Mennonites and World War II:

The Catalyst of Urban Shift and Cultural Change

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During World War II, young Mennonites in Canada enlisted in large numbers for military service, as 12,318 of the 16,913 Mennonites, aged 15 to 35, enlisted into either military service or alternative service.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, more interesting is the number of men who voluntarily enlisted for military service by taking up arms, which was against Mennonite biblical teachings. The Mennonite leadership had negotiated with the national government, for an option to do alternative service, where they would work building national parks, fighting fires and lumbering, however many young men still enlisted in military service despite having an alternative option.[[2]](#footnote-2) 4,775 of the 12,318 Mennonites who enlisted during World War II chose military service over alternative service.[[3]](#footnote-3) The leadership of the Mennonite people and their communities were troubled by the young Mennonites eagerness to enlist, defying their biblical teachings of pacifism, which did not allow the taking up of arms and fighting in wars. Even though there was an option for men to opt for alternative service, they still enlisted in large numbers to fight on the battle lines in World War II.

The pre-war society of Mennonites in Canada was characterized by being an isolated, rural and agriculturally based people. However, a transition began in World War II, as there was a significant out migration of Mennonites towards urban Canada, away from their rural roots. Prior to the war in 1941, only 9% of the Mennonite people were living in urban centres, however by 1971 47% of Mennonites now lived in urban settings and only a quarter of them still farmed.[[4]](#footnote-4) The shift away from their traditional lifestyle, can be traced back to World War II and the enlistments. Nevertheless, historians such as T.D. Regehr[[5]](#footnote-5), caution people from saying that the distinct culture and heritage of the Mennonites was lost during shift to urban life, but rather Mennonites “adjusted to the modern world by accommodating as a group while still retaining their own identity, values and traditions.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Mennonites in the aftermath of World War II and the urban migration, reunited and redefined their culture through religion. The Mennonite enlistments in World War II was a catalyst[[7]](#footnote-7) that started the urban shift and a lifestyle change for many Mennonite people however, the Mennonite identity and heritage was not lost.

Pre-War Mennonites

In the years leading up to World War II, Mennonites were making small adaptions to their culture and lifestyles in order to keep pace with the changes going on internally. The internal problems and changes before World War II came to fruition during the War and are the beginnings of the massive changes to come in the years following. In order to understand the changes, some contextual information needs to be given on the culture that existed before the changes. The pre-war Mennonites’ foundational beliefs and culture is summed up well by Frank Epp, as he classifies the Mennonite culture into two different types of values. The first group of values revolved around their everyday lives, which needed to be rooted in their biblical teachings and beliefs. The other values that governed the Mennonites was their lifestyles and being separate from society, as they were non-conforming to society, had their own distinct language and they lived out rural and agricultural lifestyles. Geographic, language and social separation from the rest of Canada was essential to the Mennonites in order to minimize outside influence, however the 1930’s presented challenges to the separatism.[[8]](#footnote-8) All aspects of biblical teachings and lifestyle behaviors were beginning to change due to external influences from their Canadian neighbours around them. “For the present, it was clear that the Mennonites had to focus on new and accustomed ways of exercising their faith and citizenship.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The first group of values, based on religion was very important to the structure and livelihoods of the Mennonites. Mennonites’ beliefs aligned with the Anabaptist teachings, as they shared characteristics such as; the sinful nature of man and the need for repentance, the Bible being the only reliable guide to life and living out their religion day in and day out. Nevertheless, Mennonites most contentious and problematic theological belief was the “ethic of love and non-resistance”, “where they could not participate in self-defense, violent revolution or killing of other human beings, even in war.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The religious teaching and practice of pacifism had been problematic for Mennonites over the last 400 years, forcing relocations and new settlements in order to uphold their religious teaching of pacifism.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, leading into the Second World War pacifism was being challenged once again, as the call for soldiers to take up arms became a debated topic. Examining the Mennonites and World War II, their religious teaching specifically pacifism becomes the centerpiece of debate within Mennonite leadership and communities. Mennonites’ lives were intertwined with religion, which was and continued to be the foundation of the culture through the Second World War.

Reading a mainstream media inspection of the Mennonites’ lives illuminates the second set of Epp’s Mennonite values; lifestyle and the importance of separation. In the MacLean’s article from 1931, *The Western Mennonites,* Mennonites were described as a secluded people of peace and non-materialism, who lived modest lives as rural farmers.[[12]](#footnote-12) The education of young Mennonites was structured around learning basic rules of arithmetic and guarding children from all other forms of knowledge that would undermine the children’s faith, as the only textbook in the school was the Bible. “All they [Mennonites] ask is to be left alone to live their religion rather than talk about it.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Separation was an important facet of their lifestyles, just as much as farming and being spiritual. Their lives were defined as rural, agriculture and separate, however these identities would soon feel a major shift directly after the ending of World War II.

