

## From Aryanism to Anabaptism: Nazi Race Science and the Language of Mennonite Ethnicity

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*Abstract:* This essay advocates a new approach to the study of “Mennonite ethnicity.” Rejecting older narratives of white Mennonite ethnic identity as generated by cultural isolation, it instead depicts ethnicity as contested and situationally contingent. Focusing on the emergence of a discourse of “Mennonite ethnicity” in the late 1940s, the essay traces the linkages between Nazi racial scientific practices—especially as appropriated by Mennonite genealogists in the Third Reich—and their reformulation by Mennonite Central Committee during the postwar era as a means of helping Mennonite refugees migrate from Europe to the Americas. Arguing that M.C.C.’s deployment of the language of “ethnic Mennonitism” constituted a systematic denial of the collaboration of tens of thousands of Mennonites with National Socialism, it suggests that similarly today, invocations of “Mennonite ethnicity” undergird notions of white supremacy within the church.

In early 1950, the Mennonite church leader and historian Harold S. Bender published in these pages a review of the German-language periodical *Reports from the Genealogical Association of the Danzig Mennonite Families* (*Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes der danziger Mennoniten-Familien*). Appearing in Nazi Germany between 1935 and 1944, the *Reports* had provided detailed information on the research and activities of the country’s fast-growing Mennonite genealogical community. “One of the striking developments in Germany under Hitler,” Bender noted, “was the great growth in interest in family history and genealogical research.” As the longtime dean of Goshen College Biblical Seminary certainly knew—having himself spent significant time in the Third Reich, completing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Heidelberg in 1935 and serving as a Mennonite Central Committee liaison to the Nazi government as late as 1940—that explosion of ancestral studies in Hitler’s Germany had not been limited to Mennonite citizens. Across the Führer’s “racial state,”

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blood purity laws and racist activism, as well as more than a decade of government propaganda, had elevated genealogy from the margins of social consciousness to a celebrated, nationwide practice. "This interest naturally had a strong response among the Mennonites," Bender informed readers of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, "because in Germany as well as elsewhere the Mennonites have a strong sense of family loyalty, and Mennonites are members of the church largely because of their family ancestry."<sup>1</sup>

Readers today might be surprised to learn that Bender was not critical of these developments. Decades of scholarship since then have demonstrated the close links between genealogical enthusiasm in the Third Reich and Nazi policies of racial exclusion, including the systematic persecution and murder of millions of European Jews.<sup>2</sup> For most citizens of Nazi Germany, including the vast majority of its Mennonite population, genealogy provided a valuable means of proving Aryan ancestry, simultaneously granting individuals capable of demonstrating "pure" Germanic heritage access to generous political and welfare benefits, while also entrenching racism as a normal category of social division.<sup>3</sup> And yet for Bender, family research as practiced under National Socialism could and should be disentangled from its cultural context, viewed as separate from and even superior to the unabashed racism, militarism, and anti-Semitism from which it had largely emerged. The seminary dean and avowed pacifist did not believe that ancestral research and fascist politics were inherently intertwined. Indeed, he found it "encouraging" to discover that Mennonite genealogical research had not fallen in 1945 with the Third Reich. Welcoming the transformation and incorporation of a major tenet of National Socialist ideology into mainstream Mennonite

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1. H. S. Bender, "Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes der danziger Mennoniten-Familien Epp-Kauenhowen-Zimmermann, Herausgeber: Dr. Kurt Kauenhowen (Göttingen, 1935-1944)," *MQR* 24 (April 1950), 170. On Bender, see Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1897-1962* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1998).

2. On Nazism and racial science, Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Paul Weindling, *Health, Race, and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). On the role of genealogy, Eric Ehrenreich, *The Nazi Ancestral Proof: Genealogy, Racial Science, and the Final Solution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 76-142.

