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NOW TOO MUCH FOR US: GERMAN AND MENNONITE
TRANSNATIONALISMS, 1874-1944

by

John Phillip Robb Eicher

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in History in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

August 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Professor H. Glenn Penny
Professor Elizabeth Heineman

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the PH.D. Thesis of

John Phillip Robb Eicher

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in History at the August 2015 graduation.

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Royden Loewen

For Julia, my one love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have accrued an embarrassment of riches through an embarrassment of debts, far too many to be acknowledged in such a brief space. First, I thank H. Glenn Penny and Elizabeth Heineman for their advice and encouragements. I also thank John D. Roth, for inspiring me to dedicate my future to the past, and Royden Loewen for his boundless enthusiasm for it.

Uwe S. Friesen, Christian Lopau, Colleen McFarland, Gundolf Niebuhr, Conrad Stoesz, John Thiesen, Frank Peachy, and Gary Waltner helped me navigate the archives they expertly administer. Peter Letkemann deserves special thanks for his spirited interest in my project and his vast archival knowledge. Richard Ratzlaff, Erwin Warkentin, Benjamin Goossen, the UT-Austin Religious Studies Colloquium, and my colleagues at the University of Iowa all improved portions of the manuscript. I also thank Jake Hall, Dennis Kuhnel, and Jason Moyer for debating me on almost everything. They have made me articulate in ways that I cannot articulate. I am deeply grateful to the institutions that made this work possible: the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies (with special thanks to Karin Goihl), the DAAD, the Mennonite Historical Society, the Religious Research Association, and the University of Iowa. Appreciation is also due to the Zerger family in Weierhof, Germany and Susie Fisher, Ryan Stoesz, and Caroline Fisher in Winnipeg, Canada for use of their beautiful homes.

I thank my friends—Aeron Kopriva, Jesse Smith, Michael Thomas Taren, Josh Weaver, Benj Yoder, and Michael Zerger—for their many distractions. I also thank my family for always choosing the museum over the mall and the National Park over the theme park. Finally, I thank Julia for being a partner with me in this project, for her intelligence and curiosity, and for most everything that is good in my life.

ABSTRACT

This is a comparative analysis of two German-speaking Mennonite colonies. One group of 1,800 migrants voluntarily left Russia for Canada in the 1870s and departed Canada for Paraguay's Gran Chaco in the 1920s to preserve their communal autonomy. Another group of 1,500 Mennonites remained in Russia until 1929, when Stalinist persecution forced them to flee as individual refugees through Germany to the Gran Chaco. Here, the colonies negotiated separate relationships with the Paraguayan government and crafted different responses to German Nazis and American Mennonites who desired global German or Mennonite unity. Comparing the groups' collective narratives—as voluntary migrants and refugees—reveals problems faced by individuals who do not fit into prescribed national or religious molds.

This work engages global forces—such as nationalism and displacement—and universal conditions affecting mobile groups—including how they negotiate group identifications and perpetuate local cultures. It begins from the premise that group identifications are not immutable and objective. Rather, they are embedded in mythologies that are articulated as contingent, subjective narratives. This approach shapes three arguments: First, governments and aid agencies benefit from the existence of migrants and refugees by advancing mythologies that include or exclude them. Second, faith-based diasporas are tenacious carriers of national cultural features—such as languages and folkways—but they maintain these features for their own ethnoreligious purposes and not at the behest of a nation-state. Third, faith-based diasporas draw on national and religious myths to interpret new environments, but their communities formulate divergent narratives about their roles in these settings—on a spectrum from faithful nomads to exiled victims.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

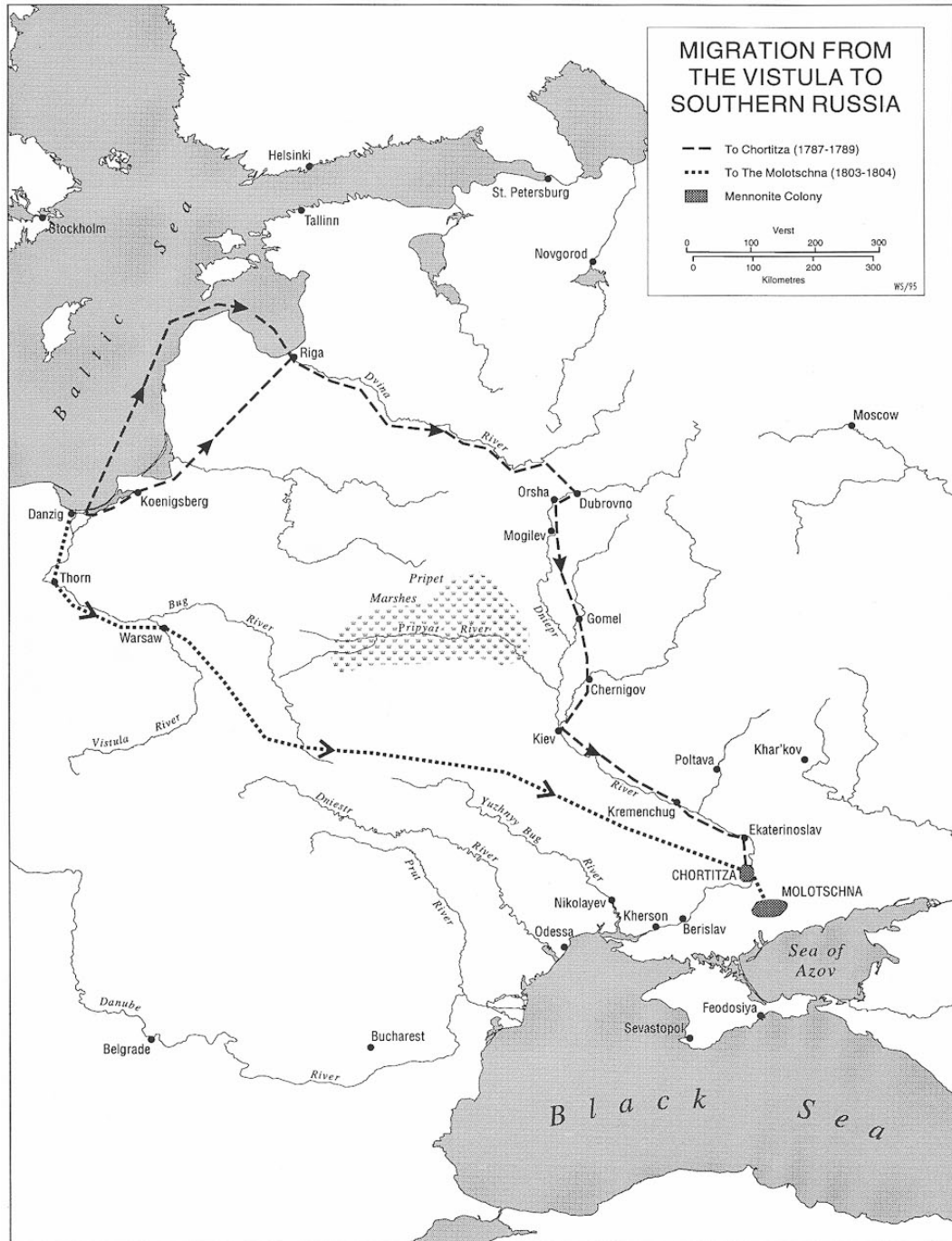
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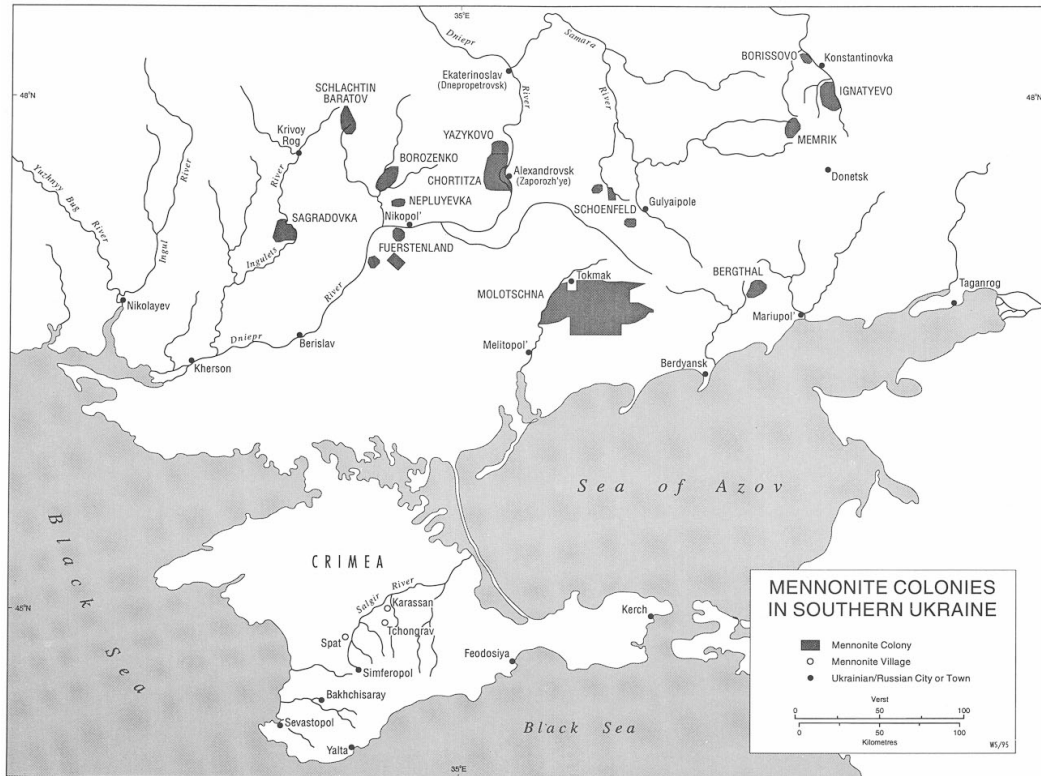
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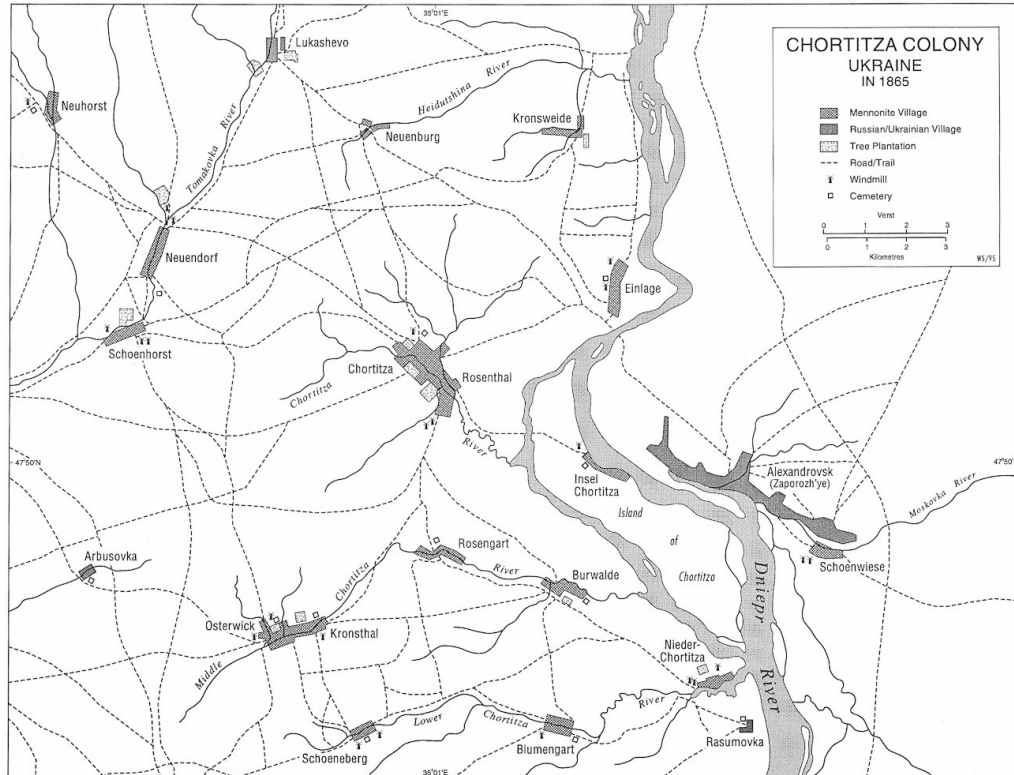
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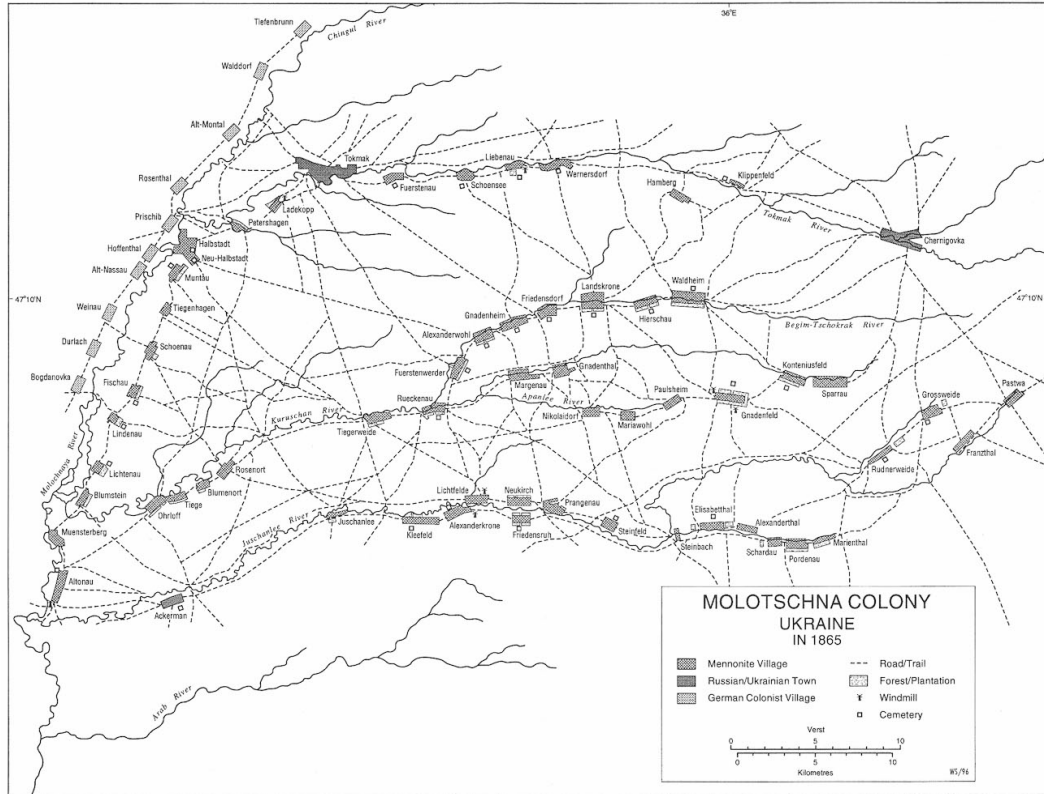
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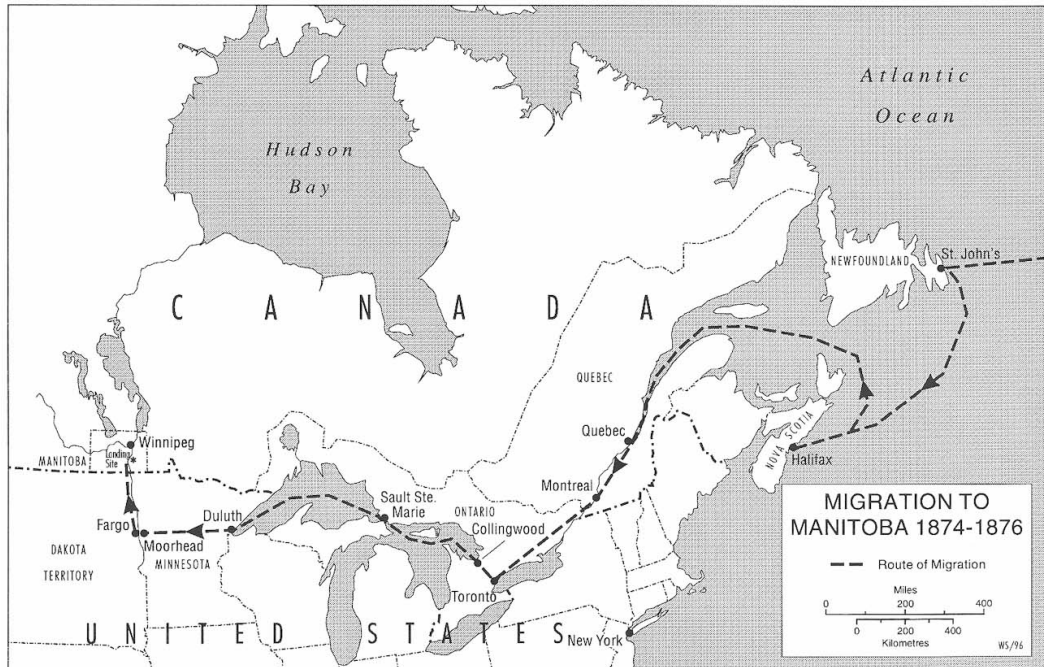
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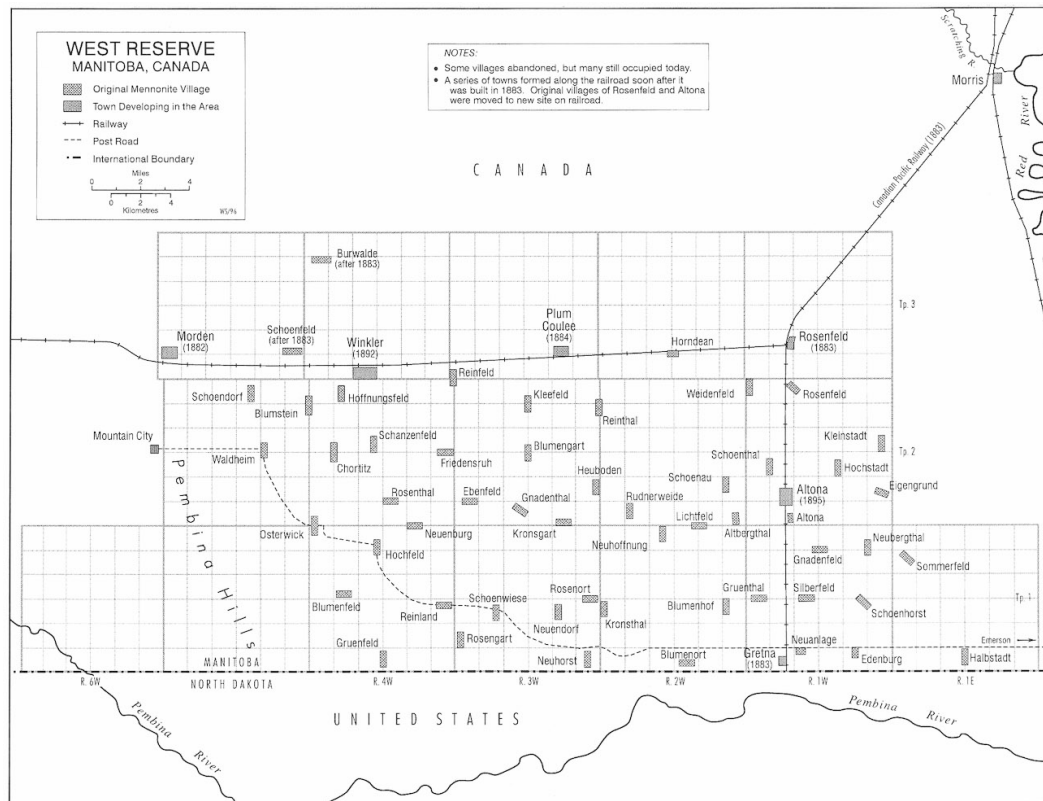
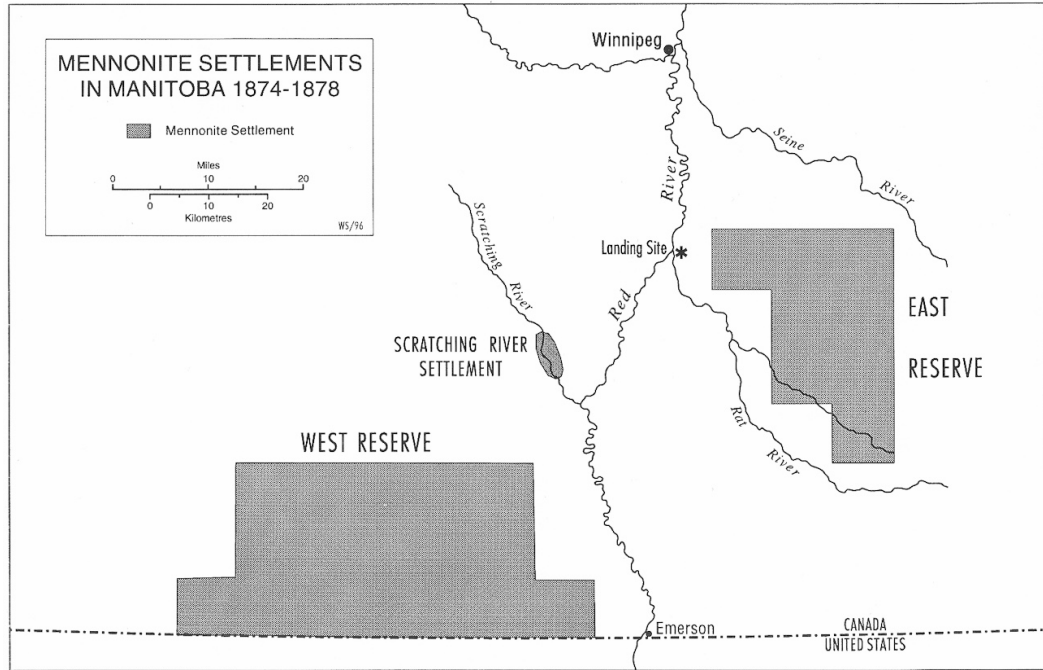
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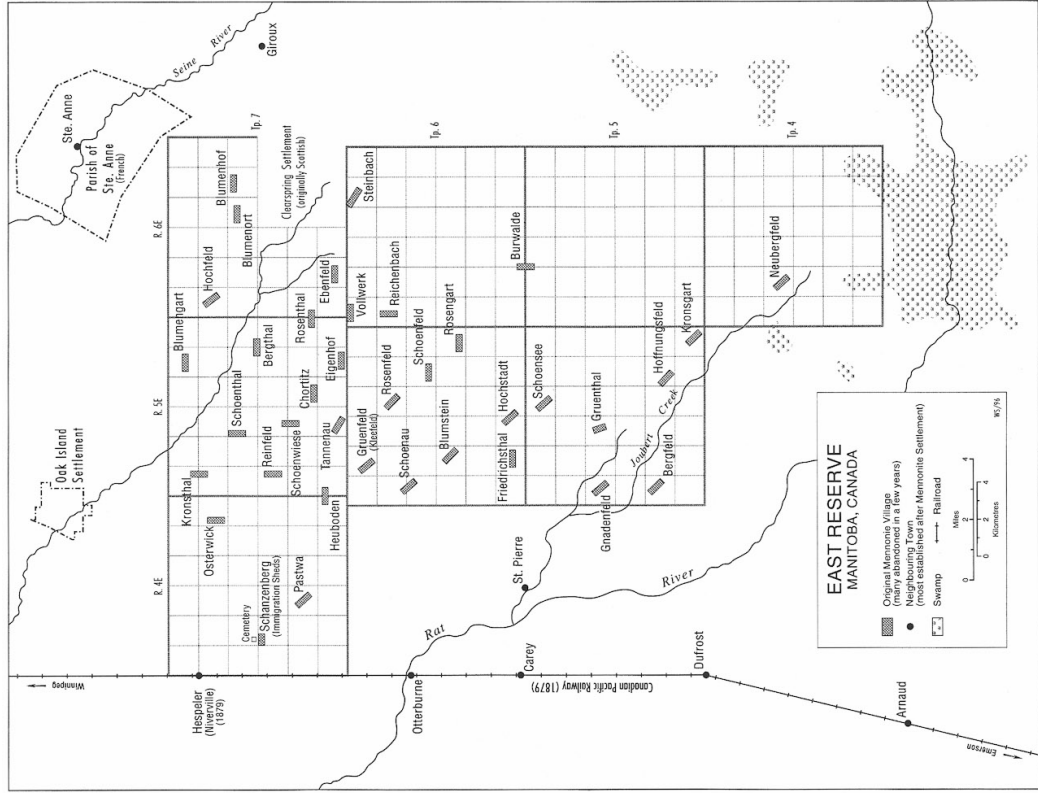


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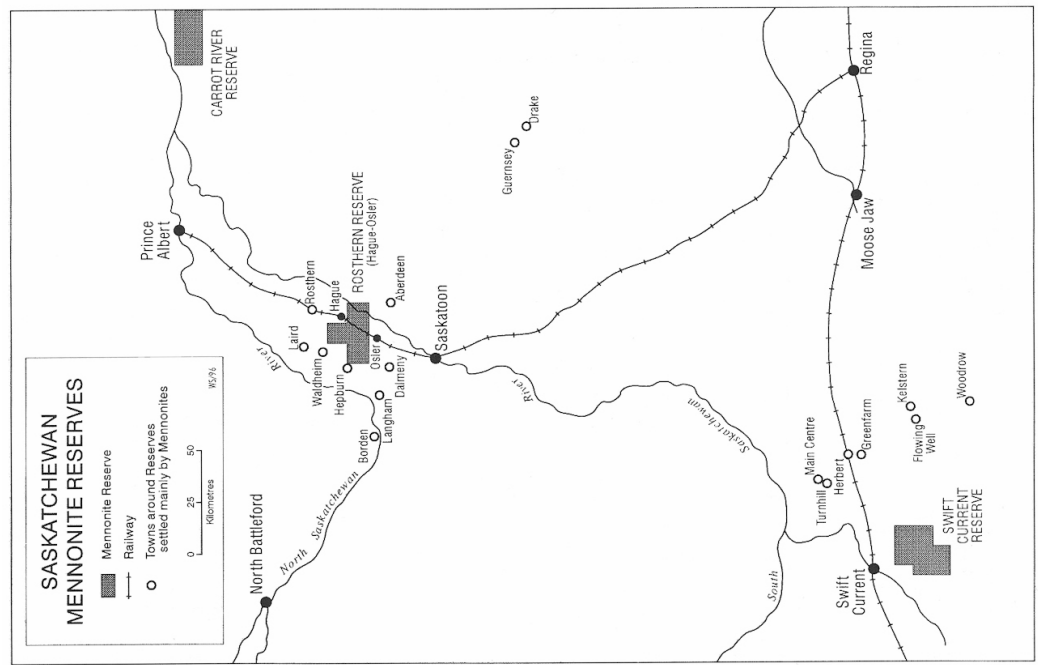


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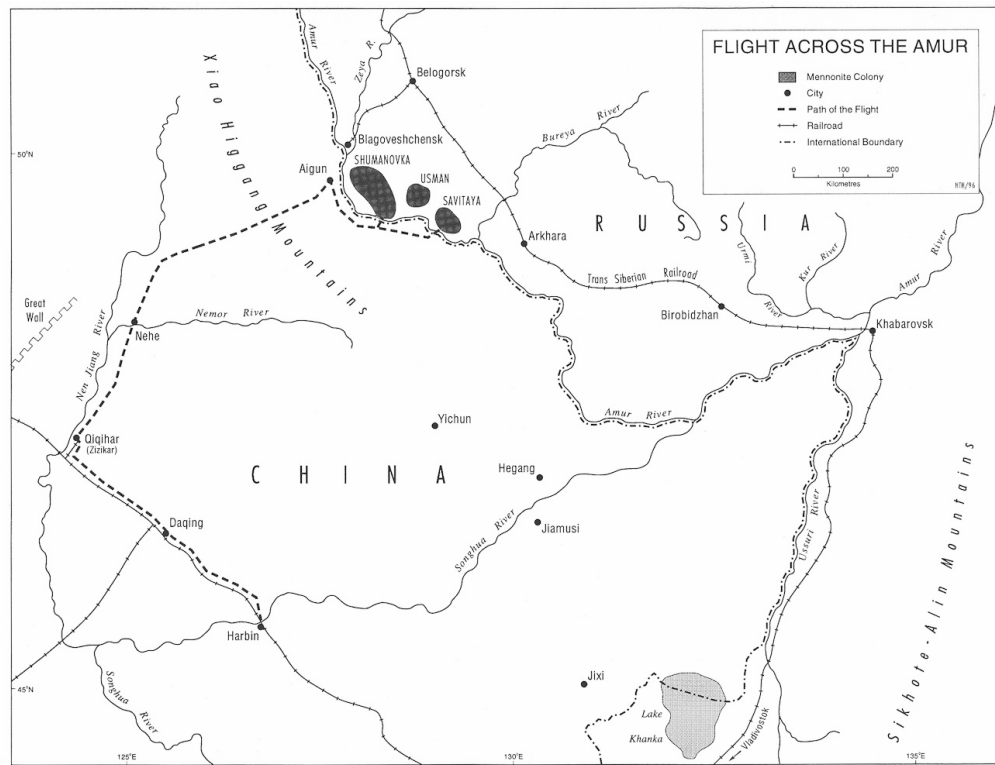
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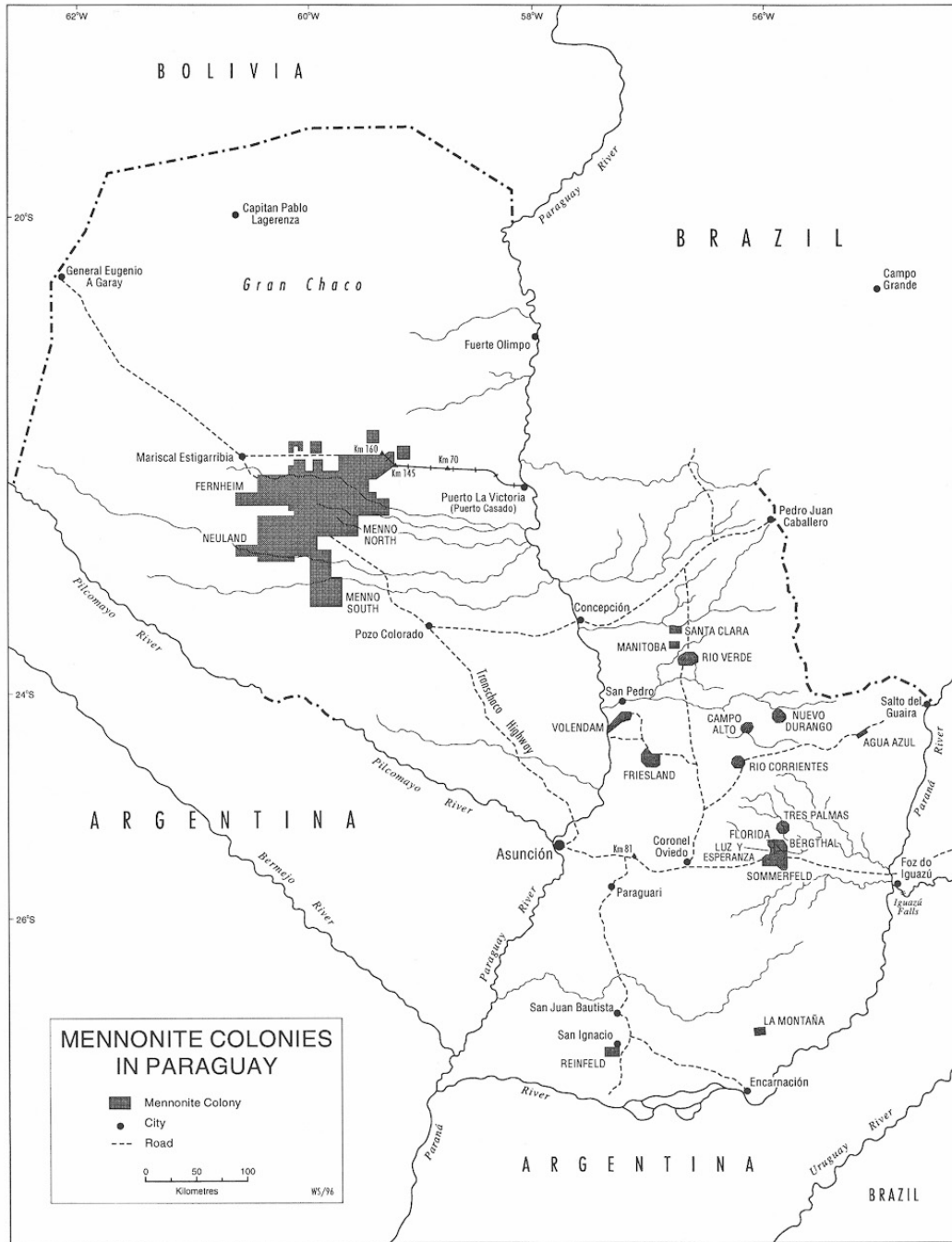
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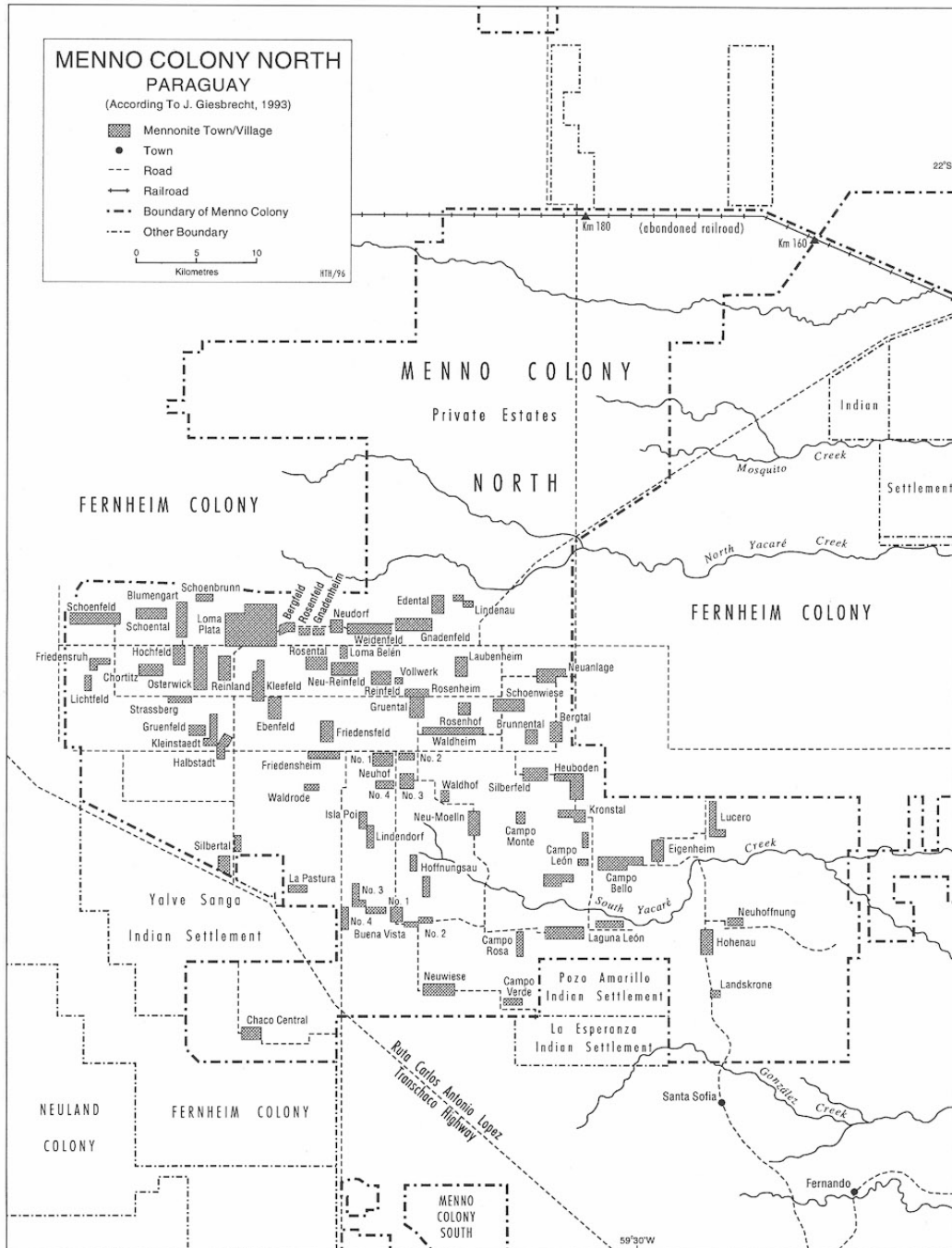
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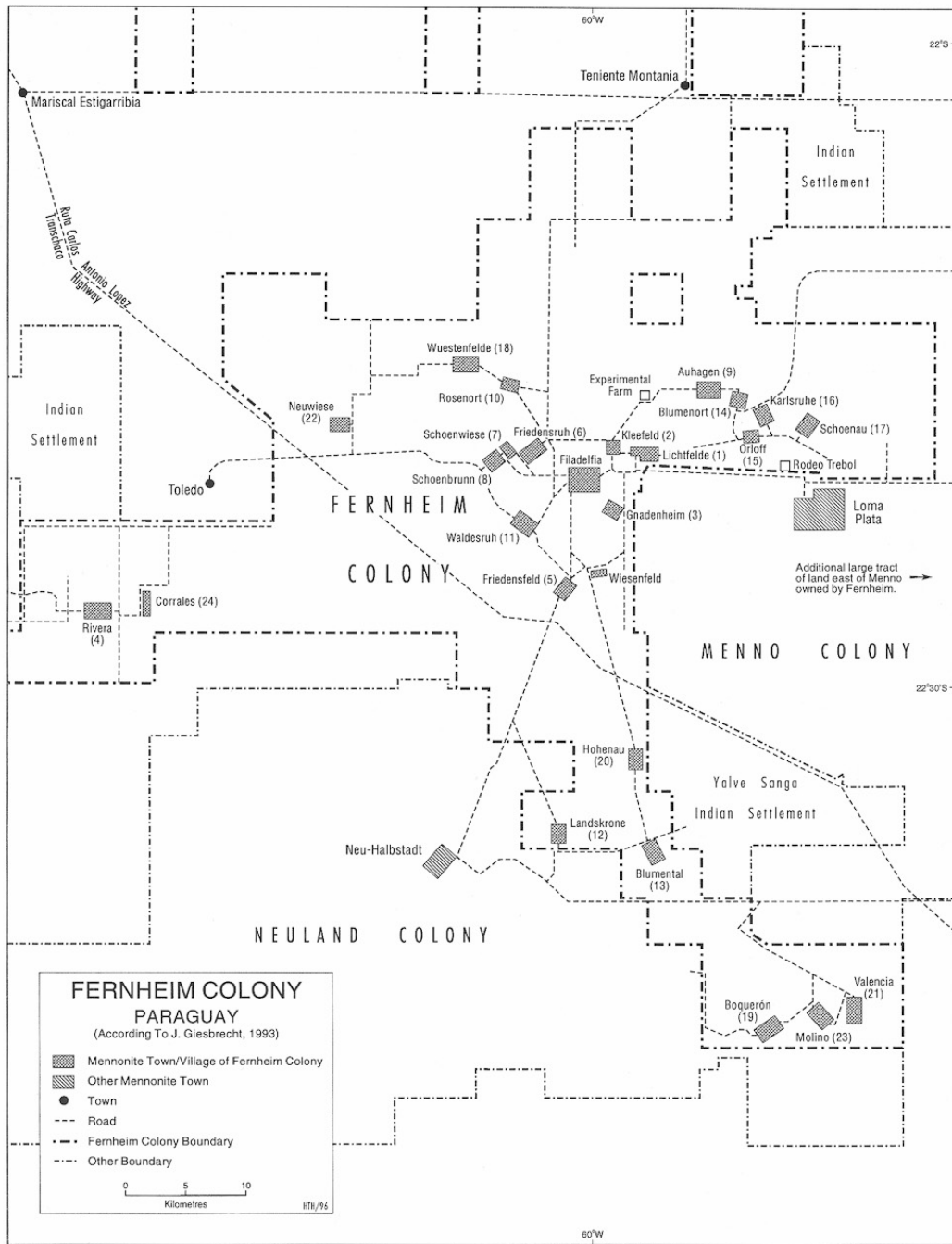
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INTRODUCTION

Man... is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall—or when he's about to drown—he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.

-Graham Swift, *Waterland*

This manuscript follows the transnational movement of two streams of German-speaking Mennonites. One group of 7,000 migrants voluntarily departed southern Russia for Canada's prairies in the 1870s. They left due to their conscientious objection to the Russian Empire's modernizing reforms, exemplified by a new military conscription law. In the mid 1920s, 1,800 of their descendants exited Canada for Paraguay's remote Gran Chaco on account of the nationalizing policies embedded in Canadian public education. Here they established the Menno Colony. Meanwhile, in 1929, a second group of 3,800 Mennonites was purged from their Russian villages when the Soviet government labeled them wealthy farmers (*kulaks*). Now refugees, they sojourned in Germany for several months in 1930. With the aid of Germany's Weimar government and an American relief agency named the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), 1,500 of these individuals traveled from Germany to Paraguay to create the Fernheim Colony, adjacent to the Menno Colony. More refugees arrived from Poland and from Siberia via China, swelling the Fernheim Colony's ranks to 2,000. Over the next two decades, these two settlements with ostensibly similar origins in Russia negotiated relationships with their indigenous neighbors, the MCC, the Nazi government in Germany, and the Bolivian and Paraguay governments during the Chaco War (1932-1935). They did so with astonishingly different results. In separate ways, both groups crystalize the problems faced by individuals who did not fit into prescribed national and religious molds during the era of high nationalism. Yet a comparison of how each colony formulated their collective narratives—as voluntary migrants or refugees—reveals their divergent tactics for evading and engaging multiple national and religious affinities. It also demonstrates how their identifications as Mennonites and Germans aided and inhibited their movements.

Between 1870 and 1944, Canada, Germany, Paraguay, Russia, and the Soviet Union each tried their hand at integrating one or both groups of Mennonites into a national paradigm. On one hand, Weimar Germany hoped it could establish a transnational economic bond with the colonies while Russia, Canada, and Paraguay believed their physical presence on the steppes, the plains, and in the Chaco would respectively bring these regions under their political and economic control. On the other, Russia, Canada, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union censured Mennonites when they did not fall into line with their nationalist projects, which demanded they act as Russians, Canadians, Nazis, and Communists. Beginning in 1929, a group of American Mennonite intellectuals—operating as the MCC—also attempted to incorporate the groups into an imagined global Mennonite body: a Mennonite nation, so to speak. Each entity argued that the modern world demanded the creation of clearly defined populations, with clearly defined loyalties, who lived within clearly defined boundaries. They conflated settlement with stability and believed that identities were (or should be) circumscribed and singular. Mobility and fluid identifications were “problems” requiring “solutions.” Nevertheless, both groups of Mennonite migrants were highly mobile and evinced a range of identifications—as Mennonites, Germans, farmers, Christians, and as racially “white.”

My work contributes to our understanding of German and Mennonite history but it also helps us understand larger forces such as nationalism, citizenship, and displacement that shaped the movements of both groups and were not unique to the Mennonites. As the twentieth century unfolded, there were millions of individuals who were voluntarily or coercively displaced because they did not fit a particular government’s prescribed national, racial, or class demographics. Many resisted participating in assimilative or corporate bodies and many more were indifferent to them. Though this work traces the lines of two small movements of people across the globe, it engages universal conditions experienced by mobile groups such as how they negotiated “hybrid identities” and perpetuated their local cultures under a variety of circumstances.¹ It does so by analyzing the shifting contours of their collective narratives—how they

¹ Social psychologist Kerstin Hein uses the concept “hybrid identities” to describe how German-speaking individuals living in Chile assemble their identifications while navigating between cultural spheres. See *Hybride Identitäten. Bastelbiografien im Spannungsverhältnis zwischen Lateinamerika und Europa* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2006), 88.

created, sustained, and modified them over time—and the evolving national and religious narratives promoted by governments and aid agencies that wished to exclude them from or absorb them into their ranks.

This research poses two principle questions: How did each group formulate collective narratives that were complementary of and contradictory to larger national and religious mythologies? Why did each group become a critical target of state policies and international interests in ways greatly disproportionate to their size and strength? I argue that in contrasting ways, each group of Mennonites confounded institutions—both state and religious—that attempted to impose singular, comprehensive identities on them. On a broader level, I argue that ethnoreligious diasporas assume and abandon national and religious labels even as they selectively use national and religious concepts to interpret the past, present, and future. Here, at the nexus of myth and migration, narrative and nationalism, lies this manuscript’s center of gravity.

Mennonites’ Longue Durée

Mennonites have a long history of contrarianism and mobility, extending back to the confession’s inception in the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement.² Anabaptists wished to establish a pure and literal understanding of the Bible and purge all ecclesial traditions from Christianity that did not conform to their interpretation. Under the loose direction of a former Catholic priest named Menno Simons, the Mennonites emerged from the skein of the Anabaptist movement believing that Christians should follow the example of the early, persecuted church under the Roman Empire. Most importantly,

² I use the word “confession,” rather than “denomination” or “church,” to describe groups who call themselves Mennonites since the latter terms imply centralized or ecclesiastical authority, often with government oversight. According to Thomas Finger “Mennonites are neither a creedal church nor a confessional one in the sense of adhering to a single authoritative confession. They are confessional, however, in the sense of having authored numerous confessions that at times have played important roles in church life.” Over time, various groupings of Mennonites from various locations devised “confessions,” or “statements” of the faith—including the “Schleitheim (1527),” “Waterlander (1577),” and “Dordrecht (1632)” confessions—that were accepted or rejected by other Mennonites. According to Finger, the word “confessional” covers “a variety of somewhat comprehensive (though not always lengthy) statements of faith drawn up by church conferences and agencies, by congregations and even individuals. Such confessions are usually more localized in space and time, often self-consciously so. In this sense of *confessional*, Mennonites, as a communion in which significant attempts of this sort have often been made, qualify as a confessional church.” See Thomas Finger, “Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist/Mennonite Tradition,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76, no. 3 (July 2002): 277-97.

Mennonites believed that the church body should be composed of voluntary members who confessed their faith and were baptized as adults.

On a social level, Mennonites accentuated precepts of non-violence, closed communities, and the separation of church and state, even as individual communities perpetuated a number of other doctrines within their own local contexts, regarding such things as occupation and dress, which they thought were essential to the faith. They retained the Anabaptist focus on purging and purity by emphasizing the spiritual integrity of local communities, issuing bans against errant members, and engaging in numerous schisms. At the time, Central European magistrates also aspired to purge religiously errant groups under the stipulations of the Peace of Augsburg (1555): *Cuius regio, eius religio* (“Whose realm, his religion”) in their own pursuit of ecclesial and social purity. Branded as heretics by Europe’s Catholic and Lutheran authorities and scattered to the wind, the Mennonites never solidified around a geographic center, agreed upon a specific theology, or forged a set of shared practices.

One of the most effective strategies that Mennonites discovered for maintaining their religious beliefs and closed communities was fleeing to marginal lands on imperial borders. The fact that Mennonites quarreled often and divided frequently certainly did not hinder their physical dispersal. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, hundreds of Mennonites living in a broad swath between Switzerland and the Low Countries immigrated to North America, where they settled first in Pennsylvania and Virginia and then traversed the Appalachian Mountains to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and north to Ontario.

At about the same time, the free cities of Gdańsk and Elbląg, invited Mennonites living in the Low Countries to cultivate the swamplands of the Vistula delta. In exchange, authorities granted them a set of legal, economic, religious, and social guarantees that was collectively called a *Privilegium*, a practice that was a common feature in the early modern European legal system.³ After the first and second partitions of Poland (respectively, 1772 and 1793), Frederick II (“the Great”) of Prussia affirmed Mennonites’ religious freedoms but he limited their land holdings and required annual compensations

³ Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870-1925* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 4-5; James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe-Russia-Canada 1525-1980* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 44-47.

for military exemption.⁴ The stipulations eventually became too onerous for some Mennonites and they looked for new land to the east.

The eighteenth century witnessed the rise of large, multi-ethnic empires that replaced ecclesial law with civil law and were governed by monarchs who sought capable pioneers to settle their expanding territories. Instead of emphasizing purity and ecclesial homogenization, they asserted their “enlightened” benevolence, promoted the tolerance of religious minorities, and legitimated their imperial plurality with a religious and royal metaphor: “so we, though many, are one body.”⁵ When successful, this type of government practiced what historians Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper call the “contingent accommodation” of heterogeneous interests.⁶ Specific groups—merchants, craft guilds, intellectuals, religious minorities, and the like—pledged loyalty to the Crown in exchange for specific concessions or a degree of local autonomy. This balancing act resulted in neither “consistent loyalty nor consistent resistance,” but was serviceable for its intended purposes.⁷ Described by literary theorist Northrop Frye as, “imperial monotheism,” under such an arrangement, the monarch represented God on earth and was “tolerant of local cults, which it tends increasingly to regard as manifestations of a single god.”⁸ In 1763, Catherine II (“the Great”) of Russia issued a Manifesto directed at German-speaking farmers living in Central Europe that gave prospective settlers a charter of privileges in exchange for making her southern and eastern territories economically productive. Western farmers’ economic standing as “free” settlers from Europe—instead of Russian serfs whom the regime considered to be less economically productive—mattered more to Catherine II than their religious, cultural, or linguistic features.⁹

⁴ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 4-5; Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 50-51.

⁵ Romans 12:5 (ESV). See Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, ed. Alvin A. Lee (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2006), 118.

⁶ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸ Frye, *Great Code*, 112; Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 44.

⁹ E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955), 18; Dirk Hoerder, “The German-Language Diasporas: A Survey, Critique, and Interpretation,” *Diaspora* 11, no. 1 (2002): 19.

In 1787-1789, a number of Mennonites living in Prussia took up Catherine II's invitation to settle the empire's vast steppes. Twelve years later, Tsar Paul I confirmed the Mennonites' *Privilegium*, which included clauses that ensured their exemption from military service and the right to administer their own education and taxes.¹⁰ Mennonites viewed the agreement as a personal covenant between their colonies and the monarch and believed that Paul I and his descendants would respect their privileges in perpetuity. The guarantees prompted other Mennonite groups from Prussia to emigrate to Ukraine, Crimea, and Southern Russia. Here, they created Mennonite spaces in Russian places by retaining their Low German (*Plautdietsch*) dialect, cultural and religious customs, village structures, and even their village names, though their constituent churches remained at odds with each other over religious practice and doctrine.

Once in Russia, the Mennonites fit into a broad milieu of German-speaking minorities. Historian Stefan Manz outlines three primary groups: The first two groups included social elites living in the Baltic region who were absorbed by the empire in the eighteenth century and German-speakers from the burgher class who had filtered into the empire's cities from the fifteenth century on. Both groups maintained their own ethnic enclaves and retained their German nationality so that by 1871, there were about 250,000 Germans from Germany (*Reichsdeutsche*) in Russia. The third group, invitees of Catherine II, accepted a Russian nationality with important caveats enshrined in the Manifesto. This group was composed of farmers, tradesmen, and professionals from across Central Europe. Most were Catholic and Lutheran but smaller pietistic confessions dotted their ranks. They established hundreds of colonies in the Black Sea and Volga regions and soon represented the plurality of German-speakers in the Empire, which by the late-nineteenth century numbered about 1,800,000 individuals.¹¹

Between 1789 and 1870, the empire's Mennonite population grew to over 50,000 members spread across several settlements from Odessa to the Volga River.¹² Mennonites

¹⁰ Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 85.

¹¹ See Stefan Manz, *Constructing a German Diaspora: The "Greater German Empire," 1871-1914* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 145-146; Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution* (Altona, MB: Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council, 1962), 14.

¹² F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 17-20.

established villages of about twenty to fifty families, with their homes laid out in a street-village (*Strassendorf*) structure of single-family houses arranged in two rows down the sides of a broad street. Fields extended from behind each property, except for landless individuals who worked as hired laborers or in non-farming occupations. Villages maintained their own churches, windmills, primary schools, and cemeteries although there were usually one or two larger villages within a colony that contained factories, granaries, hospitals, administrative buildings, post offices, secondary schools, and retail stores. Colonies were mostly self-sufficient but as the century progressed, they began interacting to varying degrees with nearby Russian and German-speaking settlements.¹³

The Mennonites' standing as autonomous colonies ruled by a benevolent monarch changed when Tsar Alexander II introduced a series of modernizing initiatives in the 1860s. Russia's military loss during the Crimean War (1853-1856) led the Tsar to conclude that his heterogonous and agrarian population was a deterrent to the empire's status as a world power. His initiatives—broadly referred to as “Russification”—included freeing serfs, tightening bureaucratic control over the provinces, implementing new educational programs, and introducing universal military conscription.¹⁴ The country's Mennonites were disturbed by the policies, especially the military service requirement, which they feared would cause their young men to imbibe Russian nationalism and violate their commitment to nonviolence.¹⁵ The reforms did not target Mennonites

¹³ In particular, the wealthy and progressive Molotschna settlement worked with their German-speaking Lutheran neighbors to develop economic and trade relations. See Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 14; F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 17-20.

¹⁴ James Urry, “The Russian State, the Mennonite World and the Migration from Russia to North America in the 1870s,” *Mennonite Life* 46, no. 1 (March 1991): 12. For more on Russia's late-nineteenth century reforms Ben Eklof, John Bushnell, and Larissa Zakharova eds., *Russia's Great Reforms, 1855-1881*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ The nobility also feared the military service law since they were wary of enlisting their children in a peasant army. Other reforms that worried Mennonites included the government's promotion of the Russian language in their schools and the country's new administrative apparatus. They had come to see the use of High German (in addition to their older *Plautdietsch* dialect), the election of village and colony mayors (*Schulzen* and *Oberschulzen*), the street-village (*Strassendorf*) municipal structure, and even the practice of establishing autonomous colonies as “traditional” Mennonite features in spite of the fact that these practices were introduced to them by the Russian state. See Urry, “The Russian State,” 14.

specifically, but were broad-based initiatives that demanded empire-wide compliance.¹⁶ Mennonites had adapted to Russian legislation in the past—provided they were allowed to do so on their own terms—but the slate of new reforms, introduced quickly and impartially, led Mennonites to wonder whether they were the privileged minority that they assumed themselves to be. Within ten years, 17,000 Mennonites who preferred to live on a new frontier rather than under the new laws relocated to North America’s western prairies. Yet it was not long before this frontier was also integrated into the national fabrics of Canada and the United States. In Canada, as in Russia, the British Empire’s dominions inaugurated a new era of homogenization and unity.

By the 1920s, Canadian, Soviet, and other state-sponsored integration schemes transitioned from integration to exclusion. Resembling the purifying fervor of sixteenth-century European reformers, early-twentieth century communists and nationalists took a strong stand against dissidents by harshly enforcing existing policies and formulating new understandings of purity based on race, religion, class, or nationality.¹⁷ Mennonites met the challenge by making peace with the initiatives—either through compromise or emigration—which again raised questions of religious purity within the confession. Those who continued to migrate emphasized their adherence to biblical examples of itinerancy and their resistance to “worldly” influences. Alternately, those who stayed tended to reinterpret the question of Mennonites’ religious purity into questions of confessional unity and personal morality.

Simultaneously, a growing number of Mennonites in Europe and North America began pursuing higher education where they absorbed liberal humanist attitudes about church/state relations. Mennonite intellectuals reinterpreted the confession’s traditional tenants of voluntary membership in the church and the separation of church and state as

¹⁶ Commemorative accounts of the 1870s Mennonite migration often represent the reforms as being aimed specifically at Mennonites, though this was not the case.

¹⁷ Incidentally, Marxists and nationalists also articulated their claims of authenticity in a Western religious framework, which accepts that authority is textual/aural (the Word), chronological (“in the beginning”), and singular (God). Consequently, they claimed authority using Marxist writings and primordial national mythologies, established chronologies through dialectical materialism and the “awakening” of national consciousness, and intended to unify populations around the singular purity of class or nationality. Frye gets at this similarity in *Great Code*, 105.

analogous to the democratic tenants of individual freedom and religious pluralism.¹⁸ They also worked to create conferences, institutions, and aid agencies that supplanted the confession's local expressions of "Mennonitism" with a few major tenants that were easily articulated to an external audience within the political sphere. Despite the reality that most of the world's Mennonites were unaware, indifferent, or opposed to their idealistic goals, Mennonite intellectuals reasoned that a new era of Mennonite history had arrived that legitimated the confession's transnational solidarity and permanent settlement in democratic and liberally oriented countries.

Framework and Interventions

This manuscript follows the narrative threads of the voluntary migrants and refugees who respectively created the Menno and Fernheim Colonies, Paraguay. It traces each group's narrative warp through time and space while teasing out the weft of national and religious identifications that entangled the groups during their travels. Each colony possessed Mennonite and German identifications but they also eschewed them in important ways. On one hand, both colonies claimed to be Mennonite but they held different understandings of essential Mennonite principles. On the other, both colonies were composed of German-speakers living outside of the German nation-state (the so-called *Auslandsdeutsche*), but they possessed contrasting ideas of "Germanness" (*Deutschtum*). I therefore begin from the premise that national and religious identifications are not objective and immutable but are tied to subjective narratives that change over time. The upshot of this framework shapes three general arguments. First, governments and aid agencies benefit from the existence of migrants and refugees by advancing mythologies that either include or exclude them. Second, faith-based diasporas are some of the most tenacious carriers of national cultural features—such as languages and folkways—but they maintain these features for their own ethnoreligious purposes and not at the behest of a nation-state. Third, faith-based diasporas draw on national and

¹⁸ In the American context, historian James C. Juhnke refers to these individuals as "Mennonite progressives." See *Vision, Doctrine, War* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 164-165; In the German context, historian Benjamin W. Goossen refers to them as "Mennonite activists." See "Into a Great Nation: Mennonites and Nationalism in Imperial Germany, 1871-1900" (honors history thesis, Swarthmore College, 2013), 14-15, 37 ff.

religious myths to interpret new environments, but their communities formulate a variety of narratives about their roles in these settings—on a spectrum from faithful nomads to exiled victims.

At least until the late nineteenth century, when Mennonite intellectuals in Europe and North America began making peace with national identifications, Mennonites' primary allegiances routinely disregarded the states in which they happened to live. They likewise showed little interest in the Germany, the nation to which they ostensibly belonged. Consequently, building an analytical framework based primarily on state borders or national essentialism is as disingenuous as it is dangerous. In particular, Russia's Mennonites often understood themselves to be less a part of the German nation—or any other nation for that matter—and their Germanness to be more a part of their communities.¹⁹ Russia's Mennonites did not perpetuate German cultural features—such as using Luther's translation of the Bible, German village names, and farming practices—to maintain a connection to the German state but rather to maintain a historical link to their ancestors. Ultimately, individuals held “German” cultural features because they were Mennonites, not because they were Germans.

For the sake of simplicity, historians of German immigration frequently merge a wide variety of different Mennonite groups with the histories of other German-speaking enclaves.²⁰ Such histories promote a uniform and essentialist understanding of groups, which neglects local variations and evaporates individuals' self-identifications.²¹ Alternately, historians of Russia's Mennonite population are generally uninterested in exploring Mennonites' Germanness, mindful as they are of the confession's emphasis on

¹⁹ Historian Pieter Judson argues forcefully that the term “German” has for too long “privileged the German state founded in 1871 as the social, cultural, and political embodiment of a German nation.” See “When Is a Diaspora Not a Diaspora? Rethinking Nation-Centered Narratives about Germans in Habsburg East Central Europe,” in *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness*, eds. Krista O'Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy Reagin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005): 219.

²⁰ See for instance Jonathan Wagner, *A History of Migration from Germany to Canada, 1850-1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006); and Grant Grams, *German Emigration to Canada and the Support of Its Deutschtum during the Weimar Republic* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

²¹ Historian Dirk Hoerder draws attention to this disparity. See “German-Language Diasporas.” So too does historian H. Glenn Penny's historiography of German enclaves in Latin America. See “Latin American Connections: Recent work on German Interactions with Latin America,” *Central European History* 46 no. 2 (2013): 362-394. For examples of writing German history without privileging the nation-state or essentializing “Germanness” see O'Donnell et. al., *The Heimat Abroad*.

the separation of church and state and aware that the vast majority of Mennonites never lived within the political borders of Germany. Though Russia's Mennonites may not have actively cultivated a sense of German *political* nationalism, they shared a great deal in common with the local cultures of other German-speaking enclaves in Russia and their histories were frequently entangled. In addition to a shared written culture, German-speaking enclaves of all faith backgrounds negotiated *Privilegia*, tended to be more loyal to their local communities and colonies than national or international attachments, and entwined culture and religion in unique and enduring ways.²²

Paradoxically, some Mennonite historians rely on national paradigms for framing their histories. Historians write of "Russian Mennonites," "Canadian Mennonites," and "Paraguayan Mennonites," instead of "Russia's Mennonites," "Canada's Mennonites," or "Paraguay's Mennonites."²³ The former designation assumes that Mennonites' most relevant and essential descriptor is the state in which originated from or resided, which is true for some individuals, but certainly not all. The latter designation places Mennonites within state territories but it does not assume their loyalty to the state.²⁴ The distinction matters because it opens up an avenue for examining the fluid nature of Mennonites' external attachments. Mennonite historians' reasons for using national frameworks are seldom engaged directly but they likely have as much to do with ease and convention as they do with the persistent belief that there is something essential about defining a group of people by the state in which they reside.²⁵ I accept that a state-centered paradigm tells

²² Manz, 3.

²³ R. Loewen makes a similar observation in *Village among Nations: "Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916-2006* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 5.

²⁴ In a similar vein, historian Tobias Brinkmann demonstrates that scholars of Jewish immigration retroactively assign national identifications to their subjects: "Immigrants are often described as 'German Jews' by historians, even though Jewish immigrants themselves, other Jews, German-speaking immigrants, and native-born Americans rarely used the actual term before 1880." See Tobias Brinkmann, "'German Jews'? Reassessing the History of Nineteenth-Century Jewish Immigrants," in *Transnational Traditions: New Perspective on American Jewish History*, ed. Ava F. Kahn and Adam Mendelsohn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 145.

²⁵ Strangely, national labels are even found in the self-generated histories of Mennonites who patently chose to avoid national citizenship. For example, Martin W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites Conquer a Wilderness: The Beginning and Development of the Menno Colony First Mennonite Settlement in South America*, trans. Christel Wiebe (Loma Plata: Historical Committee of the Menno Colony, 2009). Other examples include John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes Among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933-1945* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999); and F. H. Epp's two volume, *Mennonites in*

us valuable things about some Mennonites' relationship with specific states, but other Mennonites thrived under a variety of governments even as they remained indifferent to state borders and national loyalties. In such instances, they shared a great deal in common with other German-speaking enclaves who were tepid toward their host states and German nationalism. My framework is sensitive to political borders and national cultures but it does not conflate them with state or national allegiances. Doing so would risk telling us more about the state's narrative than the Mennonites'.

At various times, Mennonites cast themselves as victims of government efforts to nationalize new territories, but I argue that they were not simply victims of these processes but actually helped make them possible through their perpetual movement. Hence, building a framework out of Mennonites' collective persecution at the hands of a generic "State" is misleading. During much of the confession's history, Mennonites sought out states with weak or amorphous borders where they could establish agrarian communities that were relatively free from state control. Yet due to their proclivity for transforming marginal terrain into productive farmland, they invited the attention of authorities and made it possible for the state to consolidate its authority over them. Then, when states demanded that Mennonites abandon their local cultures and integrate into the host nation, they relocated to new frontiers in other lands. Some Mennonites thus rode a wave of nationalism from borderland to borderland thereby preserving their communities and their cultures even as they literally sowed the seeds of their own dispersal. In this way, Mennonites used transnational means to attain transchronological ends. They successfully replicated their early modern privileges in the modern era by relocating to new unnationalized spaces.

Predictably, Mennonites' strong local cultures, ambiguous national ties, and penchant for mobility made them suspicious to outsiders who demanded clarity about their ultimate loyalties. In this study, the Menno Colony migrants rejected national identifications and schemes for global Mennonite unity since they organized on a local basis and were willing to migrate if this condition was threatened. Perpetual migration

Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1974); and *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1982). An important exception is R. Loewen, *Village among Nations*.

remained their guiding principle, believing as they did that nomadism was an essential condition for true Christians. Alternately, the Fernheim Colony refugees felt victimized by the unfair Soviet policies that had uprooted them from their God-given homeland. They were amenable to pan-German and pan-Mennonite unity even though their lack of solidarity—composed as they were of disparate individuals from across the Soviet Union—kept them from rectifying their broader attachments or agreeing upon a shared interpretation of their suffering. Ultimately, the Menno Colony's group identifications were too narrowly focused and the Fernheim Colony's group identifications too widely scattered to merge with larger national or religious narratives.

All Mennonites were not so inclined or compelled to migrate. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a majority of the world's 516,300 Mennonites (in 1925) made peace with national identifications and state borders.²⁶ While the promise of citizenship integrated an increasing number of Mennonites into national paradigms, some Mennonite intellectuals in Germany and North America aimed to unite the world's Mennonites by promulgating a shared set of beliefs, culture, or ethnicity. Among the United States' 250,000 members, the relief organization cum Mennonite multinational institution, MCC, represented the most prominent and enduring attempt to cultivate a shared global Mennonite allegiance while allowing for a variety of national allegiances.²⁷ Yet this manuscript demonstrates that owing to Mennonites' local cultures and religious peculiarities, early-twentieth century Mennonitism was marked more by disunity than by collaboration. Large numbers of Mennonites remained as recalcitrant to their intellectuals' entreaties as they were to nationalist appeals. This observation is significant, because it demonstrates that early-twentieth century Mennonite intellectuals were as prone to corporatist thinking as early-twentieth century nationalists, and they experienced similar problems in uniting a diverse constituency.

²⁶ An 1850 estimate places the number of Mennonites at 67,500, which represents a sevenfold increase between 1850 and 1925. Escalating birth rates and shrinking death rates (as opposed to the proselytization of new members) are the likely causes of this growth. For population estimates see Harold S. Bender, Sam Steiner, and Richard D. Thiessen, "World Mennonite Membership Distribution," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified November 17, 2013, accessed March 12, 2015, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=World_Mennonite_Membership_Distribution&oldid=103542.

²⁷ Ibid.

Thus, at the broadest level, this manuscript intervenes in the literatures of nationalism, “national indifference,” and church history.²⁸ It does so by focusing on nationalism’s mythological and narrative aspects—how it exists as a body of myths that are arranged as a story across time. From this angle, we see that nations are not simply a structural expression of modernity as advanced by theorists in the 1980s. For example, Ernest Gellner regarded nationalism as a byproduct of industrial society, Eric Hobsbawm contended it was an instrument of bourgeoisie social control, and Benedict Anderson treated it as a “secular transformation of fatality into continuity,” or in other words, a modern placeholder for religion.²⁹ Although Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” gets at nationalism’s transcendent nature, he does not account for its affective and moral qualities, which breathe life into the phenomenon.³⁰

Nations—and by extension, denominations—exist as mythologies in the space where imagination merges with sentiment.³¹ Nations and denominations embody a corpus of myths, which theorist Ernst Renan regards as “common glories” and “regrets.”³² These myths are welded and wielded by political or religious “entrepreneurs” who compete

²⁸ “National indifference” describes and historicizes “non-national and nationally ambivalent populations” in modern societies. See Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 98.

²⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 11-12; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ernest Gellner *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

³⁰ Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” describes nations as groups of people who share a sense of affinity and equality with each other without having ever met. See Anderson, 6-7; Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), 89.

³¹ Along similar lines, nationalism can be understood as ideology though the latter differs from mythology in a few important aspects. On one hand, ideologies tend to be future-oriented and project a vision of how the world *should* be. Politics and economics serve as the principle tools of change. On the other, mythologies account for time—either linearly or cyclically—though they may or may not privilege past, present, or future. Mythologies present a vision of the world as it *appears* to be and do not have an explicitly political or material edge. In general, ideologies are positions people hold; mythologies are worlds in which people live. Though I agree that nationalism is ideology, I engage it as mythology to better account for the religious disposition and political ambivalence of my subjects. See Renée Balibar “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), 86-106.

³² Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 52-53.

among themselves to string them into mythologies.³³ This definition resonates with theorist Anthony Smith's concept of "mythomoteurs" since it focuses on how mythologies succeed or fail based on how closely their constitutive myths resonate with a population's experience of reality.³⁴ Thus, myth and mythology should not be confused with the oft-used concept of "memory" as a means of social agency, since any number of memories may or may not be enshrined in a particular population's pantheon of myths.³⁵

Understanding national "mythscape," where battles over collective memories are won and lost, is not simply an intellectual exercise.³⁶ It has significant consequences for how we understand acts of resistance, insurrection, flight, and dispersion. One need only consult the headlines to witness stories of émigrés and refugees that for one reason or another defy dominant national narratives with their own interpretations of history and "the nation." The same goes for so-called "cults" that challenge dominant religious narratives with alternative interpretations of church doctrine and scripture. If the nation is an "idea," then it is for good reason that theorist Anthony Smith reminds us of Émile Durkheim's dictum that "ideas, once born, have a life of their own."³⁷ Unorthodox ideas about nations and denominations are dynamic engines that reveal the essential malleability of a "mythscape."

How do we understand nationalism's mythical characteristics without ourselves becoming entrapped by them? In the words of historian Timothy Snyder, "Refuting a

³³ Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 12.

³⁴ According to A. D. Smith, "mythomoteurs" provide an ethnic group with an "overall framework of meaning." Without one, "a group cannot define itself to itself or to others, and cannot inspire or guide collective action." See *The Ethnic Origins of Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 24-25.

³⁵ Historian Duncan S. A. Bell argues that even if "we accept the more rigorous social agency definition of memory—in both its individual and collective senses—then there are at least two major problems with the manner in which it is more commonly employed. Firstly, 'memory' is not transferable (as memory) to those who have not experienced the events that an individual recalls, which means that it cannot be passed down from generation to generation." For another, "it is often a question of perspective, that different sets of people 'remember' different things." Alternately, myths are transferable and necessarily require a "believer" to accept a specific perspective. See "Mythscape: memory, mythology, and national identity," *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (March 2003): 73, 76-77. On memory as social agency see Emmanuel Sivan and Jay Winter, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³⁶ On the concept of "mythscape" see Bell, 66.

³⁷ A. D. Smith, *Nationalism*, 72.

myth is dancing with a skeleton: one finds it hard to disengage from the deceptively lithe embrace once the music has begun, and one soon realizes that one's own steps are what is keeping the old bones in motion."³⁸ I propose that we do not attempt to refute mythologies (after all, one cannot kill a skeleton) but rather treat them as objects of historical inquiry. A way forward is to focus attention on group narratives that challenge the logic and structure of dominant narratives. By tracing the fluctuations of subaltern narratives (the Menno Colony migrants) and the formation of new ones (the Fernheim Colony refugees), historians can denaturalize governing mythologies about a particular group: national, religious, or otherwise. The center is illuminated from the periphery.

By the early 2000s, historians of Central Europe—including James Bjork, Pieter Judson, Jeremy King, and Tara Zahra—began reevaluating nationalism as an artifact of modernity by taking up Hobsbawm's call to analyze it from below.³⁹ They did so by focusing on expressions of "national indifference"—instances when modern individuals identified themselves outside (and often in defiance) of national strictures, usually on a local or regional level.⁴⁰ These scholars were aided by sociologist Rogers Brubaker's concept of "groupness," which he defines as highly-contingent "moments of intensely felt collective solidarity" that may or may not crystalize into group mobilization.⁴¹ Their work confirmed that the formation of ethnic or linguistic national blocs (that supposedly share a perennial solidarity) was not inevitable or even particularly desirable for large numbers of urban, rural, working- and middle-class Europeans well into the twentieth century.⁴² From a state perspective, Kate Brown demonstrated how indifference to

³⁸ Timothy Snyder, *Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 10.

³⁹ Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780*, 10-11.

⁴⁰ See Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities."

⁴¹ Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 12. Brubaker likewise argues that ethnicity, community, identity, and diaspora are not "things" so much as "perspectives" or "stances" that are manifested in specific instances. See Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2005): 1-19; Brubaker, et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2006, 15.

⁴² James Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the language frontiers of imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948*

nationalism collided with official policies under Soviet and Nazi regimes in the so-called *kresy*, an amorphous region in northern Ukraine. There, peasants remained stubbornly inscrutable to nation builders by defying modernization and nationalizing programs that swept over them until state-sponsored persecution eventually carried them away.⁴³

Yet it is not enough to focus on the (mostly) political maneuverings of nationalists and nationally indifferent individuals, since human affiliations extend beyond political parties and public schools. Nor is it sufficient to restrict our field of view to nationalism's vicissitudes and victims within a specific geographic locale. We must also cultivate an understanding of the counter-stories, religious and otherwise, that run parallel to nationalist narratives—cosmologies that apparently explain nationalism better than it explains itself. Bjork's Catholic Silesians, King's Budweiser polity, and Zahra's Bohemian parents contested their German, Czech, or Polish nationalities in editorials, referendums, and parent-teacher conferences, but they had little doubt that membership in a state (of their choosing or not) was a given. If their local identifications were threatened, they likewise did not conceive of abandoning their lands, though mobility is no less of a natural human condition than immobility. Subaltern group narratives therefore are not synonymous with "national indifference," since the latter focuses on specific *instances* where nationalism does not "happen" rather than on individuals' basic assumptions about how the world is ordered, including its past, present, and future.⁴⁴

Scholars of nationalism and "national indifference" therefore succeed at describing the presence or absence of a population's collective identifications but they do not do an especially good job of pegging these observations to broader mythologies. *Moments* of "groupness" happen and individuals recall *specific* memories, but questions persist about how they are woven into longer narratives. Like Hobsbawm's "traditions," mythologies may be "invented" and ahistorical, but naming them as such does not

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

⁴³ Kate L. Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Zahra "Imagined Noncommunities," 97; Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 12.

diminish their power.⁴⁵ I argue that historians of nationalism should not leave questions of narrative and myth to the pernicious pushers of primordialism and their “just-so” ethnic and nationalist stories. This manuscript examines the shifting terrain of collective mythologies, for they too are the stuff of history.

Germanness and Mennoniteness

Generally speaking, outsiders such as the German government and the MCC regarded both groups of colonists as members of a distinct ethnoreligious minority (*the Mennonites*) who were culturally, ethnically, or racially German. This manuscript therefore makes a point of examining outsiders’ notions of Germanness—or the constellation of qualities regarded as essential for being German—and “Mennoniteness”—or the constellation of qualities regarded as essential for being Mennonite. In doing so, we can better understand how outsiders imagined and deployed these concepts and how their interpretations, in turn, aligned with and diverged from each group’s shifting collective narrative.

Germanness is a nebulous concept, used to define a nebulous category of people, which was highly susceptible to revision and adaptation. It first came into use during the nineteenth century as Europe’s German-speaking liberals struggled to create a German civic and cultural taxonomy.⁴⁶ During this century, the idea of Germanness (*Deutschtum*) and the geographic space of Germany (*Deutschland*) generally referred to German-speaking enclaves concentrated in Central Europe, regardless of the political realm in which they actually lived (Austria, Bavaria, Prussia, etc.). Germanness also existed in tandem with the concept of *Heimat*, a word peculiar to the German language that connotes an individual’s sentimental attachment to a specific location.⁴⁷ In short,

⁴⁵ Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴⁶ David Brodbeck, *Defining Deutschtum: Political Ideology, German identity, and music-critical discourse in liberal Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6-10.

⁴⁷ For a rigorous analysis of the term see Peter Blickle, *Heimat: A Critical Theory Of The German Idea Of Homeland* (New York: Camden House, 2004). For a case study of the early-twentieth century Heimat Movement see Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Germanness was a trans-state identification while *Heimat* was a sub-state identification and both concepts existed prior to the formation of the German nation-state in 1871.⁴⁸

During the early-twentieth century, each identification generated problems for German nationalists who wished to gather together and order the world's German-speaking individuals under the leadership of a single regime or within a single geographic location. By the first decades of the century, the concept of *Heimat* in Germany existed alongside, and eventually buttressed, German nationalist propaganda that promoted loyalty to the German nation-state.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, many German-speakers who occupied their own "*Heimats* Abroad"—in Asia, Africa, and the Americas—responded tepidly to German nationalism.⁵⁰ According to Manz, "*The German abroad did not exist. What did exist were extremely heterogeneous groups or individuals of different geographical regions, political convictions, religious beliefs and social backgrounds, all moving into, and within, very different contact zones [emphasis added].*"⁵¹

After the First World War, the concept of Germanness became politically charged as new citizenship laws in Central European countries required individuals to choose a nationality that often entailed relocating to a new state. The Weimar government harnessed Germanness to promote economic and cultural ties between Germany and communities they identified as *Auslandsdeutsche*, while the Nazi government reformulated the concept as a "scientific" category to promote *Auslandsdeutsche* racial allegiance to Germany.⁵² As Germanness transformed from a vague and voluntary category to an academic and ascriptive one, individuals who were classified as *Auslandsdeutsche* found themselves in the crosshairs of heated debates in Germany and their host states concerning their German bona fides. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries Mennonites' Germanness helped convince a range of governments that they were desirable pioneers. Nonetheless, after the creation of the

⁴⁸ Richard Ned Lebow, "The Future of Memory," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617 (May 2008): 30.

⁴⁹ Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials*, 107, 198.

⁵⁰ See O'Donnell et. al., *The Heimat Abroad*; Matz, *Constructing a German Diaspora*, 3.

⁵¹ Manz, *Constructing a German Diaspora*, 4.

⁵² Christopher Hutton, *Race and the Third Reich: Linguistics, Racial Anthropology and Genetics in the Dialectic of Volk* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005), 58-59.

German nation-state and especially after the Nazis' rise to power, their Germanness raised troubling questions in host countries about whether they were loyal citizens, loyal to Germany, or even a dormant fifth column for the Nazis' military ambitions.

Less precise still is the concept of Mennoniteness. Indeed, it is a word that lacks historical provenance. Generally speaking, it is a catchall term indicating a set of attributes that twentieth-century Mennonite intellectuals used to articulate the confession's essential cultural and religious nature. Yet owing to Mennonites' biblical literalism and ecclesial disunity, Mennonite communities have often held a strong, if imprecise, understanding of how culture affected their lives and their religion. They lacked scholarship, High-Church practices, and the refined sacramental theology of other Christian denominations, which kept them from parsing religion from other aspects of their lives or establishing a systematic connection between faith and culture. Indeed, their cultural attributes were not handed down by church authorities but were generally manifested from the bottom up. The local community (*Gemeinde*) was the arbiter of culture and every other aspect of life.

In Russia's Mennonite communities, the religious life of the *Gemeinde* was supervised by an *Ältester*—sometimes translated as “bishop” or “elder”—who was elected from the colony's ministers. The geographic area in which the *Ältester* could reasonably traverse in a day or two limited the size of the group and encouraged compact settlements. The *Ältester* looked after baptisms, ordinations, weddings, and funerals and possessed a great deal of influence beyond the community's religious sphere. The *Ältester* was aided by an elected team of lay ministers (*Prediger*) who supervised the moral life of each village.⁵³ Together they comprised the *Lehrdienst*.⁵⁴ Likewise, an elected official named the *Oberschulze* represented a colony's social organization and governed its internal and external affairs. The *Oberschulze* and his assistants, called *Besitzer*, combined to form the *Gebietsamt*. This body looked after a colony's civic

⁵³ R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 50; Uwe S. Friesen, “Ältester,” in *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 20.

⁵⁴ Andreas F. Sawatzky, “Lehrdienst,” *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 262-263.

functions: healthcare, schools, insurance, and economic development.⁵⁵ Village administration was composed of a mayor (*Schulze*) and his assistants who maintained the village's infrastructure, fire safety, local justice, and church attendance.⁵⁶ Civic and religious leaders were always men, though lay members—also men, but often in consultation with their spouses—collectively held a broad range of powers including imposing taxes, hiring teachers, and assigning farmland and crop rotations.⁵⁷

Divisions between the religious and civic spheres were never completely clear. In the small, closely-knit village setting—and even at the broader colony level—there were frequent instances where civic and religious leaders clashed over the boundaries of their particular jurisdiction.⁵⁸ Family connections, historic precedent, and strong personalities often had as much sway as official rules and regulations. Altogether, the *Gemeinde* was

more than an organization. It was the all-encompassing community and articulator of culture: it interpreted the historical stories that gave members a common identity; it pronounced the mercies and judgments of God that gave meaning to daily disasters and fortunes; it legitimized social arrangements that structured community and defined boundaries; it built social networks that tied together distant places; and it set the agenda for discourse, debate, and conflict. It extolled the virtues of an envisaged yesterday, and it confronted ideas and trends that threatened that vision in the present.⁵⁹

As *Gemeinden* moved from one environment to another, they incorporated and perpetuated various cultural features that they absorbed along the way: in the Low Countries, Prussia, Russia, Canada, and Paraguay. This in turn led to an ongoing

⁵⁵ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 6; Heinrich N. Dyck, "Oberschulze," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 318-319.

⁵⁶ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 5-6; Gerhard Ratzlaff, "Schulze," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 378-379.

⁵⁷ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 5-6. Mennonite households were embedded in thick intergenerational kinship ties, which often provided women with power and influence in communal decision-making beyond their ability to vote. See R. Loewen, "The Children, the Cows, My Dear Man and My Sister': The Transplanted Lives of Mennonite Farm Women, 1874-1900," *Canadian Historical Review* 73, no. 3 (1992): 348.

⁵⁸ Various instances are noted in James Urry, *None but Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989).

⁵⁹ R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 50.

discussion within and between *Gemeinden* over which aspects of culture were important to their faith and which were not.

One debate that is particularly germane to this observation was waged in 1921 between Abram A. Friesen and Benjamin H. Unruh. Both individuals had left Soviet Russia in 1920 as part of a Russian Mennonite Study Commission (*Russlandmennonitische Studienkommission*), which was tasked with finding immigration possibilities in the wake of Soviet persecution. A. A. Friesen eventually settled in Saskatchewan, Canada while Unruh settled near Karlsruhe, Germany. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Unruh was the main point of contact between the Fernheim Colony, the MCC, and the Weimar and Nazi governments.⁶⁰ He viewed German language and culture as intimately tied to Mennonites' religious practice and part of the fundamental Mennonite "nature" (i.e. their Mennoniteness) while A. A. Friesen understood such cultural aspects as malleable and tangential to religious fidelity. Unruh argued that it was a "right of all peoples" to "speak one's mother tongue, to pray in one's mother tongue, to know and love what our forefathers... have known and loved." He conflated Germanness with Mennoniteness. Alternately, A. A. Friesen argued that Mennonites should be willing to adapt to the cultural norms of their host societies, wherever they may be, while remaining on guard for threats to their religious convictions. He argued, "The [Soviet] government's attacks were not directed against the Mennonites as a confessional body, but against the Mennonites as a national construct," maintaining as they did a separate language, culture, and social organization.⁶¹ Similar disagreements arose in the United

⁶⁰ Bender, "Unruh, Benjamin Heinrich (1881-1959)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified November 24, 2013, accessed January 22, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Unruh,_Benjamin_Heinrich_\(1881-1959\)&oldid=103975](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Unruh,_Benjamin_Heinrich_(1881-1959)&oldid=103975); Jakob Warkentin, "Brüder in Not," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 56-57. For a broader, though more hagiographic, account of Unruh's life see Heinrich B. Unruh, *Fügungen und Führungen: Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, 1881-1959: Ein Leben im Geiste christlicher Humanität und im Dienste der Nächstenliebe*, (Detmold, Germany: Verein zur Erforschung und Pflege des Russlanddeutschen Mennonitentums, 2009).

⁶¹ Both are quoted in Abraham Friesen, *In Defense of Privilege: Russian Mennonites and the State before and during World War I* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2006), 260, 264. For Unruh's position, see B.H. Unruh, *Bote* "Praktische Fragen," #757 (23 March 1938). For A. A. Friesen's position, see *A.A. Friesen Papers*. Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

States as American Mennonites debated Mennonite higher education, dress, and other aspects of culture and conduct that set them apart from or aligned with broader society.

Historians Geoff Eley and Ronald Suny assert, “Culture is more often not what people share, but what they choose to fight over.”⁶² Cultural battles, in turn, give rise to a remarkable amount of “groupness” when individuals recognize in each other a shared or conflicting objective.⁶³ Between the 1870s and the 1940s, Mennonite communities and conferences across the Americas and Europe battled each other over a broad spectrum of social and cultural issues, from personal appearance, to occupation, to attending public schools, and participating in government. These conflicts led to a remarkable amount of “groupness” that caused Mennonites to move centripetally inward toward a manifest sense of local unity or centrifugally outward toward imagined sense of confessional or national unity as their collective narratives unfurled through time.

Identity and Narrative

Mennonites’ local organization, movements across state borders, and use of different identifications challenges the notion that we can discover or create a clear Mennonite identity.⁶⁴ Instead, I argue that diasporic groups such as the Mennonites do not have “identities” so much as narratives.⁶⁵ Therefore, an important goal for this work

⁶² Eley and Suny, “Introduction: From the Moment of Social History to the Work of Cultural Representation,” in *Becoming National*, 9.

⁶³ See Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 12.

⁶⁴ In other words, identity is constantly being modified as its bearers move through time and space. See James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 302-338; and Linda Basch, Cristina Blanc-Szanton, and Nina Glick Schiller, *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992).

⁶⁵ Historically, Mennonites did not use the term “diaspora” to describe themselves as a collective entity. Though my aim is not to reify diasporas as bounded groups, I use the term to describe Mennonites’ dispersion throughout the world. My usage intersects with several common features of diasporas laid out by sociologist Robin Cohen including: a traumatic “dispersal from an original homeland,” “a strong ethnic group consciousness,” a “troubled relationship with host societies,” and, in some instances, “a collective memory and myth about the homeland,” “an idealization of the putative ancestral home,” the development of a return movement,” “a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries,” and “the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.” See *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 26. On the use of the term “diaspora” as an “idiom, stance, and claim” rather than a bounded entity see Brubaker, “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora.” On the differences between “diasporism” specifically and “transnationalism” more broadly see Gabriel Sheffer, “Transnationalism and Ethnonational Diasporism,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 121-145. On the interface of religion and diaspora see

is accounting for the ways that diasporic groups perpetuate alternative narratives to nationalist ones or incorporate fragments of nationalist narratives into their communal stories. Along with Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai, I argue, “Diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and of attachment.”⁶⁶ My approach pays special attention to how Mennonites’ group narratives, often rooted in specific understandings of the Bible, affected their actions and allegiances. In doing so, I demonstrate that religious diasporas connect their earthly communities to transcendent mythologies.

Mennonites interpreted the world through the Bible. This book is not simply a collection of laws and prophecy but in the words of theologian Don Cupitt, is a “story to live by.”⁶⁷ Yet owing to the open-ended nature of biblical exegesis’ a more apt description of the Bible is that it provides “stories to live by.” The Bible animated Mennonites’ ambivalence to nation-building schemes, mediated their relationship to the environment, and helped them make sense of their migrations. Bible stories are not simple “morality plays,” but provide existential meaning to a group’s historical and contemporary developments. According to historian Royden Loewen, “When crops failed, children died, cattle fell to rinderpest, storms threatened lives, farmsteads burned, wives became ill, and governments abolished special privileges,” Mennonites “conceded and uttered, ‘what God does He does well’ or ‘He takes all and gives all.’”⁶⁸ The local congregation remained the arbiter of Mennonites’ communal narratives, binding the living to the dead, the past to the present, the world to heaven, and connecting everything to the Bible. Believing that the Mennonites were, in a sense, God’s chosen people, Mennonites’ various interpretations of their history are often as mythical as they are historical: the faithful heretic who evades capture by God’s hand, the martyr who meets death with a prayer, a safe passage through the wilderness, or the “worldly” ruler stirred

Steven Vertovec, “Religion and Diaspora,” *New Approaches to the Study of Religion 2: Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches*, eds. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 275-304.

⁶⁶ Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai, “On Moving Targets,” *Public Culture* 2, no. 1 (1989): i.

⁶⁷ Don Cupitt, *What is a Story?* (London: SCM Press, 1991), xi.

⁶⁸ R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 52.

to Christian compassion. Thus, “The literal basis of faith in Christianity is a mythical and metaphorical basis, not one founded on historical facts of logical propositions.”⁶⁹

Frye’s “Theory of Modes” is useful for interpreting how Mennonites applied biblical concepts, such as “wandering” and “exile,” to their collective narratives and how they articulated their migrations as “tragic” or “comedic” plot progressions. In chronological order, Frye’s modes, or literary epochs, are “mythic,” “romantic,” “high mimetic,” “low mimetic” and “ironic.”⁷⁰ The point of using Frye’s modes is not to suggest a collective “progress” of Mennonite theology or a Hegelian culmination of history, but rather to arrive at a better understanding of how theology is expressed in narrative form and changes through time. When Mennonite migration is viewed from this perspective, a new layer of interpretation arises in the Mennonite *longue durée*.

