CHAPTER ONE

Viewing German Nationalism from the Bottom Up

In the 1880s a popular nationalist melodrama of the Prussian stage was Ernst von Wildenbruch’s *Der Menonit*, which portrayed a particular religious minority in the Vistula Delta as cowardly traitors. This group of strict pacifists, the Mennonites, grew out of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement. In the German Empire their largest settlement was near Danzig/Gdańsk. Wildenbruch’s play, set in this area, accused them of opposing the national cause in 1813 during the decisive final phase of the Napoleonic wars. Although its setting was historical, the play resonated with audiences at the founding of the second German Empire because its main themes captured three key threats to Protestant and Prussian conceptions of German national identity: subversion of the nation due to disloyalty in the borderlands, seditious religious difference, and disorder in the family. The two main Mennonite characters, Reinhold, a farm boy, and Maria, the congregational leader’s daughter, overcame all of these temptations to declare in word and deed that their highest loyalty was to Germany, not their religion or their family.
Reinhold’s conversion from pacifist Mennonite to Prussian soldier, along with Maria’s support, was, of course, only fictional. Wildenbruch based his play, however, on a historical couple, David and Maria van Riesen, both of whom had been members of the Mennonite community of the Vistula Delta. David defied Mennonite religious scruples against participation in warfare and in 1813 abandoned his wife and family in order to join the fight against the French for reasons that can no longer be completely reconstructed. Beginning in 1772, when much of the area was seized by Prussia, Mennonites made considerable efforts to avoid Prussian military service. This struggle included excommunicating recalcitrant members like van Riesen. In this case his wife supported the church’s decision by refusing to accept him back as a husband when he returned from fighting. David van Riesen complained to the government that this action amounted to church interference in his private affairs. The resulting court case was finally resolved in 1818 by the High Court in Berlin in favor of Maria and the Mennonites, freeing them from the obligation to support or even become soldiers. Sixty years later, however, all Mennonites remaining in Prussia had changed their stance and accepted military service in some form, becoming German soldiers, in many cases quite enthusiastically. Although Wildenbruch got many of the details of van Riesen’s story wrong, like millions of other Europeans the Mennonites of the Vistula Delta did in fact make the passage in the nineteenth century from national indifference to national loyalty, as their ecclesiastical identity was dissolved by the growing possibility of individual choices and was eventually subordinated to a national identity.

The transformation of indifferent peasants into glowing nationalists, exemplified by Reinhold and Maria in Wildenbruch’s play, fascinates historians of nationalism as much as it tantalized Prussian theatergoers in the early Kaiserreich. How did concern for and identification with the nation spread from educated elites to the masses? Is manipulation by elites, emancipatory activism by the masses, or some interactive arrangement between the two the more helpful model for understanding the process?

This book argues that both “push” and “pull” factors transformed the Mennonites of provincial Prussia into German nationalists. A cen-
tury of persistent and diverse governmental and social pressure impelled Mennonites to give their highest loyalty to the nation. The government politicized family matters by tightly regulating Mennonites’ property and inheritance rights and by circumscribing whom they could marry. At the same time more and more Mennonites gradually sought participation in the German nation in order to share in its social, cultural, economic, educational, and military achievements. In the end the majority chose to join the German nation, suggesting that nationalism, in fact, had tremendous appeal to outsiders. Mennonites calculated or felt that they had much to gain by joining German society. Their choice discounts notions that nationalism was manipulated or constructed by elites without regard to the interests of common people. Yet in making this choice they literally rewrote centuries-old confessions of faith to make soldiering acceptable. Military service was the lynchpin of the various connections to the nation, and the Mennonites’ experience documents how becoming soldiers became a necessary precondition to joining the German nation—necessary, but not sufficient, as the historical experience of the Jews would show.1

For at least two reasons the Mennonites of the Vistula Delta offer a unique perspective on the dissemination of nationalist thinking. As a religious community completely separate from the government, they maintained an autonomous leadership structure. The records produced by Mennonite leaders about congregational life furnish a modest, yet valuable source of insight into the thought world of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century farmer-preachers. In addition, given the family and communal nature of Mennonite congregations, these accounts provide insight into the decisions made in and by families as they struggled to respond to social and cultural changes. As researchers of nationalism have lamented, the recorded thoughts of this stratum of society are woefully few.2

A second facet of Mennonites’ value to a study of nationalism is the way in which their religious scruples against military service directly challenged the most important application of nationalism’s highest creed. Starting with Ernst Gellner’s definition of nationalism as “a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent,”3 Eric Hobsbawm argues that, at least in the
extreme case of war, loyalty to the polity that represents the national unit must become the highest priority for members of a nation.\textsuperscript{4} Historian Dieter Langewiesche sees ultimate loyalty to the nation as the single principle that sets modern nationalism apart from all of its early modern precursors.\textsuperscript{5}