3. On Mennonites in the Third Reich, see Diether Götz Lichdi, *Mennoniten im Dritten Reich* (Weierhof im Bolanden: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1977); *Testing Faith and Tradition*, ed. Hanspeter Jecker and Alle G. Hoekema, (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2006), 123-130; James Irvin Lichti, *Houses on the Sand? Pacifist Denominations in Nazi Germany* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Astrid von Schlachta, "'in unbedingter Treue'... 'keine Verfechter der Wehrlosigkeit.' Volksgemeinschaft, Staatstreue und das Bild, das von den Mennoniten herrschen sollte," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 72 (2015), 117-132.

culture, he reported with approval that “a permanent interest in family history remains among the Mennonites in Germany, even after the Hitler regime has long since passed away.”<sup>4</sup>

What explains Bender’s enthusiasm for genealogical research in the Nazi era? This article argues that it was neither anomalous nor anachronistic. Placed in the context of the immediate postwar years, it rather appears symptomatic of a larger effort on the part of high-profile Mennonite leaders across Europe and the Americas to generate and popularize notions of global Anabaptist peoplehood, especially as encapsulated in the discourse of “Mennonite ethnicity.”<sup>5</sup> Noting that the vast majority of the world’s Mennonites were directly descended from the Anabaptists of the sixteenth-century Reformation, supporters of this project maintained that their church was bound not merely by theological ties but also by an inherited culture, and even, perhaps, by hereditary bonds of blood. Like the members of other ethnically-defined communities—whether whole “nations” and “races” like the Germans, Czechs, or Jews, or smaller “tribes” and “clans” such as Kashubians, Schwabians, and Cherokees—Mennonites’ historical experiences or common genes had supposedly predisposed them to exhibit a set of collective characteristics, ranging from emotional qualities such as thrift and severity to proclivities for certain professions and activities like agricultural work and four-part singing. In addition to a host of other factors, the emergence of the racial sciences in Germany and elsewhere directly influenced such thinking. Although leaders like Bender often expressed open political and theological opposition to Nazism and sometimes to racial science as a whole, they nevertheless found themselves in a world deeply shaped by these systems—one in which

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4. Bender, “Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes,” 173.

5. I refer to descriptions of Mennonites as “ethnic” or “ethnical” as a discourse of “Mennonite ethnicity.” Scholarly accounts of “Mennonite ethnicity,” both positive and critical, include E. K. Francis, “The Russian Mennonites: From Religious to Ethnic Group,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 54 (Sept. 1948), 101-107; James C. Juhnke, “Mennonite History and Self Understanding: North American Mennonitism as a Bipolar Mosaic,” and Donald B. Kraybill, “Modernity and Identity: The Transformation of Mennonite Ethnicity,” in *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Sam Steiner and Calvin Redekop (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988); Rodney J. Sawatsky, “Mennonite Ethnicity: Medium, Message and Mission,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 9 (1991), 113-121; Daphne Naomi Winland, “The Quest for Mennonite Peoplehood: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Dilemma of Definitions,” *Canadian Review of Sociology & Anthropology* 30 (Feb. 1993), 110-138; Hans Werner, “Peoplehoods of the Past: Mennonites and the Ethnic Boundary,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005), 23-35; James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe—Russia—Canada, 1525 to 1980* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), esp. 205-228; Royden Loewen, “The Politics of Peoplehood: Ethnicity and Religion Among Canada’s Mennonites,” in *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, ed. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 330-364.

claims based on ethnic and even racialist grounds could wield enormous power.

This article focuses on two significant moments in the history of what Harold Bender might have called Mennonite ethnic formation: first, the rise of genealogy as a practice among Mennonites in Nazi Germany; and second, the efforts of Mennonite Central Committee and related organizations in the late 1940s and early 1950s to extract more than 15,000 Mennonite refugees from Europe and to transport them across the Atlantic Ocean. Working closely with Nazi-era documents, categories, and methodologies, top M.C.C. administrators and field agents systematically developed and deployed notions of “Mennonite ethnicity”—a discourse that has continued to thrive well into the twenty-first century. Unlike the many historians, genealogists, and church leaders who began researching and promoting “Mennonite ethnicity” in the postwar years, however, this article does not consider ethnicity an objectively discoverable category, easily traceable across the centuries. Following recent scholarship on language and identity, it starts from the assumption that categories such as “race,” “ethnicity,” and even “culture” have their own specific histories. Only with the rise of modern scientific and social scientific disciplines like anthropology and sociology have these terms come to take on present-day connotations. In this light, I consider it less valuable to examine the different ways that “Mennonite ethnicity” has been manifested over the years, than to ask how ideas of ethnicity arose, why they entered certain Mennonites’ consciousness, and what they have meant to those who have used and experienced them in everyday settings.<sup>6</sup>

