Mennonites and World War II: Books in the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies

by Kevin Enns-Rempel

The following books in the Center’s library collection help to tell the story of the Mennonite experience in World War II. All may be checked out from the Center by anyone with a Special Borrower’s card (no charge to Historical Society members, $25 a year for anyone else).


North American Mennonites may forget that Mennonites found themselves on both sides of the struggle during the war. Bartel, a Mennonite living in Poland at the time of the war, joined the German Army in 1937 and fought on the eastern front until the war ended in 1945. He later migrated to Canada, where he still lives today. This book “traces the story of one man’s struggle to overcome guilt and become convinced that the way of peace is the only alternative to war.”


This collection of oral history interviews with fifteen men who served in CPS and two “CPS wives” documents the varied experiences of those who performed alternative service during the war. It includes accounts by members of historic peace churches as well as objectors from other religious, political and philosophical orientations.


This book is the single most complete account of the Mennonite Civilian Public Service program. It includes information on every CPS camp operated by Mennonite Central Committee during the war.


The decision to be a conscientious objector to the war fell more directly on men than on women, since only men were subject to military service. Goossen explores the ways in which women expressed their opposition to the war and performed alternative service even though not required to do so by the Selective Service program.


Hershberger focuses on how the “Old Mennonite” Church anticipated and responded to the challenges of the war, particularly in terms of conscription and alternative service. Though it focuses primarily on that one specific Mennonite group, the book also contains information pertaining to other Mennonite groups.


This brief and profusely illustrated book offers a basic overview of the many ways that CPS participants carried out their alternative service duties during the war.


For Mennonites still living in the Soviet Union, the war was a particularly difficult and often terrifying experience. In 1998 several thousand survivors of that experience gathered in Manitoba to share their stories and memories. Harry Loewen edited this collection of stories and photographs drawn from that event.


Edna Schroeder Thiessen was born in 1926 near Warsaw, Poland. This is her story of the war years and her subsequent flight from Poland through Germany to Saskatchewan.


The author, who was raised in a Mennonite community in Nebraska, recounts “the tedium and adventure, the drama and humor” of the CPS camps.


This novel, set in the Vistula River delta region of Poland, explores the ways in which Mennonites of that area responded to Hitler’s Third Reich.
The Swiss Mennonites who settled the mid-western and western communities did not come as groups, nor did they originate in one place. Some came from established communities in the east—Franconia, Lancaster, Virginia, or from one of the mid-western settlements. Others came directly from one of the south German states or from Switzerland. A guide to the genealogical resources at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies has recently been prepared. Compiled by Alf Redekopp, assistant archivist, the guide lists books, church registers, maps, diaries, obituary collections and also details the holdings of the large Katie Peters genealogical collection at the Centre. The guide has a name index of significant family collections. The barbarous practices of war had been in vogue in Europe as far back as one can trace, regardless of the advancement made along the lines of education and science. As a country excelled in one thing, its rival must excel in some other as a means of protection. Fear and jealousy were general. More and more military laws were being passed and it was becoming almost impossible for nonresistants to get exemption. Practically all the countries had some form of military training. In course of time thereafter, Mennonites and Amish, like their fellow Americans, came to the New World at different times and for different reasons, with different background, languages, and dialects. Along with other immigrant groups they eventually began to ask who they were as a people. Like others, they searched for identity and mission. And provincially, in fragments, they began to tell their stories. Now they see more and more that their separate Mennonite and Amish stories weave into one story which in turn is intertwined with national and world history.