Two of Frye’s modes, romantic and high mimetic, are useful for mapping the trajectory of the Mennonites’ wanderings. Mennonites emerged from the Anabaptist movement with a narrative corresponding to Frye’s romantic mode. They understood themselves as perpetual wanderers, trying to follow the spiritual precedent of the early persecuted church.⁷¹ Protagonists in romantic narratives are killed when there is a “tragic” plot structure (for example, the stories recorded in the Anabaptist/Mennonite *Martyrs Mirror* martyrology) or survive in a “comic” plot structure where the hero is absorbed into a pastoral life (for example the cliché of Mennonites as “the quiet in the land”).⁷² Either way, Mennonites took the path of diaspora. They remained separated from society and lived (or died) in opposition to the world.⁷³

⁶⁹ Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 17.

⁷⁰ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 40, 54.

⁷² The full title of Thieleman J. van Braght and Jan Luiken’s *Martyrs Mirror* is *The bloody theater or Martyrs mirror: of the defenseless Christians who baptized only upon confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the testimony of Jesus, their Savior, from the time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1950). On folk literature as a social behavior in exiled groups see Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989), 11.

⁷³ On diaspora as a rule rather than an exception in the Bible see John Howard Yoder, “Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation,” *Cross Currents* 23 (Fall 1973): 304.

With the increasing affluence and physical expansion of Russia's Mennonite colonies—what some historians have dubbed the “Mennonite Commonwealth”—in nineteenth-century Russia, some Mennonites began interpreting their story in a high mimetic mode, which is thematically associated with a city or a nation.⁷⁴ The “Commonwealth” represented a happy resolution to the Mennonites' wanderings. It was the gathering place of God's people on earth, autonomous from “earthly” influences and secure under the protection of a benevolent monarch's “eternal” privileges. Nevertheless, in the 1870s, a third of Russia's Mennonites again followed a “romantic” path by migrating to North America and fifty years later a smaller number sustained this path by moving to South America. Alternately, those who remained in Russia reached their material and organizational zenith in the first decade of the twentieth century, the so-called Russian-Mennonite “golden age,” which reinforced a mimetic connection to Russia, now their “homeland,” and lingered on even after the Bolshevik seizure of power.

The Mennonites who fled to Canada and thence to Paraguay interpreted their collective story as a “comic” plot progression: They lost their privileges, underwent the physical and moral test of immigration, and regained them in Canada and Paraguay.⁷⁵ By way of example, in 1900 Gerhard Wiebe, an *Ältester* in Manitoba's (West Reserve) Chortitzer *Gemeinde* recorded a meandering chronicle of the Christian church defined by moments of rupture and restoration,

For approximately three hundred years God had upheld the teaching of humility, but then through arrogance it sank to an animal level. The Jews foundered due to false prophets and amorous alliances with the Assyrians. Four hundred years after Christ the Christians denigrated to an animal level through worldly wisdom and false priests, yet the Lord always safely hid his own. We have seen that God's Word first came from southern France to Bohemia, and a hundred years later to Switzerland, Germany, Holland, Poland and Austria. In 1789 the Mennonites began to move to Russia, and by 1862 or 1863 the rest of the Mennonites had left Germany. Now they were all gathered together in the vast Russian empire, and nowhere else have they been able to live out their faith and principles of freedom as undisturbed as in Russia. Yet, through arrogance, quarreling

⁷⁴ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 54. For an appraisal of the term “Mennonite Commonwealth” as a description of Russia's Mennonites see James Urry, “The Mennonite commonwealth in Imperial Russia revisited,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 2 (April 2010): 229-47.

⁷⁵ Frye, *Great Code*, 190.

and contentiousness they departed more and more from the simple life until the beast could dare to enter into battle with them.⁷⁶

When Mennonites, such as Wiebe, confronted “the beast,” they moved to a new location where they were spiritually renewed.

Alternately, the Mennonites who fled from Soviet Russia to Paraguay in 1929 experienced what scholar Robert Zacharias describes as a “break event” and interpreted their collective story as a “tragic” plot progression: It rose to a point of peripety when they fled their Russian colonies and plunged downward to catastrophe when they were “exiled” to Paraguay.⁷⁷ These Mennonites felt as if they were thrown out of their homeland and remained divided over the ambiguity of their expulsion and the unlikelihood of their restoration.⁷⁸ Both groups believed that they were acting as Mennonites but their separate pasts and different interpretations of scripture led them to articulate contrasting interpretations of their present situation and an overarching Mennonite narrative, which kept them divided in Paraguay and led them to make very different choices.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Gerhard Wiebe, *Causes and History of the Emigration of the Mennonites from Russia to America*, trans. Helen Janzen (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1981), 15.

⁷⁷ Frye, *Great Code*, 197. Zacharias argues that retelling the story of the Mennonite Commonwealth and its swift dismemberment by those who fled from the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution “has taken on the status of a supplementary scripture.” See Robert Zacharias, *Rewriting the Break Event: Memories and Migration in Canadian Literature* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 2. On understanding exile from the subjective point of view of the exiled see D. L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*.

⁷⁸ Novelist Robert Kroetsch, writes that the history composed by Mennonites who fled the Soviet Union was “a story of the fall from a golden age (the departure from an ideal world somewhere in the past which was apparently in Russia, somewhere, in the late 19th century).” See “Closing Panel,” in *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada* ed. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe (Waterloo: University of Waterloo, 1992), 225.

⁷⁹ On like groups’ construction of different narratives for a shared event see Liisa Malkki’s discussion of “mythico-histories” in *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). On the challenges of reconciling competing historical narratives see William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (March 1992): 1347–1376. On the relationship between historical narratives and communities see David Carr, “Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity,” *History and Theory*, 25, no. 2 (May 1986), 117–131. In a similar vein, scholars Susan Schultz Huxman and Gerald Biesecker-Mast point out that when speaking to governments, Mennonites “use argument and narrative to preserve the delicate balance between consistency with faith values and accommodation to larger social mores,” such as military participation. During these conversations Huxman and Biesecker-Mast argue “Mennonites typically adopt paradoxical rhetorical strategies: *separatist* arguments derived from their faith’s tragic orientation; *assimilative* arguments derived from the comic orientation of their yearning

Before proceeding, it is important to delineate the difference between group identifications and group narratives, as the concepts are easily conflated. Group identifications are a shorthand way of making a particular group legible to others. Identifications such as nationality and religion are often singled out from a range of possibilities for the sake of simplicity or to convey a desired sentiment. For example, some governments identified migrants as “Germans” when “Mennonite” was unintelligible to their constituency. Alternately, some migrants referred to themselves as “German” when “Mennonite” was distasteful to their audience. In short, identifications are used for a specific purpose, within a specific context to suggest group cohesion.

Collective narratives also describe groups of people, but they include the element of time. A collective narrative is a curated assembly of myths, events, and identifications that run like a red thread through the clutter of history. It may be substantiated in part by historical scholarship but finds its most robust articulation as the story of a distinct culture, from the smallest *Gemeinde* to the largest nation. Since collective narratives are embedded in time, they are susceptible to transformations as groups experience new events and incorporate and dismiss various identifications. For example, the Menno Colony Mennonites emphasized the continuity of their narrative as religious nomads despite numerous relocations and being labeled as “Russians,” “Canadians,” and “Paraguayans.” Alternately, the Fernheim Colony was composed of sundry individuals and families, each of whom was torn from preexisting narratives as members of a specific community, and now had to create a new one. To do so, they first had to discover or invent a set of shared attributes—the untested flotsam and jetsam of identifications they carried with them (or that others gave them)—that they could fashion into a shared story.

Ultimately, collective narratives err more towards mythology than history. Their “plot points,” or moments of rupture, are often historical events burnished with mythological meaning. For instance, it is a historical fact that none of the ships carrying the 1874 Mennonite migrants to Canada sank in the Atlantic Ocean, but in the Mennonites’ collective narrative this fact is only relevant because God had protected them. Likewise, histories go to great pains to clarify causality (Did Mennonites leave

to be good citizens.” See “In the world but not of it: Mennonite traditions as resources for rhetorical invention,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 7, no. 4 (2004): 539-554.

Canada due to new public education laws? Or were they motivated by other reasons?) while group narratives are remarkably clear on the point: The Menno Colony Mennonites left Canada because it had become a “Babylon.” Histories plunge into detail, while group narratives float above historical nuance, such as G. Wiebe’s tidy summary of his *Gemeinde*’s past. Finally, histories move outward, seeking to incorporate more factors into their analysis, while group narratives remain tightly focused on a specific and highly meaningful thread. As we move from Russia, through Canada and Germany, to Paraguay and up to the United States over the span of seventy-five years, the chapters in this manuscript accentuate the ways that Mennonite migrants and refugees situated their Mennonite and German identifications within their collective narratives and how outsiders influenced these developments.

Chapter Overview

This manuscript comprises six chapters. The first chapter follows the movement of Mennonite migrants from Russia to Canada to Paraguay between 1870 and 1926. It argues that members of this cohort underwent a contentious process of integrating state citizenship and broad-based Mennonite unity into their group narratives or rejecting them in favor of an alternate narrative of local religious separation. Chapter two examines the discourse among states, aid agencies, and the press surrounding the Mennonite refugees who fled from Soviet Union to Germany to Paraguay in 1929-1930. It contends that the refugees were both aided and inhibited by their polysemous national, religious, and economic identifications and that this formative event left them with an ambiguous collective narrative. The third chapter grounds us in the local context of the Chaco Desert and describes how each colony’s collective narratives—as faithful nomads and as displaced victims—kept the groups divided throughout the 1930s. Chapter four looks to the United States to explain why the colonies found themselves in the crosshairs of the MCC’s emerging mission as the arbiter of a narrative of global Mennonite unity, while chapter five looks to Germany to explain why the colonies found them themselves in the crosshairs of the Nazi State’s bid for transnational German unity. Each of these chapters argues that the colonies frustrated outsiders’ initiatives due to their local conceptions of Mennoniteness and Germanness. The sixth and final chapter argues that the Fernheim

Colony's collective narrative reached a point of crisis between 1937 and 1944 as colonists' transitioned from thinking that they should remain in Paraguay, as per the wishes of the MCC, or relocate to Europe under Nazi jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the Menno Colony remained indifferent to Germany's oscillating fortunes as they preferred to maintain their own, local expression of Mennoniteness and Germanness.

This work is neither a micro history that comprehensively describes the groups' social, religious, and political dimensions nor a macro history that uses multiple categories of analysis to delineate the shared features of a larger diaspora.⁸⁰ It focuses on group narratives, often crafted by community leaders, as they moved in and out of several national contexts. As a result, it necessarily contains a set of analytical limitations. For one, the thousands of other Mennonites, Jews, and other migrants who moved across borders in Europe, Asia, and the Americas during this tumultuous era are acknowledged but remain unexamined. For another, the material aspects of Mennonite colonies—their farming practices, use of technology, and material cultures—are not discussed in detail. Likewise, I refer to the colonies' organizational structures—such as economic cooperatives and municipal governments—insofar as they relate to the argument at hand but I do not elaborate on their internal mechanics.

Class and gender are important lenses for understanding the effects of power and inheritance within agrarian communities and they provide us with reasons why individual families elected to stay or leave a given country.⁸¹ Yet I am primarily concerned with the community-level narratives that illuminate how Mennonites' national and religious identifications mediated their wanderings. These narratives generally emerged from the groups' internal hierarchies, which placed landowning, male leaders from recognized families at the fore.⁸² Mediators were generally men, their Bible-based theology was

⁸⁰ Historian R. Loewen has made significant contributions to our understanding of mobile Mennonites on each of these counts. For a local, comparative study see *Family, Church Market*. For a broader survey of transnational Mennonite networks see *Village Among Nations*.

⁸¹ In keeping with 1 Peter 3:7, which states that men and women are co-heirs of the grace of life, Russia's Mennonites practiced bilateral partible inheritance for their temporal goods. This gave women influence over the household's future and allowed both men and women class and geographic mobility through marriage. See Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 36; and R. Loewen, "The Children, the Cows, My Dear Man and My Sister," 360-363.

⁸² Naturally, individuals create personal narratives of migration but understanding them is best achieved through oral interviews or an analysis of diaries and letters. On gender and personal narratives see Brigitte

patriarchal, and their decisions to migrate were grounded in male issues: Boys received a longer formal education and young men were targets of the draft. Adult men were allowed the franchise in Canada and were most at risk of incarceration in the Soviet Union. Older men generally preached sermons, administered the colonies, and organized migrations. As historian Marlene Epp notes, Mennonite theology and leadership generally “had nothing to say specifically to women, who had no military service obligations to their country, [or] about how they might live out nonresistant beliefs within their sphere of activity.”⁸³ Of course, this is not to say that Mennonite women lacked theological convictions, agency, and feelings of excitement or apprehension over the possibility of migration but they were generally articulated at the interpersonal or family levels.⁸⁴ Insofar as one or both family heads found Mennonite leaders’ arguments for migration persuasive or unpersuasive, this manuscript speaks to those decisions.

As a history, this manuscript is organized as a *Weltgeschichte*, an attempt to answer the question “What should I have seen if I had been there?”⁸⁵ Yet I am writing the history of a people who interpreted their story as a *Heilsgeschichte* and who would have answered, “This may not be what you would have seen if you had been there, but what you would have seen would have missed the whole point of what was really going on.”⁸⁶ This project operates in the space where these views collide: It considers the evidential causes and effects of migration and nationalism while remaining attuned to how these processes were interpreted by Mennonites. Folklorist Henry Glassie notes that scholars are often “tempted to dismiss religious people as marginal (which they are to histories

Bönisch-Brednich, “Migration, Gender, and Storytelling: How Gender Shapes the Experiences and the Narrative Patterns in Biographical interviews,” in *German Diasporic Experiences*, eds. Mathias Schulze, James M. Skidmore, David G. John, et al. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008): 331-344; Sandra K. D. Stahl, *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). For an example of using this approach in the Mennonite context see R. Loewen, *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001).

⁸³ M. Epp, 13.

⁸⁴ According to M. Epp, the female partner may “indeed have been the one who pushed her family to go, perhaps because she feared for the future security of her children, or perhaps because she had an adventurous spirit.” See M. Epp, 28.

⁸⁵ Frye, *Great Code*, 66.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

painstakingly arranged around secular centers) and to probe beneath religious motives for worldlier goals deemed to be more real.”⁸⁷ Brown likewise argues the “myth” of using rational approaches is that “even when [humans] act irrationally, their actions when examined reveal an underlying political, social, psychological, or economic motivation.”⁸⁸ A “hermeneutic of suspicion” may be more insidious to our understanding of historical individuals than simply misunderstanding their motives since it “destroys the very possibility of understanding historical difference” between past and present, “us” and “them,” and “imposes on past events modern, a priori assumptions intent on separating the ‘ideological’ from the ‘authentic.’”⁸⁹ As Frye reminds us, “mythical and typological thinking is not rational thinking and we have to get used to conceptions that do not follow ordinary distinctions of categories and are, so to speak, liquid rather than solid.”⁹⁰ Human identifications, both past and present, are more liquid than solid. They are active, dormant, aspirational, disposable, and frequently quite irrational. In the same way that the quark—a fundamental constituent of all matter—is too ephemeral to be studied in isolation, human identifications are elusive things that are best observed during moments of interaction. These interactions are in turn part of larger stories, or mythologies, that I argue are best captured in narrative form.

I am neither a theologian nor a literary critic and so my work is primarily focused on apprehending the applied dimensions of Mennonites’ *Heilsgeschichte*: how, why, and where they migrated and the interpretations they recorded along the way. Yet on a broader level, this manuscript turns a mirror on the secular *Heilsgeschichten* advanced by nationalists to understand the role of transient and nationally resistant individuals within their mythologies. In doing so, I aim to uncover the insecurities, complications, and ambiguities attendant to the creation of nation-states, which have been one of the largest and most destructive experiments in the history of social engineering.

⁸⁷ Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 21.

⁸⁸ K. L. Brown, *A Biography of No Place*, 69.

⁸⁹ Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 14, 15; John D. Roth, “The Complex Legacy of the Martyrs Mirror among the Mennonites in North America,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 87, no. 3 (July 2013): 283.

⁹⁰ Frye, *Great Code*, 195.

CHAPTER I. NO LASTING CITY

The morning of August 21, 1927 was unseasonably cool and rainy in the small Manitoba village of Osterwick.¹ Here, Martin C. Friesen, the handsome and young *Ältester* of the Chortitza Mennonite *Gemeinde*, delivered his farewell address to several hundred spectators including the faithful and the merely curious. According to one reporter's account, 200 cars and 100 buggies crowded the property and lined the muddy road.² M. C. Friesen's sermon—based on the apocalyptic passage of Jeremiah 51—conjured imagery of punishment and escape. There is no record of the exact section M. C. Friesen focused on but the passage is a relentless condemnation of corrupt regimes:

“Flee from the midst of Babylon; let every one save his life! Be not cut off in her punishment, for this is the time of the Lord's vengeance, the repayment he is rendering her. Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine; therefore the nations went mad... Forsake her, and let us go each to his own country, for her judgment has reached up to heaven and has been lifted up even to the skies.”³

M. C. Friesen's message was accompanied by several hymns including “*Als Lot und Abrah'm schieden*,” based on the biblical passage Genesis 13: 5-13. This section describes a scene in which the Jewish patriarch Abraham senses conflict with his nephew Lot and tells him “separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.”⁴ The pragmatic and opportunistic Lot chose the land directly before him—the fertile Jordan valley, located ominously near the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham—ever faithful to the Lord's inscrutable will—set out for unknown Canaan.

Surely the significance of this song and the passage from Jeremiah were not lost

¹ Osterwick was later renamed New Bothwell. For weather information see Government of Canada, “Daily Data Report for August 1927,” last modified August 8, 2014, accessed October 28, 2014, http://climate.weather.gc.ca/climateData/dailydata_e.html?timeframe=2&Prov=MB%20%20&StationID=3703&dlyRange=1872-03-01|1938-07-31&Year=1927&Month=8&Day=12.

² Titus F. Guenther, “*Ältester* Martin: C. Friesen (1889-1968): A Man of Vision for Paraguay's *Mennogemeinde*,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23, (2005): 189, n. 29.

³ Jeremiah 51: 6-9, ESV.

⁴ ESV.

on the audience. Before M. C. Friesen helped lead nearly 1,800 Mennonites from the Bergthal (Saskatchewan), Chortitza (East Reserve, Manitoba), and Sommerfeld (West Reserve, Manitoba) out of Western Canada and into the wilds of Paraguay's Gran Chaco, he wanted to explain to all in attendance why they made this decision. The Canadian government likely represented the all-encompassing state, drunk on power, and indifferent to the concerns of the righteous. The Mennonites who chose to remain in Canada presumably represented Lot and his pragmatic decision to remain on the land that was immediately before him. They were not evil, but they made a sensible choice to remain on their established farms in Canada rather than trusting the Lord's guidance. M. C. Friesen wanted to be clear that it was not he who was leading the group to Paraguay, but God. Two days later the M. C. Friesen family accompanied the second to last group of Mennonites bound for Paraguay.⁵ They believed that the journey, and the primitive conditions that greeted them, represented a sacred and timeless test of God's providence.

This chapter focuses on the strategies of resistance, adaptation, and exploitation used by Mennonite migrants as they confronted nation-building projects in Russia, Canada, and Paraguay. Beginning in the last decades of the nineteenth-century and culminating in the First World War, Canadian provincial authorities viewed public schooling as a litmus test of state citizenship. In a 1920 editorial on public education, John Dafoe, the influential editor of the *Manitoba Free Press*, articulated the sentiment of the province's Anglo majority by stating that the country's youth are "the children of the state of which they are destined to be citizens."⁶ Alternately, some Mennonites believed that Canada's Dominion government, under the headship of the Crown, guaranteed them indefinite and exclusive control of their own schools in their 1873 *Privilegium* and did not wish to abandon this entitlement. Yet the latitude given to Mennonites in organizational matters in the 1870s was more a symptom of the frontier's fluid society than an expression of the government's permanent intentions. As Canada shifted from an imperial frontier of the British crown to a democratic country in its own right, Mennonites had to decide whether they wished to participate in the Canadian political system or find new frontiers on the borders of weaker states.

⁵ Guenther, "Ältester Martin: C. Friesen (1889-1968)," 189.

⁶ "Editorial," *Winnipeg Free Press*, May 18, 1920. Quoted in Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 179.

This chapter considers Western Canada's Mennonites under two broad identifications that emerged between 1890 and 1913 and solidified during the First World War: 1) Associative Mennonites who were willing to participate in the democratic process; engage the state as individual, enfranchised citizens; and viewed Canada as their home. Their congregations helped develop the confessions' first institutions and conferences and worked together to oppose government policies that they did not agree with. 2) Separatist Mennonites appealed to government officials directly and personally. They wished to maintain a limited number of communal rights in exchange for a limited number of responsibilities. While most separatist Mennonites possessed Canadian citizenship—it was a requirement for owning land—they did not avail themselves of the tools of citizenship such as joining political parties and voting. Moreover, they did not wish to become members of the Canadian nation through compromise or negotiation. Nor did they migrate as a Mennonite “nation” looking for their own “homeland.” Rather, they moved through states as autonomous units with their own local identifications.⁷

The public school question forced Mennonites in Manitoba and Saskatchewan to decide between remaining in Canada as citizens and seeking new lands where they would (at least functionally) be allowed to live as subjects. This decision accompanied a rupture in Mennonite organization wherein the locally oriented *Ältester*-led community was eclipsed by a new generation of Mennonite leaders who advocated church conferences and teacher-training institutes. These organizations promoted conciliation with government authorities over the school issue and presumed to speak on behalf of the entire confession. Thus, the chapter correlates *Ältester*-oriented *Gemeinden* with an interest in subjecthood and communal mobility, and conference-oriented Mennonites with an emphasis on citizenship and institutions. I argue that Mennonites were guided

⁷ There are several ways of grouping Canada's Mennonites each of which remains insufficient for describing in a general way the differences between them. For instance, one could divide their communities and congregations by their schisms in Europe and North America, their adaptation of certain technologies or participation in government; their organizational structure, whether *Ältester*-oriented or conference-oriented; or the time of their migration to North America, including their subsequent migrations across the continent. For the argument at hand, Ens provides a particularly germane categorization in *Subjects or Citizens?* On page forty-six he notes that Mennonites “were quite prepared to be subjects of the realm, but reluctant to accept the privileges and obligations of full citizenship in the nation.” Generally speaking, Ens' argument is more descriptive of Mennonite attitudes about becoming Canadian citizens (via settlement, naturalization, participation in municipal government, and public education) than it is assertive that some Mennonites preferred living as subjects rather than as citizens, even if it entailed emigration.

(and divided) over accepting citizenship and conferences by their various interpretations of scripture and articulations of a Mennonite narrative. Associative Mennonites believed that Mennonites could find a place in the Canadian national narrative, provided that they organized themselves to speak to government with a collective voice. Alternately, separatist Mennonites believed the Mennonite narrative was a story of locally organized churches that accepted perpetual migration as a necessary burden of their faith.

The Mennonites who eventually left Canada for Paraguay's Gran Chaco were therefore voluntary migrants. They wished to live on Canadian soil but only on their own terms. They were not forced to leave the country but did so willingly and only after decades of debate. Between the first state interference in Mennonite education in the 1880s and their departure in the 1920s, separatist Mennonites argued with state officials and crafted a narrative about themselves that justified, and indeed necessitated their movement to a new land. The Menno Colony was not a collection of disparate individuals, but a group that possessed a strong, self-generated understanding about their relationship to states and their identification as religious nomads.

Despite Mennonite migrants' communal orientation, Russian, Canadian, and Paraguayan authorities shared the belief that they were German settlers. Mennonites may have been indifferent about the social and political aspects of this designation but they did not deny its usefulness when it aided their movements. Governments valued German-speaking settlers for their presumed heartiness and attracted Mennonites to their weak borders by offering them privileges that guaranteed their separation from state and society. Yet once Mennonites helped consolidate new territories into the national fabric, authorities reevaluated their privileges and demanded their participation in the state. This, in turn, provoked new migrations to new locations where governments welcomed their "German" settlements.

Conscription and Crisis in Imperial Russia

The 1860s was a watershed decade in the Russian Mennonites' economic and religious organization and their relationship to the Russian state. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Russia's Mennonites were small, freeholding farmers primarily

clustered within or around two settlements: the older and more demographically stable Chortitza Colony, which was settled between 1789 and 1811, and the younger and more socially dynamic Molotschna Colony, which was settled between 1803 and the 1840s.⁸ By the 1860s, Russia's 50,000 Mennonites witnessed a shift in their farming operations from subsistence farming to commercial grain production, which entailed the creation of capital-intensive industries, increased contact with outsiders, and greater economic disparities between those who owned land and capital and those who did not.⁹ These developments, in turn, provoked migration to new settlements in the Black Sea and Volga regions on land vacated by recently emancipated serfs.¹⁰ The 1860s also witnessed painful schisms that divided colonies along religious lines, most notably the emergence of the revivalist Mennonite Brethren Church (*Brüdergemeinde*) and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church (*Krimmer Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde*) from the old, established Mennonite Church (*Mennonitengemeinde*).¹¹

In the midst of these changes, Tsar Alexander II introduced a slate of social and legal initiatives that were intended to modernize the empire after Russia's losses in the Crimean War (1853-1856). Until mid-century, the Imperial government's "Rossification" agenda allowed national minorities to remain culturally autonomous from Russian society

⁸ Urry, "The Russian Mennonites, Nationalism and the State 1789-1917," in *Canadian Mennonites and the Challenge of Nationalism*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1994), 27.

⁹ R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 15; Urry, "The Russian State," 14-15.

¹⁰ For instance, in 1865, 700 Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites who had been living in the Molotschna Colony migrated en masse to Borosenko, 100 miles to the northwest. The move served as a "dry run" for their subsequent movement to North America. See R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 19-20. Interestingly, Mennonite historian Delbert Plett notes that "all three denominations that came to Manitoba had resettled within Imperial Russia in the decades prior to 1874." See Delbert F. Plett, "Poor and Simple?" The Economic Background of the Mennonite Immigrants to Manitoba, 1874-1879," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000):123.

¹¹ The biggest internal rupture among Mennonites occurred on January 6, 1860 when a group of Molotschna Colony Mennonites formed the *Brüdergemeinde*. *Mennonitengemeinde* leaders were alarmed by this development because the Brethren Church tried to maintain their Mennonite privileges while openly proselytizing to Russian peasants, which angered the state-run Orthodox Church. See A. Friesen, *In Defense of Privilege*, 109-112; Urry, "The Russian State," 14-15; and Sergei I. Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation: Peasants, Millennialism, and Radical Sects in Southern Russia and Ukraine, 1830-1917* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) 159-163. John B. Toews wryly notes, "Mennonites in Russia quarreled before 1860... In one sense the [*Brüdergemeinde*] dispute of 1860 reaffirms continuity in the history of a rather contentious people." See "Brethren and Old Church Relations in Pre-World War I Russia: Setting the Stage for Canada," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 2 (1984): 42.

and conduct business with the state in their chosen vernacular. For the Mennonites, this was High German, which was the closest officially recognized language to *Plautdietsch*. Ironically, both the Russian and German governments would eventually regard Russia's Mennonites as "Germans" based on their knowledge of High German, a language that they had acquired at the behest of the Russian government. Nevertheless, Alexander II's new "Russification" policies included a cultural dimension that made Russian the official language of government and pursued the administrative integration of minority subjects into the Empire.¹² Accompanying this plan, in 1866 the government's Guardians' Committee of the Foreign Colonists in the Southern Regions of Russia (*Fürsorge-Komitee*) required Mennonites to begin teaching the Russian language in their schools.¹³

The government also introduced mandatory military conscription for all state subjects, a proposition that directly threatened the legitimacy of Mennonites' non-violent convictions.¹⁴ Historian Harry Loewen argues that even though some *Ältesten* were outspoken in their support of biblical nonresistance, the government believed that the Mennonite laity "did not take their principle of nonresistance all that seriously" since many had vocally and materially supported Russia's efforts during the Crimean War. Ultimately, "at stake was not only exemption from military service, but also their rights and policies with regard to education, the German language and control of their colonial affairs," generally.¹⁵ Military conscription therefore was simply the catalyst in a battle for local control. Language and education reforms would affect individuals within the colonies but military service would literally remove individuals from them.

When the Mennonite colonies caught word of the Imperial Court's decision to implement mandatory military conscription, the Chortitza and Molotschna colonies

¹² For a detailed discussion of "Rossification," and "Russification" see Urry, "Mennonites, Nationalism and the State in Imperial Russia," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 12 (1994): 65-88.

¹³ Cornelius Krahn, "Fürsorge-Komitee (Guardians' Committee)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified June 15, 2014, accessed April 4, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=F%C3%BCrsorge-Komitee_\(Guardians%27_Committee\)&oldid=123221](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=F%C3%BCrsorge-Komitee_(Guardians%27_Committee)&oldid=123221).

¹⁴ The nobility also feared it since they were wary of enlisting their children in a peasant army. See Urry, "The Russian State," 185.

¹⁵ Harry Loewen, "A house divided: Russian Mennonite nonresistance and emigration in the 1870s," in John Friesen ed., *Mennonites in Russia 1788-1988: essays in honour of Gerhard Lohrenz* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 127.

dispatched an ad hoc delegation led by elders Gerhard Dyck and Leonhard Sudermann to St. Petersburg. They intended to remind the government of the special concessions enshrined in their *Privilegium* and beg for an exemption.¹⁶ At the meeting, officials spoke wryly of the confession's contradictions as a people of peace. They had "shelves full of records... which told the stories of quarrels among Mennonites concerning religious and educational matters and above all of the injustices perpetrated against the landless among them."¹⁷ If Mennonites fought amongst themselves, why should it matter if they also fought for the state? Ultimately, the delegation failed to convince the government that Mennonites should keep their privileges. Naturally, it did not help that their delegates could not speak Russian, but on a deeper level, the Mennonites' request was terribly out of touch with the emerging government position that minority populations should conform to Russian society.¹⁸ After being chastised by the president of the Imperial Court for their temerity, the delegates were sent home with an ultimatum: Comply with the new laws or emigrate within ten years. Mistrustful of the Chortitza and Molotschna Mennonites, the younger and less prosperous Bergthal Colony (which was formed by landless Chortitza Mennonites between the 1830s and 1850s) dispatched its own representatives to conduct separate negotiations.¹⁹ They received the same reply. In an act of conciliation, however, the government granted Mennonites the exception of fulfilling their military requirements by working in state forestry units, hospitals, fire brigades, railways and factories since they valued Mennonites' prosperous farms and factories and wagered the Mennonites did likewise.²⁰

¹⁶ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 184; Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 99. For more on the origins of the Russian *Privilegium* see John Staples, "Religion, Politics, and the Mennonite *Privilegium* in Early Nineteenth Century Russia: Reconsidering the Warkentin Affair," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 21 (2003): 71-88.

¹⁷ H. Loewen, "A house divided," 127.

¹⁸ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 184; Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 99. From this meeting forward, the Russian Mennonites kept abreast of developments in St. Petersburg and were quick to assert their "eternal privileges" to government officials.

¹⁹ Martin W. Friesen, *New Homeland in the Chaco Wilderness*. 2nd ed., trans. Jake Balzer (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Cooperativa Chortitzer Limited, 1997), 19.

²⁰ H. Loewen, "A house divided," 132.

A third of the country's Mennonites refused to accept the new laws or the consolation prize of alternate service and sought land in North America. In 1873, the Borozenko (Kleine Gemeinde), Bergthal, and Molotschna colonies, dispatched representatives to survey land in the western United States and Canada.²¹ In the United States, there were already about 20,000 Mennonites living in a band from the Mid-Atlantic States to eastern Iowa.²² They had arrived in the preceding two centuries from the Low Countries and German-speaking Central Europe. In Canada, there were about 10,000 Mennonites who mostly resided in southern Ontario, a world away from the prairies.²³ The ancestors of Ontario's Mennonite population also originated in Central Europe, but many arrived in Canada via the United States after they were suspected of pro-British sentiments during the American Revolutionary War.

Due to their history of negotiating with Imperial Prussian and Russian representatives, Russia's Mennonites preferred to communicate with the highest authorities possible in North America. This was confusing in the United States since they were required to consult a wide cast of characters including railroad agents, land speculators, and politicians. The situation was different in Canada where their broker, the German-born agent Wilhelm Hespeler, spoke directly with the United Kingdom's Dominion representatives in Canada. The closer they came to the highest levels of

²¹ Mennonites also considered Turkestan and Australia. See Frances Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010), 36.

²² The first reliable figures for the Mennonite population in the United States are from the 1891 Census Bulletin. The two largest conferences at this time were the (old) Mennonite Church, which claimed a population of 17,078 baptized members and the General Conference Mennonite Church, which claimed a population of 5,670 baptized members. All other Mennonite churches (Apostolic, Brethren in Christ, Bruederhof, Bundes Conference der Mennoniten Brueder-Gemeinde/Mennonite Brethren, Defenseless, Holderman, Reformed, and Wisler) claimed a combined total of 6,654 communicants. The Russian Mennonites that arrived in the United States in the 1870s overwhelmingly associated with the General Conference and Mennonite Brethren Churches. Considering that in 1891 there were about 3,000 baptized General Conference and 1,388 baptized Mennonite Brethren Mennonites settled in the core areas of Russian Mennonite migration, it is safe to assume that the population of Mennonites living in the United States prior to the 1870s immigration stood at about 20,000-25,000 baptized members. Henry King Carroll, "Statistics of Churches," Census Bulletin, no. 131, (Washington D.C.: United States Census Office, October 25, 1891).

²³ This figure is an estimate based on the 1841 and 1901 census data found in F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 74-75, 304. The 1841 figure is 5,382 Mennonites living in Upper Canada. The 1901 figure is 15,316 Mennonites living in the eastern provinces of Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia.

government (“*die hohe Regierung*”), the more secure they felt as a “privileged” minority and as “children” of the monarchy.²⁴

Mennonites often articulated their relationship to the government using the analogy of a family structure. Historian Benjamin Goossen observes “rhetorical conventions used by historical subjects including metaphor, metonymy, and diction, were not simply throwaway tools of momentary expression, but rather points of departure and convergence that brought a host of unspoken connotations to bear on the conversation at hand.”²⁵ In their articulation of Christianity, Russia’s Mennonites viewed themselves as the children of a paternalistic state. In the Russian context, a family metaphor reinforced the headship of the Tsar and Mennonites’ self-perception that they were subjects. This suited the Russian government for “What was required [by it] were subjects (*poddannye*), not citizens (*grazhdane*).”²⁶ Mennonites did not assume any obligation to adopt the manners and morals vocalized by the state’s other “children”—be they Russian peasants or the fleeting leaders of a democratic majority. Popular democracy therefore remained a foreign and suspicious breed of governance.²⁷

Coincidentally, Russian imperial actions in North America aided the Mennonites’ search for land in Canada. In 1867, United States Secretary of State William Seward negotiated the Alaska Purchase with Russian minister Eduard de Stoeckl. The Purchase excited fears in London and Ottawa that Canada’s southern neighbor would soon expand north of the controversial fortieth parallel in a bid to dominate the plains. In 1870, the growing din of rhetoric from American expansionists, Canadian separatists, and anti-imperialists coincided with the Métis-led Red River Resistance in the Hudson Bay Company’s Rupert’s Land, in Western Canada. This confluence of events compelled government leaders to demand that the Hudson Bay Company relinquish its Rupert’s

²⁴ Ens notes that Mennonites “preferred to deal with the Prime Minister rather than the Minister of Agriculture or the Interior; with the Minister of the Interior rather than his Deputy; with the Department in Ottawa rather than the Commissioner’s Office in Winnipeg,” *Subjects or Citizens?* 46.

²⁵ Goossen, “Into a Great Nation,” 84. For an analysis of how language affects the construction of meaning see Joan W. Scott, “On Language, Gender, and Working Class History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 31 (Spring 1987): 1-13.

²⁶ Urry, “Mennonites, Nationalism and the State in Imperial Russia,” 72.

²⁷ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 175.

Land holdings. Soon thereafter, the Dominion consolidated its legal title to the region, put down the Métis Resistance, and established the province of Manitoba. With Fort Garry serving as the only Anglo-Canadian bastion in the region, Dominion leaders set about building a transcontinental railroad and aggressively pursuing Mennonite colonization, which was a cheap alternative to establishing a military presence in the region.²⁸

Manitoba's colonization plans also coincided with an ongoing competition with various American state governments and railroad companies to attract German-speaking settlers to the frontier. In both countries, government representatives and immigration agents tended to regard German-speaking peasants as expert farmers and model pioneers. According to James Zohrab, the British counsel stationed in Berdyansk, the Mennonites and other German-speakers living in Russia would be a "valuable acquisition" for the realm since "they are very hard working and, therefore, in proportion to each man, they bring a much larger quantity of land under cultivation" than their Russian counterparts.²⁹ Although the Dominion government generally preferred British immigration, it lauded Germans' perceived sobriety and industriousness.³⁰ Canadian Secretary of Agriculture John Lowe stated "German immigrants have been found to be specially adapted for settlement on the Prairies of the North West of the Dominion."³¹ Manitoba's lieutenant governor also articulated a special affinity between the British Crown and German-speakers by stressing Queen Victoria's Germanness to the 1873 Mennonite delegation.³²

As a result of these push and pull factors, between 1874 and 1880, Russia lost over a third of its Mennonite population to North America (roughly 17,000 of 50,000

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of the Dominion's annexationist worries prior to Mennonite settlement and the attendant difficulties of establishing the Manitoba province see Donald F. Warner's chapter "The Union Movements in the West 1866-1871" in *The Idea of Continental Union: Agitation for the Annexation of Canada to the United States 1849-1893* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1960), 99-142.

²⁹ Public Archives of Canada (PAC), *Shortt Papers*, M.G. 30, D45, Vol. 57, J. Zohrab to E. Granville, 3 February 1872. Quoted in F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 185-186. See also, R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 73.

³⁰ Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes*, 19.

³¹ John Lowe, Secretary of Agriculture, to Dr. Hahn, May 30, 1879, Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Canada, RG 25, accession A-1, vol. 3, 11. Quoted in Wagner, *A History of Migration from Germany to Canada*, 76.

³² F. H. Epp *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 191.

members).³³ About 10,000 members of the *Mennonitengemeinde* and *Brüdergemeinde* hailing from the Borozenko, Molotschna, and Volhynia colonies settled in the United States while another 6,931 *Mennonitengemeinde* individuals from the Bergthal, Kleine Gemeinde, Chortitza, and Fürstenland colonies settled in Manitoba.³⁴ Recalling the trip later in life, one migrant recorded that God had willed the Mennonites' departure from Russia and their restoration in Canada,

It was the angel of the Lord who also led Israel through the desert till they reached Canaan; indeed, Jehovah's angel was also our escort and protector on this long burdensome journey, by water and by land. Even a captain said to me in 1875: "It is remarkable that since 1874 twenty-five ships have stranded and wrecked, but not a single one with emigrants or your Mennonites."³⁵

United States-bound migrants were enticed by the promises of better weather, lower tariffs, less contact with indigenous populations, and better transportation links. They were not guaranteed block settlements but they imagined that they could reasonably reproduce their colony arrangement due to the sheer vastness of the Great Plains. Military conscription was not a federal issue in this country but state officials convinced settlers that they would be granted military exemption if the country ever went to war. Alternately, less affluent and more culturally conservative Mennonites tended to pursue the Canadian option due to the prospect of free land and the Dominion's guarantee of complete exemption from military service. They also chose Canada because its monarchical government resembled the Russian context more closely than the United States.³⁶ The choice between Canada and the States was not a final decision. One

³³ Ibid., 185.

³⁴ See F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 194-200, especially Table 3, listing number of immigrants by year of departure. See also Krahn and H. Leonard Sawatzky, "Old Colony Mennonites," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified February 20, 2014, accessed July 4, 2014, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Old_Colony_Mennonites&oldid=113570; and R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 74.

³⁵ G. Wiebe, *Causes and History*, 40.

³⁶ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 195; R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 108-111.

pragmatic farmer who settled in the latter happily stated that “one can always still move to [Canada]” in the event of United States military conscription.³⁷

In keeping with the confession’s tradition of disunity, the division of Russia’s Mennonites was not amicable. Economic, social, and religious factors each played a role. It was a buyer’s market when departing Mennonites sold their assets and individuals who remained in Russia often acquired property at fire sale prices. In later years, Canada’s Mennonites told stories of calculating co-religionists who waited until the day of embarkation to make a final offer on their land.³⁸ Migrants remembered those who remained in Russia as more political than pious since they negotiated with the Russian state and conceded to alternative military service. Echoes of the hard feelings were recorded in Peter M. Friesen’s influential *Die Alt Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789-1910), im Rahmen der Mennonitischen Gesamtgeschichte*. Published in Russia in 1911, the book argues that the 1870s immigrants were “incapable of God-willed and God-permitted closer association with Russian society... it was good for Russia which is now free of these unmanageable, pious foster children whom it was impossible to satisfy,” even as it includes a section specifically on Russian-Mennonite patriotism.³⁹

The Mennonites who stayed in Russia derisively referred to those who left as “*Kanadier*” and stereotyped them either as inflexible religious zealots or ignorant poor people.⁴⁰ In their “Whig” interpretation of the Mennonite narrative—of which P. M. Friesen’s book remains an excellent example—Russia’s Mennonites viewed the departure of this group as the beginning of a “golden age” of Mennonite history in the

³⁷ See Jacob Klassen to Heinrich Ratzlaff, October 4, 1874, John K. Loewen Papers, C. J. Loewen Family, Giroux, Manitoba. Quoted in R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 109.

³⁸ Plett, “Poor and Simple?” 120. Immigrants’ losses were offset somewhat by the fact that Canadian land was free and land in the United States was only \$3.50 per acre, while their farms in Russia were valued at between two to three times this amount. See R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 113.

³⁹ Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1879-1910)*, trans. J. B. Toews (Fresno, CA: Mennonite Brethren Board of Christian Literature, 1978), 592-594.

⁴⁰ Plett, “Poor and Simple?” 114. When thousands of Russian Mennonites entered Canada following the Bolshevik Revolution, tensions between “*Kanadier*” and the incoming “*Russländer*” were renewed and their contours remain perceptible to this day. For an insightful account of this division see Urry, “Of Borders and Boundaries: Reflections on Mennonite Unity and Separation in the Modern World,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73, no. 3 (July 1999): 503-24.

country that lasted until the First World War. Burnished by the subsequent tragedies of war and revolution, twentieth-century histories and memoirs eulogize this period when Russia's Mennonites reached their organizational zenith.⁴¹ Materially and intellectually, this was quite true. By 1914, Mennonite farmers held a total of 728,008 hectares of property and Mennonite industrialists commanded six percent of the Russian market in agricultural machinery and owned thirty-eight brick and tile factories. Mennonites also supported 400 elementary schools, thirteen high ("central") schools, four girls schools, two teachers colleges, two four-year trade schools and one eight-year business college, a school for the deaf, one deaconess institution, and one Bible school.⁴² Organizationally, their General Conference of Mennonite Churches in Russia (*Allgemeine Bundeskonferenz der Mennonitengemeinden in Rußland*) helped unify their beliefs and practices and presented a united front to outsiders. What was ultimately at stake with the 1870s migration and its interpretations were the "correct" answers to essential questions about religious purity and scriptural interpretation. Those who left remembered "Russification" and accepting military service alternatives as an insidious first step to youth abandoning their faith communities for the wider world. Those who stayed maintained that acquiescing to "Russification" and serving the government were acceptable since Christian submission to the state was justified in scripture.

Once in Canada, Mennonites attempted to remain autonomous from society and sustain their continuity with the past. As in Russia, Manitoba's Mennonites separated themselves into block settlements: the East Reserve, the West Reserve, and the smaller Scratching River Reserve. Bergthaler and Kleine Gemeinde families settled the East Reserve and Scratching River locations, while families from Chortitz and Fürstenland (collectively, the Reinländer or Old Colony) settled the West Reserve. Within a few years about 300 Bergthaler families became unsatisfied with their land and moved to the West

⁴¹ See J. B. Toews, "The Calm Before the Storm: Mennonite Brethren in Russia (1900-1914)," *Direction* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 74-75. In a previous article, J. B. Toews labels this type of historiography "Favorite Opinions on the Russian Mennonite Past," though he also tends to perpetuate the "golden age" myth. See "The Russian Mennonites: Some introductory Comments," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 48 (1974): 406. For an analysis of fictional commemorative retellings of the so-called "golden age" and Mennonites' abrupt departure from the Soviet Union or "break event" see Zacharias, *Rewriting the Break Event*.

⁴² F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 17, 21.

Reserve.⁴³ Mennonites also restructured their sectional homesteads to recreate a communal *Strassendorf* arrangement.⁴⁴ They gave their villages the same German names that they had used in Russia—Hoffnungsfeld, Osterwick, Schoenthal—but they were not meant to honor the new German nation-state or promote a national identity.⁴⁵ Rather, village names represented an attempt to sustain the memory of their previous locations.⁴⁶

Dominion and provincial governments were initially indifferent to Mennonites' cultural and religious peculiarities because they simply wanted capable farmers to grow the economy and populate the seemingly endless frontier. According to an 1877 speech given to a group of Mennonite pioneers by the Governor General of Canada, Lord Frederick Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood, First Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, "the battle to which we invite you is the battle against the wilderness."⁴⁷ Lady Harriot Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood, Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava specifically lauded the group's German sensibilities, stating in a August 21, 1877 diary entry, "The Mennonites are most desirable emigrants: they retain their best German characteristics, are hard working, honest, sober, simple, hardy people."⁴⁸ The East Reserve was a worthy adversary of scrub brush, rocky soil, and no infrastructure to speak of since the major industry was

⁴³ Krahn, "West Reserve (Manitoba, Canada)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified February 20, 2014, accessed October 6, 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=West_Reserve_\(Manitoba,_Canada\)&oldid=106431](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=West_Reserve_(Manitoba,_Canada)&oldid=106431).

⁴⁴ Mennonite rezoning of their individual patents was recognized by an amendment to the 1872 Dominion Lands Act which stated "that, in the case of settlements being formed of immigrants in communities, (such for instance as those of Mennonites or Icelanders,) the Minister of the Interior may vary or waive, in his discretion, the foregoing requirements as to residence and cultivation on each separate quarter-section entered as a homestead." See Canada, *Statutes*, 1876, p. 75, 39 Vic., ch. 19, sec. 9, amending sub-sec. 1 of sec. 33 of the 1874 Act. Quoted in *ibid.*, 36. See also R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 126.

⁴⁵ Mennonites' self-referential place names differed from other ethnic groups on the frontier. For instance, Ukrainian immigrants embraced fin de siècle Ukrainian nationalism and gave their villages explicitly nationalist names such as Bohdan (a Cossack leader known for his 1648 revolt against Polish rule), Szewczenko (a nineteenth-century poet), and Myroslaw (a university student who assassinated the Polish governor of Galicia in 1908). See Swyripa *Storied Landscapes*, 50.

⁴⁶ See P. P. Klassen, "Die Namen der Dörfer wanderten mit," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 13 (2012): 7-30.

⁴⁷ Recorded in a letter from Abraham Doerksen, Heinrich Doerksen, David Toews, Klass Peters, Benjamin Ewert, to R. B. Bennett, Director General, National Service April 27, 1917, Benjamin Ewert fonds, CMBC collection, MHC. Quoted in F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 370.

⁴⁸ Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, *My Canadian Journal 1872-8: Extracts from my letters home written while Lord Dufferin was Governor-General* (London: John Murry, 1891), 332.

trapping.⁴⁹ Manitoba remained at the very margins of Anglo-Canadian geography and society, though Mennonites quickly set about rectifying this by cutting trails, draining fields, removing rocks from the land, and experimenting with wheat cultivation.

In due course, Manitoba's provincial leadership invited a diverse cast of participants to battle nature. Although Mennonites represented the first substantial wave of prairie immigrants—and remained its largest German-speaking minority—subsequent waves of migrants from the United States, Nordic countries, and the German, Russian, and Habsburg Empires expanded the province's population. Icelanders arrived in Manitoba in the mid-1870s due to the island's poor economic conditions and the eruption of Mount Askja. They too received an exclusive land grant and named it New Iceland. In the 1880s, large numbers of German-speaking Lutherans from Russia (especially Ukraine and Volhynia) and Central Europe (including "Galicia" and southern Hungary) also established themselves on the prairies in close proximity to the Mennonites.

Generally speaking, the entire manner of Canadian colonization made the Mennonite settlers initially feel comfortable but eventually led to confusion when Canada asserted itself as an independent country.⁵⁰ Mennonites likely felt themselves to be "special" in the eyes of British authorities since the government extended a direct assistance loan in the amount of \$100,000 CAD to the colonists—an advantage that it had not previously given to non-British settlers.⁵¹ Furthermore, Lowe's 1873 letter to the Mennonite delegation cast the Dominion's guarantees in the language of a *Privilegium*,

⁴⁹ In 1870, the Red River Colony of southern Manitoba had a population of 11,960 individuals that included 5,720 French-speaking Métis, 4,080 English-speaking Métis, 1,600 Anglo-Canadian or Anglo-American "whites," and 560 indigenous individuals. There were also about fifty individuals from other countries. See Adams G. Archibald, Fort Garry, to the secretary of state of the provinces, Ottawa, December 9, 1870, cited in Gilles Martel, "When a Majority Becomes a Minority: The French-Speaking Métis in the Canadian West," in Dean R. Louder and Eric Waddell eds., *French America: Mobility, Identity, and Minority Experience Across the Continent*, Franklin Philip trans. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 73; Norma J. Hall, "Census Making at Red River Settlement," Provisional Government of Assiniboia, accessed December 1, 2014. <https://hallnjan2.wordpress.com/the-red-river-resistance/red-river-censuses/>.

⁵⁰ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 37.

⁵¹ Gerald E. Dirks, *Canada's Refugee Policy: Indifference or Opportunism?* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), 30. See also Ernst Correll, "The Mennonite Loan in the Canadian Parliament, 1875," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 20, no. 4 (October 1946): 255-75.

even though most of the terms were part of its standard immigration policy.⁵² The letter only gave Mennonites two unique provisions: the ability to establish block settlements and exclusive management of their schools. Unbeknownst to the Mennonites, the latter provision actually remained outside the Dominion's jurisdiction since education matters were handed over to the provinces under the British North American Act of 1867. Its inclusion in Lowe's letter to the Mennonites eventually caused serious misunderstandings when the province started enforcing standardized public education.⁵³ The government did not necessarily intend for the reserves to be permanent—as its Indian reserves were meant to be—but were merely a means of attracting and settling pioneers.⁵⁴

The Fluid Frontier Meets the Solidifying State

During the 1870s, Manitoba's small bureaucracy possessed neither the ambition nor the ability to implement legislation across its great territory, so Mennonites' self-perception as "subjects" or "citizens" was of relatively little consequence. Yet by 1890, authorities began conflating good governance with a range of initiatives from literacy to hygiene to the introduction of municipal districts. In this year, Manitoba passed the Public School Act, which repealed provincial funding for parochial schools by establishing a taxpayer-based system, and insinuated that the state curriculum would be

⁵² The specific conditions given by Lowe to the Mennonites on July 23, 1873 included transportation credits and supplies; complete exemption from military service; the right to affirm oaths, rather than swearing; the freedom to maintain their own schools and religious institutions; free land to all males twenty-one years or older on block settlements; and the ability to expand their settlements with these attendant privileges. See F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 192. Francis writes "The Mennonites have always referred to Lowe's letter as the 'privileges' and regarded it as their Magna Carta." See *In Search of Utopia*, 47.

⁵³ The letter's tenth point states, "The fullest privilege of exercising their religious principles is by law afforded the Mennonites, without any kind of molestation or restriction whatever, and *the same* privilege extends to the education of their children in schools [emphasis added]." Prior to the document's ratification by Order-in-Council it was amended to read "The Mennonites will have the fullest privileges of exercising their religious principles and educating their children in schools, *as provided by law*, without any kind of molestation or restriction whatever [emphasis added]." The former enshrines Mennonite autonomy within law while the latter makes it subject to the law. Quoted in F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 338-339. The discrepancy between Loewe's letter and the Order-in-Council has provoked much debate in the historiography. For an nuanced discussion of the debate see Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 141-142.

⁵⁴ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 41.

taught in English.⁵⁵ The Act came on the heels of legislation that established municipal governments in the countryside that were tasked with collecting property taxes for public schools. These developments sharpened Mennonite attitudes about public education and paved the way for a schism between associative Mennonites who accepted a public school English-language curriculum and their separatist brethren who did not.

In the Western provinces, standardized education and municipal governments represented more than a moral goal of establishing a shared culture or a practical goal of increased efficiency, but an attempt to wrest control from local authorities.⁵⁶ The Public School Act was one aspect of what sociologist Bruce Curtis calls Canada's "educational state." Imbedded in the broader nineteenth century Progressive Movement, the Public School Act aimed to normalize Anglo culture in Manitoba society.⁵⁷ Manitoba's creation of municipal governments also aligns with political scientist James Scott's concept of "legibility," which describes government attempts to standardize communication, interpretation, and social space in general. Both goals were intended help provincial authorities efficiently observe and control their populaces.⁵⁸

In 1878, twelve years before the passage of the Public School Act, East Reserve *Ältesten*—Gerhard Wiebe from the Bergthal group and Peter Toews from the Kleine Gemeinde—were the first Mennonite leaders to convert their private schools to public status since it allowed them to collect provincial money.⁵⁹ These early "public" schools

⁵⁵ The Public School Act did not explicitly name English as the official language of instruction in provincial schools but a second act passed by the government in 1890 stipulated the use of English in all government, legislative, and judicial matters. It was therefore widely assumed that English would also be the primary language of instruction in government-supported schools. See Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 106-107. Historian Benjamin Bryce points to a similar tactic used by the Ontario government in 1880s and 1890s. "Even when German was a subject of instruction, it occupied a relatively marginal place in an overall educational experience organized firmly around several separate English subjects." See "Linguistic Ideology and State Power: German and English Education in Ontario, 1880-1912," *The Canadian Historical Review* 94, no. 2 (June 2013): 224.

⁵⁶ Bryce, "Linguistic Ideology and State Power," 208.

⁵⁷ Bruce Curtis, *Building the Educational State: Canada, West, 1836-1871* (London, ON: Falmer, 1988). In the United States, Carlos Kevin Blanton writes of a corresponding "Progressive paradigm" that entailed standardized English-language instruction. See *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1836-1981* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 42-43.

⁵⁸ James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 80.

⁵⁹ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 62-63; Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 162.

existed under the broad supervision of either the Protestant or Catholic section of the Provincial Board of Education, which handed out grants to the local trustees. With the encouragement of the land agent Hespeler, who was now the Winnipeg Commissioner of Immigration and Agriculture, Mennonites registered thirty-six public schools. Roughly an equal number remained private.⁶⁰ However, when Mennonites recognized the strings attached to the “free” money—such as teaching licenses and examinations—their enthusiasm cooled. Suspicious of the government’s ulterior motives, G. Wiebe stated, “It didn’t take long until we discerned where the matter was leading and so we quickly backed out and accepted no more money. Oh, how much we would have liked to see the Kleine Gemeinde do likewise.”⁶¹ Within two years, the number of public schools dropped to twenty-two and by 1883 there were only seven, including six from the Kleine Gemeinde.⁶² Though the number of Mennonite public schools ticked upward in the following years, a plurality of Mennonites remained wary of public education and retained their private status.

Mennonites were not opposed to education or even learning English.⁶³ They were simply opposed to the British and Canadian nationalisms that were embedded in a public curriculum. They feared that school marches resembled military drills, sports drew children away from home, and the acquisition of advanced skills encouraged youths to move to the city.⁶⁴ They valued education as a path to run a family farm and to participate in religious life. For these specific purposes, girls age six to twelve and boys age six to fourteen were instructed in reading, writing, language, arithmetic, and the Bible.⁶⁵ Even the schoolhouse was endowed with religious meaning since it doubled as a church.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ William Janzen, *Limits on Liberty: The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite, and Doukhobor Communities in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 90.

⁶¹ G. Wiebe, *Causes and History*, 55.

⁶² Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 63-64.

⁶³ It is important to remember that Mennonites’ first language was *Plautdietsch*. In addition to German—which was important for religious reasons—English would effectively be their third language. Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 167-168; Guenther, “Ältester Martin C. Friesen (1889-1968),” 189.

⁶⁴ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*, 105.

⁶⁵ Foght, *A Survey of Education*, 174.

⁶⁶ Guenther, “Ältester Martin C. Friesen (1889-1968),” 192.

Their fears were justified. In the Ontario context, historian Benjamin Bryce bluntly states, “From the moment German was no longer used as a language of instruction, there were no German schools in Ontario.”⁶⁷ When there were no German schools, Mennonites were anxious that there would be no Mennonite schools and when there were no Mennonite schools, parents feared their children would be lost to Anglo-Canadian society. Mennonites who were skeptical of public education agreed with Gellner that in a modern society, the “monopoly of legitimate education is now more important, more central than is the monopoly of legitimate violence.”⁶⁸ Violence controls individuals from without, but education controls them within.

Thus, the question of German-language schools reveals the challenge of discerning which aspects of faith and culture were essential for maintaining the Mennonite confession. It also reveals a common problem for diasporic groups when they encounter modernity. Anthropologist Steven Vertovec argues that when individuals attempt to replicate traditional cultural-religious practices in secular places, they are required to think critically about questions of time, space, and religious practice.⁶⁹ In Russia, Mennonites were not required to discern between which aspects of their lives were sacred/secular and cultural/religious, but now they were required to. In Canada, was education a cultural or religious matter? What of dress, food, and occupation? What of nonresistance? Generally speaking, was Mennonitism a seamless cultural-religious way of life or a set of so-called “essentials,” carved out of an essentially secular lifestyle? Anthropologist Werner Schiffauer records a similar quandary in his study of Turkish Muslim peasants who relocate to Germany, noting that “during sacred times, society no longer changes into a religious community but, rather, one leaves the society and enters the religious community—if possible, we must add, since the opposition between secular and sacred times is now determined by the more fundamental notions of the working day and leisure.”⁷⁰ Thus, “the reconfigured distinctions of sacred and secular space and

⁶⁷ Bryce, “Linguistic Ideology and State Power,” 232.

⁶⁸ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 33.

⁶⁹ Vertovec, ‘Religion and Diaspora,’ 287.

⁷⁰ Werner Schiffauer, “Migration and Religiousness,” in *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, ed. Thomas Gerholm and Yngve Georg Lithman (London: Mansell, 1988), 150.

time... are matched by the sharpening of distinctions between religion and culture.”⁷¹ Mennonites wrestled with the question of whether the working day—or in this case the school day—was a discreet, areligious interval in daily life or simply one facet of a unified cultural-religious whole.

By the mid-1880s, some Mennonites hoped to carve a middle path between private and public education by establishing a teacher-training institute to prepare Mennonite teachers for work in public schools. One such individual was the Bergthal (West Reserve) *Ältester* Johann Funk. A small, stout man with a shaved face, Funk was born in 1836 in the Chortitza Colony, Russia and relocated along with his wife, Susanna, and family to the East Reserve in 1875. Awhile later, they relocated to the West Reserve, where he took up the position as *Ältester*. Funk’s progressive position was often informed as much by his theology as his enthusiasm for conflict. Despite strong opposition, he pushed the Bergthaler Mennonites to create a teacher-training institute in Gretna, Manitoba named the Gretna Normal School.⁷² He feuded with his allies over the school’s location, maintained a running battle with his conservative brethren over modernization, and quarreled with the General Conference Mission Board over baptisms.⁷³

Another individual who promoted the teacher-training institute was school inspector Heinrich (Henry) H. Ewert. Ewert was equally vocal in his promotion of adapting Mennonite education to the Canadian context. Born in West Prussia and educated in Kansas, Iowa, and Missouri, he was a cosmopolitan educator who wanted Mennonite children to become Canadian citizens. When he moved to Manitoba in 1891, he served as a principal of the Gretna teacher-training institute and as Manitoba school inspector, a dual position that let him assess Mennonite schools from both a church and state perspective. Although he received a degree of support among Funk’s Bergthaler *Gemeinde*, he was a controversial figure in the broader Mennonite milieu due to his

⁷¹ Vertovec, ‘Religion and Diaspora,’ 287.

⁷² It was later renamed the Mennonite Educational Institute, and then the Mennonite Collegiate Institute.

⁷³ R. D. Thiessen “Funk, Johann (1836-1917),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified May 2008, accessed January 15, 2015, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/funk_johann_14E.html; Lawrence Klippenstein, “FUNK, JOHANN,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed January 19, 2015, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/funk_johann_14E.html.

Prussian background, identification with the United States, level of education, and his government salary, which meant that his loyalties were compromised.⁷⁴

Mennonites who advocated the teacher-training institute and public schooling looked beyond the reserves for support, a move that foreshadowed the growth of Mennonite conferences and government cooperation. They consulted Mennonites in the United States and reached out to the Provincial Board of Education's George Bryce, who encouraged the initiative. Yet the biggest boost to the teacher-training institute came when the Manitoba government established municipal government districts. An essential role of municipal governments was to collect property taxes for public schools and other services. Now Mennonites were faced with paying for both public and private schools. When the reserves' conservative groups complained to the Dominion's Deputy Minister of Justice, he replied that the government's hands were tied since municipal issues fell under provincial sovereignty.⁷⁵ Angered by their co-religionists, stymied by the Dominion's lack of jurisdiction, and unwilling to vote in provincial elections, Mennonites who were skeptical of the new legislation directed their displeasure towards individuals within their own group. Manitoba's Mennonite reserves were ripe for division.

Thus between 1890 and 1893, the Bergthal (West Reserve) church splintered over accepting government money for schools, the teacher-training institute, and the creation of municipal governments, railheads, and trading centers on the reserves.⁷⁶ The dispute sharpened the line between the province's *Ältesten*. Funk occupied the minority position. His group kept the Bergthal name though they only retained sixty-one of 476 families. The majority took the name "Sommerfelder," since their new *Ältester*, Abram Dörksen was from the village of Sommerfeld. The original East Reserve Bergthaler group also changed its name—in protest against the West Reserve Bergthalers—to "Chortitzer" since their *Ältester*, G. Wiebe (grandfather-in-law of M. C. Friesen) came from the village of Chortitz (Canada). Thus the Sommerfelder (East Reserve) and Chortitzer (West

⁷⁴ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 341-342.

⁷⁵ W. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 90.

⁷⁶ Klippenstein, "FUNK, JOHANN," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed January 19, 2015, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/funk_johann_14E.html.

Reserve) bodies were opposed to the initiatives but remained organizationally and geographically divided. Meanwhile, the original West Reserve Reinländer Mennonites led by *Ältester* Johann Wiebe, sided with the conservative Sommerfelders but remained ecclesiastically separate from them. Now there existed three new Mennonite factions in Manitoba that were opposed to the reforms: Sommerfelder (East Reserve to West Reserve), Chortitzer (East Reserve), Reinländer (West Reserve).⁷⁷ Despite their similarities, their continued separation from each other is significant since unification would mean forming an organization that transcended the authority of the *Gemeinde*.

Mennonites were only one of several non-English speaking groups in Manitoba who were opposed to the 1890 Public School Act, and clearly not the most organized. Before the legislation took effect, the province's large and vocal French-speaking population declared their opposition. According to B. Bryce "French and German were at two points on the same spectrum, facing off against a growing English linguistic ideology," though the German-speaking Mennonites lacked a political articulation of their Germanness.⁷⁸ French-speaking Manitobans did much of the legwork for checking the Public School Act's Anglo agenda. In 1896, Manitoba Premier Thomas Greenway and Canadian Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier sanctioned the Laurier-Greenway Compromise, which approved bilingual instruction in rural schools where more than ten foreign language-speaking pupils were present.⁷⁹ The deal benefited Bergthaler and Kleine Gemeinde communities since they could keep teaching their public schools in German, but it left a sour taste in the mouths of the emergent separatist Mennonites.

A new wave of Mennonite migrations between 1890 and 1905 brought the public school debate to the District of Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan became a province in 1905). Manitoba's burgeoning Mennonite population spawned migrations of conservative Reinländer and Sommerfelder families to points further west, where they created the

⁷⁷ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 171. See also Alf Redekopp, "Reinlander Mennoniten Gemeinde (Manitoba)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified August 23, 2013, accessed April 3, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Reinlander_Mennoniten_Gemeinde_\(Manitoba\)&oldid=93365](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Reinlander_Mennoniten_Gemeinde_(Manitoba)&oldid=93365).

⁷⁸ Bryce, "Linguistic Ideology and State Power," 212.

⁷⁹ When ten or more families requested religious instruction, the school would also be allowed to extend the school day for this purpose. F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 340; *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 96.

Rosthern and Swift Current Reserves.⁸⁰ After the move, 1,000 Sommerfelders resurrected the Bergthaler name so now there were two Bergthaler groups in Canada: the progressive Manitoba group and the conservative Saskatchewan group.⁸¹ In 1891, a group of families from West Prussia migrated to the territory on account of Germany's new conscription laws. They settled near Rosthern and were amicable to forming broad-based organizations similar to the ones that they belonged to in Germany.⁸² Families from the United States also filtered into the district, particularly after the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898.⁸³ They too accepted public schooling with little debate.⁸⁴

In 1905, Saskatchewan's Mennonites who were inclined toward public education established a teacher-training institute in the town of Rosthern, named the German-English Academy. As in Manitoba, the Academy was tasked with educating bilingual teachers for implementing a public school curriculum.⁸⁵ In 1906, the stocky and kind-faced David Toews became the school's principle and served in the position until 1917.⁸⁶ Perhaps more than any other individual during the twentieth-century, D. Toews promoted a vision of Canadian Mennonite unity and state cooperation. In 1884, he migrated from Russia to Kansas, where he studied under Ewert. He then moved to Manitoba in 1893 where he taught under Ewert's inspectorship for four years.⁸⁷ Like Ewert, he was an

⁸⁰ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 147; R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 146-147; Bender, Ens, and Jake Peters, "Sommerfeld Mennonites," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified January 31, 2014, accessed October 6, 2014 http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Sommerfeld_Mennonites&oldid=112425; Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 109.

⁸¹ Bender et al., "Sommerfeld Mennonites," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified January 31, 2014, accessed October 6, 2014 http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Sommerfeld_Mennonites&oldid=112425.

⁸² Krahn and R. D. Thiessen, "Regier, Peter (1851-1925)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified September 8, 2013, accessed March 28, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Regier,_Peter_\(1851-1925\)&oldid=101381](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Regier,_Peter_(1851-1925)&oldid=101381).

⁸³ Helmut Harder, *David Toews Was Here, 1870-1947* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2006), 55.

⁸⁴ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 114. W. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 27.

⁸⁵ H. Harder, *David Toews Was Here*, 73.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 68; John G. Rempel and R. D. Thiessen, "Toews, David (1870-1947)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, accessed April 3, 2015, last modified February 13, 2013, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Toews,_David_\(1870-1947\)&oldid=112895](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Toews,_David_(1870-1947)&oldid=112895).

⁸⁷ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 114.

interloper among Western Canada's Mennonites. Significantly, D. Toews' family had participated in the ill-fated journey of Mennonites from the Molotschna and Volga Trakt settlements to the Emirate of Bukhara—the so-called “Great Trek” of 1880-1884.⁸⁸ Guided by the charismatic Klaas Epp Jr., the group hoped to escape military conscription, obtain land, and reunite with Christ through Bukhara's “open door” in 1889. When the Emir refused their entry, the date passed, and the increasingly eccentric Epp declared himself Christ, the movement disintegrated and the Toews family moved to Kansas.⁸⁹ Tarnished by the incident in the eyes of his contemporaries, D. Toews rarely spoke of his childhood though he went on to enjoy success as a Mennonite leader. By 1914, he was elected *Ältester* of the Rosenort, Saskatchewan Mennonite community and was made the moderator of the Conference of Mennonites in Central Canada.⁹⁰ After the War, he organized the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC), which helped 20,000 of Russia's Mennonites relocate to Canada. A tireless fundraiser, D. Toews accepted both a farmer's milk-stained bills and a check from future Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King to fund Mennonite cooperation.⁹¹

In both provinces, Mennonites' ecclesiastical stratification and the arrival of autonomous Mennonites from other countries led to a growing sense that their traditional organization structure, the *Ältester*-led *Gemeinde*, was being eclipsed. Individuals involved with business and education, as well as families that settled on individual homesteads or moved to urban areas, formed churches with a more fluid relationship to Canadian society than traditional, *Ältester*-led groups. Less bounded by geography and individual personalities, these Mennonites nevertheless possessed a leadership elite who

⁸⁸ H. Harder, *David Toews Was Here*, 12-14.

⁸⁹ In later years, D. Toews' father, Jacob Toews, admitted that “the influence of those of our surrounding community who believed that Revelation 12:14 seemed to indicate that Russia had a service to render for the church.” See Jacob Toews, “A Short Sketch of My Life,” trans. and ed., Frank and Anna (Toews) Wenger (Aberdeen, Idaho, 1963), David Toews Project files, Mennonite Heritage Centre (hereafter MHC), 15. Quoted in H. Harder, *David Toews Was Here*, 13. On the Great Trek see Waldemar Janzen, “The Great Trek, Episode or Paradigm?” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (April, 1977): 127-39; Juhnke, “Rethinking the Great Trek,” *Mennonite Life* 62, no. 2 (Fall 2007), accessed April 3, 2015, <http://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-62-no-2/article/rethinking-the-great-trek/>.

⁹⁰ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 351.

⁹¹ H. Harder, *David Toews Was Here*, 73.

established Mennonite conferences, promoted Mennonite institutions, and advised churches on specific social and political matters.⁹² According to historian Frank H. Epp, “At one and the same time, [Mennonite organizations] represented an adjustment to a society which was obsessed with organizations and institution-building, and a protection from that society through institutions uniquely Mennonite.”⁹³

Mennonite public schooling therefore accompanied and aided the rise of Mennonite church conferences. In the 1890s, Ewert and D. Toews organized and led a series of Mennonite teaching conferences where educators could meet and exchange information.⁹⁴ By 1900, the conferences morphed into the “German-English Teachers’ Association of Southern Manitoba,” which invited Mennonite teachers to benefit from innovations in pedagogy introduced by the Department of Education. A corollary goal of the Association was to influence provincial legislation, a development that neatly combined education, democratic participation, and supralocal Mennonite organization.⁹⁵ Significantly, the two Mennonite communities that possessed a teacher-training institute, the Manitoba Bergthaler and Saskatchewan Rosenort Mennonites, organized the Conference of Mennonites in Central Canada in 1903. This organization aimed to “promote the fellowship of the Spirit among the various Mennonite congregations and to encourage and strengthen one another” and was a precursor to the nation-wide General Conference of Mennonites in Canada.⁹⁶ Its annual meetings welcomed “fraternal visitors”

⁹² For a more detailed description of *Ältester*-oriented and conference-oriented Mennonites see F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*, 23-25.

⁹³ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*, 49.

⁹⁴ The organization called itself the Western Local Conference of Public School Teachers of the Mennonite Settlement in Manitoba (*Westliche Lokal Konferenz der Distriktschullehrer in der mennonitischen Ansiedlung von Manitoba*). See Lawrence Klippenstein, “Western Local Mennonite Teachers’ Conference—An Early Minute Book,” *Manitoba Pageant* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1977), last modified January 22, 2014, accessed April 3, 2015, <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/pageant/22/mennoniteteachers.shtml>.

⁹⁵ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 113.

⁹⁶ Johann G. Rempel, ed. *Fuenfzig Jahre Konferenzbestrebungen, 1902-1952*, (Erster Teil 1902-1927), Zweiter Teil (1928-1952) (Rosthern, SK: Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada 1952,) 27. Quoted in H. Harder, *David Toews Was Here*, 67. Initially, the conference focused on promoting “home missions” in Canada but later expanded to include trans-local missionary, educational, and publishing functions. For a full description of the Conference of Mennonites in Central Canada (later renamed the General Conference of Mennonites in Canada and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada) and its transition to a national church conference see Ens, *Becoming a National Church* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2004).

from Mennonites across Canada and the United States.⁹⁷ In 1908, Ewert and D. Toews also helped found the publication *Der Mitarbeiter* to promote inter-church communication on conference and education issues.⁹⁸ By 1913, the Manitoba Bergthaler, *Brüdergemeinde*, and some Sommerfelder Mennonites formed a school commission (*Schulcommission*) that petitioned the Manitoba government to recognize it as the official Mennonite representative for education issues.⁹⁹ The teacher-training institutes not only prepared teachers for public schools but also prepared Mennonites to cooperate with provincial authorities and organize on a trans-local and transnational basis.

Ewert and D. Toews resembled a growing number of Mennonites in Germany, Russia, and the United States who viewed the liberal late-nineteenth century zeitgeist as providential for the confession.¹⁰⁰ By compromising with governments over specific issues, such as education or military conscription, they hoped to sustain the confession while sharing in the fruits of modernity. Ironically, these Mennonites, who had left Russia in the 1870s, began resembling their counterparts who remained in Russia and who had already accepted alternative military service and Russian instruction in their schools.¹⁰¹ Likewise in the United States, college-educated Mennonite intellectuals, such as historian C. Henry Smith, disparaged the confession's isolationist tendencies and argued that Mennonite values, such as the separation of church and state and freedom of conscience, were *democratic* values. In this respect, Mennonites should not fear acculturation but accept, if not embrace, it as the confession's destiny.¹⁰² Yet separatist Mennonites continued to impede this development by confusing state authorities and

⁹⁷ H. Harder, *David Toews Was Here*, 68.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁹⁹ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 113.

¹⁰⁰ For accounts of this phenomenon in the German, American, and Russian contexts see respectively, Goossen, "Into a Great Nation;" Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War*; and Urry, "Constitutionalism and Solidarity (1905-1908)," in *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 111-136.

¹⁰¹ J. B. Toews, "The Russian Mennonites," 405; Peter Braun, "Education Among the Mennonites in Russia," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified August 23, 2013, accessed April 2, 2015, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Education_Among_the_Mennonites_in_Russia&oldid=91640.

¹⁰² See Perry Bush, "'United Progressive Mennonites': Bluffton College and Anabaptist Higher Education, 1913-1945," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74, no. 3 (July 2000): 357-80.

maintaining their own organization structure. At the Rosthern Academy's annual meeting in 1909, D. Toews stated, "Every good endeavor has its opponents... We are not surprised by the fact that our school project in Saskatchewan is not recognized by all in our community."¹⁰³ Theologically, separatist Mennonites believed that God worked exclusively through their local communities while associative Mennonites believed that God was at work in the *whole* world.

In contrast, the reactive Chortitzer (East Reserve) leader G. Wiebe—who by this point was firmly against public schooling and Mennonite institution-building alike—argued that the "heavy battle against the princes of the world" was increasingly strenuous since "the wicked enemy knows how to throw such clever slings." A particularly insidious trap was Mennonite schooling that accepted "worldly wisdom" as God's wisdom. Singling out Canada's public schools for special condemnation, he speculated that their founders and proponents do not "stem from Bethlehem, where the three kings knelt at the manger to worship the child Jesus; rather they step from Babylon, that is, they produce confusion... the fruit of worldly knowledge and arrogance."¹⁰⁴ In G. Wiebe's view, there were only three Mennonite *Ältesten* who were "standing up to the beast [presumably, the beast of Revelation]:" Chortitzer (East Reserve) [David?] Stoesz, Sommerfelder (West Reserve) [Abraham?] Dörksen, and Reinländer (West Reserve) Johann Wiebe, "with their beloved preachers, and they try as best [as] possible to ward off the false teaching" though "there may be a few more in the United States."¹⁰⁵ Consequently, two categories of Mennonites in Canada began to emerge in the first decade of the nineteenth century: associative Mennonites who looked to Canada as a national home and their conferences as a religious home and separatist Mennonites who desired no national home and retained their local focus.

In 1908, the division among Saskatchewan Mennonites over public schooling drew provincial authorities into the fray and solidified the divisions between separatist and associative Mennonites. It also confirmed provincial authorities' suspicions that the

¹⁰³ H. Harder, *David Toews Was Here*, 74.

¹⁰⁴ G. Wiebe, *Causes and History*, 63.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 63, 67.

Mennonites were a contentious group of people. Under the leadership of *Ältester* Jacob Wiens, the Reinländer Mennonite *Gemeinde*—which numbered 950 members, spread across three churches—began excommunicating families who sent their children to public schools and avoided its seventeen private schools.¹⁰⁶ The stakes were high since excommunicated members were not simply banned from the church but were boycotted by the entire *Gemeinde*, and were perhaps banned from heaven too.¹⁰⁷ D. Toews’ Rosenort church received the excommunicated families, which no doubt displeased the Reinländer Mennonites.¹⁰⁸ The dispute soon came to the attention of Premier Thomas Walter Scott who threatened to remove Reinländer leaders’ ability to solemnize marriages and to force public school attendance on the entire community.¹⁰⁹ The threat was met with silence and the government set up a Royal Commission of Inquiry at Warman in December 1908 to arbitrate the skirmish.

D. Toews and J. Wiens were present at the meeting and took very different positions on compliance with earthly authorities and the Mennonite metanarrative. Using an interpreter, a provincial delegate asked J. Wiens whether the Bible commands Mennonites to refuse sending their children to public schools. He responded with a passage from Deuteronomy 11:19 that instructs the Israelites to teach the word of the Lord to their children.¹¹⁰ Alternately, D. Toews stated, “Our Church believes in public schools and progress all along” and that they favored “public schools, progressive

¹⁰⁶ Importantly, a large number of these children came from families of the small Mennonite merchant class. See Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 114. For a detailed discussion of the incident and its fallout see Alan M. Guenther, “‘Barred from Heaven and Cursed Forever’: Old Colony Mennonites and the 1908 Commission of Inquiry Regarding Public Education,” *Historical Papers 2007, Canadian Society of Church History: Annual Conference, University of Saskatchewan, 27-29 May 2007* (2008): 129-148.

¹⁰⁷ Guenther, “‘Barred from Heaven and Cursed Forever,’” 136.

¹⁰⁸ H. Harder, *David Toews Was Here*, 55.

¹⁰⁹ [Walter Scott], Memorandum for Mr. Calder, marked “Confidential,” 2 Sept. 1908, File Ed. 12 d., SAB. Cited in Guenther, “‘Barred from Heaven and Cursed Forever,’” 133.

¹¹⁰ To the annoyance of government representatives, Wiens deferred questions over his authority to the Reinländer members in attendance because he did not consider himself to be a “leader” so much as the first among equals. See Guenther, “‘Barred from Heaven and Cursed Forever,’” 133. Other scriptures used by Reinländer Mennonites to justify the excommunications include Matthew 18:15-18; Mark 7:21-24; Romans 16:17-18; Thessalonians 3:6, 14; 2 John 9, 10; 2 Timothy 3:1-6; and 2 Timothy 3:15. See “Inquiry re Practices of Old Colonier Mennonite Church: Minutes of Evidence,” Proceedings of Commission of Inquiry at Warman, Dec. 28 & 29, 1908, File Ed. 12 d., Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon, SK. Quoted in W. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 102.

schools, and they [Reinländer] don't believe in them. We believe in voting, and they forbid it."¹¹¹ Soon thereafter, Reinländer elders assembled their congregations and declared they could not accept the claims of their "rebellious" brethren, come what may.¹¹² The faceoff eventually settled into a stalemate. The government did not press the issue and Mennonite leaders eased off of excommunicating parents who sent their children to public schools.¹¹³

The confrontation testifies to a clear separation of paths for Canada's Mennonites. Associative Mennonites were comfortable with rights rather than privileges and did not conflate education with religion. Alternately, separatist Mennonites thought that the rules of citizenship did not apply to them—doubly so, since they appealed to the authority of both scripture and their special privileges to preserve their strictly religious schools.¹¹⁴

On an existential level, separatist Mennonites viewed the world through a mythical, biblical lens that evaporated nuance and rendered chronology and history irrelevant. Among the (East Reserve) Chortitzer Mennonites, G. Wiebe, had no problem comparing Israel's departure from Egypt, King David's battle with the Amalekites, as well as Jesus' disciples to the Mennonites in Canada.¹¹⁵ Viewed uncritically and ahistorically, biblical passages and their interpretation appeared so obvious that there was no other way to understand them. Separatist Mennonites believed that the "correct" interpretation of the Bible was available to anyone who studied it with enough humility.¹¹⁶ Individuals could obey it and remain in the *Gemeinde* or reject it and (literally) go to hell. Separatist Mennonites' comprehension of reality was not so different

¹¹¹ "Inquiry re Practices of Old Colonier Mennonite Church," 43. Quoted in Guenther, "Barred from Heaven and Cursed Forever," 131.

¹¹² "Rev. Jacob Wiens, bishop to the Government of Saskatchewan, Regina, January 21, 1909, Scott Papers, Saskatchewan Archives Board, 12d, 118G. Cited in W. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 103.

¹¹³ W. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 103.

¹¹⁴ Guenther observes during the Reinländer testimony that "The language of 'privilege' rather than 'right' pervades the ministers' discourse," indicating a belief that their *Gemeinde* was wholly beyond the pale of provincial authorities. See "Barred from Heaven and Cursed Forever," 142.

¹¹⁵ G. Wiebe, *Causes and History*, 4-5.

¹¹⁶ According to Guenther, "The commissioners rightly pointed out that the role of interpretation is actually more determinative than that of the Scripture alone. This was something that the ministers apparently found difficult to comprehend." See "Barred from Heaven and Cursed Forever," 139.

from an Early Modern worldview, which reversed the places of Christianity and science. According to philosopher Jacques Barzun, “in earlier times people rarely thought of themselves as ‘having’ or ‘belonging to’ a religion... just as today nobody has ‘a physics’; there is only one and it is automatically taken to be the transcript of reality.”¹¹⁷ To accept a modern, twentieth-century narrative of progress, acknowledge that humans controlled events, and concede that politics determined human activity meant denying God’s singular authority—a fantastic and perverse proposition. In short, separatist Mennonites were a literate people and crafted a narrative about the past but it was not an historical one.

Separatist Mennonites’ brand of mythological thinking was an existential threat to associative Mennonites and government authorities since notions of human progress—from the “beginning” of Mennonite institutions to the “expansion” of Anglo culture—required *historical* thinking. Associative Mennonites and Canadian officials were irritated that the Reinländer Mennonites did not acknowledge their progressive narrative, which appeared to them to be manifestly obvious. For the nation to function and for the modern zeitgeist to be realized, separatist *Gemeinden* would have to deny God’s ahistorical authority and accept the “progress” of Canada’s national history as transcendent, which was not a concession they were willing to make.

Ironically, the separatist Mennonites’ stance against Canadian integration provoked admiration from confused nationalists in Germany who viewed language preservation as an expression of German patriotism. According to one 1908 article in the *Berliner Zeitschrift*, most *Reichsdeutsche* quickly lost their language and culture upon landing on North America’s shores but the Mennonites had retained their Germanness despite having not lived in Central Europe for generations. Conflating the Mennonite colonies in Canada with the German colonies in Africa, the paper encouraged the world’s German-speaking enclaves to remain connected to their presumed homeland.¹¹⁸ Yet separatist Mennonites were as disinterested in preserving a link to Germany as they were

¹¹⁷ Jacques Barzun, *From dawn to decadence: 500 Years of western cultural life: 1500 to the present*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 24.

¹¹⁸ Reprinted in “Mennoniten als Kolonisten,” *Mennonitische Blätter*, 1908, 31-32. Cited in Goossen, “Into a Great Nation,” 18.

to forming one with Canada, a position that was confounding to Provincial authorities and German nationalists alike.

A Fight for Freedom During the “War for Democracy”

Provincial attitudes toward education shifted decisively in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the west, an expanding education bureaucracy and a growing immigrant population provoked the change. The “Progressive paradigm’s” seeds now bore the fruits of a large education bureaucracy that was aided by reliable transportation, detailed statistics on the provinces’ inhabitants, an army of school inspectors, and a legal system amenable to government regulation. While the country’s French-speaking minority remained a perennial concern for its Anglo majority, provincial leaders also harbored fears about the large and diverse immigrant populations that settled on the prairie in the preceding decades.¹¹⁹ According to one prominent Manitoba journalist, schools were destined to be the “blast furnaces” for the Canadian melting pot, which would lead to a “fusion of races” and “the new Canadian.”¹²⁰ The Mennonites were no exception. An American education specialist appointed by the Saskatchewan government named Harold W. Foght bluntly stated that a Mennonite child’s “only history is that of the Mennonite church. As for the ideals, the aspirations and the future of the Canadian people, they are largely meaningless to him; for while he lives in Canada he is not of Canada.”¹²¹ The First World War was not the catalyst of Manitoba and Saskatchewan’s struggle against Mennonite private schools but the culmination of a quarter century of policies that promoted Anglo culture and national loyalty through education.

Between 1896 and 1914, about 2.5 million immigrants entered Canada, a significant number, considering that the country’s population in 1891 stood at 4,833,239. About half settled in the central and western provinces.¹²² In 1871 there were fewer than

¹¹⁹ As the British system of governance transformed from empire to commonwealth and as the Crown’s “contingent accommodations” gave way to the rights and duties of democratic nation-states, government officials at all levels no longer tolerated local or regional diversity and, in fact, they often feared it. This broadly observable phenomenon is outlined in Burbank and Cooper.

¹²⁰ George Fisher Chipman, “Winnipeg: The Melting Pot,” *The Canadian Magazine*, September 1909, 410.

¹²¹ Foght, 147.

¹²² Wagner, 118.

75,000 people on the prairies; in 1891 there were 250,000; and in 1911, there were 1.3 million.¹²³ As in the previous decades, there were plenty of German-speakers but the majority arrived from Russia and Austria-Hungary since the United States remained the destination of choice for most *Reichsdeutschen*.¹²⁴ In 1911 the total number of immigrants living in the western provinces ranged from forty-one to fifty percent of the population.¹²⁵ Little had changed by 1921. That year's census revealed that over forty percent of the prairie population was either born outside of Canada or the British Isles or possessed one parent who was.¹²⁶ Owing to their prolific reproduction, the prairie's Mennonite population increased during this period from 31,524 to 44,964.¹²⁷

Government officials and the Anglo press believed that the process of turning immigrant communities into Canadians began when minorities rejected Old World traditions and learned English.¹²⁸ Conservatives took an imperialistic position by demanding that minorities become "infused with British patriotism," while Liberals were more nationally focused and wanted minorities to embrace a Canadian identity. Neither party was willing to argue for the advantages of heterogeneity since it portended the "Balkanization" (i.e. regression) of the country's population.¹²⁹ In a unique twist on a biblical story that was favored by Mennonites, Anglo-Canadians voiced concerns that the country was building a "Tower of Babel" by allowing ethnic enclaves to retain their languages. Whereas Mennonites used the story to emphasize the hubris of a monolingual society building a tower to heaven, Canada's Anglo commentators emphasized the

¹²³ Ibid., 119.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 125.

¹²⁵ According to the 1911 government census, the immigrant populations of Manitoba and Saskatchewan were 41%, and 50%, respectively. See Roderic P. Beaujot and Don Kerr, eds., *The Changing Face of Canada: Essential Readings in Population*, (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2007), 146.

¹²⁶ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*, 99.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹²⁸ Immediately before the war, Canadian Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier stated that the twentieth century would "belong to Canada" because it was the "last, best West." Quoted in John Herd Thompson and Stephen J. Randall, *Canada and the United States: Ambivalent Allies*, 4th ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 79. See also R. Loewen, *Village among Nations*, 10.

¹²⁹ Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 211.

story's abominable polyglot consequences. Aside from biblical analogies and blurry platitudes, educationalist Neil Sutherland summarizes that Anglo Canadians "projected their fear for the future much more clearly than they did the vision of it."¹³⁰

The country's integration fears came into sharp relief during the First World War. Historian Rita Chin argues that questions of integration become more acute within environments that provokes them.¹³¹ At no time was integration more acute in the Canadian context than during the years surrounding the First World War. Canada's participation in the conflict, its independent signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty, and its membership in the League of Nations created an opportunity for provincial leaders to reimagine their history as a march toward Canadization. The war cultivated a strong sense of national identity within its English-speaking and Protestant middle class, even as the population remained fractured along lines of class, ethnicity, religion, and region.¹³²

The war cultivated the attitude that Canada was fighting for democracy, and government officials conflated this objective with unilingualism. According to historian John Herd Thompson,

"'Democracy' was a word into which the people of the West could sink their teeth, teeth cut on direct legislation, the initiative, referendum and recall. 'Democracy' was what the farm organizations were going to use to confront the 'big vested interests,' and the prohibitionists to crush liquor. It was a concept used to explain the need to assimilate the immigrant, and to justify the need for unilingual education. What better reason to fight a war?"¹³³

"Democracy," was such a broad and righteous justification for war that the Dominion did not require a sophisticated propaganda machine. Supporters emerged spontaneously at the municipal level to denounce Germany and encourage military enlistment even as they demanded more immediate displays of citizenship such as

¹³⁰ Ibid., 211.

¹³¹ Rita Chin, *The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 2007.

¹³² Tom Mitchell, "The Manufacture of Souls of Good Quality: Winnipeg's 1919 National Conference on Canadian Citizenship, English-Canadian Nationalism, and the New Order after the Great War," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 31, no. 4 (Winter 1996-97): 21.

¹³³ John Herd Thompson, *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914-1918* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1978), 30.