In the following pages, I hope to provide one model for future research into the history and meaning of “Mennonite ethnicity.” Most fundamentally, my approach is to situate social theories in their historical contexts, rather than to treat them as universally applicable.<sup>7</sup> If the language of “Mennonite ethnicity” arose only in the middle of the twentieth century, I am skeptical of accounts that claim to describe Mennonite communities in ethnic terms prior to this time. This is not to

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6. See the parallel discussion of race in Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso Books, 2012). My approach has also been influenced by recent scholarship on nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), and Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008).

7. For a discussion of this approach and its benefits, see Greg Anderson, “Retrieving the Lost Worlds of the Past: The Case for an Ontological Turn,” *The American Historical Review* 120 (June 2015), 787-810.

say that discussions of Mennonite culture and corporatism must be limited to an age in which some observers grouped them under the common heading “ethnicity.” Discussions of Mennonite linguistic, culinary, and agricultural practices—all categories in which recent generations of (white) Mennonite commentators have identified common ethnic characteristics—certainly began long before the 1940s. And just as particular iterations invariably differed among individuals as well as across regions, popular understandings of “Mennonite ethnicity” have experienced myriad evolutions since the middle of the last century. Put differently, my aim is not to suggest that scholars and leaders like Bender were able to produce a stable definition of “Mennonite ethnicity” any more than his famous 1944 essay, “The Anabaptist Vision,” accurately identified a common thread of Anabaptist belief and practice running from the Reformation to the nuclear age.<sup>8</sup> By extension, I wish neither to imply that discussions of “Mennonite ethnicity” are inherently fascist, nor that National Socialism was a sufficiently unitary system to make this a meaningful charge.

My claim is more modest but also, I think, more significant. Just as Mennonite genealogical practices held different connotations during and after the Nazi era, so are all discussions of Anabaptist identity contingent on the specific circumstances of their production. “Mennonite ethnicity” does not reflect deep-seated characteristics acquired during centuries of intermarriage and cultural isolation; rather it is embedded in particular moments. Understanding how representations of Anabaptism, both historical and contemporary, emerge in wider contexts can reveal how they absorb and redeploy (at least nominally) “non-Mennonite” elements. Even while certain ideas can seem specifically or uniquely Mennonite, they are always also implicated in broader systems and patterns. It is in this way that during the postwar years, M.C.C. could both officially denounce Nazism and also translate Nazi racial theories into a socially-acceptable and theologically-sanctioned discourse of “Mennonite ethnicity.” Similarly, today, an open discussion of “ethnic Mennonitism” could tell us about much more than some members’ culture and history; it could shed valuable light on issues of equality, access to resources, and racial justice across and beyond the global Anabaptist church. Engaging such a debate will require understanding how the language of “Mennonite ethnicity” has functioned in the past. This article offers one window onto that question. I hope other researchers will open many more.

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8. Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” *Church History* 13 (March 1944), 3-24.

## MENNONITE GENEALOGY IN THE THIRD REICH

In February 1943, Kurt Kauenhowen, the leading Mennonite genealogist in Nazi Germany, penned a retrospective on “Ten Years of Genealogical Research and Racial Hygiene in the Third Reich.” Published in *Reports from the Genealogical Association of the Danzig Mennonite Families*—the same journal that Harold Bender would later praise and which Kauenhowen had founded and edited since 1935—the article outlined the meteoric rise of genealogical science in Germany since Hitler’s “seizure of power,” clearly associating the mounting successes of Mennonite family research with the progressive severity of Nazi race policies. The “great achievements” of National Socialism, according to Kauenhowen—who, in addition to teaching at Göttingen’s Felix-Klein Gymnasium, also managed the Nazi Party’s local Racial-Political Office (*Rassenpolitisches Amt*)—included the establishment of “fundamental laws for the protection of the race” as well as the “mandate for [Aryan] ancestral proof,” namely the requirement that all German citizens carry special “racial passports,” detailing the racial purity of their spouses, children, parents, and grandparents. For particular approval, the genealogist singled out the most famous race laws of the previous decade, including the July 1933 Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring, which legalized the compulsory sterilization of individuals diagnosed with hereditary schizophrenia, epilepsy, deafness, and bodily deformities, as well as the September 1935 Nuremberg Laws, responsible for the disenfranchisement of Jewish citizens and the banning of all sexual intercourse between Jews and Aryans. For Kauenhowen, these measures had given unprecedented impetus to his own chosen discipline. By obligating all citizens to provide evidence of Aryan heritage, Nazi lawmakers had made family research “an activity integral to the entire nation.”<sup>9</sup>

