

IN THIS ISSUE

In the fall of 1935, Harold S. Bender, founder of this journal and one of the most respected voices in the twentieth-century Mennonite Church, gave an interview to the *Goshen News-Democrat* shortly after returning from Heidelberg. "I went into Germany with serious doubts as to the ability and sincerity of Hitler," he said, "but I now am convinced that he is one of the great statesmen of our times." Bender went on to clarify that he did "not agree with his attitude toward the church and toward the Jews"; and he later vigorously condemned Hitler's policies. But in the mid-1930s what impressed Bender most was Germany's remarkable economic recovery.

Today, given what we know about the Holocaust and the devastation of World War II, Bender's assessment seems naïve, if not obtuse. Nonetheless, it serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing challenge of political and moral discernment, and the long arc of history's judgment.

This issue of *MQR* focuses on the Mennonite experience during the rise of National Socialism in Germany and its influence on Mennonites elsewhere, especially in Paraguay. We begin with an article by **Anthony Chvala-Smith**. Although his focus is primarily on the efforts of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to resist National Socialism, the essay serves as a helpful introduction to German Protestantism in the aftermath of World War I and the emergence of a distinct sense of German identity, captured in the complex meanings of *Volk*. Not least, Chvala-Smith reminds readers that resistance to Nazi ideology was indeed possible. **Benjamin Goossen** follows with a long introduction to a pamphlet by Karl Götz, a highly-regarded writer and member of the SS, that describes Mennonites from the perspective of the Nazi regime. Götz was particularly interested in the *Volksdeutsche*—ethnic Germans, like the Mennonites, who had settled outside of the Third Reich but might still be integrated in Hitler's new world order as racially pure Aryans.

In 1943, **Jacob Guenther**, a schoolteacher from the South Russian Mennonite colony of Chortitza, moved with his family and thousands of other refugees westward with the retreating German army. For a short time, they settled in what had once been Poland. But in January of 1945, Guenther was conscripted into the *Volksturm*, a ragtag defense force in East Prussia. For the following year, Guenther kept a diary of his activities, first as a soldier, then, following his capture by the Russian Army, as a prisoner of war. In this issue we include excerpts from that diary offering a firsthand account of one Mennonite soldier's wartime experiences.

These first three essays set the stage for a series of articles describing the experience of German-speaking Mennonites in Paraguay during the

Nazi era. Mennonites from Canada had first settled in the Paraguayan Chaco in the late 1920s in search of religious freedom. But during the decade of the 1930s, a growing number of refugees from Stalinist Russia also found a homeland in Paraguay, particularly in the colony of Fernheim. As the newly-established colony struggled for economic survival, cultural identity, and clarity of religious conviction, the influences of National Socialism took root.

In March of 2017, the Mennonite Historical Society of Paraguay sponsored a symposium to address openly the details and the legacy of those difficult years. In this issue of *MQR* we make four of those essays available in English translation. **Hans Theodore Regier** opens with a chronological overview of the growing tensions in Fernheim, which culminated on the night of March 11-12, 1944, in a violent confrontation among various groups in the colony center of Filadelfia. **Heinz Dieter Giesbrecht** traces the theological and ideological nature of the debate as it unfolded in Mennonite Brethren Church of Fernheim. His account also includes a description of a public process intended to heal the divisions, as well as some general reflections on the challenges of reconciliation. Then follow two essays by **Daniel Stahl**, a research associate at the University of Jena. The first situates the Paraguayan Mennonite story within the broader context of US-Latin American relations and the global struggle against fascism. Stahl argues that Mennonites became a focal point of US-Paraguay relations because the US government assumed that they were part of a larger National Socialist conspiracy and the crisis served to promote US interests in the region. In a similar way, Stahl offers a broader context for understanding the historiography of the events. In the decades following the division and reconciliation, colony leaders in Fernheim sought to control the historical narrative with a policy forbidding discussion of the Nazi era. Beginning in the 1980s, however, the globalization of Holocaust memory and the democratization of many South American states opened a new space for conversation, which inevitably extended to the Fernheim colony.

Finally, we conclude the issue with a response by **Volker Horsch** to an essay by Thomas Nauwerth published in the April 2017 issue of *MQR*. In that article Nauwerth sharply criticized Michael Horsch's actions following a Gestapo raid on the Rhön-Bruderhof community in the spring of 1937. Although we normally do not publish responses to articles, Volker Horsch's defense of the actions of his grandfather illustrate well how debates over charges of Mennonite complicity in the National Socialist regime continue to echo still today.

– John D. Roth, editor