Entering into the time period of World War II, external influences were beginning to affect Mennonite communities in Canada, as the separation from other Canadians was becoming more difficult. Keeping young people faithful to the Mennonite ways was essential to preserving the culture, however the means of deeper isolation was no longer an option in the 1930’s. A new wave of Mennonites, who had emigrated from Russia during the early 1920’s, were challenging the old ways of the long-standing Mennonites in Canada. This wave of new Mennonites had a “desire for an education” and were eager to become Canadian, as they infused progressive ideas.[[14]](#footnote-14) These progressive ideals were changing old cultural habits, as young Mennonites were encouraged to leave their homes in order to pursue post-secondary opportunities not in defiance, but to better use their abilities. Certain Mennonites left to enhance their knowledge of agriculture or to further their English skills. These changes were inevitable, however some the foundational parts of Mennonite culture was still in place. Young people who went on to get a further education still stayed in their communities and brought back skills for the communities benefit.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, not all was good, as young Mennonites were being heavily influenced by their English neighbours.[[16]](#footnote-16) Youth were taking up the vices from the world around them; slang, swearing and smoking. “Unfortunately the young folks here as elsewhere are more apt to copy the vices rather than the virtues of their neighbours [non-Mennonites]”. The separation from the world was waning, the culture was changing and there was uncertainty amongst the leaders of the Mennonite people. The new generation of younger Mennonites was beginning to experience the outside world and be influenced by non-Mennonite values, which was causing tensions and changes in the traditional lifestyles of Mennonites.

The Mennonite population leading up the Second World War was still living as it had for decades before, but internal tensions and changes were starting. Young Mennonites were starting to be influenced by their English peers, but most were still mostly faithful to Mennonite lifestyles and biblical teachings. In 1941, 91% of the Mennonite people were still rural and most were farming as they had done since coming to Canada.[[17]](#footnote-17) Nevertheless, these internal struggles came to the forefront during World War II because of the massive enlistments by Mennonite men. Irreversible changes would be coming, as the biblical teachings of pacifism would be challenged, the farming and rural lifestyles would feel changes, however despite these cultural changes the Mennonite heritage would continue on.

World War II

World War II is an interesting event in Mennonite history because of the large voluntary military enlistment numbers when Mennonites were; pacifists and exempt by the government from having to take up arms. Despite being pacifist and being exempt from military service, 41% enlisted for military service over being a contentious objector and working in camps as a form of alternative service. 4,775 enlisted for military combat and 7,543 enlisted for alternative service. In total 12,318 Mennonites were thrust into military duties, which constituted roughly 72% of the Mennonite men between the ages 15 to 35.[[18]](#footnote-18) The Mennonite communities had been uprooted like the rest of Canada, taking away fathers, community leaders and much of the labour force, which left farms unattended and communities scrambling to re-order themselves.

The Second World War once again brought up the controversial religious teaching of pacifism, which has affected the Mennonite people everywhere they have went. In the wake of another World War, at a Mennonite Conference in 1937, the Mennonites stuck to their peace position. Over the last 150 years of immigration to Canada, Mennonites had negotiated terms that exempt them all from combat armed service. The establishment of such terms was important to the Mennonites, as it allowed them to continue their “ethic of love and non-resistance.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Mennonites would receive a certificate to protect them from such service. An example can be found in *That There Be Peace*, which states “Jacob H. Hildebrandt has been baptized and accepted as a member of the Mennonite church. He is exempted from Military Service by Oder-in-Council, dated August 13, 1873 exempting Mennonites from all forms of military service.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The protections that had been negotiated years previous were now coming under attack, as World War II was escalating and it was becoming clear that the War could drag on for some time, so the government needed more men and resources. The Government negotiated with the Mennonite leadership in order to negotiate terms on participation in wartime efforts.[[21]](#footnote-21) During the call from the government for Mennonites to help in the war-time efforts, Christian scholars such as Dr. Claris Silcox discussed the unbiblical teachings of pacifism and called on the Mennonites to help fight in the War. In his article, *The Case against Pacifism*, he stated pacifism as bad theology, explaining that God was not just loving but also a God of Justice and Law.[[22]](#footnote-22) The pressures mounting from both the government and the outside world forced Mennonites to compromise by having Mennonite men selected for alternative service but not military combat (but Mennonites could choose military service voluntarily).[[23]](#footnote-23)

Even though Mennonites had the option not to defy their pacifist beliefs and do alternative service, 4,775 Mennonite men enlisted for armed service. So why did 4,775 Mennonites choose armed service over the option to follow their culture and take the pacifist route? One would think that they were rebelling and challenging the Mennonite culture, however this was not the case. The Mennonite men who enlisted for armed service still had respect for their culture, but factors of nationalism, bad Mennonite leadership and previous experiences of military service before migration led to involvement. Historians like Regehr and Dirks in their articles never once speak of a youth rebellion against the institution as being a reason for enlisting. Regehr even states “some of them [young enlisted Mennonites] were desperately sincere members.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The enlistees were not inherently against the Mennonite culture as a whole, but were seeing logical reasons for helping their country in the fight. Three of the largest factors for enlistment need to be looked at in order to understand that the enlistment was not an attack on the culture and heritage of the Mennonites.