Within this larger context, Kauenhowen identified a special role for Mennonitism. According to his telling, members of the Anabaptist confession were unusually predisposed to support Nazi race laws, in large part because they themselves already possessed a remarkable degree of

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9. Kurt Kauenhowen, “Zehn Jahre Sippenforschung und Sippenpflege im Dritten Reich, 1933-1943,” *Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes Danziger Mennoniten-Familien* 9 (Feb. 1943), 2-3. On racialist and genealogical scholarship among Mennonites in the Third Reich, Helmut Foth, “Wie die Mennoniten in die deutsche Volksgemeinschaft hineinwuchsen: Die Mennonitischen Geschichtsblätter im Dritten Reich,” *Memnonitische Geschichtsblätter* 68 (2011), 59-88; Benjamin W. Goossen, “Mennoniten als Volksdeutsche: Die Rolle des Mennonitentums in der nationalsozialistischen Propaganda,” trans. Helmut Foth, *Memnonitische Geschichtsblätter* 71 (2014), 54-70; Gerhard Rempel, “Heinrich Hajo Schroeder: The Allure of Race and Space in Hitler’s Empire,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 29 (2011), 227-254.

blood purity. "The marriage regulations and the relatively long isolationism of our demographic group," Kauenhowen wrote, "induced us at an early date to engage questions of eugenics." Mennonite communities across the world, whether in various parts of Germany or abroad, in the Soviet Union, Canada, or Latin America, he claimed, had always concerned themselves with what Nazi ideologues termed "blood and soil." Given Mennonites' long history of endogamous marriage as well as their historically high rate of mobility, Kauenhowen theorized that there could be few other groups that had "spread across so many areas of settlement in the Old and New Worlds" while simultaneously retaining "such prodigious purity of race and loyalty to the hereditary transmission of blood." For Kauenhowen, that is, Mennonites were not hangers on of a swiftly advancing Nazi science. He believed that, in many ways, they had anticipated and even perfected Hitler's project long before the *Führer* himself had come to power. Admittedly, Mennonite researchers had only begun to adopt modern genealogical approaches in the late 1920s and early 1930s, a shift clearly paralleling the rise of scientific racism and pan-German expansionism as expressed by the Nazi Party and other far right groups. But it was Mennonites' longer history of internal marriage, in Kauenhowen's view, that had allowed these more recent developments to "fall on especially fertile ground among our demographic circles."<sup>10</sup>

Such assertions, of course, were nothing new. By the last years of the Second World War, genealogists like Kauenhowen could draw on more than a decade of biological and anthropological research conducted by Nazi and pro-Nazi researchers on Mennonite populations across Brazil, Canada, the Free City of Danzig, Germany, Paraguay, Poland, and Ukraine. While the studies conducted by these scholars differed in scope and detail, they found a surprising degree of agreement on one major point: Mennonites were more Aryan than the average German.<sup>11</sup> Mennonites were ostensibly protected from foreign blood by their conservative religious insularity; their tendency to live in closed, agrarian colonies was alleged to have preserved the integrity of their original Aryan bloodlines wherever they settled, whether on the Ukrainian steppes, the prairielands of Canada and the American Midwest, the deserts of Mexico, or the jungles of south Brazil. Even among one group of 1,271 Mennonite refugees from Siberia and other parts of the Soviet Union, analyzed in 1930 by the Kiel Anthropological Institute (*Kieler*

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10. Kauenhowen, "Zehn Jahre Sippenforschung."