English language public schooling. Once “democracy,” the war, and public education were conflated, University of Saskatchewan president Walter Murray felt confident proclaiming to a group of graduating Manitoba schoolteachers that prior to the war “the problem of racial assimilation quickened our interest in the schools as agencies for... the adoption of a common language. Today the war has intensified our interest in education as a factor in nationalization.”¹³⁴ Fighting German-speakers in rural Saskatchewan schoolhouses was as good as fighting Germans at Vimy Ridge.

German-speakers consequently became a hot topic for Dominion and provincial governments. What began as tolerance in the early years of the conflict transformed to oppression by the war’s end. Perhaps the Dominion’s most extensive discriminatory measure was its passage of the War-time Elections Act in 1917. The Act disenfranchised enemy aliens, naturalized citizens of enemy origin who arrived in Canada after 1902, and all conscientious objectors. Mennonites welcomed the Act since, in a roundabout way, it reaffirmed their status as conscientious objectors.¹³⁵ Everywhere, the stereotype of “hardworking Germans” was recast into “militaristic Huns” and speaking German or possessing even a tenuous connection to the geographic region between the Rhine and the Dnieper Rivers provoked suspicion.¹³⁶ Interestingly, much of the country’s paranoia was directed south of the border, where the presence of an estimated seven million German-Americans stoked Canadian fears of a covert attack on the British Empire.¹³⁷

Canadian officials respected Mennonites’ objection to military service but the war gave them new ammunition against *Gemeinden* that steadfastly maintained their rudimentary private schools.¹³⁸ According to one journalist writing for *The New Outlook*

¹³⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

¹³⁶ Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Poles, Austrians, Slovenes, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Turks, and Armenians or individuals who spoke these languages even though they may not have arrived from a Central Power country were all under suspicion. Altogether, the “enemy threat” was as vague as it was diffuse. Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada’s Great War*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 119.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹³⁸ Aside from a great deal of red tape and a few scandals over unbaptized Mennonite young men avoiding the draft, Dominion authorities largely accommodated Mennonites’ refusal to serve in the military—though press antagonism of their German and nonviolent culture remained strong. See Chapter 15, “The War and Military Exemption,” in F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 381.

on Mennonite education, “When the war spirit got hold of the West, and to poor equipment were added the dual sins of pacifism and German speech, the patience of public and officials could no longer stand the strain. Recourse was had to compulsion.”¹³⁹ In 1915, the Liberal candidate Tobias Norris replaced the Conservative Rodmond Roblin as Premier of Manitoba. Following in his predecessor’s footsteps, Norris immediately called for compulsory public school attendance and mandatory instruction in the English language for all of the province’s children. Like others, he reasoned that citizenship started with the cultivation of national identity at a young age.¹⁴⁰ In the same year, Liberal candidate William Martin became the premier of Saskatchewan and heightened his predecessor’s threats against Mennonites by fining parents who did not send their children to an available public school.¹⁴¹

Under this hardened stance, within a broader context of anti-Germanism, and with associative Mennonites still assured of the 1890 bilingual proviso, Mennonite public school enrollment continued to grow. By the end of 1915, nearly 2,600 Mennonite children mostly from the Bergthaler (West Reserve) and Kleine Gemeinde (East Reserve) groups were enrolled in Manitoba’s public schools.¹⁴² Another 1,000 students—from the Chortitzer (East Reserve) and Reinländer (West Reserve) groups—attended private schools.¹⁴³ A similar division existed in Saskatchewan.

Yet the provincial governments were jealous parents of “Canada’s children.” They wanted all Mennonites enrolled in *monolingual* public schools. On March 10, 1916 Manitoba passed the School Attendance Act, which overturned the section of the 1890 Act that permitted bilingual instruction.¹⁴⁴ Mennonites were aware of the proposed change before it went into effect and its associative wing—including Bergthaler, Kleine

¹³⁹ *The New Outlook* (New York), March 7, 1928. Quoted in Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, p. 180, n. 19.

¹⁴⁰ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 254.

¹⁴¹ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 116.

¹⁴² F. H. Epp, reports this was an all-time high with over sixty schools receiving public money. See *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 97; Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 113,

¹⁴³ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 113, 153; F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920*, 352.

¹⁴⁴ Rose Bruno-Jofre, “Citizenship and Schooling in Manitoba, 1918-1945,” *Manitoba History* 36 (Autumn/Winter 1998-1999), last modified October 23, 2011, accessed January 21, 2015, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/36/citizenship.shtml.

Gemeinde, and some Sommerfelder Mennonites—appealed to the government on political grounds by stating that if the Mennonites “were betrayed [by the new legislation], they would feel so offended that they would cease to support the Liberal government.”¹⁴⁵ Of course, there were other ethnic groups in Manitoba and Saskatchewan that were opposed to the new laws, including the highly vocal and well-organized Francophone and Ukrainian minorities. Like associative Mennonites, they pursued dissent within the political system, not against it.¹⁴⁶

Separatist Mennonites also petitioned the government to withhold the Act but they did not avail themselves of a political threat since belonging to political parties entailed an alternative loyalty to the *Gemeinde*. While the associative Bergthaler petition stated that they “put their confidence in the Liberal Party,” the Reinländer petition started from the premise that the Canadian government was “ordained of God.”¹⁴⁷ In another letter, separatist Chortitzer Johann Schroeder stated that “with prayer to God, we ask you, as high officials, also to hold this alliance sacred; for it is not the custom of the English government to consider such [the *Privilegium*] as a scrap of paper. It is our desire that Canada may be a loving and benevolent mother to us for a long time.”¹⁴⁸

The petitions drafted by associative and separatist Mennonites testify to a different understanding of Mennonites’ relationship to the state. The former acted like enfranchised citizens who were invested in the democratic process and viewed a political threat as their best recourse. Alternately, separatist Mennonites from the Chortitz (East Reserve) and Reinländer (West Reserve) groups did not act like enfranchised citizens. They acted as subjects whose only options were to beg the government to rescind the law

¹⁴⁵ Vol. 544, no. 47, MHC. Quoted in Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 156. See also F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 97 and Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 234.

¹⁴⁶ Some groups were entirely unconcerned by the legislation. For example, the Icelanders used English as their main language of instruction since the 1870s and were mostly indifferent toward the 1916 Act. See F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*, 110.

¹⁴⁷ *Manitoba Free Press*, May 18, 1920, 15, vol. 544, no. 47, MHC. Quoted in Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 156.

¹⁴⁸ This quote is from a letter accompanying the “Petition on behalf of the Chortitza church council directed to the Department of Naval Service in Ottawa,” October 2, 1919. Quoted in M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 41.

or threaten to migrate.¹⁴⁹ Their reasoning did not originate in liberal philosophy since they neither wrote nor spoke of individuals' "inalienable rights," nor did they threaten to overthrow the unjust rule of authorities for violating these rights.¹⁵⁰ Rather, they articulated their position to the government in the language of collective privileges—attendant to their *Privilegium* but also grounded in a particular understanding of Romans 13:1, which holds that Christians are subject to authorities unless it causes them to violate their allegiance to Christ.¹⁵¹ According to historian Adolf Ens, separatist Mennonites actually trusted governments *more* than associative Mennonites since the former had an "intrinsic obligation to deal justly and to keep its promises" while the latter "had already developed a sense that the ruling party had a political obligation to them" that was only predicated on their support at the polls.¹⁵² Like the early Christian Church in the New Testament, separatist Mennonites understood themselves to be nomads on earth, beholden to governments but not political majorities.

Before the Act's passage, Norris and his ministers assured Mennonites that private schools would remain unaffected by the monolingual legislation.¹⁵³ *Gemeinde* who accepted public schools but disliked monolingual education privatized their schools so that by November 1918 only thirty were public.¹⁵⁴ Yet the dramatic rise in private schools and the public's increased scrutiny of this development, in the context of wartime anti-Germanism, led the government to threaten imposing public schools on any

¹⁴⁹ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 234.

¹⁵⁰ Francis speaks to this misunderstanding by stating "The democratic heritage of England... implied above all the exemption of the individual from governmental control in respect to person and property, religious convictions and institutions, and all matters not plainly affecting the common welfare." Yet to the Mennonites, "the idea of the moral autonomy of the individual immanent in democratic philosophy had little appeal. They were not preoccupied with the greatest possible freedom of the individual *from* social controls, but with the freedom of the group as a whole *for* the exercise of strict social controls over each individual member." See *In Search of Utopia*, 81-82.

¹⁵¹ A 1920 letter from the Reinländer churches to the Saskatchewan Premier, Johann F. Peters speaks directly to the Romans passage by stating, "We want to be subject to the authorities. But you must also allow us our rights. If you force us to violate our teaching, who will then bear the punishment?" Translated by and quoted in Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 147.

¹⁵² Ens, "Becoming British Citizens in Pre-WW I Canada," in *Canadian Mennonites and the Challenge of Nationalism*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1994), 85.

¹⁵³ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 120-121.

¹⁵⁴ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 97.

Mennonite school district that failed to submit an annual census (which many did not).¹⁵⁵ In the face of this hard-line approach, the remaining Manitoba Bergthalers and Kleine Gemeinde (with a few exceptions) acquiesced to the legislation.¹⁵⁶ Saskatchewan followed suit in 1917 with the passage of their own Attendance Act, which dictated compulsory public school attendance for all provincial children within range of a public school.¹⁵⁷ It then set about building public schools within range of Mennonite communities.¹⁵⁸ Its final stroke was modifying existing education legislation to make all public schools monolingual.¹⁵⁹ At the time, there were about ninety “Mennonite” school districts in Saskatchewan, two thirds of which were public. Reinländer congregations were adamantly opposed to the legislation while the Sommerfelder and Bergthaler groups remained internally divided for a time.¹⁶⁰

The legislation evaporated any remaining leeway for private schools and any doubts that Canada’s Mennonites shared a similar trajectory. Fractures were obvious before 1914 but the hothouse environment of the First World War injected the issue with renewed urgency. On the reserves, Mennonite ecumenicism and democracy faced off against doctrine and purity. In the courts, “Canadization” faced off against a strain of “Mennonitism” that rejected national allegiances. As the Mennonites diverged philosophically, some chose to diverge physically and leave their brethren to the “clever snares” of the world.

Ambiguous Conclusions and Clear Solutions

As the war in Europe sputtered to an uncertain armistice, the battle over public education in the western provinces became even clearer. The months following the

¹⁵⁵ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 124.

¹⁵⁶ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 109.

¹⁵⁷ The range was set at two and one half miles for children under twelve and three and one half miles for children over twelve. See School Attendance Act, *The Revised Statutes of Saskatchewan, 1920*, Chapter 111 (Assented to 10 November, 1920), <http://www.publications.gov.sk.ca/redirect.cfm?p=66948&i=74287>.

¹⁵⁸ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 134.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 98.

Armistice of Compiègne were a turbulent time on the prairies. Returning soldiers introduced a public health crisis in the form of the Spanish influenza pandemic, which killed 50,000 Canadians in a matter of months.¹⁶¹ The post-war depression also sent grain prices falling, unemployment soaring, and instigated the massive Winnipeg general strike of 1919. The resulting chaos led government officials to prosecute dissident groups as a threat to national security. Separatist Mennonites viewed it as a sign of divine retribution against a pugnacious and prideful nation.¹⁶²

After the passage of the Manitoba and Saskatchewan legislation, the roughly 14,000 Mennonites that resided in the provinces were left with three alternatives:¹⁶³ 1) They could accept public schools and hope that language and religious instruction in the home and church would make up for the deficit. 2) They could continue supplying qualified Mennonite teachers from their teacher training schools to public school districts with large Mennonite populations, thereby teaching a monolingual state curriculum while retaining a semblance of Mennonitism.¹⁶⁴ 3) They could immigrate to a new country. The majority of Manitoba and Saskatchewan Mennonites—including primarily the Bergthal and the Kleine Gemeinde churches on the East Reserve—explicitly or implicitly opted for the first two alternatives. Yet members of the Reinländer (West Reserve), Bergthal (Saskatchewan), Chortitz (East Reserve), and Sommerfeld (West Reserve) *Gemeinde* continued their losing battle against the policies while also pursuing immigration.

By 1919, the Manitoba government was commandeering private Mennonite schools that refused compliance.¹⁶⁵ They also started building new schools in areas that

¹⁶¹ Mark Osborne Humphries, *The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 3.

¹⁶² R. Loewen, *Village among Nations*, 20.

¹⁶³ This number is compiled from Table 9 “Mennonite Congregational Families in Canada,” in F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 20-21. It is based on congregation censuses that correspond closest to 1920 and includes only baptized member, not children or adolescents. F. H. Epp estimates the total population of Canada’s Mennonites in 1920 at 58,800. Ontario and other eastern Mennonites largely came out of the Swiss/South German tradition and were altogether less divided over the school issue.

¹⁶⁴ Teacher training schools included the Mennonite Educational Institute in Altona, Manitoba, the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba (administered by Ewert), and the German-English Academy in Rosthern, Saskatchewan (administered by D. Toews).

¹⁶⁵ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 125-127.

lacked them. In an act of hostility toward Mennonite sensibilities, Manitoba's Department of Education pointedly gave English names to public school districts (including 'Bristol' and 'Aldershot') in Mennonite areas. The latter was particularly distasteful to the nonviolent Mennonites since it is the name of a British military town.¹⁶⁶ Mennonites refused to sell the province land and building materials for the new schools so the government responded by expropriating Mennonite land and importing materials from Winnipeg.¹⁶⁷ Parents who were in contempt of the legislation risked heavy fines or jail sentences. Instead of prosecuting every possible case—a move that threatened to clog the courts—authorities took a scattershot approach by imprisoning various preachers and fining individuals who did not acquiesce to the legislation.¹⁶⁸ This was too much for the remaining Bergthaler (East Reserve) communities who caved under the pressure.¹⁶⁹

Saskatchewan's tactics were even more punitive. In 1920 and 1921 the province opened 2,935 cases against Mennonites who did not avail themselves of the public schools. Of these, 2,346 individuals were fined a total of \$20,984 CAD (\$256,240 in 2014 CAD).¹⁷⁰ Sometimes police resorted to seizing property—from cows to cured hams—and sold it at auction. Unluckier still were twelve Mennonites who were jailed. In short order, associative Mennonites made peace with the schools while their separatist brethren were hauled into court. Even when Mennonites evaded penalties and prisons, they still had to pay taxes for public schools that they did not attend. In light of the mounting pressure, separatist Mennonites offered to settle the wilds of northern Manitoba—even to the shores of the Hudson Bay—if they were allowed their privileges.¹⁷¹ The proposition was as creative as it was unfeasible. Nation, state, and

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 127.

¹⁶⁷ After the schools were built, state-appointed teachers sat alone for weeks in empty schoolhouses or contended with private school teachers to occupy the same building. Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 127; 144; W. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 96.

¹⁶⁸ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 144.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 124.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 147-148. The inflation adjustment was made with the Bank of Canada inflation calculator, accessed November 17, 2014, <http://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator/>. W. Janzen places the amount of fines for these years at over \$26,000 but his estimate is taken from an earlier publication by Ens. See n. 82 in W. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 328.

¹⁷¹ F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 96.

territory were indivisible and all Canadian citizens were subject to the same law. In a different time and place, though in the same spirit, one eighteenth-century French politician bluntly stated, “To the Jews as a Nation, nothing; to the Jews as individuals, everything.” As associative Mennonites already realized and as separatist Mennonites were starting to comprehend, they could have “nothing” as an individual collective and “everything” as individual citizens.¹⁷²

Like the Russian government in the 1870s, the Canadian government in the 1920s had little faith in the separatist Mennonites’ resolve to leave and assumed that they would remain on their farms. Saskatchewan’s Premier Martin was sanguine about the government’s ability to force Mennonites to incorporate themselves in to the national fold. A 1919 edition of the *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs* carried a quote by the Premier, which stated, “These people are here and they are going to remain... They have been here a long time and while they are deluded in thinking they have special privileges in Saskatchewan over other citizens, at the same time we have got to use reasonable toleration in our treatment of them.”¹⁷³ The reactions of both governments indicates that they believed in the objective truth of their modernizing plans and that Mennonites would choose material prosperity over religious conviction.

Associative Mennonites endeavored to make their division from separatist Mennonites clear to Canadian officials. This objective was particularly acute for D. Toews, Ewert, and a coterie of politically savvy and ecumenical Mennonites who wished to resettle impoverished Mennonites from the Soviet Union on the prairie. With anti-Mennonite sentiments at an all-time high in 1919, the Dominion issued an Order-in-Council against further Mennonite immigration due to their “peculiar habits, modes of

¹⁷² "Opinion de M. le Comte Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre, député de Paris, le 23 decembre, 1789," reprinted in *La Révolution française et l'émancipation des Juifs*, vol. 7, p. 13. Quoted in Paula E. Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 27.

¹⁷³ Quoted in J. Castell Hopkins, *The Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs* (Toronto: The Canadian Annual Review, Ltd., 1920), 552; Even after the exodus was underway, the Premier maintained that the Mennonites would return to Canada stating that “I am fairly sure personally that it will only be a short time until people who have gone to Mexico will be coming back.” See Premier Martin to A.W. Golzen, October 25, 1922, Public Archives of Canada, RG. 6, 58764, Vol. 9. Quoted in F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 125.

life and methods of holding property.”¹⁷⁴ D. Toews, Ewert, and a visiting delegation of Russian Mennonites—the *Russlandmennonitische Studienkommission* that included A. A. Friesen and Unruh—therefore approached Canada’s acting premier, D. M. Reesor on July 19, 1921 to clarify who they were and what they wanted.¹⁷⁵ The group claimed that the “Dutch” (not German!) Mennonites of Russia were, like the majority of Canada’s Mennonites, “a most progressive people and would give the government no trouble in school matters.”¹⁷⁶ A. A. Friesen followed up the meeting with a letter to Canadian Minister of Immigration, James A. Calder. In an act of normalizing the associative Mennonites’ outward-oriented worldview against the separatist one, A. A. Friesen wrote of a global community of Mennonites that held strong religious principles, none of which were inimical to Canadization.¹⁷⁷ A. A. Friesen’s letter argued,

I am aware that there is a certain branch of the Mennonite church in western Canada which endeavors to keep aloof from the Canadian people and perpetuate some foreign customs and practices, but this branch can not stand as representatives of Mennonites in general. In my travels among the brethren of my faith in the United States I have found that everywhere they have unquestionably adopted the public schools... The same attitude is taken also by the Mennonites of Ontario, as well as by a large part of the Mennonites in the west, and these have become thoroughly welded into the modes of life, ideals, and ambitions of the Canadian people.¹⁷⁸

Incoming Premier W. L. M. King was favorably disposed to the immigration scheme since he had grown up among the acculturated Mennonites of Waterloo County, Ontario and repealed the Order-in-Council.¹⁷⁹ Between 1923 and 1927, the Dominion government allowed about 20,000 Mennonites to emigrate from the Soviet Union to

¹⁷⁴ “A hundred years of immigration to Canada 1900-1999,” Canadian Council for Refugees, last modified May 2000, accessed April 3, 2015, <http://ccrweb.ca/en/hundred-years-immigration-canada-1900-1999>.

¹⁷⁵ F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 102.

¹⁷⁶ Report on interview by delegation dated July 20, 1921. Quoted in *ibid.*, 102.

¹⁷⁷ Educationist Bruno-Jofre argues that Canadian authorities’ conception of the country was similarly outward oriented since its leader valued the country’s membership in the larger international communities of the League of Nations, the British Commonwealth, and Western civilization in general. See “Citizenship and Schooling in Manitoba, 1918-1945.”

¹⁷⁸ Letter from A. A. Friesen to J. A. Calder, 25 July 1921. Quoted in F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 102-103.

¹⁷⁹ F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 103.

Canada. The immigration was supervised by the CMBC, facilitated by the Canadian Pacific Railroad, and had the ostensible financial backing of “The Mennonite Church of Canada,” whom D. Toews claimed to speak on behalf of.¹⁸⁰ Many of the new arrivals bought farms vacated by the exiting separatist Mennonites. Nevertheless, the CMBC’s ledger was always in the red, it lacked broad-based participation, and it encountered outright hostility from many separatist and associative Mennonites who felt they owed nothing to Russia’s Mennonites, whom they pejoratively dubbed *Russländer*.¹⁸¹

Within the historiography, D. Toews’ and the associative Mennonites’ greatest champion is F. H. Epp, whose account of the resettlement, *Mennonite Exodus*, and his influential two-volume *Mennonites in Canada* tirelessly promotes the unification of Canada’s Mennonites.¹⁸² While separatist Mennonites penned diaries and memoirs that celebrated their adherence to a very narrow ecclesial lineage, F. H. Epp regarded early-twentieth century Mennonite disunity as an “internal weakness” that “significantly impaired their ability to deal effectively with the problems of the day.”¹⁸³ Separatist Mennonites were “stubborn” while those who pursued a “middle-of-the-road position” by emphasizing a select set of religious “essentials,” “kept the best that tradition had to offer and allow[ed] adjustments which were believed to be necessary and useful but not threatening to the faith.”¹⁸⁴ Similar in many respects to the Russian Mennonites who damned the 1870s migrants as “poor” and “backward,” F. H. Epp’s view of Mennonite history assumes that associative Mennonites’ “problems of the day” were objectively more relevant than those of their separatist brethren. Reflecting on the school question in 1925, D. Toews likewise concluded that English-language public schooling was a positive development for Canada’s Mennonites by stating “I do not think that the provincial governments can be blamed for enacting this [education] law, since the

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 121.

¹⁸¹ For a complete description of the scheme see F. H. Epp, “Part V. Debts and Developments in the Immigrant Community,” *Mennonite Exodus*.

¹⁸² For an interesting discussion of F. H. Epp’s national vision and its departure from reality see Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes*, 127-128.

¹⁸³ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 1.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 18.

schools of the Old Colony Mennonites [and, by extension, other separatist Mennonites] were very poor, even in German, and of course, no English was taught there.”¹⁸⁵ Private German language schools were not essential for *Canadian* Mennonites.

A Canadian identification was now part of the associative Mennonites’ collective narrative. Over the course of fifty years, they came to believe that God had brought them to Canada, where they could integrate into society while maintaining their religious “essentials.” Like other mythologies, nationalism is not imparted wholly and immediately. Individuals first experience it to be true and only then believe it to be real. This is what gives a conversion story its power, since it really *is* miraculous to change one’s reality. For associative Mennonites, this happened gradually and on an individual basis. They developed their brand of Canadian nationalism by reformulating Mennonite privileges, bestowed on them by the Crown, as a set of legal rights enshrined in Canadian law. Associative Mennonites were thankful that officials respected their curated set of religious “essentials” (such as their objection to military service) and were relatively patient as they transitioned from private German-language schools to public English-language schools.

Separatist Mennonites also felt the Lord’s guidance in the matter—sometimes quite literally. With the education storm still gathering wind, the intractable Reinländer, J. Wiens, was standing in his wheat field one warm summer day in 1913 when he heard a voice telling him “you will not be able to stay here forever; the church will once again have to take up the walking staff.”¹⁸⁶ Reinländer diarist, Isaac M. Dyck, located the reasons why God willed the Mennonite faithful to leave Canada in the trials of migration. In historian R. Loewen’s analysis, I. M. Dyck articulated that “religious rebirth and commitment could occur only in exile” for it was during these hard times that God revealed himself to his people.¹⁸⁷ According to I. M. Dyck, the *Privilegium* had given the

¹⁸⁵ Letter from David Toews to W. J. Egan, Deputy Minister of Immigration, 3 July 1925. Quoted in F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 96.

¹⁸⁶ Isaak M. Dyck, “Emigration from Canada to Mexico, Year 1922,” trans. Robyn Dyck Sneath, 2005 (unpublished manuscript in possession of R. Loewen). The book was also published as Isaak M. Dyck, *Die Auswanderung der Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde von Kanada nach Mexiko* (Cuauhtémoc, MX - CH: Imprenta Colonial, 1993). Quoted in R. Loewen, *Village among Nations*, 14-15.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

confession a false sense of security. Although it exempted Mennonites from military service, their prosperity and acquiescence to public school made them accomplices in building a new “Sodom” and a “Canadian tower of Babel.”¹⁸⁸ The only option was to follow Christ in the “footsteps of grief,” by seeking out earthly Zions until they finally reached the “upper Zion” of heaven.¹⁸⁹

No Rest for the Righteous

Between 1919 and 1922, separatist Mennonites sent a total of seventeen delegations to Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Paraguay, Uruguay, Mississippi, and Quebec, to scout for land and privileges.¹⁹⁰ On February 20, 1921, a Reinländer delegation was granted an audience with President Obregon in Mexico City. Eight days later, the President and his Minister of Agriculture put their names to a new Mennonite *Privilegium*. The Reinländers’ only reservation was that the document did not yet have the force of congressional law. Nevertheless, between 1922 and 1926, 5,350 Reinländer Mennonites and 600 Sommerfelders immigrated to Mexico where they purchased over 100,000 hectares in the states of Chihuahua and Durango.¹⁹¹ According to Francis, many individuals pragmatically retained their Canadian bank accounts and Canadian citizenship, in the event that they had to return.¹⁹²

During their search for new lands, the Reinländer delegates initiated contact with New York banker Samuel McRoberts, president of the Metropolitan Trust Company. In 1919, they visited him in New York to inquire about financing an immigration venture

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 14. Quoted in R. Loewen, *Village among Nations*, 19-20.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 4.

¹⁹⁰ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 110 and 120.

¹⁹¹ On the Old Colony immigration to Mexico see Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 203-209; F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 109-128; and “Leaving the ‘British Empire’ in Canada: Promises in the South, 1916-1921” and “Drawing Lines on God’s Earth: Settlers in Mexico and Paraguay, 1922-1929,” in R. Loewen, *Village among Nations*; For a transcript of Mexico’s charter of freedoms see J. H. Doerksen, *Geschichte und Wichtige Dokumente der Mennoniten von Russland, Canada [sic], Paraguay und Mexico* (n.p., 1923), 125-126.

¹⁹² Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 192.

but he turned them away.¹⁹³ According to Mennonite sources, his fundamentalist Christian wife, Harriet Skinner, intervened on the Mennonites' behalf since she was fascinated by their faith.¹⁹⁴ McRoberts then agreed to look into settlement possibilities and solicited the aid of the Norwegian-born ex-millionaire and freelance explorer, Fred Engen. After reviewing options in Africa and Asia, the two agreed that South America held the high possibility for a large-scale resettlement. Under McRobert's direction, Engen departed for South America in 1919.¹⁹⁵

According to Menno Colony historian Martin W. Friesen—the son of *Ältester* M. C. Friesen—Engen mounted a small expedition to the Gran Chaco in May or June of 1920 “as did William Penn in North America” in order to explore the area and “conclude an honest alliance of friendship with the savages” who were living in the region.¹⁹⁶ M. W. Friesen's interpretation is significant because it simultaneously justifies the righteousness of Engen's motives and vindicates the “manifest destiny” of Mennonite colonization. Concluding his trip, Engen wrote to McRoberts that he had “found the promised land.”¹⁹⁷

McRoberts visited South America in July 1920. His plan was to settle the Mennonites in Argentina. Yet on the steamer from New York to Buenos Aires, he

¹⁹³ M. W. Friesen states that the Mennonites had either learned of McRoberts through a Canadian banker who had gone to college with him or the Minneapolis realtor Alvin Solberg. Either way, it is unclear why he made an impression on the Mennonite. See M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 58.

¹⁹⁴ Bender, "McRoberts, Samuel (1868-1947)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified April 12, 2014, accessed December 11, 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=McRoberts,_Samuel_\(1868-1947\)&oldid=118554](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=McRoberts,_Samuel_(1868-1947)&oldid=118554); Bernhard Toews, *Reise-Tagebuch des Bernhard Töws 1921: Chacoexpedition mit Fred Engen* (Kolonie Menno, Paraguay: Abteilung Geschichtsarchiv, Schulverwaltung der Kolonie Menno, 1997), 13.

¹⁹⁵ M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 59.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 60. M. W. Friesen was born in Grunthal, Canada in 1912 and was the Menno Colony's most prominent teacher and historian during the twentieth century. For more on M. W. Friesen, see Susan Huebert, "Friesen, Martin W. (1912-2000)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified January 2008, accessed January 15, 2008, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Friesen,_Martin_W._\(1912-2000\)&oldid=94752](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Friesen,_Martin_W._(1912-2000)&oldid=94752). See also, Uwe Friesen, "Martin W. Friesen: Ein Leben im Dienste der Gemeinschaft," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 5 (December 2005), 53-90. For a description of M.C. Friesen see H. Ratzlaff, *Ältester Martin C. Friesen: Ein Mann, den Gott brauchen konnte* (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Geschichtskomitee der Kolonie Menno, 2006), 44. For an English-language source on M. C. Friesen see Titus F. Guenther, "Ältester Martin C. Friesen (1889-1968): A Man of Vision for Paraguay's Mennogemeinde," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 185-211.

¹⁹⁷ M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 64.

serendipitously met the newly elected Paraguayan president, Manuel Gondra Pereira, and his traveling companion, Minister of Foreign Affairs and future president, Eusebio Ayala. Apparently, McRoberts relayed to them the Mennonites' desire to relocate to Latin America and praised the Mennonites as efficient farmers and pioneers.¹⁹⁸ Listening attentively, Gondra and Ayala viewed a possible Mennonite settlement in the Paraguayan Chaco as an excellent means to their ends.

McRoberts' negotiations with the government in Buenos Aires stalled over the Mennonites' *Privilegium* so he embarked up the Paraná River for Asunción to resume negotiations with Gondra.¹⁹⁹ The president immediately approved the Mennonites' terms and organized a publicity campaign to convince Paraguay's press and citizenry that the settlement was a national opportunity. Gondra threw a banquet for McRoberts to which he invited key representatives in the government and organized a two-day cruise up the Paraguay River, accompanied by Asunción's business elite, government ministers, and representative of the Catholic Church.²⁰⁰ Like the Canadian government in the 1870s, Gondra was acutely aware that his country was low on the list of destinations for prospective immigrants, especially self-sufficient German-speaking agriculturalists.²⁰¹

Ayala had previously worked for the Liberal Party papers *El Liberal* and *El Diario* and so these publications swung behind the cause. The former gushed, "It is said these people are very industrious and very conscientious in observing their religious regulations. They are rich. Some 40,000 of them propose to come to Paraguay. They are bringing with them everything needed for developing a flourishing settlement... The contribution of these well-to-do and very industrious people should certainly have a very positive effect on the development of our nation socially and economically."²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 66.

²⁰¹ The vast majority of migrants to Latin America chose Argentina or Brazil. Paraguay was regarded as an isolated hinterland. During the interwar years, Paraguay was not the only government that wished to attract a mass resettlement of agriculturalists with European ancestry. In 1938, Dominican Republic president Rafael Trujillo welcomed up to 100,000 Central European Jews in order to improve agriculture and "whiten" the Dominican population, though only 757 were actually granted passage. See Allen Wells, *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosua* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), xix.

²⁰² *El Liberal* (Asunción), August 30, 1920. Quoted in M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 67.

Paraguayan leaders may have also looked kindly on the scheme because the Mennonites were “Germans.” After the First World War, Paraguay’s Congress anticipated a mass transfer of rural Germans to Latin America and proposed creating a propaganda and immigration office, strategically located in Hamburg. Simultaneously, the German League for Paraguay (*Deutsche Volksbund für Paraguay, DVP*), printed a pamphlet titled *Paraguay: Hints for Immigrants (Paraguay: Winke für Einwanderer)*.²⁰³ Like Canada fifty years prior, Paraguay’s liberal government disregarded the Mennonites’ religious peculiarities, emphasized their industry and culture, and assured skeptics that they would be good Paraguayan citizens, though religiously Mennonite.²⁰⁴

Throughout 1921, Paraguayan newspapers waged a battle over whether the Mennonites should be allowed to settle in Paraguay. *El Liberal* steadfastly maintained that Mennonites could be easily incorporated into the national fabric and that they would “civilize” the Chaco.²⁰⁵ Advocates also argued that the Mennonites did not wish to create a state within a state but merely wished to re-establish their highly organized farming communities in a style that was familiar to them. Other Paraguayans were less than enthusiastic about the prospect of thousands of foreigners living in the country’s isolated hinterland. They argued that the Mennonites offered Paraguay little incentive other than a vague promise that they would eventually develop the Chaco.²⁰⁶ Striking an alarmist note, the Conservative *La Tribuna* held that the Mennonites would turn Paraguay into a German-speaking state and threaten the Paraguayan race.²⁰⁷ Others maintained that by agreeing to the Mennonite privileges, the state was actually creating two classes of citizens: Paraguayans who shared a set of duties and rights, and Mennonites who would

²⁰³ Joseph Winfield Fretz, *Immigrant Group Settlement in Paraguay: A Study in the Sociology of Colonization* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1962), 38.

²⁰⁴ The debate in the Paraguayan legislature preceding the passage of Law 514 is found in Cámara de Senadores, Paraguay. “Franquicias a los Menonitas,” *Diario de Sesiones Del Congreso - Cámara de Senadores*, 32 Sesión Ordinaria, July 12, 1921. Asunción: Imprenta Nacional, 1921.

²⁰⁵ *El Liberal* (Asunción), July 20, 1921.

²⁰⁶ The Menno Colony Archives in Loma Plata, Paraguay have a large folder of photocopied press reports from the country’s leading papers. M. W. Friesen also provides a detailed overview of press attitudes toward Mennonite settlement in *New Homeland*, 111-118.

²⁰⁷ *La Tribuna* (Asunción), 8, July 23 and 25, 1921.

become an aloof and privileged minority. In this aspect, the Paraguayan debate over Mennonite citizenship closely paralleled the contemporaneous Canadian conflict.²⁰⁸

The Paraguayan situation also reflected Canada's territorial anxieties of fifty years prior, namely the existence of an undefined border with a larger and more powerful neighbor. Since Paraguay's defeat in the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870), the country remained embroiled in a dispute with Bolivia over its northern border.²⁰⁹ A massive and immediate transfer of settler-farmers to the Gran Chaco promised to transform the wilderness into an agricultural Elysium and check Bolivia's ambitions. With the dissenting Conservatives in a minority position and geopolitical concerns outweighing civic equality, the Paraguayan government accepted Mennonite settlement.

When McRoberts returned to the United States, he informed the Reinländer Mennonites of Paraguay's terms but the group had already decided on Mexico.²¹⁰ In their place, the Saskatchewan Bergthaler Mennonites registered interest in the Chaco and organized a delegation in 1921 composed of Johann Friesen and Jakob Neufeld (Bergthal, Saskatchewan), Isaak Funk and Bernhard Toews (Sommerfeld, West Reserve), and Jakob Doerksen (Chortitz, East Reserve).²¹¹ Two were ministers and three were farmers, including one who was a private school teacher.²¹² Johann Priesz of Altona, Manitoba, also accompanied the group and was responsible for its legal matters.²¹³ Their mission was to consult with McRoberts in New York, rendezvous with Engen in Buenos Aires, meet with Paraguayan authorities in Asunción, and explore the Gran Chaco.²¹⁴

²⁰⁸ For a detailed description of this debate see also Bridget María Chesterton, *The Grandchildren of Solano López: Frontier and Nation in Paraguay, 1904-1936* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 97-101.

²⁰⁹ See Bruce W. Farcau, *The Chaco War: Bolivia and Paraguay, 1932-1935* (London: Praeger, 1996), 7. In a ruling arbitrated by United States president Rutherford B. Hayes, Paraguay remained in control of the v-shaped territory between the Rio Pilcomayo and the Rio Verde but Bolivia protested this decision, citing its own interests in the region. Hayes refused to consider Bolivia's claims in the final ruling and the ground was laid for five decades of unsuccessful negotiations.

²¹⁰ M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 68.

²¹¹ Another Bergthaler by the name of Aaron Zacharias met the group in New York City. *Ibid.*, 74.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 71.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ For a complete itinerary and diary of the trip see B. Toews, *Reise-Tagebuch*.

In addition to privileges, the Mennonites also needed land. At the time, the Paraguayan state directly owned no more than about 375,000 hectares of territory in the Gran Chaco. The vast majority was divided between 821 owners, a small number, considering that the average estate was about 18,000 ha.²¹⁵ During their layover in Buenos Aires, the delegates met with one of the largest Chaco landowners, José Casado.²¹⁶ His company, Carlos Casado S. A., was a major South America wheat grower and livestock producer who also specialized in extracting tannin from the Chaco's quebracho tree. At 1.2 million hectares, the Casado's Gran Chaco real estate constituted the largest single private landholding in the world.²¹⁷

In Asunción, Ayala and Gondra received the delegates and endorsed their list of privileges pending the Mennonites' approval of the Chaco.²¹⁸ Continuing up the Paraguay River, the delegates stopped at Puerto Casado before venturing inland. Everywhere they went, the delegates were intensely interested in the weather, livestock, farming, industry, and transportation and correspondingly less interested in the country's culture, history, and politics. Once the delegates were back in Asunción, they again met with the president who put in motion the passage of Law 514, which ensured the Mennonites' privileges. Though the state expected that Mennonites would eventually be naturalized as Paraguayan citizens, the law guaranteed that their communities would receive special treatment. It would reproduce in function, if not in form, their desire to remain autonomous subjects of a benevolent government.

1921 and 1922 were difficult economic years in Canada and Paraguay so McRoberts placed the immigration plans on hold until the price of land stabilized.

²¹⁵ Jan M. Kleinpenning, *Integration and Colonisation of the Paraguayan Chaco* (Nijmegen: Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1986), 20.

²¹⁶ B. Toews, *Reise-Tagebuch*, 28.

²¹⁷ M. W. Friesen based the assertion on a letter from Jose Casado to the Mennonites. See *New Homeland*, 87. The land figure is taken from Willard H. Smith, "Corporación Paraguaya," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified August 20, 2013, accessed December 12, 2014, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Corporaci%C3%B3n_Paraguaya&oldid=79930.

²¹⁸ These included exemption from military service, permission to not swear oaths, freedom of religious practices, the establishment of private schools and use of the German language, free management of inheritances and fire insurance, the right to forbid alcohol in the colony, freedom from import duties and taxation for ten years, and the admission of the church's mentally and physically handicapped members. See M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 81-82.

Moving forward in 1925, McRoberts established three corporations, in conjunction with Philadelphia investment banker Edward Robinette, to manage the financial details: 1) the Intercontinental Company Limited, which handled the purchase and resale of the Mennonites' Canadian acreage, 2) the *Corporación Paraguaya*, which handled the purchase of land from Casado S.A. and 3) the American Continental Company, which was based in Philadelphia but organized in the Dominican Republic, to hold the *Corporación Paraguaya* stock. In total, the Mennonites exchanged 17,805 hectares of land in Canada for 55,814 hectares in Paraguay. The sale price for the Canadian land was valued at \$902,900 in American gold (\$12,111,765 in 2014 USD) while the *Corporación Paraguaya* was capitalized at \$750,000 (\$10,060,720 in 2014 USD).²¹⁹

Before the immigration, the Paraguayan-bound Mennonites attempted to unite as a single economic entity and church. They succeeded on the first count by organizing a commission to handle the land transactions.²²⁰ Interestingly, they named the commission the *Fürsorge-Komitee*, referencing the Russian government's colonial administrative apparatus. Yet religious unity remained impossible after Aaron Zacharias of the small Bergthaler (Saskatchewan) group approached the larger Manitoba groups with a list of demands. The Sommerfeld (West Reserve) and Chortitz (East Reserve) churches reviewed the demands but rejected them outright stating that they were not willing to allow a minority of outsiders to impose a system of laws on their people, especially their rejection of cars and telephones.²²¹ As a result, the churches remained divided even though they shared common goals.

²¹⁹ Peter G. Sawatzky, "The Paraguayan Corporation: The Agency which Facilitated the Mennonite Settlement in the Chaco" (History Senior Seminar paper, Goshen College, 1965), 15-18; Bender, "Intercontinental Company, Limited," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified December 8, 2013, accessed December 12, 2014, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Intercontinental_Company,_Limited&oldid=104872. Bender takes his numbers from Walter Quiring, "The Canadian Mennonite Immigration into the Paraguayan Chaco," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 8, no. 1 (January 1934): 36. The inflation adjustment was made with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (CPI) Inflation Calculator, <http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm>.

²²⁰ The name *Fürsorge-Komitee* was appropriated from the Russian government, which established this organization to deal with colonists' concerns during the nineteenth-century. P. G. Sawatzky, "The Paraguayan Corporation," 15.

²²¹ M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 141-142.

Between 1926 and 1930, about 1,800 Mennonites from Bergthal (Saskatchewan), led by Aaron Zacharias; Sommerfeld (West Reserve), led by Heinrich Unruh; and Chortitz (East Reserve), led by M. C. Friesen (whose wife, Elisabeth Wiebe, was the granddaughter of the group's former leader G. Wiebe), sold their land, packed their bags, and moved to the Chaco, where they established the Menno Colony.²²² Groups were subdivided into *Strassendorf* villages of about ten to sixteen families each, located about five to ten miles apart. Like the Reinländer Mennonites, some of these families pragmatically retained their Canadian citizenship in the chance that Paraguay did not work out.²²³ Out of a total Manitoba and Saskatchewan population of approximately 45,000 Mennonites, 7,735 (seventeen percent) left for Mexico and Paraguay, and repeated once again the measures that their ancestors had taken in the 1870s.

Under the constellation of power, money, and politics that made the immigration possible, the Mennonites of Menno Colony continued to view their place in the world from the perspective of humble subjects rather than assertive citizens. In lieu of a tsar or queen, the Mennonites now looked to McRoberts, Casado, and the Paraguayan government as adopted monarchs to whom they would obsequiously communicate their wishes. A 1930 letter from Menno Colony member Peter A. Falk to McRoberts testifies to this observation. The letter concerned a financial discrepancy that Falk encountered with employees of the *Corporación Paraguaya*. As a salutation Falk stated,

“Now my dear sir, you will probably, after looking through this imperfect writing, think or say to yourself, how presumptuous and daring it is for one so insignificant to be so bold as to write a letter to me personally, and you certainly have a right to think so for I am in fact as compared with you

²²² The exact number is uncertain. Estimates range from 1,742 to 1,876. For a list of sources and figures see F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*, n. 123, 136. The respective percentages from each group were ten percent from Bergthal (Saskatchewan), twenty percent from Sommerfeld (West Reserve), and seventy percent from Chortitz (East Reserve). See Guenther, “Ältester Martin C. Friesen (1889-1968),” 188; Cornelius J. Dyck, M. W. Friesen, and U. S. Friesen, “Menno Colony (Boquerón Department, Paraguay),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified 2009, accessed January 15, 2014, <[http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Menno_Colony_\(Boquer%C3%B3n_Department,_Paraguay\)&colid=103606](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Menno_Colony_(Boquer%C3%B3n_Department,_Paraguay)&colid=103606)>.

²²³ Acquiring a Canadian passport was expensive and so most migrants traveled under the colony's group passport. Into the 1930s, enough Menno Colony residents retained Canadian citizenship that the German envoy in Paraguay noted it in a report. See Dr. Hans Karl Paul Eduard Büsing, “Nr. 371, 2 Durchdrucke,” R127972e [formerly Altes Amt 69559], Auswärtiges Amt (hereafter AA). For Mennonites' passport issues see M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 276-281.

in worldly reputation and standing a nobody, but in spite of this I make this imperfect appeal to your Christian character...²²⁴

Separatist Mennonites were not afraid to speak to the highest authorities but they did so in the language of subjects and not citizens.

In the late-nineteenth century, Mennonites became British subjects in order to claim title to their land, yet by the 1920s, Canadian citizenship entailed more than simply plowing the prairie. It required rights and responsibilities inimical to separatist Mennonites' insular communities. They were willing to grow the state's territory but unwilling to grow the nation. By contrast, Mennonites such as the (West Reserve) Bergthalers and the (East Reserve) Kleine Gemeinde moved in and out of the associative category for decades, sometimes adopting public schools, sometimes reverting to private status, but slowly adapting to democratic negotiation. Leaders such as Ewert and D. Toews provided a vision for associative Mennonites but it remained a vision—a hazy picture, perhaps utopian, of confessional solidarity that may be achieved with the next conference initiative or annual report. Compared to these aspirations, public schools were relatively insignificant, if not inevitable. As in Russia, Mennonites' preponderance for division and mobility within a broader context of state pressure prompted a new round of Mennonite migrations to new lands on the margins of weaker states.

In 1920, the *Manitoba Free Press* summarized the popular view that the separatist Mennonites' case rested on the “assumption that it is a fundamental natural right of any sect, group, or nationality to set up a state within the state and arrogate to itself one of the state's prime functions, that of seeing that children are suitably educated to discharge the duties of citizenship.”²²⁵ Yet separatist Mennonites did not demand more rights, their own state, or even citizenship. Rather they desired a tailored set of privileges in exchange for their communal autonomy as state subjects. They were satisfied to develop their land, pay taxes, and offer their humble gratitude to the state as long as it recognized the

²²⁴ Peter A. Falk, May 3, 1930 letter to McRoberts, Corporacion Paraguay: Letters from Mennonites, January 1927-January 1931, IX-3-3 Paraguayan Immigration 6/32, Mennonite Central Committee Files (hereafter, MCCF), Akron, PA.

²²⁵ “The Plea of the Mennonites,” *Manitoba Free Press*, May 18, 1920. Quoted in F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*. 126-127.

autonomy of their *Gemeinden*. Unlike other minorities who balked at Anglo Canadization (such as the French Canadians), separatist Mennonites rejected the liberal language of natural rights and the basic premises of legal equality and personal freedom altogether. As a result, they could not articulate their worldview in terminology that provincial governments or the emergent associative Mennonites were willing to acknowledge.

And so the separatist German-speaking Mennonites voluntarily moved to a new state that admired their industry and ethnicity and where they again separated themselves from society. Though they continued to correspond with family members in Canada, they remained detached from the conferences that they felt had deceived so many of their brethren. Before their departure, the emigrants wrote a polite letter to the Ottawa government thanking them for decades of peace and prosperity. This quaint and deferential gesture placed separatist Mennonites in a different time and so they were required to live in a different place, where they would once again be labeled as citizens but would be allowed to live as privileged subjects.

CHAPTER II. A SORT OF HOMECOMING

At 11:00 p.m. on November 9, 1929, the Neufeld family packed thirteen bags and a featherbed into their horse-drawn wagon and set off across the frozen Siberian landscape for Moscow. Kornelius A. Neufeld had already sold everything of value at a fraction of its original cost and the family left at night to reduce their chances of being seen. Given the immense distance and the regime's growing harassment of Mennonites, the Neufelds feared they might not even make it past the regional capital of Omsk. In the preceding weeks, news had filtered through the region's Mennonite villages that families were being granted exit visas by the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. Without a backup plan, the Neufelds hoped that by fleeing to Moscow, they might be allowed to migrate elsewhere.¹

Across the Soviet Union, and especially in Siberia, thousands of Mennonite families made a similar decision to abandon their homes in the face of Stalin's burgeoning war against the so-called *kulak* class of wealthy farmers.² As early as February—but especially from September to December—thousands descended on the capital to request exit visas from the government. Those with money rented unoccupied summer homes (*dachas*) in the suburbs and those without money slept wherever they could find shelter.³ By the end of November, the total number of refugees reached 13,000 individuals⁴ (10,000 of whom were Mennonites⁵).

¹ Kornelius K. Neufeld, *Flucht aus dem Paradies: Damals vor Moskau*, (Weisenheim am Berg, Germany: Agape, 2005), 25-28.

² The flight to Moscow was highly disorganized and included a number of German-speaking Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, and Adventist families, many of who lived near Mennonite settlements. Some families had their properties confiscated in the preceding months while others, like the Neufeld family, abandoned their properties because they feared that their confiscation was imminent. Fritz Adalbert Ernst von Twardowski, "Memorandum by Twardowski," November 5, 1929, GFM 33/4538: L192441, National Archives (hereafter NA).

³ Ibid, L192460. By way of example, one German embassy report written by Otto Auhagen and dated October 18, 1929, states that up to three families composed of twenty-five individuals in total lived in a single *dacha*. The *dacha*'s size was no more than two and a half meters by three meters plus a kitchen half this size. See "Aufzeichnung!," October 18, 1929, GFM 33/4538: L192460, NA.

⁴ Oskar Trautmann, "Memorandum by Trautmann," November 25, 1929, R29275, E160405-10, AA. Most sources place the total number of refugees at 13,000 but some estimates range as high as 18,000. See also Harvey Dyck, *Weimar Germany and Soviet Russia 1926-1933: A Study in Diplomatic Instability* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1966), 163.

The Soviet Union's Politburo was aware of the situation by the middle of October and attempted to halt the influx, but it initially had little idea what to do with the *kulak* troublemakers.⁶ The German government also received news of the crisis and identified the refugees as *Auslandsdeutsche*. Concerned German citizens, led by the relief organization Brethren in Need (*Brüder in Not*)—which was initially founded by the German Red Cross in 1922 to help German-speaking victims of the Russian famine—were reinvigorated to raise public awareness of the emergency. Meanwhile, the American Mennonite relief organization MCC—which was also formed after the First World War to help starving Mennonites—volunteered to find the refugees a new home. The Paraguayan government eventually welcomed some of them as pioneers who would fortify its national border. Within a few short weeks, the ragged group of individuals became a critical topic of international diplomacy, a symbol of transnational ethnic and religious solidarity, and an important item in the international press.

During the interwar years, mobility rose to new heights and threatened to destabilize the world order.⁷ The nebulous category of “refugee” was an especially critical issue for the world's governments because these individuals existed outside the prevailing nation-state paradigm. It is difficult to find an adequate definition for the term during the 1920s since it did not yet exist as a universally recognized legal category.⁸ A 1933 League of Nations “Convention Relating to the International Status of Refugees” represented an initial attempt to establish a comprehensive legal framework for refugees

⁵ GFM 33/4538: L192381 and L192405, NA; H. Dyck, 163.

⁶ Andrey I. Savin, “The 1929 Emigration of Mennonites from the USSR: An Examination of Documents from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 30, (2012): 47.

⁷ Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, “Introduction: Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s,” in *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s*, eds. Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). The broad scope of early-twentieth century long-distance migration is covered in Adam McKeown, “Global Migration, 1846-1940,” *Journal of World History* 15, no. 2 (June 2004): 155-189 and chapters seventeen and eighteen of Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁸ For an analysis of the term's interwar uses and limitations see Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees From the First World War through the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); and Claudena M. Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: The Emergence of a Regime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

but before this date the League only recognized groups on a case-by-case basis.⁹ It is almost as if by carving up Europe into distinct nation-states, the Treaty of Versailles wrote such individuals out of existence. Not every individual was part of a nation, not every nation had a state, and not every state wished to accommodate all of the members of its supposed nation. The number of individuals who fell through the cracks is staggering. By one estimate, in 1926 there were nearly ten million refugees on the European continent, with countless others “trapped” as citizens within hostile states.¹⁰

Clearly much had changed since the 1870s when 7,000 German-speaking Mennonites relocated without passports from the Russian Empire to the British Empire and transplanted their *Privilegium*, village structures, and religious culture with them en toto. Now, governments were curating their populations and attempting to mold them into ideal citizens. They strictly enforced immigration quotas and demanded that their populations conform to a growing list of social, cultural, political, economic, and racial characteristics at the risk of incurring severe consequences.¹¹ Groups that held a wide range of identifications were particularly confounding to authorities. Though the Mennonite refugees possessed Dutch surnames, they were not Dutch nationals and though they spoke German, they were not German nationals. Technically, they remained Soviet citizens until they left Russia. Yet their property was confiscated when they left their villages and their citizenship was a hollow artifact once they were labeled as *kulaks*. They were first homeless, then rightless, and finally stateless.¹²

When several outside interests characterize a group of refugees, the situation provides us with a chance to compare external actors’ motives, assumptions, and

⁹ In 1922 the League recognized “Russian refugees” as one such group but the term only referred to persons of Russian origin who were already living outside the Soviet Union. See League of Nations, “Arrangement with respect to the issue of certificates of identity to Russian Refugees,” July 5, 1922, *League of Nations Treaty Series* 13, no. 355, accessed September 4, 2014, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3dd8b4864.html>.

¹⁰ See John Hope Simpson, *The Refugee Problem: Report of a Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 62.

¹¹ The nadir of this dilemma came at the 1938 Évian Conference in Switzerland when every major power declined to accept German Jews.

¹² Citizenship was tenuous for millions of other refugees and minorities living in Central and Eastern Europe during the interwar years as governments arranged new state borders around existing populations. See Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Skran.

worldviews. It is often assumed that governments regard refugees as “a problem” since they existed between or beyond fixed identifications and appear to threaten the “purity” of a given national population.¹³ Nonetheless, a tacit feature of a given refugee “problem” is that it provides governments with an opportunity to articulate refugees’ essential similarities or differences with their own constituencies. Refugees were not simply a “problem” for interwar governments because they threatened the integrity of their borders and the homogeneity of its citizenry but also a useful means of establishing a normative national identity. In short, refugees give states a platform to articulate their visions of an ideal society. Without the presence of ambiguous individuals, governments would have a harder time promulgating national archetypes and nationalist legislation. In the case at hand, refugees were mostly Christian farmers with “Nordic” racial features. These traits positioned them to invoke a religious and agrarian past—the *Deutscher Michel*—in a romanticized version of Germany’s collective history. Yet this chapter is not simply about German nationalist impressions of the refugees but delineates a range of competing interpretations about them—from nefarious *kulaks* to religious brethren.

This chapter argues that each state and non-state actor that interacted with the Mennonite refugees used the refugees’ polysemous identifications—as *kulaks*, *Auslandsdeutsche*, and Mennonites—to advance competing interests and define their own constituencies around issues of class, nationality, race, or religion. It therefore focuses on the external identifications, embedded in national or religious mythologies, that refugees encountered between their flight to Moscow and their arrival in Paraguay. This analysis will subsequently help us understand how external narratives collided with refugees’ own interpretations of their plight after they settled in the Gran Chaco.

The Soviet government labeled the refugees as reactionary *kulaks* and wanted to banish them from the country or exile them internally. The democratic Weimar government, which existed in Germany between 1919 and 1933, regarded them as *auslandsdeutsche* farmers and wanted to resettle them in Brazil where they could establish an economic relationship with Germany. The rising Nazi Party saw them as “race comrades,” and used the opportunity to criticize the Soviet Union and communists

¹³ Gatrell, 5; and Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 7.

in Germany. The German charity *Brüder in Not* viewed them as German Christian brothers, whose story could be used to raise awareness of Soviet atrocities. The Paraguayan government perceived the refugees to be sturdy German pioneers who would solidify its nebulous national border. Finally, in the United States, the MCC rejected the idea that the refugees (or any Mennonites, for that matter) owed special loyalty to the German nation or state and used the situation to promote global Mennonite unity.

All of these groups imbued the refugees with symbolic meanings that far outweighed their actual strength or numbers. Their predicament was compelling to each entity because the refugees embodied a central preoccupation of Western political and religious leaders during the interwar years, namely, the problem of uniting diffuse members of a nation or religion within the confines of a specific territory or establishing between them a sturdy network of transnational attachments.¹⁴ In their haste to interpret the broader meaning of the refugee crisis, each state and non-state actor elided or disregarded the refugees' own identifications and loyalties, which were quite varied.

Refugee groups in general are often composed of a heterogeneous mixture of people who share little in common other than their collective persecution. As the debate over the refugees' significance played out in the press and ricocheted between Moscow, Berlin, Ottawa, Asunción, and La Paz, it also swirled around the refugees and provided them with an initial understanding of their economic, national, and religious similarities. During their sojourn in foreign lands, the refugees' personal subjectivities were seriously disrupted: They were no longer self-sufficient but highly reliant others' charity; they were no longer respected members of a local community but set adrift in the wider world; they no longer held a vision of the future for it was shrouded in darkness and insecurity. Consequently, this chapter demonstrates how the broader interpretations that outsiders

¹⁴ Regarding the growth of early-twentieth century philanthropic and nationalist movements, Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier argue "the intensified entanglement of communicative public spheres enabled the actors and agents of these movements to connect and their visions and agendas to influence each other, across national and cultural borders." See, "Introduction: Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s," 10-11, 13. For a broader examination of early-twentieth century transnational networks see Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann eds., *The Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the German Historical Institute, 2001); Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); and Louis L. Snyder, *Macro-Nationalisms: A History of the Pan Movements* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984).

attached to the refugees provided the group with new ways to understand themselves: as victims, Mennonites, and Germans.

The refugees that formed the Fernheim Colony held a few general similarities but also a wide range of differences. They were all German-speaking Mennonites from communities that witnessed growing prosperity, increased education, and greater cooperation with the Russian state and with other Mennonites during the so-called Mennonite “golden age” from 1870 to 1914. They also experienced various abuses and setbacks during the First World War and its revolutionary aftermath. Aside from these generalities, the Fernheim colonists hailed from different local circumstances. By 1932, the Fernheim colony was composed of three separate groups: the 1,572 refugees who had assembled in Moscow, fifty-seven voluntary migrants¹⁵ from Poland, and another 370 refugees from Siberia via Harbin, China.¹⁶ A majority came from Siberia but most had only moved to the region from older settlements in southern Russia in the previous twenty years. They also belonged to different Mennonite branches (of which the *Brüdergemeinde* and *Mennonitengemeinde* were the largest) and were members of different Mennonite economic organizations—the Association of Citizens of Dutch Descent (*Verband der Bürger Holländischer Herkunft*) in Ukraine and the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Association (*Allrussischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verband*) in Russia, which maintained different relationships with the Soviet state.¹⁷

On a personal level, the refugees had different occupations, levels of education, family histories, and migration experiences that further inhibited their unity. For example, some individuals such as Nikolai Siemens—who founded the Fernheim Colony newspaper *Menno-Blatt*—married outside the faith and were educated and well traveled.

¹⁵ For the sake of simplicity, I refer to the Fernheim Colony Mennonites collectively as “refugees,” in light of the fact that only .03% of its population were voluntary migrants.

¹⁶ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 76-77; P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume I: Kingdom of God and Kingdom of this World*, trans. Gunther H. Schmitt (Filadelfia, Paraguay: Peter P. Klassen, 2003), 81-82.

¹⁷ Peter F. Froese, “Allrussischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verein,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified August 23, 2013, accessed December 17, 2012, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/A446.html>; Benjamin B. Janz, “Verband der Bürger holländischer Herkunft,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified August 23, 2013, accessed December 17, 2012, http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/verband_der_burger_hollandischer_herkunft.

N. Siemens was born in Crimea in 1895, visited the United States with his family, and settled on the expanding Siberian frontier in 1910. After marrying a Polish-German Baptist named Anna Wosnjak Fessner, he attended a Bible school in Tchongrav, Crimea, for training as a pastor, and returned to the village of Smolyanovka in Siberia where he was a *Brüdergemeinde* preacher until he fled with his family to Moscow.¹⁸ Others were less educated and more sedentary, such as the farmer and Fernheim *Oberschulze* Jakob Siemens. He was born in the Chortitza Colony in 1885, where he received a primary school education. After moving to Siberia, he participated in the Forest Service, married his wife, Sara, and farmed until 1927 when his family was forced to join a collective further east. On the night of December 17, 1930, he led 217 Mennonites across the frozen Amur River into China on sixty-three sleds.¹⁹ Mennonites often had large families, so many individuals—such as Elisabeth (Goerzen) Niebuhr and Kornelius K. Neufeld (the son of Kornelius A. Neufeld)—were adolescents during their respective escapes through China and Germany. They had not yet joined the church, and came of age in a tenuous and transnational environment that was much different from their parents’ generation.²⁰ During the uncertain months of transit, competing external influences played a varied but critical role in shaping refugees’ understanding of their situation, which affected them long after they settled near the Menno Colony in the Gran Chaco.

The refugees shared with their soon-to-be Menno Colony neighbors the advantage of finding a country that was keen to attract “German” immigrants but the similarities in

¹⁸ For a concise history of N. Siemens’ life see Bender, “Siemens, Nikolai (1895-1958),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified January 21, 2014, accessed April 4, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Siemens,_Nikolai_\(1895-1958\)&oldid=110914](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Siemens,_Nikolai_(1895-1958)&oldid=110914); Alfred Neufeld, “Siemens, Nikolai,” *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 387-388. For a longer account see Frieda Siemens Kaethler and A. Neufeld eds., *Nikolai Siemens der Chacoopitist* (Weisenheim am Berg, Germany: Agape, 2005).

¹⁹ Sara Siemens and children, “Ein Nachruf,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), January 1941, 2-3. The group acquired the sleds from the Soviet government under the auspices of doing voluntary forestry work in a neighboring city. On the night of their departure, they left food on the table, their clocks wound, and their oil lamps burning to give the appearance that they had not left. For a complete description of the flight see Helmut T. Huebert, *Events and People: Events in Russian Mennonite History and the People That Made Them Happen* (Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 1999), 201-207.

²⁰ E. Niebuhr’s family had in fact attempted to leave via Moscow but was turned back by Soviet authorities. Her interview is included in in the book G. Niebuhr and H. Ratzlaff, *Die Flucht über den Amur: ein Zeugnis von Gottvertrauen und Mut* (Filadelfia: Jubiläumskomitee der Herbiner Gruppe, 2007), 95-100.

their migration stories end there. The Menno Colony Mennonites firmly believed that God had ordained their movement to the Chaco, while the Fernheim Colony was more ambivalent about their purpose and destiny. Moreover, the Menno colonists had the luxury of researching destinations, organizing their groups, and purchasing land and supplies prior to their relocation, while the refugees possessed no such advantages and remained at the mercy of others. The disparate and difficult circumstances under which the Fernheim Colony was eventually formed began when individuals and families, such as the Neufelds, placed their lives in the hands of governments and non-governmental organizations who saw their plight as embodying the fears and possibilities of a new world order defined by nation-states and transnational solidarities.

Creating Kulaks

In 1928, the Soviet Union's Stalinist bloc made the "liquidation" of *kulaks* the focal point of achieving progress in the countryside. Stalin rejected the conventional wisdom of Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP), which held that educating the peasantry would lead to their rationality and atheism. Instead, he argued that the battle for communism was more than a rational or material contest, but embodied a fundamental struggle between good and evil. Conjured from theory and history, *kulaks* were a nefarious force lurking in the countryside that could rise up and destroy the Bolsheviks' bright future.²¹ Yet in order to be destroyed, *kulaks* first had to be invented. As with other mythological entities, the *kulak* lent itself to myriad local manifestations. Unsurprisingly, most resembled the opposite of the average Russian peasant: wealthy, "foreign," and not members of the Russian Orthodox faith.

The *kulak* category was never self-evident. At the most basic etymological level, the word means "fist" and it was first used in the nineteenth century to describe wealthy peasants who were "tight-fisted."²² The word assumed an increasingly political meaning

²¹ James Hughes, *Stalinism in a Russian Province: Collectivization and Dekulakization in Siberia* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1996), 132; Terry Martin, "The Russian Mennonite Encounter with the Soviet State, 1917-1955," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 20, No. 1 (Winter 2002): 16.

²² The word came into wider currency after the Stolypin Reforms in 1905, which encouraged the growth of modern, capitalist farming techniques and heightened the economic stratification of the peasantry. The peasantry sometimes considered *kulaks* to be exploitative but they also served as a source of local patronage and employment.

after the Bolshevik Revolution but it remained highly dependent on the subjective reasoning of local officials. The bar for admission into the *kulak* class was low and arbitrary but a peasant was surely a *kulak* if he owned a house, a barn, a dozen animals, and twenty *desiatinas* of land (about twenty-three hectares).²³ The use of hired labor was especially indicative of one's status as a *kulak*. Simply employing a neighbor boy for seasonal help on a three-*dessiatine* patch of land would qualify.²⁴ In various contexts, a peasant could also be labeled as a *kulak* by abstaining from alcohol, being married multiple times, or simply being a newcomer to a particular area.²⁵

Significantly, government officials often used the *kulak* label to brand national minorities or anyone who did not fit in to the dominant culture.²⁶ The country's large German-speaking population made easy targets for local officials to fulfill their *kulak* incarceration quotas due to their privileged status before the Revolution.²⁷ By 1929, the Soviet Union's German-speaking population was estimated at about 1.2 million individuals.²⁸ It included 91,134 Mennonites but even greater numbers of Catholics and Lutherans who had also accepted Catherine the Great's eighteenth-century manifesto.²⁹

²³ T. Martin, "The Russian Mennonite Encounter," 16.

²⁴ The most definitive state definition of a *kulak* appeared in mid-1929, on the eve of collectivization. Amongst other things a peasant was a *kulak* if they hired permanent workers for agricultural work or artisan industry; owned an "industrial enterprise" that used an engine, wind-mill, or water-wheel; hired out "complex" agricultural machines; or had members in the family who are engaged in commerce or have "other sources" of income not derived from labor. This category also included "ministers of cults." See Moshe Lewin, "Who Was the Soviet Kulak?" *Soviet Studies* 18, no. 2 (1966): 195.

²⁵ Some sectarian religious groups such as the Doukhobor, New Israelites, Free Christians, and Spiritual Christians declared themselves to be "communists" after the Revolution based, in part, on their avoidance of alcohol. Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society between Revolutions, 1918-1929* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 143.

²⁶ Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926-1936* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 46; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 122; Hughes, 8.

²⁷ Despite German-speakers' long history of living in the heart of Russia and in complete defiance of orthodox Marxism, some of the Soviet government's highest officials believed that their villages were composed exclusively of *kulak* farmers. See Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 320.

²⁸ Otto Auhagen, "Aufzeichnung," October 11, 1929, GFM 33/4538: L192467, NA.

²⁹ This number is tallied from Adolf Ehrt's population statistics. His count relies on the Mennonite's Committee for Church Affairs (*Kommission für Kirchenangelegenheiten, KfK*) 1926 census, which stated that there were 46,830 Mennonites in Ukraine and 44,304 Mennonites in the Soviet Union (excluding

In general, there was more separating the groups—religiously, culturally, economically, politically, and historically—than there was uniting them as a class or nationality.

Siberia was the epicenter of Stalin’s war against *kulaks* and Mennonites were well represented in this region. Poor harvests in Ukraine, Crimea, and the North Caucasus between 1927 and 1930 shifted the center of gravity for government grain procurements squarely on Siberia and specifically on the heads of its “wealthy” farmers.³⁰ Siberian Mennonite communities embodied the *kulak* threat because of their insularity, agricultural unions, foreign contacts, and relative wealth.³¹ The majority of their settlements were located in the vicinity of Omsk, Slavgorod, and Pavlodar. Before the First World War, they had established about fifty-nine colonies in Siberia, occupying 60,000 *dessiatine* of land (65,400 hectares) and claiming a total population of 21,000 individuals.³² Mennonites’ insularity and local autonomy especially bothered government officials. One Siberian authority noted, “The class differences of the Mennonite population are not outwardly apparent, they are so good [at hiding them] as to be unnoticeable. The poor and laborers are themselves Mennonites, that is to say sectarians, therefore, it is very difficult to use them as a weapon against the sect.”³³ A second official bluntly stated, “The Mennonite communities are run by wealthy preachers.”³⁴

On the village level, ethnic tensions, long-standing family rivalries, inter-village jealousies, and millennial fervor played a major role in creating and then destroying *kulaks*.³⁵ One or two petty grudges could set off a domino effect of accusations. Ethnic

Ukraine). See *Das Mennonitentum in Russland von seiner Einwanderung bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin: Verlag von Julius Beltz, 1932), 152.

³⁰ Hughes, 22.

³¹ Colin Neufeldt, “The Flight to Moscow, 1929,” *Preservings* 19 (December 2001): 35.

³² Petr P. Wiebe, “The Mennonite Colonies of Siberia: From the Late Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 30 (2012): 26. P. P. Wiebe bases his figures on Horst Gerlach, *Die Russlandmennoniten: Ein Volk unterwegs* (Kirchheimbolanden, Pfalz: Horst Gerlach, 1992), 49.

³³ Gerhard Hildebrandt, *Die Mennoniten in der Ukraine und im Gebiet Orenburg: Dokumente aus Archiven in Kiev und Orenburg* (Göttingen: Der Göttinger Arbeitskreis, 2006), 101.

³⁴ G. Hildebrandt, 99.

³⁵ In one small village, ritualized public shaming accompanied official *kulak* accusations—leading to a carnival-like atmosphere of howling grief-stricken women and children. See Hughes, *Stalinism in a Russian Province*, 46, 101.

ties did not necessarily ensure solidarity. In some areas, German Lutherans labeled Mennonites “Dutch bandits”³⁶ and Mennonites likewise held their German-speaking neighbors in contempt.³⁷ In a few instances, non-landowning Mennonites joined the Communist party and helped liquidate their erstwhile brethren.³⁸ In the final analysis, the Bolshevik quest to discover a class of individuals that embodied the *kulak* typology was more of a dream than a reality—but finding individuals that could be labeled as *kulaks* and blamed for “sabotage,” grain shortages, and the country’s “backward” rural economy was politically expedient in welding together a disparate and indifferent peasantry.

In retrospect, the Mennonites’ wager that they could survive under a communist government after the Revolution may appear incredible since the Bolsheviks were opposed to most everything that Mennonites believed in. Yet familiarity with previous European revolutions may have led contemporary observers to take a more Tocquevillian standpoint and to bet on the ultimate moderation of the revolutionary government. Although the Revolution was guided by ideology, Soviet policy under the NEP was guided by a spirit of pragmatism within a rubric of social and economic egalitarianism. In this climate, the highly politicized Mennonites of Russia and Ukraine successfully carved out an economic and religious niche for themselves.

Despite Mennonites’ self-perception as “the Quiet in the Land,” they possessed a leadership elite that extended back to their negotiations with Tsar Alexander II in the 1870s. In fact, they had even elected representatives to the third and fourth Dumas (1907-1917) to guard their interests.³⁹ Generally speaking, their guiding belief was that personal patronage of key leaders was more valuable than maintaining good relations with local

³⁶ G. Hildebrandt, 45.

³⁷ See C. Neufeldt, “Liquidating” Mennonite Kulaks (1929-1930),” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 83, no. 2 (April 2009): 221-91.

³⁸ Some Mennonite party members went on to write exposes against their former co-religionists. See H. Loewen, “Anti-Menno: Introduction to Early Soviet-Mennonite Literature (1920-1940),” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 11 (1993): 23-42; C. Neufeldt, “Re-forging Mennonite *Spetspereselentsy*: The Experience of Mennonite Exiles at Siberian Special Settlements in the Omsk, Tomsk, Novosibirsk and Narym Regions, 1930-1933,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 30, (2012): 275.

³⁹ Abe J. Dueck, “Mennonite Churches and Religious Developments in Russia 1850-1914,” in John Friesen ed., *Mennonites in Russia 1788-1988: essays in honour of Gerhard Lohrenz* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 174.

authorities. Since agriculture was the engine of the Soviet economy—out-producing the industrial sector by nearly two times—their agricultural skills were badly needed by the nascent government.⁴⁰ Mennonites retained their influence in Moscow, particularly in the Ministry of Agriculture and Food where they counted People’s Commissar for Agriculture, A. P. Smirnov, as a friend.⁴¹ Like the Tsars, Communist officials praised Mennonites’ strong economic culture and allowed them to establish economic unions in Ukraine and Russia.⁴² Ostensibly, the unions’ prerogatives were confined to the economic sphere, but they were also the vanguard protecting Mennonite social and religious autonomy. Thus, Mennonites continued to respond to the government as they had before the Revolution—playing to their economic strengths, cultivating powerful friends, and guarding their religious privileges.

The Diplomatic Dilemma

The political changes that swept through the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s destroyed the fragile truce built on the strengths of Mennonite organization and the weaknesses of the NEP.⁴³ By the middle of 1929, and with the regime’s war against *kulaks* fully underway, Mennonites experienced the termination of their economic and religious organizations, witnessed the imprisonment of many of their leaders, and saw sympathetic contacts in the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture dismissed or relocated.⁴⁴ *Dekulakization* represented a new type of homogenizing initiative that was altogether more visceral and existential than what they had experienced in the 1870s, and

⁴⁰ James W. Heinzen, *Inventing a Soviet Countryside: State Power and the Transformation of Rural Russia, 1917-1929* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 4.

⁴¹ Urry, “After the rooster crowed: some issues concerning the interpretation of Mennonite/Bolshevik relations during the early Soviet period,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995); 26-50, 48, n. 39.

⁴² A filed report to the Executive Committee of the All-Ukrainian Peoples Central Committee on July 16, 1924, stated “The existence of the Association of Mennonites as an economic institution is rated very positive because it has set a goal to increase agricultural production.” See G. Hildebrandt, *Die Mennoniten in der Ukraine*, 28.

⁴³ These changes entailed the domination of the political sphere by the Communist party; the purging of political leaders to the left and right of Stalin’s (ostensibly) center position; abolition of the free market; nationalization of the industrial sector; collectivization of the countryside; and disenfranchisement and exile of millions of so-called “wreckers,” “NEP-men,” and “*kulaks*.” See Hughes, 208; Siegelbaum, 188.

⁴⁴ Urry, “After the rooster crowed,” 48, n. 39.

what their co-religionists had experienced in Canada in the early 1920s. Mennonites were not offered a chance to leave within a given time period or even fined and incarcerated for their presumed transgressions. The Soviets demanded their immediate and complete physical removal—either through death or banishment—from Soviet society. With little influence in regional or local party circles, Mennonites looked to Moscow and abroad to be saved from the growing persecution. As unlikely as it might have seemed to the refugees, the German government was highly interested in their fate.

In keeping with their history of mobilization and migration, thousands of Siberian Mennonites fled to Moscow at the end of 1929. More would have followed if not for the government agents that were scrambled to staunch the movement. A directive from the Orenburg District Executive Committee dated October 4, 1929 compelled subordinates to fight emigration, arrest agitators, and threaten them with complete economic destruction.⁴⁵ Prospective emigrants traveled to multiple towns and cities hoping to find a station where they could buy tickets unnoticed. One Mennonite family, the Kasdorfs, moved between Slavgorod and Pavlador for several months, trying to find a way to Moscow.⁴⁶ Others boarded trains regardless of their destination, wending their way from Siberia to Crimea to Moscow.⁴⁷ A few families even hitched rides on postal trains.⁴⁸

Refugees' long, uncomfortable train rides were usually followed by difficulties in obtaining shelter and food in the capital. Families disembarked at stations several miles outside Moscow—Djangarovka, Perlovka, Kljasma, and Pushkino—where rents were cheaper and where they would not attract attention. Early arrivals had a modest amount of money because they had more time to sell their possessions but the majority of refugees were quite poor. The average family possessed only 250 rubles.⁴⁹ Sometimes ten

⁴⁵ G. Hildebrandt, 122.

⁴⁶ Hans Kasdorf, *Design of my Journey: An Autobiography* (Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies; Nürnberg, Germany: VTR Publications, 2004), 16-17.

⁴⁷ Erwin Warkentin, "The Mennonites before Moscow: The Notes of Dr. Otto Auhagen," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 26 (2008): 210.

⁴⁸ Auhagen, "Aufzeichnung," October 29, 1929, *Russland Politik. Mennoniten—Deutschstämmige. Deutsche in Russland*, GFM 33/4538: L192466, NA.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

or more people lived in spaces that measured forty square feet or less.⁵⁰ Bread and fuel were especially difficult to obtain since many individuals had been disenfranchised and were unable to procure government ration cards. Most families had to subsist on potatoes and black bread.⁵¹ In spite of this reality, the *Moscow Review* reported that most of the refugees were of the landed classes (i.e. *kulaks*).⁵² By this point, it did not matter how wealthy the refugees actually were or what class they supposedly belonged to. They were *kulaks* and they were attempting to evade justice.

Once in the capital, individuals and families contacted every powerful group that they could think of who might secure them exit visas and passports. Women and children took the lead in coordinating petitions for these items since they were less likely to be arrested. Most wished to go to Canada, under the auspices of D. Toews' CMBC. Mennonites visited or wrote letters to the Soviet Central Committee, the Politburo, and Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya. Some wrote to Maxim Gorky, who was exiled in Italy.⁵³ A number of Mennonite women and children even staged a protest in the waiting room of President Mikhail Kalinin's office.⁵⁴ The group also mailed signed petitions to six government offices, closing with the threat that if they were not allowed to emigrate, they had no other choice but to commit mass suicide on the Kremlin's steps.⁵⁵

Like other German-speaking enclaves in Central and Eastern Europe before the First World War, Russia's Mennonites did not understand themselves to be part of a "German diaspora," or view Germany as their homeland or eventual destination. Their Germanness was defined locally or regionally and involved no clear attachment to the German nation-state.⁵⁶ Despite Mennonites' reluctance to identify with the German

⁵⁰ Ibid., L192460, L192472-L192473; Kasdorf, 21.

⁵¹ Auhagen, "Aufzeichnung," October 29, 1929, L192473.

⁵² Carl Dienstmann [?], "Aufzeichnung," October 29, 1929, Russland Politik, Mennoniten—Deutschstämmige, Deutsche in Russland, GFM 33/4538: L192456, NA.

⁵³ Auhagen, "Aufzeichnung," October 29, 1929, L192473-74.

⁵⁴ C. Neufeldt, 39.

⁵⁵ C. Neufeldt, "The Flight to Moscow," 39; H. J. Willms, *At the Gates of Moscow: God's Gracious Aid Through a Most Difficult and Trying Period*, trans. George G. Thielman, (Yarrow, BC: Columbia Press, 1964), 62.

⁵⁶ Judson, "When Is a Diaspora Not a Diaspora?" 221.

nation-state, they did view its embassy, and especially its agricultural attaché, Dr. Otto Auhagen, as a potential ally since Auhagen and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Auswärtiges Amt, AA*), were, in fact, interested in them.⁵⁷

Despite the Mennonites' ambivalence toward Germany, the *AA* possessed a highly developed analytical paradigm for interpreting the refugees as *Auslandsdeutsche*. After the First World War, German fears about the country's loss of territory merged with fears about *Auslandsdeutsche* losing their Germanness to create the perception that the German nation was weak and vulnerable. The *AA* was highly interested in monitoring and aiding *auslandsdeutsche* enclaves around the world by directing large amounts of money and resources through embassies and back door channels to fund German business and farm loans and support German newspapers, charities, and schools.⁵⁸

One of the most pressing concerns facing the Weimar government was whether *Auslandsdeutsche* from eastern countries deserved citizenship in the German state. Historian Annemarie Sammartino summarizes, "Germans from across the political spectrum—save the extreme left—shared a belief that citizenship should only be available to those who had proven their German identity."⁵⁹ Yet there was a lack of agreement among state and *Land* authorities and between government and private organizations as to what attributes actually denoted German identity. The German citizenship law of 1913 remained in effect during the Weimar era but it often yielded to prevailing political winds. The law stated that a descendent of a "former German" could be granted citizenship but it does not reveal how far back one could claim German

⁵⁷ Auhagen, "Aufzeichnung," October 29, 1929, L192473.

⁵⁸ Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 123-124; Thomas Lekan, "German Landscape: Local Promotion of the *Heimat* Abroad," in *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness*, ed. Krista O'Donnell, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 153; Nancy R. Reagin, "German Brigadoon? Domesticity and Metropolitan Perceptions of *Auslandsdeutschen* in Southwest Africa and Eastern Europe," in *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness*, ed. Krista O'Donnell, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 254.

⁵⁹ Annemarie Sammartino, "Culture, Belonging and the Law: Naturalization in the Weimar Republic," in *Citizenship and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Eley and Jan Palmowski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 59.

ancestry or enumerate the specific attributes of “former Germans.”⁶⁰ During the Weimar years, citizenship was not simply an issue of legal membership in Germany but a battleground for defining the ideal German nation, state, and individual.

Throughout the 1920s, the German government was often willing to grant permission for *auslandsdeutsch* individuals from eastern countries to stay in Germany until they could find new homes abroad. The German Red Cross headed up the effort by creating a network of refugee camps. From Russia alone, about 100,000 German-speakers fled during the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the ensuing Civil War. As of 1925, about 58,000 remained in Germany.⁶¹ Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union were a small part of the flood. By the mid-1920s, Camp Lechfeld, a former German army barracks in Bavaria, was a way station for about 20,000 Mennonites who had secured passage to Canada.⁶² Some refugees eventually migrated to other states. Others wished to stay in Germany. National and provincial governments often granted citizenship on an arbitrary basis or left the decision up to local officials. In one instance, an official at the Prussian Welfare Ministry encouraged the governor (*oberpräsident*) of Kassel to have a more cultural understanding of Germanness rather than a legal or technical interpretation.⁶³ In this regard the German government echoed Soviet administrators who encouraged local officials to define who was a *kulak* on a “case-by-case” basis and not “mechanically” or “formally.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ “German Imperial and State Citizenship Law. July, 22 1913,” *The American Journal of International Law* 8, no. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (1914), 217-227. For an overview of Germany’s changing citizenship laws, which generally excluded newcomers to the German state while privileging Germans living overseas, see Howard Sargent, “Diasporic Citizens: Germans Abroad in the Framing of German Citizenship Law,” in *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness*, ed. Krista O’Donnell, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

⁶¹ James Casteel, “The Politics of Diaspora: Russian German Émigré Activists in Interwar Germany,” in *German Diasporic Experiences: Identity, Migration, and Loss*, eds. Mathias Schulze, James M. Skidmore, David G. John, et al. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 120. The initiative proved costly. In 1921, for example, the German government spent more than 80 million marks on refugee assistance. See Sammartino, *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East 1914-1922* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 111.

⁶² See Peter Letkemann, “Mennonite Refugee Camps in Germany, 1921-1951: Part I - Lager Lechfeld,” *Mennonite Historian* 38, no. 3 (2012): 1-2.

⁶³ Sammartino, *The Impossible Border*, 109.

⁶⁴ A. S. Kiselev, State Archives of the Russian Federation f. 1235, op. 74, d. 427, l. 109. Quoted in Alexopoulos, 48.

Auslandsdeutsche who wished to remain in the Soviet Union presented a complicated and delicate situation for the AA because it was unclear on what terms they wished to interact with the “homeland.” Should the Germans treat them as citizens of the Soviet Union? Or were they national compatriots who should be saved from Bolshevik tyranny? To be sure, there was a bewildering mixture of German-speaking communities in the Soviet Union—each with its own sense of Germanness. One German-speaking writer in the Soviet Union argued in *Deutsche Post aus dem Osten* that Russian-Germans are real Germans, though “when you read the writings about us, you sometimes get the impression that we are a newly discovered people.”⁶⁵

Throughout the 1920s, Mennonite communities in the Soviet Union were a special source of consternation for the AA since they did not cultivate a relationship with Germany. One report filed by the German embassy in Kharkiv, Ukraine on April 1, 1925, expressed an admiration of Mennonites’ ability to resist Soviet integration but registered skepticism about their dependability since they “are not politically loyal.”⁶⁶ This assessment may have been due to the fact that Mennonites eschewed participation in the Soviet Union’s schemes to organize its population under national labels. In 1924, the Bolshevik government helped nationalize the country’s German-speakers by established the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Yet Mennonites eschewed this organization in favor of their own.⁶⁷ German embassy officials living in the Soviet Union balanced the perception that the Soviet Union’s Mennonites were ethnic Germans with the reality that they were ambivalent about their nationality.

Officials at the German embassy in Moscow were therefore quite aware of the difficulties faced by *Auslandsdeutsche* living in the Soviet Union, but they were at loggerheads among themselves over how to proceed with the crisis. In the spring of 1929, Auhagen visited Mennonite colonists in Ukraine and Crimea. He was an early proponent of German intervention. In a report filed on May 26, 1929, Auhagen stated, “If the

⁶⁵ *Deutsche Post aus dem Osten* (Berlin), March 28, 1920, p. 1.

⁶⁶ On an optimistic note, the report concluded that Mennonites were “harmless nonetheless.” See “1 April 1925,” p. 4, R67278, AA. Internal reports at the AA reveal that the government also kept tabs on Mennonite colonies in Canada, Mexico, and Paraguay. See for example R67257 and R67278, AA.

⁶⁷ Martin, “The Russian Mennonite Encounter,” 19-20.

system [of collectivization] remains as it is, it is my conviction that Germanness in the colonies of southern Ukraine and Crimea will face hopeless economic impoverishment, moral decay, and their [the colonies'] eventual destruction.”⁶⁸

In contrast, German ambassador Herbert von Dirksen was against intervention because it lacked a clear geopolitical incentive. On August 1, 1929, in an in-depth report titled “Situation of the German Colonists in the USSR,” Dirksen claimed the German government could help some individuals by giving them citizenship but helping all of them would be like trying “to fill a bottomless pit.”⁶⁹ Dirksen lamented that refugees would have to go to the Americas where they would be settled in a “chess board order that endangered the preservation of Germanness.”⁷⁰ Dirksen also noted that helping Germans in the Soviet Union carried the threat of exacerbating ethnic tensions in other European theaters including southern Tyrol.⁷¹ He concluded that aiding prospective German migrants would cost the government a great deal of effort and money without benefiting the German state or nation.

Later that month, Dirksen returned to Germany for holidays and health treatments. Director of Eastern Affairs, Fritz Adalbert Ernst von Twardowski, temporarily filled his position.⁷² The embassy’s negative attitude toward the refugees began to change after he sent Auhagen to investigate the situation in the refugee camps in mid-October. Auhagen was a capable and shrewd civil servant who was familiar with the Soviet system. He brought with him reporters from the *Hamburger Nachrichten* and the *Kölnische Zeitung* and American reporters from the *Chicago Daily News*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *International News Service*.⁷³ Between October 11 and October

⁶⁸ Auhagen, *Die Schicksalswende des Russlanddeutschen Bauerntum in den Jahren 1927-1930* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1942), 43. See also Christoph Mick, *Sowjetische Propaganda, Fünfjahrplan, und deutsche Rußlandpolitik 1928-1932*. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1995), 335.

⁶⁹ “Lage der deutschen Kolonisten in der UdSSR,” August 1, 1929, R83850, K480945, AA.

⁷⁰ Ibid, K480947.

⁷¹ Ibid, K480946. Writing on the Moscow refugees, another German official by the name of Zechlin mentions the “delicate” issue of German-speakers in South Tyrol in a memorandum to German Secretary of State Carl von Schubert. See “Memorandum by Zechlin,” n.d., R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196191, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde (hereafter BA).

⁷² Twardowski remained at this post until November.

⁷³ Mick, *Sowjetische Propaganda*, 357; Auhagen, *Die Schicksalswende*, 49 ff.

18, 1929, Auhagen filed several reports on the condition of the Mennonite camps and the communities from which they originated.⁷⁴ In his first report, Auhagen stated that Stalin's "New Method" of allowing local officials to extract taxes and grain from the peasantry had caused great distress in rural German-speaking enclaves.⁷⁵ He estimated about 700,000 to 800,000 of these wished to emigrate "as fast as possible though he did not speculate how such a large quantity of *Auslandsdeutsche* could possibly be absorbed into the present borders of the German state."⁷⁶

Persuaded by Auhagen and Unruh—member of the 1921 *Russlandmennonitische Studienkommission* and the German Mennonite representative to *Brüder in Not*—that the refugees' passage to Canada was assured (it was not), the German government permitted a limited number of refugees to enter Germany.⁷⁷ On October 15, the Germans dispatched a diplomat by the name of Carl Dienstmann to Moscow to meet with Soviet diplomat Boris Shtein.⁷⁸ In the preceding months, the Soviets had granted a number of Swedish-speaking individuals the ability to immigrate to Sweden. Dienstmann's mission was to ask for a similar privilege on behalf of the German government.⁷⁹ The Soviet Foreign Ministry responded in the affirmative. They promised to cooperate as long as the Germans did not publicize their demands, which would put the Soviets in a corner.⁸⁰

On October 18, 1929, the Politburo issued a resolution, signed by Joseph Stalin, which stated that the government "did not object to the emigration of the Mennonite

⁷⁴ For a more detailed analysis of these reports see Erwin Warkentin, "Germany's Diplomatic Efforts during the 1929 Mennonite Immigration Crisis," *Mennonite Historian* 31, no. 3 (September 2005), 4-5, 8 and "The Mennonites before Moscow."

⁷⁵ Auhagen, "Aufzeichnung," October 29, 1929, L192467.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, L192462.

⁷⁷ Unruh made this claim based on the fact that several thousand refugees possessed prepaid tickets to Canada, which were bought for them by relatives living in the country. Unbeknownst to Unruh, the tickets did not guarantee Canadian naturalization. H. Dyck, 165-166.

⁷⁸ C. Neufeldt, "The Flight to Moscow," 40.

⁷⁹ Savin, "The 1929 Emigration of Mennonites," 47.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

refugees.”⁸¹ The next day, N. J. Raivid, of the Second Western Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, relayed a message to N. N. Krestinsky, one of the regime’s plenipotentiary representatives in Germany, that it was a good way to rid the Soviet Union of some of its *kulak* elements.⁸² On October 29, 1929, the first group of 323 refugees left Moscow for Leningrad. They were transferred to a steamer and arrived in Kiel on November 3.⁸³ Before they left, the refugees’ military escorts confiscated their money and valuables. According to one source, a Soviet official laconically told the Mennonites, “You came to Russia naked and we will send you forth naked.”⁸⁴

The proposal initially worked for both governments and it appeared as though the whole situation could be resolved through high-level negotiations.⁸⁵ Then on October 30, the German consulate in Montreal informed Berlin that the Canadian government was prevaricating and could not accept refugees before the following spring.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, a second refugee transport left Moscow for Leningrad on October 31.⁸⁷ Now the German government faced a decision. It could turn the refugees back, avoid the burden of caring for them on its own dime, and risk provoking the wrath of the German press, or it could accept the refugees, bear the costs, and reap favorable publicity for its sympathetic treatment of *Auslandsdeutsche*.