The leadership of the Mennonites were undetermined on how to react to World War II and the call by the government for enlisting Mennonite men. The leadership was unable to direct an understandable argument to the young Mennonites, leaving them in the dark and unsure how to respond. Their government and the society around them were refuting pacifism as a theologically sound idea and encouraging enlistment.[[25]](#footnote-25) Dr. Claris Silcox states ““they [Mennonites] must reject the philosophy of Pacifism as unworkable in the kind of world in which we live.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The Mennonite culture, as discussed previously, was being infused by other influences from English Canada and this was affecting how young Mennonites saw World War II. “Young Mennonites simply were not receiving adequate direction from their leaders on how to approach the service called of them by their government.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The divisions within Mennonite leadership, led to no practical responses for young Mennonites. The lack of sound decisive leadership gave young Mennonites no direction or a sense on what was right or wrong in terms of military service. So young Mennonites took matters into their own hands and came up with their own solutions, which sometimes meant taking up arms and enlisting.[[28]](#footnote-28) The young Mennonites were not intending to defy their culture because there was no clear distinction on what was or was not allowed for Mennonites, in regard to military enlistment.

The newest wave of Mennonite immigration came from Russia in the 1920’s, who had a different historical experience then other Mennonites. This wave of Mennonites were more progressively thinking than the older Mennonite groups in Canada,[[29]](#footnote-29) which also impacted the way they viewed pacifism. The new wave of Mennonites called Russlaenders, had been required to perform military service for Russia in 1870, which softened this group’s position on pacifism, allowing special cases in which you could take up arms.[[30]](#footnote-30) The normalization of military service by some Mennonite communities, helps make the case that most Mennonites were not intentionally trying to challenge the institution, rather their historical experiences shaped and softened their views on pacifism and taking up arms.

The final major factor for enlistment was nationalism and the wanting to thank Canada by enlisting. Jake Neisteter, a Mennonite man that enlisted and fought in the war explained his reasoning for enlisting, “how can you just accept all the good things about living in Canada, and then when they ask for help, you say, 'Sorry, I can't do that.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Undoubtedly Mennonites felt honoured and in debt to Canada for taking them in. Zado writes about the Russlaender Mennonites as wanting to be Canadian Citizens, as soon as possible.[[32]](#footnote-32) The enculturation and external influences that had been happening previous to the War, instilled Canadian nationalism. The want to protect and defend the country that had taken them in gave cause to some Mennonites for wanting to enlist, nevertheless the reason for enlisting is far from wanting to rebel against the values and traditions they grew up in.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The high number of voluntarily enlistments into the military service, was not to defy their Mennonite beliefs and traditions of pacifism, but rather enlisted due to a lack of leadership, historical involvement of military service and nationalism. The experiences outside the homes and the rejection of re-integration of Mennonite would lead to a cultural shift. However, Mennonite heritage continued after the war but the culture had to be adapted in the new landscape that the Mennonites lived in. Understanding that these men did not enlist out of defiance is important, as it explains the fondness of Mennonite heritage by these enlisting men, which helps preserve the culture through cultural changes to come after World War II. These men wanted to continue to be part of the Mennonite heritage even though their lives had changed.

