

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.

Graham Swift, *Waterland*

This book poses two questions: How do mobile populations fashion collective narratives as nations, religions, and diasporas? Specifically, how did German-speaking Mennonites – a part of the larger German-speaking diaspora – conceive of themselves as Germans and Christians during the era of high nationalism? I answer these questions by tracing the movements of two groups of Mennonites between 1874 and 1945. One was composed of 1,800 voluntary migrants, the other of 2,000 refugees. Both groups originated in nineteenth-century Russia, took separate paths through Canada and Germany, and settled near each other in Paraguay's Gran Chaco between 1926 and 1931. The settlement of voluntary migrants was named the Menno Colony. The settlement of refugees was named the Fernheim Colony. Through an analysis of both groups and the eight governments and four aid agencies that they encountered along the way, this book advances two overarching theses: First, it argues that diasporic groups harnessed the global spread of nationalism and ecumenicism to create local mythologies and secure evolving local objectives. Second, it argues that governments and aid organizations in Europe and the Americas used diasporic groups for their own purposes by portraying them as enemies or heroes in their evolving national and religious mythologies. This comparative study positions the groups at the center of how we understand mobile populations who were forced

to reckon with the twin developments of nationalism and Christian ecumenicism in the modern era.

The theses advanced in this book help us understand the global forces of nationalism, citizenship, ethnicity, and displacement. As the twentieth century unfolded, there were millions of individuals who were voluntarily or coercively relocated 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 challenges experienced by mobile groups such as how they negotiate hybrid identities and perpetuate local cultures under a variety of circumstances. It also engages the ways that mobile groups confounded institutions – both state and religious – that attempt to impose singular, comprehensive identities on them. It does so by mapping the shifting contours of the Mennonites' local narratives and of the national and religious narratives promoted by governments and aid agencies that wished to exclude them from or absorb them into their ranks.

The groups' troubled relationships with national and religious assimilation are therefore not unique to Mennonites, or even the millions of German speakers who poured out of Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, many other national and religious groups in Europe and around the world struggled to come to terms with what homogenized nations and religions meant for their larger cosmologies – from Polish-speaking Catholics living in Germany, to German-speaking Jews living in the Dominican Republic, to Chinese nationalists living in Singapore.¹ Myriad groups existed outside the paradigm of national and religious uniformity and some were required to take to the road. The Mennonites in this book traveled farther and longer than most.

MENNONITES' *LONGUE DURÉE*

Mennonites have a long history of contrarianism and mobility, extending back to the confession's inception in Central Europe's sixteenth-century

¹ James Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008); David Kenley, *New Culture in a New World: The May Fourth Movement and the Chinese Diaspora in Singapore, 1919–1932* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Allen Wells, *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosua* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

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 an apostate Dutch priest named Menno Simons, the Mennonites emerged from the skein of the Anabaptist movement, and believed that Christians should follow the example of the early, persecuted church in Rome. Most importantly, Mennonites believed that the church should be composed of voluntary members who confessed their faith and were baptized as adults. On a social level, Mennonites accentuated precepts of nonviolence, closed communities, and the separation of church and state. Nevertheless, individual communities perpetuated additional doctrines within their local contexts regarding such things as occupation and dress, which they believed were essential to the faith.

Mennonites maintained 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. Central European magistrates likewise aspired to purge religiously errant groups under the stipulations of the Peace of Augsburg (1555), which promulgated the idea “*Cuius regio, eius religio*” (“Whose realm, his religion”), in their 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 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 in Pennsylvania and Virginia and then traversed the Appalachian Mountains to the Midwest and Ontario.

² I use the word “confession,” rather than “denomination” or “church,” to describe the 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.” See “Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist/ Mennonite Tradition,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76, no. 3 (2002): 277–97.

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 legal, economic, religious, and social guarantees, which was a common practice in the early modern European legal system. 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 compensation for military exemption.³ The stipulations eventually became too onerous for some Mennonites and they looked east for new land in the Russian Empire.

The eighteenth century witnessed the rise of large, multiethnic 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 religious purity, they asserted their “enlightened” benevolence, tolerated religious minorities, and legitimated their imperial plurality with a religious and royal metaphor: “so we, though many, are one body.”⁴ When successful, this type of government practiced what Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper call the “contingent accommodation” of heterogeneous interests.⁵ 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 autonomy. This balancing act resulted in neither “consistent loyalty nor consistent resistance,” but worked for its intended purposes.⁶ In a worldview described by Northrop Frye as, “imperial monotheism,” the monarch represented God on earth and was “tolerant of local cults, which it tend[ed] increasingly to regard as manifestations of a single god.”⁷ 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 – rather than Russian

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), 44–51.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 14.

⁶ *Ibid.* ⁷ Frye, *Great Code*, 112; Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 44.

serfs, whom the regime counted as less productive – mattered more to Catherine II than their religious, cultural, or linguistic preferences.⁸

From 1787 to 1789, Mennonites living in Prussia took up Catherine II's invitation to settle the Empire's vast steppes. Twelve years later, Tsar Paul I confirmed a Mennonite *Privilegium*, or list of Mennonite-specific privileges that included clauses that ensured their exemption from military service and swearing oaths in court. Mennonites viewed the agreement as a personal covenant between their colonies and the monarch and believed that his descendants would respect their privileges in perpetuity.⁹ The guarantees prompted other Mennonites from Prussia to emigrate to southern Russia and especially the regions of Ukraine and Crimea. Here, they created Mennonite spaces in Russian places by retaining their *Plautdietsch* (Low German) 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.