The crisis appeared as an item of discussion on President Paul von Hindenburg’s cabinet minutes on November 9, and it instigated a debate about what the German

⁸¹ *Etnokonfessiiia v soveiskom gosudarstve. Mennonity Sibiri v 1920-1980-e gg Annotirovannyi sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov I materialov. Izbrannye dokumenty*. Compiled by A. I. Savin (Novosibirsk-Saint Petersburg: 2006), 320-321. Quoted in Savin, “The 1929 Emigration of Mennonites,” 47.

⁸² Savin, “The 1929 Emigration of Mennonites,” 48.

⁸³ Peter Letkemann, “Mennonite Refugee Camps in Germany, 1921-1951: Part II - Lager Mölln,” *Mennonite Historian* 38, no. 4 (2012): 1-2 and 10, 1.

⁸⁴ Donald Day, “Russia blocks ruined German farmers’ flight: ‘Naked you came, naked you go,’ says Moscow,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 4, 1929, p. 19.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Trautmann, “Memorandum by Trautmann,” November 25, 1929, AA. C. Neufeldt dates the Canadian decision on October 28. See “The Flight to Moscow,” 41.

⁸⁷ This group would remain in Leningrad for over a month before it was allowed to continue to Germany on November 29. Letkemann, “Part II - Lager Mölln,” 2.

government owed the refugees and other German-speakers in Russia.⁸⁸ Interestingly, the minutes do not contain a discussion about the historic or contemporary connections the refugees had to the German nation or state. Cabinet officials accepted that the refugees were German farmers. The very idea that Germans were being abused in the Soviet Union precluded any debate as to what constituted Germanness and whether *these* particular refugees were Germans. Foreign minister Julius Curtius suggested that if the German state did not help their “ethnic German countrymen” then Germany’s international prestige might suffer.⁸⁹ Abandoning the refugees would define the limits of Germany’s foreign policy and perhaps its impotency.

Chancellor Hermann Müller proposed that the League of Nations handle the situation.⁹⁰ Curtius registered skepticism over this proposal at a subsequent *Reichsministeren* meeting, citing the “complete fiasco” of the League’s efforts to aid Armenian refugees.⁹¹ Another official by the name of Planck proposed that Germany take a middle path by providing money for the refugees’ return tickets to Siberia under the auspices of the Red Cross. His memorandum warned against unrestricted immigration by invoking the refugee crisis of 1919, when German-speaking individuals “returning” from the Soviet Union swamped Germany’s borders.⁹²

For a time, the German government entertained the idea of settling a limited number of Mennonites in Prussia where they would serve as a bulwark against the country’s eastern neighbors and lessen the country’s reliance on Polish farm workers. Auhagen had already made a similar proposition in an October 13 letter to Government

⁸⁸ “Sitzung des Reichsministeriums aus der Niederschrift über die Ministerbesprechung,” November 9, 1929, R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196168, BA.

⁸⁹ Julius Curtius, “Memorandum by Curtius,” November 6, 1929, R29275, E160292. See also Twardowski, “Memorandum by Twardowski,” November 11, 1929, GFM 33/4538: L192411, NA.

⁹⁰ “Sitzung des Reichsministeriums,” November 9, 1929, L192412. League involvement was never seriously pursued although Germany’s undersecretary for the League of Nations Albert Dufour-Feronce apparently discussed it in Geneva’s diplomatic circles. On November 20, during an informal conversation between Dufour-Feronce and a Mr. Lodge, the latter stated “the whole movement should be considered as an internal Russian problem, which the League of Nations could deal with.” See A. Dufour-Feronce, “Memorandum by Dufour-Feronce,” November 20, 1929, R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196231, BA.

⁹¹ “Sitzung des Reichsministeriums,” November 9, 1929, L196168.

⁹² “Rückführung deutschstämmiger Kolonisten aus Rußland,” n.d., R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196156-L196158, BA.

Minister for Food and Agriculture (*Reichsminister für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft*) by noting that these “precious elements” would “be very suitable material as East Prussian settlers.”⁹³ Now Democratic and Center party *Bundestag* representatives picked up this torch at a meeting of party leaders on November 14.⁹⁴ Cabinet minutes indicate the representatives “campaigning for settlement of part of the refugees in Germany. East Prussia and Eastern Germany in general could undoubtedly accept a great number of settlers.”⁹⁵ Yet twelve days later, the Central Organ of the German Farmers’ Association (*Das Zentralorgan der Deutschen Bauernschaft*) tendered the dissenting position that it was impossible to resettle the refugees without spending a great deal of time and money acclimating them to life in Germany. According to the association, “The Russian peasant families live on grain production and it is quite clear that they would never find a living on German soil in today’s competitive conditions.”⁹⁶ It argued that accepting even a small number of “return migrants” (*Rückwanderer*) would only be possible if refugees took low-level positions as farmhands.⁹⁷

Ultimately, the cabinet charted a middle course by temporarily accepting the refugees until a permanent host country could be found. Based on a quota of 13,000 individuals, the cabinet earmarked up to 6,000,000 *Reichsmarks* for the purpose of transportation and housing.⁹⁸ At this point, it appeared as though the evacuation would proceed in an orderly fashion and could be settled within a few weeks. Nevertheless, a month passed before further transports were actually allowed to leave the Soviet Union.

⁹³ Auhagen, *Die Schicksalswende*, 54-55.

⁹⁴ “Niederschrift über eine Parteiführerbesprechung am 14 November 1929 nachm. 5 Uhr im Reichskanzlerhause,” R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196193, BA. The option continued to circulate in the German government but it was never officially pursued. In January 1930, the secretary for the Imperial Colonial Office (*Reichskolonialamt*) wrote to the Society for German Settlement and Migration (*Vereinigung für Deutsche Siedlung und Wanderung*) that settling the refugees on Germany’s eastern borders was desirable since they would “constitute a very valuable part of the colonization of the nationally and ethnically endangered parts of the country.” See, “Entschliessung,” R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196247-L196248, BA.

⁹⁵ “Niederschrift über eine Parteiführerbesprechung... 14 Nov 1929,” L196193, BA.

⁹⁶ “Russlandbauern als deutsche Siedler,” November 26, 1929, R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196231, p. 115, BA.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ “Sitzung des Reichsministeriums,” November 18, 1929, R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196228, BA. The German Treasury later reduced the amount to three and a half million *Reichsmark*. See C. Neufeldt, “The Flight to Moscow,” 43.

During this time the German government and press wrestled with the question of what it meant for the German state to help the refugees and *Auslandsdeutsche* in general.

The idealism of settling the refugees in Germany gave way to more practical considerations, yet the refugees' designation as *Auslandsdeutsche* remained useful for government propaganda. Within days of the German government's decision to help the refugees, it established the Government Commission for Aid to German Russians (*Reichskommissar für die Deutschrussen Hilfe*) under the auspices of the Minister of the Interior.⁹⁹ The government granted refugees "letters of identification" instead of German citizenship, which allowed the regime to publically demonstrate its support for the refugees while ensuring that they would not remain in Germany.¹⁰⁰

Perhaps due more to the publicity surrounding the refugees than the acuteness of their plight or the size of their group, Hindenburg proclaimed that it was essential to care for these "unfortunate farmers of the German race."¹⁰¹ Hindenburg stated that the German National People's Party (*Deutschnationale Volkspartei*) and the Party of the German Middle Class (commonly known as the *Wirtschaftspartei*) were ready to aid the downtrodden German farmers.¹⁰² As honorary president of the German Red Cross, he also "directed a heartfelt plea to all Germans in and out of Germany each according to his abilities to contribute help to their German kinsmen (*Stammesgenossen*)."¹⁰³ The call was accompanied by a plan to rally state, municipal, business, and workers' associations.¹⁰⁴ In a symbolic act of solidarity with *Auslandsdeutsche*, Hindenburg donated 200,000 *Reichsmarks* from his discretionary presidential budget to the cause.¹⁰⁵ He also promised

⁹⁹ The Social Democrat Reichstag representative Daniel Stücklen was appointed as its director. "Maßnahmen zu Gunsten der aus Rußland abwandernden deutschstämmigen Bauern," 28 November, 1929," R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196233, BA.

¹⁰⁰ One Canadian internal memorandum states "As you know the German Government is prepared to issue letters of identification to the refugees although not of German nationality." See [Walter?] de Haas "Memorandum by de Haas," November 11, 1929, GFM 33/4538: L192408, NA.

¹⁰¹ "Memorandum to Dr. Pünder," November 12, 1929, R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196164, BA.

¹⁰² "WTB," n.d. GFM 33/4538: L192399, NA. These parties largely represented the interests of the conservative middle class, landowners, and industrialists.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ "Memorandum to Dr. Pünder," L196165.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., L196164, BA.

to write a thank you note to anyone who donated 1,000 *Reichsmarks* or more to the effort.¹⁰⁶ Hindenburg's initiative was a natural extension of the country's domestic and international insecurities and identified the German state with an abstract, transnational Germanness. He helped the refugees because he hoped that doing so would unify Germans living in Germany and signal (in a token way) the government's commitment to helping *Auslandsdeutsche*. It appeared to have all the makings of a publicity coup but it ended up provoking more turmoil than the government anticipated.

Press Problems

Hindenburg's proposal came at the end of a turbulent year and it was met with a cacophony of responses. 1929 brought the tenth anniversary of the Treaty of Versailles, which dovetailed with long running press coverage about Germany's political insecurity abroad and economic insecurity at home. Over the summer, the government's renegotiation of the Young Plan increased political divisiveness in the country. In the fall, the National Socialists circumvented the Reichstag and put forward a "Law against the Enslavement of the German People," which proposed to make it a crime for the government to collect money for war repatriations. Throughout the year Germany saw rising unemployment and by the time October rolled around, the New York stock market crash only deepened its economic woes. Municipal elections in late November held the possibility of rectifying some of the country's divisions but ongoing Communist and Nazi street violence provoked new anxieties. The refugee crisis therefore splashed across the country's newspapers as an issue that could divide or unite Germans yet it quickly mushroomed into a debate about what Germany owed *Auslandsdeutsche*.

The refugee crisis was meaningful because it was so malleable. The refugees embodied everything from romantic notions of national solidarity, to the threat of Bolshevism, to the hypocrisy of a government that cared more about *Auslandsdeutsche* than about poor German farmers within its borders. The fact that most refugees were from a relatively unknown religious confession made the story all the more exotic and pliable.

¹⁰⁶ C. Neufeldt, "The Flight to Moscow," 43.

Altogether, the German press received the story as a convenient vehicle for airing their particular concerns and grievances.

The German government assumed that “public opinion” both in Germany and abroad was of the mind that the refugees were Germans and had a right to state protection. Hindenburg articulated this idea when he stated “the public opinion... would not understand if these people were left to death by starvation” especially since “Germany has allowed in more than a hundred thousand foreigners of undesirable quality since [the First World War].”¹⁰⁷ In 1928, Oswald Spengler asserted, “The public truth of the moment... Is today a product of the Press.”¹⁰⁸ What Spengler did not consider was that the press seldom arrived at one interpretation of the truth. Hindenburg and other officials falsely believed they could decipher and control “public opinion,” despite the reality that the press was an unpredictable mélange of highly partisan opinions.¹⁰⁹ Though the international press seized on the story to reaffirm the conventional wisdom that states should protect “their” nations, within Germany the story merely reaffirmed the country’s divisions.

By early-November, the refugee story was being given top billing in the *New York Times* and other international news outlets. Perhaps at no other point in history had a group of Mennonites achieved such notoriety. An editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* opined “The suffering of the Mennonites has met with a prompt if unavailing response from Germans, who have not ceased to regard these Russian peasants as Germans despite centuries of physical and political separation.”¹¹⁰ Half way around the globe the story resonated with a *Times of India* reader, Ardeshir Edalji Bengali, who saw in the Mennonite refugees a warning against an independent, communistic India. According to Bengali, the Mennonites “are a Christian Sect with almost Buddhistic tenets of non-

¹⁰⁷ “Sitzung des Reichsministeriums,” November 9, 1929, L196164. It is likely that Hindenburg was referring to the thousands of Russians and Eastern European Jews who fled to (or through) Germany after the First World War and the Russian Civil War. Members of the German government feared that the country was a “bridge” for Eastern European migration to other lands and a “cauldron” for those who entered Germany but could not exit. See Sammartino, *The Impossible Border*, 1-2.

¹⁰⁸ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, ed. Helmut Werner, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 394-395.

¹⁰⁹ Bernhard Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

¹¹⁰ “The Plight of the Mennonites,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*; November 27, 1929, p. 12.

violence... They ought to prove betimes a warning to my countrymen.”¹¹¹ The specifics of the Mennonites—their particular history, faith and culture—meant very little in the face of how their situation could be used to mirror a diversity of concerns.

In Germany, the fractured and boisterous Weimar press exhibited a stark difference of opinions about the refugees and about *Auslandsdeutsche* in general. Coverage of the Soviet Union’s German-speaking communities was a critical topic in the press during the 1920s, especially when it became clear that the Soviet government was targeting German-speaking citizens for grain requisitions and disenfranchisement.¹¹² Outlets from the center-left *Dresdner Neuesten Nachrichten* to the far right *Völkische Kurier* had their own interpretation of what *Auslandsdeutsche* meant to Germany, but generally portrayed them as sturdy, hardworking, and resilient.¹¹³ On a more existential level, the refugees symbolized German insecurities about the country’s reduced borders after Versailles, the spread of communism, and the country’s tenuous social and economic connections abroad. Germans were concerned about the refugees but they were also concerned about what those refugees’ plight meant for themselves.

From the fascist right, the Nazi Party paper *Völkischer Beobachter* used the refugees to articulate some of the most strident claims about German national solidarity. As a party whose brand of socialism found its greatest articulation in the solidarity of the trenches during the First World War, the refugees personified frontline soldiers’ embattled existence. They were a group embroiled in their own *Fronterlebnis*, brought together under adverse circumstances as “Germans,” and who required the complete support of the “home front.” Between November 1929 and January 1930 the paper published no fewer than fifteen articles on the refugees. Editor Arthur Rosenberg and other contributors attacked the Soviet regime with articles such as “The German Peasantry in Russia, a Parable of the Incompetence of the Parasitic Moscow Government,” and waxed melodramatically about Russia’s Germans who endured the

¹¹¹ Ardeshir Edalji Bengali, “A Russian Model. Warning to People of India,” *The Times of India*, January 9, 1930, p. 3.

¹¹² Though perhaps somewhat hyperbolically, H. Dyck states that the German press “reacted with a volcanic anti-Soviet campaign” in regard to the circumstances surrounding the refugees’ flight to Moscow. See, 162-163.

¹¹³ See for example *Völkischer Kurier* (Munich), May 29, 1929.

First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution to preserve their German culture “more than some communities within the German state’s own borders.”¹¹⁴ The Nazis ignored the refugees’ religious beliefs and maintained a focus on their racial and occupational identifications. The actual situation of the refugees—their flight to Germany and the outpouring of aid on their behalf—was less compelling to the *Völkischer Beobachter* than using the crisis as a platform for deriding the “so-called” German embassy’s inability to help save their “blood comrades” from the “Mongoloid” flood and speculating on the political-racial destiny of the Soviet Union.¹¹⁵

On the other end of the political spectrum, Germany’s communist press used the crisis to position itself as the defender of Germany’s working class. On November 14, *Red Flag (Rote Fahne)*, the official paper of Germany’s Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD*), acquired photographs of a memorandum supposedly written by Auhagen on August 1, 1929.¹¹⁶ *Rote Fahne* ran a front-page article (accompanied by numerous exclamation points) excoriating the German government for interfering in the Soviet Union’s domestic politics and stealing bread from Germany’s proletariat to feed the *kulak* outlaws.¹¹⁷ Interestingly, the only thing the Nazi and communist presses could agree on was that the Mennonites were prosperous farmers and that their Mennoniteness was marginal to the situation.

After the publication of the *Rote Fahne* article, the *KPD* seized on the hypocrisy of the government’s support for “*kulak* immigration” to Germany by claiming that many

¹¹⁴ “6000 deutsche Bauern mit Verbannung nach Sibirien bedroht,” *Völkischer Beobachter* (Munich), 12 Nov. 1929.

¹¹⁵ “Das deutsche Bauernsterben in Sowjetrussland,” *Völkischer Beobachter* (Munich), 24 and 25 Nov. 1929, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ The official document bears Dirksen’s name. “Die Not der Deutschen in der USSR ein entlarvter Wahlschwindel!” *Rote Fahne* (Berlin), 14 Nov. 1929, p. 1. It was later discovered that the source of the leak was an official named Zarske “with a pretty bad reputation” who worked in the German Immigration Office and employed a communist typist. See Trautmann, “Memorandum from Trautmann,” November 16, 1929, GFM 33/4538: L192359, NA.

¹¹⁷ “Die Not der Deutschen,” *Rote Fahne* (Berlin). See also, “Millionen für die kulaken—Nichts für die deutschen werktätigen Massen,” *Rote Fahne* (Berlin), December 1, 1929, p. 3.

of the country's poorer farmers were simultaneously being forced to immigrate to other countries.¹¹⁸ They articulated their disgust in a Reichstag interpellation, which read:

The decision of the German government to carry out a relief operation for known Russian kulaks who, in their fanatical struggle against the socialization of agriculture and the construction of socialism in Soviet Russia, desire to emigrate from the Soviet Union is an unprecedented interference of capitalist Germany in the internal affairs of the Russian workers' state.¹¹⁹

The sentiments expressed in *Völkischer Beobachter* and *Rote Fahne* strike at the paradox of what it meant for the Weimar Republic to help *Auslandsdeutsche*. On one hand, the *KPD* argued for the integrity of state borders, at least until the international triumph of communism. On the other, the *Völkischer Beobachter* argued for a borderless understanding of Germanness, at least until the German state could be expanded enough to include all Germans.

Yet in 1929, the annexation of Eastern Europe by the German state was simply one nationalist fantasy among many. There is no teleology connecting German nationalist aims in 1929 and German tanks rolling through the Soviet countryside twelve years later. Rather, the Germanness imagined by most late-Weimar Germans, including the members of its government, would be established through connections, not conquest. *Auslandsdeutsche* represented a global web of German attachments that could potentially be united and controlled by the German nation-state. *Auslandsdeutsche* were vital to Germany not as potential residents but as landowners and economic contacts abroad.¹²⁰ It was for this reason that the German government was unenthusiastic about supporting poor farmers within its borders while going out of its way to monitor and support *Auslandsdeutsche* in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

After the *Rote Fahne* expose, the German embassy begged the country's dailies to cool their polemics about the Soviet regime, but they made little progress because they

¹¹⁸ *Verhandlungen des Reichstags: IV Wahlperiode 1928*, vol. 426 (Berlin: Druck und Verlag der Reichsdruckerei, 1930), 3308.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ On the respatialization of German history with an emphasis on *auslandsdeutsch* connections to Germany see Penny. During the interwar years, German officials were keen to promote economic ties between German-speaking enclaves and Germany. See Reagin, 254.

were also under siege.¹²¹ Led by the center-right *Kölnische Zeitung* and *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, journalists accused ambassador Dirksen of dereliction of duty because he was undergoing health treatments in Germany instead of remaining in Moscow.¹²² By November 25, one Soviet official named Litwinow complained to Dirksen that he “lamented” the attitude of the German press whose “violent language had made a favorable situation very difficult.”¹²³ The German government learned that it might be able to guide diplomatic events but it could not guide their interpretation.

Back in Russia, government authorities were growing exasperated by the foreign press and the German government’s inability to find a host country. On November 17, Twardowski informed the *AA* that the Soviet Joint State Political Directorate (*Obyedinyonnoye gosudarstvennoye politicheskoye upravleniye, OGPU*) had already arrested over a thousand men.¹²⁴ Time was running out for the refugees, including the Neufeld family. Soon after arriving in the Moscow suburb of Kljasma in mid-November, the family was visited by the OGPU. State officials immediately took father K. A. and the oldest son, Heinrich, to a makeshift jail in the basement of a nearby school.¹²⁵ After being incarcerated for several days, the men were allowed to leave with the stipulation that they would return to Siberia within forty-eight hours.¹²⁶ However, after they were freed, the family moved to a different suburb near Moscow. They reckoned they had a week or two before the authorities discovered that they had not returned to Omsk. During this time, two of the older children, Marie (“Mariechen”) and Peter, commuted daily to Moscow, where they received news from the German embassy that their family would receive documentation at their former address in Kljasma. Risking the chance of being captured

¹²¹ Twardowski, “Memorandum by Twardowski,” November 19, 1929, GFM 33/4538: L192334 and L192387, NA.

¹²² Dirksen, “Memorandum to Schubert,” November 30, 1929, Person 2782, Dirksen, AA.

¹²³ Dirksen, “Memorandum,” November 25, 1929, p. 2,” GFM 33/4538: L192317, NA. This was likely ambassador Maxim Litwinow, who organized the Litwinow Pact in February 1929.

¹²⁴ Twardowski, “Memorandum by Twardowski,” November 18, 1929, R29275, E160358, AA.

¹²⁵ K. Neufeld, *Flucht aus dem Paradies*, 44.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

again, the Neufeld family returned to Kljasma.¹²⁷ A few nights later—while K. A. and Heinrich hid outside in the snow—the family was again visited by the OGPU. To their bewilderment, they were informed that they could leave the country.¹²⁸

On November 18, Hindenburg's cabinet bypassed budget committee approval since the committee would not hold its next meeting until November 25, and sanctioned the use of state funds to aid the refugees.¹²⁹ The decision came too late for some. Within a week, the Soviet government brusquely returned 8,000 colonists to their villages or sent them into internal exile.¹³⁰ Many would become vanguard denizens of Stalin's gulag. The Neufelds and other refugees who evaded OGPU agents and possessed the required money and papers were transported to Germany by train between November 29 and December 9.¹³¹ The total number of refugees transported to Germany stood at 5,671. 3,885 of these were Mennonites, 1,260 were Lutherans, 468 were Catholics, fifty-one were Baptists, and seven were Adventists.¹³²

By the end of 1929, the Soviet Union no longer entertained the possibility of a mass, legal departure of *kulaks* from the country. The costs in time, money, resources, and diplomatic wrangling for sending thousands, if not millions, of people abroad made the option impossible. Perhaps the decision was ideological as much as it was practical. Stalin's 1924 plan to establish "socialism in one country" confined communism's universal laws within specific geographic parameters so allowing unrepentant *kulaks* to leave the country meant that the regime lost the power to enforce retribution on those who had ostensibly harmed it. At a December 27, 1929 conference of Marxist Students of the Agrarian Question, Stalin delivered a speech that confirmed *kulaks* were beyond redemption and called for their complete liquidation. He flippantly concluded "There is

¹²⁷ Ibid., 109-111.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 113-114.

¹²⁹ "Sitzung des Reichsministeriums," November 18, 1929, L196228.

¹³⁰ H. Dyck, 172; "Letter from H. S. Bender to Maxim Litwinow, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the U.S.S.R.," June 16, 1930, Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (hereafter, CMBC) Immigration Movement I, c. General Correspondence 1923-1946, vol. 1181, 122, p. 2, MHC.

¹³¹ Letkemann, "Part II - Lager Mölln," 2.

¹³² C. Neufeldt, "The Flight to Moscow," 43.

another question which seems no less ridiculous: whether the *kulaks* should be permitted to join the collective farms. Of course not, for they are sworn enemies of the collective-farm movement.”¹³³ The Soviet Union’s German-language paper *Deutsche Zentralzeitung* had already predicted this when it gleefully announced in mid-November that “For the *kulak* there is no place in the collective! He is sentenced to death.”¹³⁴ The only two options were internal exile or their complete physical destruction. The Soviet government energetically pursued both well into the 1940s.¹³⁵

Refugee for the Refugees

The Mennonite refugees entered the divisive atmosphere of late-Weimar Germany with little understanding that they sat at the nexus of so many competing interpretations. They initially arrived in Camp Hammerstein, Germany (now Czerne, Poland) where they found temporary housing in five abandoned army barracks. Some were also sent to Prenzlau, Germany after a measles epidemic broke out in the Hammerstein camp. Eventually, all of the refugees were consolidated at a vacant military academy in Mölln, Germany, a small town a little to the southeast of Hamburg. While they waited for a host country to open its doors, representatives from *Brüder in Not* in Germany and the MCC in the United States visited them to evaluate their Germanness and Mennoniteness. Their assessments demonstrate that both agencies used the crisis to promote their own brands of national and religious solidarity.¹³⁶ The former viewed the refugees as their national and religious brethren, victimized by a foreign, atheist power. The latter viewed them as members of a global confession of Mennonites. Both wished to

¹³³ J.V. Stalin, “Concerning the Policy of Eliminating the Kulaks as a Class,” *Works* vol. 12, April 1929-June 1930, (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1954), 177.

¹³⁴ *Der Deutschen Zentralzeitung*, November 13, 1929. Quoted in Twardowski, “Twardowski to Trautmann,” November 19, 1929, GFM 33/4538: L192349, NA; “Lage der deutschen Kolonisten und der Landwirtschaft in der UdSSR,” December 18, 1929, GFM 33/4538: L192271-L192272, NA.

¹³⁵ In the first great wave of *kulak* deportations between 1930 and 1932, nearly 400,000 households or nearly 2,000,000 people were exiled from their villages. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 122.

¹³⁶ Other Mennonite aid organizations including the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, the Dutch Mennonite Emigration Office (*Hollandsch Doopsgezind Emigranten Bureau*) and the German Mennonite relief organization “The Christian’s Duty” (“*Christenpflicht*”) played a smaller role in coordinating and financing the refugees.

cultivate the notion that helping the refugees was a meaningful and important enterprise for their constituencies. To do this, they had to represent the refugees as essentially similar to Germans in Germany and Mennonites in North America.

Though *Brüder in Not* was primarily an evangelical Christian organization, it was sponsored by a wide range of associations from across the religious and political spectrum including the Red Cross, the German Caritas Association, the Home Mission's Central Committee (*Centralanschuß für die innere Mission*), the Steering Committee for the Workers Welfare Association (*Hauptausschuss für Arbeiterwohlfahrt*), the Central Committee of Christian Workers (*Zentral Wohlfahrtsausschuss der Christlichen Arbeiterschaft*), and the Central Welfare Office of German Jews (*Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der deutschen Juden*).¹³⁷ Until the Nazi seizure of power in 1933—after which the organization was repurposed as a supplier of “Hitler aid” to the Soviet Union—*Brüder in Not*'s interfaith arrangement implied that all of these groups were equally German.

Brüder in Not and local residents greeted the new arrivals as long-lost German brethren. It was the Christmas season, so refugees were presented with fir boughs, flower garlands, and a large banner of the German *Reich* at the Hammerstein camp. Major D. Fuchs gave a welcome speech and called them Germany's “disposed and scattered children.”¹³⁸ The speech was followed by a large meal served on linen covered tables.¹³⁹ Each refugee was presented with sweets and a “practical gift,” a gesture that *Brüder in Not* regarded as a tremendous success since “the refugees received no sugar in many months” and were overwhelmed by the organization's generosity.¹⁴⁰ Residents near the camps also invited refugees to their houses for Christmas dinners and celebrations. Deeply moved, refugee H. J. Willms wrote that while the refugees “had become no better

¹³⁷ “Memorandum to Hermann Müller,” January 22, 1930, R43 I/141, vol., 1, L196245-L196246, BA. Core evangelical organizations included the *Gustav-Adolf-Verein*; *Verband für Evangelische Auswandererfürsorge*; *Vereinigung Evangelischen Frauenverbände*; *Evangelischen Pressverband*; *Evangelischen Hauptverein für Deutsche Ansiedler und Auswanderer*; *Evangelisch-Lutherische Auswanderermission*, Hamburg; *Centralausschuss für Innere Mission*; *Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenbundesamt*; and *Evangelische Oberkirchenrat*. See “Bericht über die Gründungssitzung des “Evangelischen Hilfsausschusses Brüder in Not,”” November 22, 1929, Church Archives, Box 13, *Stadtarchiv* (hereafter, SA), Mölln, Germany.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Willms, 96.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ “Bericht über die Sitzung des Evang. Hilfsausschusses “Brüder in Not,”” January 9, 1930, SA, 5.

than slaves in Russia, here they were treated as fully-fledged fellow countrymen.”¹⁴¹ The refugees had lost their homeland in Russia but discovered a new one in Germany.

Although the refugees looked and spoke German, they did not act or think as such, at least according to their hosts. During the first few weeks, camp officials worked to “reeducate” refugees to bring them in to line with their conception of Germanness. The refugees’ strange food preferences were one of their most glaring discrepancies. They had little interest in vegetables and were mystified that they had to eat their main meals without bread.¹⁴² Their relationships with camp staff were also occasionally tense. In one instance, a group of refugees called for the dismissal of a supervisor because they did not agree with what he said. Camp staff retaliated by reminding the refugees that “the Bolshevistic type of recall election had come to an end, and that the time had come for the refugees to learn to be obedient again.”¹⁴³

One of the best ways of reeducating the refugees was to inform them of the current state of politics in Germany. In one instance, a contingent of nationalist students from Berlin visited the Prenzlau camp.¹⁴⁴ The students lectured the refugees on the greatness of the German nation and held discussion groups in order to bring the insecurities of Germany’s 1918 Revolution “nearer to the farmers.” Subsequent topics including “10 years rebuilding,” “Germany as a world trading power,” and “German agriculture,” affirmed that the Mennonites were a part of the German nation and would remain connected to Germany no matter where they resettled.¹⁴⁵

Mennonites’ sense of German unity was checked by aggressive confrontations with German communists who wished to debate them on Soviet domestic policy. These encounters often degenerated into shouting matches with the communists accusing

¹⁴¹ Willms, 96.

¹⁴² Ibid., 97. “Re-Germanizing” *Auslandsdeutschen* in domestic matters became routine during the Second World War under the NS Frauenschaft. See Reagin, 260.

¹⁴³ Willms, 99.

¹⁴⁴ Grams, 289; Siegfried Kraft, *Die rußlanddeutschen Flüchtlinge des Jahres 1929/1930 und ihre Aufnahme im Deutschen Reich: Eine Untersuchung über die Gründe der Massenflucht der deutschen Bauern und ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis der Behandlung volksdeutscher Fragen im Weimarer Zwischenreich*, Inaugural Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde einer Hohen Philosophischen Fakultät der Martin Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg (Halle: Eduard Klinz Buchdruck-Werkstätte, 1939), 62.

¹⁴⁵ Kraft, 62-63.

Mennonites of being “murderers of the working people, traitors of the proletariat, exploiters, and *kulaks*.”¹⁴⁶ Others threw rocks over the camp’s fences, hoping to strike a passerby. According to Willms, many of the refugees “could not understand why these Communists... were allowed to roam the streets freely.”¹⁴⁷ The refugees appreciated that they were on “free German soil” but the confrontations likely checked their notions that all Germans were united under the banner of Germanness.¹⁴⁸

Beyond the walls of the refugee camp, *Brüder in Not* advertised the suffering of the refugees as a concern for all patriotic Germans.¹⁴⁹ While the refugees were still in the Soviet Union, the Evangelical Press Association (*Evangelischen Preßverband*) initiated a propaganda campaign in the country’s daily and Sunday papers.¹⁵⁰ In *Brüder in Not*’s first press release dated November 12, 1929, the organization exclaimed “a catastrophe has broken out against Germans abroad... the fate of one German affects every German!” It went on to invoke pathos in its readers by recalling memories of Germany’s hunger years during the First World War. The article assured readers that the Mennonites were Germans, their ancestors had immigrated to Russia many centuries ago, and that they “retained their German style, language, and customs.”¹⁵¹ Drawing on contemporary history, an imagined national history, and a curated set of shared cultural features, *Brüder in Not* effectively cast the refugees as authentic Germans.

In addition to a large press campaign, *Brüder in Not* also sponsored public performances and church services to bring awareness to the cause. One such event featured a presentation on the refugees followed by a performance of *Ludus de Antichristo*, a liturgical drama that narrates the story of a shadowy political figure who

¹⁴⁶ Willms, 102.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 92.

¹⁴⁹ Pastors in the Hamburg area also helped spread the word about the refugees’ plight. See “Pastor Bestmann to Pastor Bruns,” January 27, 1930, Church Archives Box 11, SA.

¹⁵⁰ “Bericht über die Gründungssitzung,” Church Archives, Box 13, SA, p. 2; “Bericht über bisher veranlasste Hilfsmassnahmen für die deutsch-russischen Auswanderer,” December 7, 1929, Church Archives, Box 13, SA, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ “Aufruf zugunsten der aus Rußland ausgewanderten deutschstämmigen Bauern,” December 11, 1929, R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196174, BA.

brings the nations of the world under his diabolical spell and heralds the end of history.¹⁵² The metaphorical connection between Stalin's Russia, the refugees, and the performance was not lost on the audience. *Brüder in Not's* efforts, in conjunction with a willing German government and press, raised public awareness and nearly 900,000 Reichsmarks.¹⁵³ The Association for Germans Abroad (*Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, VDA*), which was the country's premier advocate of German overseas nationalism, also contributed to the effort by donating quantities of food, clothing, toys, books, and school materials to the interned refugees in the hope that they would be retain their Germanness even after they left Germany.¹⁵⁴

While *Brüder in Not* drew public attention to the refugees' situation and looked out for their immediate physical needs, the American-based MCC moved forward with finding a new country where they could perpetuate their Mennoniteness. After the First World War, a handful of American Mennonites founded the organization on an ad hoc basis to provide famine relief for Russia's Mennonites. Significantly, the project was energized by negative public sentiment directed at Mennonites during the war for their nonparticipation in the armed forces.¹⁵⁵ The MCC's scope and organization represented an unprecedented commitment on behalf of America's Mennonite population. Like their neighbors to the north, American Mennonites were seldom unified in their beliefs or actions due to their historic autonomy. This situation began to change as they entered the twentieth century with growing prosperity, increased mobility, and a growing number of confessional newspapers, seminaries, and colleges.¹⁵⁶

At a meeting in Chicago on December 11, 1929, a group of several Mennonite leaders paved the way for a more financially sustained and bureaucratically sophisticated

¹⁵² Ibid, "Rotes Kreuz von Berlin Büro des Vorsitzenden, an die Reichskanzler," December 4, 1929, R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196235, p. 128, BA.

¹⁵³ C. Neufeldt, "The Flight to Moscow," 43.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., Grams, 287.

¹⁵⁵ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*, 36-37.

¹⁵⁶ Historian Theron Schlabach's concept of the Mennonite "quickenings" describes a shift in American Mennonite attitudes to the broader world during this period. For a more in-depth explanation see "Reveille for Die Stillen Im Lande: A Stir Among Mennonites in the Late Nineteenth Century: Awakening or Quickenings? Revival or Acculturation? Anabaptist or What?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 51, no. 3 (1977): 213-26.

commitment.¹⁵⁷ The executive committee consisted of P.C. Hiebert (chairman), Harold S. Bender (secretary), Levi Mumaw (secretary-treasurer), M. H. Kratz, and Orië O. Miller.¹⁵⁸ A study committee composed of Bender, P. C. Hiebert, and Kratz was also formed for the purpose of locating a host country for the refugees.¹⁵⁹ A guiding Bible passage for the organization was Galatians 6:10, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”¹⁶⁰ The MCC not only wished to include other Americans in this “family” but Mennonites in Europe and Russia too.

Not all Mennonites agreed with this vision of solidarity, especially within America’s largest conference, the (old) Mennonite Church (MC). The MC’s churches were located principally in the east and north-central regions of the United States and across the border in eastern Canada. Bishops—who in many ways resembled Mennonite *Ältesten* in the Russian milieu—dominated the conference’s leadership structure, though they were somewhat more associative-minded than the separatist Mennonites from Russia. In 1924, Bender regretfully informed Christian Neff, moderator of the first Mennonite World Conference in Basel, Switzerland, that the MC would not participate in the event stating “They [MC leaders] especially take exception to the idea of a Mennonite World Union in which believing and unbelieving Mennonites would be united.”¹⁶¹

America’s Mennonite intellectuals were the torchbearers of the new ecumenicism and none shone more brightly during the early-twentieth century than the young and dashing H. S. Bender at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana. Mennonite higher education lent an air of legitimacy to notions of cooperation and expansion and although individuals

¹⁵⁷ Tentative Report of the Findings of the Refugee Colonization Study Committee,” IX-3-2 Paraguayan Immigration 1/1, MCCF, Akron, PA.

Prior to the meeting, the Committee extended an open invitation to all Mennonite conferences that wished to participate. See “Chicago Meeting of the Central Committee,” *Mennonite*, January 2, 1930, p. 1.

¹⁵⁸ “Tentative Report,” 1.

¹⁵⁹ “Chicago Meeting of the Central Committee,” *Mennonite*, January 2, 1930, 1.

¹⁶⁰ (NIV).

¹⁶¹ H.S. Bender, “Liebe Bruder,” June 24, 1924. Quoted in John A. Lapp and Ed van Straten, “Mennonite World Conference 1925-2000: From Euro-American Conference to Worldwide Communion,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76, no. 1 (January 2003): 14.

at these institutions assumed an essential Mennonite unity, they were often at pains to define it with precision. Bender would spend the rest of his life trying. Born in 1897, and educated at Goshen College, Princeton University, and the University of Heidelberg, Bender was a polymath scholar, writer, and administrator who preferred to do a number of things tolerably rather than a few things thoroughly. Over the course of his life, he wrote or edited scores of books, pamphlets, and articles on the history and theology of the Mennonite Church including his seminal 1944 manifesto the *Anabaptist Vision*, which projected the original mission of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement onto the twentieth-century Mennonite Church. He was the founding editor of the scholarly journal *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (1927-) and lead editor of the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (4 volumes, 1955-59). Bender was also a dominant institutional presence. He served as a professor of History, Bible, and Sociology at Goshen College, dean of Goshen College and its Biblical Seminary, secretary of the MCC, and president of the Mennonite World Conference. At his death in 1960, he simultaneously held fourteen administrative positions. It is not an overstatement to say that during the twentieth century, his interpretation of Mennonite essentials infused the entire North American Mennonite church. Along with D. Toews in Canada, Bender stood at the forefront of a rising generation of North American Mennonites that viewed conference-level administration as the principle mode of Mennonite organization in the twentieth-century.¹⁶² In 1929, at the age of thirty-two, the precocious Bender cut his teeth on promoting the confession's global unity via the refugee crisis, even though he had no direct experience with relief work, he possessed no understanding of international diplomacy, and his American sensibilities were at odds with the Russian Mennonitism.

The Canadian Option

Canada appeared to be the most expedient and desirable option for German and Mennonite authorities because the CMBC had already helped several thousand Mennonites migrate from the Soviet Union to the country's western provinces in the preceding decade. Yet by the beginning of 1929, the country had moved toward a

¹⁶² For a detailed biography of Bender see Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1897-1962* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997).

stronger stance against immigration from non-preferred Eastern European countries.¹⁶³ Moreover, Canada's provincial leaders were skeptical that Mennonites made good Canadians, particularly Saskatchewan's newly elected Conservative Premier, James T. M. Anderson. Anderson gained an unfavorable impression of the confession during his years as a teacher and school inspector in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. With anti-German attitudes waning ten years after the War and separatist Mennonites safely out of sight in their Latin American enclaves, associative Mennonites who favored renewed Mennonite immigration from Russia now recast the confession's constituency as ethnic German Canadians who had always prioritized their allegiance to Canada.

Already in March 1929, D. Toews and an interfaith cast of characters responded to Canada's tightening immigration laws by joining together to promote the value of "German" immigration to the country. D. Toews did not deny Russian Mennonites' Mennoniteness but did emphasize their Germanness, which was apparently more expedient for the task of catching the ears of government authorities than focusing on their religious distinctions. In a roundabout way, D. Toews argued that Russia's Mennonites would easily acculturate to Canadian society since they were ethnically German. Partnering with the German Catholic Immigration Board and the Lutheran Immigration Board, the collective asked the Dominion government to consider granting special treatment to German-speaking immigrants. The petition stated,

Germans residing in non-preferred countries are technically called nationals of their respective country. They are, however, in every sense of the word German. While they readily become assimilated with the Anglo-Saxon race, they have consistently refused to assume the civilization of the non-preferred countries. In practice, therefore, it is not correct to call a German from Russia a Russian.¹⁶⁴

It was unclear what sort of social, cultural, or biological qualities allowed a "German" to so easily resist the influence of non-preferred countries while so quickly acculturating to "Anglo-Saxon culture." It was also unclear whether potential

¹⁶³ Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews: A People's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2008), 233.

¹⁶⁴ "Statement to Hon. Robert F. Forke," March 6, 1929, CMBC, Immigration Movement I, c. Organizations, Individuals and Transactions related to Immigration and relief, 1923-1946, vol. 1270, 605, MHC.

immigrants' religious beliefs would obstruct their Canadization—an issue that western provinces had hoped they had solved with the public school controversy.

In a separate letter to the Saskatchewan Royal Commission for Immigration and Settlement, the CMBC's secretary J. J. Thiessen attempted to clarify from a linguistic perspective why German-speaking Mennonites made good immigrants. He argued that the Mennonites' unique Low German dialect "comes very near the Old-English language, so that a Low-German can understand English without much difficulty."¹⁶⁵ With this statement, J. J. Thiessen not only suggests that new arrivals would easily learn English but he also insinuates that English-language schooling was actually never a major concern for the country's Mennonites, since English and Low-German were so close.

The Mennonite Agricultural Committee of Saskatchewan likewise argued that the refugees could hold their religious and national identifications in tandem, as so many of Canada's Mennonites already did. Aware that new arrivals may be negatively conflated with separatist Mennonites, it contended, "If there have been some of the old-time Mennonites who had taken a separate position with regard to the school question, this question is settled as much as we know... Can you Honored Sirs, understand that when in a meeting or by our children at home, the song "O Canada," is sung, that not only the lips but also the hearts of us older ones are singing too?"¹⁶⁶ In their assessment, *real* Mennonites accepted Canadization as a matter of course though once again it remained unclear why they would be patriotic to the Union Jack and not to Russia or Germany.

There were a few federal Canadian authorities at the Ministry of Immigration and Colonization including Minister Robert Forke, Deputy Minister William Egan, and Assistant Deputy Minister Frederick C. Blair who were interested in helping the refugees.¹⁶⁷ Telegrams between the Ministry of Immigration, the AA, and the CMBC indicate that the Dominion deferred the issue to the provinces and would go along with

¹⁶⁵ "A memorandum of the Central Committee of Mennonite Immigrants Representing the Mennonite who came to Canada since 1923," April 25, 1930, CMBC, Immigration Movement I, c. Organizations, Individuals and Transactions related to Immigration and relief, 1923-1946, vol. 1269, 598, MHC.

¹⁶⁶ "To the Government of Saskatchewan," n.d., CMBC, Immigration Movement I, c. Organizations, Individuals and Transactions related to Immigration and relief, 1923-1946, vol. 1269, 598, MHC.

¹⁶⁷ Blair went on to become the Director of Canada's Immigration Branch and was responsible for Canada's closed-door policy, arguably the harshest of all refugee-receiving states during the interwar years. See Tulchinsky, 231-233.

the plan as long as a province accepted them.¹⁶⁸ Saskatchewan was singled out as the best location for settlement since the head office of the CMBC was located in Rosthern.

Saskatchewan's Premier Anderson refused to cooperate with the Ministry since he considered Mennonites to be inimical to the province's best interests. Anderson rose through the ranks of the province's Department of Education during the first two decades of the twentieth century and attained the position of Director of Education in 1918. He also authored an influential book on "Canadianizing" public schools titled *The Education of the New Canadian*. His experiences caused him to be particularly critical of the province's Doukhobor and Mennonite communities that had resisted mandatory public schooling.¹⁶⁹ When asked whether he would allow Mennonites to settle in Saskatchewan in November 1929, Anderson expressed extreme skepticism, "I have just recently obtained information to the effect that in one locality there are at least sixty children running around in a Mennonite village with absolutely no public school facilities."¹⁷⁰ To the dismay of the CMBC, Anderson reasoned that all Mennonites were the same no matter if they lived in Canada or in Russia.

Coincidentally, during a conference between D. Toews and members of the Saskatchewan Parliament, Premier Anderson received a telegram from a group of Saskatchewan Mennonites that read, "We are not in favor of the immigration of Mennonites from Europe and we cannot house any as we have plenty of our own Canadian Mennonites to help."¹⁷¹ The group was likely referring to the Mennonites from Russia who had already arrived in Saskatchewan over the past ten years. Though the

¹⁶⁸ D. Toews, "Letter to J. T. M. Anderson," May 13, 1930, CMBC, Immigration Movement I, c. Organizations, Individuals, and Transactions related to Immigration and relief, 1923-1946, vol. 1269, 597, MHC.

¹⁶⁹ Patrick Kyba, "Anderson, James Thomas Milton (1878-1946)," *The Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan*, accessed April 18, 2015, http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/anderson_james_thomas_milton_1878-1946.html; John McLaren, "Creating 'Slaves of Satan' or 'New Canadians'? The Law, Education, and the Socialization of Doukhobor Children, 1911-1935," in *Essays in the History of Canadian Law: British Columbia and the Yukon*, ed. Hamar Foster and John McLaren (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 359.

¹⁷⁰ "Premier Talks on Refugee Question," *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, 7 Nov. 1929, p. 13.

¹⁷¹ "Mennonite Refugees Are Not Wanted by Fellow Countrymen," newspaper clipping, CMBC, Immigration Movement I, c. Organizations, Individuals and Transactions related to Immigration and relief, 1923-1946, vol. 1270, 606, MHC. The newspaper clipping likely referred to the Dalmeny, Saskatchewan Mennonites. See F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 247; C. Neufeldt, "The Flight to Moscow," 42.

group's exact motives are unclear, what is certain is that some of Canada's Mennonites had met their limit of confessional charity. Obviously, this was embarrassing for D. Toews, who was trying to convince the provincial government that Canada's Mennonites were unified in their support of immigration and would not allow the refugees to become burdens of the state.

Other premiers were similarly unwilling to accept the refugees. Manitoba unofficially indicated that it would be able to accept 250 families but only after March 1, 1930. Meanwhile, Alberta's Premier J. E. Brownlee wished to put off his decision until after the next election in June 1930.¹⁷² His ambivalence was motivated less by ideology than the political fallout that may accompany the admission of thousands of refugees during a time of increasing economic uncertainty. By the end of November, the worsening global economy, growing unemployment lines, gridlock between the federal government and the provinces, and an overarching fear of public opinion put an end to the prospects of large-scale Canadian immigration.¹⁷³ Despite the CMBC's attempts to define the confession as an assembly of German-speakers who were loyal to Canada, conventional wisdom dictated that Mennonitism contained a diverse cast of characters, some of whom were not dependable citizens.

Founding Fernheim

As most western countries raised their immigration gates, the choice came down to Brazil or Paraguay.¹⁷⁴ Both countries were amenable to German-speaking colonies that would incorporate new land into their agricultural sectors, a strategy that also dovetailed with the Weimar government's interest in economic expansion in Latin America.¹⁷⁵ The

¹⁷² F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 247-248; "Memorandum," November 13, 1929, GFM 33/4538: L192391, NA.

¹⁷³ Due to an earlier agreement between Canadian government and the country's railroads, the Canadian Pacific Railroad and the Canadian National Railroad were given permission to accept 200 families from non-preferred countries in 1930. About 1,100 Mennonite refugees eventually secured places in this quota and settled in Canada. See F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 231.

¹⁷⁴ Brazil initially reacted coolly to the proposal due to its ongoing coffee crisis but it eventually consented to settlement. "Memorandum by Pistor," December 10, 1929, R43 I/141, vol. 1, L196235, p. 134. BA.

¹⁷⁵ For a detailed discussion of Weimar policy vis-à-vis Latin America see Stefan Rinke, "*Der letzte freie Kontinent.*" *Deutsche Lateinamerikapolitik im Zeichen transnationaler Beziehungen, 1918-1933*, vols. 1 and 2 (Stuttgart: Hans-Dieter Heinz Akademischer Verlag, 1996).

Germans, including Unruh and some of the refugees, were also “very taken with the idea” of a Brazilian settlement since there were already about 600,000 German speakers living in the country—58,000 of whom had arrived in the preceding decade.¹⁷⁶ The country also had an immigration representative, Colonel Gaelzer-Netto, stationed in Brazil and the firm *Hanseatische Kolonisationsgesellschaft* was positioned to settle the refugees near other Germans living in Santa Catarina.¹⁷⁷ A Mennonite settlement in Brazil promised a higher likelihood that the refugees would preserve their Germanness and promote trade between the settlement and Germany.

Due to the mounting costs of housing and feeding the group, the Germans went forward with relocating nearly a fourth of the refugees—including most of the Catholics, Lutherans, and about 1,200 amenable Mennonites—to Santa Catarina in the first two months of 1930.¹⁷⁸ The initiative represented the leading edge of a shift in the AA’s thinking about German settlements in Latin America, which increasingly privileged group settlement above individual migration. In association with the AA, the *Gesellschaft für Siedlung im Ausland GmbH* and the *Gesellschaft für Wirtschaftliche Studien in Übersee*, subsequent German-speaking colonies were established in Paraná including the Kolonie Rolândia, which was composed of landless Germans.¹⁷⁹

The MCC was disturbed by the German government’s eagerness to send the refugees to Brazil because the country did not offer the option of conscientious objection to military service, which it thought was essential for preserving refugees’ Mennoniteness. It also feared the refugees would be absorbed by its German enclave or integrated into Brazilian society.¹⁸⁰ The MCC preferred a Chaco settlement due to the religious guarantees enshrined in the Paraguayan *Privilegium* and because the refugees

¹⁷⁶ “In Nachstehenden...” November 13, 1929, GMF 33/4538: L192397, NA; “Tentative Report,” and Nikolaus Barbian, *Auswärtige Kulturpolitik und “Auslandsdeutsche” in Lateinamerika 1949-1973* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer, 2013), 76.

¹⁷⁷ “In Nachstehenden...” L192394, NA.

¹⁷⁸ F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 322; C. Neufeldt, “The Flight to Moscow,” 44; Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 47.

¹⁷⁹ Barbian, 76-77.

¹⁸⁰ C. Neufeldt, “The Flight to Moscow,” 44; “Tentative Report.”

could settle adjacent to the Menno Colony.¹⁸¹ It therefore requested the Germans to delay future transports until mid-February and worked to make a Chaco settlement feasible.¹⁸²

A second MCC meeting was convened on January 25, 1930.¹⁸³ At this assembly, the study commission presented various materials regarding South American—and especially Paraguayan—immigration, including a report by John B. Faust, American consul in Asunción, a field report from two Mennonite missionaries in Argentina, and a statement from the Menno Colony.¹⁸⁴ Through speaking engagements and Mennonite publications, the MCC also set about trying to raise \$100,000 USD (\$1,400,000 in 2014 USD) from conferences and churches to transport and settle the refugees.¹⁸⁵

The MCC dispatched Bender to Germany to visit the refugees and steer them toward Paraguay. Yet according to Bender's biographer Albert N. Keim, it was a "most difficult task" to convince individuals to choose Paraguay "since they all wanted to go to Canada."¹⁸⁶ Like a traveling salesman, Bender visited the camps promoting a Chaco settlement. In a letter to his friend Noah Oyer he recalled, "Now you can imagine the sort of speech I made, in a language I do not master on a subject on which I am ill-informed."¹⁸⁷ Despite these handicaps, Bender and some of the refugees' prominent members persuaded about 270 families to choose Paraguay.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸¹ F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 258-259 and *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940*, 322-323.

¹⁸² "Tentative Report."

¹⁸³ This meeting drew representatives from the (old) Mennonite Church, General Conference Mennonite Church, Mennonite Brethren Church, Lancaster Conference (Mennonite Church), and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren. The Evangelical Mennonite (Defenseless) Church also joined the organization in 1930. Bender and Elmer Neufeld, "Mennonite Central Committee (International)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified April 13, 2014, accessed April 15, 2014, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Central_Committee_%28International%29.

¹⁸⁴ F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 258-259.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 259. The inflation adjustment was made with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (CPI) Inflation Calculator, <http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm>.

¹⁸⁶ Keim, 209.

¹⁸⁷ "H. S. Bender to Noah Oyer," April 29, 1930, f. 2, b. 1, H. S. Bender papers, Archives of the Mennonite Church (hereafter, AMC). Quoted in Keim, 210.

¹⁸⁸ Bender, "Die Einwanderung nach Paraguay," *Bericht über die Mennonitische Welt-Hilfs-Konferenz vom 31. August bis 3. September 1930*, ed. Christian Neff (Karlsruhe, Germany: Heinrich Schneider, 1930), 122.

While still in Germany, the refugees organized themselves into eight villages of about twenty-five families per village to streamline the move. Like the Menno Colony, each village would be laid out in a *Strassendorf* arrangement.¹⁸⁹ Colonists drew lots for their homesteads to reduce factionalism and to establish solidarity at the colony level.¹⁹⁰ After their arrival, the group elected Franz Heinrich, to be the colony's first *Oberschulze* and each village chose its own *Schulze*.¹⁹¹ They also established the town of Filadelfia in the center of the colony—about five to ten kilometers away from each village—as a central location for their common undertakings, which eventually included a hospital, warehouse, economic cooperative, and printing press.¹⁹²

Simultaneously, the MCC arranged the purchase of 135,000 hectares of land from the *Corporación Paraguaya*, adjacent to the Menno Colony.¹⁹³ Each family was allotted forty hectares, a pair of oxen, a cow with calf, twelve chickens, a rooster, and seed grain and food worth \$50 USD (\$708 in 2014 USD). Including the transportation debt, each family owed a total of \$1,500 USD (\$21,263 in 2014 USD), with all families in a village mutually signing for each other.¹⁹⁴ According to the plan, the MCC would collect the money over the next ten years and distribute it to the German government and the *Corporación Paraguaya*.¹⁹⁵

Between February 1930 and August 1931, 1,572 Mennonite refugees left Germany for Paraguay's Gran Chaco. The rest either joined the Brazilian contingent,

¹⁸⁹ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 188; C. J. Dyck, P. P. Klassen, and Gundolf Niebuhr, "Fernheim Colony (Boquerón Department, Paraguay)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified 2009, accessed February 5, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Fernheim_Colony_\(Boquer%C3%B3n_Department,_Paraguay\)&oldid=12105](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Fernheim_Colony_(Boquer%C3%B3n_Department,_Paraguay)&oldid=12105).

¹⁹⁰ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 188.

¹⁹¹ Cornelius J. Dyck and P. P. Klassen, "Filadelfia (Fernheim Colony, Boquerón Department, Paraguay)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified 1990, accessed February 5, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Filadelfia_\(Fernheim_Colony,_Boquer%C3%B3n_Department,_Paraguay\)&oldid=121054](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Filadelfia_(Fernheim_Colony,_Boquer%C3%B3n_Department,_Paraguay)&oldid=121054).

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 182.

¹⁹⁴ Bender, "Einwanderung nach Paraguay," 123. The inflation adjustment was made with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (CPI) Inflation Calculator, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

remained in Germany due to health issues, or found a way to enter Canada as individual families. The majority of Paraguayan-bound Mennonites arrived at Puerto Casado in the spring and summer months of 1930. The whole trip took about two and a half months.¹⁹⁶ According to the North American Mennonite publication *Gospel Herald*, the refugees originated from forty-six separate villages, scattered across Russia and Ukraine, and were now brought together to form Fernheim Colony (meaning “faraway home”), a little northwest of the Menno Colony.¹⁹⁷

MCC representatives painted a picture of the refugees as part of a global community of Mennonite brethren. Writing for the publication *Gospel Herald*, Bender referred to the refugees as hardworking and industrious. They were farmers with large families, quite similar in fact to the North American Mennonites from whom he wished to solicit aid.¹⁹⁸ Bender also insisted that the refugees were not “pauperized by their experience” or lazy and degenerate but are “clean, attractive, [and] active.”¹⁹⁹ His assessment resembles the glowing descriptions of *auslandsdeutsch* communities promulgated by German nationalist propaganda that “reassured German readers about the essential Germanness of such qualities as cleanliness, order, and well-organized household management... even in isolated German settlements in Russia or in the African bush.”²⁰⁰ In the eyes of the MCC, one thing was certain: The time of the confession’s isolation and communal independence was over and a new era of unity and interdependence was at hand.

The arrival of the refugees in Paraguay also made news among South America’s German speakers, whose alleged spokespeople welcomed them as members of the German nation. Upon arriving in Buenos Aires, the German consular secretary in

¹⁹⁶ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 76; Letkemann, “Part II - Lager Mölln,” 10.

¹⁹⁷ Levi Mumaw, “Relief Notes,” *Gospel Herald*, April 24, 1930. This number may be a little low. According to the same article, forty-one families came from Siberia: five from Omsk, thirty from Slavgorod, one from Omur (Amur?), and one from Pavlodar. Ten families came from Ukraine, three from Orenburg, two from Saratov, two from Samara, one from Crimea, one from Donbuss, and one from Ufa.

¹⁹⁸ “Our Russian Refugee Brethren in Germany,” *Gospel Herald*, May 29, 1930, p. 14.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 14. Mumaw pressed the issue with rhetorical questions such as “If one of these were your sister or brother, nephew or niece, friend or neighbor, what would you do for them?” See “Relief Notes, *Mennonite*, March 20, 1930, p. 2.

²⁰⁰ Reagin, 258.

Argentina and a representative of the *Deutsche La Plata Zeitung* greeted the group. The paper carried the story of these “men, women, and children—people of our language and our blood” who “have heart and real culture.”²⁰¹ Colonists were equally complimentary of the German state. According to the paper, one refugee reported that the group’s respite in Germany was a “rediscovery” of their German culture and that “the whole of Germany is one lovely garden.”²⁰² Continuing up the Paraná River to Asunción, the German envoy (*Gesandter*) to Paraguay Rudolf von Bülow of the German consulate in Paraguay also received the visitors.²⁰³ To the refugees, it appeared as though their national ties as *Auslandsdeutsche* extended around the globe.²⁰⁴ The refugees’ journey finally ended when they disembarked at Puerto Casado, Paraguay, over 10,000 miles from their homes in Russia. Yet the German state and many Germans within it remained interested in the colony as an economic and cultural experiment for the next two decades. In 1931, Unruh reminded the colonists, “Please continue to keep in mind that the eyes of the world – especially the eyes of us Germans – are upon you. If you succeed in proving that the Chaco can be colonized, this will be of great importance to future emigrants from Germany.”²⁰⁵ The refugees therefore maintained an ongoing significance in North America as Mennonites and in Germany as Germans.

New Borders, Old Problems

The refugees would not find peace in the Chaco because Paraguay and Bolivia had their own ideas about what the refugees meant, either as partners or usurpers in their nation-building schemes. On the heels of the Moscow contingent, a second group of Mennonite refugees from Russia arrived in the Gran Chaco from Harbin, China in

²⁰¹ “Die Ankunft der dritten Gruppe deutscher Flüchtlinge aus Sibirien,” *Deutsche La Plata Zeitung* (Argentina), June 5, 1930, Buenos Aires 67A (Mennoniten-Einwanderung nach Paraguay), Shelf 48, Carton 2439, AA.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid. For a refugee’s perspective on the trip see “Johann Jakob Funk to Pastor Bruns,” April 23, 1930, Church Archive Box 14, SA.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ “Letter from Unruh,” October 7, 1931. Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 74.

1932.²⁰⁶ Their arrival provoked a diplomatic clash between the countries that helped pave the way for the Chaco War (1932-1935). Already in March 1930, the AA anticipated the geopolitical dangers of Mennonite settlement in the region. One consular report stated, “Mennonite leaders [from MCC] have insisted, despite these warnings on following through with the settlement.”²⁰⁷ A few months later, Bender sanguinely predicted that the border problem would be solved peacefully.²⁰⁸ Yet the arrival of Mennonites between 1930 and 1932 did more to exacerbate border tensions than it did to establish Paraguayan hegemony in the Chaco. Paradoxically, by settling the refugees in Paraguay to help them maintain their Mennoniteness (including the tenant of nonviolence) the MCC placed them in the middle of a war zone.²⁰⁹ Thus, the broader meanings ascribed to the refugees trumped their physical security. The MCC’s interest in maintaining the group’s confessional integrity meshed with Paraguay’s concerns over its territorial integrity and Bolivia’s fears about losing its sovereignty in the Chaco.

Bolivia and Paraguay viewed the Gran Chaco as part of their national territories though their claims were equally flimsy. During the 1920s, Bolivia established a series of small forts in the region while Paraguay pressed forward with Mennonite colonization. Thus by fleeing the nationalized territories of Canada (the Menno Colony) and Russia (the Fernheim Colony), Mennonites contributed to the nationalization of another territory in South America. What is remarkable about the situation is that neither the Bolivian nor Paraguayan governments had much to do with actually settling the Mennonites. Both colonies settled on private land held by an Argentine company, days away from the nearest Bolivian or Paraguay municipality. Most Menno Colony Mennonites retained their Canadian citizenship (in the event that they would have to return) and saw to their

²⁰⁶ League of Nations. “Refugees in China. Communication from the Delegates of Paraguay to the League of Nations-Annex 1972,” *League of Nations Official Journal* 13, no. 7 (July 1932): 1339. See also a report written by Bülow about his meeting with MCC representative Gerhard G. Hiebert in “Russische Mennoniten im Chaco,” April 6, 1931, Buenos Aires 67A (Mennoniten-Einwanderung nach Paraguay), Shelf 48, Carton 2439, AA.

²⁰⁷ Freytag, “Transport deutschrussischer Flüchtlinge nach Paraguay,” March 18, 1930, Buenos Aires 67A (Mennoniten-Einwanderung nach Paraguay), Shelf 48, Carton 2439 p. 7, AA.

²⁰⁸ H.S. Bender, “Die Einwanderung nach Paraguay,” 118.

²⁰⁹ The settlement of Mennonite refugees in the Chaco was not the sole cause of the outbreak but their presence certainly did not ameliorate the situation.

own municipal administration. Alternately, the Fernheim refugees from Russia carried Nansen passports and were financially supported by the MCC and the German government.²¹⁰ The dispute nevertheless sheds light on the countries' shared perception that whoever claimed to administer the Mennonites also administered the Chaco.

Like the Moscow refugees, the Harbin refugees were displaced by Stalin's war against *kulaks* but instead of fleeing east, they fled south and west. In late-1928, a Mennonite couple named Johann H. Friesen and Margaretha Funk Klassen were the first among many Mennonites to escape the Soviet Union across the frozen Amur River into China.²¹¹ Over the next three years, others followed their path—including J. Siemens and his family—so that by the end of 1931 there were nearly a thousand German-speaking refugees in Harbin.²¹² They initially approached the Canadian embassy for help but the country refused to admit the “Chinese” immigrants.²¹³ Eventually, the MCC became aware of the situation and stepped in on their behalf. At a League of Nations council meeting in September 1931, Paraguay granted the refugees asylum. The German delegate present at the meeting, Count Johann Heinrich Graf von Bernstorff, applauded the country's offer to help these unfortunate *Auslandsdeutsche*, a diplomatic move that was beneficial to both governments.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ In 1922, the League of Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees, Fridtjof Nansen, introduced the Nansen Passport, which provided refugees with a modicum of official documentation but it literally papered over the escalating problem of statelessness. On the shortcomings of the Nansen passport see John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 28-29.

²¹¹ Robert L. Klassen, "Harbin (Heilongjiang, China) Refugees," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified, August 23, 2013, accessed January 15, 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Harbin_\(Heilongjiang,_China\)_Refugees&oldid=95103](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Harbin_(Heilongjiang,_China)_Refugees&oldid=95103); Quiring, "The Colonization of the German Mennonites from Russia in the Paraguayan Chaco," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 8, no. 2 (April 1934): 70-71. For a more detailed description of the Harbin refugees' origins, migration, and settlement see Niebuhr and H. Ratzlaff, *Die Flucht über den Amur*.

²¹² The majority were Mennonites but there were also other Protestants and Catholic who made the journey. See Quiring, "The Colonization of the German Mennonites," 62-72, 71-72.

²¹³ R. Klassen, "Harbin (Heilongjiang, China) Refugees," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified, August 23, 2013, accessed January 15, 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Harbin_\(Heilongjiang,_China\)_Refugees&oldid=95103](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Harbin_(Heilongjiang,_China)_Refugees&oldid=95103).

²¹⁴ *Ibid.* Other individuals went to the United States and Brazil. Paraguay's proposal was adopted by the Council at its sixty-fifth session on September 29, 1931. See also League of Nations, "Refugees in China."

The Bolivian government responded with a sharply worded statement to the League's secretary-general in December 1931 warning that his government "would be sorry if foreign refugees depending on unreliable information, were to infringe the laws of the [Bolivian] Republic."²¹⁵ Though a few hundred people may have been of little direct consequence to the balance of power in the Chaco, there were reports floating around international diplomatic circles that approximately 100,000 additional Soviet refugees were awaiting relocation. Bolivia feared that Paraguay might use the refugees as a humanitarian ruse to gain hegemony in the Chaco.²¹⁶

In April 1932, the Bolivian consulate in Le Havre, France was alarmed to learn that nearly 400 Mennonite refugees had arrived at the city's port from China and would soon embark for South America on the steamer *Groix* without Bolivia's approval.²¹⁷ This was unacceptable for the Bolivians since the refugees did not possess Bolivian visas. Two hours before the ship weighed anchor, the desperate official boarded the ship and halted its departure on the grounds that the Mennonites required Bolivian papers in order to enter the region.²¹⁸ A German senior civil servant, Dr. Ernst Kundt, was traveling with the Mennonites during this "unpleasant stage" of the journey and mediated between the Mennonites (who wanted to rest from their long journey) the Bolivian official (who declared the Mennonites' journey illegal), and the shipping line (which wished to remain punctual).²¹⁹ After hours of tense negotiations, the ship was allowed to leave with every

²¹⁵ League of Nations, "Refugees in China."

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Some accounts erroneously claim the ship's name was "*Croix*," though *Menno-Blatt* and contemporary German government accounts indicate that the name was "*Groix*." This group traveled by ship from Harbin, China, to Marseilles, France via the Red Sea. The group then passed through France by train to the port of *Le Havre*, where they boarded a ship that took them to Buenos Aires. From here, they continued up the Paraguay River to Puerto Casado. "Reisebericht der 1. Harbiner Gruppe," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), June 1932, p. 3-4; Ernst Kundt, "Reisebericht Paris-Le Havre, 1. Bis 7. April 1932," R127518, 5-7, AA. Secondary sources on the migration include G. Ratzlaff, "Die paraguayischen Mennoniten in der nationalen Politik," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 5, (2004): 59-91; Quiring, "The Colonization of the German Mennonites."

²¹⁸ G. Ratzlaff, "Die paraguayischen Mennoniten," 70-71.

²¹⁹ Kundt, "Reisebericht," 5-7; Bergfeld, "Bericht Nummer 58, Anspruch der bolivischen Regierung auf erteilung von Sichtvermerken für Reisende nach dem grossen Chaco," April 5, 1932, R78861 (Politik 3), AA.

Mennonite passport holding both Paraguayan and Bolivian visas.²²⁰ The Bolivian government also declared that in the future they would not allow any immigration to the Chaco, unless it was administered under Bolivian sovereignty.²²¹

When the Paraguayan government learned of the incident a few days later, it broke off diplomatic relations with Bolivia and sent a message (via the embassy in Paris) to the *Groix* protesting the Bolivian visa and the shipping line's complacency in the matter.²²² Bolivia retaliated by breaking off diplomatic relations with Paraguay. A short while later, German, French, and Dutch Mennonites sent letters of appreciation to the Paraguayan embassy thanking them for their generous support and assuring the Paraguayans that neither they, nor the refugees, wished to take part in such "political" dealings. The Harbin Mennonites arrived in the Chaco on May 12, 1932. Along with a few families from Poland that had arrived in 1930, the colony now stood at seventeen villages with a population of 2,015 people.²²³ These new arrivals settled alongside their co-religionists in the Fernheim Colony as the region descended into war.

The preceding theatrics demonstrate that the nationalist paradigm through which both Bolivia and Paraguay viewed the space of the Chaco—and energetically pursued or denied immigration to it—had little bearing on the Chaco's actual administration, which rested with the *Corporación Paraguaya* and the Mennonites themselves.²²⁴ Both countries' clumsy handling of the situation shows that their understanding of territorial sovereignty was confined more to the realms of bureaucracy and imagination than

²²⁰ Kundt, "Reisebericht," 6.

²²¹ To this end, Bolivian Minister of Foreign Relations issued a declaration on July 10, 1932, which read that "in the future no Mennonites are permitted to set foot in the Chaco without the express permission of Bolivia. All future settlement in the Chaco, west of Rio Paraguay will be permitted only under the patronage of Bolivia." Quoted in G. Ratzlaff, *Cristianos Evangélicos en la Guerra del Chaco 1932-1935* (Asunción: Gerhard Ratzlaff, 2008), 32. See also G. Ratzlaff, "Die paraguayischen Mennoniten," 70-71.

²²² Ibid. Ernst Kundt. "Reisebericht," 7,

²²³ "Ankunft der 1. harbiner Gruppe," p. 6; Cornelius J. Dyck and P. P. Klassen, "Filadelfia (Fernheim Colony, Boquerón Department, Paraguay)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified 1990, accessed February 5, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Filadelfia_\(Fernheim_Colony,_Boquer%C3%B3n_Department,_Paraguay\)&oldid=121054](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Filadelfia_(Fernheim_Colony,_Boquer%C3%B3n_Department,_Paraguay)&oldid=121054).

²²⁴ The *Corporación Paraguaya* was the same corporation that administered the purchase of lands from the Carlos Casado Corporation on behalf of the Menno Colony colonists during the 1920s.

infrastructure and reality. Neither Bolivia nor Paraguay knew how they would exploit the Chaco but they perceived that the Mennonite colonies were essential to that enterprise. It was for this reason that the Paraguayan government extended the generous conditions of the Mennonite *Privilegium* to the Fernheim Colony and the Harbin group. In 1930, Bolivia granted the colonies a similar *Privilegium*—though they had not asked for it—which ensured its respect for Mennonite autonomy in the event of war.²²⁵ To both countries, the Mennonites represented an “army of peace” and “emissaries of progress” that would establish dominion over the wilderness.²²⁶ The refugees’ identifications as Canadians, Russians, and religious dissidents were relatively less significant to both governments than the fact that they were German-speaking colonists who would transform the Chaco wilderness into a nationalized, agricultural Eden.

Hannah Arendt argues that stateless individuals during the interwar years were “superfluous.”²²⁷ This may have been true in a legal sense but the era’s politicians, press, and society certainly did not ignore interwar refugees. Despite their presumed physical superfluity, refugees suffered from a surfeit of meanings. Depending on who was speaking for (or against) them, refugees were heroes, criminals, victims, scapegoats, and could be assigned a variety of nationalities depending on where they originated, where they lived, and what they looked like.

Government, press, and church leaders each tried their hand at defining the refugees but they had to make them fit into existing categories of class, nationality, race, and religion. Soviet leaders encouraged local village councils to transpose communist class categories into myriad local vernaculars that were as mythological as they were sociological. The German government and press exploited conventional wisdom about

²²⁵ The guarantee was titled “Decreto Supremo de 27 de Marzo de 1930 – Se concede autorización a las familias menonitas y otras de índole análoga para establecerse en los terrenos baldíos del Chaco y oriente del país,” in Humberto Delgado Llano, *Complementos de la Legislación Integral del Ramo de Colonización 1928-1935* (La Paz: Intendencia General de Guerra, 1938).

²²⁶ Reprinted and translated article from *El Diario* (Asunción), December 29, 1926 in M. W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites*, 11; Sigfrido Gross Brown, *Las Colonias Menonitas en el Chaco* (Asunción: Imprenta Nacional, 1934), 1.

²²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), 296.

Auslandsdeutsche to cast the Mennonites as a long-lost tribe of Germans, even though their ancestors had left Prussia over 100 years prior. The organization *Brüder in Not* drew on similar nationalist themes but tinged their appeals with religious pathos. Across the Atlantic Ocean, Canada assumed that the Mennonites were recalcitrant separatists while Bolivia and Paraguay viewed them as hardy pioneers. Meanwhile, in the United States, the MCC called on North American Mennonites to view the refugees as their unfortunate brethren. They wanted the refugees to create a new homeland in the Americas as their own ancestors had done in the preceding centuries.²²⁸ Each of these entities identified the refugees differently in order to clarify who belonged and did not belong to their imagined national or religious communities and unify their constituencies around a shared goal. What the refugees represented meant more than who they actually were: a small, ragtag, and disparate assembly of families and individuals.

The Moscow refugees' shrewd entreaties and the Harbin refugees' daring escape unquestionably demonstrates that they were not powerless. Yet at least initially, most refugee groups are—by their very nature—disorganized and inarticulate. As we have seen, competing external voices were quick to fill the void of interpretation. Broadly speaking, the refugees shared a similar language and faith, yet their varying occupations, levels of education, local cultures, and degrees of involvement with the church make it difficult to advance meaningful speculations about their unity or identity. Certainly, their most pressing shared concern was finding a new home and rebuilding their lives but it remained unclear who would help them, where it would happen, and whether they would be doing it alone or as a group. Historian David McCreedy states “Oppressed people have no obligation to act in ways that outside observers find interesting or appropriate. They seek instead to protect themselves and their families, to survive and to keep intact as much of their world as possible.”²²⁹ This is exactly what Mennonite refugees like the Neufeld family tried to do. They had little idea what a *kulak* was, they did not feel especially loyal to an international ethnic or religious community, and they did not choose to join their community of fate. However, once the refugees arrived in Paraguay,

²²⁸ According to the editor of the North American publication *Mennonite*, “The future of Mennonitism lies in the new world.” See “Editorial,” *Mennonite*, October 31, 1929, 3.

²²⁹ David McCreedy, *Rural Guatemala, 1760-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 10.

they had to decide whether they wished to remain a part of this local community and their broader “imagined communities” in Germany and North America.²³⁰ If so, they had to establish the terms under which they would remain united and create an intelligible story about their unity, a process that took over a decade to resolve.

²³⁰ Anderson.

CHAPTER III. MAPMAKING AND MYTHMAKING

The Menno Colony drivers stood at the “Kilometer 145” train depot looking like otherworldly peasants. They wore torn clothes, straw hats, wooden clogs, and leather sun goggles on their heads. The latter protected their eyes from the Gran Chaco’s wind-swept flatlands. The depot was the last stop on the narrow gauge railroad that extended from the river port town of Puerto Casado into the vast wilderness. The drivers were paid by the MCC to take the Fernheim Colony refugees to their new land, which was an additional three-day trek through the bush. The first refugee transport had arrived at Puerto Casado on Good Friday, but the refugees were forced to wait at the station since the Menno Colony residents refused to pick them up during the Easter holiday. The refugees—though poor, dirty, and tired—wore suits, ties, and dress shoes. Men sported mustaches and women wore cloche hats—fashions incongruous with the Menno Colony Mennonites’ bib overalls and boots. They also preferred to speak a more “cultured” High German in contrast to the Menno Colony’s preferred *Plautdietsch*, which Menno Colony individuals referred to simply as “Mennonite.”¹ The two groups of Mennonites appeared to be from different worlds, and they were.

The initial meeting between the Menno Colony migrants and the Fernheim Colony refugees allowed both groups to assess the changes that had developed between them during the previous fifty years. Among the Menno Colony Mennonites, there were about eighty people who had actually been born in Russia before the 1870s migration to Canada. They remembered the schism between those who left Russia for Canada’s prairies as a defining moment when the “true believers” voluntarily chose the hardships of pioneer life over acquiescence with the Russian government. As a result, the Menno Colony Mennonites remained guarded during their interactions with the refugees, viewing them as cosmopolitan, impractical, demanding, and theologically modern. Alternately, Fernheim Mennonites believed the Menno Colony was isolated, backward, and intellectually dull.² In their understanding, it was only after the Menno Colony’s

¹ See Amos Swartzentruber, “Mennonites in Paraguay: VI. “Their Churches and Schools,” *Gospel Herald*, October 31, 1929, 629.

² M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 404, 408-411.

ancestors had left for Canada that the Russian Mennonites were able to reach their cultural zenith. In time, these suspicions solidified into a general coolness between the groups.³ Clearly, the intervening decades had deepened and expanded the differences between each group, their religious beliefs, cultural assumptions, ideas about Mennonitism, and articulations of an overarching Mennonite narrative.

Based on the fact that both groups were Mennonites, outside observers such as the MCC and the Paraguayan government hoped that the colonies would cooperate with each other. Indeed, the likelihood of their settlement in the same location at (nearly) the same time appeared providential to the MCC and augured an age of Mennonite cooperation. Yet this assumption either imposes a nationalist metanarrative on history or presumes to know God's inscrutable will, for there is no biblical passage that prophesizes this development. The question remains: On what grounds did they reject cooperation with each other and on what terms did they interact with their new environment?

This chapter argues that the Menno and Fernheim Colonies held different interpretations of their local context and their overarching purpose in the Chaco due to their separate pasts in Canada and Russia and the circumstances of their group formation—as voluntary migrants and as refugees. The Menno Colony Mennonites possessed a relatively coherent and unified group narrative. They viewed their migration as a path that sincere Christians must follow and the space of the Chaco as haven from nationalism and broader affiliations. Owing to the Fernheim colonists' condition as disparate refugees, they were at odds over their collective narrative and searched for ways to infuse their colony with existential meaning. This chapter therefore examines each colony through three lenses: 1) their encounters with the natural environment, 2) their actions during the Chaco War (1932-1935), and 3) their interactions with indigenous peoples after the War. Each lens helps us view how the colonies interpreted their obligations to the Paraguayan state and their material and moral imperatives in the Chaco.

Narratives necessarily assume a few standard shapes in order to relate a specific meaning or moral; otherwise they would simply entail a value-neutral series of events—a chronicle, so to speak—without any obvious relationship to each other and with no

³ M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 405.

beginning, middle, or end. When humans tell stories, they select events that they deem to be important, place them in a specific order, and incorporate analogies that make their interpretation reasonable to a specific audience. Sometimes the audience is big; sometimes it is small. Sometimes analogies are scientific or historical; sometimes they are mythical. Quite often events are chosen that emphasize the author's desired conclusion rather than a normative consensus of what is important (if this is even possible). For all the bewildering variety of events and analogies one may draw on to construct a narrative, the contours of its plot will inevitably share much in common with other narratives. Generally speaking, narratives form arcs. There is rising action, a climax (or two), and falling action. Depending on the author's point of view, the outcome may be either happy (comedic) or unfortunate (tragic). In the case at hand, the Menno Colony interpreted its collective narrative as a "comedy" while the Fernheim Colony manifested a *mélange* of competing narratives that tended toward the tragic.

Both colonies used biblical analogies to interpret the Chaco and their place within it. The Menno Colony drew on stories that employ a "comic" plot progression, which takes the narrative shape of a U.⁴ *Alteter* M. C. Friesen's 1927 farewell sermon in Osterwick, Canada serves as a good example. In his chosen passage, Jeremiah 51, those who were faithful to the Lord fled from Babylon's hubris and sin, whereupon the Lord "brought about [their] vindication and they declared "the work of the Lord" in Zion."⁵ Menno Colony individuals used this type of Bible story to cast themselves as heroic (though humble) nomads who resisted the temptation to comply with earthly authorities, endured the physical and moral tests of immigration, and were rewarded for their efforts. They thought it was natural, and indeed necessary, to suffer periods of hardship, believing these moments would be followed by the grace of restoration.

In contrast, the Fernheim colonists drew on biblical stories of exile to describe their collective narrative and they initially interpreted the story of their resettlement as a "tragedy." This type of story takes the shape of an inverted U that rises to a dramatic turning point before plummeting to disaster.⁶ The Fernheim colonists experienced

⁴ Frye, *Great Code*, 190.

⁵ Jeremiah 51: 10 (ESV).

⁶ Frye, *Great Code*, 197.

prosperity in Russia before the Soviet government robbed them of their livelihoods and forced them to flee to an unknown land. Once settled in the Chaco, they were faced with the ambiguity of how they would incorporate this fall from grace—this “tragic” plot progression—into their collective narrative. One of their most compelling options was to overcome it with a shared purpose that might ultimately transform their “tragedy” into a “comedy.” Consequently, the Fernheim Colony’s search for narrative meaning was both urgent and contentious as colonists struggled to keep the settlement from disintegrating.

The Gran Chaco

Historian William Cronon explains that rival narratives of an event—in this case, displacement and resettlement—produce different understandings of the relationship between humans and the natural environment.⁷ This insight is applicable to the colonies’ interpretation of the physical space of the Gran Chaco. When the Menno and Fernheim Colony Mennonites relocated to the Chaco, the transition represented either an upward or downward sweep of their collective narratives. The colonists’ paths—as voluntary migrants and as refugees—were inextricably bound to their impressions of the Chaco and each group of colonists imbued their new environment with different meanings that were mediated by the Bible and resonated with their present conditions.

Menno Colony leaders viewed their colony as the living extension of the early, nomadic Christian church. Their relocation to Paraguay represented a single step in a multigenerational journey of faith. Church leaders’ “theology of migration” was not especially concerned with the church’s geographical movement across space—from a “worse space” to a “better space.” Rather, the act of migrating was how God’s people remained holy across time and space, towards the “Promised Land” of heaven.⁸ Leaders did not proclaim the space of the Chaco to be sacred. They simply argued that it was the best place for them to maintain their religious worldview and their *Gemeinden*.⁹

⁷ See Cronon, “A Place for Stories.”

⁸ Guenther “Theology of Migration: The *Ältesten* Reflect,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 173.

⁹ According to theologian J. Denny Weaver this worldview valued, “humility and simplicity, discipleship, nonresistance, and opposition to education.” See *Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite and Amish Atonement Theology in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), 78.

Anthropologist Calvin Redekop agrees that the Menno Colony “chose the Chaco, not as the *summum bonum*, but as one of the best options for achieving their objectives—namely, avoiding further internal corruption from contact with a society that was imposing its values on them.”¹⁰ In short, it was the journey that was sacred, not the land.

According to the Menno Colony worldview, humans’ relationship to the environment could not be understood or discussed in isolation and there were few abstract qualities attached to nature. Menno Colony Mennonites viewed the environment as a practical challenge to be overcome through hard work and sacrifice. One colonist speculated that the land would be whatever individual colonists made of it: “To one person the Chaco appears to become fateful; the other person, however, sees traces of God’s grace in it and stumps happily forward.”¹¹ Colonists understood that any material gain would have to be prized from the land through hard work and sacrifice. One colonist by the name of “Mrs. (Jacob) Ginter,” speculated that if the colony’s agricultural prospects fared poorly and the leaders became disappointed “then we will move on.”¹²

Colony leaders drew on biblical passages about collective sacrifice and individual discipleship to give meaning to the relocation. According to historian M. W. Friesen, the son of *Ältester M. C. Friesen*, a guiding Bible verse for the colonists was Isaiah 20:21 which states, “And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.”¹³ M. C. Friesen also reminded colonists of Mark 10:29-30 wherein Jesus told his followers that “No one who has left... for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much.”¹⁴ Another early arrival, preacher J. W. Sawatzky, wrote that the group saw a rainbow while they were camped at Puerto Casado and proclaimed it to be “God’s wonderful sign of union

¹⁰ The Menno colonists may have idealized the *condition* of having religious privileges but they did not idealize any particular space where this condition could be met. Calvin Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors: Mennonite and Indigenous Relations in the Paraguayan Chaco* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 90.

¹¹ Reprinted report from A. B. Toews of Weidenfeld titled “Dark Mood in the Desolate Bush Wilderness—We Will Die Here,” quoted in M. W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites*, 58.

¹² Reprinted letter dated February 1928 from Mrs. (Jacob) Ginter titled “Nothing Grows in the Chaco,” *ibid.*, 34.

¹³ (ESV); M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 126.

¹⁴ Reprinted letter dated January 1928 titled “Just Forward!,” in M. W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites*, 32.

with Noah,” for Noah had fashioned his boat at God’s command without knowing where it would take him.¹⁵ The Menno Colony venture was infused with a positive religious meaning from the beginning.

Menno colonists’ occupations and the distance between their villages nevertheless kept them from speculating on the philosophical and religious meanings of the Chaco. Most were farmers or employed in other manual professions and so letters and reports to relatives in Canada reveal an emphasis on practical matters such as crop yields, water, and weather. Moreover, the Menno Colony did not establish a newspaper that could have provided a forum for discussion.¹⁶ News and gossip spread via sporadic encounters between villages and through weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly village church services—depending on whether or not a preacher was available.¹⁷ Narrow footpaths connected villages and cattle and colonists were often lost in the bush. The isolation of some villagers was so acute that if they wanted to visit another village for church, they had to depart Saturday night in order to arrive in time for the Sunday morning service.¹⁸

For some, the transition to the new environment was too much. Colonists grumbled that the 1921 delegation had misled them by promising bountiful grain fields. During the expedition, the delegation planted a test plot of wheat. The plot represented more than an experiment since it was the barometer of the colony’s ability to transplant their farm culture to a new land. Apparently, the wheat grew one foot during the month that the delegates were scouting the Chaco, which portended an easy transition.¹⁹ The delegates were also happy to learn that the edible *Physalis* (“ground cherry”) that grew wild in the Chaco bore a striking resemblance to a similar plant that grew in their

¹⁵ Reprinted letter dated January 5, 1927 from J. W. Sawatzky to M. C. Friesen titled “Encountered Everything Good,” in M. W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites*, 29.

¹⁶ Lacking a newspaper, Menno colonists intermittently shared their impressions with the *Steinbach Post* (Steinbach, Canada) The *Post* was a forum for conservative-minded Mennonites in North and South America.

¹⁷ Swartzentruber, “Churches and Schools,” 629.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 98.

Manitoba gardens.²⁰ Yet the similarities between the two environments stopped there. The settlement could not survive on ground cherries and the auspicious test plot was merely the product of a few timely rains. Colonists therefore discovered that large-scale wheat cultivation was futile and economic failure loomed. Health problems also plagued the colony. Within a year and a half, 163 people died (including ninety-six children). Another 323 returned to Canada.²¹ Abram A. Braun wrote that “Many [colonists] are like the disbelieving Thomas: they want to see first and only then believe.”²² Gerhard D. Klassen had a more negative assessment, writing to his siblings in Canada, “If a change doesn’t happen soon, I don’t know what will come of this... we have less than nothing here... Please, send me my birth certificate and passport. I think I will need it yet.”²³ Ginter simply stated, “Everything dries up. Everybody gets diarrhea here. Humans get maggots alive.”²⁴ Canada was a moral desert but the Chaco was the real thing.

Those who complained did not think that the land was cursed. Nor did they believe that God was punishing them. Rather, they directed their grievances at colony leaders. Acrimony between those who stayed and those who returned to Canada spilled across the pages of the Canadian newspaper *Steinbach Post* during the late-1920s. One returnee bitterly complained about the colony’s self-righteousness and—in regard to colonists maintaining their *Plautdietsch* dialect—taunted them that they should careful to not start speaking Spanish, since “The enemy [Satan] will sow his weeds there [in

²⁰ B. Toews, *Reise-Tagebuch*, 45.

²¹ There is a discrepancy with these numbers. B. Klassen states there were 323 return migrants and 163 dead by the end of 1928. A. Neufeld, via G. Ratzlaff, contends there were a total of 335 return migrants and 168 deaths but he does not provide a date. See Burt Klassen, “Puerto Casado-16 Monate Wartezeit an der Tür zum Chacoinneren,” *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 13 (2012): 7-30, 13; A. Neufeld, “The Mennonite Experience in Paraguay: The Congregational and Theological Experience,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 27, no. 1 (Winter, 2009): 6; G. Ratzlaff, *Ein Leib, viele Glieder: die mennonitischen Gemeinden in Paraguay: vielfältige Gemeinde, kämpfende Gemeinde, begnadete Gemeinde* (Asunción: Gemeindegemeinschaft-Asociación Evangélica Mennonita del Paraguay, 2001), 55-56.

²² Reprinted letter dated April 1927 from Abram A. Braun titled “The People Don’t Have Enough to Do,” in M. W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites*, 30.

²³ Reprinted letter dated January 4, 1927 from Gerhard D. Klassen to siblings titled “I Don’t Know What Will Come of This,” quoted in *ibid.*, 30.

²⁴ Reprinted letter dated February 1928 from Mrs. (Jacob) Ginter titled “Nothing Grows in the Chaco,” *ibid.*, 34.

Paraguay] as well as here [in Canada].”²⁵ Menno Colony Mennonites retaliated by calling those who left the colony “bondbreakers.”²⁶

Fernheim Mennonites encountered the space of the Gran Chaco much as the Menno Colony Mennonites had: vast, foreign, and seemingly untamable.²⁷ However, Fernheimers found it more difficult to situate the new environment within their group cosmology. The Chaco was not simply an agricultural challenge that they had prepared themselves to overcome, but an unwanted destiny that was thrust upon them by some dimly understood earthly or supernatural power. Most had wanted to go to Canada and Paraguay was a second choice. Johann Ediger, a homeopathic doctor who was contracted by McRoberts to serve the colonists, recorded “It makes me sick to see and hear again and again how people try to curry the favor of the Canadian government, as if it were a matter of getting into the Promised Land.”²⁸ The Fernheim colonists were also less prepared for working the land than their Menno Colony neighbors since they counted among themselves a number of professionals and educators.²⁹ Some families lacked a father and were dependent on the labor of the children and the goodwill of the MCC.