\textit{Building National Identity from Below}

One way to understand nationalism is to view this phenomenon as a response to the social and political crises of modernity. As Gellner has argued, the adaptations necessary to move from an agrarian society to an industrial one swept away “deep barriers of rank, of caste or estate.”\textsuperscript{6} According to Gellner this process of social transformation required homogeneity in order to proceed. Industrialization created a conformity that “eventually appears on the surface in the form of nationalism.”\textsuperscript{7} For Gellner social structures alone explain, indeed require, the emergence of nationalism.

Many criticisms have been leveled against this argument in which modernity alone carries the freight of explaining nationalism. Perhaps nationalism shaped modernity more than it responded to it.\textsuperscript{8} Gellner’s model ignores obvious counterexamples from eastern Europe, where ideas of the sovereignty of the nation in Poland, for example, predated “modernization” by two centuries.\textsuperscript{9} Finally, such “instrumentalist” understandings of nationalism, as Anthony Smith calls them, ignore the links between nations and the long-standing cultural communities that constitute the rallying point and boundary of most nationalisms.\textsuperscript{10}

The question of whether the nationalism under study here is German or Prussian appears vexing. The analysis that follows, however, deliberately downplays competition between German and Prussian “nationalisms” since, as Abigail Green has argued, the former starts out largely as cultural and the latter is a particular case of typical German state-building exercises of the time. The confrontation between cultural and state identity is thus not precisely head-to-head. The key question remains the transference and especially the prioritization of these loyalties to state and nation along with those to religion, family, and region. Mennonites, along with most other Germans, did a lot of
rerearranging in these areas in the nineteenth century. Green suggests
that the shift from regional or state political loyalty to the German na-
tion, while never fully completed, was also less than traumatic because
state loyalty and loyalty to a national culture started out on two differ-
ent planes.11

An additional problem becomes apparent as soon as the ques-
tion shifts to how the nation emerged as the primary object of loyalty
among the lower strata of society. Given the structural onslaught of
industrialization, what agency, if any, do farmers and teachers, artisans
and preachers retain?12 This tension is often described as the difference
between official—meaning state-sponsored—nationalism and popu-
lar nationalism—that is, the version(s) of a national identity to which
the lower strata of society lend their highest loyalty. Hobsbawm and
George L. Mosse, for example, have attempted to explain the growth
of nationalism by viewing the spread of popular nationalism as a multi-
faceted endeavor that competed for the loyalty of the masses.13 Such a
perspective restores a measure of agency to people in the lower strata
of society.

Allowing that those at the bottom of society shaped their own
variations of national identity presupposes certain limits on what can
emerge. A national identity devised by the masses must be constructed
out of materials at hand in their culture. This approach requires a
more detailed examination of the daily concerns of ordinary people
than is possible in sweeping summaries of nationalism such as the one
Benedict Anderson offered.14 The categories of everyday life such as
language, family, religion, ethnicity, and work can at most be carefully
realigned by an emerging national identity, but not created ex nihilo.15
A useful image for this process is to think of groups using cultural
“building blocks” to construct a national identity in the vortex of so-
cial, economic, and political pressures that provide both the means
and necessity to do so.16

Picturing the construction of a national identity as the simultane-
ous work of many groups and strata in society using the cultural build-
ing blocks available to them provides a helpful conception of how na-
tionalism functioned differently for diverse groups. This model leaves
the composition of, in this case, German national identity open ended
and multifaceted in the nineteenth century, a stance that better matches
the historical records available to us. Various groups in German society, once they acquiesced to the core value of ultimate loyalty to the nation which was represented by military service, felt they could accept or reject other parts of the national identity package. The perspective that national loyalty need have absolute priority only in times of war suggests how groups with high commitments to other worldviews, such as Catholics and Socialists, could nonetheless see themselves as complete and loyal Germans. They agreed to rally to the nation whenever they perceived it to be threatened, but otherwise pursued the construction of a Catholic or Socialist vision for Germany. Of course, people who understood their own identity to be solely a German national one found this type of hyphenated nationalism quite threatening.

By 1880 Mennonites in the Vistula Delta had developed their own customized version of German national identity. They accommodated their traditional religious teachings to a new commitment that gave the demands of the nation, as embodied in the state, the highest priority. This shift did not mean a simplistic substitution of nationalism in place of religion, as some theories have posited. The evidence suggests rather that for many Mennonites, accepting a German national identity was a commitment made alongside those already held to family, neighbors, congregation, work, and region. Instead of defining their total identity, their loyalty to the nation came to accompany their lives, taking absolute precedence only in times of national crisis and war. Their multiple identities thus remained in flux.