Russia's Mennonites fit into a broad milieu of German-speaking minorities. Stefan Manz identifies three primary groups: The first two included German speakers from the burgher class who began filtering into the Empire's cities in the fifteenth century, and social elites living in the Baltic region who were absorbed by the Empire in the eighteenth century. Both groups maintained separate ethnic communities and retained a German nationality. By 1871, there were about 250,000 of them living in the Russian Empire. The third group was composed of Catherine II's invitees who accepted Russian nationality with important caveats enshrined in the Manifesto. This group included farmers, tradesmen, and professionals. 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.¹⁰

Between 1789 and 1870, the Empire's Mennonite population grew to more than 50,000 members spread across several settlements from Odessa

⁸ 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): 18–19.

⁹ Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, 85–88.

¹⁰ Stefan Manz, *Constructing a German Diaspora: The "Greater German Empire," 1871–1914* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 145–46; 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.

to the Volga River.¹¹ Mennonites established villages of about twenty to fifty families, with their homes laid out in a *Strassendorf* (street-village) structure of single-family houses arranged in two rows down the sides of a broad street. Fields extended from behind each property, except for those of landless individuals who worked as hired laborers or in non-farming occupations. Villages maintained their own churches, windmills, primary schools, and cemeteries. In addition, there were usually one or two larger villages within a colony that contained factories, granaries, hospitals, post offices, secondary schools, administrative buildings, and retail stores.

During the 1860s, Tsar Alexander II introduced a series of modernizing initiatives that threatened the Mennonites' standing as autonomous colonies. Russia's military loss during the Crimean War (1853–1856) led the Tsar to conclude that his heterogenous and agrarian population was a detriment 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 educational programs, and introducing universal military conscription.¹² Naturally, the country's Mennonites were disturbed by the new policies, especially the military service requirement, which they feared would cause their young men to imbibe Russian militarism. 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 had assumed themselves to be. It is this moment of crisis that sets the stage for this book.

MENNONITES' *BREF DURÉE*

During the 1870s, approximately 17,000 Mennonites relocated from the Russian Empire to North America's western prairies because they preferred to live on a new frontier rather than under the Tsar's new laws. Yet it was not long before this frontier was integrated into the national fabrics of Canada and the United States as part of their own homogenizing

¹¹ F. H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 17–20.

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

schemes. By the 1920s, governments around the world had begun censuring individuals who did not accept national identifications. Resembling the purifying fervor of sixteenth-century European reformers, early-twentieth-century communists and nationalists persecuted dissidents by harshly enforcing existing assimilation policies and formulating new understandings of purity based on race, religion, class, or nationality.¹³ 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. In the mid-1920s, 1,800 individuals voluntarily left Canada for Paraguay's remote Gran Chaco on account of the nationalizing policies embedded in Canadian public education, and fears that their coreligionists had become too "worldly." Here, they created the Menno Colony. The Menno colonists emphasized their adherence to biblical examples of itinerancy and resistance to political power by rejecting all outside attachments. In contrast, those who stayed in Canada reinterpreted questions of separation and religious purity into questions of confessional unity and personal morality.

In 1929, approximately 3,800 of the Soviet Union's Mennonites fled to Moscow after the Soviet government labeled them as kulaks and purged them from their villages. Now refugees, they sojourned in Weimar Germany for several months. With the aid of the German government and a US relief agency named the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), 1,500 of these individuals relocated to Paraguay and created the Fernheim Colony, adjacent to the Menno Colony. More refugees arrived from Poland and China, swelling the Fernheim Colony's ranks to 2,000. Once the refugees were settled, they engaged in fierce battles over what it meant to be Mennonite, German, or Paraguayan. Some argued that God had called them to the Chaco to proselytize to their indigenous neighbors on behalf of the global Mennonite Church. Others believed that God wanted them to be good Paraguayan citizens and help the Paraguayan Army fight Bolivia during the Chaco War (1932–1935). Still others believed that God would restore them to their Russian homeland if they collaborated with the ascendant Nazi Party.

¹³ Incidentally, communists and nationalists articulated their claims of authenticity in a Judeo-Christian religious framework, which accepts that authority is singular, is transmitted textually, and develops chronologically. Consequently, communists and nationalists unified populations around the singular purity of class or nationality, claimed authority using Marxist writings and primordial national mythologies, and established chronologies through dialectical materialism and the "awakening" of national consciousness. Frye gets at this similarity in *The Great Code*, 105.

Simultaneously, a growing number of Mennonites in North America embraced higher education and absorbed liberal humanist attitudes about church–state relations. These Mennonite intellectuals reinterpreted the confession’s traditional tenets of voluntary membership in the church and the separation of church and state as analogous to the democratic tenets of individual freedom and religious pluralism.¹⁴ They worked to create conferences, institutions, and aid agencies, including the MCC, that supplanted the confession’s local expressions of “Mennoniteness” with a few key principles that were easily articulated to an external audience of politicians and journalists. Despite the reality that most of the world’s Mennonites were 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.

During the interwar years, the MCC attempted to incorporate both colonies into an imagined global Mennonite body: a Mennonite nation, so to speak. Nazi representatives – some of whom were Mennonites – also tried to incorporate the colonies into a transnational German nation. The Paraguayan government likewise assumed that the Mennonites were part of the national fabric, particularly during the Chaco War. Each external entity agreed that the modern world required 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.” Thus, the Menno Colony’s local group identification was too narrowly focused and the Fernheim Colony’s divergent group identifications were too widely scattered to merge with larger national or religious narratives. In separate ways both the Menno and Fernheim Colonies crystalize the problems faced by individuals who did not fit into prescribed national and religious molds during the era of high nationalism.

