Mennonites, Amish, and the American Civil War
By James O. Lehman and Steven M. Nolt

In the past few years the religious aspects of the American Civil War have become the subject of considerable interest. Harry S. Stout and Mark A. Noll have explored the war’s theological and moral dimensions, and William Lee Miller has reminded us that Abraham Lincoln is one of the most profound moralists and ethicists that the United States has ever produced. James O. Lehman and Steven M. Nolt take this discussion in a somewhat different direction, examining the dilemma of German sectarians who lived in both Union and Confederate territory and were committed to nonviolence, pacifism, and antislavery. The authors’ conclusions hold some surprises.

In 1860, American Mennonites and Amish, numbering about forty thousand, shared a common theological ancestry reaching back to seventeenth-century Switzerland and Rhineland Germany. But they were divided into an almost incomprehensible welter of sects and persuasions that reflected different dates of migration to the United States and different responses to modernity. Most, however, shared a sense of separation from the larger world, based on preservation of German language and folkways and a sense that they were called to be separate from “the world.” Nevertheless, when the war came, Mennonites and Amish had to respond, and Lehman and Nolt find considerable diversity in their responses. Many were voters, and one of the authors’ most fascinating findings is that Amish and Mennonite voting tended to reflect that of their neighbors. For example, Amish and Mennonites in Holmes County, Ohio, which became notorious for violent resistance to emancipation and the draft, tended to vote Democratic. In contrast, those in LaGrange County, Indiana, a Republican stronghold, voted Republican. Similarly, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, Mennonites in Augusta County, which went strongly for John Bell in 1860, were unionist. Neighboring Rockingham County, however, less strongly unionist, was home to some Mennonites who actively supported the Confederate cause.

Most Amish and Mennonites tried to remain true to pacifist convictions and refused military service. Unlike the Quakers, who saw hiring substitutes or paying commutation fees as a compromise of principle, Amish and Mennonites did so without complaint. They were not reluctant to use ties with politicians like Pennsylvania Representative Thaddeus Stevens to their advantage, or to remind such politicians that the
Amish and Mennonites represented a potentially critical voting bloc in the closely divided states of Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. The experiences of Virginia Mennonites were more difficult. Suspicions of Union sympathies dogged them, but when Union General Philip H. Sheridan devastated the Shenandoah Valley in the autumn of 1864, Mennonites suffered as much as their pro-Confederate neighbors. Some young men even departed from the faith, enlisting in the Union army in a number of cases, and, in a few others, fighting for the Confederacy as well.

This is an impressive work in every way: gracefully written, broadly researched, careful and measured in its conclusions. It is likely to become the definitive work on its subject.

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