The colony’s nascent churches were not prepared to supply a unified or coherent explanation of the colony’s fate. From the beginning, their churches were not inclined to organize under the direct leadership of an *Ältester* but preferred to create individual congregations that were organized under the egalitarian conference structures they had developed in Russia, The first was the Brethren Church (*Brüdergemeinde*), which was

²⁵ *Steinbach Post* (Canada), March 5, 1930. Quoted in M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 263.

²⁶ R. Loewen, *Village among Nations*, 69.

²⁷ For a more complete description of Fernheim Colony’s initial impressions of the differences between the temperate European climate and the sub-tropical Chaco, including temperature and precipitation records from the first two years of settlement, see Nikolai Siemens, “Muss es im Chaco immer heiß sein?” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), July 1931, p. 3-4.

²⁸ Letter from Ediger to Unruh, April 6, 1920. Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 84. Ediger was a Russian-born Mennonite living in Germany when McRoberts contacted him regarding healthcare for the Menno Colony. He settled in Hoffnungsfeld for a time before returning to Germany. See Uwe S. Friesen and Rudolf Dyck, “Ediger, Johann,” *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 117-118.

²⁹ Peter Rahn, “Was fehlt uns? – und wie kann uns geholfen werden?” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), May 1931, 3-4.

established by Isaak I. Braun on June 9, 1930. The *Brüdergemeinde* represented the colony's largest church and claimed 1,023 members (434 baptized). In Russia during the 1860s, this church had parted with the larger *Mennonitengemeinde* over various issues including its emphasis on mission work, personal repentance from sin, and the conversion experience. The second was the aforementioned Mennonite Church (*Mennonitengemeinde* or *Kirchengemeinde*). Preacher Johann Bergmann convened the church on June 22, 1930 but historian Peter P. Klassen notes that it suffered from indecisive leadership until 1936 when Russian-Mennonite preacher and teacher Abram Harder relocated to Fernheim from Germany. The *Mennonitengemeinde* attempted to reconstruct its previous traditions but it also began incorporating new practices, such as allowing women to partake in congregational discussions. By 1932, it included 816 members (355 baptized). The third was the Evangelical-Mennonite Brethren (*Evangelisch-Mennonitische Bruderschaft* or *Allianzgemeinde*). In many respects, the *Allianzgemeinde* was theologically similar to the *Brüdergemeinde*. Organized by Nikolai Wiebe in August 1930, it grew to 116 members (sixty-two baptized) by 1933.³⁰ Like some of their North American counterparts, most of Russia's Mennonites viewed the establishment of large associations as a positive development, especially after the turmoil of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution. Though Fernheimers were conditioned by these developments to pursue broad level cooperation, they nevertheless exhibited a great deal of personal diversity in their theological reflections on the Chaco.

Theologically, Fernheim Colony individuals were more eclectic and progressive than their Menno Colony counterparts. The Colony's population was composed of individuals from various congregations from across Russia and so it was not unusual for a preacher from Crimea to speak to an audience of individuals from Ukraine, Siberia, or any point in between. The majority of colonists came from Siberia, which was a region that contained a scattered and autonomous Mennonite population and was more dynamic than the confession's established strongholds in southern Russia. In the late nineteenth

³⁰ These numbers are admittedly imprecise due to the number of deaths and births during the first years of settlement. For a contemporary description of each conference including membership numbers see Walter Quiring, *Deutsche erschliessen den Chaco* (Karlsruhe, Germany: Heinrich Schneider, 1936), 191-202. For a later account including the names of conference leaders see P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 305 ff.

century, Mennonite communities were affected by various strains of radical Protestant Christianity that swept through Ukraine and Russia.³¹ During the early twentieth century, Russia's Mennonites also became oriented to European educational and religious developments including the dispensational paradigm of history, the pietistic and Moravian movements, and theologies emanating from seminaries in Hamburg, Berlin, and Basel.³² Moreover, during their sojourn in Germany, the refugees had interacted with a variety of Baptist, Catholic, and Lutheran refugees, camp staff, and visitors.

A major environmental factor that contributed to the acuteness of their situation was inadequate housing and medical care. Living in poorly sealed tents, with a meager diet, and scarce water supplies, Fernheim colonists were beset with malnutrition and disease. Typhoid fever hit the colony in 1930, especially the villages of Friedensruh, Schoenwiese, and Schoenbrunn, which were all part of the third transport of refugees from Mölln.³³ From Schoenbrunn alone, the disease claimed a total of thirty-two people out of 127 within a few months.³⁴ *Allianzgemeinde* leader N. Wiebe indicated the depth of the crisis in March 1930,

Death made the rounds... Even on Sunday we had to make coffins and dig graves, instead of going to church. This was necessary because in this heat the dead have to be buried immediately... In one tent the tablecloth was still on the table. Beds were in the tent as well as outside – but the 6 previously healthy members of the Harms family who had lived there – had left forever. I looked across the street and saw a different sight. An elderly lady was sitting in her tent alone. Her three adult children had died.³⁵

The situation remained grim for the rest of the year. In December, Wilhelm Klassen reported, “Several men were constantly on the lookout for bottle trees for

³¹ See Zhuk.

³² A. Neufeld, “Congregational and Theological,” p. 16. See also H. Loewen, “Intellectual Developments Among the Mennonites 1880-1917,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 8 (1990): 90-93f.

³³ Wilhelm Klassen “Painful Paths,” in *The Schoenbrunn Chronicles*, comps. Agnes Balzer and Liselotte Dueck, trans. Henry and Esther Regehr (Waterloo: Sweetwater Books, 2009), 34; Johann Regehr, “Death in Schoenbrunn,” in *ibid.*, 39.

³⁴ W. Klassen “Painful Paths,” 34.

³⁵ “Letter from Nikolai Wiebe to Harold S. Bender,” March 5, 1931. Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume I*, 78.

coffins, others hollowed out the tree, pruned it, and so prepared the coffin. Others were digging graves.”³⁶ In the new environment, death became a terrifyingly banal experience.

Lack of water was a constant threat. Even after the Fernheim colonists established their villages, viable sweet water wells were difficult to find and tenuous to maintain. Some villages dug upwards of thirteen wells before they found sweet water. The sandy walls often collapsed and threatened to bury workers alive.³⁷

There were also animal problems. According to Fernheim resident Gerhard Schartner, the Paraguayan cattle were untamable and often ran away. This caused their owners to incur debt on animals that they no longer possessed.³⁸ Livestock that were not lost in the bush fell prey to the pumas and jaguars that roamed the Chaco. Attacks were common occurrences throughout the 1930s, until colonists began using routine patrols and strychnine.³⁹ Foxes stole chickens, locusts ravished scanty fields, and wasps and poisonous snakes bit overly curious children.⁴⁰

The Chaco’s extreme weather also caused misery. Temperatures in the Chaco regularly exceed 110 degrees Fahrenheit during the summer.⁴¹ Strong winds brought downpours that flooded the tent-dwellers or sand storms that covered everything with a fine yellow powder.⁴² Winter brought cooler temperatures that sometimes fell below freezing. Colonists hung blankets over the doors and windows to conserve the heat from their small wood burning stoves.⁴³ Writing about his ride through the colony one winter evening, *Menno-Blatt* editor N. Siemens painted a picture of families bedecked in their

³⁶ W. Klassen, “Tiefe Wege,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), December 1930, 2-4.

³⁷ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 77.

³⁸ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 77.

³⁹ Frieda Balzer, “Brush with Terror,” in Balzer and Dueck, *Schoenbrunn Chronicles*, 65-66.

⁴⁰ Jakob Unger, “Aus der Natur unserer neuen Heimat,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay) August 1933, p. 3.

⁴¹ According to Nikolai Siemens, it was not the level of the mercury in the thermostat that caused the most misery but the relentlessness of the heat. See “Muss es im Chaco immer heiß sein?” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), July 1931.

⁴² W. Klassen, “Tiefe Wege.”

⁴³ Nikolai Siemens, “Muss es im Chaco.”

Siberian coats and huddling for warmth in their tents and huts.⁴⁴ For many colonists, the Chaco embodied its designation as the “green hell,” a term popularized by Luis Bazoberry’s 1936 film of the same name about the Chaco War, since it appeared completely hostile and beyond their control.

In this harsh context, Fernheim colonists ascribed multiple and contrasting theological and environmental meanings to the Chaco. Some believed that God blessed them with a new homeland. Others thought that their true homeland was still in Russia. Still others believed that God had sent them to this wild location for a difficult—though ultimately constructive—purpose. Some viewed it as an interminable prison sentence. Altogether, their opinions indicate that they were not unified in their interpretation of the new land.

Colony members’ impressions of the Chaco are best observed in the pages of the colony’s newspaper *Menno-Blatt*, which began in 1930 as a four-page monthly. The paper’s masthead suggests the dawning of new day in the Gran Chaco through tremendous physical toil: A blazing sun bears down on a faceless pioneer driving two oxen across a barren expanse. To the right stands an unruly agave plant; to the left stands a wooden cross that is nearly obscured by a prickly pear. This was the Gran Chaco as the colony’s supporters viewed it: defiant and scorching but with the possibility of redemption through hard work and Christian faith.⁴⁵

The wilderness was an obvious and visceral metaphor for Fernheim colonists who struggled to give meaning to their new environment.⁴⁶ Biblical concepts of exile and wandering in the wilderness were key themes in the pages of *Menno-Blatt* and indicate the general paradigm through which Fernheim Mennonites viewed the territory. In fact, some individuals compared the “Red Gate” over the train track on their way out of the Soviet Union to the Red Sea through which the Israelites had passed on their way out of

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The masthead was designed by a Mennonite artist living in Germany by the name of Hans Legiehn. For more on the history of *Menno-Blatt* and Nikolai Siemens leadership see A. Neufeld, “Nikolai Siemens: Ein Wanderer Zwischen Welten,” *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 6 (2005): 91-113, 94.

⁴⁶ These speculations began during their first week in the Chaco. See M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 406.

Egypt.⁴⁷ Yet was Paraguay a wilderness through which they must wander or was it the “Promised Land” where they would remain?

Some Fernheimers understood the Chaco as a sanctuary and a blessing from God. Writing in November 1931, preacher Heinrich B. Friesen stated, “The true believers take the whole situation as God-given.”⁴⁸ Abraham Löewen of Kleefeld suggested that the Chaco was the best they could hope for in a world that was falling apart. In his article “Ten Golden Rules for the Citizens of Fernheim Colony,” he encouraged Fernheimers to embrace the Chaco since “fortune favors the brave.”⁴⁹ His first commandment was that colonists should remember their suffering in Moscow. Another stated that they should remember that the whole world was suffering from a severe economic crisis. Löewen concluded that the Fernheim colonists should “let it also be known in the Chaco wilderness that you are a Mennonite.”⁵⁰

Other Fernheimers believed that their journey to the “Promised Land” was not over and the wilderness was filled with physical and spiritual trials that they must pass through. Writing for *Menno-Blatt* in 1933, colonist Jakob Dürksen viewed the colony’s intermittent successes as metaphorical “oases” that were comparable to the physical oases encountered by the Israelites during their sojourn in the Sinai Desert.⁵¹ In a letter to Bender dated November 22, 1930, H. B. Friesen also drew similarities between the attitudes of the Israelites and the Fernheimers writing that “One is now better able to

⁴⁷ Helmuth Isaak, *Your Faith Will Sustain You, and You Will Prevail*, trans. Jack Thiessen (Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand, 2014), 7.

⁴⁸ Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 81.

⁴⁹ Abraham Löewen, “Zehn goldene Regeln für den Bürger der Kolonie Fernheim,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), March/April 1932, p. 4. Löewen was the Colony’s bookkeeper. See Thiesen, “The Mennonite Encounter with National Socialism in Latin America, 1933-1944,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 12 (1994): 108. Schoolteacher and preacher Peter G. Klassen from Rosenort also subscribed to this line of thought, stating, “And when I think of those living under persecution in Russia or think of the five million unemployed in Germany, then I have a lot of reason to thank God for being able to live here.” See “Endlich!,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), September 1931, 2. For more on Peter G. Klassen’s role in the colony see Paulhans Klassen, “Klassen, Peter G.” *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 241.

⁵⁰ Abraham Löewen, “Zehn goldene Regeln,” Löewen was the Colony’s bookkeeper. See Thiesen, “Mennonite Encounter,” 108.

⁵¹ Jakob Dürksen, “Taufest der Fernheimer Mennonitengemeinde,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), August 1933, p. 1.

understand the whole nature of the complaining, dissatisfaction and loss of courage [among the Israelites]... and the fact that God had to punish them so often.”⁵² A 1933 front-page article written by Johann Schellenberg meditated on the biblical patriarch Noah’s faithfulness to God in the face of extreme hardship. Another front-page column published in the February 1935 issue spoke of Noah’s “lonely wandering” before the flood destroyed the wicked of the earth.⁵³ Two years later a third colonist reflected, “In Moscow the Lord had heard our prayers and had not let us fall into the hands of men. Here we fell into the hands of God.” In sum, the early years of settlement were “a time of bitter testing, a time when we could scarcely understand our Father in heaven.”⁵⁴

Sometimes this trial was too great of a burden, even if colonists believed that God had sanctified it. Editor N. Siemens was overcome with a profound sense of alienation as he was riding home on his mule one moonlit evening in December 1933. N. Siemens was lost in reverie and imagined Mennonites in Germany, Siberia, and the United States gathered around their Christmas trees. He conflated his personal sense of isolation with the vast wilderness that separated him from loved ones abroad. The experience led him to speculate on alternative destinies that might await colonists beyond the Chaco.⁵⁵ Apparently enough colonists believed that Satan was responsible for their fate to warrant a rebuke by colonist Jacob Wall in *Menno-Blatt*.⁵⁶ Wall argued that they had no proof that Satan controlled their destiny, and so it was the Lord who led them to the Chaco.

In any case, life in the Chaco was hard and pessimistic attitudes were present in the colony from the very beginning.⁵⁷ Writing under the pseudonym “Dark Glasses” (a

⁵² “Letter from H. B. Friesen to Harold S. Bender.” Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1: Kingdom of God and Kingdom of this World*, 2d rev. and updated ed., trans. Gunther H. Schmitt (Philadelphia, Paraguay: Peter P. Friesen, 2003), 79. Two years later, he remained committed to this line of thought, writing in *Menno-Blatt* that God tested the Fernheimers to demonstrate that he “is able to save us from great dangers, hardships and fears to open our eyes to his almighty power.” See H. B. Friesen, “Rückblick auf ein ereignisreiches Jahr,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), December 1932, p. 5.

⁵³ “Gehorsam,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), February 1935, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Friedrich (Fritz) Kliewer, “The Mennonites of Paraguay,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 11, no. 1 (January 1937): 94.

⁵⁵ Nikolai Siemens, “Weihnacht im Chaco,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), January 1932, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Jacob Wall, “Erntedankfest,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), June 1932, p. 1.

⁵⁷ According to the German Mennonite Walter Quiring, upon colonists’ arrival their mood “was rather depressed and many had lost heart and were gloomy.” See “Colonization of the German Mennonites,” 64.

play on the phrase “rose-tinted glasses”), one cynical colonist stated, “Our new homeland is difficult... Almost every tree and bush is full of thorns... [although even] the roses fail here.”⁵⁸ Another colonist wrote to his brother-in-law in Russia that, “The heat is intolerable... if you still have potatoes to eat, thank God... We don’t have any.”⁵⁹ A female colonist simply stated that she would rather live in a chicken coop in Russia than in a tent in the Chaco.⁶⁰ Though *Menno-Blatt* bound the colony together as a forum for public commiseration and letters abroad tied the colony to its supporters in other lands, it also cast a glaring light on the settlement’s disunity. Throughout the 1930s, the paper was laced with interpretations on the meaning of the Chaco with opinions ranging across a broad spectrum of natural and supernatural causes, demonstrating that the Colony earnestly wished to make sense of their new environment but lacked the ability to coalesce around a shared interpretation.

While the Menno and Fernheim Colonies struggled to maintain their presence in the Chaco, the Paraguayan government looked on the entire venture as Manifest Destiny on the cheap. The Mennonite colonists were central actors in an upward-sweeping nationalist narrative of economic development and environmental management. One detailed government report written in 1934 on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture describes the Mennonite colonies’ relationship to the land as beneficial to the region and the nation. According to the account, “There one sees it, hand on the plow, furrows as emissaries of progress opening up fertile ground for the country's economy. Noble fruits sprout from their fields!”⁶¹ In contrast, average Paraguayans was less enthusiastic about the role Mennonites would play in developing “their” Chaco since the territory was widely considered to be a wasteland.⁶² Before the Chaco War, the idea of the Gran Chaco as an incorporated part of country was more of a dream than a reality.

⁵⁸ Dunkle Brille (pseudonym), “Grauer Alltag,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), October 1935, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 80.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶¹ Gross Brown, 1.

⁶² For a more complete description of the various ways the Chaco was imagined by Paraguayans during this time see Chesterton’s chapter “Comparing Eastern and Western Paraguay: Scientific Nationalism,” in *The Grandchildren of Solano López*.

Competing impressions of the Chaco indicate that neither the Menno Colony nor the Fernheim Colony nor the Paraguayan government shared a common interpretation of the space. Menno Colony Mennonites viewed the Chaco as a place where they could recreate their local culture. Pessimistic Fernheimers believed that the Chaco was a prison, while optimists argued God led them to create a garden in the wilderness. Paraguayans saw the Chaco either as a no-man's land or as the nation's final frontier. Their contrasting impressions indicate that the Chaco was not only a borderland between two states—Bolivia and Paraguay—but also a liminal and malleable area in the minds of its colonizers. The critical years of the Chaco War (1932-1935) imbued the space with an increasingly overt nationalist meaning as the colonies negotiated their relationship with the Paraguayan and Bolivian governments.

The Chaco War

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century experiment in establishing firm bonds between nations, states, and territories extended to the world's most isolated regions and entailed some of its poorest governments gambling all of their country's resources to achieve this objective. The Chaco War represented one such venture. Latin American governments viewed frontier regions like the Chaco as spaces latent with national promise. For Bolivia and Paraguay, the Chaco was a blank slate upon which would be written the future of their nations. The war tested Paraguay's respect for Mennonite military exemption and both warring countries' respect for Mennonite neutrality. For the Mennonites, the war required them to choose how they would engage both governments and tested their ability to preserve their communities in the face of violence. These tests, in turn, perpetuated their collective narratives: the Menno Colony as an independent and privileged unit and the Fernheim Colony as a collection of thankful and pragmatic survivors.

The Menno Colony incorporated the war into its collective narrative by maintaining their position as privileged separatists and provided only the barest essentials to Paraguayan military personnel stationed near their colony. In continuity with their past, the Menno Colony staunchly preserved its autonomy. By contrast, the Fernheim colonists worked closely with the Paraguayan military throughout the war for several reasons 1)

they were thankful that the country had accepted them as refugees. 2) They looked upon the war as an opportunity to generate much-needed income. 3) They were used to cooperating with government authorities in Russia and viewed national affinities as a normal feature of the modern world. Finally, their sense of Mennonitism was strongest at the family level and weakest at the colony level, thereby rendering the settlement's collective narrative inclined toward testing a variety of identifications, one of which included Paraguayan citizenship and its attendant duty to serve the state.

The Fernheim Colony initiated friendly relations with the Paraguayan government soon after their arrival. An important means to this end was learning Spanish. Colony leaders believed that mastering the language was both a duty and an asset, though they did not accord the other national language, Guaraní, with the same significance. In January 1932, the colony's secretary, Heinrich Pauls, stated that "the citizens of each country must learn to speak the national language so they will be more at home and can more easily search for the best in the country."⁶³ In February 1932, several of the colony's teachers were invited to the presidential palace to meet with President Dr. José Patricio Guggiari.⁶⁴ Entering the palace, the delegation passed a contingent of Marines, clad in white, with their arms at their sides. The pomp and circumstance of the occasion impressed the Mennonites, and their meeting with the president reassured them that they were important to the regime.⁶⁵ Writing in *Menno-Blatt*, Fernheim resident Friedrich Kliewer noted the "joyful message" that the president wanted Mennonites to furnish Paraguayan soldiers with food, supplies, and horses and assured colonists "of the government's best goodwill."⁶⁶ A few months later, German envoy Bülow, received a second group of Fernheim leaders in the capital. After the meeting, the Paraguayan

⁶³ Heinrich Pauls, "Unsere Schulen," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), January 1932, p. 2. For Pauls' title, see Thiesen, "Mennonite Encounter," 108.

⁶⁴ A full report of the meeting is recorded in Friedrich Kliewer, "Empfang beim Präsidenten von Paraguay [part 1]," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), March/April 1932, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Friedrich Kliewer, "Empfang beim Präsidenten von Paraguay [part 2]," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), May 1932, p. 2.

government offered the Mennonites a tour of the country's new battleship, which they gladly accepted.⁶⁷

Menno Colony was more limited in its contact with the Paraguayan government and its representatives did not accompany the Fernheim contingents to Asunción in 1932. The Menno Colony conducted business in the capital for only the most pressing issues. For instance, on February 5, 1931, Menno Colony representative J. J. Priesz visited the German legation (*Gesandtschaft*) and complained to Bülow about various robberies committed by Paraguayan troops stationed in the Chaco. Based on the Menno Colony's "cultural connections" to Germany, Bülow arranged a meeting with President Guggiari to discuss the issue and served as translator since the colonists had not yet mastered Spanish.⁶⁸ The Menno Colony Mennonites used their status as German-speakers to gain political leverage while maintaining distance between their colony and Paraguayan troops. Until this time, Menno Colony contact with Germany was sporadic and it would remain so after the incident. They capitalized on their Germanness when it was advantageous and dismissed it when it was not.

Between 1929 and 1932 Bolivia and Paraguay careened toward conflict and the Mennonite colonies found themselves occupying its geographic and discursive "ground zero."⁶⁹ Bolivian officials were alarmed at the Paraguayan governments' ongoing promotion of Mennonite immigration while rumors spread through the Paraguayan press that "German-speaking officers" from the Menno Colony were leading Bolivian patrols

⁶⁷ Nikolai Siemens, "In Asunción," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), September 1932, p. 2. Bülow apparently met with Fernheim leaders quite frequently, having also greeted them in Paraguay when they arrived and met with them in Asunción in early 1931. For a record of this meeting see Rudolf von Bülow, "Russische Mennoniten im Chaco," AA.

⁶⁸ Bülow, "Kanadische Mennoniten," February 5, 1931, 48, Buenos Aires 67A (Mennoniten-Einwanderung nach Paraguay), Shelf 48, Carton 2439, AA.

⁶⁹ The dispute gained the attention of international actors including the Pan American League and the League of Nations. Both nations were members of the League of Nations and, at least in theory, subject to sanctions until they came to terms. League minutes indicate that both sides wanted international sympathy, but neither side was interested in concessions, especially if the League's members had no intention of enforcing them. See League of Nations, "Dispute Between Bolivia and Paraguay-Annex 1099 and 1099(a)," *League of Nations Official Journal* 10, no. 1 (January 1929): 253-256; and "Documentation Concerning the Dispute Between Bolivia and Paraguay," *League of Nations Official Journal* 10, no. 2 (February 1929): 264-274.

through the Chaco.⁷⁰ The rumors were unfounded; yet it is true that the Mennonites' very presence indirectly exacerbated an already tense situation. Ultimately, a combination of factors—the failure of an international solution, economic insecurities brought on by the Great Depression, the polemics of each country's presses, and the shared belief that nations must have clearly defined borders—propelled Bolivia and Paraguay into Latin America's bloodiest international conflict in the twentieth century. It cost the lives of about 90,000-100,000 combatants, disrupted the lives of untold numbers of indigenous people, and jeopardized the survival of both Mennonite colonies.⁷¹

By mid-1932, the warring states were engaged in full-scale hostilities. Much of the initial fighting was centered west of Puerto Casado and immediately south of the Mennonites.⁷² The Bolivians were situated to the southwest of the colonies and the Paraguayans were stationed at Isla Po'í, a few miles southeast of Menno Colony's capital Sommerfeld (later renamed Loma Plata).⁷³ The Fernheim Colony was closest to the front and most in danger of being commandeered or destroyed. *Menno-Blatt* reports that individuals living in the village of Schönbrunn witnessed a Bolivian military aircraft graze the colony's western border. Another Bolivian biplane—perhaps confusing the colony's capital of Filadelfia for a Paraguayan encampment—strafed a group of people on the town's main street and put five rounds through a metal roof.⁷⁴

A few days later, the Paraguayan government threatened a mass evacuation of the colonies, likely because the Bolivians had captured four of the Paraguayan army's forts in

⁷⁰ The rumors were likely aroused by the knowledge that an ex-German general named Hans Kundt led the Bolivian armed forces. See Bülow, "Bericht Nr. 37. Inhalt: Paraguayisch-bolivianischer Grenzstreit," February 18, 1929, 3," R78859 (Politik 3), AA. For more on Kundt see Farcau, 87.

⁷¹ Matthew Hughes, "Logistics and the Chaco War: Bolivia versus Paraguay, 1932-1935," *Journal of Military History* 69, no. 2 (April 2005): 412.

⁷² Matthew Hughes, "Logistics and the Chaco War," 420-421.

⁷³ G. Ratzlaff, *Zwischen den Fronten: Mennoniten und andere evangelische Christen im Chacokrieg 1932-1935* (Asunción: Gerhard Ratzlaff, 2009), 37.

⁷⁴ Nikolai Siemens, "Gewitterwolk am politischen horizont," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), August 1932, p. 1-2; The German Foreign Service in Berlin also kept close watch on these developments. See Bülow, "Bericht Nr. 194 Inhalt: Paraguayisch-bolivianischer Grenzstreit," August 6, 1932," R78861 (Politik 3), AA; Ernst Kundt, "Aufzeichnung, betreffend den Chaco-Konflikt zwischen Bolivien und Paraguay und die mennonitischen Kolonien im Chaco," August 4, 1932, Band 1a, R127502. AA.

as many days—Corrales, Lopez, Toledo, and Boquerón.⁷⁵ For the Fernheim Mennonites, this development invoked a specter of death and violence that seemed to follow them wherever they settled. Considering the prospect of war waged on colony soil, N. Siemens stated “Before the mind’s eye serious images appeared” of desolate Russian villages and endless refugee trains.⁷⁶ The only thing left to do, suggested N. Siemens, was to pray and wait. Their prayers were answered when unseasonal rains stalled the Bolivians’ momentum, preventing them from drawing the campaign to a close by capturing Isla Po’í or disrupting the Paraguayan depot at Puerto Casado.

Bolivian forces briefly occupied the colonies in September 1932 during the Battle of Boquerón, indicating their strategic importance but also suggesting the impotency of military administration in the remote region.⁷⁷ At the start of the battle, a detachment of Bolivian soldiers approached the Fernheim Colony border and accosted three Mennonite brothers who were searching for reeds. The soldiers asked the youths for the location of Fort Guajó. One boy knew the outpost so the soldiers took him captive, gave him a horse, and forced him to lead the way. He led them down a narrow path towards a small hut with a straw roof.⁷⁸ The leader of the detachment, a Lieutenant Suárez, stormed the hut and, upon finding it empty, noted in his field book that the position was captured and that it now belonged to the Bolivians. The detachment then rode their horses into the dusty Mennonite village of Schönwiese, on the eastern side of Fernheim Colony. Here, the lieutenant issued a statement to the undoubtedly surprised mayor Heinrich Dürksen. It affirmed Bolivia’s sovereignty over the colonies and guaranteed Mennonite’s special privileges under the laws of Bolivia but it warned residents that helping Paraguay would

⁷⁵ Alejandro Quesada, *The Chaco War 1932-95: South America’s Greatest War* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2011).

⁷⁶ Nikolai Siemens, “Gewitterwolk am politischen horizont,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), August 1932, p. 1-2. N. Siemens also drew on Friedrich Schiller (“It is the very curse of evil deeds, that they immutably give birth to ill”) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (“From the spirits that I called Sir, deliver me!”) to provide a poetic understanding of the situation. See “Krieg und Kriegsopfer,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), October 1932, p. 3.

⁷⁷ The battle of Boquerón was the furthest advance the Bolivian army made near the Mennonite colonies. Within a few months, Paraguayan troops pushed the Bolivians north, signaling the decline of Bolivia’s contact with the Chaco Mennonites and eventually, its fortunes in the war.

⁷⁸ Hans Dueck, “Prisoner in the Chaco War,” in *Schoenbrunn Chronicles*, 57.

cause the Bolivian army to “punish any treachery.”⁷⁹ The soldiers left, presumably satisfied that Bolivia now “possessed” the colonies.

Soon thereafter, the Paraguayans successfully repulsed the Bolivian advance at Boquerón and the Mennonites’ interaction with the Paraguayan government became much closer. Paraguayan leaders viewed the colonies as a valuable source of medical aid and transportation, and a critical link in their tenuous supply chain from the Paraguayan River to the front. They also tended to view both colonies as a single unit that might—under the auspices of national security—be ordered to comply with their requests. Yet each colony responded differently to Paraguay’s war plans. While the Menno Colony equivocated, Fernheim colonists committed to ongoing assistance.⁸⁰ The Fernheim colonists imagined their group narrative as being in harmony with the Paraguayan state while the Menno colonists viewed themselves in (peaceful) opposition to it.

The Menno Colony was largely indifferent to the interests of the Paraguayan military but they were not indifferent to the physical and ideological risks of war. Colonists feared that their fields and homes would be destroyed by the moving front. Leaders feared that unsavory infantrymen might transmit their violent attitudes to the colony’s youth. In August 1932, one individual helped a Paraguayan detachment recover supplies from the Carayá military post, located near the colony. When he returned, the man received a sharp rebuke from colony leaders for his “military service.”⁸¹ After this incident, Menno Colony leaders refused to allow their members to aid either army and declined Paraguayan government contracts for men and materiel. It is unclear how individual colonists felt about the leadership’s refusal to take military contracts, but the fact that there is but one recorded violation of the decision testifies that it was not a large enough issue to cause colony-wide unrest or overturn the colony’s leadership.

In the spring of 1932, a more serious request was handed down by Paraguayan authorities. On October 6, the colonies received word from Lieutenant Colonel José Félix Estigarribia that they must supply the Paraguayan army with sixty wagons, oxen, and

⁷⁹ Quoted in G. Ratzlaff, *Christianos Evangélicos*, 33. See also G. Ratzlaff, *Zwischen den Fronten*, 33-34; and Hans Dueck, “Prisoner in the Chaco War,” *Schoenbrunn Chronicles*, 57.

⁸⁰ G. Ratzlaff, *Zwischen den Fronten*, 41.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

drivers (forty from the Menno Colony and twenty from the Fernheim Colony) in order to transport supplies from “Km 145” to Isla Po’í. Menno Colony leaders immediately convened a meeting to discuss the situation and drafted a short letter to Estigarribia. In their reply, they thanked God that Paraguayan authorities had previously acquitted them from service to the military but affirmed that they would not aid the Paraguayan military under any circumstances.⁸² A few days later Estigarribia clarified to the leaders that his message was not a request, but an order. The wagons and oxen would be due on October 14, at 16:00 at Campo Espranza (Hoffnungsfeld).⁸³

The following day, Menno Colony leaders convened a second meeting in the village of Osterwick, to which all male members were invited. During the meeting, it was determined that M. C. Friesen and Isaak K. Fehr, would meet with Estigarribia personally. In the meantime, they sent another message to Estigarribia stating that the colony would do everything it its power to serve the (non-military) economic development of the country and reclaim the Chaco wilderness (“*eine Wildnis urbar machen*”) but they could not violate the dictates of their conscious on behalf of military authorities. According to historian Gerhard Ratzlaff, after Estigarribia received the leaders at his camp, the colony was granted exemption from aiding the military.⁸⁴

A curious encounter happened when the Mennonite delegates returned to the colony. According to the American *Literary Digest*, an Argentine journalist encountered them on the road. It is unclear which individuals the reporter spoke to, but he stated that the Mennonites had met with Estigarribia to “offer their humble contribution to the defense of Paraguay.”⁸⁵ The correspondent noted that the Mennonites fled to the Chaco to escape warfare and launch a “peaceful war with the wilderness,” yet the Mennonites’ affinity for the Paraguayan nation-state was apparently stronger than the reason why they

⁸² “Kolonie Menno to Estigarribia,” October 6, 1932, Binder 15, *Archivo Colonia Menno* (Hereafter, ACM), Loma Plata, Paraguay.

⁸³ “Chacokrieg-Nach Aufzeichnungen des AB Toews,” Binder 15, ACM. See also G. Ratzlaff, *Zwischen den Fronten*, 25-26.

⁸⁴ G. Ratzlaff, *Zwischen den Fronten*, 26.

⁸⁵ It is possible that Fernheim delegates accompanied M. C. Friesen and Fehr to the meeting. “The Blond Men of the Chaco,” *The Literary Digest* (New York), April 1, 1933, p. 27.

migrated to the country in the first place. The correspondent opined “it is touching to see these farmers... unacquainted as yet with the Spanish language, identifying themselves with the Paraguayan cause.”⁸⁶ The reporter failed to see the differences between Mennonite groups and assumed that they were both enlisted in Paraguay’s endeavor.

Not long after, a new Paraguayan military dispatch requested the colonies to bake bread for its military personnel. It would be paid work and the government agreed to supply Mennonite families with flour. Once again, the Menno Colony was cautious about helping the military. Colony leaders convened a meeting on October 21, to discuss the issue. Over the protests of many, they agreed that the colony would provide foodstuffs and limited aid to soldiers—especially the sick and wounded—out of Christian pity.⁸⁷ In these exchanges with military authorities, Menno Colony Mennonites reacted quickly and decisively, drawing a firm line between their own interests and the military’s.

The Fernheim Colony also convened a meeting after Estigarribia issued his demand for wagons and oxen. Although there were many opinions about how the colony should act, the discussion revolved around three general points 1) the experiences that their forefathers had dealing with authorities in Russia 2) the biblical injunction found in Romans thirteen that commands Christians to obey government authorities and pay their taxes and 3) the role of their “special privileges” in relation to their civic duties. After much debate, the group agreed that it was wrong to deny the government’s request since they enjoyed the benefits of their Paraguayan citizenship and their religious privileges.⁸⁸ The Fernheim Mennonites were thankful to the Paraguayan government for accepting them as refugees and now they wished to perform their duties as citizens. Like Canada’s associative Mennonites, the Fernheim colonists believed that they should play an active role in the political direction of their host country.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Chacokrieg-Nach Aufzeichnungen des AB Toews,” Binder 15, ACM. See also “Brotbacken fuer das Militaer, Protokoll 29 November 1932,” Binder 15, ACM; G. Ratzlaff, *Zwischen den Fronten*, 27.

⁸⁸ Four preachers from the Fernheim Colony also attended the Menno Colony discussion—which took place the next day—in order to get their perspective on the issue, though the Menno Colony’s decision to request exemption from Estigarribia appears to have not affected the Fernheim position. See Nikolai Siemens, “Krieg und Kriegsopfer,” 4.

The Fernheim Mennonites proved to be a major asset to the Paraguayan military. They helped tend wounded soldiers and transport Bolivian prisoners of war.⁸⁹ By January of 1933, the hospital and village schools were overflowing with wounded soldiers. Perhaps the most critical assistance they provided to the Paraguayan cause was supplying them with nutriment so the army could maintain a constant presence in the Chaco. In conjunction with the Red Cross, Fernheim colonists supplied troops with food (sweet potatoes, beans, bread, honey, and eggs).⁹⁰ During the dry summer months, surface water was negligible and Mennonite villages were an important source of sweet water.⁹¹ During the wet winter months, flash floods made supply roads completely impassible and the Paraguayan army had to abandon their trucks and commission Mennonites to transport their supplies.⁹² The mutuality between the Fernheim Colony and the Paraguayan Army eventually became so close that a joint church service was held at Lichtfelde in 1935.⁹³

As the public voice of the Fernheim Colony, *Menno-Blatt* was mostly positive about the military presence and affirmed the colony's solidarity with the Paraguayan cause. One article noted that there were a great number of wounded soldiers passing through the colony on a daily basis but they were all "polite and modest," at least compared to Russian soldiers during the Bolshevik Revolution.⁹⁴ A 1933 report from a P. Klassen of Rosenort mentions, "there remains much to be desired," in the soldiers' conduct but he compared the troops favorably to his understanding of how the "Cossacks" (i.e. Russians) treated Germans when they invaded East Prussia during the First World War.⁹⁵ Both authors at once asserted the goodness of Paraguay's military and

⁸⁹ G. Ratzlaff, *Zwischen den Fronten*, 40-41.

⁹⁰ To gain a sense of the level of exchange between the colonies and the Paraguayan military, in December 1935 the army ordered 30,000 eggs so that each soldier stationed at the front could receive a Christmas cake. See Paul Janzen, "Weihnacht – Hochbetrieb," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), January 1935, p. 5.

⁹¹ The army sometimes brought Fernheim to the brink of water shortages. See Nikolai Siemens, "Noch weiter Gewitterwolken," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), September 1932, 3-4.

⁹² G. Ratzlaff, *Zwischen den Fronten*, 40.

⁹³ Nikolai Siemens, "Spanischer Gottesdienst in Lichtfelde," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), May 1935, p. 3.

⁹⁴ Gerhard F[?], *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), August 1932, p. 2.

⁹⁵ P. P. Klassen, "Bericht aus Rosenort," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), February 1933.

the depravity of the military in their former country. In doing so, they highlight the degree to which the Fernheim colonists drew on their experiences in Russia to interpret their new circumstances. The second author's analogy also suggests an affinity with Germany by comparing the colonists' situation to that of Germans terrorized by a foreign army. Altogether, *Menno-Blatt* affirmed that Mennonites were loyal citizens of their adopted homeland and held its military in high regard.

Sometimes Mennonite/Paraguayan relations were too close but colonists usually blamed individual transgressors and not the Paraguayan government. This attitude fits with Mennonites' traditional reverence for national governments, as "children" of a benevolent ruler. For instance, one young woman from Halbstadt, Menno Colony apparently had a romantic affair with a Paraguayan officer before her parents forcibly relocated her to a village further from the front.⁹⁶ Colony historian Uwe S. Friesen circumspectly notes this single "liaison" but there was a darker side to the presence of troops in the colony. In Blumengart (Menno Colony), colonist Franz Funk wrote of a "soldier plague," after infantrymen shot villagers' cattle, cut off hunks of meat, and left the carcasses.⁹⁷ According to one report, soldiers sometimes broke into Mennonite houses at night to molest Mennonite women and girls.⁹⁸ The Fernheim Colony also experienced the reckless terror of soldiers when two women (one heavily pregnant) were molested in their homes and a third was molested on her way to the train station.⁹⁹

Troubling reports increased between 1933 and 1934, culminating in a "horrible murder" in the village of Chortitz (Menno Colony) on February 1, 1934.¹⁰⁰ According to colonist Franz Funk,

⁹⁶ Literature—Mennonite or otherwise—on civilian/military liaisons during the Chaco War is sparse. Uwe S. Friesen, "Der Erschließungsprozess des Gran Chaco seit dem Späten 19. Jahrhundert," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 14 (2013): 62.

⁹⁷ Franz Funk, "Colonia Menno, Paraguay," *Steinbach Post* (Canada), March 23, 1933, p. 4. From a collection of newspaper clippings compiled by Andrea Dyck and R. Loewen.

⁹⁸ Franz Funk, "Colonia Menno, Paraguay," *Steinbach Post* (Canada), September 13, 1933, p. 4.

⁹⁹ Additional transgressions committed against colonists and their property are recorded in the letter "An den Herrn Oberschulzen," Cabinet 7A, Archivo Colonia Fernheim (hereafter, ACF), Filadelfia, Paraguay.

¹⁰⁰ Franz Funk, "Colonia Menno, Paraguay," *Steinbach Post* (Canada), April 25, 1934, p. 6.

three soldiers seized Abram Giesbrecht's daughter, with whom they undertook their nefarious mischief. At the sound of her shouting several neighbors hurried over to help the girl. After the neighbors had freed the girl, the soldiers began firing at the Mennonites... whereby Abram F. Giesbrecht was unluckily hit by a bullet, killing him right on the spot.¹⁰¹

Despite the transgressions, colonists did not blame the military for the misconduct of its soldiers. Funk reports the soldiers who had shot at Giesbrecht soon received "their just reward," which either came at the hands of the prison guard or the firing squad.¹⁰²

The war let Paraguayan authorities appreciate the differences between the colonies, thereby demonstrating to Asunción that each settlement held a different interpretation of how nation building squared with their religious beliefs and worldviews. The Menno Colony was amenable to indirectly building the nation through their farming and industry while the Fernheim Colony was more intentionally patriotic since they had begun to merge their story with that of their adopted homeland. In 1934, a lawyer named Dr. Sigfrido (or Sigifredo) Gross Brown visited both settlements and submitted a report outlining each colony's administration and economy to the government.¹⁰³ Referring to the Fernheim colonists, Brown glowed "the Russian colonist is hospitable and generous," and better able to cope with the privations of war, due to their experiences in Soviet Russia.¹⁰⁴ Their past, according to Brown, made them more responsive to Paraguay's military authorities and its nationalist goals.¹⁰⁵ It was quite clear to Gross Brown that the Fernheim colonists were more patriotic than their Menno Colony neighbors.¹⁰⁶

The Chaco war ended in an armistice and peace negotiations in June 1935, though the peace treaty would not be concluded until 1938. Fernheim Mennonites received the news on Pentecost Sunday, when two military cars arrived from Trebol. Mennonites and

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ He was accompanied by Ministry of Agricultural representative, Dr. Luis A. Riart and an employee from the Agricola Bank. See Gross Brown, 43.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰⁶ During the war, the German government kept close tabs on Fernheim Colony's "very good relations" with the Paraguayan authorities and emphasized their help on the front lines. Erhard Graf von Wedel, "Betr. Gespräch mit dem Staatspräsidenten, Asunción," August 20, 1935," R79816 (Politik 25), AA.

soldiers flooded the streets of Filadelfia, their cheers vying with each other in patriotic fervor. The July issue of *Menno-Blatt* included a copy of the Paraguayan flag and the contributor nimbly combined German and Paraguayan patriotism with the words “Hail to thee in Victor’s Crown” (the unofficial national anthem of the German Empire) printed above the flag and “¡Viva! Republica del Paraguay” printed over the flag.¹⁰⁷

In July 1935, N. Siemens and the Fernheim Colony *Oberschulze* J. Siemens visited the Paraguayan president José Eligio Ayala in Asunción to offer their congratulations to the Paraguayan nation for its victory.¹⁰⁸ In his greeting to the president, J. Siemens stated, “In the name of the Fernheim Colony Mennonites in Chaco Paraguay we have appeared to you personally to convey our congratulations. At the same time we thank you that through your mediation, and the thoughtfulness of the high command in the Chaco, we got along well with the Paraguayan military.”¹⁰⁹ N. Siemens’ report in *Menno-Blatt* marveled that they had freely entered the palace without being questioned (“Democracy in the true sense of the word!”) and left the palace assured that the colony would be compensated for any property damage received as a result of the war.¹¹⁰

The Menno colonists were less enthusiastic than the Fernheimers about maintaining relations with the military and authorities in Asunción since they kept their local narrative separate from that of the Paraguayan nation-state.¹¹¹ The Menno Colony had offered aid to the military not as a duty of citizenship but out of pity for individual soldiers. After the war, Jacob A. Braun, the first *Oberschulze* of the Menno Colony also paid a visit to President Ayala but it was business, and not patriotism, that guided his mission. In his meeting with Ayala, J. A. Braun reported that there were a number of

¹⁰⁷ The author of the article also explained what the colors of the country’s flag meant: Blue for justice, white for peace, and red for freedom. He could not help elaborating that Paraguayan freedom was “not as it was preached to us in Soviet Russia, but a real one.” See “Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz!” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), July 1935, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Nikolai Siemens, “Unterhaltendes, Nach Asunción,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), August 1935, p. 4-6.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹¹¹ G. Ratzlaff, *Zwischen den Fronten*, 42; Jacob A. Braun, *Im Gedenken an jene Zeit: Mitteilungen zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Kolonie Menno* (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Jacob A. Braun, 2001[?]), 93-94.

outstanding invoices for products that his colony had delivered to the army.¹¹² With apparent kindness, the president promised to clear the matter up immediately. J. A. Braun then visited the finance minister, who issued him a check on the spot.¹¹³ Menno Colony had helped Paraguayan soldiers for humanitarian reasons but they had little interest in congratulating the government for its military prowess.

The Menno and Fernheim Colonies reacted much differently to the Chaco War. The leaders of Menno Colony thought that aiding the Paraguayan government was a slippery slope that jeopardized their standing as non-violent separatists. Working with the Paraguayans could drag members of their colony toward the enticements of greater material prosperity, the negative influences of “worldly” soldiers, and participation in the armed forces. They had received special privileges from the government and intended to use them. The leaders of the Fernheim Colony were more ambivalent about the effects of aiding the army because they felt that they owed the Paraguayan government their thanks. Fernheim colonists wished to help their country in its time of need and incorporate Paraguayan citizenship into their nascent collective narrative. Although the Fernheim Colony was composed of individual families who shared a tenuous collective narrative, they had a great deal of exposure to cooperating with larger entities. The colonists originated from communities in Russia that had first cooperated with the Tsar in the 1870s and then attempted to establish a *modus vivendi* with the Soviets. Moreover, they were aided by a state (Germany) and relief organizations (the MCC and *Brüder in Not*) that presupposed that individuals fit under national and transnational rubrics. Altogether, the Chaco War helped strengthen ties between the Fernheim Colony and the government, even as it brought into sharp relief the distance between the colonies.

The Chaco People

The Bolivian and Paraguayan governments hoped that war would determine who had the power to name and control the Chaco and who would give its space a national meaning. Yet it was the Mennonites—their daily mediation with indigenous peoples—

¹¹² G. Ratzlaff, “Die paraguayischen Mennoniten,” 59-91, 73-74.

¹¹³ J. A. Braun, *Im Gedenken an jene Zeit*, 93-94.

that ultimately determined the Chaco's social trajectory. Each colony took a different approach when it engaged the people already living in the Chaco. Fernheim colonists played an active role in the region's transformation. They created a missionary agency that served as a social and economic conduit between indigenous people and Asunción. The initiative complimented a worldview that imagined the gathering together of the world's people within nation-states and under the banner of Christianity. Alternately, the Menno Colony limited its contact with indigenous people to contracted and seasonal labor. Pleased with this local arrangement, they did not wish to become an indigenous conduit to the capital or cultivate a node of Christianity in the Chaco. Doing so would indicate their participation in the modernization of the Paraguayan nation-state, which was a situation that they had struggled to avoid in Canada. Thus, the Fernheim colonists resembled to some degree Canada's associative Mennonites who were amenable to "progressive" initiatives and government cooperation.

The Fernheim Mennonites used missionary activity as a way to give meaning to their collective venture since it would let them recast their exile from Russia as a divine mandate. After all, what better reason was there to travel to a remote wilderness half way around the world? They would not only redeem indigenous people to the Lord but also redeem themselves from their past. Missionary work was an ideal venture because it could be interpreted in different though complimentary ways. Some Fernheimers believed that God led them to the Chaco to save indigenous souls. Others believed that Christianizing indigenous people would benefit both the Mennonites and Paraguayan society. Still others viewed the initiative as a way for the colony to improve its own relationship with the government. Finally, a few individuals saw the venture as a way to introduce German culture to a benighted population. None of these opinions received immediate and complete acceptance by the settlement but the debate surrounding them indicates that the Fernheim colonists viewed missionary activity as a good candidate for fostering group unity. By establishing a missionary organization, the colony affirmed their place in a Christian narrative, a Paraguayan narrative, and a German narrative, thereby endowing the venture with both spiritual and earthly mandates.

Conversely, the Menno Colony was not interested in spreading the gospel because they did not see themselves as acting in accordance with an imagined, international

community of Christians or at the behest of the Paraguayan government. Colonists believed that it was enough to live the example of the early church instead of convincing others to do the same. According to M.C. Friesen, “before [the Menno Colony] lies a large field of activity,” not of missionary work but a place “where we can operate unhindered by the world.”¹¹⁴ Menno Colony would eventually increase its contact with indigenous people to the point of sponsoring their own form of missionary work but this development took two decades and was not a predictable development in their culture or theology. Initially, missionary work was crucial to the Fernheim Colony narrative and inimical to the Menno Colony narrative.

Menno Colony’s contact with Paraguay’s indigenous population began in 1921 when members of the exploratory delegation made contact with several Enlhit communities.¹¹⁵ The meeting represented the third time on three continents in less than 150 years that Mennonites sought indigenous lands confiscated by state authorities: The first occurred in the 1789 when Mennonites settled the Nogaitzi-dominated steppe, the second in the 1870s when they displaced Métis individuals living in southern Manitoba, and the third was underway in 1921 when the Menno Colony delegates surveyed the Chaco.¹¹⁶ Mennonite colonizers did not recognize indigenous people as legitimate proprietors because the land they occupied remained uncultivated and unincorporated. They believed that the Lord sanctified their dominion over nature and the state sanctified the establishment of their colonies. What more was needed? God gave Christians dominion over nature and all within it, even as they were to remain subjects of the state.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in H. Ratzlaff, *Ältester Martin C. Friesen*, 102.

¹¹⁵ The Enlhit were the most prominent group of indigenous people living on the land. They belonged to a broad group of peoples named the Maskoy, who had settled along the upper Paraguay River toward the end of the nineteenth century. The Maskoy were hunters, fishers, and farmers but they were also sporadic participants in the Paraguayan labor market, filling roles as hardwood harvesters and ranch hands. If we can believe Mennonite reports from the 1920s, then the 138,990 acres of land on which the Menno Colony was established contained only ten Enlhit family groups, or about 300 people. For a description of indigenous groups see René D. Harder Horst, *The Stroessner Regime and Indigenous Resistance in Paraguay* (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2007), 14. For population numbers see P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 2: Encounter with Indians and Paraguayans*, trans. Gunther H. Schmitt (Filadelfia, Paraguay: Peter P. Klassen, 2002), 66.

¹¹⁶ Francis, *In Search of Utopia*, 19; Donovan Giesbrecht, “Metis, Mennonites and the ‘Unsettled Prairie,’ 1874-1896,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 104.

Hence, an essential component of the Menno Colony's isolation from the world was their interest in interacting with as few indigenous people as possible. After the Chaco expedition, the prospective colonists had two requests. The first was to have the railroad extended from their settlements to the Paraguayan River. The second was to have indigenous people removed from the land, as had been in Canada in the 1870s.¹¹⁷ Neither request materialized by the time the migrants arrived. Contact with indigenous people remained a constant feature of colony life though it was sporadic and informal. Sometimes nearby Enlhit individuals brought the colonists logs and food or raided Mennonite crops and tents for food and luxury goods.¹¹⁸ Colony members also used indigenous people as guides and laborers. According to one report filed by a *Corporación Paraguaya* employee, tensions often developed between the groups: "We worked Indians as long as possible but there was always friction between the Mennonites and them. One day at noon it almost came to blows."¹¹⁹ Generally speaking, colonists did not consider sustained contact with indigenous groups to be particularly desirable though they certainly benefited from their local knowledge and cheap labor.¹²⁰

Menno Colony had little interest influencing their indigenous neighbors to become either Christians or Paraguayans. Their history as social and religious separatists ensured a firm distinction between their congregations and outsiders—be they Russians, Canadians, or Enlhit. Individual colony members believed in the general goodness of missionary activity and some donated money to various causes, but they did not participate in such ventures collectively. In the early 1970s, Menno Colony missionary Bernhard W. Toews recalled a debate about mission work among members of his

¹¹⁷ M. W. Friesen, "Chaco Mission (Paraguay)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified, August 20, 2013, accessed January 15, 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Chaco_Mission_\(Paraguay\)&oldid=86629](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Chaco_Mission_(Paraguay)&oldid=86629); M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 99.

¹¹⁸ Cornelius T. Sawatzky, "The Bolivians Are Here!" quoted in M. W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites*, 64; M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 340; Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors*, 49.

¹¹⁹ J. N. McRoberts, Jr., "Corporación Paraguaya [Field Report], December 1, 1930," *Corporación Paraguay Correspondence Joseph McRoberts, January 1928-June 1931, IX-3-3 Paraguayan Immigration 1920-1933 (1/19)*, MCCF, Akron, PA.

¹²⁰ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 2*, 65. Gross Brown, 13.

congregation that took place during the 1920s.¹²¹ Some individuals believed that it was good for Christians to translate the Bible into new languages and preach the Gospel in an “unsophisticated” way but it was not right to forcefully convert “heathens.” Others rejected all missionary activity as a “Pharisee-like undertaking” that was self-aggrandizing and prideful.¹²² It was not until 1952 that the Menno Colony began underwriting missionary activity among indigenous people and it is possible that this would not have materialized had not the physical proximity of Menno Colony and Enlhit people been so close.¹²³ Altogether, the Menno Colony had a minor impact on indigenous communities during the first years of settlement. It was the Fernheim Mennonites and the Chaco War that decisively entwined indigenous and Mennonite groups.

Fernheim colonists also hired indigenous people for manual labor. *Menno-Blatt* reported various stories on contact with indigenous individuals during the first years of settlement.¹²⁴ Most reports were practical in nature, concerning the use of guides and warnings about smallpox (*schwartzte Pocken*). A German professor named Hans Krieg visited the colonies for research purposes a year after settlement and noted that a few Mennonites had contracted indigenous labor for cutting trees and harvesting crops but that these laborers were unreliable and “insolent.” Krieg suggested that, if necessary, the Mennonites should use their fists to maintain an upper hand. It is unclear whether the Mennonites followed his suggestion (it is likely they did not) but indigenous people remained a presence on colony land throughout the turbulent war years.¹²⁵

The Chaco War decisively changed the relationship between Mennonites and indigenous people since it dislocated thousands of Ayoreode (Ayoreo), Chané, Nivaklé

¹²¹ Bernhard W. Toews, “The Church and Mission,” quoted in M. W. Friesen, *Canadian Mennonites*, 81-82.

¹²² Ibid. “Pharisee-like” refers to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:11. In this passage a Pharisee prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” The implication is that missionaries are prideful in their piety. It is better for Christians to heed the words of Romans 3:23 and focus on how all have “sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (ESV).

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Redekop, 120

¹²⁵ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 2*, 68-69.

(Chulupi), Enlhit (Lengua), Enenlhit, Guaraní, and Tapieté.¹²⁶ Each group had a unique and complex relationship with the Bolivian and Paraguayan governments, as well as with each other. For instance, the Mak'a were a nomadic group that had fought against the Bolivians since 1928 and joined up with the Paraguayans after 1932. Other indigenous groups, including the Guaraní and Tapieté, also collaborated with Paraguayan military personnel.¹²⁷ Alternately, the Chané were often in conflict with the Guaraní and joined with the Bolivians as they advanced south.¹²⁸ The Nivaklé were initially pressed into military service by the Bolivian government but abandoned their ranks. In response, the Bolivians engaged a group of Oblate priests from Germany to settle them. Of course, the priests had their own designs for converting the Nivaklé people to Catholicism.¹²⁹ The war transformed Chaco indigenous communities, generally to their detriment. After the war's end, indigenous men entered the labor market to work in local industries, included Mennonite farming operations, while women and children sold handicrafts and begged.

All Mennonites were willing to use indigenous labor on their farms but it was the Fernheim Colony that viewed the labor market as a mission field. During the late nineteenth century, *Mennonitengemeinde* and *Brüdergemeinde* churches sent missionaries to India and the Dutch East Indies and were familiar with this type of Christian initiative, though their work was terminated after the Bolshevik Revolution. P. P. Klassen therefore observes continuity between Mennonite missionary activity carried out in Russia before the Revolution and the Fernheim initiative to evangelize to indigenous people in the Gran Chaco.¹³⁰ In both instances, it tended to be the evangelically minded *Brüdergemeinde* who led the way. Due to the colony's lack of unity, P. P. Klassen maintains that *Brüdergemeinde* agitation for missionary work was accepted in other Mennonite congregations as a valuable joint enterprise.¹³¹ Of the

¹²⁶ Horst, 18.

¹²⁷ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 2*, 76.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

various indigenous groups, the Enlhit and the Nivaklé entered into the most sustained contact with Mennonites through the Fernheim missionary initiative Light to the Indians! (*Licht den Indianern!*).¹³²

The seeds for Fernheim missionary activity were planted as early as 1932 but it was not until February 1935 when the Fernheim Colony's Commission for Church Affairs (*Kommission für kirchliche Angelegenheiten* or *KfK*) sent a document outlining the Mennonites' missionary plans to the Paraguayan government. The Colony's *Oberschulze*, J. Siemens, and three *KfK* members signed it: Johann Teichgräf, N. Wiebe, and Gerhard Isaak.¹³³ The petition stated that the Mennonites wished to "tie these savages to the soil, to gradually educate them into useful citizens of the Paraguayan state." It also noted that the committee had already made progress in this direction by establishing relations with an Indian "chief" (*Cazique*) who brought his group to settle on Mennonite land, west of the village of Friedensfeld.¹³⁴

Menno-Blatt embraced the missionary initiative. From 1935 to 1936, the paper published nearly twenty articles on indigenous groups in the area. These reports and opinion pieces combine detailed ethnographic information—food, clothing, and social structures—with a conviction that Mennonites should work to improve the spiritual and economic lives of these people. A May 1935 article confirmed the growing contact between indigenous people and Mennonites. Writing for *Menno-Blatt*, N. Siemens reported that he had traveled with some Paraguayan military "friends" for eighteen days and over 1,000 kilometers in order to inspect the western Chaco and the area along Pilcomayo River. Along the way, he visit the Nivaklé ("Chulupi") and wrote positively, if patronizingly, of their culture and customs.¹³⁵ The next edition of *Menno-Blatt* maintained focus on the situation of indigenous people near the colonies by including the headline "Our colony has new neighbors." N. Siemens reported that about 5,000 Guaraní war refugees had arrived at Fort Toledo, about thirty-five kilometers away from

¹³² The organization's name officially contained an exclamation point.

¹³³ "Zur Indianermission im Chaco Paraguay," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), October 1935, p. 3.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 2*, 71; Nikolai Siemens, "Zum Pilcomayo," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), May 1935, p. 4-5.

Filadelfia.¹³⁶ The article was followed up by a report that Lieutenant Ortiz, the Paraguayan military police chief and son-in-law of General Estigarribia, had visited N. Siemens to invite him to inspect the military barracks where the Guaraní were located. N. Siemens noted that although the Guaraní people were poor and dispossessed, they were friendly and hardworking.¹³⁷

The missionary venture *Licht den Indianern!* was established on September 13, 1935.¹³⁸ Initially, there were six Enlhit families enrolled in the program and they were each required to build their own adobe huts and cultivate their own one-hectare plots of land. The mission station was located near Yalve Sanga, about thirty-seven kilometers southeast of Filadelfia.¹³⁹ The *KfK* was charged with administering the new mission through an elected committee of representatives from the Fernheim villages.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, there were ninety-seven “missions friends” (*Missionsfreunden*) who lent support to the project.¹⁴¹ To raise awareness for the project, the colony held a “*Missionsfest*,” an event that promoted *Licht den Indianern!* as a shared venture. “Missions friends” donated sundry articles such as horse bridles, chairs, brooms, and bedding for a fundraising auction.¹⁴² Additional support came from contributions within Paraguay and abroad (especially from North American Mennonites), voluntary one-time donations, funding from the Paraguayan government, and from income derived from the planned mission economy.¹⁴³ The four stated goals of the mission included:

¹³⁶ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 2*, 75-76; Nikolai Siemens, “Neue Nachbarn. Guaraní-Indianer,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), June 1935, p. 3; Nikolai Siemens, “Ein Besuch bei den Guaranies,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), July 1935, p. 3.

¹³⁷ Nikolai Siemens, “Ein Besuch bei den Guaranies.”

¹³⁸ “Zur Indianermission im Chaco Paraguay.”

¹³⁹ Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors*, 142.

¹⁴⁰ “Zur Indianermission im Chaco Paraguay.” Committee member names from the *Mennonitengemeinde* were: Jakob Martens (Waldesruh), Jakob Dürksen (Schönwiese), and Franz Wiens (Schönwiese). From the *Allianzgemeinde*: Nikolai Wiebe (Schönwiese) and Johann Käthler (Friedensruh). From the *Brüdergemeinde*: Gerhard Isaak (Waldesruh), Kornelius Voth (Waldesruh), and Johann Schellenberg (Auhagen).

¹⁴¹ G. G., “Missionsfest in Gnadenheim,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), September 1935, p. 2

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Apparently, the organization believed the best way to get to know the Lord was through physical labor.

- 1) Introduce Indians to the living God and give them instruction in Christian doctrine according to the Holy Scriptures.
- 2) Raise the spiritual level of the Indians through their children's education and instruction about a morally pure, Christian family life.
- 3) Educate the Indians in regards to hygiene.
- 4) Educate the Indians in economic and cultural spheres, as well as educate them to be loyal, helpful, and hardworking citizens of the Paraguayan state.¹⁴⁴

Menno Colony's neighbors, the Fernheim colonists, were thus the harbingers of Paraguay's own "educational state," by promulgating "progressive" values and a foreign culture on a "benighted" population.¹⁴⁵ Ironically, the Menno colonists left Canada to escape this paradigm but here it stood once again at their doorstep, giving them all the more reason to remain suspicious of the Fernheim Colony's modern inclinations.

The Paraguayan government was highly interested in Mennonite missionary activity for the purpose of turning indigenous people into citizens of the state and confining them to permanent settlements.¹⁴⁶ During the 1930s, Paraguayan/indigenous relations was marked by the Liberal government's attempt to integrate indigenous people into the national fabric, even as it continued to exoticize them in the nation's mythology. *Licht den Indianern!* soon became the focal point of contact between indigenous groups and the systems of modern society—including the cash economy and standardized education—that drew (or compelled) the Chaco's indigenous population into Paraguayan society. In the economic sphere, Mennonite treatment of indigenous people was not altogether a bad experience, at least in comparison to Paraguayans who owned similar farming and ranching operations. According to one indigenous person: "Mennonites pay more, make us work less, and do not beat us."¹⁴⁷

Settling Enlhit permanently in one location—let alone convincing them to embrace a Paraguayan or Christian identification—was nevertheless a daunting task. Indigenous traditions remained strong. Puberty festivals held in faraway villages drew

¹⁴⁴ "Statut für den Missionsbund 'Licht den Indianern!,'" *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), October 1935, p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ See Curtis, *Building the Educational State*.

¹⁴⁶ Horst, 49.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*

indigenous people away from the settlement for extended periods and the missionaries' education programs were met with mass indifference.¹⁴⁸ It would be fifteen years before the first Enlhit people were baptized into the Mennonite Church. It was consequently not the popularity—or even the viability—of missionary activity that maintained Fernheim Colony's interest in the venture. Rather, it was a unifying force for the colony and offered a ready explanation for their traumatic displacement from Russia and their difficult resettlement in Paraguay. If they were to remain, the colonists believed it would have to be for something greater than owning a piece of land or preserving their Mennonite faith.

Like the colonists' varied interpretations of the Chaco environment, Fernheim colonists' and their supporters' opinions about indigenous people ranged across a broad terrain. The missionary enterprise could be interpreted in many different ways, each of which projected a different meaning on to the role *Licht den Indianern!* in the colony's evolving collective narrative as Mennonites, Christians, and *Auslandsdeutsche*. Despite the range of interpretations, their goal remained the same: deciphering the Colony's place in the modern zeitgeist or in the Lord's divine plan that would somehow legitimate their arbitrary settlement in the middle of South America.

In the February 1935 issue of *Menno-Blatt*, A. Kröker connected the presence of indigenous people in the Chaco to the religious trajectory of the Fernheim Colony. Kröker wrote a sensational account of an indigenous celebration that included dancing, evil spirits, and alcohol, each of which was alone enough to disturb any Mennonite observer. Kröker's concluded his report that admonished his fellow Mennonites not to:

go carelessly past the fate of your brown brother! We have been here for quite a few years and what have we done? We do not know the duration of our sojourn in the Chaco. If our time should unexpectedly and quickly expire and we have done nothing for these poor—what would Jesus say to that?¹⁴⁹

With this statement, Kröker combines two sentiments that gave the missionary venture a sense of religious purpose. The first appears to invoke the biblical parable of the Minas. Kröker argues that Fernheim colonists should be ashamed that they have not

¹⁴⁸ Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors*, 142-143.

¹⁴⁹ A. Kröker, "Indianer='Penj-Penj.' 'Was würde Jesus dazu sagen?'" *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), February 1935, p. 3-4.

done more to evangelize to indigenous people.¹⁵⁰ The second was that the colonists might not remain in the Chaco for long. Even if they move to a different country, the possibility should not inhibit them from following the will of the Lord.

Departing from Kröker's impression that Mennonites might not remain in the Chaco, missionary Giesbrecht believed that the creation of the Fernheim Colony was part of God's divine plan to expand the global reach of Christianity. Giesbrecht was a member of the *Brüdergemeinde*.¹⁵¹ In 1937 he took his family to Yalve Sanga, which was the mission station for *Licht den Indianern!* Along with Abram Ratzlaff and Abram Unger, Giesbrecht was one the first Fernheimers to devote his life to settling and evangelizing to the Enlhit.¹⁵² In a 1936 article for *Menno-Blatt*, Giesbrach argued forcefully that God blesses his people when they engage in religious enterprises. Though he conceded that some pessimistic colonists had attacked the missionaries' goals on cultural, racial, and spiritual reasons (and goes so far as to call them "stupid"), he asserted that those who support the mission would be paid back in "blessings with interest."¹⁵³ Years later, during a 1972 interview with Redekop, Giesbrecht stated, "It came to us that God had sent us to this strange and difficult land for a purpose. God has provided us with a challenge to do something about the miserable condition of these 'wild' people."¹⁵⁴ Giesbrecht interpreted the movement of Fernheim Colonists from Russia to Paraguay as an unforeseen but sanctified act of God.

One of the colony's most influential voices, a teacher by the name of Friedrich Kliewer, also believed God had given the Fernheim Colony a heavenly mandate. He

¹⁵⁰ The parable of the minas is found in Luke 19:11-27 (ESV). It is about a nobleman who gave five minas to one slave, two to another, and one to a third before departing on a long journey. The first slave invested his minas and made five more. The second slave also invested his money and gained two more. The third buried his mina in the ground. When the master returned, he lauded the first two servants as "faithful" and chastised the third as "wicked" for not being productive with what his master had given him.

¹⁵¹ G. Ratzlaff, "Giesbrecht, Gerhard Benjamin (1906-1977)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified August 20, 2013, accessed January 14, 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Giesbrecht,_Gerhard_Benjamin_\(1906-1977\)&oldid=87831](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Giesbrecht,_Gerhard_Benjamin_(1906-1977)&oldid=87831).

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Gerhard Giesbrecht, "Teure Missionsfreunde," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), September 1936, p. 3.

¹⁵⁴ Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors*, 142.

conflated this mandate with an equally zealous promotion of German culture. Kliewer had actually been born in Deutsch-Wymysle, Russia (now Nowe Wymysle, Poland) but he had accompanied the Fernheim colonists to Paraguay in 1930. In May 1935, he submitted an article to *Menno-Blatt* titled “Our purpose and our assignment in Paraguay.” In this article, Kliewer forcefully stated, “There must be a reason why we settled among heathen tribes.” He viewed the arrival of Mennonites in Paraguay as serendipitous for without “the timely and powerful influence of the gospel, these magnificent people could easily be ruined by alcoholism and sexual promiscuity.”¹⁵⁵ Thus the loss experienced by the refugees when they were forced to flee Russia was actually a blessing in disguise since they ended up “saving” another group of people in South America.

The bulk of Kliewer’s article focused on the role of the Mennonites’ German culture in the missionary scheme. He asserted that it was impossible for all Germans to settle within the present borders of Germany. As an *auslandsdeutsche* community, Mennonites had always “blessed” the lands that they inhabited through their cultural values and economic prowess. Yet Kliewer stressed that it was not the colony’s Mennonite features that made the colony special. Rather, it was Mennonites’ German culture and their identity as Christians. Kliewer believed in the colony’s mandate to edify the indigenous people so much that he wished to create a protected area for “our Lenguas” that would remove the Paraguayan government’s role in indigenous affairs.¹⁵⁶

In Germany, Mennonite scholar Walter Quiring was highly interested in the future of the Fernheim Colony and its mission station because he hoped to guide the colony into a global association of *Auslandsdeutsche*. Quiring was born in the large Mennonite settlement of Chortitza, Russia in 1893 but moved to the Orenburg Mennonite settlement in Siberia in 1905. In 1921, he fled to Germany with his wife, Maria Friesen, and his infant son, Manfred. Quiring earned a doctorate from the University of Munich in 1927 and supported himself by working in a private school that was owned by a wealthy Jewish family. During the 1930s he joined the Nazi Party, wrote two books on the Chaco Mennonites, took up work with the German Foreign Institute (*Deutsches Ausland Institut*,

¹⁵⁵ Friedrich Kliewer, “Unsere Aufgaben in Paraguay,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), May 1935, p. 1-2.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

DAI), and changed his name from the Jewish-sounding “Jakob” to the more German-sounding “Walter.” At the DAI, he crafted propaganda that advocated the return of all *Auslandsdeutsche* to a German-controlled Eastern Europe. He also participated in some of the population exchanges after the signing of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.¹⁵⁷ Quiring had visited the Mennonite colonies in Brazil and Paraguay and consequently felt entitled to offer the settlers guidance on their venture.¹⁵⁸ Arguing along more secular lines than Kliewer, Quiring viewed the Fernheim Colony as a great experiment that would test the superiority of German Christian culture.

In response to a *Menno-Blatt* article titled “Fernheimer Proletariat,” which suggested that the Fernheim Colony could use indigenous people in their workforce, Quiring penned an article titled “Masters and Servants” that criticized this suggestion as sowing the seeds of future destruction. Quiring argued that choosing this path would reproduce the same inequalities between Fernheim Mennonites and indigenous people that existed between Russian Mennonites and their Russian neighbors before the Bolshevik Revolution. “The time for cheap labor,” according to Quiring, “is irrevocably past.” Mennonites must approach their indigenous neighbors not as “masters”—as other white people have done—but through the equitable medium of German Christian culture. He lamented that the “childlike naïve Indians” of the Chaco have already been corrupted by distrust, selfishness, and alcohol, “which is unfortunately available in Fernheim.” Quiring then outlined his suggestions for solving the “Indian problem.” Mennonites would serve as a model for indigenous improvement but they must remain detached—for to mix with them would be “incest” (*Blutschande*) and contribute to the ruin of the white race. This “separate but equal” solution was, in Quiring’s opinion, a chance to “find a

¹⁵⁷ Ted D. Regehr, “Quiring, Walter (1893-1983),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified August 23, 2013, accessed April 5, 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Quiring,_Walter_\(1893-1983\)&oldid=96151](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Quiring,_Walter_(1893-1983)&oldid=96151).

¹⁵⁸ The 1,245 Mennonite refugees who arrived in Brazil from Germany established two colonies named Witmarsum (after the birthplace of Menno Simons) and Auhagen, in Santa Catarina. Due to the isolation of both groups, there was not much communication between the Fernheim Colony and these colonies. Quiring visited both colonies between 1932 and 1934 to gather material for two book projects. The names of the books are *Germans subdue the Chaco (Deutsche erschliessen den Chaco)* published in 1936 and *Russian-Germans seek a Homeland: The German immigration to the Paraguayan Chaco (Russlanddeutsche suchen eine Heimat: Die deutsche Einwanderung in den paraguayischen Chaco)* published in 1938. On the Brazilian Mennonite settlement see Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?*

solution [to the “Indian problem”] that can lay claim to universal validity.”¹⁵⁹ Quiring approved of missionary work as a path to unity but he felt the venture should reflect their reputed German—and not necessarily Christian—qualities. Thus, *Licht den Indianern!* was a focal point of unity both inside and outside the Colony since it provoked a wealth of interpretations on the colony’s existential meaning and simultaneously connected the colony to their local neighbors, the Paraguayan government, and a transnational community of supporters.

Menno Colony Mennonites viewed the Fernheim Colony’s mission work with varying degrees of admiration and suspicion. During the interwar years, the Menno Colony did not look outside their colony for validation, and was skeptical that the entire world could be “Christianized.” It was not until 1945 that the Colony’s administration approved a Fernheim initiative to build a satellite mission in the Menno Colony capital of Sommerfeld (Loma Plata).¹⁶⁰ Menno Colony leaders therefore allowed missionary activity to take place in their territory without direct participation in the venture.

The establishment of a Second Menno Colony settlement in 1949, named South Menno, coincided with the movement of Enlhit further east, toward the Menno Colony settlements. This development increased contact between indigenous people and Menno Colony individuals. Three years later, a South Menno resident named Johann M. Funk began working among the Enlhit in the village of Schönbrun of his own initiative. In 1955, the North Menno colonist B. W. Toews began similar work near Sommerfeld. According to these men, they did not start from a position of wanting to proselytize to indigenous people but rather it was indigenous people living near the colony who wished to enroll their children in Mennonite schools. Eventually, individual congregations agreed to underwrite the schools and in this roundabout way, Menno Colony Mennonites began influencing the religious lives of indigenous people in the area.¹⁶¹

Latter-day historians reinterpreted the Menno Colony’s initial indifference to missionary activity to reveal God’s hand in the matter. For instance, Heinrich Ratzlaff

¹⁵⁹ Quiring, “Herren und Knechte,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), March 1935, p. 3.

¹⁶⁰ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 2*, 157.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

argues that God had led the colony to the Chaco to witness to indigenous people.¹⁶² *Oberschulze* J. A. Braun likewise notes that by migrating to the Chaco, Menno Colony Mennonites had followed the biblical commandment found in Matthew 24:14 that Christians should be a (passive?) witness to all nations.¹⁶³ Although the Canadian public school issue was the most immediate reason for relocating to the Chaco, God's inscrutable will eventually revealed a greater mission.

We could dismiss H. Ratzlaff's and J. A. Braun's accounts as reading present interpretations onto past events but this does not explain why the Menno Colony initially resisted missionary work and why the Fernheim Colony embraced it. Missionary work—and the external attachments that it entailed—was unimportant and inimical to the Menno Colony's collective narrative during the first twenty years of settlement. Biblical mandates were no doubt *part* of the reason why the Menno Colony eventually began witnessing to indigenous people but it was not a primary goal of the colony's leadership at least until the late 1950s.

Alternately, the Fernheim Colony deemed the work essential for its *raison d'être*. Missionary activity would not only bring them into greater fellowship with their new government and Christians abroad but also do the same for the region's indigenous peoples. In this way, they merged their story with that of their indigenous neighbors, the Paraguayan state, and a global community of Christians. Yet the organization also provoked a range of existential interpretations by a wide cast of characters—from a manifestation of the colonists' Christianity to an affirmation of their evolving Germanness—each of whom endowed the venture with a greater meaning than its rather humble physical presence. Ultimately, discovering the reason why the venture was important and collectively agreeing upon it promised to supply a much-needed resolution to the colony's open-ended group narrative.

The Menno and Fernheim Colonies held different interpretations of their local environment, and this affected their collective narratives and their relationships to the

¹⁶² See H. Ratzlaff, *Ältester Martin C. Friesen*, 103.

¹⁶³ J. A. Braun, *Im Gedenken an jene Zeit*, 17-18.

Paraguayan government, indigenous people, and each other. The voluntary migrants who created the Menno Colony shared an internally focused collective narrative about themselves and their reason for being in the Chaco. They did not view the region as a particularly special place or as an end to their wanderings; it simply offered them the best chance for living out their religious and cultural convictions in relative isolation from the world. Apart from the families who returned to Canada during the initial years of settlement, the Menno colonists endured years of hardship on the frontier because they were part of a reoccurring “plot point” in their collective narrative: Faithful Christians endured persecution at the hands of state authorities, fled to new lands, and accepted the privations of pioneer life until the Lord allowed them to prosper once again. This path was full of misfortune but it was a predictable component of the colony’s larger story as God’s chosen people no matter where it took them or how long it lasted: from their ancestors’ 1,200 mile trek from Danzig to southern Russia to their 6,000 mile journey from southern Russia to Manitoba and from Jesus’ forty-day trial in the Judean Desert to the Israelites forty-year excursion through the Sinai Desert. Mythology and history blended into a seamless whole.

The Menno Colony’s collective narrative also anticipated encounters with outsiders. As unexpected as the Chaco War was for the colony, it represented yet another instance when the settlement’s integrity was threatened by outside forces. Even as the conflict imperiled their physical existence, it also reaffirmed the divisions between themselves and Paraguayan society. Menno Colony also initially avoided interacting with their indigenous neighbors because they did not view the expansion of Christianity as an essential part of their Mennoniteness. This is not to say that the colony’s collective narrative was a generic, ahistorical set of encounters that would have produced the same results in any other location. Had the colonists settled in land without an extant indigenous population or among other Christians, they might not have incorporated missionary work into their group narrative. The Colony’s interpretation of their chosen path fit into a broader “comedic” narrative structure of persecution, migration, hardship, and restoration but it was also elastic enough to incorporate new revelations, or narrative swirls, that infused it with fresh imperatives.

The Fernheim Colony was more heterogeneous than the Menno Colony and it possessed a tenuous and outwardly focused group narrative. After they abandoned their homes in Russia, Fernheim's constituent families had ended up stranded in a foreign and seemingly hostile land. However, this "tragedy" did not simply end when they disembarked at the "Kilometer 145" train depot but persisted during the first years of settlement as the colony was beset by disease and war. There were other interpretations circulating in the colony that transformed this "tragedy" into a "comedy." Amidst their fears of disintegration and annihilation, other narrative possibilities emerged: Perhaps the Chaco was a test. Perhaps it was a punishment that would redeem them to the Lord. Perhaps they were destined to achieve some greater good on account of their Christianity or Germanness. The Fernheim colonists did not perceive their story fitting into a tested and timeless historical pattern like the Menno colonists. Rather, they anticipated that—in some way they must apprehend—either God or fate had chosen the Chaco for them. It was not a place where they could recreate a set of shared convictions, but a place that needed to be endowed with a heavenly or temporal mandate that would bind them together. For this reason, each narrative possibility advanced by colonists—owing to their Mennoniteness, Christianity, Germanness, or Paraguayan citizenship—portended a different destiny for the Colony. As the colony struggled forward, it picked up new meanings and attachments along the way, some of which complimented each other and others that were difficult to rectify. Colonists' contrasting sentiments of fear and hope battered the settlement as it tried to discern which narrative thread would "stick."

Each colony's sense of place gained their first articulations in the Gran Chaco as a result of their separate histories. But even their senses of place proved transitory as new developments gave rise to new understandings about the Chaco and their place within it. Thus, each settlement's collective narrative initially drew on past contexts but they increasingly drew upon their present circumstances until it became difficult to tell which sentiments they had brought with them and which they had developed locally. Eventually these contexts merged into fluid narratives—like metronomes moving at different tempos that suddenly come into phase—but this took a great deal of time and stress and it was never predictable.

CHAPTER IV: TROUBLED TRIBES IN THE PROMISED LAND

The Second Mennonite World Conference was held in the Free City of Danzig in August 1930 and was titled “Mennonite World Help.”¹ It brought together leaders from Mennonite aid agencies in Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United States. The bulk of the meeting dealt with the Mennonite refugees who were sent to South America and the Mennonites who remained in the Soviet Union. The Conference’s first session was dedicated to a lecture on Mennonite mutual aid in the past to lend a sense of historic continuity to the event. The second session entailed reports on what was being done to aid Russian Mennonites in the present, and the third focused on the necessity of Mennonite cooperation in the future.² According to Bender, the MCC’s representative at the event, the meeting was billed as a World Conference because they wished to gather “as wide attendance of the general membership as possible, in order to increase the interest and participation in the relief... of the refugees.”³ Along with his promotion of Mennonite religious solidarity, the ever-charismatic Bender shared an ambitious vision of the Paraguayan Chaco as a place where the MCC

could easily accommodate all of the Mennonites in the world... [the MCC] had a vague notion of a future state of Mennonites where, if possible, all Russian Mennonites would be able to reestablish and develop their life and culture within a context of unrestricted freedom. Another particular advantage of the Paraguayan Chaco in regard to culture is the fact that there exists no culture in that area at all. So there is no danger that the Mennonites and their German culture will perish in a foreign culture. The Mennonite nation [*Mennoniten-Völklein*] can continue to exist in Paraguay with its culture and faith under the most favorable conditions possible.⁴

What caused Bender to make this bold pronouncement, particularly in light of the Mennonites’ historic disunity and emphasis on the separation of church and state?

¹ The First Mennonite World Conference was held five years prior, in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Anabaptism.

² “Einladung zur Mennonitischen Welt-Hilfs-Konferenz,” CMBC, Immigration Movement I, a. General Correspondence 1923-1946, Vol. 1184, David Toews 1923-1930, MHC.

³ Bender, “Report III, June 25, 1930,” CMBC, Immigration Movement I, a. General Correspondence 1923-1946, Vol. 1175, Mennonite Central Committee 1929-1941, MHC.

⁴ Bender, “Einwanderung nach Paraguay,” 121-122.

Clearly, the MCC aspired to something greater than mere relief work. They also hoped that the refugees could somehow live unmolested by foreign ideologies. Most strikingly, Bender suggests that Mennonites in North America and Europe should initiate an almost Zionist experiment to solve the problem of Mennonite persecution by obtaining territory that was not yet completely under the jurisdiction of a nation-state—territory that possessed “no culture.” In fact, a month before the conference, Bender confided to his friend Oyer, “We old Mennonites are somewhat like the Jews, it seems to me. We are almost a race, as well as a Church.”⁵

In Bender’s view, confessional unity would not be achieved through perpetual movement and cultural isolation (as Mennonites had done in the past). Rather, it would be achieved through the establishment of secure Mennonite enclaves that articulated a curated set of religious principles and were willing to cooperate with the broader Mennonite church and amenable national governments. In contrast to the German government’s plans to use Mennonite refugees to reinforce German enclaves in Brazil and enhance its political ties to *Auslandsdeutsche*, Bender viewed the refugee crisis as an opportunity for the MCC to create a Mennonite territory in Paraguay that was theologically and organizationally connected to an imagined global Mennonite confession. In the organization’s evolving philosophy of Mennonite unity, the basis of this linkage involved Mennonites’ sharing a few, definitive tenants—such as mutual aid and the primacy of non-violence—that could be historically justified and concisely articulated to individuals outside the faith. In short, Bender advanced something akin to a Mennonite nationalist narrative; a normative definition of what Mennonitism was in the past, present and future. Yet there were competing interpretations (there are always competing interpretations) of the “Mennonite nation” and how it would sustain itself in the modern world. For instance, Mennonite intellectuals in Germany, and even a few in Canada, advanced the idea that Mennonites should fuse their narrative with a German nationalist narrative as a “little nation” (*Völklein*), and thereby remain secure under the

⁵ “Harold S. Bender to Noah Oyer,” July 14, 1930, f. 1, b. 2, H. S. Bender papers, AMC, Goshen, IN. Quoted in Keim, 210.

tutelage of a recognized nation-state.⁶ Mennonitism thus represented more than a religious confession during the interwar years, but stood alongside other nascent nationalisms vying to win the loyalties of an often-indifferent constituency.

Nations need land and organizing apparatuses. Between 1930 and 1937, the MCC mushroomed from a small group of individuals who volunteered to resettle a limited number of Russia's Mennonites into a permanent organization that purchased the *Corporación Paraguaya*, was a major landowner in Paraguay, and routinely corresponded with governments on three continents. This development necessitated a sophisticated bureaucratic structure to manage logistics, a propaganda arm to legitimate them, and above all, donations—a sort-of voluntary “tax”—to make it happen.

In spite of the MCC's evolving ambitions, Mennonite ecumenicism in the colonies—the organization's Paraguayan petri dish—remained elusive during the interwar years. The Menno Colony was at first ignorant of, and then indifferent to, even the most perfunctory goals of the MCC. It was also embroiled in its own administrative disputes and had little interest in bonding with Mennonites elsewhere. Alternately, the Fernheim colonists were initially grateful for the MCC's help but they soon became suspicious of the organization's motives as “good Samaritans” who also served as the “tax collectors” for their travel debt. Moreover, the divisions between and within both colonies trumped any possible unity between the groups. Still, the MCC hoped that their sponsorship of the Mennonite refugees—and their contact with coreligionists in the Menno Colony—would serve as a model for a united and cooperative spirit among Mennonites in North America and around the world. The MCC reckoned that through its financial aid and frequent visitations to the Chaco, it could instill its vision of Mennonitism on the colonies.

Mennonite (Di)Visions

Divisions between the world's Mennonite communities were theological and organizational as much as they were historical and cultural. Theologically, the MCC

⁶ The concept of Mennonites representing a little nation (*völklein*) was convincing since it reaffirmed Mennonites' place as a “child” of a paternalistic state and fit into the contemporary practice of anthropomorphizing nations (e.g. “poor little Belgium” during the First World War).

stood in marked contrast to the Menno Colony and other separatist Mennonites in North and South America. Theologian Titus F. Guenther—whose parents were part of the Menno Colony migration—argues that conservative Mennonite leaders are best understood as holding a practical view of Christianity that was “pastoral biblical” rather than theological and abstract.⁷ Theologian J. Denny Weaver echoes this analysis by noting that Bergthal *Ältester* G. Wiebe believed that the church was “defined and reinforced by a lifestyle rather than by an explicitly biblical and theological rationale.”⁸ This lifestyle meshed with an “integrated worldview,” that cannot be parsed into religious, secular, economic, and cultural spheres since “integration was not so much that of a theological outlook as it was an understanding of the visible church.”⁹ When leaders did venture into biblical interpretation they focused on passages that emphasized orthopraxy (right acting) rather than orthodoxy (right teaching) since the fundamental point of Christianity was to live a righteous life, rather than understand, abstractly, what righteousness is.¹⁰

In contrast, Bender was one of the first individuals to articulate a clearly defined Mennonite theology and his interpretation of Mennonite essentials helped define early-twentieth century Mennonitism in the North American context. Bender emphasized orthopraxy but he was also sensitive to how it would be taught, understood, and made intelligible to non-Mennonites. He was not an *Ältester*—a humble shepherd with both eyes steadfastly trained on his own sheep—but an intellectual who was prepared to formulate, describe (and prescribe) similarities in the entire Mennonite flock.

Bender’s theology revolved around three principles, which were recorded in his influential 1944 tract *The Anabaptist Vision*. The first urged Mennonites to replicate the person of Christ within themselves by following Jesus’ example as closely as possible.¹¹ His second focus was on the church. In his interpretation, true Anabaptism (and by

⁷ See Guenther “Theology of Migration,” 164-165.

⁸ Weaver, 78.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Guenther “Theology of Migration,” 165.

¹¹ Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944), 33.

extension true Christianity) exists in tension with “the world.” The church should not attempt to overthrow or impose itself on the existing social order since this would compromise its members’ commitment to discipleship. Rather it should work through or around the existing social order to advance the kingdom of God. Proceeding from these concepts is the idea of nonresistance to violence, or the “peace position,” which Bender believed stood at the center of individual and collective Christian action. This idea draws on the example of Christ’s renunciation of earthly power and his willingness to die at the hands of state authorities.¹² Bender believed that the global Mennonite church should set aside their local differences and unite under this core set of principles.

Bender the scholar did not think he was creating a new vision of the church; he believed that he had recovered an old one. If one could return to the original sixteenth-century source of Anabaptism (*Ad fontes*), so he thought, the church’s mission would be properly revealed. In this regard, he fit into an academic climate of the 1930s that was attenuated to discovering historical “essences” through rigorous (albeit selective) scholarship: the “essence” of a time period, the “essence” of nationality, the “essence” of a particular environment.¹³ Bender wished to discover the historical and theological essence of Anabaptism. This would not be achieved through mysticism but through education. His early writings—including a dissertation on the early Anabaptist leader Conrad Grebel (1935), a biography of Menno Simons (1936), and his book *Mennonite Origins in Europe* (1942)—testify to this observation. For Bender, it was a given that all Mennonites shared a common origin in Anabaptism and that all Mennonites groups were, at some point, persecuted and exiled. All that was needed was to document this shared story so that the world’s Mennonites could be inspired and united by it.

Bender was the leading edge of a confession in the midst of building a common history—a rediscovery revealed in the publishing history of *The Martyrs Mirror* (or, *The Bloody Theater...*) in the United States. This 1,290-page book was originally published in 1660 and describes, in grisly detail, the stories of over 1,500 Anabaptist martyrs who died

¹² Ibid, 31.