¹⁴ In the US context, James C. Juhnke refers to these individuals as “Mennonite progressives.” See *Vision, Doctrine, War* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 164–65; In the German context, Benjamin W. Goossen considers them “Mennonite activists.” See *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

GERMANNESS AND MENNONITENESS

Each colony possessed national and religious identifications that were self-contradictory in many important respects. On one hand, both colonies claimed to be Christians and Mennonites, but they held different ideas about scripture and Mennonite principles. On the other, both colonies were composed of German speakers living outside of the German nation state, but they possessed contrasting ideas of what it meant to be German. Generally speaking, outsiders such as the MCC and the German government regarded both groups as members of a distinct ethno-religious minority (*the* Mennonites) who were culturally, ethnically, or racially German. This book therefore makes a point of examining outsiders' shifting notions of Germanness – the constellation of qualities regarded as essential for being German – and Mennoniteness – the constellation of qualities regarded as essential for being Mennonite. The payoff is that we can see how national and religious identifications unite or divide populations depending on time, location, and circumstances.

Germanness, or *Deutschtum*, is a nebulous concept used to define a nebulous category of people, and one which was highly susceptible to revision. It first came into use during the nineteenth century as Europe's German-speaking liberals struggled to create a German civic and cultural taxonomy.¹⁵ During this century, the idea of Germanness and the geographic space of Germany referred to German-speaking locales concentrated in Central Europe, regardless of the political realm in which they happened to be situated. 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.¹⁶ In short, Germanness was a trans-state identification while *Heimat* was a substate identification, and both concepts existed prior to the formation of the German nation state in 1871.¹⁷

During the early twentieth century, both identifications – Mennoniteness and Germanness – generated problems for German nationalists who wished to gather the world's German speakers under

¹⁵ David Brodbeck, *Defining Deutschtum: Political Ideology, German Identity, and Music-Critical Discourse in Liberal Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6–10.

¹⁶ See Peter Blickle, *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland* (New York: Camden House, 2004). On the early-twentieth-century *Heimat* Movement see Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁷ Richard Ned Lebow, "The Future of Memory," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617 (2008): 30.

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.¹⁸ Meanwhile, many German speakers who occupied their own “Heimats Abroad” – in Asia, Africa, and the Americas – responded tepidly to German nationalism.¹⁹ 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].*”²⁰

After the First World War, Germanness became politically charged as new citizenship laws in Central European countries required individuals to choose a nationality, which sometimes entailed relocating to a new state. Abroad, the Weimar government harnessed the concept of Germanness to promote economic and cultural ties between Germany and communities of *Auslandsdeutsche* (German speakers living abroad), while the Nazi government reformulated the idea as a scientific category to promote the racial allegiance of *Auslandsdeutsche* to Germany.²¹ As Germanness transformed from a vague and voluntary category to an academic and ascriptive one, German speakers living outside of the German nation state found themselves in the crosshairs of heated debates in Germany and their host states concerning their national 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 German nation state and especially after the Nazis’ rise to power, their Germanness raised

¹⁸ Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials*, 107, 198.

¹⁹ See Krista O’Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy Reagin, eds., *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Manz, *Constructing a German Diaspora*, 3.

²⁰ Manz, *Constructing a German Diaspora*, 4.

²¹ Christopher Hutton, *Race and the Third Reich: Linguistics, Racial Anthropology and Genetics in the Dialectic of Volk* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005), 58–59. Like *Deutschtum*, *Auslandsdeutsche* is a nebulous concept. The Nazis considered *Auslandsdeutsche* to be German citizens abroad, while *Volksdeutsche* were ethnic Germans abroad, and both constituted the *Deutschtum im Ausland*. Other definitions merge *Reichsdeutsche* (German citizens) with *Volksdeutsche* (persons of German descent) to form the *Auslandsdeutsche*. See 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), 15.

troubling questions in host countries about whether they were loyal citizens, loyal to Germany, or even a dormant Nazi fifth column.

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 bundled together to articulate the confession's essential religious, cultural, and sometimes even racial, character. Yet owing to Mennonites' history of biblical literalism and ecclesial disunity, their communities held durable, yet imprecise, understandings of how their religious culture affected their daily lives. They lacked scholarship, High-Church practices, and the refined sacramental theology of other Christian denominations, all of which kept them from parsing religion from other aspects of daily life or establishing a systematic connection between culture and faith. Indeed, their cultural attributes were not handed down by church authorities but manifested from the bottom up.

Thus, the *Gemeinde* (local community) was the arbiter of culture and every other aspect of life. In Russia's Mennonite communities, the cultural and 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 colony and encouraged compact settlements. The *Ältester* looked after baptisms, ordinations, weddings, and funerals and possessed a great deal of influence in the community beyond the religious sphere. He was aided by an elected team of *Prediger* (lay ministers) who supervised the moral life of each village.²² Together they comprised the *Lehrdienst*.²³ 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*, a governing body that looked after a colony's civic functions: healthcare, schools, insurance, and economic development.²⁴ Village administration was composed of a *Schulze* (mayor) and his assistants who maintained the village's infrastructure, fire

²² Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 50; Uwe S. Friesen, “Ältester,” in *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, ed. Gerhard Ratzlaff et al. (Asunción: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 20.

²³ Andreas F. Sawatzky, “Lehrdienst,” *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, 262–63.

