial German Mennonite response to the dissolution of the Rhoen-Bruderhof. Controversy in fact became more heated, and German Mennonites had to reformulate their position, using stewardship norms as a legitimizing basis. I presented this analysis in "Linking 'Bread and Sweat' to Blut und Boden," presented at the "Anabaptist/Mennonite Faith & Economics: Breaking the Silence" Conference in Waterloo, Ontario, May 26, 1990. Conference results are due to be published.

The Rhoen-Bruderhof in 1933 or 1934.