¹³ John S. Oyer, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified January 18, 2015, accessed April 20, 2015, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=The_Anabaptist_Vision&oldid=130434.

at the hands of sixteenth and seventeenth century European magistrates. The first English-language edition appeared in 1837 and went through only three printings in the next 100 years.¹⁴ Yet in the forty years between 1938 and 1977, it was re-published an additional eight times.¹⁵ It is important to note that—at least early in his career—Bender did not look to biblical sources for inspiration, as the early Anabaptist leaders had done. Rather, he viewed recasting the contemporary Mennonite Church as a historical and cultural enterprise as much as a spiritual and religious one.¹⁶

In Bender's analysis, the Mennonites had enjoyed a spiritual "golden age" in the sixteenth-century. Now after a 400-year "dark age" of separation and dispersion, Bender believed that the twentieth-century Mennonite Church was on the verge of a religious "awakening."¹⁷ This narrative arc placed the modern Mennonite Church on an epic upward trajectory that he believed would find its resolution in unity. Surely this was what Bender had in mind when he wrote an open letter in the inaugural issue of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* entitled "To the youth of the Mennonite Church." It stated, "The Golden Age of the Mennonite Church is not past; it is just ahead... The coming generation in the Mennonite Church is being given a carefully built, well-knit, efficient organization of activities... [that] covers the field of publication, education, missions, Sunday school, church music, and church history."¹⁸ Like so many nationalist thinkers of the interwar era, Bender placed his faith in the youth and the institutions that his generation would create for them. He believed that the coming generation was poised to inaugurate a new era of Mennonite cooperation that would resurrect the essence of the Anabaptist movement and perhaps even supersede it.

¹⁴ There were also three North American German publications during this time.

¹⁵ Nanne van der Zijpp, Bender and R. D. Thiessen, "Martyrs' Mirror," last modified November 2014, accessed February 1, 2015, *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Martyrs%27_Mirror.

¹⁶ Later in Bender's career—in the 1950s and 1960s—he increasingly looked to the Bible to inform his mission but, according to his biographer Albert Keim, his exegesis was always oriented to current and practical concerns and lacked hermeneutical scholarship. See Keim, 500.

¹⁷ For a detailed discussion of this observation see Rodney J. Sawatsky, *History and ideology: American Mennonite identity definition through history* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Bender, "To the youth of the Mennonite Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 1, no. 1 (January, 1927), n. pag.

Bender's feelings of rediscovering his people's special path are strikingly similar to the explosion of nationalist movements that emerged across the European continent at this same time (such as the individuals in historian Timothy Snyder's book *Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999*). For example, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Lithuanian nationalist historians refurbished "an imagined Grand Duchy that fit their present predicament" and conceptualized a new periodization of their national history "in which the medieval was glorious and the early modern was shameful."¹⁹ By rediscovering and documenting this fractured past, historians had a tidy answer for national disunity and a legitimate demand that it must be rectified. Bender too envisaged history as a series of discrete epochs with the modern era representing a restoration of the Mennonites' true destiny.

Bender also hoped that a unified version of Mennonitism could make the confession legible to governments and other outside observers—a problem that Ewert and D. Toews had likewise encountered in their negotiations with Canadian authorities. This "public relations" aspect of Bender's mission would streamline Mennonite interactions with non-Mennonites and overturn the prevailing, negative understanding of the Anabaptist Movement, from which Mennonitism had arisen. Until the twentieth century, Mennonites were often conflated with sensational brands of Anabaptism that arose during the German Peasants' War of 1525 and the bizarre and brutal Münster Rebellion of 1534-1535. The latter was led by the messianic leaders Jan Matthijsz (Matthys) van Haarlem and Jan Beukelszoon (van Leiden) who occupied Münster, proclaimed it the "New Jerusalem," and—amongst other eccentricities—pursued polygamy and a "community of goods." Thus, in November 1929, when the Moscow refugee crisis splashed across the world's headlines, Bender was chagrined to read a *New York Times* editorial that argued, "the Mennonites in their time were good revolutionists—they were closely connected with the Anabaptists and through them with the Peasants' War of 1525, the greatest rural uprising in the history of Europe."²⁰ Bender responded that the *Times*' "conception of the Mennonites and Anabaptists is the traditional one

¹⁹ Snyder, *Reconstruction of Nations*, 32, 34.

²⁰ "Editorial on Mennonites," *New York Times*, December 6, 1929, p. 26.

based on the historiography of their enemies and has now been completely invalidated by modern scholarship,” since Mennonites had a proven record of choosing martyrdom over armed force.²¹ In reality, sixteenth-century Anabaptism was a multi-headed hydra of Münsterites, individuals that participated in the Peasants’ War, and Bender’s preferred subjects, the Swiss Brethren.²² Bender wished to once and for all define Mennonitism and clarify that the confession represented the *purest* form of Anabaptism.

Bender was not alone in his vision of Mennonite fraternity. The interwar period was a cauldron of new ideas concerning the confession’s perceived group identity and its relationship to nations and states. The idea of global Mennonite unity had existed since at least 1900 when German Mennonite “activists” promoted the idea that the world’s Mennonites embodied their own *Völklein* that mimicked the broader German nation’s stereotypical proclivity for hard work, honesty, husbandry, and migration. According to historian Benjamin Goossen, Mennonites were assumed to carry “these [German] characteristics with them wherever they went, reproducing and transplanting their confessional flag from one geographic territory or continent to another.” Though Mennonites who lived outside of Germany may have rejected the *Völklein* label for its political overtones, they nonetheless appeared to be quintessential *Auslandsdeutsche* to Mennonite observers who were more willing than Bender to subsume “the Mennonites” under a national label.²³

During the 1930s, much of the discourse around Mennonite unification focused on the persecution of the thousands of Mennonites who remained in the Soviet Union and was generated by individuals in Canada and Germany who had fled the country during the 1920s. Mennonites were not alone in this regard. Historian James Casteel notes that there were thousands of Russian-German émigrés who had fled the Soviet Union during

²¹ Bender, “H.S. Bender on history of Mennonites,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1929, p. 28.

²² For a discussion of various forms of Anabaptism see James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, “From monogenesis to polygenesis: the historical discussion of Anabaptist origins,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49, no. 2 (April 1975): 83-121.

²³ Goossen, 16. Goossen also notes a Dutch Mennonite pastor named Samuel Cramer who wrote a 1901 manifesto titled “International Mennonitism.” The article argued that Mennonites are a distinct group, with an “international essence,” who have always considered states and borders to be “entirely immaterial,” unlike state churches that are bounded to fixed territories. See Samuel Cramer, “Internationales Mennonitentum,” *Mennonitische Blätter*, 1901, 39-40. Quoted in Goossen, 19-20.

the interwar years and “generated new narratives of common German identity between Russian Germans and Germans in the Reich... In these narratives, war and revolution figured as shared moments of victimization by internal and external enemies of Germanness.”²⁴ In this regard, exiled Mennonites from Russia shared similar reference points with the broader Russian-German diaspora regarding their tenuous place in the German firmament. Yet owing to their distinct history and religious culture, Mennonites were often less focused on Germany as a perceived “homeland” or as the agent of their restoration to Russia than other émigrés. In their creative and sometimes fantastic visions of the Mennonite diaspora’s future, Russia’s Mennonite émigrés tended to alternate between Mennonite and German poles of identification and plans for a Mennonite or German-Mennonite state solution.

One idea, proposed by a Mennonite individual living in Canada named J. J. Hildebrand, involved Mennonites creating a Mennonite state (*Mennostaat*) in Australia. J. J. Hildebrand had been a leader among the Mennonites of Siberia and remained a prolific writer on contemporary and historical issues after he moved to Canada in 1924. His plan called for 400,000 Mennonites (presumably *all* Mennonites in the world) to settle Australia’s Northern Territory, where they could create an autonomous republic.²⁵ The settlement would have its own government (popular democracy), national language (High or Low German), official currency (the *Menno Gulden*), and a blue, green, and white flag with a white dove holding a palm leaf in its beak.²⁶ Though the Australian government summarily rejected J. J. Hildebrand’s petition, the refusal did not keep him from pressing Mennonite unity and the creation of a Mennonite state.²⁷

²⁴ Casteel, 117.

²⁵ Historian James Urry provides an account of J. J. Hildebrand’s life and work in his article “A *Mennostaat* for the *Mennovolk*? Mennonite Immigrant Fantasies in Canada in the 1930s,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 14 (1996): 65-80. See also the J. J. Hildebrand Papers, Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Volumes 2821, 3308, 3481-3484.

²⁶ Urry, “*Mennostaat* for the *Mennovolk*?” 65.

²⁷ J. J. Hildebrand proposed Angola and Dutch New Guinea as alternate locations. Somewhat ironically, J. J. Hildebrand also worked against Mennonite unity by establishing his own aid organization in direct competition with D. Toews’ CMBC named Mennonite Immigration Aid (MIA). Most CMBC leaders originated from influential Mennonite settlements in South Russia and they did not invite J. J. Hildebrand to join in their work because he carried with him the stigma of coming from the “backward” and provincial Mennonite settlement in Siberia. See Urry, “A *Mennostaat* for the *Mennovolk*?” 67.

The Canadian Mennonite writer J. P. Dyck advanced a different vision of Mennonite unity that relied less on the establishment of a permanent territory and more on transnational economic cooperation, a similar plan to what the Weimar and Nazi governments hoped to achieve with *auslandsdeutsch* enclaves in Latin America. J. P. Dyck proposed the creation of a Mennonite “free-trade area” that would connect Mennonite communities via a global economic partnership.²⁸ J. P. Dyck’s proposal promised Mennonite economic self-sufficiency in the midst of the Great Depression.

German Mennonite Walter Quiring was less interested in Mennonite autonomy and economic interdependence. He feared the racial and cultural assimilation that already threatened Mennonites living in North America and championed Paraguay as the Russian Mennonites’ best and last chance where they could live out their German-Mennonite destiny.²⁹ Along similar lines, the Russian Mennonite cum Nazi propagandist Heinrich Hayo Schröder hoped that the Russian Mennonites would renew their ties with Germany by establishing 100 new settlements within the *Reich* according the traditional colony structure of Russian German settlements.³⁰ This plan would fulfill Mennonites’ *Kleinvolk* destiny within the Nazi state’s larger *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Bender was not a Nazi and his religious vision of Mennonite unity stands in marked contrast to strategies that treated Mennonites purely as a cultural or racial entity. In fact, Bender and the MCC leadership considered their “German” heritage to be less important than their American identification and most had only a limited grasp of the German language. Nevertheless, the territorial, social, and cultural ambitions outlined above are not too wide of Bender’s plan of establishing a “state of Mennonites,” that possessed a “German culture,” and remained religiously and financially connected to a community that extended around the globe.³¹ They are also not too wide of contemporaneous debates in interwar Jewish circles about the destiny of their European coreligionists. While some Zionists advanced the idea of a permanent settlement in

²⁸ Ibid., 73.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 72.

³¹ Bender, “Einwanderung nach Paraguay,” 121-122.

Palestine, others—including the American-based Jewish Joint Distribution Committee—proposed establishing Jewish settlements in a piecemeal fashion throughout the world, from the plains of northern Crimea to the jungles of the Dominican Republic, that would serve as bastions of Jewishness in a hostile world.³² Nationalist paradigms and fantastic solutions for territorial insecurities were therefore not only the domain of governments who wished to solve a “German Question” or “Jewish Question” during the interwar years, but had even seeped into the organizational ideals of the most insular and nationally indifferent groups of people, such as the Mennonites.

Twentieth-century Mennonite intellectuals were often unsure if confessional unity should find its locus at conference, national, or international levels. In the United States between 1913 and 1936, Mennonite leaders such as Goshen College president, Noah E. Byers, and *Mennonite* editor, I. A. Sommer, organized a series of meetings titled the “All-Mennonite Convention” for American Mennonites interested in mending historic differences and addressing common problems.³³ Naturally, the meetings found a limited audience and they largely resulted in a closed loop of affirming Mennonite intellectuals’ preexisting aspirations.³⁴ Dutch, German, and Canadian Mennonite intellectuals shared similar unifying ambitions with varying degrees of success. Yet during the interwar years some individuals, including members of the MCC, did not necessarily wish to draw the line at a conference or nationally based American or Canadian Mennonite Church, but instead they dreamed of binding together an international community of believers. This proved to be difficult since Mennonites remained divided at all levels. In 1929, the Mennonite publication *Gospel Herald* lamented, “In America there are more than a dozen sects who have branched off from the Mennonite Church (to say nothing about further subdivisions in some of these branches).”³⁵

³² Wells, 44 ff.

³³ C. Henry Smith, “All-Mennonite Convention,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified August 20, 2013, accessed May 7, 2015, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=All-Mennonite_Convention&oldid=90797.

³⁴ Perry Bush, “A lesson from a telescope,” *Mennonite*, May 2015, p. 28.

³⁵ “The Mennonites,” *Gospel Herald*, September 19, 1929, p. 1

American and Canadian Mennonites' disunity was largely due to the numerous regions they originated from in Europe, as well as the timing and location of their arrival in North America. Congregations traced their roots back to numerous locales in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and various German principalities. They had very different traditions—and even spoke different German dialects. The physical location of Mennonite communities often meant less to a congregation's beliefs than its specific migration history. For example, a Mennonite congregation in Nebraska may have felt closer to a congregation in British Columbia than it would have toward a congregation across the state line in Iowa. In this regard, Mennonite conferences and congregations in the United States were often quite provincial yet strangely transnational.

Altogether, Mennonite intellectuals' quest to unite the world's Mennonites arose not from history but from modern preoccupations: standardization, homogenization, and associational networks. In order to do this, Bender believed the confession needed to join together not under a common national identity but under a common set of principles that would guide a shared set of endeavors. Like the JDC (established in 1915), the Armenian Relief Society (established in 1910), and other non-governmental relief organizations, MCC's leadership believed that if the Mennonites were to remain viable in a Wilsonian world of nation-states and international cooperation, then it must establish institutions, locate safe territories, and promote homogenized ideals that transcended local particularities. Sectarian division and flight from national governments was destructive while democratic participation and negotiating with governments was productive. Moreover, Bender and other North American Mennonite intellectuals believed that personal nonviolence and consciousness objection to military service—convictions that had always played a role in Mennonites' theology—were the litmus test for the confession's membership. All other particularities—including refusing to vote, public schooling, and many of the stipulations included in the Russian Mennonites' various *Privilegiums*—were decidedly less important.

Subsequent Mennonite historians, such as the Canadian F. H. Epp, championed interwar Mennonite intellectuals and followed Bender's steps in painting a picture of

inevitable confessional unity over persistent sectarian division.³⁶ Yet even on this point, intellectuals such as F. H. Epp were wary that “international” Mennonite organizations, such as the MCC, had a decidedly American flavor since most were located in the United States. F. H. Epp argued that these organizations impinged on what he saw as a distinct Canadian Mennoniteness and threatened other national Mennonite cultures as well. Writing in 1977, F. H. Epp argued “Since it is American institutions playing the international role, there is a strong tendency both within and without America to equate the two. By that equation American institutions become the institutional incarnation of the universal church.” Later, F. H. Epp quipped, “What Americans call transcending nationalism, looks like an expanding nationalism from the other side.”³⁷ Thus, Mennonite intellectuals and their subsequent champions were often as divided over their proposed units of confederation—either nationally or internationally—as separatist Mennonites. Altogether, during the interwar years, Bender’s unifying goals remained a vision in every sense, an apparition, an ideal future with little to recommend that it actually existed. It would take a well organized and well-funded transnational church to realize Bender’s ambitions—perhaps something more akin to the fifteenth-century Catholic Church that extended across Europe than the boisterous and disorderly Anabaptist movement.

In spite of Mennonites’ internal differences, Bender and the MCC pressed forward with presenting Mennonitism as they wished it to be. An ideal vehicle for this mission was the Mennonite press, which reached individual members in their homes and was not filtered through individual pastors. At the time, the Mennonite press portrayed the church as a house with many rooms. Some were smaller, more isolated, and perhaps not exposed to as much ecumenical “light,” but they were all—or should be—attached to each other in some way. United States publications such as *Gospel Herald* and *The Mennonite* regularly ran stories about the importance of Mennonites joining in with confessional activities. An editorial for *The Mennonite* argued “Mergers are common and in many instances necessary to the welfare of those becoming parties to them. If the

³⁶ F. H. Epp dedicates several passages to criticizing the “rivalry, jealousy, suspicion and mistrust,” that pervaded Mennonite circles in North America during these years in *Mennonite Exodus*, 158.

³⁷ F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Peoplehood: A Plea for New Initiatives* (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1977), 14-15, 75-84. Quoted in R. J. Sawatsky, “Canadian Mennonite Nationalism? The 49th Parallel in the Structuring of Mennonite Life,” in *Canadian Mennonites and the Challenge of Nationalism*, 107.

Mennonite church is to live... the first important step to be taken is for its numerous branches to find a way whereby they may become one.”³⁸ According to the *Gospel Herald*, an “undenominational” church “is but cheap claptrap to beguile members of other denominations to forsake their own and join in with them.”³⁹ In the eyes of the MCC and America’s Mennonite newspapers, one thing was certain: The modern world demanded consolidation and interdependence.

As noble as this vision may have appeared to Bender’s North American colleagues, it did not resonate with Paraguay’s Mennonites. The MCC’s understanding of Mennonite essentials clashed with the Menno colonists who believed that the Mennonite church found its fullest expression at the local level and its optimistic tenor did not make sense to the Fernheim refugees who were scraping by in the middle of a hostile land.⁴⁰ Importantly, P. P. Klassen suggests that Bender’s vision, including his focus on the “peace position,” was less central to the Fernheim colonists than reestablishing the “Mennonite commonwealth” that colonists had known in Russia. Bender’s speech at the 1930 Mennonite World Conference reconciles both positions through the idea that that the Fernheim Colony could create a nonviolent “state of Mennonites” in the Chaco that was autonomous from the secular and violent nation-states that dominated the geopolitical order. The establishment of the Fernheim Colony was an experiment to see if modern Mennonites could create an autonomous republic that would also remain true to the Anabaptist principles of nonviolence and the separation of church and state.

MCC was headquartered in the United States and this country’s Mennonite newspapers embraced the Fernheim Colony as fellow Mennonites and encouraged readers to help support the settlement. As early as October 10, 1929, *The Mennonite* printed a front-page article, written by Toews, on the mounting crisis in Russia.⁴¹ *The Mennonite*’s editor affirmed the publication’s commitment to the MCC by stating,

³⁸ “Editorial,” *Mennonite*, March 13, 1930, p. 3.

³⁹ “Undenominational,” *Gospel Herald*, July 31, 1930, p. 1.

⁴⁰ See P. P. Klassen, “Die Rolle des Mennonitischen Zentralkomitees (MCC) in den Konflikten der Mennonitenkolonien in Paraguay,” *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 2, (2001): 39-40.

⁴¹ “A Plea for Help,” *Mennonite*, October 10, 1929, p. 1.

“Those who are inclined to give for this worthy cause will be helping brethren.”⁴² The publication also criticized Mennonites who did not see the refugees as their confessional brothers. One article stated, “The next best blessing after rendering help should be the drawing together into closer fellowship of the numerous bodies that call themselves Mennonites but jealously maintain separate organizations.”⁴³

Though MCC’s solicitations for aid were initially successful in drawing attention to the cause, donations began to dry up in the summer of 1930. In his “Relief Notes” section, Levi Mumaw reported that it was only by carrying over money from previous contributions that the MCC could sustain its work.⁴⁴ The situation remained urgent well into the fall, with Mumaw reporting in October 1930 that MCC needed \$132,500 USD (1,873,653 in 2014 USD) to cover the refugees’ mounting expenses but only had \$83,225 USD (\$1,176,866 in 2014 USD) in its coffers.⁴⁵ The funding difficulties could partly be due to the deepening economic depression but the 100,000+ individuals living in Canada and the United States who called themselves “Mennonites” could surely have raised the funds at less than a dollar per individual. A little over a month later the organization had only raised a further \$5,000 USD (\$70,703 in 2014 USD), even as its expenses rose by about the same amount.⁴⁶ Although North American Mennonites generally supported relief work on an ad hoc basis—as they had in the early-1920s—there was little historical precedent for indefinite giving to humanitarian initiatives. The MCC would have to forge Mennonite unity on the fly. It was a venture that would be sustained through press mobilization, continuous fundraising, and wide-scale participation. Unbeknownst to them, the Menno and Fernheim Colonies were the case studies in this experiment.

⁴² “Editorial,” *Mennonite*, February 27, 1930, p. 3.

⁴³ “Editorial,” *Mennonite*, December 19, 1929, p. 3. *The Mennonite* carried frequent articles on Mennonite unity and the need for a unifying Mennonite creed. See “The Need for a Creed,” *Mennonite*, March 27, 1930, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Mumaw, “Relief Notes,” *Mennonite*, October 2, 1930, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Mumaw, “Relief Notes,” *Mennonite*, October 30, 1930, p. 7. The inflation adjustment was made with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (CPI) Inflation Calculator, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

⁴⁶ Levi Mumaw, “Relief Notes,” *Mennonite*, December 11, 1930, p. 3. The inflation adjustment was made with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (CPI) Inflation Calculator, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

Discovering Indifference

The Menno Colony initially found itself in a unique and somewhat unwelcomed position regarding the MCC's vision of international Mennonite cooperation. Bender stated in his World Conference speech that one of Paraguay's main advantages was the fact that there were already Mennonites living in the Chaco who, presumably, would help the refugees out of a sense of fraternal sympathy.⁴⁷ Yet the main reason why Bender knew that the Menno Colony existed was the fact that two MCC representatives had visited the colony in an unsolicited attempt to see if *they* needed material aid. Ironically, it was this attempt to help the Menno Colony that provoked the MCC to request their help in resettling the refugees, a task that the colony had little interest in becoming involved with. When the MCC's proxies visited the Menno Colony in 1929 they witnessed a type of Mennonitism that looked very different from what they were familiar with. Significantly, the visitors' "discovery" of the colony's archaic expression of the faith resonated with contemporary German nationalist travelers who wished to locate an authentic and primitive Germanness within far-flung *Auslandsdeutsche* enclaves. Settling the refugees in the Chaco was an auspicious opportunity to draw both colonies into the global Mennonite confession.

In late 1928, various newspapers in North America and Europe began running articles concerning a group of "distressed" Canadian Mennonites who were living in the Gran Chaco. According to one American report, "hunger and sickness are snatching away these pioneers, making help urgent."⁴⁸ In Germany, the Nazi Party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* tied the Menno Colony's suffering to the perceived persecution of Germans worldwide with an article titled, "The Drama of the Slaves in the Chaco: the largest private landowners in the world as a modern slave owners – gruesome fate for Mennonites attracted to the country – the exploitation and destruction revealed – who will intervene?"⁴⁹ Alarmed at these reports, MCC leader Orie O. Miller contacted

⁴⁷ Bender, "Einwanderung nach Paraguay," 119.

⁴⁸ *Philadelphia Enquirer*, December 13, 1928.

⁴⁹ Bruno Fricke, "Das Drama der Sklaven im Chaco: Der größte Private Grundbesitzer der Welt als moderner Sklavenhalter - Grauenhaftes Schicksal der ins Land gelockten Mennoniten - Der Ausbeutung und Vernichtung preisgegeben - Wer schreitet ein?" *Völkischer Beobachter* (Munich), August 22, 1929. This article was forwarded to the MCC by a *Corporacion Paraguaya* employee who had, in turn, received

missionaries T. K. Hershey and Amos Swartzentruber, who were both stationed in Argentina, to investigate the situation and volunteer the MCC's resources.⁵⁰

Hershey sent a series of letters to the Menno Colony, asking them for information about their colony and inquiring about a possible visit.⁵¹ His first letter, written August 10, 1928 announced, "I do not know any of you" but assured the colonists that "the motives for our visit are entirely Christian."⁵² His letter indicates that the MCC wished to welcome the colony into the broader Mennonite fold but that he had little understanding of the group's history.

Having received no response by December 1928, Hershey's second letter (this time written in German) stated:

As you will notice from the letterhead, we are Mennonites, Mennonite ministers. Our churches in the USA and Canada have sent us here to Argentina to preach the gospel to the people living in darkness. Lately, we have repeatedly received inquiries from the USA and Canada regarding how the people in the Chaco of Paraguay are doing... We are getting no connection with you... The churches of North America have only your best in mind. They have already proved that by their relief work in Russia some years earlier. We would like you to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do you find the new country and the weather there?
- 2) How are our brethren doing there and how many are there?
- 3) Would you welcome us if we visited you?
- 4) Which is the best time to come there...?
- 5) We are waiting for your reply.

P. S. In what language do you preach in your church, English or German?⁵³

Since the Menno Colony Mennonites had left Canada, in part, to separate themselves from other Mennonites, it must have come as a surprise to colony leader M. C. Friesen when he received this letter early in 1929. According to M. W. Friesen, the

it from a Mennonite by the name of Priesz (perhaps Jacob B. Pries of the Bergthaler (West Reserve) Menno Colony colonists) See J. M. Vebber, "Corporacion Paraguaya [Field Report] December 2, 1929," IX-3-3 Paraguayan Immigration 1920-1933, Corporacion Paraguay, Publicity 1929 (1/12), MCCF, Akron, PA.

⁵⁰ M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 335.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 335-337.

⁵² Quoted in *ibid.*, 336.

⁵³ Letter reprinted in *ibid.*, 337.

record does not indicate whether his father responded to Hershey's solicitations.⁵⁴ Eventually, Hershey and Swartzentruber's curiosity was so great that they voluntarily embarked on a trip to the colony in February 1929 to discover this lost tribe of Mennonites.⁵⁵

Hershey and Swartzentruber's report took the form of an ethnographic survey of an unfamiliar people. The missionaries were most interested in the Menno Colony's farming operations and their religious customs. Hershey and Swartzentruber were amazed at the progress of "these hardworking Mennonites." After a brief description of the "aboriginals" who "live very simply," built "their huts of sticks," and went "almost entirely naked," Hershey exclaimed that the Mennonites were "creating a beautiful landscape of cultivation" and outlined their ambitious building plans.⁵⁶ Their description of a colony worship service, conducted in "real German," as opposed to colonists' everyday Plautdietsch, was particularly detailed and indicated that it was much different (and more tedious) than services that they were familiar with.

Their services were conducted in the following order: First, the singing of two hymns (all their hymns have from 5 to 12 long verses) with an old time slow tune. After this the minister... got up and pulling a bundle of papers out of his pocket began to read off his sermon which consisted of 28 pages foolscap of very small script. During the reading of the sermon—which took over an hour—the congregation knelt down twice for prayer but nobody prayed audibly... It was very tiresome to sit for over two hours on benches without backs in very hot weather and a good many of the listeners fell asleep for the last half of the meeting.⁵⁷

The feelings of familiarity and foreignness experienced by the North American visitors bear a striking resemblance to an 1871 account of a Dutch Mennonite woman named Antje Brons who sponsored a missionary trip to Mennonite communities in

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ The expedition was thoroughly covered in the North American Mennonite press and several United States newspapers. From the January 7, 1929 *Evening Ledger* (Philadelphia), "T. K. Hershey, formerly of this city, is working his way through the wilderness of Paraguay, determined to reach a colony of 2,000 Mennonites reported in grave distress from sickness and hunger."

⁵⁶ The report from Hershey's journal is reprinted in M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 346-348.

⁵⁷ Swartzentruber, "Churches and Schools," 629. Many conservative Mennonite groups considered the singing of melodies to be prideful. Rather, congregants intoned "songs" with little regard to a common meter.

Alsace and Lorraine after the region was absorbed into the German Empire. Reporting back to Brons, one visiting preacher described a group that had maintained the outer vestiges of Mennonitism (though surrounded by Catholics) but were spiritually dead. Like the missionaries' impressions of the Menno Colony colonists, the rustic Mennonites of Alsace and Lorraine were simple, sincere, and suspiciously antiquated.⁵⁸

The missionaries' report also bears a resemblance to German tourists' and researchers' accounts who visited *auslandsdeutsch* settlements—sometimes referred to as “language islands” (*Sprachinseln*)—in foreign lands.⁵⁹ Especially during the interwar years, German visitors to Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe made special note of *auslandsdeutsch* crafts, guilds, and farming practices.⁶⁰ They were also struck with a condescending admiration for their archaic practices and odd dialects even as they noted the presumed superiority of settlers' “German” houses in contrast to native inhabitants' primitive “huts.”⁶¹ The missionaries' paper trail also followed the same trajectory of *reichsdeutsch* traveler accounts of *auslandsdeutsch* communities, since their report was first filed with the MCC and then disseminated by various Mennonite publications, including the *Gospel Herald*, which ran a six-part series documenting the colony's economic and religious features.⁶² In the German context, articles on German-speaking enclaves were often collected by *völkisch* organizations and then broadcasted by publications such as *Der Auslandsdeutsche* and *Der Volksdeutsche*.⁶³ The effects of this journalism on readers invoked a kaleidoscope of “authentic” features that often had as

⁵⁸ See Goossen, 21-22.

⁵⁹ There were thousands books, journal articles, and magazine reports circulating in Germany on the *Auslandsdeutsche* during the interwar years. Reagin states, “Indeed, it is far to enormous to be mastered in one lifetime,” 253. For a discussion of student trips from Germany to *auslandsdeutsch* enclaves during the Nazi era see Elizabeth Harvey, “Emissaries of Nazism: German Student Travelers in Romania and Yugoslavia in the 1930s,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 22, no. 1 (March 2011), 135-160.

⁶⁰ Reagin, 255.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁶² For the initial report, see T. K. Hershey and Swartzentruber “Report of Condition of Mennonites in Paraguay,” *Gospel Herald*, May 16, 1929, 147-148. Subsequent reports were printed as “Mennonites in Paraguay,” and ranged from September 19, 1929–October 31, 1929.

⁶³ Reagin, 253-254.

much to do with language or religion as it did with class, occupation, environment, and the amount of time the enclave had been established in the colony. It was therefore often as confusing as it was exhilarating to “discover” these lost brethren.

Menno Colony Mennonites appear to have welcomed the visitors into their homes—though Swartzentruber marked the aloofness of the colony’s bishop, deacon, and ministers: “We were introduced to them but that was about all the conversation we had.”⁶⁴ The missionaries did not ask the Menno colonists to change their language, alter their education system, or forsake their version of Christianity; they simply wished fellowship with them as co-religionists. Yet Menno Colony leaders remained indifferent to them and were likely suspicious of their motives. Either way, MCC hoped that Menno colonists would see enough similarities between themselves and the incoming refugees to draw the Menno Colony into the global Mennonite fold.

After the refugees arrived in Paraguay in mid-1930, the Menno Colony did not go out of its way to express their solidarity with MCC or donate their time and labor to the cause. Resembling the tensions between older German-speaking enclaves in the La Plata region and newer arrivals, there were few similarities between the groups to recommend that they possessed a shared history or future. The Menno Colony expected the Fernheimers to remain a separate settlement. According to M. W. Friesen Menno Colony leaders believed that “the Russians should and would take care of themselves.”⁶⁵ It did not matter to them if the MCC believed the refugees were Mennonites—they may as well be “Russians”—because the Menno Colony’s leadership did not care if all Mennonites were unified. *They* were Mennonites and that was all that mattered. Thus, MCC’s vision of Mennonite unity in the Chaco encountered an early and tenacious stumbling block.

Fernheim’s First Exodus

When Bender traveled to Germany to coordinate the refugee transports to Paraguay in the spring of 1930, another MCC representative named Gerhard G. Hiebert was dispatched to Paraguay to greet the new arrivals. G. G. Hiebert was an experienced

⁶⁴ Swartzentruber, “Churches and Schools,” 629.

⁶⁵ M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 405.

refugee worker, having scouted settlement possibilities in Mexico and coordinated the distribution of tractors among Mennonites in Russia during the early 1920s.⁶⁶ He regarded the Fernheim Mennonites as co-religionists as long as they were duly appreciative of the MCC's efforts and wisdom. When a group of colonists attempted to carve out an alternate destiny by a new colony, G. G. Hiebert was confounded by their lack of trust in the MCC's good intentions. Thus, the MCC marked the Fernheim colonists as troublesome because they did not share its vision of a Mennonite bastion in South America even as Fernheim colonists began to suspect that the MCC had ulterior motives for bringing them to the Chaco.

Despite G. G. Hiebert's prior experiences in Russia, it was not enough to maintain good relations between the MCC and the Fernheim Colony. Significant personality differences quickly emerged between G. G. Hiebert and the colonists. According to historian Gundolf Niebuhr, G. G. Hiebert was a "sober and factual man" whose partisanship and diplomatic ignorance quickly got him into trouble with a number of colonists.⁶⁷ The Fernheimers also saw him as distinctly American and under the protection of "Uncle Sam."⁶⁸ One *Corporación Paraguaya* employee J. N. McRoberts Jr., who was stationed at the neighboring Menno Colony, reported to his superiors in New York that G. G. "Hiebert was the wrong man to have come here" after hearing much "gossip and tales" from another *Corporación* employee, Mr. Norén, who was stationed at the Fernheim Colony.⁶⁹

Personality conflicts aside, the atmosphere was ripe for confrontation between the MCC and the Fernheim Colony. Even before the move, colonists were disappointed that they could not settle in Canada and they viewed South America as a lesser option. They were also nervous about the land agreements that they had signed in Germany, which

⁶⁶ F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 59, 163, 259.

⁶⁷ Niebuhr, "Hiebert, Gerhard G." *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 203; Nikolai Siemens, "November—Auhagen—Unruh—Hiebert," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), November 1932, p. 1-2.

⁶⁸ Nikolai Siemens, "November—Auhagen—Unruh—Hiebert."

⁶⁹ J. N. McRoberts, Jr., "Corporación Paraguaya [Field Report], December 1, 1930," *Corporación Paraguay Correspondence Joseph McRoberts, January 1928-June 1931, IX-3-3 Paraguayan Immigration 1920-1933 (1/19)*, MCCF, Akron, PA.

were based solely on the MCC's positive reports. Upon the colonists' arrival in the Chaco, they were disappointed in the "preparations" made by the *Corporación Paraguaya*, which amounted to little more than a small clearing, a primitive shed, and a well with a high alkaline content.⁷⁰ The timing of the colonists' arrival exacerbated these concerns since most arrived in the fall and had to wait six months to begin planting crops. Though the refugees were glad to be free from Bolshevik persecution, they now had to pay for travel expenses and land in a country that was their second choice.

Within a few months, some Fernheimers were fed up with the venture. According to McRoberts Jr., all of the Fernheim colonists, with the exception of the small "Polish" contingent, wished to leave.⁷¹ They were especially unhappy about the price that they were charged for land (approximately \$20.00 USD per hectare) and the quality of livestock supplied by the *Corporación Paraguaya* since eighty-three head of cattle died soon after their delivery. What made the situation even more frustrating for the colonists was that there was free land available near the port city of Concepción with direct access to the railroad.⁷² The only advantage to living in the Chaco as far as the colonists could tell was its relative isolation, which most did not care for anyways. They blamed the MCC for promising them good, inexpensive land and delivering an overpriced wilderness. One colonist wrote that they were "sold to South America like sheep" and that "We are dealing with an organization of Mennonites, in which everyone cheats as much as he can."⁷³ These complaints soon reached Mennonite publications in North America. Mumaw's "Relief Notes" column reported that "we have here a busy man [G. G. Hiebert], and when not given full support by those under his care he is not able to do things not under his control, it is very easy for some one to write to a friend on the spur of the moment and make complaint. We trust our people in the homeland [the United States] will give due consideration to such possibilities and not to take too seriously any such

⁷⁰ John D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and Its Service 1920-1951* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1952), 27.

⁷¹ McRoberts, Jr., "Corporación Paraguaya [Field Report], December 1, 1930," *Corporación Paraguay Correspondence Joseph McRoberts, January 1928-June 1931, IX-3-3 Paraguayan Immigration 1920-1933* (1/19), MCCF, Akron, PA

⁷² J. D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 28.

⁷³ Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 80.

rumors or letters.”⁷⁴ Casting itself as the impartial and benevolent authority in the situation, the MCC projected an air of calmness and reasonableness in the midst of a situation that was spinning out of control. By November 13, 1930, Mumaw was happy to report, “in general the people are resigned to their lot.”⁷⁵ In reality, they were not.

On October 31, 1930, the colony held a general assembly and commissioned a delegation to scout for land in eastern Paraguay. The reasons enumerated by the colonists were 1) that the Chaco’s climate is “unhealthy for Europeans” 2) the lack of markets for their goods 3) the “exorbitant” price of land and 4) their “intolerable dependence” on the *Corporación Paraguaya*.⁷⁶ The colonists selected Gerhard Isaac and Kornelius Langemann as their delegates. They left in January 1931. The delegates also visited Asunción and held a private meeting with the president who, when told of how much the colonists had paid for their land, reportedly exclaimed, “That is a crime!”⁷⁷ While the delegates were on their trip, T. K. Hershey returned to the colony in order to help G. G. Hiebert dissuade colonists against the move.⁷⁸ The representatives reminded colonists’ that MCC would not provide money for a second settlement, which gave them reason to pause. A serendipitous rain and cooler weather also helped change colonists’ minds.⁷⁹

Isaac and Langemann returned to Fernheim in late-February, 1931 and G. G. Hiebert and Hershey immediately convened a private meeting with the men. The MCC representatives especially chastised Langemann for going behind the MCC’s back to scout for a new settlement. According to Langemann, G. G. Hiebert denounced him as an agitator and as a communist, shouting “No one wants to leave the Chaco except you!”⁸⁰ G. G. Hiebert’s anger was understandable. A mass movement east would vastly complicate the MCC’s position since it stood as the guarantor of the colony’s travel debt

⁷⁴ Mumaw, “Relief Notes,” *Mennonite*, July 31, 1930, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Mumaw. “Relief Notes,” *Mennonite* November 13, 1930, p. 5.

⁷⁶ Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 87. See also Quiring, *Deutsche erschliessen den Chaco*, 152.

⁷⁷ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 94.

⁷⁸ J. D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 28.

⁷⁹ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 87.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

to Germany and land debt to the *Corporación Paraguaya*. The last thing the MCC wished to do was liquidate the Chaco holdings, find someone to buy it, and help the disgruntled colonists purchase unsurveyed land elsewhere.

A second meeting was held on February 28, 1931 that drew a clear line in the sand between colonists who wanted to abandon the venture and those who were willing to press on. Isaac and Langemann's report appeared as the last item on the agenda and someone had changed the title from "Report by the Committee to Seek Land" to "Report about a Study Tour to Improve Knowledge about the Land."⁸¹ At the meeting, the majority of the colonists decided to suspend relocation plans and remain in the Chaco. At this point, Langemann and his followers felt deceived by the MCC and disowned by their fellow colonists. Writing years later, Langemann maintained that colony leaders had been cowed by the MCC and the change in the meeting's agenda did not reflect a change in mood among most colonists, since many had wished to leave. Langemann also criticized his co-delegate, Isaac, for remaining silent during the debate in order to save his position as a colony preacher. Not too long after the meeting Langemann and about twenty-five Fernheim families abandoned the Colony. They initially settled alongside *reichsdeutsche* families in Horqueta, near Concepción, but here too they experienced tension with their neighbors and established a new settlement, named Neuhoffnung, nearby.⁸² Their exodus signaled to the remaining colonists that leaving was viable, though it would require them to sell their Chaco property at a pittance, alienate them from their co-religionists, and expose them to the possibility of financial ruin without the MCC safety net.

Langemann's settlement struggled to survive. Within a year they were writing letters to former refugee camp employees in Germany asking for used clothes and Christmas presents. Unruh caught word of the solicitations and forwarded one to Bender in the United States stating, "This is a letter that disloyal settlers sent to Mr. Reimann.

⁸¹ Ibid., 87.

⁸² The specific reasons for their tension with the *Reichsdeutsche* families is unclear. See Fretz, *Immigrant Group Settlement in Paraguay*, 39. See also J. D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 28; and Rudolf Dyck, "Neuhoffnung bei Horqueta," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 314.

Now they are begging.”⁸³ Writing to another associate in Germany, Unruh stated, “These people have a bad conscience... Don’t you agree that these [Mennonite] committees have to remain firm[?] We have to maintain order in this business.”⁸⁴ Finally, in response to the disgruntled Fernheim colonists who remained Unruh admonished, “You fled out of Russia. We did not ask you to do that. We helped you here to the limits of our resources—in fact beyond our resources... We cannot let you yell at us and scold us.”⁸⁵ For their part, Hershey and G. G. Hiebert believed that if the Menno Colony could survive, then Fernheim Colony could too. Its members needed to work together, trust the MCC, and hope for better days.

The MCC had successfully deterred a mass departure but the stage was set for further disputes between the organization and the colonists. On T. K. Hershey’s recommendation, G. G. Hiebert was relieved of his position in the fall of 1931 and the decision appeared to have had a calming effect on the colony.⁸⁶ A letter dated October 3, 1931 from the colony’s *Oberschulze* Franz Heinrichs to Unruh confidently—if prematurely—reported, “Many of those who griped initially, now admit that they did wrong and wish that they could take their words back.”⁸⁷ Nevertheless, individuals and families continued to trickle out of the colony, which steadily increased the remaining colonists’ collective debt. Many of these families and individuals settled on the fertile land around Concepción or migrated south to work for German individuals and companies in the capital. By 1936 a total of thirty-six families had left the colony and by 1938 there were about sixty Mennonite individuals living in Asunción.⁸⁸

Generally speaking, the Fernheim Mennonites were grateful for the MCC’s help

⁸³ B. H. Unruh, “Letter to H. S. Bender,” nd. Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 89.

⁸⁴ B. H. Unruh, “Letter to Pastor Hendiges,” October 9, 1932. Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 89.

⁸⁵ B. H. Unruh, September 3, 1931. Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume*, 80.

⁸⁶ Gundolf Niebuhr, “Hiebert, Gerhard G.” *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 203.

⁸⁷ Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 81.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 89; Bender, “With the Mennonite Refugee Colonies in Brazil and Paraguay: A Personal Narrative,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 13, no. 1 (January 1939): 65.

but found the organization's tactics and worldview alienating. Most of the MCC's leaders, such as Bender, Maxwell H. Kratz, Orie O. Miller, Levi Mumaw, and Peter C. Hiebert were English-speaking Mennonites from well-established communities in the United States. Like the associative Canadian Mennonites, they were among the first generation of Mennonites in North America to believe that Mennonitism could exist comfortably in the modern world. They held a positive view of American democracy and American "know-how." According to historian James C. Juhnke, early twentieth century Mennonites had an "unquestioning confidence that it was both possible and right to enjoy the fruits of American citizenship while preserving Mennonite culture and religious heritage."⁸⁹ In fact, by the early-1940s, Bender fully believed that Anabaptism had given rise to democracy since "there can be no question but that the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy, ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period."⁹⁰ Energized equally by Anabaptist history and the modern zeitgeist of freedom and equality, they wished to extend their burgeoning historical, theological, and political gospel to the ends of the (Mennonite) earth.

By contrast, most Fernheim colonists came from German-speaking frontier settlements in Siberia. They were unfamiliar with the North American church and they had only met a few MCC delegates in person—one of whom was the hard-edged G. G. Hiebert. They were skeptical about the MCC's effusive optimism in the future, having witnessed first-hand the terrors of communism and the political turmoil of late-Weimar Germany. Moreover, colonists had scant historical knowledge of Anabaptist history, much less its assumed theological implications for the modern Mennonite church.⁹¹ For Russia's early-twentieth century Mennonites, Anabaptism and Mennonitism were perhaps better understood as heritage rather than history or theology. It also did not help that the MCC's newspaper reports and internal memoranda spoke of the refugees

⁸⁹ James C. Juhnke, *A People of Two Kingdoms* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1975), 67.

⁹⁰ Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*, 4.

⁹¹ H. Loewen, "Intellectual Developments," 97. Mennonite historian David G. Rempel states "Even a cursory survey of the books authored by Mennonites prior to 1917 about their brotherhood's 130-year sojourn in Czarist Russia... suffices to reveal their amazingly small number." See "An Introduction to Russian Mennonite Historiography," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 48, no. 4 (October 1974): 409.

patronizingly as their “poor brethren” whom they had been entrusted to protect. The MCC did not simply wish to help the Fernheim Colony but to cultivate them into model Mennonites who shared their optimistic vision of the church.

One positive voice in the colony was *Menno-Blatt* editor N. Siemens. A year after G. G. Hiebert departed the colony, N. Siemens published a front-page article titled “November—Auhagen—Unruh—Hiebert.” The article focused on the help that each individual had provided the colony during the month of November in the three preceding years: German diplomat Otto Auhagen (1929), B. H. Unruh (1930), and G. G. Hiebert (1931). N. Siemens reminded his readers that G. G. Hiebert could have remained in the United States instead of volunteering his time in Paraguay. He also recounted several stories about G. G. Hiebert’s aid to the colony including one instance where he slept overnight in a storage barn to protect the colony’s supplies and ended up getting involved in a shootout with the would-be thieves.⁹² N. Siemens served as a bridge from North America to the Chaco throughout the decade, sometimes to his own detriment. In a December 1938 letter to Bender, N. Siemens gloomily reported, “I have tried to stay entirely on the side of the Fernheim Colony and to influence our people to remain faithful to the Colony... as a result, I have been besmirched... and some have canceled their subscriptions [to *Menno-Blatt*] out of spite.”⁹³

MCC representatives held fast to the idea that everything would work out for the colony if given enough time and patience. They had faith in God but they also had faith in their own vision of a Mennonite stronghold in South America. After all, the Menno Colony colonists had already survived for four years prior to the Fernheimers’ arrival. At the Mennonite World Conference held in August 1930—a month before the Colony sent scouts to eastern Paraguay—Pastor Emil Händiges of Elbing (*Elblag*), Germany enthused that the colony had a divine mandate and that it was through God’s goodness that doors were opened for settlement in the Chaco.⁹⁴ In a May 12, 1930 wire from the United States

⁹² Nikolai Siemens, “November—Auhagen—Unruh—Hiebert.”

⁹³ Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 86.

⁹⁴ Emil Händiges, “Vortrag von Pastor Lich. Händiges, Elbing, über seine Erlebnisse in der Arbeit für “Brüder in Not,” *Bericht über die Mennonitische Welt-Hilfs-Konferenz vom 31. August bis 3. September 1930*, ed. D. Christian Neff (Karlsruhe, Germany: Heinrich Schneider, 1930), 100.

to the Fernheim Colony, Bender optimistically told settlers to “be of good cheer, the Committee protects you, everything will improve.”⁹⁵ MCC chairman, Peter C. Hiebert, assured the colonists that, “Your struggles are our struggles; your pain is our pain; your joy and your success is our joy and our success.”⁹⁶ In another letter to the colonists, Unruh wrote encouragingly—if somewhat condescendingly—that life in the Chaco will be hard but that “you will find that the ultimate result will be good, because God rewards humility.”⁹⁷ Outsiders offered their reassurances throughout the 1930s but they were cold comfort to the Fernheim colonists who saw their crops fail, children die, and others abandon the venture. Between 1930 and 1932, colonists remained tied to the land mostly by the authoritarian injunctions of its sponsors, a lack of money to move elsewhere, its fledgling leadership, and whatever group pressure optimistic colonists could muster.⁹⁸

The years 1932 and 1933 saw an upturn in the colony’s morale and economic situation and Fernheim colonists’ thoughts turned back to planting crops and improving their land. A March 12, 1932 meeting between the MCC’s Executive Committee and H. G. Norman of the *Corporación Paraguaya* resulted in a reduction of the price of colonists’ land from \$8.00 USD to \$3.00 USD per acre.⁹⁹ In May 1932, the first group of refugees from Harbin, China arrived in the colony, which provided a boost in morale. The new arrivals brought word of Mennonites who were still living in Russia and Fernheim residents showed the newcomers how to survive in the new environment. A few months later, the outbreak of the Chaco War brought lucrative government contracts and the influx of soldiers provided a steady revenue stream for the cash-strapped colonists. For the time being, it appeared to many colonists that the situation between themselves, the *Corporación Paraguaya*, and the MCC might work out after all.

⁹⁵ Quoted in P. P. Klassen, “Die Rolle des Mennonitischen Zentralkomitees,” 41.

⁹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 41.

⁹⁷ Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*. 80.

⁹⁸ Injunctions came from Bender and the various MCC missionaries who visited the Chaco during the 1930s, B. H. Unruh in Germany, the colony’s *Oberschütze* Franz Heinrichs, and several of the colony’s preachers such as the previously mentioned H. B. Friesen. See P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 79-81.

⁹⁹ J. D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 29.

Thus, the Fernheim Colony's initial months of settlement were not only defined by local struggles—poor health, poor weather, and poor livestock—but by a transnational struggle over what the venture meant to the MCC and the colonists. The MCC entertained the false hope that there was a Mennonite essence that somehow transcended the vagaries of time and space and would ease relations between the parties. Yet its representatives were astonished to learn that a shared sense of mutuality would have to be created and not “discovered.” Strangely, the MCC looked to the Menno Colony as a model of unity and perseverance even though its religious life was strikingly anachronistic. For their part, the Fernheim colonists simply wanted productive land with good transportation links at a cheap price but the MCC frustratingly delivered expensive, isolated, and unproductive acreage. Colonists possessed only the weakest notion that they were fated to live together and remained on the lookout for a more satisfying conclusion to their tribulations elsewhere.

A Colony Divided

Menno Colony marked the years 1932-1936 as a time of internal struggle between its constituent churches and paid little attention to either the MCC or the Fernheim Colony. While the Fernheim colonists were divided on a personal level over their transnational attachments to Germany and the United States, the Menno Colony contended with church-level factionalism. Far from unifying with the imagined global church and reaching out to its Fernheim neighbors—as the MCC had hoped it would—the Menno Colony undermined and eventually destroyed its own administrative structure.

Before the Menno Colony Mennonites left Canada, its leaders had been more concerned with the colony's religious organization than its managerial and economic apparatus. According to one colony leader, the group had given no thought to administrative issues before arriving in Paraguay and believed that they simply needed to follow the biblical mandate to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”¹⁰⁰ Soon after their arrival, inequalities began to develop between a small group who had a large amount of money and power and a larger group who did not.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 6:33 (ESV); M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 419.

The origins of the Menno Colony administration conflict can be traced to July 13, 1928, a little more than a year after the colonists arrived in Paraguay. On this date, colony leaders convened a joint assembly of the three *Gemeinde* at Puerto Casado to re-establish the *Fürsorge-Komitee*, which was effectively dissolved after the migration to Paraguay was finished.¹⁰¹ Earlier, some of the delegates of the Sommerfelder (West Reserve) and the Bergthaler (Saskatchewan) groups had met with a lawyer in Asunción to draw up a set of documents outlining the settlement's leadership and jurisdiction. They decided that each colony—irrespective of size—should have equal voting rights in the colony's administration. Apparently, the Chortitza (East Reserve) delegates were not at the Asunción meeting and did not examine the documents until the July assembly. This group represented about eighty percent of the Menno Colony settlers, including many of the poorer colonists. According to M. W. Friesen, the Chortitzer (East Reserve) delegates balked at the equal voting clause but let the matter rest in order to avoid controversy.¹⁰²

By 1932, the equal voting clause had opened up a large rift between the Chortitzer (East Reserve) group and the other colonists. Amongst other things, Chortitzer (East Reserve) colonists wished to buy cattle and expand their farming operations on credit, but this was voted down by the other groups since they did not wish to take on the additional financial obligation. In January, there was a general meeting between the three groups to settle the issue but it ended in what M. W. Friesen described as an “indulgence in altercations.”¹⁰³ Additional *Fürsorge-Komitee* meetings were held throughout 1932 to find a *modus vivendi* but neither side was willing to compromise.

The outbreak of the Chaco War temporarily relegated this problem to the background but as the war wound down in 1934, the Chortitzer (East Reserve) representative J. A. Braun arranged a meeting with the president of Paraguay, José Eligio Ayala. At a September meeting between the Chortitzer (East Reserve) delegates and the president, the delegates enumerated the difficulties that they were experiencing with their

¹⁰¹ The colony's representatives were M. C. Friesen and Abraham A. Braun from the Chortitza/East Reserve, Isaak K. Fehr and Bernhard F. Penner from the Sommerfeld/West Reserve, and Peter Peters and Cornelius H. Wiebe from the Bergthal/Saskatchewan group. M. W. Friesen, *New Homeland*, 422.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 422-424.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 428.

co-religionists in the Sommerfelder (West Reserve) and Bergthaler (Saskatchewan) groups. Apparently, the president listened to their complaints, and their request for him to moderate the dispute, but refrained from entangling himself in the issue. The next month, the Sommerfelder (West Reserve) and Bergthaler (Saskatchewan) representatives called on the president to listen as they aired their side of the story. Exasperated with both sides, the president admonished the Mennonites that “there already was enough discord in the country” and that “the [Paraguayan] people had the impression that the Mennonites were firmly united and considered them as an example.” Two more meetings between the president and the Chortitzer (East Reserve) group followed in 1935 and 1936. Now with ninety percent support among the Menno Colony colonists, the Chortitzer (East Reserve) Mennonites created a separate organization in 1936 named the *Chortitzer-Komitee* that sidestepped the authority of the *Fürsorge-Komitee*, rendering the latter organization impotent.¹⁰⁴

The fact that the Menno Colony Mennonites asked the president of the country to arbitrate the conflict is revealing of the way these settlers understood their relationship to each other and the state. They had initially tried to work out the problem amongst themselves, along the lines of Matthew 5:25 where Jesus admonishes his followers to resolve problems with each other before seeking out government authorities. After this approach failed, the Menno Colony representatives did not ask their Fernheim co-religionists or the MCC to help settle the problem. They also did not try to resolve the dispute through the country’s legal system—as Paraguayan citizens may have done—but appealed directly to the president of the country because they viewed themselves as subjects of God, in the first instance, and of king (or president), in the second. Like their ancestors in Canada and Russia, the Mennonites of Menno Colony viewed their settlement as an autonomous unit, separate from other Mennonite groups and existing outside the normal framework of democracy and citizenship. They believed that there was no greater religious authority than the local church and no greater secular authority than the highest office in the land.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 435-437.

Fernheim's Second Exodus

In 1936, the MCC encountered another impediment to its authority and its unitary goals. While Menno Colony struggled to maintain its administrative apparatus, new tensions began to arise in the Fernheim Colony. The harvests of 1933 and 1934 were satisfactory but drought and grasshoppers demolished the colony's yields in 1935 and 1936. Colonists were forced to buy imported food and live off of credit from the colony's economic cooperative. In 1935, the colony's *Oberschulze*, J. Siemens, was placed in charge of mediating debt repayments between the colonists and the MCC, a decision that placed more power in the hands of the colony but also made its administration the focal point for bitter colonists.¹⁰⁵ By 1936, the drought had become so bad that the Paraguayan River was practically unnavigable and the colony risked starvation.¹⁰⁶ Colonists were desperate and turned once again to thoughts of migration. They were nevertheless unable to do so because the MCC had request the Paraguayan Port Authority at Puerto Casado to refuse ticket sales to any Fernheim Mennonite who did not have written permission from the colony office—presumably because a mass outmigration would leave the MCC with nothing but a large debt on unimproved land in the middle of South America.¹⁰⁷ As a result of these difficulties, the MCC sought to buy the *Corporación Paraguaya*, a move that would consolidate its complete economic control over both colonies' land debts and the corporation's residual Chaco holdings. Yet Mennonite control over the corporation came at a price for the Fernheim Colony who now occupied the MCC's land and not the *Corporación Paraguayas*: colonists would have to consent to a set of "Mennonite principles" that ideologically bound them to the North Americans. The MCC desired Mennonite unity, but they desired it on their terms. Like nationalist elites imposing national features on their populations in Europe and North America, the MCC would forge the colonists' collective narrative, not the colonists.

As pests and drought devastated colonists' livelihoods two years in a row, they nursed the suspicion that MCC had incarcerated them in the wilderness and the

¹⁰⁵ Niebuhr, "Siemens, Jakob Wilhelm," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 387.

¹⁰⁶ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 111.

¹⁰⁷ P. P. Klassen, "Die Rolle des Mennonitischen Zentralkomitees," 35-58, 43.

settlement's administration did not have their best interests at heart. Writing to the delegates at the 1936 Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam, colony leaders including *KfK* director and *Allianzgemeinde* leader, N. Wiebe; *Brüdergemeinde* leader, G. Isaak; *Mennoitengemeinde* leader, J. Teichgräf; *Oberschulze*, J. Siemens; and school administrator, A. Harder exclaimed that the colony was in a “panic” and restructuring the land debt was necessary in order to avoid a mass exodus.¹⁰⁸ The MCC responded to the unrest by sending MCC executive secretary Orié O. Miller to Paraguay in December 1936. His mission was to calm the colonists' fears and investigate the possibility of the MCC purchasing the *Corporación Paraguaya* from its North American owners. The prospect of buying the corporation was made available by the death of investment banker Edward Robinette in 1935. Robinette was the business associate of Samuel McRoberts, and owned a 65% controlling interest in the corporation.¹⁰⁹ The MCC's plan was to buy out both shareholders and thereby assume complete financial control over the operation.

The purchase would expand the MCC's interests in Paraguay beyond raising money for relief work to becoming one of the largest landowners in the Gran Chaco. Some of the most important implications of the deal are as follows 1) The MCC would be the primary debtor to both the Menno and the Fernheim Colonies 2) It could restructure land repayments on a more generous schedule 3) It would be the principal landowner of nearly 121,405 additional hectares of Chaco wilderness, and 4) It would allow Fernheim Mennonites who wished to leave the colony to do so in a regulated fashion.¹¹⁰ Though the MCC was formed on a purely *ad hoc* basis in 1920 to provide aid to starving Mennonites in Russia, it was now a permanent institution, with tangible assets, that was linked to Mennonites on three continents. As a result, it was not acting alone but in the name of a constituency who supported its mission, demanded accountability for its actions, and wanted results. The organization not only felt pressure from within the Fernheim Colony

¹⁰⁸ “An die Mennonitische Weltkonferenz in Holland,” in *Der Allgemeine Kongress der Mennoniten gehalten in Amsterdam, Elspeet, Witmarsum (Holland) 29. Jun ibis 3. Juli 1936*, ed. D. Christian Neff (Karlsruhe, Germany: Heinrich Schneider, 1936), 83.

¹⁰⁹ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 95.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*; J. D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 31-32.

to make the deal work but also from North American Mennonites who funded the operation and wanted to see a payoff on their investment.

Miller convened a series of meetings with colony and corporation representatives in January 1937. At these meetings it became clear to him that a number of colonists wanted to completely cut their ties to the MCC and that two distinct groups had solidified within the Fernheim Colony: individuals who wanted to stay in the Chaco (“*Bleibende*”) and individuals who wished to find new land elsewhere (“*Abwanderer*”).¹¹¹

Meanwhile, MCC representatives in the United States moved forward with the purchase negotiations. MCC would solicit \$25,000 USD (\$411,000 in 2014 USD) from interested Mennonites in the United States for an up-front payment and owe the remaining \$32,500 USD (\$534,300 in 2014 USD) within one year.¹¹² On February 13, 1937 the MCC, McRoberts, and the Robinette heirs agreed to the final terms and signed the papers. Now the MCC was the sole debt collector for land owned by the Menno and Fernheim Colonies.¹¹³ In addition to the land debt, the Fernheim Colony also owed MCC \$175,000 (\$2,869,890 in 2014 USD) for supplies and relocation expenses.¹¹⁴ A few months later, the MCC was incorporated as a charitable organization “to have perpetual existence by its corporate name,” while the *Corporación Paraguaya* was reorganized to include two Americans, Maxwell Kratz and Orie Miller; one Paraguayan, a Dr. Garaj; and two Fernheim colonists, Franz Heinrichs and Heinz Krupp (later replaced by Abram Loewen).¹¹⁵ Menno Colony was not represented in the corporation’s administration.

The Menno Colony appears to have viewed MCC’s purchase of the *Corporación Paraguaya* strictly as a land deal; one debtor was as good as another and it did not matter if it was a Mennonite organization or not. The buyout came in the middle of the colony’s administration dispute and so it appears to have been a minor event for the Menno

¹¹¹ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume I*, 91.

¹¹² J. D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 33. The inflation adjustment was made with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (CPI) Inflation Calculator, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

¹¹⁴ Fernheim and Menno colonists were individually responsible for paying these debts. Three-fourths of the Menno Colony debt was guaranteed by the church. See *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹¹⁵ J. D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 35-36; Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 114.

colonists. In general, one gets a sense from the literature that the land debt mattered very little in relation to the colony's internal power struggles, since it receives little mention in the colony's official histories. J. A. Braun, who was the first leader (*Vorsteher*) of the Chortitzer-Komitee, only spends half of a page in his memoir *Im Gedenken an jene Zeit* discussing the acquisition, and he was not sure whether it happened in 1936 or 1937. M. W. Friesen's 474-page history of the settlement *New Homeland in the Chaco Wilderness* includes two brief sentences on the Menno Colony's role in the purchase. Likewise, Abram W. Hiebert and Jacob T. Friesen's exhaustive history of the Menno Colony's administrative and economic organization only provides a short section on the colony's relationship with the MCC during the transition.¹¹⁶ The difficulties between the MCC and the Fernheim Colony appear to have not affected the Menno colonists and the sale of the *Corporación Paraguaya* to the MCC provoked neither fear nor relief.

The MCC's purchase of the *Corporación Paraguaya* represented something momentous for the organization since was the fullest realization of Bender's idea of creating a Mennonite republic in Paraguay. Land, religion, and culture were indispensable factors and the MCC believed that their maintenance would determine the colony's success. In fact, the MCC's sixth point in its contract with Fernheim Colony included the statement, "Since the maintenance of Mennoniteness (*Mennonitentums*) is an essential element in this agreement, both sides mutually commit to establishing the colony Fernheim as a pure Mennonite Colony and to maintain Mennonite principles as such."¹¹⁷ Though it was unclear from the document the exact nature of these "Mennonite principles," it was clear that they would not be created by the Fernheim Colony nor adopted from the Menno Colony, but handed down by the North Americans who increasingly positioned themselves as the spokespeople for a global Mennonite church.

The purchase ameliorated some of the Fernheim colonists' concerns about debt repayments but others remained steadfast in their plan to leave. 206 out of the colony's 384 landowners wished to abandon the colony at the end of 1936 and 140 maintained this

¹¹⁶ See Abram W. Hiebert and Jacob T. Friesen, *Eine bewegte Geschichte . . . die zu uns spricht: Materialien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Kolonie Menno: Ein Beitrag zur 75. Gedenkfeier* (Asunción, Paraguay: Chortitzer Komitee, Colonia Menno, 2002).

¹¹⁷ Quoted in P. P. Klassen, "Die Rolle des Mennonitischen Zentralkomitees," 46.

position after the MCC purchased the *Corporación Paraguaya*.¹¹⁸ The *Abwanderer* sent out land scouts in early 1937 to look for land in Eastern Paraguay. They also asked the Paraguayan government if they could retain their Mennonite privileges if they left Fernheim Colony, since there was a rumor that the Mennonite privileges were only recognized in the Chaco. By July 1937, the *Abwanderer* received word that their privileges were guaranteed throughout Paraguay and that two Germans named Arthur and Wilhelm Strauch wished to sell them land near Rosario on the Paraguayan River.

In July 1937, about 750 people, representing over one third of the colonists, left the Fernheim Colony for 6,879 hectares of mixed jungle and grassland in Eastern Paraguay that they named Friesland, after the area of Holland where their forefathers had originated.¹¹⁹ The new colony included many of the Fernheim Colony's wealthier families, though it did not include many of its leaders and its population was divided between *Mennonitengemeinde* and *Brüdergemeinde* congregants.¹²⁰ Writing to *Oberschulze* J. Siemens from Germany, Unruh sarcastically quipped, "You could have run a grand colonization program together. Why are you separating? After all, God saved you from persecution together."¹²¹ Colonists, however, did not necessarily see the "togetherness" of their salvation as lasting indefinitely. It was not the beginning of a new story in South America but merely the tragic conclusion of their story in Russia. Their

¹¹⁸ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 96.

¹¹⁹ There is a discrepancy with this number in the historiography. Bete Penner claims there were 750 individuals, Alfred Fast and G. Ratzlaff claim 748, and Thiesen (via Friedrich Kliewer) claims 706. See Penner, "Friesland," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 166; A. Fast and G. Ratzlaff, "Friesland Colony (San Pedro Department, Paraguay)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified August 23, 2013, accessed January 28, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Friesland_Colony_\(San_Pedro_Department,_Paraguay\)&oldid=91825](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Friesland_Colony_(San_Pedro_Department,_Paraguay)&oldid=91825); Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi*, 112; Friedrich Kliewer, "Die Mennoniten-Kolonie Friesland in Ostparaguay," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* (Emden, Germany) 3 (1938): 58. See also P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 97.

¹²⁰ A. Fast and G. Ratzlaff, "Friesland Colony (San Pedro Department, Paraguay)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified August 23, 2013, accessed January 28, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Friesland_Colony_\(San_Pedro_Department,_Paraguay\)&oldid=91825](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Friesland_Colony_(San_Pedro_Department,_Paraguay)&oldid=91825); Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 112.

¹²¹ B. H. Unruh to Jakob Siemens, August 10, 1937. Quoted in P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 98.

community of fate, made possible by the German government and helped along by the MCC, needed more than either entity's well wishes and money to survive as a group.

Friesland Colony's newly elected *Oberschulze* Heinrich Rempel answered Unruh's rhetorical question by claiming the main cause of the split had less to do with climate and economic difficulties than with the colony's administration. In his view, ninety percent of the Friesland colonists would have remained in the Fernheim Colony if its leadership had been less strict and would have allowed for private trade (instead of conducting all business through the colony's cooperative). Rempel also claimed that the MCC's representatives were out of touch with the colonists and unwilling to devise a creative solution.¹²² Yet economic opportunities and hostility to the MCC were likely not the only reasons for colonists' dissatisfaction. A large number of *Abwanderer* were also members of the Fernheim Colony's *völkisch* (nationalist) movement and supported closer ties to Nazi Germany since they were hedging their bets that they could "return" to Central Europe and graft themselves to the German nation. This is verified by a 1938 report from the German counsel in Asunción, which noted that the Friesland settlers were more aligned to the Nazi cause than either the Menno or Fernheim Colonies.¹²³ Tellingly, there were no *Abwanderer* from the *Allianzgemeinde*, a church that was firmly against the *völkisch* movement. This circumstance suggests an ideological motive for the departure in addition to an economic and administrative one, but this is taken up in the next chapter.

MCC chairman P. C. Hiebert arrived in Fernheim in July 1937, just as the dissatisfied colonists were packing their bags for Friesland and he was upset. P. C. Hiebert lauded *Bleibende* for believing that God had ordained the land of the Chaco as a Mennonite refuge and excoriated the *Abwanderer* for not recognizing God's hand in the matter. He also suggested that the latter were influenced by communist ideology while in Russia and were simply pretending to be martyrs.¹²⁴ This was the second MCC representative to accuse Fernheim colonists of being communist sympathizers, and suggests that the MCC did not feel so brotherly toward the refugees. After all, it was

¹²² P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume I*, 97; Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 98.

¹²³ Büsing, "Nr. 371, 2 Durchdrucke."

¹²⁴ Peter C. Hiebert, *Mitteilungen von der Reise nach Süd-Amerika* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, n.d.), 64; J. D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 38.

easier to accuse the *Abwanderer* of ideological subterfuge rather than admit that the Chaco made a poor setting for destitute agriculturalists or acknowledge variations between the MCC's and the colonists' conceptions of Mennoniteness. P. C. Hiebert believed that dissent in the colony betrayed not only the MCC but the Mennonite faith in general. In drawing the Fernheim Colony into an imagined global community of Mennonites, the MCC viewed part of its mission in the Chaco as transforming the Russian Mennonites into North American-style Mennonites. This was a cultural undertaking as much as it was a humanitarian or religious one. The confession's faith and future were not egalitarian and open-ended but united and linear. Any other interpretations of Mennonitism were heretical.

These are not my People

Bender's first visit to the Paraguayan colonies came eight years after his bold proclamation that MCC wished to create a "Mennonite state" in the Chaco. Before his trip, Bender had clung to a vision that the Mennonites in Paraguay should be a unified stronghold of a pure Mennonite faith. Like the interwar German ethnographers who were disappointed when they encountered the bricolage of *auslandsdeutsch* enclaves in Eastern Europe and like the American JDC, which was unable to sustain its wartime settlement project of 757 refugees in Sosúa, Dominican Republic, Bender regretfully noted "I wish it were possible to speak of the Mennonites of Paraguay as one united body, but alas, this is not the case" for what he encountered was a situation that was far more complex.¹²⁵ As a principle author of Mennonite unity in North America, Bender now had a chance to assess first-hand the difficulties of imposing an external narrative on an indifferent and resistant population. His report reveals that he considered himself to be a qualified grader of the colonies' Mennoniteness by ranking them on a scale, with individuals closest to the MCC receiving the best marks.

When Bender's plane touched down in Asunción he was greeted by several former Fernheim Mennonites who were living in the capital and J. A. Braun of the Menno Colony, who happened to be in Asunción on business. Bender's impression of the

¹²⁵ Bender, "With the Mennonite Refugee Colonies," 66. On the Sosúa colony, see Wells.

Asunción Mennonites was largely unfavorable owing to their worldliness. He concluded “it is difficult to maintain high ideals of faith and life in the midst of the destructive influences of the city, where the low standards of life, which are so common in Paraguay find their full expression.” Nevertheless, he was happy to learn that “an attempt is made to hold the group together by holding services Sunday afternoons in the German church.”¹²⁶ For Bender, “urban Mennonites” was a contradiction in terms and portended the eventual disintegration of the faith. Compact, rural settlements, similar in form to the ones prescribed by Germany’s *völkisch* organizations, were ideal since they kept Mennonites close to each other and close to the land.

Traveling north to the Chaco, Bender spent a few days visiting the Menno Colony *Ältester* M. C. Friesen, whom he described as an “able man, determined to maintain uncompromisingly the principles of his group, and evidently succeeding in doing so.” Bender was impressed with the material progress the colony had made though he unfavorably describes the people as “very conservative” and desiring “little contact with others.”¹²⁷ He had nothing to report on their religious life but instead pressed on to the MCC’s experiment, the Fernheim Colony.

When Bender visited the Fernheim Colony, he describes it as “the most important and most interesting of all the Mennonite groups” in Paraguay because it “represents the great relief project which was undertaken in 1930 by the Mennonite Central Committee.”¹²⁸ Apparently, the group was “important” because the MCC had helped create it. Skirting the edge of solipsism, Bender wrote that the colonists are “anxious to prove worthy of their privileges and blessings” on account of their salvation from Russia, and therefore “anxious for fellowship with the Mennonites of North America.”¹²⁹ Thus, the reason why the Fernheim Colony was interesting was because some of its members wished to draw closer to North American Mennonites. Bender had a preexisting ideal of

¹²⁶ Bender, “With the Mennonite Refugee Colonies,” 65.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

what Mennonitism looked like and tried to discover this phenotype among the Mennonites of Paraguay.

Bender was coy about the colony's chronic difficulties, opaquely noting that "Not everything in Fernheim is perfect, and not everything is as it ought to be, but there is no need to enter into details here," suggesting that any unpleasanties with the project were best ignored. He reassured his North American audience that the Fernheimers "have maintained a staunch Mennonitism thus far... including the principle of complete nonresistance," which he increasingly viewed as the litmus test for true Mennonitism, but was in fact a more ambiguous tenant for colonists whose lives were suffused with war and violence since the First World War. Bender admitted that "there are good reasons why most of us from North America would not want to exchange [places] with them," but he believed that the colony's special privileges and their isolation from the outside world portended great things. Despite evidence to the contrary, Bender concluded that the Fernheim Colony was a "paradise" and "the best organized, the most prosperous, and spiritually the soundest Mennonite colony in Paraguay."¹³⁰

Playing the role of Goldilocks, Bender maintained that the Asunción Mennonites were too liberal, the Menno Colony Mennonites were too conservative, but the Fernheim Mennonites were "just right," even though the preceding eight years had witnessed two major departures that provoked bitter disputes and reduced the colony's population by over one third.¹³¹ Yet its modern inclinations, agrarian circumstances, and high level of education helped it resemble early-twentieth century American Mennonites, and by extension Bender's Mennonite ideal.

In spite of the MCC's desire for Mennonite cooperation, the interwar years witnessed continued theological and cultural divisions between Mennonites in North America and Paraguay. The source of the tension came down to each entity's collective narrative and its articulation of Mennoniteness. Secure in its local conception of Mennoniteness and un beholden to an external agency that demanded accountability, the

¹³⁰ Ibid., 67, 69.

¹³¹ Ibid., 67.

Menno Colony was indifferent to outsiders' appraisals of their settlement. When they experienced internal conflict they either resolved the problem themselves or appealed to the highest state authority. Their Mennonitism positioned the colony in a binary relationship with the government and a binary relationship with "the world." They were not members of a transnational confession or nation. As a result, the colony was not compelled to worry about how outsiders viewed their organization or faith (for everyone outside their colony was an outsider) or advance a vision of "the" Mennonite Church's place in the world order.

Alternately, the fate of the Fernheim Colony was intertwined with the MCC, but they were far from sharing a similar goal or vision of the future with the organization because they were so deeply divided amongst themselves. After all, they had made their decision to flee the Soviet Union as individuals and families, not as a group. As the Fernheim Colony moved from one crisis to another, their fractured identifications not only inhibited the MCC's projected future of unity and cooperation but their own ability to see themselves as a united group.

For its part, the MCC undertook the daunting task of transporting the Fernheim refugees, covering their debts, and purchasing the *Corporación Paraguaya* because they believed that Paraguay held the promise of a new Mennonite homeland, far from the incursions of hostile governments and the terror of invading armies. Amidst a cacophony of Mennonite voices that proposed various destinies for the colonists, the MCC pressed forward with linking the colonists' narrative to an emerging North American-style Mennonitism, which often perturbed the Fernheimers. Attendant to this project were the inevitable consequences of institution building: quarterly reports, standards of accountability, cost-benefit analyses, propaganda, and a sustainable cash flow. Thus, form often followed funding as the MCC reckoned with the temporal difficulties of cajoling the Fernheim Colony into accepting its vision of Mennonitism and reporting its successes to an expectant North American constituency.

On a broader level, the decades of the 1920s and 1930s were an unprecedented time of both interconnection and conflict among Mennonites worldwide. Concepts of nation, state, and race that were a prominent feature in the writings of Mennonites such as J. P. Dyck, J. J. Hildebrand, and Quiring figured into these debates, especially among the

nearly 30,000 Mennonites who arrived in the Americas from the Soviet Union. As Hitler's "New Germany" unfolded into a world-encompassing vision of German solidarity, the Mennonites of the Paraguayan Chaco stood at a crossroads between their religious identity as Mennonites and their purported national identity as Germans.

CHAPTER V. PEANUTS FOR THE FÜHRER

The Third Mennonite World Conference was held in Amsterdam in the summer of 1936. Much had changed since the 1930 conference—particularly regarding the delegates’ notions of German and Mennonite identity. Alongside other attendees—including Bender, D. Toews, and Unruh—a Fernheim Colony member by the name of Friedrich Kliewer, who was pursuing doctorate studies in Germany, was also present at the conference and spoke on its behalf. Highly fluent in the discourse surrounding Mennonite religious and German national identity, Kliewer indicated that the Fernheim Colony was a model German village, although Mennonite in its religious orientation.¹ The speech and an article titled “Mennonite Young People’s Work in the Paraguayan Chaco” were subsequently printed in two issues of the scholarly journal *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. Kliewer wrote of the “new insight” that God revealed to colonists about their membership in the German *Volk* and argued that Fernheim Colony was

endeavoring to arouse and strengthen the national [*völkischen*] forces in our midst, so that we shall be strong to resist the forces of degeneration which will attack us from the outside. After all we as German-speaking Mennonites belong to the great German national and cultural group, and we wish to affirm our participation in “Germandom.” What the Canadian Mennonites of our neighbor colony, who left their homeland for the sake of maintaining their German schools, rather unconsciously feel, we in Fernheim wish to make conscious and fruitful in the training of our children and youth.²

What caused Kliewer to announce the Fernheim Colony’s loyalty to the German nation? What were the “forces of degeneration” that he feared? What of Bender’s assertion six years earlier that the Fernheim Colony would be a model “Mennonite state,” containing a “Mennonite nation” [*Mennoniten-Völklein*]? What of the Menno Colony’s loyalty to these identifications who—according to Kliewer—“no longer maintain a living

¹ Friedrich Kliewer, “The Mennonites of Paraguay.” Kliewer’s original message is found in “Vortrag von Fritz Kliewer über Paraguay,” in *Der Allgemeine Kongress der Mennoniten gehalten in Amsterdam, Elspeet, Witmarsum (Holland) 29. Juni bis 3. Juli 1936*, ed. D. Christian Neff (Karlsruhe, Germany: Heinrich Schneider, 1936), 75-78.

² Friedrich Kliewer, “Mennonite Young People’s Work in the Paraguayan Chaco,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 11, no. 2 (April 1937): 126. *Mennonite Quarterly Review* translated the article from German to English.

connection” with Germany?³ Ultimately, how and why did a German national identification so easily merge with the Fernheim Colony’s nascent collective narrative while the Menno Colony remained altogether indifferent?

Bold as they were, Kliewer’s 1936 statements were fraught with as many ambiguities as Bender’s 1930 speech. The heart of the problem was that neither Fernheim Colony nor Menno Colony Mennonites fully comprehended the type of Germanness adumbrated by Germany’s new Nazi government or the type of Mennoniteness promoted by North American Mennonites. Indeed, the Menno Colony did not desire to have a clear understanding of either; they were happy to identify themselves entirely at the local level. Alternately, the Fernheim Colony’s identifications remained as chaotic and varied as their migration stories from Russia to Paraguay and the geopolitical spheres through which they had traversed. For this reason, the Fernheim Mennonites searched for solid ground upon which to build a collective narrative by cultivating the land, drawing closer to the Paraguayan government, establishing a missionary organization, and (temperamentally) working with American Mennonites. They also looked to the Nazi government and its *völkisch* organizations for validation as members of the German nation because they had “discovered” their Germanness during their sojourn in the country.

Led by Kliewer, and nursed by Quiring and Unruh, the Fernheim Colony’s homegrown *völkisch* movement attempted to guide the colony away from seeing itself as an arbitrary collection of Mennonite refugees from Russia and toward an understanding that they were *German* Mennonites with a special place in Germany’s national story. The Nazi Party’s state-subsidized *völkisch* movement aided them. During the 1920s, Germany’s *völkisch* proponents viewed the liberal orientation of the Weimar government as a deterrent to national unity but they did not lament the regime’s liberal associational laws, which allowed *völkisch* supporters to fund educational and relief organizations on behalf of their imagined brethren abroad, such as *Brüder in Not*.⁴ Now the *völkisch*

³ Ibid., 126.

⁴ Renate Bridenthal, “Germans from Russia: The Political Network of a Double Diaspora,” in *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness*, ed. Krista O’Donnell, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 194.

organizations that had emphasized “the Germans” collective suffering under the Weimar Republic became more pugnacious in their interpretation of Germanness under Nazi rule.

Groups such as the German Foreign Institute (*Deutsches Ausland Institut, DAI*) and especially the Association for Germans Abroad (*Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, VDA*)—which more than doubled in size from under 1,000,000 to over 2,000,000 between 1925 and 1929—advanced strident claims that the German state should help all members of the German nation, no matter where they resided.⁵ In one book, published in conjunction with the Government Migration Office (*Reichswanderungsamtes*), the *VDA* conceded, “In modern German history, there is no period in which the boundaries of nation and state overlapped completely.” Despite this handicap, the organization argued that the “deepening of a [national] state of consciousness” among *Auslandsdeutsche* could transform Germany into a “world power” and advance its interests on economic, political, and cultural fronts. It argued that an “alertness” of Germany’s global connections “forms the spirit and cultural community of all Germans!”⁶ This mandate extended to even the most remote *auslandsdeutsch* communities, including the Chaco Mennonites.

The good intentions expressed by the MCC’s American, English-speaking representatives were outmatched by a well-oiled *völkisch* publicity machine that was more inspiring and relevant to the Fernheim colonists’ local situation. *VDA* propaganda on German global unity especially found a receptive audience. With Hitler at its helm, the Third Reich represented a sort of (trans)nationalist monarchy as well as a community of peers that was united in opposition to communism—a political and social alliance that they were invited to join. Naturally, this stance was attractive to a group of people who were exiled by the Bolsheviks, but it also had deeper roots. According to historian John Thiesen, “The [Russian] anti-German nationalist agitation beginning in the 1890s, the expropriation laws and anti-German hysteria of World War I, and the continuing anti-German prejudice surviving even the Bolshevik Revolution all drove the Mennonites

⁵ For a concise overview of the *DAI* and *VDA* mandates see Grams, 7-14. See also Reagin, 253-254.

⁶ Friedrich Flierl, “Die Ausbreitung des deutschen Volkes,” in *Deutsche im Ausland - im Auftrage des Reichswanderungsamtes und in Verbindung mit dem Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Mohr and Walter von Hauff (Breslau, Germany: F. Hirt, 1923): 1, 17.

together with others who were classified as Germans.”⁷ Though colonists’ Russian patriotism was extinguished with the flames of the First World War, they retained their ability to imagine themselves belonging to a fatherland governed by a benevolent ruler. For example, upon being baptized, many colonists would have recited a commentary on the Russian Mennonites’ “Elbing catechism,” which included the words “we experience the great emotion and sacred obligation of gratitude that unites us with our dear Russian fatherland... our hearts beat in loyal submission to our imperial family... [so] we should pray both in our public services and in our private chambers for our fatherland and our emperor.”⁸ With all of the power and gravitas of a major world power, the Nazi state appeared to take the geopolitical threat of global communism seriously and defend its members no matter where they resided. Even more significantly, the idea of unity—particularly the idea that national unity could be replicated within their small colony—was most compelling to the Fernheim colonists. Historian H. Glenn Penny observes that other German-speaking enclaves reacted similarly to nationalist concepts during the interwar years by “instrumentalizing” the term *Auslandsdeutsche* to serve their own local purposes and secure a wide range of economic and cultural privileges from Germany.⁹

Thus, a number of Fernheimers became enamored of the Nazi movement because they wanted to belong to something that was larger than themselves and larger than their colony. At least initially, colonists held little hope that they could live within the boundaries of the German nation-state. Rather, Fernheim’s leaders believed the Nazi movement’s emphasis on *völkisch* unity was an attractive template for the colony’s local unity. Once again, a shared cause promised to validate that the settlement was not simply a random collection of individuals, but possessed a meaning and a mandate. A national narrative was a bright star upon which they could hang their own fledgling story. Yet the

⁷ Thiesen, “The Mennonite Encounter with National Socialism,” 112.

⁸ The commentary was written by written by David H. Epp, a Mennonite preacher, historian, editor of the newspaper *Botschafter*, and chairman of the Russian *KfK*. See “*Kurze Erklärungen und Erläuterungen zum Katechismus der christlichen, taufgesinnten Gemeinden, so Mennoniten genannt werden*,” trans. Al Reimer (Odessa: A. Schultze, 1897; 2nd ed., Klaterinoslav: D. H. Epp, 1899; Canadian reprint of 1899 ed., Rosthern: Dietrich Epp Verlag, 1941), 176-179. Quoted in Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 108.

⁹ Penny, “Latin American Connections,” 376. Penny bases this observation on Hoerder, “The German-Language Diasporas.”

merger needed an interpreter, someone who could meaningfully weave both stories together and account for their most vital strands: history, destiny, theology, and culture. Kliewer positioned himself as the man for the job. Erudite and persuasive, Kliewer used the Bible and Nazi propaganda to deftly entwine the Fernheim refugees' history as *German-Mennonites* with a destiny that promised closer ties to their "homeland."

Fernheim colonists wished to repurpose a national narrative as a local narrative, thereby reinforcing their own group unity through an attachment to a transnational community. As historian Alon Confino has demonstrated with the German *Heimat* movement and as Goossen has shown with Germany's Mennonites in Imperial Germany, local and national identifications were mutually reinforcing concepts. German nationals interpreted the "nation as a local metaphor" just as Germany's Mennonites "interpreted [the] nation as a religious metaphor."¹⁰ In the example of the Fernheim Colony, the nation was both a religious and local metaphor: Hitler was a benevolent Christian ruler and the *VDA* was an organization that would bind the Fernheim colonists to each other and to their "homeland."

Yet this chapter also demonstrates that in separate ways both colonies frustrated the Nazi goal of kindling *Auslandsdeutsche* solidarity with the Nazi state. Fernheim's leaders established a *völkisch* youth organization and cultivated a relationship with the *VDA*, which supplied them with a schoolteacher and educational materials, but the colony suffered from such an acute lack of consensus within its own ranks that *völkisch* ideology ended up causing more friction than harmony. Moreover, as the *VDA*'s representatives became acquainted with the Fernheim Mennonites, it realized that they did not live up to its evolving definition of Germanness. This was partly due to colonists' hesitations over some features of Nazi ideology but it was also due to their religious traditions, such as giving their children "Jewish" names. Hence, when *reichsdeutsch* individuals visited the Colony later in the decade, they were surprised and suspicious of its "foreign" and religious articulation of Germanness.

¹⁰ Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Goossen, 9. See also Applegate.

Alternately, the Menno Colony flatly refused to participate in any *völkisch* activities. Individuals in this settlement did not view Hitler as a leader who deserved their loyalty since they were already “subjects” of a country that guaranteed their *Privilegium*. They had land and local autonomy in Paraguay. What could the nationalist and quasi-democratic Germany offer that they did not already possess? They also saw within German propaganda and the *VDA*’s “free” school materials, a new manifestation of an old threat to graft foreign identifications on to their collective narrative and educate their young people along national lines. Hitler’s promise of a “New Germany” and the *VDA*’s books and pamphlets consequently remained unconvincing to the Menno Colony on both local and transnational levels.

The Jugendbund Influence

In December 1931, about a month after the divisive MCC representative G. G. Hiebert left the Fernheim Colony, the German envoy Bülow, toured both Mennonite settlements.¹¹ It was the first time he had made the trip, since the Menno Colony did not seek his counsel or invite him to visit the Chaco when they immigrated in 1926-1927. Bülow was impressed by the colonies’ cleanliness and the fact that they had given their villages German names. He was also surprised at the level of visual similarity between the groups. Bülow was particularly glad to observe that the colonies spoke either Low or High German in their daily activities. Bülow, however, was disappointed that the groups were not socially unified. The relationship between the two was “clouded” due to the ideological differences between the Menno Colony’s “simple farmers” and Fernheim’s more educated settlers. Bülow also speculated that Menno Colony was “jealous” of the Fernheim Colony’s overseas financial support.¹² The diplomat was the first representative of the German government to visit the colonies and set the tone for how subsequent Germans would understand them: They held a great deal of cultural potential as a German enclave in South America, but the Menno Colony’s religious peculiarities and

¹¹ Bülow, “Bericht Nr. 184, Asunción,” December 17, 1931, Buenos Aires 67A (Mennoniten-Einwanderung nach Paraguay), Shelf 48, Carton 2439, AA. Incidentally, Bülow had briefly met Hiebert earlier in the year to discuss land prices. Bülow’s wife also made the trip to gain a better understanding of Mennonite women’s concerns, though her notes do not appear in the report.

¹² *Ibid.*

the Fernheim's internal conflicts threatened to keep them separated and undermine a lasting connection to the German state. Nevertheless, there were a number of individuals within the Fernheim Colony that hoped to change Bülow's estimation by starting where so many other nationalist organizations did, by "educating" the youth on their Germanness.

Between 1932 and 1933, a series of events provoked the Fernheim Colony to strengthen its attachment to Germany and the Nazi Party by creating a German-style youth group (*Jugendbund*). According to Kliever, the rowdy behavior of a few of the colony's youths inspired him and another colony schoolteacher, Julius Legiehn, to create the youth group. Despite the local nature of the problem, Kliever believed that it should be solved with a nationalist solution, one that would simultaneously promote obedience to (his) authority and bring the colony into sustained contact with German (trans)National Socialism. The plan was appealing because a Nazi-style youth group provided a ready-made organizational template—a "franchise," so to speak—complete with its own activities, songs, and rituals. Yet the goal was not to create little Storm Troopers that would defend the Nazi state, but to adopt the strategies of the Nazi *Jugendbund* (or *Hitlerjugend*) to suit the Colony's local needs and adapt a national narrative to suit the Colony's local one.

The origins of the insubordination are somewhat unclear but it appears to have stemmed from the colony's lack of opportunities for young people and colony leaders' inability to maintain control of its members. According to Kliever, about twenty of Fernheim's young men were employed at a Casado-owned agricultural station at Palo Santo, which was located about ninety kilometers east of the colony. Kliever avers that within a few months they had become engaged in various "intolerable excesses" that warranted action from colony leaders.¹³ According to colony records, the *KfK* discussed the situation in November 1932. They were especially disturbed that "individuals [at the station] behave very badly, especially regarding scorn for God's Word."¹⁴ Ultimately, the

¹³ Friedrich Kliever, "Mennonite Young People's Work," 121.

¹⁴ "Protokoll einer K. F. K.-Sitzung," November 14, 1932, ACF. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 80.

youths' actions embarrassed the Fernheim Colony's *Oberschulze* enough to request that they be fired from the station.¹⁵

When the young men returned to the colony, they apparently brought their disorderly conduct with them. According to Kliewer, the troubles came to a climax during an Easter gathering at Rosenort, when the young men engaged in "very extreme misbehavior" of an undisclosed nature. The details are sketchy but in Kliewer's telling, the behavior required "energetic [disciplinary] action," by colony leaders, who meted out various "penalties" to the "rioters."¹⁶ Yet according to historian John D. Thiesen, when the colony convened a public hearing in Filadelfia, it apparently ended with leaders being embarrassed in the eyes of the broader community.¹⁷ It is possible that the discord was exacerbated by the fact that colonists held different ideas about parenting, youth culture, and their obligations to colony leaders and Casado. Shortly thereafter, Kliewer and Legiehn seized on the opportunity to find a solution to the problem of juvenile idleness and disobedience through a youth group organized under their control.