²⁴ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 6; Heinrich N. Dyck, “Oberschulze,” *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, 318–19.

safety, local justice, and church attendance.²⁵ 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 taxation, hiring teachers, and assigning crop rotations.²⁶

Divisions between Mennonites' civic, economic, and religious spheres were never completely clear, which meant that every aspect of life was a part of ones' Mennoniteness. In the small, closely knit village setting there were frequent instances where civic and religious leaders clashed over the boundaries of their particular jurisdiction.²⁷ Family connections, historic precedent, and strong personalities often had as much sway as official rules. 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.²⁸

As *Gemeinden* moved from one environment to another, they incorporated and perpetuated cultural characteristics that they absorbed along the way: in the Low Countries, Prussia, Russia, Canada, and Paraguay. This in turn led to an ongoing discussion within and between *Gemeinden* over which aspects of culture were important to their articulation of Mennoniteness 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 left the Soviet Union in 1920 as part of a Russian Mennonite study commission, which had been tasked with finding immigration possibilities in the wake of Soviet persecution. A. Friesen eventually settled in Saskatchewan, Canada while Unruh settled near Karlsruhe, Germany.

²⁵ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 5–6; Gerhard Ratzlaff, “Schulze,” *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, 378–79.

²⁶ Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?* 5–6. Mennonite households were embedded in thick intergenerational kinship ties, which often gave women power 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.

²⁷ Various instances are noted in James Urry, *None but Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789–1889* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989).

²⁸ R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 50.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Unruh was the main point of contact between the Fernheim Colony, the MCC, and the Weimar and Nazi governments.²⁹ He viewed German culture as intimately tied to Mennonites' religious practice and part of their fundamental Mennonite "nature" (i.e. their Mennoniteness), while A. Friesen believed that cultural features were 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. 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," because they maintained a separate language, culture, and social organization.³⁰ Similar disagreements arose in the United States as Mennonites debated higher education, dress, and other aspects of culture and conduct that set them apart from or aligned with broader society.

Geoff Eley and Ronald Suny assert, "Culture is more often not what people share, but what they choose to fight over."³¹ Between the 1870s and the 1940s, Mennonite communities and conferences across the Americas and Europe battled each other over a broad spectrum of issues, from personal appearance, to occupation, to attending public schools, to participating in government. Similar to other minority groups during this era, the Mennonites' internal conflicts led to a remarkable degree of

²⁹ Harold S. Bender, "Unruh, Benjamin Heinrich (1881–1959)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified November 24, 2013, [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), last accessed June 7, 2018; Jakob Warkentin, "Brüder in Not," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, 56–57. For a longer, 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).

³⁰ 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 Benjamin H. Unruh, *Bote* "Praktische Fragen," #757 (23 March 1938). For A. A. Friesen's position, see A. A. Friesen papers, Mennonite Library and Archives (hereafter, MLA), Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

³¹ Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, "Introduction: From the Moment of Social History to the Work of Cultural Representation," in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9.

polarization that caused them to move centripetally inward toward a manifest sense of local unity or centrifugally outward toward an imagined sense of confessional or national unity. In doing so, they redefined the meanings of Mennoniteness and Germanness to align with their collective narratives about the past, present, and future.

INTERVENTIONS AND FRAMEWORK

The Menno and Fernheim Colonies help us understand a range of migrants and refugees who interpreted nationalism and ecumenicism through local lenses. My framework 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. I therefore begin from the premise that national and religious identifications are not objective and immutable but are tied to subjective mythologies that unfurl through time as collective narratives.

Mennonites' primary allegiances were generally not directed at the nations to which they ostensibly belonged. Consequently, building an analytical framework based on national labels is as misleading as it is dangerous. For example, Russia's Mennonites often understood themselves to be less a part of the German nation – or any nation for that matter – and more a part of their local communities. Their Germanness was likewise created and sustained at the local level.³² They did not perpetuate German cultural characteristics – such as using Luther's translation of the Bible, German village names, and farming practices – in order to maintain a connection to the German state, but rather to maintain a historical link to their ancestors. In short, they held to German cultural characteristics because they were Mennonites, not because they were Germans. Not surprisingly, historians writing about the Mennonites are mostly uninterested in exploring the confession's Germanness since they are aware that Mennonites emphasize the separation of church and state and know that most 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 nonetheless shared features

³² Pieter Judson argues 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*, 219.

in common with other German-speaking locales in the Russian Empire and the Americas. In addition to a shared written culture, German speakers of all faith backgrounds negotiated special privileges, were more loyal to their colonies than to national or international attachments, and entwined culture and religion in unique and enduring ways.³³ In this way, Mennonites were “real” Germans, even if they did not always articulate this identification in the public sphere.

It is common practice for scholars of migration and diaspora to use state borders to describe mobile groups, but this jeopardizes our understanding of how mobile populations understood themselves. For example, historians writing about Germans living abroad frequently merge a wide variety of German-speaking groups under the label of their host countries (e.g. German Canadians, Russian Germans, and Paraguayan Germans).³⁴ These histories promote a uniform and essentialist understanding of “the Germans,” which neglects local variations and obscures individuals’ self-identifications.³⁵ Mennonite historians likewise tend to rely on national paradigms for framing their histories by writing about “Russian Mennonites,” “Canadian Mennonites,” and “Paraguayan Mennonites,” instead of “Russia’s Mennonites,” “Canada’s Mennonites,” or “Paraguay’s Mennonites.”³⁶ The former designations assume that Mennonites’ most relevant descriptor is the geographic area in which they originated or resided. The latter designations place Mennonites within state territories but they do not assume their loyalty to the state.³⁷ The distinction matters because it opens up an avenue for

³³ Manz, *Constructing a German Diaspora*, 3.