Post War

Understanding that the military enlistments were not a challenge to the institution and the teachings of Mennonites and their pre-war culture, I can now show the changes that occur in the 50’s and 60’s to the Mennonites, as they adapted and re-invented their culture because of the enlistments in World War II. The reception of young enlisting Mennonites after World War II and the experiences outside of their traditional communities by both military servicemen and contentious objectors, led to an urban migration. The men who enlisted were changed by their experiences outside their communities, which in return affected both the communities they went back to or they migrated to the cities to start their new lives. However, the heritage was maintained, as an adapted Mennonite culture evolved due to a religious re-centering. The pre-war tensions of external influence from English Canadian society and traditional changes were speed up do to the happenings of World War II. The enlistments are to be seen as a catalyst to the changes that were happening before the war, as World War II only sped up the inevitable changes that were ongoing in the 1930’s.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Mennonite men that were either fighting in the armed service or working in camps as contentious objectors, began their journey back to their original communities, however their lives had been altered. The men who had defied the pacifism teachings (not out of defiance), were now returning to their homes, but met a disappointed community. Mennonite communities demanded they apologize for their wrong-doings and did little in the way of spiritual support. Most men could not meet the requirements made by their communities to rejoin, so “most were permanently lost.”[[34]](#footnote-34) As Jake Neisteter states “People shunned you.”[[35]](#footnote-35) The military men were forced to join the mainstream Canadian society, which mainly took them to the cities. Cities had veteran educational and civil re-establishment efforts that could help ease the transition into their new lives.[[36]](#footnote-36) The contentious objectors on the other hand were more welcomed back into Mennonite society, as they had upheld their peace positions, however the life experiences away from home had changed them. One man Dave Derksen, who had been in a British Columbia work camp states, “Our parents complained that we were so different. After CO [contentious objector] camp, most of the boys had changed completely... We had experienced a lot.”[[37]](#footnote-37) The outside world experiences made the transition back into their communities hard, as many eventually made their way into mainstream society or changed the communities that they re-integrated into. “These men had experienced much that was new and foreign to their home communities. Very few could return home unchanged, and they changed their home communities *if* and when they returned.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Both military and contentious objector’s lives had been changed and no longer fit into their old communities. The changes within the communities and the urban migration are the beginning of a new re-invented culture that would form during the 50’s and 60’s, which happened because of both the contentious objectors and military enlisters. In addition the outcast of military men and external experiences of men that did alternative service began the Mennonite shift to the cities.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Undoubtedly Canada’s had a rural to urban shift during the same time period, but the Mennonite case is special due to the size and the sharp change. In 1941 the Canadian rural percentage was at 46% and went down to 24% by 1971. The decline had been happening at a consistent rate since the turn of the century.[[40]](#footnote-40) On the other hand, Mennonites had seen a sharp decline in rural population that started in 1940’s and was more rapid than the rest of Canada. In 1941, the rural population made up 91% of the total Mennonite population in Canada, and by 1971 it was down to 52.8%. Leading up to World War II, little to no urban shift had been made, but directly after the war a sudden, drastic shift happened in the direction of cities.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The out casting of military men and contentious objectors seeing life different, led to the urban shift, and also altered the Mennonite culture. Nevertheless, Mennonite heritage and culture continued but was re-invented, as the heart of the new Mennonite culture would be religion. The previous culture that could be defined simply as rural, agriculture, isolated and spiritual was taking on a new image, as the Mennonite lifestyles were changing.[[42]](#footnote-42) The isolation and rural identities were being torn apart as more and more of the Mennonite population was entering the cities. The agriculture lifestyles were also changing, by 1971 only 29.8% of Mennonites were rural farmers.[[43]](#footnote-43) The previous Mennonite identities were being made obsolete, needing a new re-invented culture based on other ideals, such as religion. Religion had been a focal point of the Mennonite culture, but became more vital and the centerpiece when all other identities and values were no longer true. Religion brought Mennonites together and became the unifying factor and the centerpiece of their culture. Even though the peace-position had been highly debated and challenged throughout World War II, all other major biblical teachings were continued to be upheld and seen as important.[[44]](#footnote-44) After World War II between the years 1940-1960, more churches had been planted than the entire period before the war.[[45]](#footnote-45) The beginning of Mennonite Christian post-secondary bible schools also arose in the years after the War.[[46]](#footnote-46) Institutions were growing and rising in order to refocus and preserve the heritage of Mennonites and grow the new culture which was intertwined with Christianity. The focus of the Mennonite culture by then had centered on a united religion, which was further fostered by new Mennonite churches and post-secondary bible schools. Even though the Mennonite culture was changing due to the Second World War and the urban shift, the Mennonites renewed their heritage and culture, which revolved around their religious beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

Mennonites in World War II, can be seen as a catalyst for the changes that occurred after the war. Before the Second World War, the Mennonites were an isolated, rural, agricultural and spiritual people that were starting to experience changes and tensions. The experience of World War II was the catalyst not the roots, as there were rumblings before the war. Nevertheless, World War II brought those tensions out and made them larger and sped up the inevitable changes caused by external inference. The high enlistment rates into military service and contentious objectors, allowed men to experience a new world, which changed the landscape of the Mennonite culture. The enlistment of Mennonites was not out of defiance but out of confusion, historical military experience and nationalism. Enlisting for others reasons then defiance became important in uniting the Mennonite culture after the War, as most young Mennonites were still fond of their Mennonite heritage. Even though many men were out casted from their communities, men still felt the connection to their heritage. The urban shift and redefining of Mennonite identities led to the re-defining of the Mennonite culture, which revolved around religion. The Mennonites that had left their homes during World War II, experienced a new world that led to major changes that occurred in the years following the war, however the changes re-invented the Mennonite culture.

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