Kliewer and Legiehn seemed suited for the job of working with the colony's youths because they were (relatively) young schoolteachers. Kliewer was born in 1905 and attended a teacher-training school in Łódź, Russia (now Poland) from 1926-1930.¹⁸ Here, as a member of the German-speaking minority in Poland, Kliewer absorbed the teaching philosophy and school materials promulgated by the German School Association (*Deutsche Schulverein*) from their regional base in Bydgoszcz. He also became familiar with *VDA* materials aimed at *Auslandsdeutsche* and brought this

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The festival was variously reported as a youth-sponsored "Chacofest" or a "chacrafest." The latter is a mixed Spanish and German expression for a farm worker celebration. See Friedrich Kliewer, "Mennonite Young People's Work," 121; Quiring, *Deutsche erschliessen den Chaco*, 182-183; and Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* f. 19, p. 264.

¹⁷ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 80.

¹⁸ Robert Foth, *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, "Deutsch-Wymysle (Poland)," last modified September 14, 2014, accessed September 20, 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Wymysle_\(Poland\)](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Wymysle_(Poland);); Jakob Warkentin, "Kliewer, Friedrich," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 244-245.

knowledge with him to Paraguay.¹⁹ At the age of 25, he arrived in the Chaco with his parents and siblings as part of the small Polish Mennonite contingent that accompanied the Moscow refugees to Paraguay.²⁰ Legiehn, a slight man with a shy face, was born in Ukraine in 1899. At age 31, he arrived in the Chaco as part of the Moscow refugee group.²¹ He settled with his wife and three children in the village of Schönwiese. Naturally, the schoolteachers viewed the question of youth delinquency as the result of bad education. From Kliewer's perspective, the root of the problem concerned the "communist schools" that some of the youths had attended while still in Russia.²² Although the disturbances were coarse and unsystematic, Kliewer saw them as part of an ideological problem that required an ideological solution—their "reeducation" from "communist" juvenile delinquency to *völkisch* good behavior.²³

Coincidentally, Walter Quiring, the German Mennonite scholar and eventual Nazi propagandist, was living in the Fernheim Colony during the first half of 1933.²⁴ He was highly esteemed by the Fernheim colonists and knowledgeable about Germany's political situation.²⁵ More than their Menno Colony neighbors, the Fernheim Colony wished to stay abreast of political developments in the broader world, particularly as they related to Germany and Russia. Quiring relayed his knowledge of the Nazi movement to a curious

¹⁹ Kurt Daniel Stahl, "Zwischen Volkstumspflege, Nationalsozialismus und Mennonitentum, unveröffentlichte wissenschaftliche," (Wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit zur Ersten Staatsprüfung für das Lehramt an Gymnasien im Fach Geschichte, Universität Jena, 2007), 35.

²⁰ Robert Foth, *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, "Deutsch-Wymysle (Poland)," [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Wymysle_\(Poland\)](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Wymysle_(Poland)), last modified September 14, 2014, accessed September 20, 2014; Warkentin, "Kliewer, Frederick," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 244-245.

²¹ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 80.

²² Like MCC leaders' accusations, this charge should perhaps be taken with a grain of salt. "Communist" may simply have been the worst bad word that Kliewer could call them.

²³ Friedrich Kliewer, "Mennonite Young People's Work," 121.

²⁴ "Verschiedenes," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), May 1933, 6.

²⁵ Ted D. Regehr, "Quiring, Walter (1893-1983)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified April 12, 2014, accessed May 12, 2014, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Quiring,_Walter_\(1893-1983\)&oldid=118693](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Quiring,_Walter_(1893-1983)&oldid=118693).

KfK at some point in the fall of 1933.²⁶ His information inspired the committee to draft a resolution in which the colonists proclaimed their Germanness to Unruh in Germany and the German consulate in Asunción.²⁷

The Fernheim colonists also wanted to make their enthusiasm for the Nazi's political victories known to the German government in Berlin. They believed that the party's ascendancy portended great things not only for the German nation, themselves included, but also for Christianity and the geopolitical balance of power. On May 18, 1933—about the same time as Quiring's departure for Germany—one of the settlement's *Brüdergemeinde* preachers, Gerhard Isaak, spoke enthusiastically at a colony meeting about Germany's "national awakening" (*nationale Erhebung*).²⁸ His speech led the settlement's leaders—*Oberschulze* David Löwen and *KfK* leader N. Wiebe—to write a letter to Berlin expressing their "excitement" over the country's "new direction."²⁹ The overall character of the message suggests that they had little understanding of the new regime's leadership but that they saw continuity between the new government and the nationalist organizations that existed under the Weimar government.

With apparent serendipity, Germany "discovered" its new direction—its mission as a nation—at the same time the Fernheim Colony was recognizing its own mission in South America. Speaking on behalf of the *KfK* and the Fernheim Colony, the letter stated,

We German Mennonites of the Paraguayan Chaco follow the events in our dear motherland and experience in spirit the national awakening of the German people. We are pleased that after a long time a German government stands at the head of the nation, freely and openly professing God as the ruler of the world, which can lead our enslaved and battered people to new heights.³⁰

²⁶ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 81.

²⁷ "KfK minutes," May 9, 1933, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies (hereafter CMBS), Fresno Pacific University, Fresno, California. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 79.

²⁸ "Die Mennonitensiedlungen des paraguayischen Chaco und die nationale Erhebung in Deutschland," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), June 1933, 2.

²⁹ Ibid. N. Wiebe's official title was "*Geistlicher Vorstand*." He was the chairman of the colony's pastors and the leader of Fernheim colony's *Allianzgemeinde*, though this group would later separate themselves from the *völkisch* cause. The letter was reprinted in the "Paraguay" column of the *Deutsches Ausland Institut's, Kalender des Auslandsdeutschtums 1934* (Stuttgart), 16, no. 21 (1933): 542-543.

³⁰ "Die Mennonitensiedlungen."

The letter went on to praise the new government's strong stance against communism and criticize the Weimar government's tolerance of this "ruinous" ideology. Fernheim's civic and religious administrators viewed the new government's stance against communism as a "mighty deed," and as a result felt "most closely associated with [it]." It concluded by declaring the Fernheim Colony's "loyalty [*Treuebekenntnis*] to the German people, to which we belong... [but] without forgetting that we are loyal citizens of our Paraguayan fatherland."³¹ The colonists affirmed their Germanness but they also affirmed that they were loyal to the state in which they resided. This position was common among the world's *Auslandsdeutsche* enclaves but it is likely the Fernheim Colony was particularly adamant in their support of the new government because of its clear position against the Soviet Union.

The letter's enthusiastic tone suggests that the authors viewed the ascension of a new government as unequivocally good for *Auslandsdeutsche*. It emphasizes the unity of the German people—an important value for a colony beset by the Chaco War and struggling to maintain group coherence—and conflates the colonists' suffering at the hands of the Soviet government with the perceived suffering of "enslaved and battered" Germans elsewhere in the world. Again, the Mennonites response echoes other German-speaking enclaves in Latin America. Historian Jürgen Buchenau speaks of similar sentiments among Germans in Mexico City. *Auslandsdeutsche* in this location looked favorably on the new government's aspirations toward a greater Germany and its geopolitical assertiveness, especially against the threat of global communism.³² Altogether, the Fernheim colonists viewed the Nazi party as an improvement for the German nation-state and Germans living abroad.

In addition to Quiring's talk with the *KfK*, it is also possible that he provided Kliewer and Legiehn with the inspiration for establishing the colony's *Jugendbund* as an ongoing testament to their nationalist aspirations.³³ An initial meeting for the group's formation was convened in the village of Lichtfelde in early-May 1933, not too long

³¹ "Die Mennonitensiedlungen."

³² Jürgen Buchenau, *Tools of Progress: A German Merchant Family in Mexico City, 1865-Present* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 2004, 122-123.

³³ "Verschiedenes," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), May 1933, 6.

before Quiring's departure. According to Kliewer, it attracted members from all three of Fernheim's Mennonite churches: *Allianzgemeinde*, *Brüdergemeinde*, and *Mennonitengemeinde*. The representatives agreed that the *Jugendbund* should be a joint project between the colony's churches. However, he argued that it "should not be limited to religious work but should include the cultivation of the peculiar cultural heritage of the group as Mennonites and as Germans."³⁴ Thus, the Fernheim colonists embarked upon their first collective social undertaking—an enterprise that flavored their religious precepts with a nationalist tang and laid the foundation for an imaginary bridge to their German "homeland."

At a second conference in August 1933, Kliewer was nominated as the group's leader (*Bundesleiter*), a Peter Klassen was named the deputy leader (*Vertreter*) and Legiehn was given the position of secretary (*Schriftführer*). The assembly also christened the *Jugendbund* as the "German Mennonite Young People's Federation of Fernheim Colony" (*Deutsche-Mennonitischen Jugendbund der Kolonie Fernheim*).³⁵ Notably, there were no Menno Colony individuals represented at the gathering. In the weeks following the August meeting, Kliewer was chagrined to learn that membership was flagging in some villages and that many of the "elder brethren did not understand the purposes and goals of the work and unjustly attributed various undesirable intentions to the new organization."³⁶

Recognizing the public relations problem, Kliewer convened a colony-wide youth meeting in the village of Waldesruh in October 1933, which was perhaps the first general, non-holiday celebration held in the settlement. This "youth fest" (*Jugendfest*), as it was called, was better planned than the August meeting and included "flowers and other festival materials;" fresh baked biscuits, coffee, and tea; a tent that could accommodate 700 people; and a raised platform with the conference's motto "Forward, upward, homeward!" written above it.³⁷ The gathering climaxed in a group rendition of the

³⁴ Friedrich Kliewer, "Mennonite Young People's Work," 122.

³⁵ Friedrich Kliewer, "Aus der Jugendarbeit in der Kolonie Fernheim," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), October 1933, p. 1.

³⁶ Friedrich Kliewer, "Mennonite Young People's Work," 122.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

Jugendbund's official song, "Call to Arms" (*Aufruf zum Kampf*), which apparently did not provoke censure from religious leaders. As the Nazi Party in Germany was simultaneously learning to invent its own traditions through public spectacles and festivals, Fernheim Colony's *Jugendbund* leaders also recognized the value of orchestrated performances that galvanized the community.

Apparently, the celebration proceeded so smoothly that colony leaders approved of the *Jugendbund*, though they continued to monitor the group's leadership meetings. By the end of the year, the group claimed 350 participants from thirteen of the colony's seventeen villages.³⁸ The success of the October assembly lent further credibility the notion that the colonists could promote solidarity by instructing young people in their shared history as "German Mennonites." Yet it soon became clear that Kliever and Lieghen did not want the youths to be Mennonites (who happened to be Germans) but rather Germans (who happened to be Mennonite). On a broader level, the *Jugendbund* embodied the collective hope that the colonists were not alone in the world but had a real community in Paraguay and an imagined ethnic community in Germany.

The *Jugendbund*'s activities highlight the type of organization that Kliever and his associates wished to build, which increasingly intermingled religious and nationalist activities. The group was apparently modeled on the Nazi Party's Hitler Youth (*Hitlerjugend*), which had itself been named the *Jugendbund* from 1922-1923. Its work revolved around weekly village-level meetings, organized hikes, bonfires, field trips, and other outdoor activities. The first meeting of the month concerned Bible devotions and prayer. The second meeting entailed studying and discussing Mennonite history. The third focused on the "development of Germany in the past and in the present." The fourth meeting consisted of teaching the youths about good manners and music. Whenever there were five weeks in a month, the last meeting was devoted to learning German folk songs since, according to Kliever, the youth "had no common treasury of songs." Of course this statement overlooked the religious hymns that they certainly shared.³⁹ The Fernheim Mennonites' support for the "New Germany" was therefore not confined to a few giddy

³⁸ Ibid., 125.

³⁹ Ibid., 127-128.

months of excitement. It was carried forth through an ongoing dialogue between Unruh, Quiring, Kliewer, Legiehn, and the colony's civic and religious leaders about how Fernheim Colony's "little Mennonite nation" (*Mennoniten-völklein*) fit in to the emerging concept of a Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*.

The Bible was recognized by all of the colony's churches as the definitive source of God's guidance and so the *Jugendbund* and the concept of a *Mennoniten-völklein* had to make theological sense. *Jugendbund* leaders professed that they were not trying to undermine the colony's Mennonite faith, but they did see it as more of a cultural tradition than as a living connection. Legiehn clarified this point in *Menno-Blatt* when he claimed that the group advocated the "biblical Christianity" of their forefathers but made no mention of applying Mennonite theology to contemporary life.⁴⁰ Alternately, the group wished to celebrate the colony's German nationality, which they felt was more relevant to the times. In a circuitous way, Legiehn tied the "wonderful diversity" of clans, nations, and languages expressed in Genesis 10:4-5, to Mennonites and other present-day Germans discovering their national "ennoblement."⁴¹ The Bible's unfolding narrative of Christian peoplehood was unfurling before their eyes as German peoplehood. In Russia, God blessed Mennonites for their faith. Now God blessed them for their Germanness. The implication, of course, is that the group was not nationally Russian but historically Mennonite and presently German. *Jugendbund* leaders were interested in the *völkisch* cause for local and cultural reasons and were relatively unconcerned with the Nazi Party's legal, legislative, or military imperatives. Kliewer and Legiehn earnestly hoped that under their influence, the Fernheim Colony—and especially its youths—would embrace their national identity and thereby achieve national *and* religious harmony.

Unruh, who increasingly saw the Mennonite confession's destiny entwined with the nation, also guided the Fernheim Colony's "recovery" of its German national identity. During the 1930s, he was the principal interlocutor between Germany's Mennonites, the Fernheim Colony, the *VDA*, and the German government (to whom the colonists' still owed money). Unruh welcomed the Nazi's rise to power since he believed that Hitler was

⁴⁰ Julius Legiehn, "Unser Jugendbund," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay) August 1934, 3-4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

a deeply religious man who revered agrarian communities like the Mennonites. Others within the German Mennonite confession likewise shared this perspective. The type of Mennonitism articulated by Germany's Mennonite publications and leaders was an attractive template for the Colony since it promised that individuals' could hold their national and religious allegiances in tandem.

Thus, as the Fernheim Mennonites looked to Germany to inform their attitudes about the Nazi government, Germany's Mennonite churches aligned themselves with the strident mission of the new government. For example, an August 1933 issue of *Menno-Blatt* included an announcement that a recent conference of Mennonite leaders (*Kuratoriumssitzung*) in Germany had decided to drop the traditional Mennonite principle of non-resistance to violence (*Wehrlosigkeit*) from their statement of faith.⁴² By the mid-1930s, Germany's Mennonite youth commission and its periodical, the *Mennonite Youth Viewpoint* (*Mennonitische Jugendwarte*), were also promoting a quasi-nationalist articulation of the faith. This position was uncontentious, unsurprising, and represented the final touch on the German Mennonites' acceptance of the goals of the German state.⁴³ The country's Mennonites had aligned themselves with German nation-building as far back as the 1870s when most decided to trade military service for citizenship in the new *Reich* and began unifying as a confession and formalizing their religious principles. As in Russia during this same decade, hundreds of Mennonites left Germany for the Americas, while their brethren steadily incorporated themselves into German society.⁴⁴

Germany's Mennonite publications and leading voices argued that National Socialism was actually good for Christianity since it promised to clearly separate the spheres of church and state. In a surprising twist on Anabaptist ecclesiology, German Mennonites argued that "the proper separation of religion and politics, the separation between state and church (but please not between *Volk* and church!) that is so hotly

⁴² "Verschiedenes," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), August 1933, p. 6.

⁴³ According to historian Diether Götz Lichdi, "This official position was widely endorsed, and was mentioned in many articles in various Mennonite periodicals." See *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, "National Socialism (Nazism) (Germany)," last modified May 23, 2014, accessed March 20, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=National_Socialism_\(Nazism\)_\(Germany\)&oldid=122567](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=National_Socialism_(Nazism)_(Germany)&oldid=122567).

⁴⁴ Goossen, 7-12.

contested [in these times] was realized some four-hundred years ago in our founding principles.”⁴⁵ Thus, the Mennonites’ confessional history actually embodied one of the highest ideals of religion in modern-day Nazi Germany. “After all,” points out historian James Lichti, the position could be theologically justified since “Jesus died because the ‘Jewish church’ had interfered in the affairs of the Roman state.”⁴⁶ As American Mennonites advanced their first articulations of a shared set of Mennonite principles that highlighted Anabaptism’s “historic” proclivities for democracy and the separation of church and state, German Mennonites drifted toward viewing the confession as the harbinger of separation of church and state under the Nazis, which legitimating their supplication before Hitler.

Nevertheless, the German Mennonite discourse on state and church relations in Nazi Germany remained “stunning” in its incoherence.⁴⁷ It lauded the state’s “Christian” character and encouraged Mennonites to subordinate themselves to it, even as it advertised itself as apolitical and fiercely independent. Under this incoherent framework, *any* interpretation of Mennonitism that prioritized state objectives was justifiable to German Mennonites and therefore justified any interpretation of the faith that the Fernheim Colony’s *völkisch* faction cared to advance. Yet German Mennonitism was not alone in its tolerance of government objectives. Mennonites in Canada and the United States maintained their own positive state relations, provided that a few—though not all—of their various historical tenants were respected by the law. In each instance, laws and policies legitimated the Mennonite faith as much as their communities.

Marked by its elasticity, the style of Mennonitism articulated by German Mennonites such as Unruh, allowed colonists to retain the comfortable parameters of a familiar *personal* religious story—birth, salvation, death, and deliverance—while giving

⁴⁵ Ernst Fellmann, “Warum und wozu Jugendarbeit?” *Mennonitische Jugendwarte* (Elbing, Germany) 3 (1936), 72. Quoted in James Irvin Lichti, *Houses on the Sand? Pacifist Denominations in Nazi Germany* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 42. Pastors Gustav Kraemer and Horst Quiring made similar observations in Mennonite publications throughout the 1930s. See Kraemer, *Wir und unsere Volksgemeinschaft 1938*, (Crefeld, Germany: Crefeld Mennonitengemeinde, 1938), 15; and Quiring, “Kirche, Volk und Staat in mennonitischer Sicht,” *Mennonitische Jugendwarte* 5 (1937), 106-107. Also see Fritz Hege, “Das Täuferium in der Reformationszeit,” *Mennonitische Jugendwarte* 2 (1935), 52.

⁴⁶ Lichti, 42.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

them a German homeland beyond the alien Chaco and a temporal destiny beyond their alienated Russian past. Accordingly, *völkisch* proponents argued that overt expressions of Mennonitism were best left to individuals' private lives, or at most the lives of the colony's *separate* churches. The colony's *collective* identification was best represented by its Germanness, since it was arguably the one thing that all colonists shared in common (other than their unfortunate status as refugees).

In June 1934, Kliewer and Legiehn led a three-day conference for the *Jugendbund* leadership committee that blended National Socialism with a generic articulation of Christianity. At the assembly, Kliewer read a letter from Unruh, which stated "Make the concerns of our nation yours; think of Hindenburg and Hitler, on God and our Savior!"⁴⁸ A month later, the *Jugendbund* was permitted to launch a two-page *Menno-Blatt* insert titled *Fighting Youth (Kämpfende Jugend)* with the encouragement of Unruh and other friends of the group. The first page of each issue generally contained an inspirational or didactic message that encouraged its young readers to be virtuous, obey authority, and sustain the fight against evil forces. The second page included various short announcements about the group's past and future meetings. The paper's name was an ironic choice considering the confession's ostensible emphasis on nonviolence. Bizarrely, the name was also used by the German communist writer and *Rote Fahne* contributor Walter Schönstedt for a 1931 novel about Germany's struggling proletariat. It is unclear how much resistance there was to the bellicose title but editor N. Siemens deemed it appropriate because the youth were not using physical weapons but were battling "for nonviolence as defined by Jesus Christ." N. Siemens also took the opportunity to encourage German and North American Mennonites to accept the paper as a gift that would connect the Fernheim youth to their friends abroad.⁴⁹

As the mouthpiece of the *Jugendbund*, the paper articulated a narrative of German Mennonitism that extended back to the confession's tangled history in Central Europe. It erased the line between "Mennonite" and "German" and blurred the line between spiritual and earthly "friends" and "enemies." In one article dated February 1935, Walter

⁴⁸ Ein jugendlicher Teilnehmer, "Jugendleiterkursus in Schönau," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay) June 1934, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Nikolai Siemens, "Kämpfende Jugend," *Kämpfende Jugend* (Fernheim, Paraguay), July 1934, 1.

Quiring proclaimed “for the first time a light has awakened Mennonite youths from the idle notion that *Auslandsdeutsche* Mennonites are Dutch or Russian Mennonites (*Mennonitas Russos* [sic])!—We are Germans! And for those who do not like it, they should find friends elsewhere.”⁵⁰ Quiring also motivated his readers to refrain from incorporating the Spanish language into their daily speech by arguing that Mennonites do not speak a unique “Mennonite dialect” or “mutilated Dutch,” but a pure and recognized form of Low German that they should be proud of.⁵¹ In general, *Kämpfende Jugend* contained more fighting words in support of Germanness than in support of Mennonitism. Apparently, this articulation of Mennonitism and its history was well received in the colony since it became a permanent monthly feature of the publication.

Menno-Blatt and *Kämpfende Jugend* were not the only publications floating around the Fernheim Colony. Colonists also subscribed to foreign newspapers—both Mennonite and German—that debated Mennonite and *Auslandsdeutsche* loyalty to Germany. Already by 1932, the colony was receiving sixty-four copies of the *Mennonitische Rundschau* and fifteen copies of *Der Bote*, which were both published in Canada.⁵² The Fernheim Colony held another thirty-five subscriptions to the German Mennonite paper *Dein Reich komme* (Thy Kingdom Come) and forty-eight subscriptions to *La Plata Post*, which was the weekly edition of the pro-Nazi *Deutsche La Plata Zeitung* published in Buenos Aires.⁵³ The colony also received copies of Paraguay’s leading German-language and pro-Nazi newspapers, *Deutsche Zeitung für Paraguay* and *Deutsche Warte*, which regularly carried announcements from the Fernheim Colony including a full-page article on the Mennonite colonies authored by Legiehn.⁵⁴ It may have also received copies of *Deutsche Post aus dem Osten*, whose mandate was to

⁵⁰ Walter (Jakob) Quiring, “Kampf dem Fremdwort!,” *Kämpfende Jugend* (Fernheim, Paraguay), February 1935, 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The former was established in 1880 to serve the Russian Mennonite diaspora in Canada, Russia, and the United States. The latter was established by and for the Mennonites who had left Russia in the 1920s. Thiesen, “Mennonite and Nazi?,” 88.

⁵³ Thiesen, “Mennonite and Nazi?” 88.

⁵⁴ Julius Legiehn, “Die Mennoniten im Chaco von Paraguay,” *Deutsche Warte* (Asunción), July 15, 1937, 56.

mobilize “Russian Germandom in all the world and to join it to the German *Muttervolk* under the leadership of Adolf Hitler.”⁵⁵

In the main, the German papers were staunchly pro-Nazi while the Mennonite papers expressed both pro- and anti-Nazi sentiments. Importantly, the publications informed colonists that they belonged to several overlapping national and transnational communities including German-speaking Mennonites, the Russian Mennonite diaspora, *Auslandsdeutsche*, and Paraguay’s own German-speaking minority. Holding these affiliations in equilibrium would become increasingly difficult as the German-based *VDA* insinuated itself in the colony’s schools and the MCC began drawing a line between non-resistant Mennonitism and a truculent Germany.

During the early 1930s, the *Jugendbund* gave form to National Socialism’s function as a symbol of unity. The colony’s *völkisch* proponents—Kliwer and Legiehn foremost among them—hoped to peg the colony’s local narrative to a larger Nazi narrative that promised strength through solidarity. *Kämpfende Jugend* likewise attempted to tie the colony’s youths to its allies in Germany, such as *Unruh* and *Quiring*. Although the German envoy Bülow had had little confidence in 1931 that the Fernheim Mennonites could overcome their differences and become an asset to Germany, within a few years the colony’s *völkisch* supporters laid claim to a popular youth group and a publication that clearly identified itself with the aims of the German state. By mid-decade, the notion that the Fernheim Colony was as German as it was Mennonite was assumed both in the Chaco and in Germany.

The VDA Influence

On August 5, 1934—at the height of the *Jugendbund*’s success—Kliwer left the Fernheim Colony for Germany to pursue doctorate studies in pedagogy at the University

⁵⁵ “An Unsere Leser und Freunde!” *Deutsche Zeitung für Paraguay* (Asunción), Eingehende Korrespondenz (amtliche) 1933, Cabinet 11B, ACF. Founded by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Deutschen aus Rußland und Polen, the periodical *Deutsche Post aus dem Osten* was published on a monthly basis from 1926 to 1943. In 1935, it was subsumed by the *Verband der Deutschen aus Rußland* and became the flagship Nazi publication aimed at Russian-Germans. It was also largely responsible for cultivating solidarity and pan-German identity between Russian-Germans and the German state. See Bridenthal, 196; Casteel, 121.

of Marburg.⁵⁶ The trip, his tuition, and finding a substitute teacher were sponsored by the *VDA* with Unruh's assistance.⁵⁷ During the 1930s, the *VDA*'s foreign connections and its voluminous cultural and educational materials were repurposed as vectors for Nazi indoctrination, which extended even to the remote Chaco. The organization's first contact with the Fernheim colonists occurred in Germany and in conjunction with *Brüder in Not*, when it provided refugees with food, clothing, and other supplies. Now the *VDA* looked on the compact, agrarian colony in the heart of South America as a strategic connection to the "homeland" that should be encouraged to remain within the national fold.⁵⁸ Like the CMBC and the MCC in North America, the *VDA* assumed that nodes of similar people who shared essential qualities could be found across the world, and should remain connected to each other and help each other. For this reason, it leaned on Kliever's replacement, the Russian Mennonite schoolteacher Peter Hildebrand, to maintain the colony's ties to Germany. P. Hildebrand, however, did not possess Kliever's finesse and could not translate Nazism into a vernacular that colonists understood. Rather, he ushered in more controversy than cooperation, which allowed doubt to seep into colonists' hope that the *völkisch* movement was a panacea for its disunity.

By the mid-1930s the *VDA* and other *völkisch* organizations were churning out massive quantities of propaganda under the ascendant Nazi regime, which exhibited a marked curiosity toward *Auslandsdeutsche* and valorized their experiences. Increased contact between Germany and *Auslandsdeutsche* represented part of a larger interwar experiment to see if the Nazi Party and its affiliate organizations could solve what they perceived to be a crisis of German (trans)national disunity. During the interwar years, Germany pursued "homeland nationalism," which encouraged contact between "the homeland" and German enclaves abroad.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ His dissertation was titled *Die deutsche Volksgruppe in Paraguay. Eine siedlungsgeschichtliche, volkskundliche und volkspolitische Untersuchung* (*The German minority in Paraguay. A settlement history, folkloric, and national political investigation*). See Warkentin, "Kliever, Frederick," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 244-245.

⁵⁷ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 85.

⁵⁸ Grams, 287.

⁵⁹ "Homeland nationalism" is diametrically opposed to "nationalizing nationalism." "Nationalizing nationalisms... are directed 'inward' by states toward their own territories and citizenries." Of course these

During the 1930s, the Nazis' outward orientation and interest in *Auslandsdeutsche* aligned with its promulgation of racial theories that assigned humanity into specific racial categories, called "*Volk*," that had separated out in the preceding centuries but were now dictated by history and pseudo-science to reforge their primordial solidarities. Yet the concept of *Volk* proved difficult to define. According to historian Jonathan Wagner:

The uniqueness of the *Volk* could not be defined in rational terms. *Völkisch* greatness lay in depth of soul, in the possession of deep, subjective qualities...a *Volk* was defined by its past, by those special traditions, customs, and manners it had evolved over the centuries. Thus each *Volk* remained culturally distinct, unique in thought and feelings, because its soul had a history of its own. The closeness of the *Volk* to nature, the *Volk's* possession of a tradition, of a history, meant that the *Volk* had roots. All true *Volk* groups were rooted firmly, secure in the belief that they had a permanent place in nature and history."⁶⁰

In the midst of this ambiguity, the Fernheim colonists hoped to carve out a spot for themselves within the German *Volk* even though most of them had only a vague understanding of the Nazi Party's combative nationalism and the racial ideology embodied in *völkisch* propaganda.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the Nazi Party and the *VDA* welcomed Fernheim Colony's interest in their imagined homeland and reached out to reeducate them along *völkisch* lines.

Aside from the *VDA*, the MCC was the only other organization interested in influencing the Fernheim Colony's loyalties during the 1930s. Saddled with the task of handling the colony's debts, the nascent MCC had little time and few resources to promote shared Mennonite values and disseminate religious and education materials. Though the MCC may have wished to exert a greater influence over the colony's culture, they simply did not possess a German-language propaganda arsenal, and teaching English to a German-speaking colony in a Spanish-speaking country was admittedly pointless. Hence, Fernheim Mennonites looked more to Germany, the country to whom they were

nationalisms are not mutually exclusive; states can pursue both courses. See Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 111.

⁶⁰ Wagner, 177.

⁶¹ For the 1940s American Mennonite debate over "political pacifism" or "biblical nonresistance" as the preferred term for faith-based nonviolence see R. J. Sawatsky, "Two Wars: The Context of Identity," in *History and ideology*.

sentimentally indebted, than to the MCC, to whom they were monetarily indebted. The MCC's sincere but nervous creditors were no match for the *VDA*'s sophisticated propaganda, which made Nazi Germany appear strong, compassionate, and hopeful of the future. It would not be until the early-1940s that the MCC would have enough resources, manpower, and motivation to challenge the *VDA*'s pan-Germanist promises.

By now, Unruh was working closely with the Nazi Party, so much so that when the *Gestapo* later reflected on his work, it considered Unruh to be an "old member" of the Party that had "succeeded in recruiting numberless [German] Mennonites for National Socialism by the expert use of appropriate means."⁶² In Fernheim, those means entailed gaining control of the schools by tapping P. Hildebrand to assume Kliewer's duties and supplying the colony with *VDA* education material.⁶³ P. Hildebrand was born in Russia in 1906 and was trained as a teacher before he fled the country to Harbin, China in 1930. Here, he took up work teaching German-speaking refugees while also attempting to immigrate to Canada, Mexico, or the United States. After these options failed, he was granted permission to live in Germany. Before P. Hildebrand and his wife Susie Penner moved to Paraguay in 1934, he became associated with the Nazis' *Sturmabteilung (SA)* and various *Auslandsdeutsche* organizations.⁶⁴ P. Hildebrand's years as a refugee and his gratefulness for Germany's acceptance, were formative experiences that led him identify strongly with the Nazi party's anti-communist stance.

P. Hildebrand was more openly nationalistic than his predecessor, Kliewer, and more knowledgeable about the Nazi Party's political goals. When he took up teaching at the colony's secondary school in Schönwiese, he was pleased to hear the students demonstrate their knowledge of the Nazi party to him and greet him with "*Heil Hitler!*"⁶⁵

⁶² "Berlin Gestapo to Dr. Karl Götz, Stuttgart," October 2, 1942, Berlin Geheimes Staatspolizeiamt, United States National Archives/T-81/143/0181573. Quoted in Gerhard Rempel, review of *Fügungen und Führungen: Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, 1881-1959: Ein Leben im Geiste christlicher Humanität und im Dienste der Nächstenliebe*, by Heinrich B. Unruh, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 2 (April 2010): 277.

⁶³ Peter Hildebrand, *Odyssee wider Willen: Das Schicksal eines Auslandsdeutschen* (Oldenburg, Germany: Heinz Holzberg Verlag, 1984), 187-188.

⁶⁴ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 85; Jakob Warkentin, "Hildebrand, Peter," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 203-204.

⁶⁵ P. Hildebrand, *Odyssee wider Willen*, 183.

In July, P. Hildebrand addressed a colony assembly in Filadelfia about the new German government titled “Germany under the Nazi Government and the interest for the *Auslandsdeutschtum*.” His talk focused on questions about Germany’s economic recovery, the German education system, the “Jewish Question” (*Judenfrage*), and Hitler as a person and as a leader.⁶⁶ In addition to this news, P. Hildebrand also brought with him 800 *Reichsmark* donated by the *VDA* and received shipment of the German school textbook *Curriculum of the German Elementary School (Lehrplan der reichsdeutschen Grundschule)*, which painted its interpretation of subjects such as geography and history in a patently *völkisch* hue.⁶⁷ According to Kurt Daniel Stahl, the colony received 250 additional titles from the *VDA*.⁶⁸ Unruh encouraged the use of the new materials and worked for greater *VDA* subsidies to Fernheim’s schools since it would reduce P. Hildebrand’s dependence on the colony’s fickle leadership.⁶⁹

Thus, the *VDA* shared with the Manitoban and Saskatchewan governments, as well as many other governments across Europe, the idea that nationalism began in the schoolhouse.⁷⁰ According to one *VDA* press release, “whoever has the youth, has the future; and he who has the schools, has the youth.”⁷¹ The Menno Colony implicitly recognized this maxim due to its prior dealings with the Russian and Canadian governments. In the late nineteenth century, the Manitoba government had temporarily allowed Mennonites to run their own schools with taxpayer money. Yet they quickly learned that nothing provided by a government was free and if they accepted public support they would be required to teach uncomfortable subjects in a foreign language.

⁶⁶ “Zum Tierschutzmann,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), July 1934, pp. 2, 5. “Auszüge,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), July 1934, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Stahl, “Zwischen Volkstumspflege,” 36.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 88.

⁷⁰ This idea was one of the *VDA*’s founding tenets when it was initially established in Vienna in 1881 as the General German School Association (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein*). See Jonathan Kwan, “Transylvanian Saxon Politics, Hungarian State Building and the Case of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein (1881–82),” *English Historical Review* 127, no. 526 (2012): 604.

⁷¹ “*VDA* Pressemitteilungen Dezember 1932,” *Der VDA und die deutsche-amerikanische Press*, 5. Quoted in Grams, 13.

Presented with another Faustian bargain, the Menno Colony remained committed to their rudimentary school materials.

P. Hildebrand was not satisfied with simply bringing *VDA* resources to Paraguay. He also wanted to prove the settlement's economic and political allegiance to Germany. In early-1935, he organized the shipment of 1,500 kilograms of peanuts to the *VDA* in Germany. The peanuts were distributed to German schoolchildren as a sign of goodwill between the Fernheim Colony and the "homeland." Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring were also presented with small sacks of peanuts, the latter receiving the gift on his wedding day. The gesture received a good deal of publicity in the German press and a flood of letters to the Fernheim Colony. According to P. Hildebrand, one "enthusiastic" *Hitlerjugend* member wrote, "we love you [the Fernheim Colony] because you have also sent peanuts to our leader."⁷² Peanuts were a delicious and exotic treat that carried the flavor of empire since most of the world's peanut crop was produced in the United States and the British Empire. The idea of a "German" agricultural stronghold in the heart of South America therefore had both a culinary and geopolitical appeal to *reichsdeutsch* citizens and the Nazi government. Yet the gift symbolized more than a suggestion that Germany could economically benefit from the colony. As small of a token as it was, Hitler and Göring's acceptance of the peanuts validated them as real Germans and as collaborators in a shared transnational story of German solidarity.

Despite the peanut publicity coup, the disruption caused by Kliewer's departure and P. Hildebrand's arrival led Fernheim's leaders to start reevaluating the *Jugendbund*'s place in the community. Thiesen argues that the formation of the *Jugendbund* created an alternate "power center" that existed outside the colony's civil, economic, and religious realms. Thiesen observes that "competition among such social institutions for public influence has been a prominent theme in Russian Mennonite history" and the *Jugendbund* was a new interloper.⁷³ The *Jugendbund* held its own weekly meetings and promoted an

⁷² P. Hildebrand, "Über unsere Erdnussendung," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), September 1935, pp. 4-5. The *Deutsche Ausland-Institut (DAI)* also maintained a pen pal program that connected Reich Germans with *Auslandsdeutsche* called *Lesepaten*.

⁷³ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 85. See also Urry, *None but Saints*.

alternative group identification. In the eyes of some of the colony's pastors, Kliever and his associates were perhaps *too* successful at unifying the colony.

Suspicion of the *Jugendbund's* popularity under P. Hildebrand's leadership—though not necessarily its *völkisch* inclinations—gained momentum in the colony throughout 1935 and 1936. Most of Fernheim's parents favored the group's structured activities that promoted family values—but they were wary of its militant overtones. One January 1935 *Menno-Blatt* article written by a colonist mentions the group's militant drift, but fails to explore its repercussions.⁷⁴ Minutes from a *KfK* meeting in Philadelphia on May 8, 1935 picked up this theme and reveal that at least one leader found “the entire movement” to be “thoroughly unhealthy” for the youth and the colony.⁷⁵ Like many Germans in Germany, the *KfK* believed that Hitler stood above the fray of politics. It was the Nazi Party lackeys, the “little Hitlers” such as P. Hildebrand, who were to blame for National Socialism's ills.⁷⁶ In this way, the purity of the ideal remained intact despite its disordered reality. Moreover, the malleability of Hitler's persona allowed the colony to incorporate it into their own mythology of an idealized future wherein a just and benevolent leader—reminiscent of the Russian Tsar—presided over a religious, agrarian society. The *KfK* did not have a problem with Nazism as long as it worked to unify the colony but they became wary when its adherents started using politics as a tool of division. Ultimately, colony leaders believed that local unity was the highest form of German patriotism—despite the concerns of P. Hildebrand or officials in Germany.

At the end of 1935, P. Hildebrand was terminated from his position as the leader of the colony's central school in Philadelphia. The action was provoked by a group of parents who were furious that one of the school's pupils had stabbed another student and had threatened to stab several more. Parents called on the *KfK* to look into the issue. They also requested that the *KfK* review the school's curriculum, including its *VDA* supplied reading materials. Not long after, the Hildebrands resigned from their teaching positions

⁷⁴ A. Braun, “Eltern hört!,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), January 1935, pp. 2-3.

⁷⁵ “Protokoll einer KfK-Sitzung am 8. Mai 1935 in Philadelphia,” CMBS. Quoted in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 92.

⁷⁶ For an account of German attitudes toward Hitler and Nazi party bosses (i.e. the “little Hitlers”) see of Ian Kershaw, 'Führer without Sin': Hitler and the 'Little Hitlers,' in *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

before they were officially dismissed.⁷⁷ The formal reasons for P. Hildebrand's dismissal—had it been carried through—included that he did not believe in Christ, did not regularly attend church services, and had spoken disparagingly about the Mennonite faith. The *KfK* also accused him of arrogance, uncollegial behavior, and mockery.⁷⁸ Legiehn did not escape the fracas either. The *KfK* threatened to terminate his teaching position if he did not alter his divisive political opinions.⁷⁹ Once again, a local issue regarding disruptive youth led colony leaders to reevaluate Fernheim's relationship with its external attachments and indicates that not all of the colony's members were enthralled with its turn toward Germany. Though their displeasure was channeled through the person of P. Hildebrand, the situation indicates that Nazism did not sit well with some of Fernheim's leaders and households, not because Hitler or the movement was irreligious but because its representatives were.

The colony's elected leaders (including the pastors) reasoned that they did not dismiss P. Hildebrand because he possessed too much National Socialism but because he did not exhibit enough national consciousness (*Volkstum*). Writing to Unruh, they accused him of working against colony unity by reporting to authorities in Berlin and the German envoy in Asunción that some of the colony's prominent members were anti-German. According to *KfK* members, P. Hildebrand's defamation of Fernheim individuals would not be tolerated by a colony of Mennonites who held their Germanness in the highest regard. The letter praised God for uniting the German people under Adolf Hitler but the *KfK* thought that P. Hildebrand's political opinions were so divisive that they were anti-German.⁸⁰ Resembling the religious debates over Mennoniteness that

⁷⁷ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 97-98. See also "Protokoll einer Elternversammlung in Philadelphia, Col. Fernheim zwecks Behandlung der vorliegenden Fragen unserer Zentralschule. Stattgefunden am 5. Nov. 1935," ACF.

⁷⁸ Jakob Warkentin, "Hildebrand, Peter," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 203-204. P. Hildebrand provided his own reasons for the dismissal, including his high level of education and his production of Schiller's *Die Räuber*, which the *KfK* considered to be "corrupting" of the youth. See P. Hildebrand, *Odyssee wider Willen*, 185-199.

⁷⁹ It is possible that the *KfK* was more lenient toward Legiehn because he was the stepson of *Brüdergemeinde* preacher Gerhard Isaak. See Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 101.

⁸⁰ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 98.

divided Mennonites in the past, the *KfK* felt that it was completely within their authority to determine the type of Germanness—nationalist exegesis, so to speak—that was suitable for their colony.

Unruh was furious that the *KfK* had fired P. Hildebrand and that the parents' committee had questioned the value of the *VDA* educational materials. Recalling G. G. Hiebert's complaints about the Fernheim colonists, Unruh was annoyed that they had put their local concerns over the interests of their international benefactors. The colonists made Nazism *too much* of a local metaphor to be useful to the nation. He responded with a letter addressed to the colony *Oberschulze* that trivialized parents' concerns over the *VDA* school materials—especially some books by the Nazi neo-pagan missionary Jakob Wilhelm Hauer. Unruh emphasized that there was “only *one* authoritative book on National Socialism:” Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Unruh was adamant that colonists should let leaders in Germany decide what the Paraguayan Mennonites should read and not concern themselves with questions of literary rectitude. Behind it all, Unruh saw, “certain Canadian circles,” plotting to cast P. Hildebrand, Legiehn and Kliewer in a bad light and disrupt the *völkisch* cause. Unruh warned the *Oberschulze* “against these international intrigues!” and closed his letter with a “*Heil Hitler!*”⁸¹

It is unclear who belonged to Unruh's feared “Canadian circles” but it probably was not the Menno Colony. This settlement remained largely indifferent to the entire *völkisch* movement throughout the 1930s. Its leaders declined the *VDA*'s school materials and its constituents did not participate in the *Jugendbund*. Part of the colony's indifference was due to the fact that it did not maintain contact with the German government or German organizations in Paraguay. They also did not share an affinity with German Mennonites or other *Auslandsdeutsche*. Their Germanness lacked a political edge. It was not something that they elected to participate in (no letters to Berlin here) but something that was inscribed in the daily rhythms of life such as Bible study, church, food, and other folkways. For this reason, they did not care to identify with the German nation or a global association of Mennonites. Leaders viewed both identifications as

⁸¹ “*Heil Hitler*” was not an uncommon exclamation among the Fernheim Mennonites. P. Hildebrand, Kliewer, Quiring, and Unruh often used this salutation in their correspondences. It was also used in the schools and at the end of some colony meetings. “B. H. Unruh to Jakob Siemens,” January 4, 1936, ACF. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 99.

intrusive concepts that threatened to divert colonists' loyalties away from the local church and toward the individualism and cosmopolitanism that they feared.

The most significant contact the Menno Colony had with the broader world came from letters exchanged with friends in Canada and the news they received through the publication *Steinbach Post*, which was published in Steinbach, Manitoba. The *Steinbach Post* reported the concerns of the 1870s group of immigrants from Russia and served as a message board for their communities in Canada, Mexico, and Paraguay. It struck a conservative tone and generally avoided political commentary. Altogether, the Menno Colony remained detached from the Mennonite/Nazi debate but it did not lack controversy during the 1930s. The Chaco War and the *Fürsorge-Komitee* dispute of 1928-1936 were major sources of conflict and helped maintain members' focus on their local context.

Nevertheless, the May and June 1936 issues of *Kämpfende Jugend* contain an illuminating perspective on Menno colonists' attitudes toward the *völkisch* movement. Menno Colony resident, Peter J. R. Funk debated a Fernheim Colony *völkisch* supporter named P. Neufeld of Orloff, on the ethics of entwining religious and *völkisch* loyalties. What is important about the exchange is that both writers use scripture to defend their opposing views and both speak from a different conception of Germanness: either as an essential identification or as one identification among many. The debate also reveals a principal dilemma regarding biblical exegesis and nationalism: Both are expansive and imprecise enough to justify a wide range of interpretations—making them seductive and contentious in equal measure. J. Funk and P. Neufeld's "evidence" regarding the Bible and nationalism appeared more objectively true to each author because each was describing his own subjective position and his own understandings of how "God's people" fit into history and the present world order.

Although most Menno Colony residents were silent on the topic of national identity, J. Funk pointedly asked *Jugendbund* members to whom they owed their allegiance: Christianity or Germanness.⁸² He called on the Bible to make his point by

⁸² It was rare to see Menno Colony Mennonites writing for the *Menno-Blatt*. It is worth mentioning that in September 1935, another Menno Colony member named Peter A. Falk from Neuanlage wrote a critical if vague, indictment of the Chaco Mennonites as he saw it. Falk stated "If one looks around and listens—especially within our Mennonite community—one hears a lot of arguments and altercations... one has to

noting that Joseph, Daniel, and David all fulfilled their duties to God without needing a larger organization's help.⁸³ These individuals operated independently, outside of the context of the Israelite nation. J. Funk contended that the Bible teaches Christians to trust in God alone and not in human institutions. His letter was brief but its argument reveals a clear dichotomy between sacred and secular paths: God calls his chosen people to forge a course of complete separation from broader loyalties even at the expense of persecution, which in the case of Daniel meant being thrown into a den of lions by the Persians. Demonstrating the elasticity of biblical exegesis, Funk used individual "heroes" as an example of the Menno Colony's collective autonomy even though Menno Colony leaders generally suppressed the individualism of their constituency.

In the next issue of the paper, P. Neufeld from the Fernheim Colony, took the opportunity to enlighten his conservative Mennonite brother on the virtues of the *Jugendbund* and national loyalties. He too used scripture to argue that the *Jugendbund* fulfilled the colony's Christian duty of shielding its youth from dangerous forces.⁸⁴ P. Neufeld drew on the apostle Paul's letters to Titus and Timothy, written at a time when Paul was trying to give direction and clarity to a nascent and disorganized church. Applied to the modern day, P. Neufeld suggests that Paul would have given his approval to *völkisch* youth instruction since it taught children the importance of broader loyalties, including those demanded by church and state, which were both ordained by God.

P. Neufeld then challenged J. Funk on the Menno Colony's expression of Germanness. He asked: "Had they not, after all, left [Canada] to retain their German culture?"⁸⁵ With this rhetorical question, P. Neufeld suggested that the Menno Colony was ignorant of the real reason why they left the country: It was not their religion but their Germanness that they wished to preserve and it was not their local form of

fear whether real Mennonitism did not already die a long time ago." It is unclear what arguments and altercations Falk had problems with but since the article was written for a Fernheim audience and makes a firm distinction between Mennonites and "the world," it may have been that Falk wished to remind Fernheim Mennonites of their religions and not national identifications. See Peter A. Falk, "Kolonie Menno," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), September 1935, p. 2.

⁸³ Peter J. R. Funk, "Kolonie Menno," *Kämpfende Jugend* (Fernheim, Paraguay), May 1936, p. 1.

⁸⁴ P. Neufeld, "Antwort auf den Artikel 'Kolonie Menno'." *Kämpfende Jugend* (Fernheim, Paraguay), May 1936, p. 1-2.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Germanness but the Germanness that was ultimately revealed in the Nazi state. This is also what Kliewer was getting at in his Mennonite World Conference speech of the same year, namely that the Menno colonists are part of “Germandom” even though they “rather unconsciously feel” it. Presumably, P. Neufeld wanted the Menno Colony to discover their true historic path as Christians within the Nazi movement, as had he and so many other Fernheim Colony Mennonites. P. Neufeld closed his article by asserting that there was no implicit tension between God and nation.

The exchange testifies to a burgeoning sense among Latin America’s German-speakers that the Nazi Party represented something new—and perhaps troubling—under the sun. J. Funk did not understand his Germanness to be tied to Germany yet this was simply one of many interpretations of Germanness held by German-speakers throughout Latin America. In Mexico, for example, Austrian and Swiss nationals, as well as the Reinländer and Sommerfelder Mennonites from Canada who settled there, mostly paralleled the Menno Colony in their indifference to the German nation-state, Nazi or otherwise.⁸⁶ Alternately, Latin America’s bourgeois German enclaves remained staid in their political preferences and romanticized the Germanness embodied in the *Kaiserreich*. The Weimar and Nazi governments alienated them in equal measure. Business-minded Germans were also wary of the Nazis’ aggressive geopolitics. In urban centers, exiled artists and intellectuals attacked Nazi Germany as a corruption of Germanness. Other recent arrivals, often young and relatively poor war veterans, supported the Nazis’ aggressive expression of Germanness. Such varied articulations were found across Latin America, from Mexico and Central America to the Southern Cone.⁸⁷ It goes without saying that the regime and its Latin American supporters alienated German-speaking

⁸⁶ See Buchenau, 119-121.

⁸⁷ Ibid.; Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21-22; and Hoerder, “German-Language Diasporas,” 27-28. For a full discussion of Germanness, Nazism, and the problems faced by the Nazi Party’s foreign organization (*Auslandsorganisation*) tasked with aligning *Auslandsdeutsche* to the Party see Jürgen Müller, *Nationalsozialismus in Lateinamerika. Die Auslandsorganisation der NSDAP in Argentinien, Brasilien, Chile und Mexico, 1931–1945* (Stuttgart: Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1997). For the Argentine context also see Ronald C. Newton, *The “Nazi Menace” in Argentina, 1931–1947* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992). For the Brazilian context also see Frederick C. Luebke *Germans in the New World: Essays in the History of Immigration* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 126 ff.

Jews in every national context.⁸⁸ Within this range of sentiments, P. Neufeld and other *völkisch*-minded Fernheimers maintained that they were indebted to the state (Paraguay) that they lived under, the nation (Germany) they were a part of, and could hold these identities in equilibrium since—according to the Bible—Christians were called to submit to earthly authorities and God himself was the author of nations.

Throughout 1936, Unruh and Kliewer shored up support for the *völkisch* cause in Fernheim by publishing articles and writing letters that emphasized a theological connection between National Socialism and Christianity. Yet interest in the *Jugendbund* began to flag without a strong local advocate. By the beginning of 1937, *Kämpfende Jugend* was downsized to a column in the *Menno-Blatt* and there were rumblings that the small *Allianzgemeinde* was against the *völkisch* movement altogether. The formation of the *Jugendbund* and the colony's relationship with the *VDA* were useful vectors for rallying local unity for a time. Colonists carved out this relationship on their own terms since Kliewer deftly combined local and national concerns into a credible story about Christian theology and German history. Nonetheless, P. Hildebrand could not build on Kliewer's successes since his overt *Nazism* appeared aggressive, foreign, and decidedly un-German to a leadership committee that placed a premium on local harmony.

Visitors from the Reich

After the Nazi seizure of power, a small army of *Reich* journalists, scholars, and free-lance explorers fanned out across the globe to uncover the special “genius” of Germanness worldwide. Trips combined patriotism and ideology with tourism and the thrill of adventure.⁸⁹ Closed farming settlements, such as the Mennonite colonies, made compelling destinations since there was a perception in Germany that emigrants who lived in urban areas or scattered homesteads quickly lost their Germanness.⁹⁰ Yet what visitors found—even in closed settlements—often surprised them. Many *Auslandsdeutsche* communities, especially those whose ancestors had left Europe

⁸⁸ Penny, 371.

⁸⁹ Harvey, 138.

⁹⁰ Lekan, 159.

generations before, were sometimes more “foreign” in their customs and demeanor than the racially “non-Aryan” Poles, Jews, and other minorities who had integrated themselves into German society. Thus when Dr. Herbert Wilhelmy, lecturer at the University of Kiel, visited the colonies in early 1937, his negative analysis—and the Fernheim Colony’s reaction to it—exhibited in stark relief the problems that *Auslandsdeutsche* faced when they tried to make their Germanness intelligible to hardline Nazis. Wilhelmy’s report indicates that many colonists wanted to hold their German and Mennonite identifications in tandem—a sentiment that struck Wilhelmy as despicable. Wilhelmy’s visit is also significant for its timing since he arrived at a moment when the colonists were shifting their aspirations from being a German outpost in Paraguay to viewing themselves as potential settlers within an expanded *Reich*. A positive report from an influential academic could improve their chances, but a negative assessment would destroy them.

Generally speaking, Latin America’s *Auslandsdeutsche* communities disappointed *reichsdeutsch* visitors. Though subsumed under a single word, *Auslandsdeutsche*, the German-speaking individuals and communities scattered across Latin America were quite heterogeneous in their composition.⁹¹ They were urban and rural; atheistic and religious; working class, middle class, and wealthy; and they had emigrated as individuals, families, and groups from states across the Northern Hemisphere: Austria-Hungary, Canada, Switzerland, the German Confederation’s constituent realms, Russia, and of course Germany itself. Some lived in Latin America for decades while others were recent arrivals. Some individuals laid claim to a German nationality (*Reichsdeutsche*) while others—including the majority of Paraguay’s Mennonites—were given the “second-class” designation of *Volksdeutsche* by the German state, which kept them from officially participating in the Nazi Party or freely returning to Germany.

The *reichsdeutsch* population of Latin America (including about 100,000 who had arrived from Germany since 1919) appeared to have great political potential for observers in Germany.⁹² *Völkisch* and government organizations—prominent among them the Nazi Party’s Foreign Organization (*Auslandsorganisation*)—were tasked with the ostensibly

⁹¹ Penny, 370-371. See also Hoerder, “German-Language Diasporas,” 31-32.

⁹² Albrecht von Gleich, *Germany and Latin America, Memorandum RM-5523-RC* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1968), 7. Cited in Penny, 365.

important job of projecting a positive image of the Third Reich around the globe and controlling *reichsdeutsch* activities through local Nazi syndicates.⁹³ However, guiding the continent's *reichsdeutsch* population was a task not unlike herding cats, due to their varied loyalties to the regime and because the political destination remained entirely unclear.⁹⁴ Ultimately, Latin America was of some political and economic interest to Hitler but was of little military consequence, at least in comparison to Eastern Europe, as he considered the region to remain under the United States' sphere of influence.⁹⁵

Aligning the region's *volksdeutsch* communities with the Nazi initiatives was often more difficult than consolidating its *reichsdeutsch* population. According to one succinct report by Hermann von Freedon, a senior civil servant (*Regierungsrat*) in the government's Emigration Office (*Reichsstelle für das Auswanderungswesen*), that was written soon after the Nazi seizure of power "colonization in the northern part of South America can be characterized in a few words. The old [*volksdeutsch*] German colonies of Pomerania in Espirito Santo, the colony Tovar in Venezuela and the old settlements in Peru Oxapampa and Pozuzo stagnate."⁹⁶ Continuing south, the report included mixed impressions of state-, railroad-, charity-, and capitalist-sponsored colonies in the Southern Cone, with the latter category receiving the most praise for its economic potential.⁹⁷ Freedon had first-hand experience working with *Auslandsdeutsche* when he established the Kolonie Rolândia for landless Germans in Brazil during the early 1930s under the auspices of the *Gesellschaft für Wirtschaftliche Studien in Übersee* and was predisposed

⁹³ Friedman notes that the leader of the *Auslandsorganisation*, Ernst Bohle, was "something of a bad joke," in the Nazi Party apparatus for his agency's impotency. See Friedman, 23.

⁹⁴ Penny, 378.

⁹⁵ United States president Franklin D. Roosevelt nevertheless feared that there was a Nazi "Fifth Column" in Latin America, especially after about 1937. See Uwe Lübken, *Bedrohliche Nähe. Die USA und die nationalsozialistische Herausforderung in Lateinamerika, 1937–1945* (Stuttgart, Germany: Fritz Steiner, 2004).

⁹⁶ Hermann von Freedon, "Kolonisatorische Erfahrungen aus der Nachkriegszeit," *Archiv für Wanderungswesen und Auslandkunde: Studien und Mitteilungen zur Wanderungsbewegung der Kulturvölker* 4, no. 4 (1933/1934): 1.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

to favor group settlements with direct connections to Germany.⁹⁸ In a subsequent publication that struck a more political tone, Freeden concluded, “spontaneous settlement, a settlement without organic connections to the mother country, its people and its national needs, is a loss and a waste of national resources.”⁹⁹ By Freeden’s criteria, the Menno Colony was an “amateur colony,” the Fernheim Colony was a “charity colony,” and neither possessed “organic connections” to Germany.

Freeden’s analysis was one of many opinions that informed the Nazi Party’s evolving assessment of *Auslandsdeutsche* communities and their potential for helping the German nation-state. There were many other influential Party members who disagreed with Freeden’s assessment and went to Latin America for themselves to discover their long-lost German brethren, assess their Germanness, and promote German solidarity within *reichsdeutsch* and *volksdeutsch* communities alike.

The Mennonite colonies played host to several high-profile *reichsdeutsch* visitors during the late 1930s including Josef Ponten, the German novelist and former colleague of Thomas Mann, and the famous African explorer Adolf Friedrich Albrecht Heinrich, Duke of Mecklenburg. Their assessments of the colonies ranged from tepid approval to amused antipathy.¹⁰⁰ Yet the most detailed, scholarly, and damning, report on the Mennonite colonies came from Wilhelmy’s pen. His early research focused on Bulgarian *Auslandsdeutsche* but he reoriented his academic interests to South America after he met Oskar Schmieder, who had taught human geography at the University of Córdoba in Argentina and at the University of California-Berkeley in the United States. Schmieder was now working with the Nazi regime to uncover the purported connections between

⁹⁸ Pedro Moreira, “Juden aus dem deutschsprachigen Kulturraum in Brasilien: Ein Überblick,” in *Das Kulturerbe deutschsprachiger Juden: Eine Spruensuche in den Ursprungs* ed. Elke-Vera Kotowaski (Berlin, Germany: Walter De Gruyter, 2015), 426.

⁹⁹ Freeden, “Über die Möglichkeiten der Kolonisation für die Weisse Rasse in der Tropischen Zone,” in *Comptes rendus du Congrès International de Géographie Amsterdam* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1938): 118. A copy of this article is located in Buenos Aires 70, Shelf 48, Carton 2441, AA.

¹⁰⁰ Richard W. Seifert, “Bericht über die Reise nach der Mennoniten-Kolonie Fernheim mit S. H. Herzog Adolf Friedrich von Mecklenburg,” February 15, 1936, R127972d [formerly Altes Amt 69558], AA, 163-165. Nikolai Siemens, “Dr. Josef Ponten,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), October 1936, 6; “Ein Gesucher,” “Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), Oct. 1936, 5.

geography, culture, and race.¹⁰¹ Under his supervision, Wilhelmy secured government funds from the Albrecht Penck Foundation of Berlin, the German Research Council (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*), and the Hänel Foundation of Kiel to undertake a “colonial geographic expedition” of German colonization in South America.¹⁰²

Essentially, the trip was an attempt to assess the viability of German settlement in the Chaco and uncover the loyalties of Paraguayan *Auslandsdeutsche* to the Nazi cause.

In the months preceding his visit to the Fernheim Colony, Wilhelmy assessed the degree of Nazi-style Germanness in fourteen German-speaking colonies in the Alto Parana region and around Encarnación. Most were composed of a mixture of “*Reich* Germans,” “Brazilian-Germans,” and to a lesser extent “Russian-Germans,” “Austrian-Germans,” and “Swiss.” Wilhelmy classified the San Bernardino and Altos colonies as being composed primarily of “Paraguayan-Germans,” presumably since they had lived in the country the longest. Not surprisingly, Wilhelmy notes “the greatest cultural and political unity prevails without doubt in the *Reich* German settlements” since “the living link to the home has been preserved, and the colonists take part in all events in Germany with a lively interest.”¹⁰³ In contrast, the colonies

inhabited mainly by Brazilian-Germans and Russian-Germans, the overall situation is much different. The settlers know little or nothing of Germany and are only curious about major transformations in the former homeland. Supplying colonists with newspaper and other literature is almost fruitless, since a large percentage can only read or write poorly and did not take the trouble to pursue our literature. Book donations from home therefore find only a very modest readership. School and church capture the majority of the population.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Ulrike Block, “Deutsche Lateinamerikaforschung im Nationalsozialismus – Ansätze zu einer wissenschaftshistorischen Perspektive,” in *Der Nationalsozialismus und Lateinamerika: Institutionen – Repräsentationen – Wissenskonstrukte I*, ed. Sandra Carreras (Berlin: Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2005), accessed June 14, 2014, Iberio-Online.de, 11-12.

¹⁰² Dr. H[erbert] Wilhelmy, Bericht über eine [?] mit Unterstützung der Albrecht-Penk-Stiftung – Berlin, der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft und der Hänel-Stiftung – Kiel durch geführten kolonialgeographischen Forschungsreise nach Südamerika,” (26.VI.1936 – 8.IV.1937), R127972d [formerly Altes Amt 69558], AA: 71-79, 71.

¹⁰³ Wilhelmy, “An die Deutsche Gesandtschaft in Asuncion: Bericht über meine reise im südlichen Paraguay,” R127972d [formerly Altes Amt 69558], AA: 69-70, 69.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

In an observation that foreshadowed his impressions of the Mennonite colonies, Wilhelmy concluded that the moral level of the Russian-Germans gives “food for thought” for anyone trying to exert a Nazi influence on the groups.¹⁰⁵ They were only concerned with events in Russia and were mostly indifferent to the geopolitical issues facing their presumed national homeland .

After his tour of Eastern Paraguay, Wilhelmy turned his sights on the Mennonite colonies where he encountered a Menno Colony that was entirely beyond Nazi redemption and a Fernheim Colony that tarnished the Nazi cause with their ignorant expressions of Germanness.¹⁰⁶ Wilhelmy spent about a week in the Fernheim Colony—inspecting its villages, giving lectures on the “New Germany,” and presenting patriotic slideshows of the bucolic German countryside. Coincidentally, his visit came on the heels of Orié O. Miller’s trip to calm Fernheim colonists’ fears about land debts, the ongoing drought, and the threat of a third of its members to leave the colony and form their own settlement (the Friesland Colony). Thus he encountered a colony that, in his telling, was in the throes of crisis with a leadership structure that would do anything to maintain its “theocratic” hold on the group. His observations led him to conclude that they were not loyal Germans—at least in comparison to the *reichsdeutsch* settlements that “met the work of the Nazis with understanding.”¹⁰⁷ In an observation that would have made the MCC happy, Wilhelmy believed that it was not their Germanness that the Fernheim colonists wished to preserve but their abstruse Mennonite doctrines.¹⁰⁸

Wilhelmy was inclined to see the world as a battleground of competing races and ideologies, and he interpreted the Fernheim migration to the Chaco as a conspiracy of the global Mennonite church. “The political and religious goal of colony leaders” was to implement “the dream of all orthodox Mennonites whether they live in Paraguay, Brazil, Canada, the USA, Holland and Switzerland,” namely the creation of a Mennonite state

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰⁶ For a complete description of Wilhelmy’s trip see his co-authored publication with Oskar Schmieder, *Deutsche Akerbausiedlungen im südamerikanischen Grasland, Pampa und Gran Chaco*. Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen, Neue Folge 6 (Leipzig: Deutsches Museum für Ländkunde), 1938.

¹⁰⁷ Wilhelmy, “Forschungsreise nach Südamerika,” 73.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 77-78; “Fritz Kliewer to Landesleiter des VDA Landesverbandes Weser-Ems,” November 18, 1937, R127972d [formerly Altes Amt 69558], AA: 51-62, 52.

(*Mennostaat*).¹⁰⁹ The colonists had nearly realized this dream by securing from the Paraguayan government a set of “extraordinary privileges,” which allowed their “inviolable” preachers to extend their religious authority down to the family unit.¹¹⁰ To further their goals, colony leaders practiced “Pharisaism” and dishonesty by unabashedly exploiting Germany’s goodwill for their own benefit: “While the ignorant, but religiously fanatical farmer does not conceal his negative attitude [toward Germany], the preachers and mayors try to work with the [German] embassy and consulate on friendly terms.”¹¹¹

Far from being honest Germans, let alone loyal Nazis, the colonists in Wilhelmy’s eyes were more similar to the Jews who believe that they were “God’s chosen people.” Here he discovered another conspiracy, arguing that “Jewish history dominates the Mennonites to the last detail and by giving their people Jewish names, they outwardly align themselves with the Jewish people.”¹¹² It is unclear exactly what Wilhelmy meant by “Jewish names”—considering that a substantial number of Germans possessed names belonging to Jews in the Bible—but he likely meant names found in the Old Testament that were uncommon among non-Jewish Germans, such as Abraham. Mennonites used these names because they considered the entire Bible to be part of God’s revelation, not the abbreviated Bible promulgated by Germany’s pro-Nazi German Christians. Moreover, he believed that the refugees were not part of the German nation but parasites that exploited the *Volksgemeinschaft* for their own benefit. While the Fernheim Mennonites certainly gave their children Jewish names and their identification as Germans had saved them from the Soviet Union, it was ludicrous to argue that there was a global conspiracy of Mennonites plotting against Germany, much less a unified Mennonitism within the colonies. Resembling contemporaneous anxieties of the Soviet Union’s insidious global aspirations and the proliferation of fears about spies and “fifth columns” in the Spanish Civil War and elsewhere, Wilhelmy perceived a vast conspiracy

¹⁰⁹ Wilhelmy, “Forschungsreise nach Südamerika,” 77.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 78.

¹¹² Ibid., 77.

in a situation marked primarily by disunity on the part of the Fernheim Colony and indifference on the part of the Menno Colony.

The only bright mark on his report was a suggestion that the Fernheim Colony's young people—shaped by their experiences in the Soviet Union and the Chaco War—were perhaps more inclined to reject the Mennonite position of nonresistance and accept the Nazi “Will to action” (*Wille zur Tat*).¹¹³ Prospects remained hopeful as long as the *VDA* continued cultivating this dynamic spirit among the young people through its literature and teaching material. Although the colonists “appreciated” National Socialism and were “thankful” that God had created it as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, the Mennonites' traditions and culture were entirely unsatisfactory from the standpoint of this *reichsdeutsch* Nazi.¹¹⁴

Despite Wilhelmy's hopes of discovering a pure, German enclave in the heart of South America, he likely would have agreed with Freedon that a spontaneous settlement without “organic connections” to the homeland was a waste of resources.¹¹⁵ While the Menno Colony was entirely lost to the Nazi cause, the Fernheim Colony had a connection to Germany but it was not “organic.” It was grafted onto a group of people that he deemed to be essentially Jewish in nature.

The Fernheim Mennonites were surprised and dismayed by Wilhelmy's report because it appeared to invalidate their Germanness, which they felt was sincere, and compromise their standing with the Nazi government. In response, *Oberschulze* J. Siemens and other colony leaders wrote a letter to Unruh, who was still smoldering over P. Hildebrand's dismissal. In an impersonal and passive voice, they admitted that the colony had many “defects and disabilities” but argued that Wilhelmy did not spend enough time in the colony. They concluded with the declaration that he was an “enemy of the Mennonites.”¹¹⁶ Even so, they stated that they were appreciative of National

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

¹¹⁴ “Jakob Siemens, Heinrich Pauls, and Abram Loewen to B. H. Unruh,” September 29, 1937, Paraguay Fernheim Colony 1937, IX-6-3 Central Correspondence, 1931-85, MCCF, Akron, PA.

¹¹⁵ Freedon, “Über die Möglichkeiten,” 118.

¹¹⁶ “Jakob Siemens, Heinrich Pauls, and Abram Loewen to B. H. Unruh.”

Socialism and were thankful to God that Hitler led the German nation. Like Wilhelmy, Unruh was not persuaded by the Fernheim leadership's equivocal support of the Nazis.

Friedrich Kliewer—who was still living in Germany—took it upon himself to set the record straight and mailed a strongly worded rebuttal to the German Foreign office in Berlin. He wanted to demonstrate that the Paraguayan Mennonites were patriotic Germans, willing to fight for the country if only they were allowed to “return.” Kliewer's tightly-spaced, eleven page document argued that the Fernheim Mennonites were mostly concerned for their German *cultural* preservation (not necessarily their religious peculiarities) and had proven themselves both generous and patriotic during the Chaco War—a conflict that Kliewer suggested could not have been won without their aid. Kliewer also called it “absurd” to suggest that some Mennonite religious leaders wished to create a “*Menno-Staat*” (Menno-state) in Paraguay instead of identifying principally with the German nation-state. In fact, Kliewer averred that both the Menno and Fernheim Colonies were “largely the same” when it came to their sentiments on Mennoniteness and Germanness (“*Mennonitentum und Deuschtum*”). Kliewer's trump card (though perhaps more of a guess than a fact) was that the Fernheim Mennonites “are also quite determined to send their sons to military training to the Reich.”¹¹⁷ Thus, Kliewer not only tried to make Nazism intelligible the Fernheim Colony but also make the colony's brand of Germanness intelligible to a German audience that supported *volksdeutsch* enclaves in theory but had little idea who they actually were.

Concerning the most serious of Wilhelmy's accusations—that the Mennonites were pro-Jewish—Kliewer stated, “Dr. Wilhelmy's statements on this issue are hurtful to every upright *auslandsdeutsch* Mennonite.”¹¹⁸ According to Kliewer, the Mennonites give their children Jewish names out of respect for the Old Testament, not out of respect for present day Judaism. He also challenged Wilhelmy to criticize Nazi Party leaders who had biblical names.¹¹⁹ Kliewer assured the Foreign Office that the Fernheim Mennonites only wished to live in peace—a peace that assured their freedom to express their faith and nationality.

¹¹⁷ “Fritz Kliewer to Landesleiter,” 55-61.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 60.

Despite the great strides the colony made toward incorporating *völkisch* Germanness into their local community, it fell far short of the Nazi ideal. Wilhelmy's visit revealed precisely how much the Nazi interpretation of Germanness differed from local interpretations of the concept and how much the colony's Germanness was "contaminated" by other influences. Too much was lost in translation across so wide a geographic, philosophical, and historical terrain. Although Wilhelmy's report was mostly of an academic nature, Kliewer and the Fernheim colonists were nevertheless anxious about it reflecting poorly on their settlement. It was as much of a patriotic anxiety as a practical one. From about 1935 until 1944, there was a growing impression within the colony that they could be repatriated to Germany, if only they could obtain German citizenship.¹²⁰ Upon Kliewer's return to the colony in 1939, he set about promoting the idea that colonists could be relocated *en toto* to Germany or a German-controlled Eastern Europe. As the next chapter demonstrates, his plan only raised the colony's anxieties and expectations to fever pitch before throwing it into chaos once more.

Collective narratives require outside validation. The Fernheim Colony's *völkisch* proponents wanted Nazi confirmation that their local story of a tenacious *Mennoniten-völklein* in the heart of South America resonated with the larger narrative of a battered but stalwart *Volksgemeinschaft* in Central Europe. In other words, Nazi legitimation would substantiate their place in the Nazis' evolving narrative of *völkisch* unity and transnational expansion. The Colony's formation of the *Jugendbund* signified that it wished to "arouse and strengthen" its tie to Germany, while the *VDA*'s interest in the colony confirmed that Germany desired contact with it. For a time, it appeared as though the Fernheim colonists had discovered their own story within a larger national story. Yet P. Hildebrand's dismissal and Wilhelmy's criticism quashed this aspiration and sent the colony's understanding of itself as a model *auslandsdeutsch* colony into a tailspin.

During the first half of the 1930s, solidarity with Nazi Germany remained elusive for the Fernheim colonists and did not exist in any form within the Menno Colony. In 1933, the Fernheim Colony enthusiastically cheered the rise of Germany's Nazi Party and

¹²⁰ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 135.

looked to the new regime as an inspiration for maintaining their local unity. However, within four years they dismissed their *VDA* sponsored schoolteacher and were lambasted by a *reichsdeutsch* visitor for being too “Jewish.” Ironically, what had saved the Fernheim colonists from Russia—their identification as *Auslandsdeutsche* by the Weimar government—ended up alienating them from their German benefactors once they were in Paraguay since they did not exhibit the particular type of Germanness the ascendant Nazi Party was looking for. They “passed” as Germans in 1929, but not in 1939.

Despite the Fernheim Colony’s initial enthusiasm for Nazism, their local brand of Germanness frustrated Unruh, exasperated P. Hildebrand, alarmed Wilhelmy, and worried Kliewer. Each of these individuals attempted to mold Fernheim’s interest in National Socialism but the colony’s involvement in the movement had less to do with their influence than it did with a collective desire to belong. Understandably, the Fernheim Mennonites did not feel like they belonged anywhere or to anything. They were refugees, living on other peoples’ land and other peoples’ money. The formation of the *Jugendbund*, the shipment of peanuts to the Führer, use of *VDA* school materials, and even the Nazi slogan hanging in the community building “Common need before self greed!” (“Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz!”) demonstrated their longing to achieve unity by grafting their story to an entity that was larger than themselves. It is revealing that on each occasion when Nazi ideology threatened to disrupt the colony’s fragile unity, colony leaders responded swiftly and severely. Meanwhile, the Menno Colony had little to say about these broader geopolitical developments and maintained that national allegiances were unequivocally in tension with religious ones.

Paraguay’s Mennonites—like other German-speaking enclaves in Latin America—were relatively marginal characters in the Nazi Party’s evolving perception of *Auslandsdeutsche* though they remained valuable for *Reich* propaganda. This situation inflated the Fernheim Colony’s sense of value to the regime as potential settlers in an expanded *Reich*, increased their sensitivity to the criticisms leveled by *Reich* visitors, and provided Kliewer with another opportunity to assert himself as the Colony’s Nazi ambassador. Yet this time he no longer wanted to bring Nazism to the colony but instead wished to bring colonists to Nazi Germany.

CHAPTER VI. CENTRIFUGAL FANTASIES, CENTRIPETAL REALITIES

On the night of March 11, 1944, about sixty armed members of the Fernheim Colony's *völkisch* movement violently confronted several of their erstwhile compatriots over sundry personal slights, public embarrassments, and the fading hope that they could be repatriated to a German-controlled Eastern Europe. It was fifteen years since the German attaché Auhagen discovered the motley collection of German-speakers in Moscow's suburbs who hoped to immigrate to Canada. Ten years earlier, these individuals were embroiled in arguments over their destiny as pioneering Mennonite *Auslandsdeutsche* community in Paraguay. Now most colonists believed their true destiny could only be achieved by accepting a Nazi form of Germanness and "returning" to Germany. The outbreak of war in Europe fueled the idea that they were not exiles forced to contrive their own fate in the Chaco. Rather, their purgatorial Southern Hemisphere sojourn augured a happy resolution in the "paradise" of a German-controlled Eastern Europe. As speculations about the Fernheim Colony's place in the "Greater German *Reich*" during the 1930s segued into the heady possibilities of war and finally disintegrated in the disappointing reality of a German defeat, the Fernheim Colony's *völkisch* movement imploded in a violent and highly local fashion that had less to do with grand notions of German solidarity than with the colony's persistent inability to cultivate local unity.

The *völkisch* group's collapse was a small and remote footnote to the broader geopolitics of the 1940s but it caused an inordinate amount of international intrigue.¹ Quoting Hosea 8:7, *Oberschulze* Bernhard Wall stated that the Fernheim Colony "planted wind and we reaped a storm."² The meltdown brought several MCC representatives and high-ranking Paraguayan and American officials to the Chaco, each of whom feared that the colony had drifted too far into the Nazis' orbit.

¹ The same could be said of other German-speaking enclaves who supported National Socialism throughout Latin America. See Friedman.

² P. P. Klassen, *Die deutsch-völkisch Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, Chaco, Paraguay, 1943-1945: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der auslandsdeutschen Mennoniten während des Dritten Reiches* (Bolanden-Weierhof, Germany: Mennonitischer Geschichtsferein e.V., 1990), 81. Quoted in Gerhard Reimer, "The 'Green Hell' Becomes Home: Mennonites in Paraguay as Described in the Writings of Peter P. Klassen, A Review Essay," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76 (October 2002): 467.

By the beginning of the 1940s, the MCC feared that the Fernheim Colony was losing its Mennoniteness. In the United States, American Mennonite intellectuals and their supporting institutions—colleges, seminaries, periodicals, and relief organizations—had finally supplanted the confession’s local expressions of Mennonitism with a few major tenets (i.e. Bender’s *Anabaptist Vision*). In particular, they viewed non-violence as a political and social endeavor in addition to a personal and communal conviction.³ By contrast, the Fernheim Mennonites tended to view nonviolence as a personal attitude that was not necessarily translated into civic action. In this context, the *völkisch* movement was both startling and vexing to the MCC who had invested so much time and effort in creating a Mennonite asylum in Paraguay.

The *völkisch* movement’s collapse also garnered the attention of Paraguayan and American officials who believed the hype that Latin America’s German-speakers, including some Fernheim Mennonites, were part of the feared Nazi “Fifth Column” in Latin America. According to historian Max Paul Friedman, “Overseas agitators for the... Nazi Party—made a few converts and a lot of commotion in these communities during the mid-1930s.”⁴ In 1944, United States Naval Intelligence detained and interrogated the MCC’s Orié O. Miller in the Panama Canal Zone, and on at least two occasions the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, wrote memorandums on the Fernheim situation.⁵ Kliewer was number four on the United States government’s Paraguayan Nazi “most wanted” list and Franz Heinrichs—the Fernheim Colony’s business agent in Asunción—also made the file.⁶ Perhaps never before had the United States intelligence community cared so much about a group of Mennonites as the Fernheim colonists. Yet American

³ For the 1940s American Mennonite debate over “political pacifism” or “biblical nonresistance” as the preferred term for faith-based nonviolence see R. J. Sawatsky, “Two Wars: The Context of Identity,” in *History and Ideology*.

⁴ Friedman, 2.

⁵ U.S. Office of Censorship record no. BATC-1, 289, included with a memo from J. Edgar Hoover to W. R. Hulbert, Jr., American Embassy, Asunción, August 7, 1944. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 195; J. Edgar Hoover to Adolf A. Berle, Jr., September 29, 1943, U.S. State Department Decimal File 862.20210/2599. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 167.

⁶ Frank G. Siscoe, “Memorandum for the Ambassador,” January 4, 1944, and Wesley Frost to Secretary of State, March 1, 1944, dispatch 1860, both in confidential File 1944, b. 10 820.02 Detention and Deportation of Dangerous Aliens, Paraguay, Asunción Embassy, RG 84. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 174; Wesley Frost to Secretary of State, April 2, 1943, U.S. State Department Decimal File 740.00112 A EUROPEAN WAR 1939/28631. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 170.

officials did not care about the colonists because of their Mennoniteness or even their Germanness. Rather, they cared because some of them articulated their Germanness as Nazism, which was unacceptable for the country's hegemonic and hemispheric war aims.

During the 1930s, persistent crises within the Fernheim Colony—war, drought, conflict, and division—cast a dark shadow over the proposition that the colonists could remain in the Chaco. According to political scientist Michael Barckun “Belief systems which under non-disaster conditions might be dismissed now receive sympathetic consideration... It is small wonder that among persons so situated doctrines of imminent salvation should find such a ready acceptance.”⁷ Thus, by the late 1930s, many colonists began looking to Nazi Germany not as a template for local unity but as a country that could quite literally rescue them from the Chaco. Fueled in part by Kliewer's return from Europe and Unruh and Wilhelmy's criticisms, the notion that they should decisively merge their local expression of Germanness with the Nazi articulation of the concept gave rise to the idea that they could physically merge their colony with the German state. Yet this fantasy was not embraced by all Fernheim colonists when the small *Allianzgemeinde* emerged as an alternative pole that was amenable to the MCC.

The Fernheim colonists' reevaluation of their fate and their hope for repatriation is not surprising, since the Nazis appeared fully capable of instituting their “Thousand-Year *Reich*,” particularly after the German Army's rapid advance into the Soviet Union in 1941. In fact, Russia's Mennonites had already come close to an arrangement of this sort during the First World War. In 1918, after Germany and Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Molotschna and Chortitza colonies sent a delegation to Berlin to negotiate with the German government over their place in the *Reich*. At the meeting, the Mennonites were granted the option of becoming citizens of the yet-to-be-formed Ukrainian puppet state under German rule. Of course, this plan came to naught after Germany's defeat but hope persisted and Fernheim Mennonites believed that Hitler was a benevolent ruler. Owing to the Mennonites' specialized agricultural skills and the fact that the German government had rescued them once before, colonists could well imagine that they might once again farm the Russian steppes.⁸ Enter Kliewer. Like a traveling

⁷ Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1986), 56-57.

⁸ Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 138.

salesman, he returned from Germany in 1939 and positioned himself as an agent of the *Reich* who could grant the colonists German citizenship and ensure their return. Like a fairy tale, the story was a lie that—if only for a short time—seemed better than the truth.

Between 1937 and 1944, the Fernheim Colony shifted from understanding themselves as *Auslandsdeutsche* (a bastion of Germanness in South America) to seeing themselves as potential citizens of the Third Reich (grafting their Germanness on to the Nazi state) to a final realization that their Germanness would remain grounded at the local level. Such a rapid shift in their group narrative put the colony on edge by drawing colonists' attentions outward, towards an ideal future that should be pursued at any price. Since their self-understanding relied to such a high degree on events outside their control (a Nazi victory in Europe), it is significant that *völkisch* leaders attempted to exert increasing control over their local constituency until it was overwhelmed in violence.

The situation is a case study in the effects of ambiguities and quick reversals in a group's collective narrative—from a “comedic” outcome to a “tragic” one—but it also demonstrates that the Second World War was more than a matter of Nazi fugitives and Fifth Columns in Latin America. Rather, Latin America's German-speaking enclaves exhibited a wide range of attitudes toward the conflict, from political indifference, to economic anxiety, to overwrought anticipation. Their attitudes depended on their historic relationships to Germany and their host country, but they were increasingly affected by the United States and its army of diplomats and proxies who were intent on keeping the region free of Nazi ideology.

Several developments thwarted the Fernheim Colony's repatriation narrative, not least of which was the German Army's declining fortunes after 1943. Soon after Kliever returned to the colony, his temper and divisive rhetoric split the *völkisch* movement in two, with each group appealing for recognition by Nazi Party representatives in Asunción. At about the same time, a *wehrlos* (non resistant) group of individuals began voicing its opposition to Nazism on biblical-confessional grounds with the encouragements of the MCC. For its part, the MCC redoubled its efforts to draw the colonists into its narrative of global Mennonite unity by dispatching representatives to the colony to streamline its finances, improve its infrastructure, provide healthcare, and monitor colonists' attitudes. Yet it was neither the *wehrlos* faction nor the MCC

representatives who destroyed the *völkisch* movement. Rather, it was undone by its own frustrations and inability to impose its vision of an ideal future on the world.

Meanwhile, the Menno Colony carried forth as it had before the war. It valued its local expression of German culture and had little interest in relocating to Europe. To do so would have meant becoming German citizens, relinquishing their cherished autonomy, sending their children to state schools, and participating in German military conscription, in essence abandoning every position that had preserved by moving to Paraguay.

Moreover, they did not view Hitler as their earthly ruler because they did not subscribe to the notion of transnational German unity. In the Menno Colony ordering of the world, if anyone represented a “father” in their collective conscious, it was the representatives of the Paraguayan government who guaranteed their privileges.

The Menno Colony remained relatively free of ideological strife during the war years, which indicates that it was both unified in its self-understanding and its future trajectory and that its Germanness and Mennoniteness remained defined at the local level. During the War, it may have appeared as though the Menno Colonists exhibited a greater degree of Paraguayan citizenship since they did not politicize their Germanness but it was actually the Fernheim colonists who were better citizens of the modern world, since they aspired to belong to a nation; it just happened not to be the one in which they resided.

A Bridge to Germany

In 1937, some of the colony’s most strident supporters of the *völkisch* cause formed the League of German Mennonites in Paraguay (*Bund Deutscher Mennoniten in Paraguay* or *BDMP*). The group held its first meeting in Filadelfia on February 20, 1937 and elected Julius Legiehn as chairman and N. Siemens as secretary. Preacher and teacher A. Harder consecrated the event with a prayer.⁹ Within a few months, about 274 individuals joined the *BDMP* out of a total estimated Fernheim Colony population of 2,015.¹⁰ Though the group employed military terms such as *Stützpunkt* (“support point”)

⁹ This was the Abram Harder that had arrived from Kaiserslautern, Germany in 1935 and took up work as a preacher in the *Mennonitengemeinde*.

¹⁰ Schmieder and Wilhelmy, 105; “Bund Deutscher Mennoniten,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay) October 1938, p. 5. It is likely that only adult males were allowed to join the organization. Relying on Wilhelmy’s numbers (p. 126), in February 1937, there were 384 “farm owners” (i.e. male heads of

in its organization structure, its activities were mostly local and entirely civilian.¹¹ Initially, they wished to create an archive and library, support the schools and *Jugendbund*, and promote German and Mennonite periodicals in the colony.¹² The *BDMP* and its successor organization, the Union of Russian Germans (*Verband der Russlanddeutschen* or *VDR*), also worked to strengthen the colony's ties to the German presence in Asunción and throughout Paraguay. They soon elected to join the larger German League for Paraguay (*Deutsche Volksbund für Paraguay, DVP*),¹³ to whom they paid a third of their yearly dues (set at sixty pesos).¹⁴ In time, the *BDMP* would become the focal point for the colony's fantasies to reestablish themselves under the Third Reich even as the *wehrlos* looked to North America for its own providence.

The *DVP* originated during the First World War to unify Paraguay's German minority and shore up support for its language, culture, and educational institutions. After the war, it turned its attention to promoting German settlement in Paraguay. Its trajectory and challenges resembled those of other German organizations in Latin American countries that were formed during the war years such as the *Deutsch-Chilenische Bund*, the *Deutsche Volksbund für Argentinien*, the *Germanische Bund für Südamerika* in Brazil, and the *Verband Deutscher Reichsangehöriger* in Mexico.¹⁵ After the Nazis seized power in Germany, the *DVP* bent in the regime's direction and integrated National Socialist propaganda into its activities.¹⁶

Reichsdeutsch individuals who possessed an official German nationality could also belong to the country's burgeoning Nazi Party. In 1929, the first Nazi Party organization in Paraguay was founded in Independencia, near Villarrica, where a number

household) in the Fernheim Colony. Altogether, it is reasonable that about sixty to seventy percent of the colony's adult male population belonged to the organization.

¹¹ Their designation as a *Stützpunkt* aligned with the Nazi's organizational schema for local groups who supported the *völkisch* cause.

¹² Bund Deutscher Mennoniten, "Richtlinien für den 'Bund Deutscher Mennoniten in Paraguay,'" *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay) March 1937, p. 4.

¹³ In Spanish it was called the "*Unión Germánica*."

¹⁴ Bund Deutscher Mennoniten, "Richtlinien," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay) March 1937, p. 4.

¹⁵ Barbian, 74-75.

¹⁶ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 110.

of German soldiers had retired after the First World War. In 1931, Nazi activists founded a Paraguayan “country group” (*Landesgruppe*) with the retired Major Franz Reitzenstein at its head, and the first regional group (*Ortsgruppe*) in Asunción.¹⁷ As *Volksdeutsche* who did not possess German citizenship, most Fernheim colonists could not belong to these organizations. Nevertheless, the Fernheim Colony’s *völkisch* faction believed that a strong connection to the *DVP* and the German consulate in Asunción were crucial for the Mennonites’ attachment to the Nazi Party.

In the face of the Nazis’ and the *DVP*’s schemes for organizing the country’s German-speakers, Paraguay’s *auslandsdeutsch* enclaves were a heterogeneous lot having arrived in the country at various times since the 1880s and from various locations: Argentina, Austria, Africa, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, and the Soviet Union. Even those who arrived from Germany came from all points within the country: Bavaria, Pomerania, Saxony, Thuringia, and Wittenberg. Once settled in Paraguay, they mixed with each other in both urban and rural locales, though they seldom shared unified ambitions or sentiments about their German “homeland.” According to sociologist Joseph Winfield Fretz, “This diversity of background may account in part for the lack of internal cohesion and the frequent breakups of the various colonies.”¹⁸ Despite this diversity, Thiesen notes that by 1937, the *DVP* claimed a membership of about half of the adult German men in Paraguay.¹⁹ Although individuals were proud of their German heritage, their participation in the *DVP* did not necessarily ensure that they were in complete alignment with the political and military objectives of the Third Reich or stood ready to join a so-called “Fifth Column.”²⁰ By the eve of the Second World War, “most German citizens in the region [of Latin America], although still unwilling to join the Party, enthusiastically celebrated the achievements of their homeland regime.”²¹ As a *völkisch*

¹⁷ Rinke, 409.

¹⁸ Fretz, 45.

¹⁹ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 110. Thiesen cites Friedrich Kliewer’s *Deutsche Volksgruppe in Paraguay: Eine siedlungsgeschichtliche, volkskundliche, und volkspolitische Untersuchung* (Hamburg: Hans Christians, 1941); “German Society in Paraguay: 25 Years 1916-1941,” translated pamphlet, U. S. State Department Decimal File 862.20234/140, National Archives, College Park, MD.