11. Much of this material—to appear in independent monographs or academic series such as "Deutsche Rassenkunde" and "Sammlung Georg Leibbrandt," as well as Nazi-era periodicals like *Odal: Monatsschrift für Blut und Boden, Volk und Rasse*, *Der Deutsche im Osten*, and *Rasse*—was reviewed or excerpted in *Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes Danziger Mennoniten-Familien*.

*Anthropologische Institut*) and Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics (*Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik*), scientists claimed to discover a "heredity quotient" over 98 percent.<sup>12</sup> Studies of Mennonite noses, ears, and foreheads revealed them to be shapely; their hair was admirably fair; and in the opinion of one researcher, Mennonites were the tallest racial group outside Scandinavia.<sup>13</sup>

Kurt Kauenhowen's account of Mennonite genealogy—written at the height of Nazi racial barbarity, at a moment when Hitler's armies controlled the great majority of the continent and when the mechanized murder of European Jewry was in full swing—contained a strange mix of fact and fabrication. The genealogist's assertion that Mennonites had always espoused an ideology of "blood and soil," for example, or that their historic marriage restrictions had anything in common with Nazi race policies, were little more than fantasy. While some commentators had begun to

associate Mennonitism with increasingly racialized concepts like whiteness and Germanness already in the nineteenth century, it was not until the interwar period that such associations became explicitly integrated into discussions of racial hygiene and eugenics. And yet, the



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Mennonite men from the Danzig area, tested by the racial anthropologist Otto Aichel in 1931. Image: Friedrich Keiter, *Rußlanddeutsche Bauern und ihre Stammesgenossen in Deutschland* (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1934), Tafel III.

12. Friedrich Keiter, *Rußlanddeutsche Bauern und ihre Stammesgenossen in Deutschland* (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1934), 31. See also Jakob Stach, "Zur Einführung der Sammlung," in Christian Kugler, *Großliebental* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1939), viii.

13. Heinrich Schröder, *Russlanddeutsche Friesen* (Julius Beltz: Langenfalza, 1936), 25.

shocking disparity between Kauenhowen's interpretation and the diverse realities of Mennonite life in hundreds of locations over hundreds of years reveals a deeper truth: namely, Kauenhowen's own desire to link the world outlooks of his ancestors and fellow clansmen to the collectivist goals of the Nazi state. In this sense, the editor's characterization of Mennonite genealogy was entirely correct. Like Kauenhowen, a majority of practitioners in the Third Reich probably did consider it among the highest goals of their craft to align their family research with the "great racial, demographic, and national-political goals of our Reich."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, since the racial laws of the 1930s had transformed genealogy into a kind of professional necessity for German citizens, it would have been virtually impossible to disassociate the practice from Nazi totalitarianism.

Assessing the exact size and influence of the Third Reich's Mennonite genealogical community is difficult. By 1943, *Reports from the Genealogical Association of the Danzig Mennonite Families* had barely 300 subscribers, a number exceeded only slightly by its bimonthly print run of 500. For a prewar population of 13,000 Mennonites—let alone a wartime population of 120,000 (virtually all European Mennonites, with the exception of those in Switzerland, had come under Nazi rule by 1941)—these are miniscule numbers. Add to this the fact that many of the earliest and loudest proponents of Mennonite genealogy were not themselves believing Christians; several of the journal's most prominent contributors, including Kauenhowen himself, considered themselves Mennonite by blood only and not by religion—a reality that in turn raises questions about the relative views and participation of the confession's more pious members. Nevertheless, *Reports* was far from marginal. If its subscriber list was small, the names it contained represented an impressive who's who of the country's Mennonite community. Among the periodical's most recognizable recipients were Abraham Braun, secretary of the Union of German Mennonite Congregations (*Vereinigung der Deutschen*

