

Peter P. Klassen. *Die deutsch-völkische Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, Chaco, Paraguay 1933-1944. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der auslandsdeutschen Mennoniten während des Dritten Reiches*. Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e. V., 2001. Printed by Imprenta Zamphiropolos, Asunción, Filadelfia, Paraguay, 1990. [The time of the German Volk in Fernheim Colony, Chaco, Paraguay 1933-1944. A Contribution to the History of Expatriate German Mennonites during the Third Reich]
Reviewed by Wilf Hein

Peter P. Klassen was born 1926 in the Chortitza Colony in South Russia. He was able to escape Bolshevism in 1931 when he immigrated with his parents via Germany to Fernheim Colony, Paraguay. Here he grew up and took up teacher's training. In 1953 he received a scholarship from Mennonites in North America, enabling him to continue his studies for two years in Switzerland and Germany.

In his well-researched book, *Die deutsch-völkische Zeit*, Klassen describes in detail the differences that existed among Mennonites in Paraguay with regard to their support of or opposition to the National Socialism of the Hitler regime. Writing in excellent German, Klassen clarifies the underlying causes of these great disparities and tensions in the Mennonite camp during the time of the Third Reich. Some Mennonites were interested in seeing how far they could go in supporting the National Socialism of Hitler's regime.

Klassen keeps the reader's interest high in wanting to know the outcome of these conflicts. He divides the Mennonites in the Chaco mainly into three groups:

- (a) *Die Mennonitengemeinde* (MG) who supported National Socialism (NS); they also called themselves *Völkische* (untranslatable; but loosely meaning "of the German people") Mennonites. Among the most influential people in this group were Dr. Fritz Kliewer and Professor Benjamin H. Unruh; the latter lived in Germany and corresponded with the Paraguayan Mennonites. Unruh was highly appreciated among the Mennonites because he had helped them come out of Russia and find a new home in Paraguay.
- (b) The Mennonite Brethren (MB) who were divided among themselves on the question of support or non-support of the Hitler regime.
- (c) The Evangelical-Mennonite Brethren (EMB), also called "pacifists" (*Wehrlosen*), or sometimes "conservatives" (traditionalists), who opposed the National Socialists and the *Völkische* group of Mennonites. People of influence belonging to this group were Nikolai Wiebe, Wilhelm Klassen, Gerhard Balzer and most MCC delegates and workers (44).

Reasons for supporting National Socialism and what some Mennonites said

The MG was thankful to their German "motherland" which helped them escape Bolshevism, took them up as refugees, and provided a new home for them in North- and South America.

The mayor (*Oberschulze*) in Fernheim, David Loewen, wrote, "We thank the Almighty that he brought the right men at the right time to our motherland who would stand against communism" (27). [translations by WH]

Nikolai Siemens wrote, "We thank our motherland for freeing us of slavery almost 12 years ago, accepting us and providing for us a new place to live" (80).

Unruh said, "We thank God that he gave the German nation the energetic leader Adolf Hitler who was able to erect a barrier against communism for all of Europe" (46).

The cultural achievements of the Russian Mennonites had been recognized in the highest military ranks within the Nazi regime. Alfred Rosenberg, the minister for the occupied eastern territories, expressed to Unruh his admiration for the Mennonites. Unruh wanted to utilize for the benefit of Mennonites the good connections he had been able to establish within the highest circles of the Third Reich (81).

Dr. Fritz Kliewer, who was a teacher at the *Zentralschule* (high school) in Schönwiese, held a talk under the theme “The Christian and His Nation” on July 3, 1941. In his speech he said that “nation” and “nationalism” are an order instituted by God and that Germans of the new Germany certainly also can be Christians (70). When Germany invaded Russia, Kliewer called for a public meeting in which he announced, “Europe’s people rose united under Germany’s leadership against the satanic power of Bolshevism. The Russian-born German-speaking Mennonites are aware that this battle is not only a test for Germany and Western Europe, but that it also includes the liberation of Russia and our brothers and sisters in Christ for whom we have prayed for such a long time.” The evening ended with prayer and a thanksgiving service (80).

The *völkische* Mennonites (MG) in Paraguay expressed their gratitude towards the new German nation by sending little bags of peanuts to all prominent leaders of the Nazi regime. Joseph Goering’s package arrived exactly on his wedding day. The people in Fernheim said the *Führer* should realize that there were also German hearts in the Chaco of Paraguay beating for him. They assured him that they were faithfully standing with him and his mighty nation (28).

The position of the Mennonitengemeinde on taking up arms

Fritz Kliewer wrote that the Mennonites in the Fernheim Colony were aware of the fact that they would have to give up their stand on pacifism in case of repatriation, and that they would be prepared to serve their nation and fatherland even if it meant for them to sacrifice their lives (84).

Many young males among the MG even signed a vow which stated, “I promise my allegiance and obedience to the *Führer* and the highest military commander of the German nation that I will be prepared to serve this nation as a brave soldier, and that I will keep my promise of committing my life to this cause” (41).

A possible resettlement to the Ukraine was in the talks

Dr. H. C. Buesing, who visited the Mennonite colonies in Paraguay in May 1938, wrote: “The ideal will be that the *Führer* will conquer the Ukraine. Then they [the Mennonites in Paraguay], who are experienced wheat-growers, would like to return to their familiar Russian soil, working for Germany’s food needs” (49).

SS *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler, who personally negotiated with Unruh, told him, “I had been in the Ukraine where I met the Mennonites and came to the conclusion that they are the best.” During this meeting the possibility of resettling the Russian Germans in the Ukraine had also been discussed (81-2).

Unruh advocates in his letters that the pacifist Mennonites should be included in the plan of the “Great German Reich in the East” (82).

Himmler believed that the pacifist standpoint of the Mennonites could be utilized by assigning them as “ambassadors of peace” to the Russian nation. A copy of his letter was forwarded to Hitler (83).

Opponents of the National Socialist regime

When the North American Old Mennonite missionary Elvin Snyder visited Paraguay, he presented a lecture against National Socialism. In it he mentioned that NS is worse than Bolshevism and called it “syphilis of the spirit.” This triggered a scandal, and some who did not agree with him left the meeting (71).

Other pacifists opposed to the NS group lost their peace-loving attitude for various reasons, armed themselves with sticks, whips and steel-cables, and beat up some of their “brethren in Christ” (*Glaubensbrüder*) who disagreed with them (114). It took many years until the deep rifts could be healed and forgiveness granted.

Conclusion

Peter Klassen’s book is a vivid, well-researched, and thought-provoking contribution to the story of the political tensions among Paraguayan Chaco Mennonites during the time of the Third Reich. It is recommended for those fluent in German – unfortunately the book has not been translated into English – who are interested in learning about the positions “peace-loving” Mennonites in Paraguay held during Hitler’s time.