



2021 DAAD/GSA
Book Prize
(History/Social
Sciences):
Honorable Mention
John P.R. Eicher

Honorable Mention: Dr. **John P.R. Eicher** (History, Penn State University Altoona)

Book: *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2020)

Announced at #thegsa2021 conference on September 30, 2021, by Dr. Ben Marschke (Humboldt State University), Chair of the DAAD/GSA Prize for the Best Book in History or Social Sciences. The other members of the Committee are Dr. Jörg Echternkamp (Halle and Potsdam) and Dr. Astrid M. Eckert (Emory University).

Honorable Mention for the DAAD/GSA Book Prize for the Best Book in History / Social Sciences:

John P.R. Eicher, *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2020)

Laudatio:

John P.R. Eicher's *Exiled Among Nations* surprises readers with its broad scope, innovative approach, and irresistible appeal. In tracing the trials and tribulations of two communities of Germanophone Mennonites who migrated from Russia to ultimately settle in Paraguay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this book presents an in-depth investigation of cultural, national, religious, ethnic, and racial identity. One group voluntarily departed Imperial Russia in the 1870s, settled in Canada, and then left Canada in the 1920s to put down roots in Paraguay as the "Menno Colony." The other group was forced out of the Soviet Union in the 1920s, briefly took refuge in Germany and China, and then alighted in Paraguay as the "Fernheim Colony." Though the two colonies abutted each other, they remained separate, both in administration and worldview. *Exiled Among Nations* is an exemplary work at the nexus of German studies and global history, not only tracing its research subjects over three continents, but also focusing upon and problematizing their self-identification and ascription as "German" during a time of hypernationalism.

Eicher has not only painstakingly researched the complex stories of these two meandering groups, but also presents an innovative method of understanding their self-identities and group cohesion by examining the "mythologies" that informed their worldviews. Both migrating

Mennonite groups interpreted their collective experiences, current situations, and broader world events in light of biblical stories, especially in terms of salvation, Babylonian captivity, or deliverance to a promised land.

Exiled Among Nations shows how, against the backdrop of the rise of National Socialism in Germany and the coming of the Second World War in Europe, the Mennonites' multiple intersecting identities precipitated a crisis. For the members of the Menno Colony, who had chosen freely to move to Paraguay, it was at least a temporary and temporal promised land. They sought to pretend that international politics were irrelevant to their lives and stymied the attempts of government agents who sought to pigeonhole them as "Germans" (who would support Nazi Germany) or as "Mennonites" (who would align with their fellow co-religionists in North America). Even as these *Auslandsdeutsche* studiously maintained their German cultural identity, they rejected any ties with the government in Germany, and even as they held to their religious convictions, they rejected any allegiance to Canada (equated with Babylon), from whence they had come, or the USA, which sought to unite Mennonites worldwide. For the refugees in the Fernheim Colony, Paraguay was their Sinai, and the Nazi conquest of eastern Europe and Russia inspired the hope that they might find a new promised land there. At least some of them embraced *völkisch* ideology and claimed "Aryan" bloodlines, and they actively sought to regain German citizenship and repatriation to Europe for their group. For them the defeat of Germany, the dashing of their hopes for deliverance, and the uncertainty of their future was yet another trauma, which led to tensions and violence among them. Eicher also places these two groups in the larger context of German emigrants in Latin America, a group which was generally misunderstood by the regime in Germany (which sought their support), and the Allies' governments (who believed Nazi propaganda that *Auslandsdeutsche* were potential fifth columnists).

Exiled Among Nations' wide topical, temporal, and geographic scope and theoretical sophistication are especially impressive because the book remains relatively brief (<300 pages), and it is Eicher's first monograph (his revised dissertation). It deserves a readership far beyond those interested in the history of Mennonites.