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14. Kauenhowen, "Zehn Jahre Sippenforschung." On the Holocaust, Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008); Götz Aly, *"Final Solution": Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews* (London: Arnold, 1999); Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). On the role of science in the Holocaust, Paul Weindling, *Epidemics and Genocide in Eastern Europe, 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Detlev Peukert, "The Genesis of the Final Solution from the Spirit of Science," in *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945*, ed. David F. Crew (New York: Psychology Press, 1994); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989). On Mennonites and Jews in the Third Reich, see Helmut Foth, "Juden, Täufer, Mennoniten: Ein Überblick über ihre 500 Jahre währende Beziehungsgeschichte," *Mennonitischer Geschichtsblätter* 70 (2013), 23-54; Diether Götz Lichdi, "Minderheiten, die sich lange fremd bleiben: Mennoniten und Juden in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus," in *Freikirchen und Juden im "Dritten Reich,"* ed. Daniel Heinz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 65-76; Gerhard Rempel, "Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetration," *MQR* 84 (Oct. 2010), 507-549.

*Mennonitengemeinden*); Benjamin Unruh, a paid M.C.C. representative until 1941 and the Russian Mennonites' official representative to the Nazi government; Berlin pastor Horst Quiring; the Russian émigré and Nazi propagandist Heinrich Schröder; and Hans Harder, the novelist.<sup>15</sup>

Well beyond the circulation of its newsletter, the Genealogical Association of the Danzig Mennonite Families and its activities were well integrated into the broader patterns of Mennonite life in Nazi Germany. Genealogy was in many ways a decentralized activity, often understood as the provenance of individual families and "clans." *Reports* had initially emerged as a periodical for people bearing the names Epp, Zimmermann, and Kauenhowen, although it later expanded to provide information on all Mennonites with connections to the Danzig region, Germany's densest area of Mennonite population. Within its first seven years, *Reports* had carried full articles on the families Atzinger, Conwentz, van Dühren, Doß, Entz, Epp, Grabowski, Harder, van Hoek, Kauenhowen, Kaunhowen, Kouwenhoven, Kliewer, Loewens, Momber, Springer, von Steen, Sudermann, Tiessen, de Veer, Wiebe, Wiehler, and Zimmermann, in addition to discussing, in less detail, over 250 other family names. Among the association's main initiatives was the sponsorship of smaller "Family Associations," responsible for researching and publishing their own histories as well as organizing regular family reunions. Family associations particularly active in northern Germany included those for the Epp, Kauenhowen, Loewens, Regier, and Zimmermann clans, while leaders such as Christian Hege, historian and co-founder of the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (*Mennonitisches Lexikon*), established analogous groups in other parts of the country.<sup>16</sup> A photograph from one 1938 gathering, held by the genealogical society of the van Bergen family, shows more than 200 attendees—indicating that the total number of Mennonites involved in formal genealogical organizations, whether members or not, may have been quite large.<sup>17</sup>

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15. New subscriptions were reported in select issues for 1942 and 1943. If a full list of subscribers containing professions and postal addresses could be located, it would provide a valuable, if partial, window onto Mennonite involvement in the Nazi wartime economy, including military posts and SS membership.

16. See Christian Hege, *Chronik der Familie Hege* (Frankfurt am Main, 1937). For a partial register of ancestry lists and family chronicles taken from the Prussian east at the end of the Second World War, Gustav E. Reimer "Rescued Documents Relating to the History and Genealogy of the Mennonites of Former West Prussia," *MQR* 23 (Apr. 1949), 99-104. A larger overview of Mennonite genealogical activities during the Third Reich along with a postwar outlook can be found in Kurt Kauenhoven, "Mennonitische Familienforschung," *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch* 4 (1951): 28-33.