³⁴ See for instance Jonathan Wagner, *A History of Migration from Germany to Canada, 1850–1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006); Grant Grams, *German Emigration to Canada and the Support of Its Deutschtum During the Weimar Republic* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

³⁵ Hoerder draws attention to this disparity. See “German-Language Diasporas.” So does 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): 362–94. For examples of writing German history without privileging the nation state or essentializing “Germanness,” see O’Donnell et al., *The Heimat Abroad*.

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ In a similar vein, Tobias Brinkmann demonstrates that scholars of Jewish immigration retroactively assign national identifications to their subjects. See “‘German Jews’? Reassessing the History of Nineteenth-Century Jewish Immigrants,” in *Transnational Traditions: New Perspectives on American Jewish History*, ed. Ava F. Kahn and Adam Mendelsohn (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 145.

examining the fluid nature of Mennonites' external attachments. 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 geographic territory.³⁸ I accept that state-centered paradigms tell 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 national loyalties and state borders. In such instances, they shared a great deal in common with other German-speaking communities who were tepid about their host states and German nationalism. My framework is sensitive to national cultures and political borders, 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 – and the historians who write about them – have cast those of that confession as victims of government efforts to nationalize new territories; however, I show that Mennonites were not victims of these processes and actually provoked them. Hence, building a framework out of Mennonites' persecution at the hands of a generic “State” is misleading. Mennonites routinely 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 governments to consolidate 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 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, groups like the Menno Colony Mennonites used transnational means to attain transchronological ends.

³⁸ Oddly, national labels are even found in the self-generated histories of Mennonites who patently chose to avoid national citizenship. See for example John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes Among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933–1945* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999). An important exception is R. Loewen, *Village Among Nations*. Oddly, national labels are even found in the self-generated histories of Mennonites who patently chose to avoid national citizenship. See 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, Paraguay: Historical Committee of the Menno Colony, 2009).

They successfully replicated their early modern privileges in the modern era by relocating to new, unnationalized spaces.

It is unwise to assume that Mennonites were always “victims” of nationalism. However, I also contend that it is unwise to assume that their integration into host societies or an international fraternity of Mennonites was a given, even if “official” narratives make it appear so. By the end of the First World War, the promises of modern citizenship had led a majority of the world’s 516,300 Mennonites to make peace with national identifications and state borders.³⁹ For example, Mennonite intellectuals in Germany aimed to unite the world’s Mennonites under a shared ethnicity, while Mennonite intellectuals in North America – organized under the MCC – tried to unite the world’s Mennonites under a shared set of religious principles. Yet owing to Mennonites’ local cultures and religious peculiarities, early-twentieth-century Mennoniteness was marked more by disunity than by collaboration. Large numbers of Mennonites remained as recalcitrant to their intellectuals’ high-minded entreaties for solidarity as they were to the alleged virtues of nationalism. This observation is important, because it demonstrates that Mennonite intellectuals were as prone to corporatist thinking as nationalist politicians, and the two groups experienced similar problems in uniting diverse constituencies.

Now that I have described what my framework is not, I will now describe what it is. At the broadest level, this book’s structure demonstrates how nations and religions exist as mythologies that are arranged as narratives across time. In doing so, it intervenes in the literatures of European-style nationalism, religious ecumenicism, and modern diasporas.

In the 1980s, scholars of nationalism advanced structural explanations of the phenomenon by focusing on nationalism’s political and social dimensions. Yet they did not generally engage its mythical qualities.⁴⁰

³⁹ An 1850 estimate places the number of Mennonites at 67,500, which represents a sevenfold increase between 1850 and 1925. For population estimates, see Bender, Sam Steiner, and Richard D. Thiessen, “World Mennonite Membership Distribution,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, last modified November 17, 2013, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=World_Mennonite_Membership_Distribution&oldid=103542, last accessed June 7, 2018.

⁴⁰ 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, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

Although Benedict 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.⁴¹

I argue that nations – and by extension, denominations – exist as mythologies in the space where imagination merges with sentiment.⁴² Nations and denominations embody a corpus of myths, which Ernst Renan regards as "common glories" and "regrets."⁴³ These myths are welded and wielded by political or religious "entrepreneurs" who compete among themselves to fashion them into mythologies.⁴⁴ This definition resonates with 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 lived reality.⁴⁵ 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 corpus of myths.⁴⁶

⁴¹ 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, *Imagined Communities*, 6–7; Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 89.

⁴² 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 are the principle tools of change. On the other, mythologies hold either a linear or cyclical view of time that may or may not privilege the past, present, or future. Mythologies present a vision of the world as it *appears* to be, and the principle agent of change is either God or an indeterminate "spirit" of history. In general, ideologies are positions that people hold; mythologies are worlds in which people live. Though I agree that nationalism is also ideology, I engage it as mythology to better account for the religious disposition and political ambivalence of my subjects. See Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), 86–106.

⁴³ Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" in *Becoming National*, 52–53.

⁴⁴ Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 12.

⁴⁵ According to 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.

⁴⁶ 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

Understanding national “mythscape,” where battles over collective memories are won and lost, is not simply an intellectual exercise.⁴⁷ 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 who 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.”⁴⁸ Unorthodox ideas about nations and denominations are dynamic engines that reveal the essential malleability of a given “mythscape.”

