

Exiled among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age. By John P. R. Eicher. Publications of the German Historical Institute. Edited by Simone Lässig with the assistance of David Lazar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xxii+338. \$99.00 (cloth); \$80.00 (Adobe eBook Reader).

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John Eicher has written a wonderful study, even if the exact content of it is not apparent from the title. Eicher focuses on two distinct Mennonite settlements in the Paraguayan Chaco: Menno Colony, founded in 1926 by immigrants from Manitoba and Saskatchewan (Canada), though their forebears had emigrated from Imperial Russia in the 1870s; and Fernheim, a colony founded in 1930 by other Mennonites who had fled the Soviet Union by way of Germany.

Even this brief sketch highlights two of Eicher's key themes: first, the shifting identities of diasporic peoples such as Mennonites in the twentieth century; and, second, how the various states involved shaped and reshaped group identifications and narratives over time, both of themselves and the peoples they encountered. In the course of this fine work, Eicher considers how Mennonites—a sixteenth-century European Protestant movement—become “legible to outsiders” (25).

In some ways, Eicher's work is emblematic of a recent historiography that sees all identities as contingent, where “all that is solid melts into air.” However accurate Marx's dictum may be, Eicher risks leading the reader to a place where every identity is in flux, including those associated with “Mennonite,” “German,” and even “Homeland.” Yet that never happens, thanks to Eicher's strong engagement with his sources, and his equally strong hold of the narrative thread. Though four of his six chapters deal with the period from 1930 to 1945, Eicher has set the stage much earlier. In brief, Menno and Fernheim Mennonites formed their colonies in the Chaco within four years of each other, but that is almost where their similarities end. Eicher makes plain that their foundational stories diverged dramatically. The Menno Colonies began when Mennonites in Canada emigrated in the aftermath of World War I, at a time when they feared that Canada's “Solidifying State” (48) threatened their ability to live out their faith. Thus they chose to

immigrate to Paraguay, did so collectively, and understood all subsequent events through that willful and God-directed act of immigration.

Those who founded Paraguay's Fernheim Colony a few years later, by contrast, did so reluctantly, and much less coherently. Those first settlers arrived from all over the Soviet Union. They happened to be those who congregated in Moscow at the end of the 1920s as they desperately sought permission to emigrate. Their goal? Canada, but that was not to be. As Eicher points out, Canada's view of Mennonites had turned negative, in part because those who formed Paraguay's Menno Colony in 1926 had spurned it, and even earlier Mennonites had refused to support the British Empire during the Great War. With the Canadian door closed, these Moscow-based Mennonites now found that Weimar Germany also refused them safe haven, partly because socialists there claimed that these Soviet refugees were less "German" than they were "kulak," and as such unwelcome (102–6). Thus, with seemingly nowhere in the world to go, the Mennonites involved in this last-chance Soviet emigration accepted an invitation to settle in Paraguay where they formed the Fernheim Colony.

Eicher wonderfully tells the parallel stories of the Menno and Fernheim colonies from the point of settlement on. We soon get a sense of one colony that was determined to separate out from the state (Menno Colony) and one (Fernheim) that was much more integrative, in part because these Mennonites had already learned lessons of accommodation in Imperial Russia. As a result, Fernheim Colony Mennonites publicly supported Paraguay in its Chaco War with Bolivia, whereas Menno Colony Mennonites did not. Fernheim attempted to evangelize the indigenous peoples of the Chaco so as to curry favor with Paraguayan authorities. The Menno Colony Mennonites made no such effort as they sought no such favor. Many Fernheim Mennonites enthusiastically followed the rise of Hitler after 1933, and even more so after Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. Many of these reluctantly Paraguayan colonists hoped that the Nazi conquerors would soon invite these "German" settlers back to resettle in their former homeland. The Menno Colony had no such interest, largely because it shared no such pan-Germanic identification.

Eicher is equally strong when he outlines the shifting observations of state actors, as with Canada's increasingly negative evaluation of Mennonites in the 1920s, or Nazi Germany's struggle to understand how "German" the Paraguayan Mennonites actually were in the 1930s. American Mennonites also wondered how "Mennonite" the Menno and Fernheim

colonists were at a time when they wanted to spearhead a global communion of Mennonites. Yet neither colony offered what the Americans wanted to find in the southern hemisphere. Indeed, Eicher's treatment of American Mennonites (which occasionally morphs into North American involvement so as to include Canadian Mennonites) is particularly fascinating as it compels the reader to ponder the ties between those American Mennonites and the superpower state peeking over their collective shoulder. In all of this Eicher highlights the complexity behind the American Mennonites' initiative to sever any connection between Fernheim's Mennonites and Germany's National Socialism.

Overall Eicher's work is replete with fascinating observations, and raises probing questions, such as in his discussion on the meaning of "Fernheim"—translated as "Distant Home"—for those Mennonites who were compelled to found their colony in Paraguay instead of Canada. He wonders if the Distant Home in question was Canada, Russia, or both (120). One also wonders if the Mennonites who moved to the Russian Empire ever sought to be "separated from society" or "in opposition to the world" as is generally assumed (23). Did Mennonites understand themselves to be "perpetual wanderers" (22)? Lastly, can one categorically break down Mennonites into either associative or separatist camps with respect to the larger society, as Eicher suggests (53)?

Such questions suggest the depth of engagement that Eicher has with this work, and with his readers. This study deserves a wide readership as it deals with issues at the heart of the twentieth century. One looks forward to Eicher's next project.