²⁰ Friedman, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

organization, the *DVP* and others like it allowed *Auslandsdeutsche* to express their nationalism without necessarily joining the Nazi Party. As in other Latin American countries, uniting Paraguay's *Auslandsdeutsche* behind the Nazis' militaristic ambitions remained a ticklish proposition.

Sometimes the Nazi Party's ideology and tactics were even at odds with the German government's official diplomatic corps in Paraguay, both in *Asunción* and its regional stations. For example, Friedrich Brixner, the regional consul of Villarrica since 1929, was a party member but he abstained from anti-Semitic rhetoric out of his desire to keep the peace with the resident Jews in his sector. Other consuls, such as Emil Kloss and Eugen Franck from Encarnación, Erwin Eberhardt from Villeta, and R. W. Seifart from Concepción also assumed their positions before the regime came to power and declined joining the Party despite its ongoing disapproval.²² In general, before and during the war years, the corps sustained a balancing act of maintaining friendly relations with the Paraguayan government even at the expense of frustrating Nazis in the country and in Europe. Like the varied enclaves of German-speakers it monitored, the Nazis diplomatic corps was hardly the vision of solidarity that Berlin wished it to be.

In mid-1938, a little over a year after the *BDMP* was established, the German government's highest representative in the country, envoy Dr. Hans Karl Paul Eduard Büsing, visited all three Mennonite colonies. Büsing was the fourth envoy in five years to hold the post. This turnover rate exhibits a rather turbulent era for Germany's diplomatic presence in Paraguay. After Bülow was redeployed to Calcutta in 1933, Fritz Max Weiß assumed the post for several months until Erhard Graf von Wedel replaced him. Wedel was described in *AA* memoranda as an "old National Socialist," who was "very active" in the Party. Yet Wedel held the position for less than three years and apparently left amid a flurry of allegations, including one that he maintained a homosexual liaison with a young Austrian.²³ Büsing took over in February 1937 and attempted to restore the Nazi mission

²² Jan Päßler, "Kuriositäten und Wissenswertes aus Paraguays Vergangenheit," *Das Wochenblatt* (Asunción), January 22, 2012, accessed March 27, 2014, <http://wochenblatt.cc/nachrichten/kuriositaeten-und-wissenswertes-aus-paraguays-vergangenheit-teil-8/7953>.

²³ "Memorandum by R. Hess to Herr von Neurath," February 1, 1936, Erhard Graf von Wedel Personalakten 016255, AA. The undisclosed author who wrote the document concerning Wedel's rumored homosexuality and the individual ("Berthel") who passed it up the *AA* chain-of-command clearly had an axe to grind against the man. The author also stated that Wedel was "not worth a damn" ("*keinen Pfifferling*")

in Paraguay by ascertaining who within Paraguay's German-speaking population could be relied upon and who could not. Like Bender, who had graded the Mennonite colonies on their Mennoniteness when he visited the colonies that same year, Büsing devised his own hierarchy of the Mennonites' Germanness. In contrast to Bender, who wrote disparagingly of urban Mennonites, Büsing reported that the Asunción Mennonites and the Friesland Colony stood closest to the goals of the Nazi state.²⁴ Like so many other nationally-minded individuals of their era, Büsing and Bender believed in notions of social purity and that individuals could be described and ranked according to their "essence"—be it German, Mennonite, or otherwise.

Unlike previous envoys, Büsing felt it was his duty to broaden the Nazis' *auslandsdeutsch* tent in Paraguay.²⁵ In his report, Büsing notes that the Fernheim colonists had warm feelings about their Germanness, but they remained "widely separated from [*Reichsdeutsche*]," and were "typical overseas Germans (*Deutsche im Ausland*). Presumably, this meant that that they were more interested in their local community's fate rather than the good of the broader German community. As an expression of this self-interest, Büsing noted that the Fernheim colonists were hopeful that Hitler would conquer Ukraine for Germany so they could be wheat farmers once again.²⁶ In his analysis, the *BDMP* was but a weak attempt to manifest loyalty where there was only selfishness.

Though not as negative as Wilhelmy, Büsing nevertheless found the Menno Colony colonists to be completely "cool and reserved" toward him and indifferent to modern Germany. He also reported that they remained British subjects, and felt "comfortable doing so without making much use of it." Concerning their attitudes toward

wert") because he only paid attention to Paraguay's German merchants ("*Grosskaufleute*") and ignored "mere mortals" ("*gewöhnliche Sterbliche*"). See "Berthel to Kreisleiter, July 24, 1936," Erhard Graf von Wedel Personalakten 016255, AA. Jan Päßler of the Paraguayan *Wochenblatt* offers the perspective that Wedel was "insufficiently sympathetic" to the cause. See "Kuriositäten und Wissenswertes aus Paraguays Vergangenheit."

²⁴ Büsing, "Nr. 371, 2 Durchdrucke," 164.

²⁵ Jan Päßler, "Kuriositäten und Wissenswertes aus Paraguays Vergangenheit," January 22, 2012, accessed March 27, 2014, <http://wochenblatt.cc/nachrichten/kuriositaeten-und-wissenswertes-aus-paraguays-vergangenheit-teil-8/7953>.

²⁶ Büsing, "Nr. 371, 2 Durchdrucke," 163.

Germanness and the Third Reich, Büsing stated that they have little use for either preferring instead to “have no other ambition than to be able to live in their Mennonite community after their old customs and traditions.” Even so, he established “a loose bond” with them since, after all, “it is German blood that flows in their veins.”²⁷ Unclear as to what the colony’s archaic form of Germanness actually *meant* to the Third Reich, Büsing wrote them off as a lost cause.

Büsing placed urban Mennonites and Menno Colony Mennonites at either end of his spectrum with the Fernheim and Friesland colonists falling in between. This makes sense because the more individual colonists became disillusioned with the MCC’s goals and separated out from the Chaco, the more they gravitated to other types of solidarity, especially ones that they were already familiar with. Büsing concluded his report with the cynical recommendation that “a degree of caution is in order concerning their [the Fernheim Colony’s] joyful commitment to the Third Reich. At the moment they only have Germany, from which they can expect help and support, and they are not foolish enough to squander it.”²⁸ What he saw was what others had also witnessed. Büsing understood quite rightly that Paraguay’s Mennonite colonies were a fickle crowd when it came to national unity. Like the *Jugendbund* before it, the *BDMP* used their German identification to maintain a connection to Germany, though it did little to convince officials that the Mennonites actually supported the Nazi cause.

Kliwer and his German-born Mennonite wife, Margarete Dyck, returned to the Fernheim Colony in June 1939 to reinvigorate its *völkisch* movement. With a newly minted German doctorate in hand, Kliwer taught school, was elected leader of the colony’s teachers’ organization, and took up work with the *BDMP* and the *Jugendbund*. Yet Kliwer not only brought his penchant for leadership and organization with him from Germany but also carried a new scheme to resettle Fernheim residents in Europe. He found a willing audience.²⁹ Despite the *reichsdeutsch* visitors’ lukewarm impressions of the colony’s Germanness, some Fernheim residents believed they were “German enough”

²⁷ Ibid., 161-162.

²⁸ Ibid., 167.

²⁹ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 135.

to be resettled either within the *Reich* or—especially after 1939—within Germany’s newly acquired territories in the east.

The idea of repatriating Fernheim Colony Mennonites to Germany was not a new idea. It had first excited colonists in 1935 when the Mennonite Nazi propagandist Heinrich Hayo Schröder promoted a scheme to bring fifty Fernheim families to Germany. Nothing came of the proposal but within a few years Schröder devised another plan, in collaboration with P. Hildebrand, to create a traditional Russian Mennonite colony, using individuals from Canada and Paraguay, that would be under Schröder’s personal tutelage. He falsely assured potential colonists that the German government supported his plan, which it did not. Schröder’s actions aroused the imaginations of Fernheim’s and Friesland’s young people, though it also triggered the ire of Germany’s Ministry of Food and Agriculture and led to a series of exchanges between this agency, the German Foreign Office, German consulates in Canada and Paraguay, the Central Welfare Office for Ethnic Germans (*Hauptamt Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, VoMi*),³⁰ the MCC, and Fernheim Colony leaders—who all agreed that the idea was “fantastic” and “utopian.”³¹

Despite the failure of Schröder’s plan, a month before the Kliewer’s return, the *VoMi* granted twenty-six young people from Friesland (twenty-one men and five women) permission to migrate to Germany for the purpose of attending agricultural school. The plan looked great on paper. The *VoMi* assured participants that they would attend classes for two years after which they would be placed on German farms. Unfortunately, the plan changed after the participants arrived in Germany and they were immediately hired out as farm laborers. Within a couple of years, the men were drafted into the army and only a few participants actually saw the inside of a classroom.³² Of course, the difference between the *VoMi* plan and Schröder’s scheme was that the former entailed cheap labor

³⁰ The *VoMi* absorbed the *VDA*’s duties in July 1938, as part of Hitler’s *Gleichschaltung*. For more on the *VoMi*’s inner workings see Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe 1933-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

³¹ Schröder later revised his plan, turning it into a long-term goal that would be realized after Germany had conquered Eastern Europe. “Betrifft: Heinrich Hayo Schröder,” R127972e [formerly Altes Amt 69559], Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin, Germany, 143-146, 146. The entire series of exchanges runs from p. 143-154 of the file and includes Schröder’s justifications for his scheme.

³² Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 136.

in exchange for a third-class boat ticket while the latter required land, resources, money, and trust, which the suspicious and authoritarian government could not afford as it careened toward war. Nevertheless, the 1939 partnership between the Friesland Mennonites and the *VoMi* appeared to be an auspicious development to colonists.

Kliewer had previously supported the Chaco settlement but now he believed that the position was untenable. In an October 1939 letter to Quiring, Kliewer wrote that Paraguay's Mennonites were destined for failure if they remained in Paraguay since "The decline of their cultural life cannot be stopped. Added to this is the climate that for the longest time has had a paralyzing effect on the mind... I am now of the opinion, that neither economic nor national [*völkisch*] positions can be maintained and therefore a way out of this situation must be sought."³³ Relocation to Germany or newly-conquered Poland appeared to be the only way out. Having come of age as a member of the German-speaking minority in Poland during the 1920s and having imbibed the siege mentality of the *VDA* and the *Deutsche Schulverein* at the Łódź teacher-training school, Kliewer now embraced the Nazis' eastern fantasies with gusto.³⁴ The initiative fell on receptive ears. Many colonists were dissatisfied with the Chaco, including those who did not otherwise support National Socialism. After several years of drought, poor harvests, and inadequate medical care, death again made its rounds in early 1940 in the form of malaria and typhus. By April 29, twenty wagons of sick and dying colonists lined the street in front of the colony's small hospital.³⁵ The Kliewers thus returned to an expectant colony that was increasingly anxious about its ability to survive.

The Kliewers' arrival was also preceded by the contentious election of teacher and *Jugendbund* leader, Julius Legiehn, to the position of colony *Oberschulze*. Legiehn won the election with a two-thirds majority but he did not begin his term until after a two-day meeting in which his political attitudes generated much controversy among *Allianzgemeinde* pastors.³⁶ The *Allianzgemeinde* was the colony's smallest denomination

³³ Quoted in P. P. Klassen. *Die deutsch-völkische Zeit*, 56.

³⁴ Stahl, 35.

³⁵ "Nelson Litwiller to H. S. Bender," May 1, 1940, f. 69, b. 54, H. S. Bender papers, Hist. Mss. 1-278, AMC.

³⁶ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 125.

and the most adamant about the Mennonite tenant of nonviolence. P. P. Klassen observes that throughout the 1930s they had become increasingly exclusive, especially after the rise of the *völkisch* movement. He ascribes their separatist attitude to their “patriarchal leadership and their uncompromising family orientation,” though it also likely had to do with their minority status and opposition to games and other amusements practiced by the *Jugendbund*, which they considered to be “worldly.”³⁷ Similar in some respects to the Menno Colony colonists, its members were opposed to repatriation. They also worried that their small group would be hopeless to maintain if their brethren abandoned them.³⁸

Fernheim’s original *völkisch* leaders, Kliewer and Legiehn, were back in power but the intervening years had changed both men. Kliewer’s time as a graduate student in Germany had made him more convinced of the Nazi cause while Legiehn—who had remained in the colony as a secondary school teacher—took a more cautious approach to questions of religion and politics. In the main, Legiehn wanted to restore the community’s trust in him by avoiding controversy and fulfilling his official duties, while Kliewer wished to provoke the colony to action.³⁹

The Fernheim and Friesland colonies greeted Germany’s invasion of Poland in September 1939 with muted excitement and there is no indication that the Menno Colony had an opinion on this geo-political development.⁴⁰ As the year drew to a close, editor N. Siemens gloomily reported in that the colony could no longer sell cotton to Germany (“Our plans have once again been thwarted.”) and penned a general condemnation of war, but he refrained from blaming Germany or the Allies.⁴¹ The new conflict surely

³⁷ P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay*, vol. 1, 315.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 315-316.

³⁹ This is perhaps why, at the end of 1939, he resigned from his post with the *BDMP* and turned his responsibilities over to Friedrich Kliewer though he remained attentive to Kliewer’s *völkisch* objectives in his capacity as *Oberschulze*. See “Bund Deutscher Mennoniten in Paraguay,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), December 1939, p. 4.

⁴⁰ The news reached Fernheim and Friesland via radio broadcast since the *VoMi* had shipped radios to both colonies in the preceding year. See “Radioapparat für die Kolonie Friesland,” R127972e [formerly Altes Amt 69559], Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin, Germany, 100-107. *Menno-Blatt* also carried a new column titled “*Neueste Nachrichte*” (“Latest News”) based on these transmissions. For the first written war report in *Menno-Blatt* see “Krieg in Europa!” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), August/September 1939, p. 8.

⁴¹ Nikolai Siemens, “Verschiedenes,” *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), October 1939, p. 6; Nikolai Siemens, “Friede auf Erden?!” December 1939, p. 1.

summoned painful memories of the colonists' wartime experiences in the First World War but their recollections were likely focused on their ill treatment at the hands of Russian and Soviet authorities because they were "Germans" than the German army's abuses of Russian civilians.⁴² By this point, the Fernheim colonists—and especially those under the age of twenty-five—were largely inured to war and violence. In the preceding quarter century, they had survived the First World War, the Russian Revolution and Civil War, Stalin's war against *kulaks*, and the Chaco War. Their lives were defined by conflict and so the renewed hostilities in Europe were less of a rupture than a continuity with their past, and one that held the promise of opportunity.

Breaking completely with Mennonites' historic distaste for violence, some individuals, including the Kliewers and members of the *BDMP*, were energized by the war and the possibility of German victory. On Kliewer's first day as leader of the *BDMP* in November 1939, he set forth a new set of goals for the organization:

- 1) Mobilize nationalist (*völkischen*) forces in our colony and deploy them accordingly.
- 2) Mobilize our municipal administration as well as our cultural and charitable institutions such as the hospital and school.
- 3) Maintain communication with German organizations and their branches in Paraguay
- 4) Maintain a connection with the Reich and the German embassy in Paraguay.⁴³

In January 1940, Kliewer and M. Dyck became embroiled in a heated debate with Friesland and Fernheim preachers over the couple's growing militarism. The conflict placed them in clear opposition to the colony's religious leadership even as it drew them

⁴² In March 1915, the Russian Duma introduced a plan to liquidate all property owned by the country's German-speakers, including the Mennonites. In response, the Mennonites' *KfK* petitioned that Mennonites were not Germans, but Dutch. Mennonites also published and distributed a book titled *Kto takie Mennonity? (Who are the Mennonites?)*, hoping to gain support for their cause. After one year of arbitration and thousands of rubles paid out in bribes, the Mennonites were officially granted Dutch status by the Duma. However, Mennonites abandoned their hard-won Dutch status and reverted to calling themselves "German" when German troops occupied Mennonite villages in Ukraine during the spring and summer of 1918. By autumn, the Armistice and the dissolution of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk brought Ukraine under the sway of the Soviets and now their colonies endured the brutalities of marauding armies. Historian A. Friesen provides an extensive analysis of Mennonite negotiations with the state over the German/Dutch issue in, *In Defense of Privilege*, 17-27. See also F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 30; and Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 132, 138.

⁴³ "Bund Deutscher Mennoniten in Paraguay," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), December 1939, p. 4.

nearer to the country's Nazi leadership.⁴⁴ Coincidentally, Gerd von Schütz, business manager of the *DVP* in Asunción, was visiting the colony at the time. In February, *Menno-Blatt* printed an article on Schütz's impressions of the colony. Unlike Wilhelmy, who exhibited both suspicion and condescension toward the colonies, Schütz praised the Mennonites' Germanness, "German will, German tenacity, German faith has once again, as so often, repeatedly, shown that the seemingly impossible is still feasible," from the steppe to the bush.⁴⁵ Perhaps his enthusiasm was due to an awareness the colony's *völkisch* supporters were experiencing difficulties or because Paraguay's disparate and relatively small German-speaking population—20,000 individuals out of a Paraguayan population of 992,420, or .02%—needed all the support his organization could muster.⁴⁶ Either way, Kliewer and N. Siemens traveled to the capital for news and a debriefing with Schütz at his private residence.

After the meeting with Schütz, N. Siemens experienced an abrupt change of heart concerning his role as a *völkisch* booster in the colony, which led to decisively withdraw from the *völkisch* movement. It is unclear exactly what transpired at the meeting—perhaps the Nazis' brutal ambitions were finally spelled out to him—but he later stated that he had seen the dark heart of National Socialism and no longer wished to place *Menno-Blatt* at its service.⁴⁷ From this point on, he began running articles that highlighted the biblical basis for pacifism and mailed a request to Orié O. Miller at the MCC for resources to combat the colony's *völkisch* drift. In April, N. Siemens went public with his dissatisfaction during a general meeting of the *Brüdergemeinde*. The *Brüdergemeinde* church was the largest denomination in Fernheim and Friesland and contained most of the colonies' *völkisch* supporters.⁴⁸ N. Siemen's speech "Fernheim in Distress!" ("*Fernheim in Not!*"), a possible play-on-words with the organization "*Brüder*

⁴⁴ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 127.

⁴⁵ Gerd von Schütz, "Eindrücke in Fernheim" *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), February 1940, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Dennis M. Hanratty and Sandra W. Meditz eds., *Paraguay: A Country Study* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 247.

⁴⁷ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 128. Apparently, at about this same time he was offered money from "paid Germans," to buy his printing press, which he refused to do. See "Litwiller to Bender," May 1, 1940, f. 69, b. 54, H. S. Bender papers, Hist. Mss. 1-278, AMC.

⁴⁸ It is of note that Unruh too belonged to the *Brüdergemeinde*.

in Not,” laid out the stakes as he saw them.⁴⁹ He argued that the colony had a choice between two paths: “*Volkstum*” and “*Christentum*.” Although Germany was the colony’s national “mother,” she had forsaken her children by becoming an “eccentric” (*Sonderling*). Adding a biblical twist to the analogy, N. Siemens argued that they were orphans who must wander the earth according to Hebrews 13:14 “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”⁵⁰ With this plea, N. Siemens suggested that the Fernheim Colony’s collective narrative did not have an earthly conclusion—either in Paraguay or Germany—but would only be revealed by through faithfulness to God’s inscrutable will. At the heart of it, N. Siemens believed that politics was a sickness that infected the colony and must be cured with a return to biblical Christianity.⁵¹

Perhaps inspired by N. Siemens speech at the *Brüdergemeinde* meeting, the *Allianzgemeinde* submitted a statement to *Oberschulze* Legiehn in February 1940 that affirmed their commitment to remaining in the Chaco. The document was signed by all male members of the church and clarified their problems with the *völkisch* movement. As quoted by P. P. Klassen, it read, “We believe that God prepared the way to Paraguay for us, where we can live by our beliefs and Mennonite principles, as stated in the *Privilegium* that was issued by the Paraguayan government.”⁵² They argued that *völkisch* activity had jeopardized the colony too much and that Kliewer’s leadership of the schools had infused the youth with a martial spirit. If Legiehn did not take immediate action, they threatened to withdraw their children from the Central School (*Zentralschule*).⁵³ Weighing the odds, Legiehn declined to check the *völkisch* movement’s growing strength and allowed Kliewer to maintain his position in the *Zentralschule*.

Stonewalled by the colony’s leaders, N. Siemens and the *Allianzgemeinde* found an ally in three North American missionaries from Argentina who visited the colony in April 1940 and shared the belief that God had ordained the colonists to remain in the

⁴⁹ Nikolai Siemens, “Fernheim in Not!” f. “Paraguay Fernheim Colony 1940,” IX-6-3 Central Correspondence, 1931-85, MCCF, Akron, PA.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6. (ESV).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁵² P. P. Klassen, *The Mennonites in Paraguay Volume 1*, 316.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Chaco. If *völkisch* individuals could garner transnational support, so too could the *wehrlos*. Nelson Litwiller, Josephus W. Shank, and Elvin V. Snyder worked for the (old) Mennonite Church (Bender's denomination) and arrived at the same time that the Fernheim colonists were celebrating Hitler's birthday, which happened to fall on a Sunday. Though the missionaries overlooked Kliewer and A. Harder's "riding pants," "high boot[s]," and "a certain amount of heel clicking" as a local custom, Litwiller reported that they "were simply dumbfounded" by the colony's "vociferous" support for Hitler.⁵⁴ As North American Mennonites who had come to view the principle of nonviolence as the cornerstone of Mennonite doctrine, the notion that any Mennonites were favorable (let alone celebratory) of the Nazi dictator seemed antithetical and bizarre. Yet from the colonists' perspective, Hitler represented a decisive leader who had apparently brought peace to a quarreling German populace through his *völkisch* tactics and may even secure their own return to Europe. Both parties therefore viewed the colony as a local metaphor for national and global anxieties.

Tensions came to a head when the three missionaries preached sermons at a colony assembly in Filadelfia. During their speeches, they clarified the North American Mennonite position against German militarism and provoked a coarse *völkisch* rebuttal. Snyder was second to speak and directly addressed the issues of non-violence and Nazism. He engaged Nazism as a system that abuses power, represents totalitarian absolutism, and is determined to abolish both individual personality and Christianity. Placing quotes from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in contrast to statements by theologian Karl Barth, Snyder avoided local and emotional appeals in favor of a theological critique of Nazism.⁵⁵ His approach depersonalized the assault but also made him appear out of touch with an audience that viewed Nazism much more personally—as the best means to the end of leaving the Chaco.

Naturally, Snyder's speech did not go over with the colony's *völkisch* group. After he took a seat, several young men walked out of the assembly and were followed soon thereafter by Kliewer and A. Harder. After commiserating in the yard, Kliewer

⁵⁴ "Litwiller to Bender," May 1, 1940, f. 69, b. 54, H. S. Bender papers, Hist. Mss. 1-278, AMC.

⁵⁵ "Elvin Snyder to S. C. Yoder," May 1, 1940, f. 2/13, Elvin Snyder Papers, Hist. Mss. 1-113, AMC.

shouted through the open door that the sermons were an insult (“*Beschimpfung*”) to Germany and would be vindicated in due time.⁵⁶ The colony’s high school students supported the reprisal with applause.⁵⁷ As in 1929, when the *AA* and the MCC debated the refugees’ destiny as Brazilian Germans or as Paraguayan Mennonites, ideology swirled around the colonists once more, confusing outsiders’ impressions and their own self-perceptions. If, according to Marx, history repeats itself, first as tragedy, and then as farce, then the 1929 disputation between the *AA* and the MCC was revisited through Snyder’s English-language theological treatise and Kliewer’s petty tantrum.

After the missionaries left, each wrote a report to a different Mennonite leader in the United States revealing their distinctly North American attitudes about faith and politics. In his letter to Bender, Litwiller stated that the missionaries encouraged the Fernheim colonists to “not mix in politics,” though perhaps he meant to say “German politics” since he also noted that he was writing as a “loyal Canadian.” Apparently, identifying with a North American government was fine since North American Mennonites believed that their Anabaptist forbearers anticipated democratic governance. However, identifying with a fascist government was another story, even though German Mennonites were entirely at peace with this arrangement for their own historical and theological reasons.⁵⁸

Interestingly, it was not Fernheim’s *völkisch* contingent that the missionaries had the most difficulty understanding since both parties shared a modern, political vocabulary. Rather, it was the Menno Colony that Snyder singled out as a bastion of “fanaticism” in his letter to Goshen College president and Mennonite Board of Missions secretary, Sanford C. Yoder. Snyder observed that the Menno Colony neither shared nor desired “harmony or cooperation” with Fernheim.⁵⁹ Though Snyder was firmly opposed to the latter’s Nazi contingent, at least theirs was a type of extremism that he could understand. *Völkisch* individuals could be debated on intellectual and theological

⁵⁶ “Litwiller to Bender,” May 1, 1940, f. 69, b. 54, H. S. Bender papers, Hist. Mss. 1-278, AMC.

⁵⁷ Ibid.; “Snyder to Yoder,” May 1, 1940, f. 2/13, Elvin Snyder Papers, Hist. Mss. 1-113, AMC.

⁵⁸ “Litwiller to Bender,” May 1, 1940, f. 69, b. 54, H. S. Bender papers, Hist. Mss. 1-278, AMC.

⁵⁹ “Elvin Snyder to Yoder,” May 1, 1940, f. 2/13, Elvin Snyder Papers, Hist. Mss. 1-113, AMC.

grounds. The Menno Colony Mennonites could not. Though Snyder observed that it would be difficult to change the Fernheim colonists' minds, he intuited that it would be nearly impossible to do the same with the Menno colonists.

One of the missionaries' most troubling discoveries was financial rather than spiritual or ideological. During their conversations with sympathetic Fernheimers, they learned that Kliever was encouraging colonists to take out German citizenship papers, which threatened to forfeit the colony's privileged status in the eyes of Paraguayan authorities. They also learned that his ultimate goal was to persuade colonists to default on their MCC debts and save their money for boat tickets to Buenos Aires, where they would ostensibly receive free passage to Germany. With an estimated fifty to eighty percent of colonists receptive to the Nazi cause, this was a serious threat to the MCC's ability to collect the colony's collective debt and remain solvent.⁶⁰ Altogether, the missionaries' visit in early 1940 was a wake-up call to the MCC, for it illuminated the degree to which their vision of a triumphal American-style Mennonite enterprise in the Chaco diverged from the growing *völkisch* sentiment that the colonists' true destiny was in Germany and that they should abandon the venture at any cost to their creditors.

Apparently, the three North American representatives emboldened the colony's preachers to hold a subsequent meeting to discuss the *völkisch* movement and its effect on the settlement. At a meeting held on April 28, 1940 most of the colony's preachers voted to not go along with the *völkisch* cause since it "creates anxiety in us and is not consistent with the Mennonite principles."⁶¹ Yet it would take more than an injunction by the colony's preachers to break the will of the *völkisch* group. The movement did not simply represent a rival political opinion or even a rival loyalty to the colonies' churches. It represented the possibility of salvation from a territory marked first by disease and dying, then by war, and then by drought. The *völkisch* movement, and the possibility of repatriation that it entailed, was to many Fernheim and Friesland individuals their best and perhaps only chance of survival.

⁶⁰ Ibid.; "Litwiller to Bender," May 1, 1940, f. 69, b. 54, H. S. Bender papers, Hist. Mss. 1-278, AMC.

⁶¹ Peter Wiens, *Die K. f. K. Fernheim: ein geschichtlicher Überblick 1931-1991* (Filadelfia, Paraguay: K. f. K. Fernheim, 1992), 35.

By May 1940, a line was drawn between the Fernheim colony's *wehrlos* and *völkisch* factions that largely fell along church lines. The *Allianzgemeinde* dominating the former and *Brüdergemeinde* and *Mennonitengemeinde* individuals dominated the latter. Of course, a large number of colonists existed somewhere in the middle of the opposing *wehrlos* and *völkisch* poles: They sincerely wished to return to Europe if it was possible, but they remained engrossed in their immediate concerns of growing crops and meeting the next debt payment. Hence, the *völkisch* faction maintained the upper hand, not because it had to defend its ideology but because it merely had to cast doubt on the colony's reality. According to Thiesen, "What helped persuade waverers to go along with the *völkisch* movement's promotion of Germany was a fear among Kliewer's opponents that if they refused to sacrifice their religious principles for a return to Europe, they would be left isolated and unsupported in the Chaco."⁶² Thus, many colonists who were more-or-less apolitical viewed the repatriation movement as the last train from a station that was on the verge of being demolished.

Soon after this informal division, the *völkisch* contingent flexed its power by drawing up a petition to the German consulate in Asunción requesting resettlement in Germany. Signatories requested German citizenship, promised to fit themselves into the German National State, and to "do our duty unto the utmost for the German Fatherland"—which suggested their willingness to perform military service—since "the ten colonial years and the conditions in this country have persuaded us that we will never find a homeland here."⁶³ By September, the number of signatories reached 240 families, representing a clear majority of the colony's population. Friesland's entire population made a similar request.⁶⁴

What Kliewer had intimated to Quiring the year before—that the Chaco was uninhabitable for "German" colonists—was now accepted as fact by the Fernheim Colony. They *must* return to Europe. The petition's popularity also indicates that

⁶² Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 137.

⁶³ "Application of Russian-German Colonists of the colony Fernheim for citizenship," May 26, 1940, quoted in translation in Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *From the Files of MCC* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 56.

⁶⁴ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 143.

colonists believed the war would be over soon and that they had a real possibility of relocating to Germany or Eastern Europe. In view of the Nazis' stunning victories, there was little chance that they would be required to perform military service and every indication that they could reap the benefits of German victory. Either way, colonists had nothing to lose and everything to gain by having their names on the document.

MCC leaders, including P. C. Hiebert, Orie O. Miller and Bender, weighed in on the controversy with a strongly worded letter that was read at a colony assembly in June 1940.⁶⁵ The letter focused on a few key issues including repatriation to Germany and Kliewer's (mis)management of the school system.⁶⁶ It also included a rumor that the colonists' special privileges were in danger of being revoked by the Paraguayan government due to its *völkisch* activity.⁶⁷ Echoing N. Siemens, the MCC exhorted the colony to remain apolitical by referencing Jeremiah 27:8-9 which states, "But if any nation or kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, declares the Lord, until I have consumed it by his hand. So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your fortune-tellers, or your sorcerers, who are saying to you, 'You shall not serve the king of Babylon.'"⁶⁸ In the MCC's view, Paraguay may be "Babylon," a foreign and hostile land far removed from the colonists' imagined "Promised Land," but the Lord willed them to embrace their situation and not heed the false words of the "dreamer" Kliewer.

The MCC's designation of Paraguay as "Babylon" is particularly interesting since it highlights the variegated application of biblical metaphors within a single confession depending on a groups' specific context. Canada was a decadent and prideful "Babylon" to the Menno colonists in 1927, but an unrealizable "Promised Land" to the Fernheim

⁶⁵ "MCC to Oberschulzen... in der Kolonie Fernheim," June 15, 1940, f. 69, b. 54, H. S. Bender papers, Hist. Mss. 1-278, AMC.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Thiesen argues that Paraguayan officials were likely worried about the repatriation movement for several reasons including the fact that the Fernheim Colony grew a major portion of the country's cotton, supplied food and materials to Paraguayan troops stationed in the Chaco, and provided a social and economic bulwark against Bolivian reprisal. See *Mennonite and Nazi?* 152.

⁶⁸ (ESV).

colonists in 1930. Alternately, the Menno Colony regarded Paraguay as one of a series of “Promised Lands,” while the MCC regarded it as a foreign “Babylon”—not as felicitous as the Russian steppe or the North American prairies but serviceable enough. With the Chaco’s disease, drought, and war, many Fernheim colonists experienced Paraguay neither as a “Promised Land” nor as “Babylon,” but as a “Sinai Desert,” that they must escape. It is understandable that the Fernheim Mennonites seriously doubted their Mennonite contemporaries to explain their situation in biblical language, which no doubt contributed to a their own formulation that they would find their “Promised Land” in an expanded German *Reich*.

By 1940, the vast majority of North American Mennonites had found their “Promised Land” in Canada or the United States. A few outliers, such as the aforementioned J. J. Hildebrand, used Canadian publications to advertise their *völkisch* fantasies but they were strongly criticized by most of the denomination’s faithful, especially Mennonites who had arrived on the continent before the 1920s.⁶⁹ With the United States teetering on the edge of war, MCC leaders wanted to be clear that they were a peaceful organization, committed to working with Western governments, and did not conflate their Mennonite identity with a German identity. In this spirit, P. C. Hiebert encouraged Legiehn to fall in line with the MCC and cut the colony’s financial and organizational ties to Germany and *völkisch* organizations in Paraguay.⁷⁰ The colony’s *wehrlos* faction was buoyed by the MCC’s strong stance but the *völkisch* contingent considered the MCC’s entreaty as a demand to cut their lifeline.

Playing the role of the Pied Piper, Kliever continued to set the tune to which most of the colony expectantly followed. By the fall of 1940, he had started to become a petty tyrant, a perfect Nazi. According to one observer Gerhard Balzer, “Dr. Kliever gives and takes German citizenship to and from whoever he wants.”⁷¹ Now that Germany had

⁶⁹ Urry notes that elder Jacob H. Janzen in Canada was a key figure in the battle against German nationalist ideology and promoted his views in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*. See “*Mennostaat for the Mennovolk?*” 73-74.

⁷⁰ “P. C. Hiebert to Julius Legiehn,” March 25, 1941, f. 394 Correspondence, March 1941, b. 35, P. C. Hiebert papers, MS-37, Mennonite Library and Archives (hereafter, MLA), North Newton, KS.

⁷¹ Quoted in “Bernhard Wall to H. S. Bender,” May 8, 1940, ACF. Reprinted in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 137.

conquered Poland and was poised to subdue the rest of Europe, Kliewer's status was elevated to being the gatekeeper to a new life in the new *Reich*.

Legiehn stood in a difficult position as he attempted to bind the colony together while nursing his own hope that repatriation was possible. As *Oberschulze*, he agreed with editor N. Siemens that politics had become a disease in the colony but he wanted to remain on friendly terms with Kliewer. In October 1940, he proposed a compromise that called for a moratorium on the issue. The statement was titled "Recommendations for the Strengthening of Public Peace in the Fernheim Colony" and was read at a conference of the colony's preachers, who themselves were divided on the matter.⁷² In general terms, the document called both groups to admit that they had been uncharitable towards each other and that they would keep all future disagreements personal and private. With the preachers' endorsement and the *BDMP*'s assurances, both sides assented to Legiehn's tepid injunction. Pleased with the truce, Legiehn reported to the MCC that peace reigned in the Chaco but the organization remained doubtful that it would last. As Kliewer and Nazi Germany's fortunes rose, the MCC and *wehrlos* positions fell. This was not strictly an ideological struggle but a combination of how colonists imagined their future, their collective narrative, and their identification as Germans and as Mennonites.

The Fernheim and Friesland colonies' *völkisch* spirits were buoyed in June 1941 when Germany's war machine leveled its sights on the Soviet Union during Operation Barbarossa. Preacher A. Harder heard the news en route to Asunción to conduct church services for Mennonites in the capital. This event spurred him to write that Paraguay:

cannot be a permanent home [for Fernheim Colony Mennonites]! It was and is only our place of refuge! The tropical climate and the hard work makes us unable to work early and paralyzes our mental abilities. We shall tell our children ever more of God's wonderful help in time of need, our most wonderful rescue out of Russia, the help from the German *Reich* and our brethren in North America... we will stand our ground in the thorny, inhospitable Chaco until God will bring to fulfillment our burning wish, our almost insatiable longing!⁷³

⁷² Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 141-142.

⁷³ Abraham Harder, "Reisebericht," 1941, 1, f. 262 "Paraguay and Brazil 1937-1941," b. 25, General Conference Emergency Relief Board papers, I-G-I, MLA.

Although A. Harder was among the Mennonites that Wilhelmy had criticized for having a “Jewish name” he nevertheless longed for deliverance to Eastern Europe. He believed that God had plans for the Fernheim colonists and it was only a matter of time—weeks perhaps—before Germany would widen its horizons “with the hills and valleys of our old home in Russia.”⁷⁴ A. Harder’s statement symbolizes the local and mythological way that the Fernheim colonists imagined their repatriation to Europe. It was *the* happy resolution to the struggles that defined their time in the Chaco. As the Nazis cast the Weimar era as the German nation’s sojourn through ambiguity and pain, renewed hostilities on the European continent portended a happy finale to both stories. This, of course, would not come to pass. The way in which the colony’s hopes disintegrated reveals that the year 1944 was less of an end to the Fernheim Colony’s dreams than a reevaluation of its future as a German-speaking Mennonite colony in Paraguay.

As A. Harder was proclaiming a new destiny for the Fernheim Colony, the *DAI* in Germany outlined its own vision for the role of overseas Germans (*Überseedeutschen*) in an expanded *Reich*. The document was titled “Fundamental questions about a possible resettlement of the overseas *Volksdeutsche*” and was presented to the Nazi’s Commissariat for the Strengthening of German Nationhood (*Reichskommissariat für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums*). Notably, the report stated that much of Paraguay’s German population was interested in relocating to Germany if so allowed. According to a 1941 estimate by the *DAI* there were about 20,000 Germans in Paraguay (likely including both Mennonite colonies), of whom it estimated about 15,000 would return to Germany after a successful conclusion of hostilities in Europe.⁷⁵ In total, the *DAI* suggested there would be about 800,000 *Überseedeutschen* who would want to return to Europe, possibly more if host states increased their persecution of Germans.⁷⁶

It appeared as if the Fernheim Colony’s *völkisch* stars were finally coming into alignment for the report went on to suggest that rural *Überseedeutschen* were of high value to the Nazis’ agrarian ambitions in Eastern Europe. Mentioning the Paraguayan

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Deutsche Ausland-Institut, “Grundfragen zu einer etwaigen Umsiedlung der überseeischen Volksdeutschen,” GFM 33/4822, NA, 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 3.

settlers directly, the report stated, “It can be said with certainty that after the victorious conclusion of the war, a significant return migration of ethnic Germans [*Volksdeutsche*] will be from overseas. The overseas Germans themselves are striving to return to the realm because they are hoping to find within its boundaries an extended tree upon which they can develop their *Volk* style [*Volksart*] freely and because they want to participate in the economic prosperity of the empire.”⁷⁷ Thus, as the Fernheim Mennonites looked to Germany to save them, Germany looked to South America’s German-speakers and the answer to their desolation of the Eastern European countryside.

As Germany moved from victory to victory, Mennonite conscientious objectors from the United States arrived in the Fernheim Colony, thereby placing the *völkisch* group in stark contrast with the MCC. The organization sent these young men to Paraguay to perform alternative service to the military draft. American Mennonites had learned from the violence and confusion that was directed against conscientious objectors during the First World War and it was eager to provide Mennonite young men with federally sanctioned alternatives to military service. In 1940-1941, the MCC added a Civilian Public Service (CPS) component to its relief operations as an alternative to the United States Selective Service and Training Act. It therefore positioned itself as the broker between the federal government, Mennonite groups, and other historic peace churches, such as the Quakers, with whom it increasingly cooperated. Within a few years, Mennonites outnumbered all other denominations in the program with 4,665 of 12,600 participants, though less than half of all Mennonite young men chose CPS over military service.⁷⁸ The MCC aimed to protect what it considered to be the denomination’s most essential tenets by using the tools available within the democratic system.

In the same month that A. Harder had his prophetic vision of leaving the Chaco and the *DAI* filed its report on repatriating *Überseedutschen*, MCC representatives Ori O. Miller and CPS participant John R. Schmidt arrived in the colony. Miller’s visit was brief, but J. Schmidt remained in the Chaco for a year and a half working as a medical

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷⁸ Importantly, participation in the CPS was much higher in conservative Mennonite churches rather than in more progressive ones. See Melvin Gingerich, “Civilian Public Service,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified April 13, 2014, accessed February 9, 2015, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Civilian_Public_Service&oldid=120961.

doctor in Fernheim's small hospital. In October 1941, a second CPSer named Vernon H. Schmidt arrived in Paraguay. He was tasked with helping build a hospital and road for the Fernheim and Friesland colonies.

The year 1943 brought three more MCC individuals to the colony. They were Robert W. Geigley, a lawyer from Pennsylvania; A. E. Janzen, a college professor from Kansas; and George S. Klassen, a dentist also from Kansas. These men were older than the CPS men and their assignment was to deal with the colony's inflationary crisis, provide dental care to colonists, and help draw them into closer fellowship with American Mennonites.⁷⁹ In the United States, Mennonite men faced the condescension of their peers for not fighting in the military. Now, surrounded by Mennonites in Paraguay, they were surprised to learn that some colonists had little interest in conscientious objection and even cheered the military achievements of the country that had started the war. Moreover, the CPSers had learned politically sophisticated and theologically justified reasons for their decisions, which did not translate well to a colony that had cut its teeth on the visceral realities of a pioneer existence that it wished to escape.

The new arrivals were accustomed to working with the American government and not against it, since it made their CPS service possible. They visited the United States embassy in Asunción from time to time, bringing with them various accounts of colony members' loyalty to Germany. One of Janzen's reports, which eventually reached FBI director J. Edgar Hoover in Washington, reassured American authorities that the Nazi threat in the Chaco had somehow been neutralized.⁸⁰ V. Schmidt painted a different picture in a report to ambassador Wesley Frost: that many of the colonists continued to favor Germany. When V. Schmidt returned to the colony, he encouraged Legiehn to show some American propaganda films that he had brought with him in an effort to sway colonists toward the Allies' perspective on the war. About 1,500 colonists viewed the films including, interestingly enough, many people from the Menno Colony.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Wesley Prieb, *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, "Janzen, Abraham Ewell (1892-1995)," last modified July 31, 2014, accessed February 9, 2015, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Janzen,_Abraham_Ewell_\(1892-1995\)&oldid=123758](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Janzen,_Abraham_Ewell_(1892-1995)&oldid=123758).

⁸⁰ "J. Edgar Hoover to Adolf A. Berle, Jr.," September 29, 1943, U.S. State Department Decimal File 862.20210/2599. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 167.

⁸¹ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 170-171.

Despite the American and MCC propaganda, the Fernheim Colony's repatriation scheme would not die, and Kliever's status as the intermediary between the Fernheim Colony and the *DVP* remained secure. In 1943, the colony obtained news from the *DVP* in Asunción that qualified *Auslandsdeutsche* who wished to "return" to Germany would be exchanged for Allied civilians in occupied Europe.⁸² Kliever submitted forms for his family and the ten other Fernheim families (likely including Legiehn) who held German passports. He also submitted a petition on behalf of 180 families, which represented a little less than half of the colony's population.⁸³ Though the transfer scheme melted away in the light of German reversals later that year, Kliever continued to sustain the colony's hopes for a return migration, even as the MCC worked to keep the colonists settled.

Burned Bridges and a New Beginning

The stage was now set for a confrontation between the MCC and the *BDMP* (now the *VDR*), which numbered 278 individuals.⁸⁴ As it turned out, the MCC representatives and the *wehrlos* contingent largely sat on the sidelines as the Colony's *völkisch* supporters eviscerated themselves in a pathetic attempt to sustain the notion that they were ordained to leave Paraguay. It began as a personality conflict between Kliever and one of the *VDR*'s younger members, but morphed into violence and vigilantism after a cantankerous shopkeeper entered the fray. Like the formation of the *Jugendbund*, local events entwined with broader allegiances to create an ambiguous and volatile situation.

The trouble started in late-1942 when Kliever, playing the role of a "little Hitler," overextended his authority during a colony-wide celebration. One event required the colony's young people to jump over a fire. The practice was evocative of the German Youth Movement (*deutsche Jugendbewegung*) practice of jumping through a fire to rededicate oneself to Germanic values. Like a martinet, Kliever demanded *all* of the

⁸² This plan may in fact have related to the failed 1943-1944 arrangement between Nazi Germany and Western governments to exchange German nationals in the Americas for Polish and Dutch Jews holding American or Latin America papers. The Jews were held at the Bergen-Belsen "Residence Camp," in Germany until the scheme failed and they were transferred to Auschwitz. See Friedman, 209-213.

⁸³ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 164. For more on the colony's sentiments about returning to Europe see Julius Legiehn to Orie O. Miller," July 9, 1940, f. "Paraguay Fernheim Colony 1940," IX-6-3 Central Correspondence, 1931-85, MCCF, Akron, PA.

⁸⁴ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 153.

colony's young people to participate and this presumably meant anyone younger than thirty years old. Yet the activity seemed quaint and silly to some of the older attendees who themselves were leaders in the *VDR*. Some of these young men had joined the *Jugendbund* nine years earlier and had grown up while Kliewer was in Germany. Now Kliewer wanted to be a dictator. According to one of his primary antagonists, Hans Neufeld, "As I repeatedly tried to defend our feeling that our age was not appropriate to these games, he became increasingly agitated and finally furious. His words still ring clearly in my ears: 'You will obey me!'"⁸⁵

Subsequent confrontations ensued regarding Kliewer's unfair treatment of *VDR* members and his injunction against dancing. Class was also an issue. H. Neufeld and his compatriots, even those who were over thirty years old, were referred to as "boys" because they did not own land. As a result, they were effectively "second class citizens" and could not vote in colony elections.⁸⁶ Combined with Kliewer's self-styled position as the gatekeeper to Germany, the situation quickly spiraled into a faceoff between his supporters and a smaller group clustered around H. Neufeld. Ironically, it was a conflict between members of the *Jugendbund*—the very organization meant to subdue and unify colony youths—that unraveled the settlement's peace.

The first sally came from the H. Neufeld group who posted anti-Kliewer posters around the colony that called into question the credentials of his doctorate degree.⁸⁷ Kliewer's supporters raised their own posters a week later. Failing to resolve the issue within the bounds of the *VDR*, Kliewer asked *Oberschulze* Legiehn to take action against "all elements who stand against the community and refuse to submit."⁸⁸ The letter's implication was that Kliewer represented the entire community and that everyone he disagreed with should bow to him. As usual, Legiehn was indecisive and issued a public

⁸⁵ Hans (Juan) Neufeld, *Affaire Dr. Fritz Kliewer in Farnheim [sic] 1940-1944* (Asuncion: Hans Neufeld, 1988.), 10.

⁸⁶ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 290, n. 91.

⁸⁷ P. P. Klassen *Die deutsch-völkish Zeit*, 94.

⁸⁸ [Friedrich] Fritz Kliewer, "Darlegungen über den Zwischenfall in Philadelphia. Auszug aus einen Briefe Dr. F. Kliewers an den Oberschulzen Legiehn," November 6, 1942, Nachlaß Dr. F. Kliewer, ACF. Quoted in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 157.

statement calling for moratorium on the issue—there would be no investigation and no attempt at reconciliation. Each side should simply pretend that the other did not exist.

Though neither side apologized or admitted any wrongdoing, Kliewer maintained the high ground since he remained the leader of the *VDR* and intermediary with the *DVP* in Asunción. The H. Neufeld group therefore asked Legiehn to give them a copy of his moratorium statement, showing that the affair was finished and would not hurt their chances of returning to Germany in the event that Kliewer became vindictive (and Germany won the war).⁸⁹ Perhaps under pressure from Kliewer, Legiehn delayed and then declined to share the statement with H. Neufeld. This in turn prompted H. Neufeld and his compatriots to break into Legiehn's office to steal the document.⁹⁰

During their search, the H. Neufeld group uncovered something much more interesting (and damning) than the moratorium letter. Apparently, Kliewer had written an unmailed letter addressed to the *DVP*'s Schütze in Asunción that requested his and Legiehn's transfer to another German colony since he had come to believe that the Fernheim colonists' loyalty to Germany was insincere. He asked, "Is there any point in leading such people back to Germany? ... Maybe it would be more correct to leave them in peace, so that it would not even occur to them to leave this country." He also noted the presence of Americans in the colony who were working to undermine the *völkisch* cause.⁹¹ Kliewer was ready to jettison his loyalty to the colony.

Kliewer's letter condescended the colony's Germanness and struck directly at its fear of losing its contact with Germany. Though Kliewer retained an upper hand, he was required to account for the letter before a preachers' meeting on December 10, 1942. At the meeting, he conflated the recent break-in with the youth disturbances of ten years prior and tried to place all of the blame on H. Neufeld.⁹² A few days later, Legiehn was

⁸⁹ H. Neufeld, *Affaire Dr. Fritz Kliewer*, 13-14.

⁹⁰ Several documents describe the incident: H. Neufeld, *Affaire Dr. Fritz Kliewer*, 14-15; minutes of annual meeting of the *Verband der Russlanddeutschen*, October 18, 1942, SA-II-490, MLA; minutes of extraordinary members' meeting of *Verband der Russland-deutschen*, December 20, 1942, SA-II-490, MLA; "Erklärung der Gruppe, gelesen auf der Volksbundsitzung am 20.12.42," SA-II-490, MLA.

⁹¹ "Fritz Kliewer to Gerd von Schütz," October 8, 1942, SA-II-490, MLA. Quoted in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 158.

⁹² Friedrich Kliewer, "Notizen für die Aussprache mit der Predigerkommission der MBG am 10 Dez. 1942 in Philadelphia," Nachlaß Dr. F. Kliewer, ACF. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 159.

called before an assembly of the colony's mayors. After a vote of confidence for Legiehn's leadership, the pastors recommended to table discussion of the theft until a general colony meeting could be convened.⁹³ Kliewer also tried to put out the flames that his letter had caused with the *VDR* at a special meeting held on December 20. His semantics were impressive. He denied that the letter was "real," stating that he had written it during a depressive episode and did not intend to actually mail it to the *DVP*.⁹⁴

H. Neufeld's voluntary departure to the Friesland Colony on January 4, 1943 helped calm the situation but it also solidified the *völkisch* movement's internal divisions. On the same day, his supporters in the *VDR* (numbering about forty individuals) attempted to circumvent the *VDR* by appealing to Asunción for direct membership in the *DVP*.⁹⁵ The organization's leaders declined the request, maintaining that all Mennonites should be united under the same banner. After protracted negotiations between Kliewer, the H. Neufeld group, and the *DVP*, all sides dropped the matter without an apparent resolution.⁹⁶

By early 1944, there were other individuals in the Friesland colony besides H. Neufeld who were fed up with Kliewer's leadership of the *VDR* and his imperiousness in the repatriation scheme. *Brüdergemeinde* leader Kornelius Voth was one of them. In January, he accused Kliewer of no longer following God's path since he had abandoned his faith for politics. Voth also criticized Kliewer's followers in Friesland for placing national loyalties above religious loyalties. Yet Voth was not wholly against National Socialism. Rather, he claimed that Kliewer had undermined the spirit of National Socialism by telling colony pastors that their religious attitudes hindered the possibility of immigration to Germany. According to Voth, Hitler was a champion of Christianity and—if they were to migrate to Germany—he would surely allow Mennonites to live out

⁹³ "Protokol einer Schulzenberatung am 16. Dezember 1942 in Philadelphia," ACF. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 160.

⁹⁴ "Protokol der ausserordentlichen Mitgliederversammlung des Verband der Russlanddeutschen am 20.XII.1942 in Philadelphia," ACF. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 160.

⁹⁵ "DVP to Fritz Kliewer," February 5, 1943, Nachlaß Dr. F. Kliewer, ACF. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 162.

⁹⁶ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 166.

their religious beliefs in peace.⁹⁷ With the *VDR*'s constituency split between the Fernheim and Friesland colonies, its leadership split between Kliewer and H. Neufeld, and its members' impressions of Nazi Germany ranging across a wide interpretative terrain, open conflict broke out in the colony.

Strangely, it was the erratic accusations of an obscure Mennonite shopkeeper named Abram Martins that unraveled the entire *völkisch* movement in Fernheim and Friesland. Martins operated a small general store in the Paraguayan military outpost of Fortín Lopez De Filippis, located about ninety-five kilometers from Filadelfia. He was not a regular face in the colony and those who did know him found him to be quarrelsome.⁹⁸ In 1943, he was put out of business when the Fernheim Colony's economic cooperative opened a store in the same town. Disgruntled with the colony's leadership, the mercurial Martins returned to Fernheim in February 1944 and denounced Legiehn in an "unchristian" and "common" public letter.⁹⁹

Among the various charges, Martins claimed that Legiehn and Kliewer were liars, that they were trying to create a dictatorship, and that Legiehn specifically was a fraud. There was a bit of truth to Martins' claims, since the colony cooperative represented an economic monopoly that put Martins' business at an unfair disadvantage. Less truthful perhaps was his accusation that Legiehn carried out his schemes with "satanic energy."¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, Legiehn was purchasing new equipment for the colony in Argentina so he could not immediately confront Martins and dispel the accusations.¹⁰¹ Martin's rumors spread quickly and the colony was on edge when Legiehn returned five days later.

Colony leaders called a meeting on March 3, 1944 to discuss the issue, which at this point had nothing to do with repatriation or *völkisch* ideology. The outcome was the formation of an auditing committee that was tasked with (once again) investigating the

⁹⁷ Kornelius Voth, "Ein Offenes Wort an die M. Bruedergemeinde in der Kolonie Friesland," January 16, 1944, J. H. Franz Papers, CMBS. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 174.

⁹⁸ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 173.

⁹⁹ "John R. Schmidt to MCC," March 18, 1944, f. 431, b. 39, P. C. Hiebert papers, MS-37, MLA.

¹⁰⁰ "Aufruf an alle Buerger der Colonie [*sic*] Fernheim...", March 1944, ACF. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 173. Thiesen correctly dates the document February 19, 1944.

¹⁰¹ "Protokoll einer Kolonie-Versammlung am 8. Januar 1944 in Philadelphia," ACF. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 173.

colony's confidence in Legiehn and other leaders, and to reassemble on March 10, to discuss their findings though the report was later pushed forward by three days.¹⁰²

One of the auditors, a Peter Rahn, was a strong supporter of Legiehn and Kliewer and rather wished to solve the problem via alternate means. On March 10, he convened a secret meeting of Kliewer's supporters where they formulated a plan to take a stand against the "agitators."¹⁰³ It is unclear whether this meant Martins specifically or anyone who stood against Legiehn and Kliewer but the next day the colony was surprised to learn that Legiehn had stepped down from his position as *Oberschulze* due to the "tense situation."¹⁰⁴ Yet Legiehn's resignation did not thwart his and Kliewer's supporters from forming a posse of vigilantes to confront *all* of their opponents—Martin and otherwise—in an impotent attempt to sustain their nationalist hopes through complete local control. By this point, the colony had witnessed three failed repatriation schemes (Schröder's two plans and Kliewer's 1943 petition) and combined with Nazi reversals in Southern and Eastern Europe, the colonists' chances were quickly fading away.

By the beginning of 1944, the Fernheim Mennonites sensed, but did not completely accept, that the time for building a collective narrative based on repatriation was over. The harbingers of this narrative—the *VDA* and the Nazi government—were increasingly turning their attentions in other directions: inward, toward their own survival and outward toward the destruction of the Jews and other minorities. They no longer had the ability to project a compelling narrative of (trans)National Socialism to their receptors around the world. The vacuum left by this failure gave rise to terrifying ambiguities for the Fernheim Colony's *völkisch* contingent. As in life, so too in death, they repurposed German national glory as their own local glory and German national trauma as local trauma. The colony was plunged into violence as a sort of collective catharsis for its troubled history and failed aspirations.

¹⁰² "Aktentnotizen," March 6-11, 1944, ACF, cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 175; "Julius Legiehn to P. C. Hiebert and Ori O. Miller," April 14, 1944, f. 431, b. 39, P. C. Hiebert papers, MS-37, MLA.

¹⁰³ "Bekanntmachung," George S. Klassen papers, AR 920 K63g, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Tabor College, Hillsboro, Kansas. Quoted in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi*, 175.

¹⁰⁴ "Aktentnotizen." Quoted in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 176.

Martins was no ideologue and H. Neufeld's problems with Kliewer were mostly personal in nature. The events of March 1944 therefore had less to do with which "side" would "win" and more to do with colonists' pent-up frustrations that Nazism—no matter how sincere—was a transcendent force in the world. So it began. The night of March 11 was bright and clear with enough light from the waning moon to see without a lantern.¹⁰⁵ According to H. Neufeld, the posse's first victim was his brother, Heinrich, who was called out of his house, beaten until he was bloody, and threatened that he would "get it better" tomorrow.¹⁰⁶ Yet Kliewer's brother, Franz Kliewer, stated that he (and by extension Kliewer) were unaware of the event. F. Kliewer reported that he only received word of the agitation as he was en route to Philadelphia in order to listen to the radio and chat in the yard of a friend, J. Günther. Here, he learned that a group of about ten or fifteen men planned to visit Martins and demand his silence.¹⁰⁷

As Legiehn and Kliewer's supporters sat in Günther's yard, about ten armed men walked slowly past the front of the house. Apparently, someone had alerted the H. Neufeld group. Now the Legiehn-Kliewer contingent sent out riders to muster a force of about sixty men in order to find the prattling Martins and intimidate any H. Neufeld supporters that they happened to encounter. The vigilantes were armed with clubs, iron rods, heavy cattle whips, bush knives, and a few guns when they confronted two of H. Neufeld's men in front of Martins' house. Sharp words led to harsh blows. A running battle ensued between the groups as the vigilantes moved from house to house searching for Martins.¹⁰⁸ The vigilantes finally decided to confront Heinrich Warkentin, who was H. Neufeld's closest confidant in the Fernheim Colony. When they approached the house, Warkentin's mother stormed out of the door and called the men "Mahknovtsy," a pejorative referring to the anarchist Nestor Makhno who terrorized Ukrainian Mennonites during the Russian Civil War. The insult worked on religious and national levels, by labeling the posse as (irreligious) anarchists and conflating them with Germany's current

¹⁰⁵ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 176.

¹⁰⁶ H. Neufeld, *Affaire Dr. Fritz Kliewer*, 20.

¹⁰⁷ Franz Kliewer, "Aufzeichnung von Franz Kliewer," n.d., Nachlaß Dr. F. Kliewer, ACF. Quoted in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 177-178.

¹⁰⁸ "G. S. Klassen to Orie O. Miller," March 17, 1944, f. 428, b. 38, P. C. Hiebert papers, MS-37, MLA.

enemy, Russia. F. Kliewer reported that least one person brandished a gun but after the confrontation with Warkentin's mother, the vigilantes skulked away.¹⁰⁹

The Americans, J. Schmidt and G. S. Klassen, were notified of the situation when one of the victims came to J. Schmidt for medical aid. He proceeded to wake the dentist G. S. Klassen who lived next door. G. S. Klassen was an excitable man who was concerned with decorum. He grabbed his tropical hat (it was past midnight) and his gun to "lock horns" with Kliewer. Before he left, his wife admonished him to "put that gun down," an order with which he grudgingly complied. J. Schmidt and G. S. Klassen then dashed to Kliewer's home, stood outside his window, and called on him to account for the fracas. Apparently, Kliewer acted as though he was unaware of what had happened and the Americans eventually returned home.¹¹⁰

Over the instructions of J. Schmidt, who was the authorized MCC leader in the colony, G. S. Klassen called the Paraguayan military outpost at Isla Poá the next morning to dispatch a truck in case there was further violence.¹¹¹ While J. Schmidt hoped to deal with the situation through Mennonite channels and not allow the incident to reach a public forum, G. S. Klassen was eager to flex control over the *völkisch* movement and Kliewer especially. Meanwhile, rumors quickly spread through the colony. People poured into Filadelfia see what would come of the previous night's disturbance. Finally, at about four in the afternoon, the Americans, Legiehn, and other colony leaders persuaded the members of each faction to go home. An army truck with four soldiers arrived a short while later but proceeded on to Lopez De Filippis without incident. Nevertheless, word soon got back to Asunción that there was trouble in the colonies, piquing the interest of the Paraguayan government and the United States embassy.

On March 13, 1944, the *KfK* denounced the violence that had taken place two days earlier in order to distance the colony from the event and those who instigated it. Another colony-wide meeting was scheduled for the next morning. About 275 people were in attendance. Each individual involved in the disturbance was considered: from

¹⁰⁹ Franz Kliewer, "Aufzeichnung von Franz Kliewer," 178-179.

¹¹⁰ Personal communication from John R. Schmidt to John D. Thiesen, August 10, 1990. See Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 179-180.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

Martins, Legiehn and Kliewer, to Klassen and J. Schmidt.¹¹² Colony leaders gave the irascible Martins two months to leave the colony. The Americans, G. Klassen and J. Schmidt, both argued that Kliewer should also be forced to leave and threatened to return to the United States if he was not. G. Klassen was especially vindictive and wished to see Legiehn leave as well. He stated that he made his demands for himself, for MCC, and (significantly) for the United States government, a triumvirate that he apparently represented.¹¹³ After this, Kliewer and Legiehn voluntarily decided to leave the colony. At a second meeting on March 24, the victims were allowed to determine their attackers punishment. Fourteen participants had their voting privileges suspended for one year and six more—all underage—were sentenced to one month's labor. The attackers admitted their wrongdoing and the victims assured colony leaders and their assailants that they would not retaliate.¹¹⁴

In late-March, Kliewer and Legiehn were seized by a Paraguayan military dispatch and taken to Asunción on charges that they were Nazis. Working with information that G. S. Klassen had supplied to the United States embassy, the Paraguayan government was ready to impound the *völkisch* Mennonites.¹¹⁵ Thus, an American Mennonite collaborated with the American government, to pressure the Paraguayan government to impound a Paraguayan (née Polish) Mennonite who supported the German government. Much was lost in translation as nationalist ends blurred with transnational means in a local situation. The American government deemed Kliewer a nationalist threat to its hemispheric hegemony and influenced Paraguay to assert its own nationalism and intervene in the local situation. G. S. Klassen deemed Kliewer to be decidedly un-Mennonite and helped worldly authorities in Paraguay and the United States impound him, even as Kliewer's Mennonite community simply asked that he leave the Colony. In

¹¹² "Protokoll einer allgemeinen Siedlerversammlung, abgehalten am 14. Maerz 1944," ACF. Cited in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 181-183.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ "Julius Legiehn to P. C. Hiebert and Orie O. Miller," April 14, 1944, f. 431, b. 39, P. C. Hiebert papers, MS-37, MLA. See also "Akt der Vermittlungskommission der Kolonie Fernheim," n.d., ACF.

¹¹⁵ George D. Henderson, "Memorandum of Trip to Chaco re Mennonite Colony," enclosure to confidential dispatch No. 2195 of June 17, 1944 from the American Embassy, Asunción, Paraguay, b. 10, Asunción embassy confidential file 1944: 820.02 Mennonites, RG 84. Quoted in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 188-189.

the Fernheim Colony, Mennonitism and nationalism were once again purveyed through transnational vectors. True to the Fernheim Colony's chaotic local context, Kliewer and Legiehn found themselves entwined in the political machinations of governments on three continents, although they lived in one of the most remote regions in the world.

Kliewer and Legiehn were taken to the capital where they were to be held until they could be sent to a Paraguayan internment camp for Nazis. Yet before they were taken away, the men brokered their release from military custody and surreptitiously returned to Fernheim.¹¹⁶ On May 31, 1944, George D. Henderson, third secretary at the United States embassy, and three officers from the Paraguayan military—Lieutenant Colonel Meyer and Majors Careaga and de Filippis—traveled to Fernheim Colony to get a better understanding of the situation and attempt to find the men. The officials' first stop was G. S. Klassen's home. He reported that Legiehn lived less than fifty yards away and that Kliewer lived nearby on his father's ranch. After phoning a General Andin of the Paraguayan military to ask how to proceed, the men visited Legiehn and Kliewer and gave them notice that they should report to Andino the next day.¹¹⁷

Henderson's interest in the affair was typical of American diplomats operating in Latin American countries during the war years due to prevailing beliefs that Latin America's German enclaves were bastions of Nazi subterfuge and Latin American governments were naïve and feckless. According to Friedman, the suspicions were kept alive throughout the war because German-speakers often remained "unassimilated, because rumors of Nazi involvement in coup attempts were taken as gospel in the late 1930s, because Nazi propagandists claimed the allegiance of every German, and because... many in the United States thought Latin American countries could not manage their own affairs without paternal guidance from Washington."¹¹⁸

After Henderson and the Paraguayan officers "captured" Kliewer and Legiehn, the fugitives were sentenced by the Paraguayan military to an internment camp in San Pedro. Soon thereafter, officials rescinded the order and the men were sent to the village

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Friedman, 2-3.

of Barranqueritas, located near Friesland, where they taught school. After the war, Paraguayan authorities in Asunción questioned the men and searched their houses but by the end of 1947, they were allowed to return to the colony.¹¹⁹ The colony gave Legiehn work in its economic cooperative while Kliewer remained in Asunción. In 1952, both men moved with their families to a Mennonite settlement in Brazil.¹²⁰

After Kliewer and Legiehn were taken into custody, colony members debated whether it was right to involve national authorities and the MCC in their local problems. This was a surprising concern since they had actively sought outside influence in their affairs since the colony's inception. Perhaps they felt guilty about Kliewer and Legiehn's fate, or they had finally found their elusive group coherence through more embarrassing means. Paradoxically, some of the colony's remaining *völkisch* supporters structured their argument against outside involvement around the Mennonite ideal of non-resistance. According to Leslie E. Reed, first secretary at the United States embassy, "The pro-Nazi elements had been criticizing some of the colonists for having complained to the Embassy... The criticisms were based on the ground that such complaints... were incompatible with the Mennonite doctrine of non-resistance."¹²¹ It is unclear upon what strange interpretation of non-violence the *völkisch* supporters based this argument but they may have understood the concept as a mandate to not involve outsiders in community politics—though they certainly did not extend this criticism to the *VDA*. Alternately, they may have been simply trying to use the rhetoric of their *wehrlos* foes to justify their position, a tactic that ended up being too clever by half.

Another argument emerged a few months later in the form of an anonymously published document titled The Mennonite Central Committee as a Political Tool (*Das Mennonitische Zentralkomitee als politisches Werkzeug*). The author took for granted that the colonists' most natural and noble allegiances were to the German nation but that they had been hoodwinked by a scheming MCC, which destroyed their *völkisch* unity through

¹¹⁹ Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 190-191, 200.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

¹²¹ Leslie E. Reed, "Memorandum," December 7, 1944, enclosure to dispatch No. 328 from the American Embassy, Asunción, Paraguay, b. 10, Asunción embassy confidential file 1944: 820.02 Mennonites, RG 84. Quoted in Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?* 198.

a diabolical pact with the United States government. Though flawed in its content and logic, the author stated that the Fernheim Colony had accepted the organization's aid without realizing that its representatives "came to us not only as Mennonites but as Americans." The author concluded that acting under "Mennonite pretenses, [the MCC] did the dirty work of the North American government" by banning Kliever and Legiehn from the Fernheim Colony.¹²² Thus, it was the American Mennonites who were impish nationalists, not the Fernheim Colony's *völkisch* leaders. Yet by now the debate had already moved on. The author was no longer promoting the *völkisch* cause, and by extension the Nazi Party's enduring glory, but offering self-conscious excuses for its failure, thereby exonerating the movement and disentangling it from a future that was no longer tenable.

The intrigue that swirled around the Fernheim fiasco eventually subsided as the colonists' attention returned to more practical matters and the MCC demonstrated that it would continue supporting the colony indefinitely. The postwar years brought a flood of MCC volunteers from North America to serve in the colony school and provide other services. On the international level, Bender and the MCC effectively sidelined Unruh, who was caught up in the Nazi reckoning after the war and no longer had access to the same channels and quantities of aid as the Americans.¹²³ The *völkisch* era in the Fernheim Colony was over. There would be no Nazi deliverance to Germany or a German-controlled Russia. They would remain in Paraguay.

The events that transpired in early 1944 represented a violent release for the colony—"dance of death," or a "rite of spring,"—to end the colony's long winter of ambiguity and augured a new and permanent life in the Chaco. Their imagined repatriation to Europe—A. Harder's "insatiable longing"—remained unfulfilled and so the Fernheim colonists were compelled to look for new meanings and attachments elsewhere. Some Fernheimers had already made peace with remaining in the Chaco by channeling their energies into *Licht Den Indianern!* and aligning themselves with the

¹²² Anonymous, *Das Mennonitische Zentralkomitee als politisches Werkzeug* (1944), MLA. The document is also available on the MLA website: http://mla.bethelks.edu/archives/ms_139/folder_23_mcc_als_werkzeug/.

¹²³ Unruh voluntarily testified at the Nuremberg trials in defense of Werner Lorenz, the head of the *VoMi*. See G. Rempel, review of *Fügungen und Führungen*, 278.

MCC. It is no surprise that the individuals who could not accept the path of remaining in the Chaco—the Kliewers and the H. Neufelds of the colony—responded most intensely when the possibility of a victorious return to a “Greater Germany” began losing its influence as a solution to the colony’s hardships. As Nazi Germany felt the initial tremors of its own death throes in the spring of 1944, the Fernheim Colony was already charting a new direction, as a *Mennonite* colony in Paraguay that was not as utopian as repatriation, but serviceable enough.

It is easy to imagine that the Nazi Party’s racist hubris and martial appeals found a receptive audience in every *auslandsdeutsch* community the world over. In 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt declared in a radio address, “Hitler’s advance guards” are gaining “footholds, bridgeheads in the New World, to be used as soon as he has gained control of the oceans.”¹²⁴ Scores of pulp history books, magazines, and comics have subsequently burnished the perception that Nazi spies could be found in every German-speaking community during the war years.¹²⁵ Yet this is to unfairly privilege military intrigue and politics above other interests. As Friedman notes, the Nazi mobilization of Latin America’s German-speakers “generated a kind of surface response commensurate with the effort that went into it.”¹²⁶

The Fernheim colonists certainly disliked the Soviet Union, cheered a Nazi victory, and were flattered by the *DAI* and *VDA*’s attentions. When the opportunity arose for a new destiny in a fondly remembered environment, they readily reinterpreted their Germanness as Nazism, if only to profit from Germany’s conquest. Despite Kliewer and the *BDMP/VDR*’s agitation and Legiehn’s equivocation, colonists were usually required to focus on the more mundane realities of life: the meager household budget, the next rain, low cotton prices, etc. Meanwhile, the response among Menno Colony Mennonites was practically nonexistent. They wanted to retain their German culture without being

¹²⁴ Russell D. Buhite and David W. Levy, eds., *FDR’s Fireside Chats* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 192.

¹²⁵ Cited in Francis MacDonnell, *Insidious Foes: The Axis Fifth Column and the American Home Front* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.

¹²⁶ Friedman, 39.

labeled German, and certainly not Nazi. These distinctions matter because they demonstrate, in miniature, the breadth of opinions toward National Socialism among Latin American *Auslandsdeutsche*. Even in communities that were ostensibly the same—in this case, German-speaking Mennonites from Russia—there was a range of opinions on national identifications that baffled observers who clung to the notion that nationalist ideology had the irresistible power to standardize large populations. The hubris of a few individuals who propagated Nazi ideology only superficially outweighed the manifest indifference to politics of at least half, if not much more, of the colonies’ population and attracted a “storm” of outside attention.

The Fernheim colonists were refugees and need to be understood as such. Their most pressing, though most elusive, concerns were stability and continuity. During the 1930s, German nationalism allowed them and other Russian-German refugees to imagine that they were members of a transnational web of German-speakers. As the Nazis cast a long shadow over Eastern Europe, colonists reimagined themselves as members of the German nation-state. For all practical purposes, each idea was an illusion but they served the valuable purpose of providing the colonists with hope. Likewise, their idealistic and misguided interpretations of Hitler demonstrate that Nazism was an alluring but flimsy concept—an ideal that was as much of a Nazi fabrication as their own. Kliewer, who was the colony’s main interpreter of Nazi ideology, and created the colony’s fleeting *völkisch* alliance, did not bring an end to the colony’s problems through ideology but helped tear it apart through personal antagonism. Ironically, this was the same paradox, in miniature, that Stalin had created in the Russian countryside when he declared an ideological war against *kulaks* that set local communities against each other.

The disintegration of the Nazi’s *völkisch* narrative—a seductive though ultimately unrealizable historical path—represented a second tragic event for the Fernheim colonists. The colonists’ had experienced an initial trauma—forced relocation from the Soviet Union—as independent families. Now they experienced a second trauma as a group. With the first trauma, others persecuted them. With the second, they persecuted each other. During the 1930s, in the middle of these tragic bookends, the Fernheim Mennonites devised a range of “comedic” destinies—as the redeemers of the Chaco’s

land and people through their Mennonite or German “genius.” Yet it was tragedy that had brought them together and tragedy that kept them together.

The end of the Second World War did not make the Fernheim colonists less German. It simply made them a different kind of German. After the war, the colony’s schools redoubled their efforts to train their youths in German *and* Paraguayan culture and their example reflects larger patterns within *auslandsdeutsch* communities. Historian Dirk Hoerder states that most members of the German language diaspora reinvented themselves after the two world wars in a “quick drawingboard-like process” of disassociating themselves from the German nation state but not their local German culture. Eventually, he argues, even these cultural markers were eroded or modified beyond recognition. Nevertheless, the Mennonites of Paraguay are somewhat unique. According to Hoerder, “Only among the distinct group of the Mennonites did a diasporic connectedness between Russian, North American, and South American colonies last through the 1950s and beyond—but this was religiocultural, not ethnocultural.”¹²⁷ In their own ways, both the Menno Colony and the MCC had won the day. The former by maintaining the same type of Mennoniteness and Germanness that it possessed before the war and the latter through a continually evolving theology that was increasingly comfortable with national allegiances.

While the Fernheim Colony was rocked by international intrigue, the Menno Colony was mostly absorbed in expanding their land holdings and cotton production.¹²⁸ The conflicts that engulfed the Fernheim Colony did not concern the Menno Colony due to the fact that the latter simply did not care about German nationalism or a *political* German identity. Though the Menno Colony suffered from decreased imports and exports during to the war, the year 1944 was not the end (or the beginning) of anything, but simply a continuation of the colony’s local rhythms. In this regard, 1944 was no more a turning point for them than 1933 or 1945—ostensibly pivotal dates in the history of any “German” community. Despite the notion that national unity exists in the ether of every group of people, it brutally simplifies the skein of individuals’ lived realities and the

¹²⁷ Hoerder, “German-Language Diasporas,” 33.

¹²⁸ A. W. Hiebert and Jacob T. Friesen. *bewegte Geschichte*, 139-149.

millions of “nationally indifferent,” nationally resistant, and nationally opportunistic groups of people such as the Mennonites of Paraguay who continued to debate their identifications and sustain their group narratives beyond the war years.

“Emancipation” and “final solutions” are two sides of the same coin. They are both modern preoccupations.¹²⁹ The modern world celebrates freedom from social norms, political conventions, intellectual constraints, and territorial boundaries. It celebrates freedom from history and from narratives, even as it creates its own in the process of destroying others. Emancipation is the underlying sensibility of all pronouncements that humans have finally wrested control of their destiny from the Gods. Yet even if there are no Gods, there are always narratives, stories that arrange the vastness of time and space, provide humans with hopes and fears, and make it possible for them to understand history and mythology, and—more often than not—entwine the two.

As the Menno Colony allowed the narrative of progress and its modernist teleology to wash over them—or rather, slosh them from shore to shore—they battened down the hatches and refused to accept that humans controlled events or that it was possible to be emancipated from the divine order. Though they remained embroiled in their own internal disputations, which kept them far from a presumed ideal of fraternal love, they uniformly regarded emancipation and earthly “final solutions” as deceptions that only lead to Babylon and to death. The Fernheim colonists, composed as they were of competing factions with competing aspirations, viewed emancipation from the Chaco as emancipation from uncertainty. It was, perhaps, the only panacea for the collective ambiguities that the world had thrust upon them. For this reason, their identification as refugees—with all of the tenuous hopes and terrifying uncertainties embodied in the term—remained perhaps their most enduring condition, from their settlement in 1930 to the chaos of 1944. They remained refugees until they could no longer imagine relocating elsewhere. They remained refugees until they could reinterpret their confinement in the Chaco as emancipation from ambiguity. They remained refugees until their only option was to reinterpret their fate as destiny and to transform their “tragic” narrative into a “comedic” one themselves.

¹²⁹ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* Mariner Books Edition (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2000), xiii.

CONCLUSION

Schism in the soul [and] in the body social, will not be resolved by any scheme of return to the good old days (archaism), or by programs guaranteed to render an ideal projected future (futurism), or even by the most realistic, hardheaded work to weld together again the deteriorating elements. Only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new.

-Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

During the twentieth century, large groups of people, united as nation-states, engaged in a fevered quest to draw imaginary lines across the globe. National populations and territorial boundaries consecrated the inexorable triumph of homogenization as a social imperative and “progress” as a moral imperative. Some Mennonites, such as those living in Germany, were receptive to this development and they united within national territories, created their own confessional organizations, and established historical chronologies that legitimated their triumphal place in the new order.

Yet there were always alternate trajectories and ways of organizing other than the nation-state paradigm. For example, the Weimar and Nazi governments of Germany looked abroad, beyond central Europe to imagine a transnational network of Germans that stood in economic or racial solidarity with the German state. Mennonite intellectuals in North America likewise imagined a global web of brethren that would either consolidate Mennonites inside “safe” national frameworks (for example, the CMBC’s reception of Russian Mennonites in Canada) or establish a new territory under Mennonite jurisdiction (the MCC’s efforts in the Chaco). Thus, the concerns of Mennonite intellectuals in Germany, Canada, and the United States mirror to a certain degree Germany’s geopolitical concerns during the early-twentieth century, as each struggled to determine whether a nation or a denomination should be consolidated within a specific territory or could remain united through a transnational alliance of independent enclaves.

Each option outlined above requires nations and denominations to participate in “imagined communities” either within a consolidated geographic area or dispersed

throughout the world.¹ Yet other courses remained viable too. Some Mennonite *Gemeinden*, such as the individuals who created the Menno Colony, refused these orderings of the world and drew on various identifications—as farmers, German-speakers, and Mennonites—to stay in motion and preserve their local cultures. Finally, there were others who slipped between the cracks of nations and confessions alike. The Fernheim Colony Mennonites, for example, preferred to remain settled and draw closer to governments but they were forced to abandon this course due to their own heterogeneous identifications: as *kulaks*, Germans, and Mennonites. These different avenues are not unique to Germans or Mennonites. Indeed, many other national and religious groups struggled to come to terms with what nations, states, and territories meant for their larger cosmologies—from Polish-speaking Catholics living in Germany to Zionist Jews living across Europe.² Such problems, therefore, are not confined to the Mennonite confession but affected myriad groups and individuals who found themselves within, between, or beyond a nationalist paradigm and were required to take up the walking stick. The Mennonites in this project simply traveled farther and longer than most.

How did this happen? How did a nation-state paradigm that was so misunderstood and which negatively affected so many individuals appear so natural and inevitable to so many others? One could create an index of political, economic, and social factors that explain this development, but it would simply ground nation-states in their own cosmologies, which are predicated on humans' mastery of time and space. Nationalist writers articulated a curated chronology of the world that legitimated a specific groups' dominance over a particular space. Using primordial national mythologies that relied on political events as well as Marxist scholarship that relied on economic ones, governments legitimated their chronologies through theories of dialectical materialism and the “awakening” of national consciousness. In short, they created a new mythology—a new rationality—that glorified progress and homogenization. Like other Western mythologies, “it was not their belief that their God was the true God but their belief that all other Gods were false that proved decisive” in singling out and then persecuting those who did not

¹ Anderson.

² Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole*; Joshua Shanes, “Neither Germans nor Poles: Jewish Nationalism in Galicia before Herzl, 1883-1897,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 34 (January 2003): 191-213.

subscribe to it.³ This was a process of consent and coercion but it was not merely social, political, or economic. It was a narrative one as well.

Russia's Mennonites—with their strange customs and multiple identifications—were square pegs in the round holes of idealized national profiles. They did not fit. Or perhaps the analogy works the other way around: Mennonites were round pegs in the square holes of nationality, since they fit various profiles, albeit awkwardly. As it turned out, this was a blessing and a curse, as it allowed them to move out of harm's way but also provoked their relocation in the first place. In various national contexts—Russia, Canada, Germany, and Paraguay—Mennonites were labeled as Germans and consequently fit into a larger historical context about the variegated nature of the German-language diaspora. The kaleidoscope of significations swirling around both colonies, and by extension other German-speaking enclaves, was highly disturbing to German governments and host governments that had little patience for hyphenated identifications as they set about crafting their own national narratives.

During the early-twentieth century, the German state and the thousands of German-speaking enclaves outside its borders seldom shared a sense of unity or a similar trajectory, though this did not keep the German state from trying to cultivate one—from the cultural and economic connections of the *Kaiserreich*, to the racial and economic connections of the Third Reich. Appeals were often grounded in heavy-handed injunctions or high-minded pleas that lent a sense of immediacy, peril, or glamour to the project. Unsurprisingly, host countries and their presses often paid more attention to *Reich* propaganda (and feared it) than they paid to the articulations and actions of their own German-speaking populations. After all, the intrigues of a Fifth Column infiltrating a given country through the nefarious actions of its “foreign” minority are better narrative fodder for building a shared, national story than focusing on “foreign” citizens' workaday lives. The former portends a dramatic reversal for the host nation's fate unless immediate, collective action is taken. The latter is generally aimless and boring. Nationalist stories spun from the pens of journalists and politicians have to be riveting. They have to be “good” if they are to unite a constituency.

³ Frye, *Great Code*, 134.

In the midst of hardening nationalist molds and national narratives that sanctified this development, separatist Mennonites adhered to a mythology that transcended time and space. They anachronistically interpreted modern events in Russia, Canada, and Paraguay through an assemblage of stories chosen from the Old and New Testaments—a timespan of roughly four thousand years that meanders across the Mediterranean world, heaven, and hell—to legitimate their actions and their cosmology. These Mennonites found ready answers to questions about Russian military conscription in first-century Jerusalem, and answers to questions about Canadian public schooling in ancient Babylon. It was all the same. There was nothing new under the sun.

Carving a middle path between nationalists and separatist Mennonites were associative Mennonites—such as Bender and D. Toews—who used history and theology to weave a story that legitimated a clear set of religious principles that were generally amenable to modern, democratic governments. An important byproduct of this development entailed locating spaces where Mennonites could retain a specific set of confessional peculiarities, in exchange for their political and economic loyalty. Initially, this proposition was confusing to governments and separatist Mennonites alike. Governments were confused by Mennonite intellectuals' confessional peculiarities while separatist Mennonites were confused by Mennonite intellectuals' political dealings. It took decades of conference and institution building, money, and publicity, to make this vision a reality—developments that were altogether unimaginable before the turn of the century. Above all, it took the dissemination and acceptance of the notion that this particular Mennonite trajectory was historically and theologically ordained and that modern, democratic governments represented a good thing for the confession.

Governments and religious groups strove to clarify their collective narratives to each other but ended up rearticulating their own mythologies to themselves and their constituencies. Separatist Mennonites could not convey their religious cosmology to government authorities so they settled in places where they did not need to be understood. This was a moving target—Russia, Canada, Paraguay—so they relied on concepts that governments did understand such as their ethnicity and economic productivity to make their case. Their movement inevitability brought them to the margins (or battlegrounds) of state sovereignty where they remained, for a time.

Governments likewise tried to convey their national cosmologies to separatist Mennonites, but the only narrative tools at their disposal were the ones that they had created themselves, and so officials ejected them from their territories. Sometimes—as was the case with the Nazis who visited the Fernheim Colony—government representatives were heartened that Mennonites were receptive to specific aspects of their nationalist mythology, but were dismayed to learn that they were interested mostly for local purposes. The circular loop implicit in these encounters testifies to the fact that foreign concepts—articulated through ideology and theology—cannot be bestowed on a population but can only be interpreted into (or contaminated by?) local vernaculars. The German government parlayed conventional wisdom about *Auslandsdeutsche* to recast Mennonites as long-lost Germans, the MCC recast the colonies as North American-style Mennonites in its American publications, and in each host country migrants traversed through, they were always labeled as “German farmers.” Humans cannot accept new information that does not, in some way, reflect their own reality.

Communities and nations cannot exist without consensus. Dissenting narratives—either large or small—within the body politic are existential threats because they cast doubt on the naturalness of the dominant narrative. Speaking in theatrical terms, incongruent actors on the national stage compromise the audience’s suspension of disbelief. Thus, the Menno colonists fell out of favor with each country that tried to force their communities into a nationalist mold because they refused to play the part. They performed their own drama for the benefit of a closed audience that took them across several national stages. At the risk of overextending the analogy, the Fernheim colonists sampled different roles on different stages—flitting from one to the other over the course of fifteen years. Yet they often wore the wrong costume for the wrong performance, thereby confusing an impatient audience. They were not “German enough” during Wilhelmy’s visit in 1937, nor “Mennonite enough” during the North American missionaries’ visit in 1940.

Group narratives do not exist in a vacuum, they must be acknowledged, internally and externally and either positively or negatively, in order to be real. For the Menno colonists, outside validation was a negative process. They defined themselves in opposition to outside interests; in fact, they defined themselves against every entity that

was not a part of their group. Negative validation gives rise to a very specific theology about nearly every aspect of life: clothing, conduct, occupation, etc. As outsiders evaluated and attempted to influence the loyalties of separatist Mennonites—such as the Menno Colony—these groups cultivated a sense of continuity and internal coherence that rendered the barrage of influences, recommendations, and demands un compelling.

Alternately, the Fernheim colonists hoped to define themselves in positive cooperation with outside interests at the local, national, and transnational levels. Positive external validations entail a process whereby one group—in this case, the Fernheim Colony—desires to align with another group—in this case, German Nazis or North American Mennonites. Continuity is replaced by contingency: a new revelation or the rediscovery of an old one draws it into closer orbit with others. Yet the Fernheim Colony’s path was fraught with ambiguity because their various identifications were at loggerheads: Their Paraguayan citizenship versus their German nationality and their German nationality versus their Mennonite religion. A group that seeks positive external validations consequently embraces a fluid interpretation of nearly everything—culture, customs, and politics—as time progresses. This process is mostly future-directed. In the words of artist Paul Klee, “One deserts the realm of the here and now to transfer one’s activity into a realm of the yonder where total affirmation is possible. Abstraction.”⁴

Ultimately, we must reimagine the way we understand how populations construct their cosmologies, merge their mythologies, and project collective narratives on to sacred and secular eschatologies. The ever present now is always a handmaiden to memories and expectations, plans and happenstances (“twists”) that gel, however abstrusely, into a story. These narrative umbilical cords give life to individuals and societies. They are as gossamer as they are resilient—cobwebs that we spin and become entangled in. In short, humans live inside stories, large and small, and analyzing these stories is key to understanding human activity.

The effects of governmental persecution on ethnoreligious diasporas are therefore illuminated and explained by analyzing the national and religious narratives that provoke their persecution and sustain their migration. On a broader level, collective narratives

⁴ Paul Klee, *The Diaries of Paul Klee, 1898-1918*, ed. Felix Klee (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), 313.

play a critical role in how we understand group affinities and “imagined communities.” Narratives are not static, they are not predictable, and seldom do they fuse to other narratives without a great deal of contortion. Even when they do, they quickly separate out again. In the words of poet William Butler Yeats—who saw Europe’s narrative of progress incinerate in the flames of the First World War—“things fall apart, the center cannot hold.”⁵

The title of this work is borrowed from another poem, written after another World War, which revealed with ghastly precision the modern revulsion toward multiple, hybrid, or transient identities, personal narratives that are not easily summarized in what is perhaps the most terrifyingly intimate yet colorless book of all: the passport. It is poet Robert Frost’s “Directive” and its opening lines are as follows:

*Back out of all this now too much for us,
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off...*

Frost’s narrative takes the form of a journey, a personal exodus from a world that is no longer coherent to him. He takes the reader down a neglected path, through a forest, to a house near a forgotten stream. His withdrawal is complete since he “only has at heart [our] getting lost” and the goal is redemption, for at the stream we will find our “watering place” where we will “drink and be whole again beyond confusion.”⁶ Yet Frost is not taking us back to a place. He is taking us back in time. Or rather, he is removing us from time and space altogether. By escaping the world, Frost wishes to escape both history and progress—the interminable and incoherent crashing of events described by philosopher Walter Benjamin in his interpretation of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*. Historian H. A. L. Fischer likewise apprehended the demise of a narrative of progress in his 1935 *History of Europe*,

Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave.⁷

⁵ William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 187.

⁶ Robert Frost, “Directive,” *Robert Frost’s Poems*, (New York: St. Martins, 2002).

⁷ H. A. L. Fisher, *A History of Europe*, 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935-1936), I: vii.

Benjamin and Fisher shared the notion that nothing in the past appeared to make much sense. This is a distinctly postmodern intuition since its bearers are painfully aware of their lost faith in progress. Yet there are still stories to be made out of these “crashings” and “waves” of modern life that have nothing to do with progress. They are narratives of death and rebirth. No beginning. No end. Perfect continuity through perfect rupture, the oscillations of an eternal plot.

Along with Frost, the Menno Colony wished to escape progress by journeying to a lonely wilderness where they could reassert their “eternal privileges” and their opposition to nationalism. Likewise, the Fernheim Colony wished to escape history through a flight to the future and their messianic deliverance to a Nazi-controlled Europe. Yet the past could not be reassembled in the present, nor could the present give rise to a future of the colonies’ choosing. Neither group found exactly what they were looking for in the Gran Chaco. They did not find themselves; they found each other and in doing so, they created something new.

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* From a collection of newspaper clippings compiled by Andrea Dyck and Royden Loewen.

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