Yet how do we understand nationalism’s mythical characteristics without ourselves becoming entrapped by them? In the words of Timothy Snyder, “Refuting a 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.”⁴⁹ 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 had begun reevaluating nationalism as an artifact of modernity by taking up Hobsbawm’s call to analyze it from below.⁵⁰ They did so by focusing on expressions of “national indifference” – instances when modern individuals identified themselves outside of national strictures, usually on a local or regional

and necessarily require a “believer” to accept a specific perspective. See “Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity,” *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (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).

⁴⁷ On the concept of “mythscape” see Bell, 66. ⁴⁸ A. Smith, *Nationalism*, 72.

⁴⁹ Timothy Snyder, *Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 10.

⁵⁰ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 10–11.

level.⁵¹ These scholars were aided by 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.⁵² Their work confirmed that the formation of ethnic or linguistic national blocs (composed of individuals who supposedly shared a perennial solidarity) was not inevitable or even particularly desirable for large numbers of Europeans well into the twentieth century.⁵³

Yet it is not enough to focus on the (mostly) political aspects of nationalist-minded and nationally indifferent individuals. Nor is it sufficient to restrict our field of view to nationalism's vicissitudes and victims within a specific locale or region. 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. In the early twentieth century, Catholic Silesians, Budweiser activists, and 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, few conceived of voluntarily abandoning their homes and property, though mobility is no less of a natural human condition than settlement.

Scholars of nationalism and its discontents succeed at describing the presence or absence of a population's collective identifications, and how these identifications change, but they do not do an especially good job of pegging their observations to broader mythologies. *Moments* of "groupness" happen and individuals recall *specific* memories, but questions

⁵¹ See Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93–119.

⁵² 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 (2005): 1–19; Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 15.

⁵³ Kate L. Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole*; 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* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

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 diminish their power.⁵⁴ 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 book examines the shifting terrain of collective mythologies, for they too are the stuff of history.

Obviously, Mennonites' local organization, movements across state borders, and use of multiple identifications challenge the notion that we can discover or create a Mennonite identity.⁵⁵ Instead, I demonstrate that diasporic groups such as the Mennonites do not have identities so much as narratives.⁵⁶ Therefore, the central goal of this book is to account for the ways that diasporic groups maintain alternative narratives against nationalist ones or incorporate fragments of nationalist narratives into their communal stories. As Alexander Freund reminds us, "Europeans migrated to 'America' rather than Canada [or any specific country], to a 'story' rather than a reality."⁵⁷ Yet migrants brought their own stories with them, so my approach pays special attention to how Mennonites' group narratives – often rooted in specific understandings of the Bible – affected their actions and allegiances in new lands. In doing so, I demonstrate how ethno-religious diasporas connect their earthly communities to transcendent national and religious mythologies.

Mennonites interpreted the world through the Bible. This book is not simply a collection of laws and prophecy, but in the words of Don Cupitt, is a "story to live by."⁵⁸ 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, helped them make sense of their migrations, and gave existential meaning to their

⁵⁴ Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁵⁵ 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): 302–38; 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).

⁵⁶ Historically, Mennonites did not use the term "diaspora" to describe themselves, but the term is nevertheless useful to describe Mennonites' dispersion throughout the world.

⁵⁷ Alexander Freund, "Introduction," in *Beyond the Nation? Immigrants' Local Lives in Transnational Cultures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 3–17, 5.

⁵⁸ Don Cupitt, *What Is a Story?* (London: SCM Press, 1991), xi.

lives. According to 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.’”⁵⁹ The church congregation was 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’ 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 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.”⁶⁰

Frye’s Theory of Modes, which is discussed in his seminal *Anatomy of Criticism*, 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 “comic” plot progressions. In chronological order, Frye’s modes, or literary epochs, are “mythic,” “romantic,” “high mimetic,” “low mimetic” and “ironic.”⁶¹ 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 across time and space. When Mennonite migration is viewed from this perspective, a new layer of interpretation arises in the Mennonites’ *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.⁶² 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

⁵⁹ R. Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 52.

⁶⁰ Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 17.

⁶¹ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 40, 54.

the hero is absorbed into a pastoral life (for example the cliché of Mennonites as “the quiet in the land”).⁶³ Either way, Mennonites took the path of diaspora. They remained separated from society and lived (or died) in opposition to the world.⁶⁴

With the increasing affluence and physical expansion of nineteenth-century Russia’s Mennonite colonies – what some historians have dubbed the “Mennonite Commonwealth” – some Mennonites began interpreting their story in a high mimetic mode, which is thematically associated with a city or nation.⁶⁵ The “Commonwealth” represented a happy resolution to the Mennonites’ wanderings. Their Russian “homeland” was the gathering place of God’s people on earth, autonomous of “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 the Russian Empire reached their material and organizational zenith in the first decade of the twentieth century, which reinforced a mimetic connection to Russia and lingered on even after the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power.

The Mennonites who fled to Canada and thence to Paraguay interpreted their collective story as a comic plot progression: They experienced a falling-out with government authorities and their coreligionists who disagreed with them, underwent the physical and moral tests of migration, and were spiritually renewed in subsequent locations.⁶⁶ 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:

⁶³ The full title of Thieleman J. van Braght’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, IN: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989), 11.

⁶⁴ 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.

⁶⁵ 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 (2010): 229–47.

⁶⁶ Frye, *Great Code*, 190.