Shifting the focus of understanding nationalism to a lower stratum in society accordingly shifts our perspective on the mechanisms of its dissemination. Investigating how Mennonites came to adopt a German national identity highlights five aspects of this process, each of which offers deeper insights into the question of how and why common people embraced nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe. These aspects form the main categories of investigation for this work:

1. How official or state-sponsored nationalism was actually formulated and the impact it had
2. The foundational link between the ideology of universal conscription and the modern nation-state
3. The pressure that popular nationalism put both on the state and on those who did not conform to its expectations
4. The way theological concepts shaped Mennonites’ acceptance or rejection of a national identity
5. The reach of the official and popular nationalism into the family unit

Early in the modern period nationalisms crystallized around strong institutions and particularly around state institutions. Although state-building efforts of the eighteenth century were not justified on nationalist terms, according to historian John Breuilly they created “the political context within which nationalism could develop.” The growth of monarchical power was the goal of state building in early modern Europe. The centralization this project required brought the state via taxation and conscription directly into the lives of its subjects. As local authorities lost power to the center, the state gained in esteem. Enhanced state power was then turned to meet the military threats of other states. The political context of state building meant that the qualities a state valued in its subjects—willingness to pay taxes and to fight—became guidelines for good citizenship as well.

The Prussian government’s effort to make useful subjects out of the Mennonites offers numerous examples of how state action in the nineteenth century affected the Mennonite community. Most powerful were the Prussian restrictions on Mennonite property rights, which lasted from the 1770s to the 1870s. Mennonites could avoid these restrictions at any time by accepting liability for military service. The government’s Mennonite policy served, therefore, as steady pressure designed to mold Mennonites into better subjects and citizens from the state’s perspective.

The encounter between the Prussian state and Mennonites, however, shaped the state itself in surprising ways as well. The presence of Mennonites forced all levels of the Prussian state to prioritize the commitments expected from subjects and citizens. The fact that individuals within the Prussian bureaucracy over the course of one hundred years repeatedly clashed with each other over Mennonites’ place in the state highlights how even state-sponsored nationalism was rife.
with internal conflicts. Mennonites, for example, fit reasonably well into a mercantilist, absolutist society, but once Prussian state officials attempted to speed the transformation of subjects into citizens, they disagreed as to whether Mennonites were valuable as prosperous taxpayers or valueless because they refused to serve in the military.

Second, the linkage among benefiting from, belonging to, and defending the nation was accepted and propagated by governmental bureaucrats, liberal politicians, and the Mennonites’ neighbors. The ideology of universal conscription and the sovereignty of the nation created a dynamic in social interactions and in politics that forced Mennonites to think repeatedly about their own place in the nation but especially during times of war. Important political theorists of the twentieth century have found this issue of the state’s response to national enemies to lie at the very heart of our modern social order. This question’s most pressing form—military service—played a crucial role in realigning Mennonite priorities to accept a national identity. The role of military service and warfare in forming national identity has, in fact, only recently become an important topic of historical investigation. Mennonites’ refusal to serve in the Prussian military was one prominent thread that ran through the entire nineteenth century, regardless of whether the predominant mode of recruitment was to hire mercenaries or to conscript.

Different theorists of nationalism agree that nationalism sets loyalty to the nation as the highest priority, and willingness to fight, or at least die, for the nation as the most powerful proof of that loyalty. Given the centrality of war to nationalism, the lack of theoretical attention in the past to the role of conscription, military service, and the experience of warfare in the development of nationality identity is quite striking. Hagen Schulze’s classic account The Course of German Nationalism, for example, deals only sparingly and indirectly with the relationship between military service and the development of German national identity. Although Schulze’s emphasis on cultural developments in German society is surely not wrong, it is also not complete.

The paucity of sources created and preserved from the lower stratum of society admittedly complicates the task of the historian in uncovering exactly how attitudes toward military service and national
identity were interrelated. Linda Colley has located such sources for Great Britain in the Defense of the Realm questionnaires of 1798 and 1803, and argued that military service during the Napoleonic wars was foundational to British national identity. Some historians of France have argued the opposite, citing widespread and popular draft-dodging techniques that lasted well into the nineteenth century as proof that military service did not play a major role in spreading French national identity. The limited investigations on this matter in German historiography suggest that military service had a mixed impact on ordinary soldiers’ attitudes toward the ultimate priority of national identity.

