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**Review of *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe-Russia-Canada, 1525-1980* By James Urry**

Benjamin W. Redekop  
*Kettering University, Flint Michigan*

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*Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe—Russia—Canada, 1525-1980.* By James Urry. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006. xv + 400 pp. Maps, photographs, figures, notes, index. \$55.00 cloth, \$27.95 paper.

For much of their history, Mennonites have tended to think of themselves as apolitical, quietistic folk—"the quiet in the land"—who eschew involvement in worldly affairs, especially those involving the use of any kind of "force," whether it be political, military, or even that of labor unions (such as strikes). Mennonite identity has been wrapped up in a biblical pacifism or "nonresistance" that goes back to the sixteenth century, and this has resulted in an often tense and ambiguous relationship with governments, as James

Urry documents in *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*. The book is a deeply researched and sprawling account of the Dutch/North German stream of Mennonites' political identity and involvement as they migrated from Holland to Prussia and on to Imperial Russia before coming to North America (Urry focuses on those who settled in Manitoba).

Part 1 is devoted to Mennonite political involvement in early modern Europe, which tended to take the form of seeking special privileges that allowed Mennonites to live in a relatively undisturbed fashion, yet without many rights. The narrative is full of historical detail and at times reads like a general history of European politics, as Urry strives to place Mennonites into their historical context. He documents Mennonites' evolving stance on government and their involvement in Dutch and German politics, including the Dutch "Patriot Movement" and the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848. Yet as Urry himself notes, "For 300 years or more, many Mennonite communities in Europe lived on the fringes of legality, outside the political system, and beyond the limited jural protections provided to the confessional subjects of early modern states."

Part 2 carries the analysis into nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russia, where the contours of Mennonite political involvement come into sharper focus, as Mennonites were able to gain privileges allowing them to create closed, essentially self-governing communities. Urry documents how, despite their relative autonomy, Mennonites were never really detached from the imperial government and bureaucracy, and over time they became increasingly enmeshed in the Russian social, political, and legal system. There was a Mennonite politics within Mennonite colonies, just as there was a profoundly political relationship between Mennonites and the larger Russian society and government. Urry's detailed account of Mennonite involvement in the tumultuous events of war and revolution shows how Mennonites tried, but were unable, to fashion a viable political identity for themselves as the old order collapsed and a new one, deeply

opposed to the very concept of special privileges, emerged.

Part 3 follows Russian Mennonite emigrants as they settled in the Canadian prairies and were faced once again with a changing political landscape. As in Russia, the rise of the modern nation-state and egalitarian politics, along with the challenges of world war, forced Mennonites to begin to come to terms with their essentially apolitical theological stance. It is one thing to eschew politics under authoritarian regimes, quite another when citizens have rights and duties that link them directly to the state. Urry describes how Mennonites (often the more politically astute "Russlaender" who came in the 1920s) first became involved in local politics, then moved on to the national level, even as the emerging "Mennonite vote" was often fragmented and unreliable for aspiring Mennonite politicians.

Limitations of space prevent an adequate discussion of the wealth of data and insights contained in the book, which at times becomes overwhelming. Thus the volume's strength is also its weakness: as an exhaustive compendium of Mennonites' political involvements and the wider political contexts in which Mennonites found themselves, it suffers at times from a lack of narrative focus and coherence, aided and abetted by the fact that Urry declines to specify what he means by "politics." Nevertheless, in the conclusion he nicely draws together many of the book's threads into a larger tapestry that belies its bombastic title, "The Loud in the Land." The story told in the book is actually much more subtle than that; but it is going to take greater attention to Mennonite intellectual and spiritual life (i.e., the history of ideas), and a clearer and more developed conceptual framework, to flesh it out.

BENJAMIN W. REDEKOP  
Department of Liberal Studies  
Kettering University, Flint Michigan