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 and contentiousness they departed more and more from the simple life until the beast could dare to enter into battle with them.⁶⁷

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

By contrast, the Mennonites who fled from the Soviet Union to Paraguay in 1929 collectively experienced what scholar Robert Zacharias describes as a “break event.” Each family interpreted their story of expulsion from the Soviet Union as a tragic plot progression, which rose to a point of peripety when they fled their homes, and plunged downward to catastrophe when they were “exiled” to Paraguay.⁶⁸ Fernheimers therefore remained divided over the meaning of the colony's heterogeneous and tragic beginnings, and were skeptical that they could redeem their individual tragedies with a greater collective purpose and somehow recast tragedy into comedy. Both the Fernheim and Menno Colonies 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 of an

⁶⁷ 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.

⁶⁸ Frye, *Great Code*, 197. Robert Zacharias argues that retelling the story of Russia's Mennonite Commonwealth and its swift dismemberment 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. Novelist Robert Kroetsch notes that Mennonites who fled the Soviet Union wrote their history as “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 Writing in Canada*, ed. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe (Waterloo: University of Waterloo, 1992), 225. On understanding exile from the subjective point of view of the exiled see D. L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*.

overarching Mennonite narrative, which kept them divided in Paraguay and led them to make very different choices.⁶⁹

IDENTIFICATIONS AND NARRATIVES

Before proceeding, it is important to establish 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 outsiders at a particular moment. Identifications such as nationality and religion are singled out from a range of possibilities for the sake of simplicity or to convey a desired sentiment. For example, Canadian officials identified incoming Mennonite settlers as “Germans” in order to lump them together with a well-known and well-respected ethnic group.⁷⁰ Then again, some Mennonites referred to themselves as “Germans” when their audience knew who the Mennonites were and may have found the confession distasteful.⁷¹ In short, identifications are used for a specific purpose, within a specific context, to indicate cohesion. Of course, given the complexity of human nature it may be tempting to simply claim that every individual is a unique kaleidoscope of identifications, each with his or her

⁶⁹ 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 (1992): 1347–76. 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 (1986), 117–31. In a similar vein, Susan Schultz Huxman and Gerald Biesecker-Mast point out that when speaking to governments, “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 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): 539–54.

⁷⁰ See for example F. H. Epp’s two volume, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), 185–86; Wagner, *A History of Migration from Germany to Canada*, 76.

⁷¹ See for example “Statement to Hon. Robert F. Forke,” March 6, 1929, Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (hereafter, CMBC), Immigration Movement I, c. Organizations, Individuals and Transactions related to Immigration and Relief, 1923–1946, vol. 1270, 605, Mennonite Heritage Centre (hereafter, MHC), Winnipeg, MB; Fritz Kliewer, “Letter to Landesleiter des VDA Landesverbandes Weser-Ems, November 18, 1937,” R127972d, 52, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (hereafter, PA AA), Berlin, Germany.

own private agendas, and leave all notions of collectivism by the wayside. But that is to deny both reality and humanity. Humans are collectivist, but oftentimes they are more attached to – and unified through – shared narratives than to shared identifications.

Like shared identifications, shared narratives describe groups of people but they include the element of time, which is a uniquely human conception. Paul Ricœur theorizes that narratives constitute the very center of humans' ability to identify and be identified as anything in the first place. They necessarily presuppose all attempts to incorporate the past into the present and consequently “individual and community are constituted in their identity by taking up narratives that become for them their actual history.”⁷² Under such a theory, one can never be quite certain if a corporate memory is the literal truth or simply the best, fleeting attempt to reconcile a fractured past with present contingencies. Importantly, Ricœur argues that the “selective function” of narrative is the process through which memory is most susceptible to ideology – religious, political, or otherwise.⁷³

A collective narrative is therefore a curated assembly of myths, events, and identifications that offer a tidy and meaningful alternative to the clutter and chaos of history. It may be substantiated in part by 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. Yet the story remains. For example, the Menno colonists emphasized the continuity of their narrative as nomadic Mennonites despite numerous relocations and being identified variously as “Russians,” “Canadians,” and “Paraguayans.” By contrast, the Fernheim Colony was composed of sundry individuals and families, each of whom had been torn from preexisting narratives as members of specific communities across the Soviet Union and now had to create a new narrative in Paraguay. 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 collective story.

Ultimately, collective narratives err more toward mythology than history. Zacharias observes that “narrative itself always ‘strains’ to project

⁷² Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 247.

⁷³ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 85.

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an artificial coherency and completeness onto its subject,” even as it wields a remarkable power to shape past, present, and future.⁷⁴ Mennonite migrants’ “break events,” “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 protected them. Likewise, histories go to great pains to clarify causality (did Mennonites leave Canada due to new public education laws or did they have other reasons?), while group narratives are remarkably clear on the point: The Menno Colony Mennonites left Canada because it was “Babylon.”⁷⁵ 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 storyline.

As we move from Russia, through Canada, Germany, China, Paraguay, Bolivia, and up to the United States over the span of seventy-five years, the chapters in this book accentuate the ways that Mennonite migrants and refugees situated their religious and national identifications within their collective narratives and how outsiders influenced these developments. Here, at the nexus of myth and migration, narrative, and nationalism, lies this book’s center of gravity.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This book comprises six chapters. The first chapter follows the movement of voluntary migrants from the Russian Empire to Canada to Paraguay between 1870 and 1926. It shows that members of this cohort underwent a contentious process of integrating state citizenship and Mennonite unity into their collective narratives or rejecting it in favor of local narratives that prized religious separation. Chapter 2 examines the discourse between governments, aid agencies, and the press concerning the Mennonite refugees who fled from the Soviet Union to Paraguay via Germany and China between 1929 and 1931. This chapter contends that the refugees were both aided and inhibited by their national,

⁷⁴ Zacharias, *Rewriting the Break Event*, 5.