Studying Mennonites’ initial resistance and later embrace of military service will not answer the broader question about how everyday military affairs shaped Germany. The Mennonite experience does suggest, however, that the issue of military service must be placed closer to the center of investigations into the construction of German national identity.

Insight into the role of popular or “from-the-ground-up” ideas about national identity comes from the reactions of non-Mennonites to governmental policies concerning Mennonites. Many non-Mennonites disagreed with the exceptional standards for property rights, taxation, and military service by which the Prussian government considered the Mennonites to be adequate, if different, subjects or citizens. The power of nationalism derives from its ability to emancipate subjects from the categories assigned to them, lifting them as citizens to the status of sovereign people. The government’s determination to assign Mennonites to special categories implied a right to create such categories, a power nationalism reserves for the people. Mennonites’ neighbors insisted at first via petitions and later by voting patterns that the government was wrong to consider Mennonites who would not serve as adequate Prussians or Germans. The revocation of Mennonites’ military exemption in 1867 was due in part to their neighbors’ pressure to change government policy. In the process the very definition of what constitutes a full citizen was altered, demonstrating the power of popular nationalism to shift official versions of national identity.

Fourth, pushing the examination of nationalism down the social ladder in nineteenth-century Germany elevates the importance
of religion. Particularly historians of Germany working in the United States have highlighted in recent decades the centrality of this category to German society and examined its impact on nationalism specifically. A few historians in Germany have traced out the important linkages between Protestantism and nationalism. In general, however, historians have not paid enough attention to the diversity within Protestantism and especially the meaning of Protestantism to non- or less intensively practicing church members. Precisely the creation of a nondogmatic and noninstitutional cultural Protestant identity in the nineteenth century opened a space for Mennonites to join the German nation as Protestants, albeit of a slightly different sort. Linda Colley has demonstrated how Protestant identity broadly defined was foundational to the emergence of a British national identity. A history that would link liberal Protestantism, “Old” Catholics, and Reform Judaism together as important and similar disseminators of a German national identity has yet to be written. The experience of the Mennonites suggests, however, that shifting religious commitments helped to create both the space for a national identity and the need to fill that space. Mennonites’ embrace of Protestant rationalist or pietist identities thus eased and preceded their acceptance of a German national identity.

Finally the dramatic changes in the Mennonite community of the Vistula Delta illustrate the intimate relationship between nationalism and families. The state targeted Mennonite family relationships as the most vulnerable location to apply its pressure. For example, until the 1870s Prussian law prohibited non-Mennonite husbands from converting to their Mennonite wives’ faith. In addition to state dictates on whom they could marry, early in the nineteenth century Mennonite women of the Vistula Delta were temporarily refused inheritance rights because their men rejected military service. This restriction launched the largest single wave of Mennonite migration out of Prussia. After 1800 children of any marriage between a Mennonite and a non-Mennonite could not legally be raised as Mennonites. Taxation in support of the state Protestant church increased Mennonite costs for making a living and for burying their dead. The pressure to conform was diverse and persistent.
In this context it is also important to note that the impact of military service was not limited to males. Women were also directly affected by the recruitment of soldiers to defend the nation. Although men’s and women’s spheres and abilities were strictly divided in the nineteenth century, German women were actors in constructing a German national identity, including its martial aspects. In addition, in the first half of the nineteenth century gender issues surrounding marriages between various religious groups generated an explosive political controversy. Despite the scarcity of sources, examples such as the case of Maria van Riesen or the state’s targeting of women’s inheritance rights in 1801 in order to force Mennonite men into the military demonstrate that women clearly had a high profile in directly influencing their religious community’s decisions about military service and national identity.

**Delineating Mennonite Adoption of a German National Identity**

Mennonites adopted a German national identity over a long span of time for complex reasons that included new intellectual and theological stimuli, participation in German culture and politics, economic pressure, changing marital patterns, altered modes of association with non-Mennonite neighbors, and shifting demands from outside the community about how Mennonites should acculturate to German society. The impact of some of these forces, especially inheritance policies, the selection of marriage partners, and education, can be measured only over generations. Mennonites as a group in fact did not fully identify with the Prussian and German states until they had lived under the Hohenzollern scepter for over one hundred years. Thus the time period for this study of the formation of German national identity among Mennonites is the first century after their incorporation into the Prussian state beginning in 1772.

The Prussian state furnished the first and the most persistent pressure on the Mennonite community to become loyal subjects and citizens; the documents that explain the formation of the state’s Mennonite policy are therefore of primary importance. These records are
preserved in Prussian state and regional archives and illustrate how bureaucratic decisions sought to shape popular nationalism and were in turn shaped by it.

