# 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 heterogonous and agrarian population was a determent 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* (Scottdale, 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.