

John P. R. Eicher

Exiled among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age.

(Publications of the German Historical Institute.)

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[Mark Jantzen](#)

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John Eicher's *Exiled among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies* provides excellent material to think with on the topics of nationalism, national indifference, and how groups construct and modify their own collective narratives and mythologies. His focus is on two different mobile populations who share a common point of origin in southern Russia—present-day Ukraine—in the 1870s. They fashioned divergent accounts to explain their movements, their history, and their place in the world. Entering and leaving states as diverse as Canada, the Soviet Union, Germany, and Paraguay, their presence illustrated how those nations attempt to instrumentalize groups on the move for their own purposes just as those populations embraced or rejected those national identities for reasons of their own. The detailed demonstration of these processes is a major strength of this book. Eicher's analysis placed these itinerant groups from the margins at the center of understanding the reach and limits of nationalism and demonstrated how national indifference might give way to affirmation, subversion, or resistance to this dominant ideology of the twentieth century.

One group examined here left the Russian Empire in the 1870s for Canada, while the other stayed through the Russian Revolution and Stalin's early regime before fleeing to Germany in 1929. Both arrived at a common destination in the 1920s and early 1930s in the frontier region of the Gran Chaco in Paraguay—the group from Canada yet again as migrants and the Soviet group as refugees.

Eicher suggested two basic different stances to nationalism emerged. One approach was that of the separatist Mennonites, who others might call traditionalists. They maintained a

stronger group or collective identity that rejected the importance of democracy, education, and institutional Mennonite cooperation. The other group, labeled associative Mennonites, was more individualistic, founded institutions that became expressions of their communal identity, and were willing or even eager to integrate into the surrounding society.

Some of the Mennonites who arrived in Canada in the 1870s solidified their separatist stance by the 1920s and then left Canada for Paraguay. These separatists narrated a collective identity of suffering, movement, and covenantal group cohesion. Canadian officials for their part in the 1870s saw all Mennonites as valuable German-speaking settlers but by the 1920s thought them to be recalcitrant, even subversive, dissidents as Canadian national identity developed among Anglo-Canadian elites. The majority who stayed in Canada Eicher saw as being associative Mennonites who were willing to learn English and who strove to create a place for themselves in this new Canadian narrative. The Mennonites' shift from celebrated immigrants of the 1870s to pariahs during and after the Great War highlighted in a unique way the shifting parameters of what it meant to be Canadian.

Those Mennonites who stayed in Russia in the 1870s were already associative but found those strategies untenable in the Soviet Union, as the government declared them kulaks. Many left for Canada in the 1920s, but the focus of the book is on the group that crowded Moscow in late 1929 in a final desperate attempt to get out. As Canada slammed the door shut on immigrants, they managed to escape to Germany as refugees but were not allowed to stay long. Eicher's exploration of German reactions illustrates well how different groups used their arrival to argue for their own image of Germany. Nazis downplayed their religion to highlight their alleged superior racial qualities. The German Communist Party argued that helping these kulaks with state funds was a betrayal of German proletarians. The German government tried to project competence and compassion for oppressed German farmers without aggravating unemployment by actually letting them stay. The US-based Mennonite relief agency, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), worked to find them a permanent home but rejected Brazil, economically the better answer, because that country would not guarantee an exemption from military service, something the MCC now insisted was a key marker of Mennonite identity. Each of these outsider groups worked to foist its own narrative on these refugees, who mostly ended up in the Chaco in the early 1930s next to the

separatist Mennonites who had arrived from Canada in the late 1920s. This reunion, however, which the MCC planned to bring Mennonites together in relative isolation from destructive outside influences, did not go well.

The separatist Mennonite immigrants gathered in Menno Colony rejected the MCC's associative projects and rebuffed Paraguayan calls to assist in the Chaco War of the mid-1930s. Their history was relatively uneventful, and Eicher notes the ways in which that was by their own design. The Soviet refugees, described by Eicher as associative, gathered in the Fernheim colony next door, but they struggled to figure out which society to cozy up to. They were helpful—perhaps decisively so—to the Paraguayan government during the 1930s Chaco War, but as economic hardship set in some flirted with Nazism and a return to Germany. The MCC held their financial backing over the head of this colony and tried to steer them away from German nationalism and *völkisch* ideals. Other theological strands in the colony rejected the pull to military service in Germany, in line with Mennonite tradition and the MCC, or promoted mission work among the nearby indigenous tribes. All these tensions came to a head in 1944, when two factions in the *völkisch* group resorted to violence against each other, drawing the attention of the MCC, the FBI, US Naval Intelligence, and Paraguayan officials. After the war this community cast a veil of silence over the war years that lasted into the 1990s. They turned instead to making a life in Paraguay along with a more mundane collective narrative of their place in the world. One question addressed but not consistently analyzed in this otherwise excellent book is how and why associative Mennonites chose to affiliate with one or the other aspect of the nations they came to claim as their own, since, like the Mennonites, those national collectives were also not monolithic mythologies.

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