The Mennonite response to state pressure and later to their neighbors’ anti-Mennonite attitudes is preserved in documents generated mostly by the Mennonite leadership. Diaries and chronicles of Mennonite elders constitute the most important sources for understanding Mennonite perceptions of Prussian society. The chronicles list many details of congregational life related to weekly sermon texts and preaching assignments. Sometimes, however, an entry begins, “After the service the brothers were called together.” Detailed descriptions of church discipline proceedings, congregational business meetings, and reports from regional leadership meetings follow, providing invaluable evidence of lay reaction to and participation in shaping official Mennonite positions. The governmental archives themselves contain several official Mennonite petitions not recorded in the elders’ chronicles, along with a smattering of submissions from lay Mennonites. The most significant example of the latter is the petitions in the Prussian Secret State Archives signed in the 1860s by hundreds of Mennonites. Finally, anti-Mennonite petitions submitted to the government by the Mennonites’ neighbors exemplify the social pressure to conform that Mennonites faced.

This study of a religious minority’s adoption of a German national identity has implications for understanding some of the major themes of German history. It reveals how a web of military, religious, and economic connections shaped the policies of the Prussian government. The inhabitants of the Vistula Delta, Mennonite and non-Mennonite, in turn responded to these policies as one piece. Given that non-Mennonites repeatedly complained about Mennonites for economic, military, and religious reasons all in the same petition and that the government’s Mennonite policy linked these areas consistently together as well, arguments for the primacy of any one of these elements in German history sound one-sided. Attention not to the hierarchy of but to the relationships between domestic and foreign policy, Alltagsgeschichte, and political history is the more fruitful approach to understanding how Mennonites came to think of themselves as Germans.
The history of Mennonites in Germany also casts doubt on the proposition that the nation as whole was on a “special path” of development divergent from European norms. Mennonite developments, for example, belie the essentialist assumption of the Sonderweg thesis. Mennonites of the northwest developed in a manner similar to that of Mennonites in the Netherlands and felt more affinity with Mennonites there than with their coreligionists in the Prussian east or German south. Mennonites of the Vistula Delta were linked more to the Mennonite community in Russia until the 1870s. Despite their common history in Germany, Mennonites evolved along contrasting paths, underlying the open, not the “special,” path of German development in the nineteenth century.

Attention to Mennonite history also undermines easy assumptions about Germany’s divergence from European norms. The German Empire, for example, instituted broad-ranging liability for military service at the same time as both the Russian and Austrian empires. Mennonites from all three empires in the 1870s in fact coordinated their efforts to migrate to the United States in response to the introduction of conscription in those countries. To Mennonite traditionalists, Germany appeared no different from other European countries in placing the obligation to serve in the military above respecting religious freedom.

This study does demonstrate how the meaning of German national identity shifted from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, requiring careful attention to developments in each time period. At the same time, certain themes such as taxation, property rights, military service, marriage, and family recur in various forms throughout the hundred-year time span.

The following chapters therefore trace the Mennonite adaptation of an evolving German national identity both chronologically and thematically. Chapters 2 through 4 break the time period 1772–1818 into three discrete eras, each marked by different types of social pressures on Mennonites. The three decades of relative political stability after the Napoleonic era made Mennonite interaction with neighbors and the varieties of Prussian Protestantism more important and thus serve as the focus of chapter 5.
During the revolutionary era of 1848 the Frankfurt National Assembly clarified that Mennonites’ freedom of religion must take a back seat to their national duties and the performance of military service. Chapter 6 demonstrates how a much broader public now took note of the Mennonites’ presence in Germany. In the aftermath of 1848 the status quo is restored in Mennonite policies as in much else in Germany, but as chapter 7 details, individual Mennonites begin to participate more broadly in the Prussian education system and to marry across confessional boundaries in defiance of the law and congregational expectations, making Mennonite families once again the focus of the struggle over Mennonite and German national identity. Chapter 8 outlines how the wars of German unification in the 1860s ended Mennonite exceptionalism as they achieved full civil rights and began serving in the military. This process, however, split the Mennonite community into several different squabbling factions. In chapter 9 the wider connections of the Mennonite story for the new German Empire are examined. Mennonite traditionalists who refuse to accept the new arrangements are hauled through the court system under the May laws of the anti-Catholic *Kulturkampf*. At the same time the Mennonite struggle either to fit into or escape from the new German nation so dramatically captured the pathos of the moment that two important writers of the early *Kaiserreich*, Ernst von Wildenbruch and Theodor Fontane, appropriated their story in opposing ways to highlight the fragile and problematic nature of an emerging German national identity.