⁷⁵ Guenther, “Ältester Martin C. Friesen (1889–1968): A Man of Vision for Paraguay’s Mennogemeinde,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 189.

religious, and economic identifications, which left them with an ambiguous collective narrative. The first two chapters also demonstrate how governments used each group to define their own constituencies along the lines of class, nationality, citizenship, and religion.

The third chapter grounds us in the local context of the Chaco and examines each colony through three lenses. The first concerns the colonies' interpretations of the natural environment. The second focuses on their actions during the Chaco War. The third is about their interactions with indigenous peoples after the war. This chapter shows that each colony's collective narrative – as faithful nomads and as displaced victims – led them to make profoundly different choices vis-à-vis the Paraguayan government, and kept the groups divided during the 1930s.

Chapter 4 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 5 looks to Germany to explain why the colonies found themselves in the crosshairs of the Nazi State's bid for transnational German unity. Each of these chapters demonstrates that the colonies frustrated outsiders' initiatives for unity due to their local conceptions of Mennoniteness and Germanness.

The sixth and final chapter shows how the Fernheim Colony's collective narrative reached a point of crisis (and violence) between 1937 and 1944 as colonists became divided between those who continued to believe that they should remain in Paraguay, as per the wishes of the MCC, and those who thought they should relocate to Europe under Nazi jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the Menno Colony remained indifferent to Germany's oscillating fortunes, as they preferred to maintain their local expressions of Mennoniteness and Germanness. This chapter highlights the ambiguity caused by a quick reversal of a group's collective narrative – from an anticipated comic outcome to a tragic one. Combined with Chapter 5, it also indicates that Latin America's German-speaking communities exhibited a wide range of attitudes toward the Nazi state, from political indifference to overwrought anticipation.

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 analyze a large diaspora.⁷⁶ Rather, it focuses on two group narratives, often crafted by the community's

⁷⁶ 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, and Market*. For a broader survey of transnational Mennonite networks, see *Village Among Nations*.

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leaders as their groups moved in and out of several national contexts. As a result, it necessarily contains several 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 and economic aspects of the colonies 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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ Thus, many of the primary sources I use concerning the colonies – such as the work of Martin W. Friesen – were written by colony elites. Beyond using these works to relate basic chronologies and statistics, I do not uncritically accept their interpretations of events. Rather, I use their interpretations to exhibit and analyze the truth claims and justifications made by elites as they crafted unifying narratives. These individuals were generally men, their Bible-based theology was patriarchal, and their decisions to migrate were grounded in masculine 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

⁷⁷ 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, which gave women a degree of influence over financial decisions. See Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 36; R. Loewen, "The Children, the Cows, My Dear Man and My Sister," 360–63.

⁷⁸ Naturally, individuals create personal narratives of migration – both for and against – but understanding them is best achieved through oral interviews or an analysis of diaries and letters. On gender and personal narratives see Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich, "Migration, Gender, and Storytelling: How Gender Shapes the Experiences and the Narrative Patterns in Biographical Interviews," in *German Diasporic Experiences*, ed. Mathias Schulze, James M. Skidmore, David G. John et al. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008): 331–44; Sandra K. D. Stahl, *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: 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).

men preached sermons, administered the colonies, and organized migrations. As Marlene Epp notes, Mennonite theology and leadership “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.”⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ Insofar as one or both family heads found Mennonite leaders’ arguments for migration persuasive or unpersuasive, this book speaks to those decisions. Finally, wherever Mennonites went, they demanded indigenous displacement as a condition of settlement. There is much to be said about this conspicuous irony – given Mennonites’ presumed interest in nonviolence – but my line of argument necessarily foregrounds the relationships between colonists and state governments that accepted Mennonites into and/or rejected Mennonites from their national communities.

As a history, this book is organized as a *Weltgeschichte*, an attempt to answer the question “What should I have seen if I had been there?”⁸¹ 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.”⁸² 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 those processes were interpreted by Mennonites. Henry Glassie notes that scholars are often “tempted to dismiss religious people as marginal (which they are to histories painstakingly arranged around secular centers) and to probe beneath religious motives for worldlier goals deemed to be more real.”⁸³ 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.”⁸⁴ This “hermeneutic of suspicion” may be more insidious to our understanding

⁷⁹ M. Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada*, 13.

⁸⁰ 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, *Mennonite Women in Canada*, 28.

⁸¹ Frye, *Great Code*, 66. ⁸² *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸³ Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 21.

⁸⁴ K. L. Brown, *A Biography of No Place*, 69.

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.’”⁸⁵ 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.”⁸⁶ Human identifications, both past and present, are likewise more liquid than solid. They are active, dormant, aspirational, disposable, and frequently 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 collision. These interactions are in turn part of larger mythologies that are best captured in narrative form.

I am neither a theologian nor a literary critic and so my work is primarily focused on 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 book turns a mirror on the secular *Heilsgeschichten* advanced by nationalists to understand the position that mobile and nationally resistant individuals occupied within national mythologies. In doing so, I aim to uncover the insecurities and ambiguities that accompanied the formation of modern nation states, which was the largest and most destructive experiment in the history of social engineering.

⁸⁵ 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 (2013): 283.

⁸⁶ Frye, *Great Code*, 195.