17. Horst Gerlach, *Bildband zur Geschichte der Mennoniten* (Preusschoff, 1980), 52.

At the national level, Mennonite conference business was deeply intertwined with genealogical activity. As the only Mennonite periodical in Germany to continue publication after 1941, *Reports*, at least during the war years, began to take on the characteristics of an official church organ, providing a space for church leaders in various geographic areas to communicate with each other as well as with audiences far larger than could be reached by personal letters. Emil Händiges, an Elbing pastor and chairman of the Union of German Mennonite Congregations, as well as Ernst Crous, its vice chairman, both attended and spoke at events held by the Genealogical Association. Sometimes these meetings were cosponsored by the Mennonite Union—which also supported a Consortium for Mennonite Genealogy (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft für mennonitische Sippenkunde*), headed by elder Ernst Regehr of Tiegenhof—or by the influential regional Conference of East and West Prussian Mennonite Congregations (*Konferenz der Ost- und Westpreussischen Mennoniten-Gemeinden*), likewise host to a Committee for Historical and Family Research (*Ausschuss für Geschichts und Familienforschung*).<sup>18</sup> From these organizations' perspective, genealogical associations performed valuable work. Most importantly, they archived and catalogued large volumes of Mennonite ancestral information, a process often coordinated with official genealogical bureaus, including the Interior Ministry's Reich Genealogical Office (*Reichssippenamt*) and the N.S.D.A.P.'s Racial-Political Office, as well as the various provincial genealogical offices (*Gausippenämpter*), collectively responsible for determining whom to count as Jewish versus Aryan and how to regulate interracial relations.<sup>19</sup>

As a means of ensuring the collective Aryanness of Germany's Mennonite community, genealogical research was extremely effective. Individual members, obligated to fill out "racial passports," were often able to do so with the help of church archivists or other local genealogists. At least one congregations met to fill out race forms as an official church activity.<sup>20</sup> As one participant observed at the meeting of a group of ministers in southern Germany, "Until now, a Mennonite was considered Aryan without question. A single case would ruin our reputation."<sup>21</sup> For

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18. "Arbeitsgemeinschaft für mennonitische Sippenkunde," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 2 (1937), 63-64.

19. The SS Race and Settlement Main Office (*Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt-SS*), German Foreign Institute (*Deutsches Ausland-Institut*), and Provincial Genealogical Office of Danzig-West Prussia (*Gausippenamt Danzig-Westpreußen*) all subscribed to *Reports*.

20. Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: Inter-marriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 311.

21. Quoted in Foth, "Juden, Täufer, Mennoniten," 42. See also Anna Andres, "Die Verkartung der Kirchenbücher im Marienburger und Danziger Werder und ihre Bedeutung für die mennonitische Sippenforschung," *Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes Danziger Mennoniten-Familien* 8 (Oct./Nov. 1942), 126-127.

most people, a few generations' worth of information from congregational record books—which Nazi race offices recognized as authoritative sources on heredity—served as sufficient proof of Aryanness. But for some, especially those in military, bureaucratic, and other highly-visible positions, blood purity had to be demonstrated in even the furthest reaches of the family tree. Mennonites wishing to join the SS officer corps, for example, had to prove that they had no Jewish ancestors since at least 1750. Many of these family researchers turned to Germany's largest archives of Mennonite genealogical material. One fond, held by the Danzig Society for Family Research (*Danziger Gesellschaft für Familienforschung*), boasted a card catalog with more than 2,400 entries, provided by supporters from around the country, as well as data scoured from congregational birth, marriage, and baptismal registries. "It would not be claiming too much," Gustav Reimer, a deacon in the large Heubuden congregation and the main curator of this material, wrote in 1942, "to say that none of the men from our circles who today hold leading positions in the economy or politics could have provided the necessary proof of Aryan ancestry without my assistance."<sup>22</sup>

For genealogists like Reimer, the ability to help others prove their Aryan identity constituted a kind of altruistic public service. Seen as an ability to simultaneously serve the German race and their fellow clan members, this transaction—the symbolic induction of individual Mennonites into the "German racial community"—stood at the heart of genealogical activism in the Third Reich. Family researchers did not consider this service limited merely to those Mennonites living in Germany, however, but also sought to position themselves as the racial arbiters and benefactors of much larger populations of Mennonites living across the entire world. According to one promotional pamphlet for the *Reports*, Mennonites whose ancestors had once lived in Germany now formed a global diaspora that "belongs to the vanguard of Germandom in the Old and New World and to the most geographically expansive German clans overall." One of the periodical's stated goals was to "cultivate relationships with the clan members living abroad and to strengthen all members' feeling of solidarity and connectedness with the monumental fate of all Germans."<sup>23</sup> Among the primary motivations

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22. Gustav Reimer, "Fritz van Bergen-Kartei," *Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes Danziger Mennoniten-Familien* 8 (Oct./Nov. 1942), 128-130. See also Gustav Reimer, "Die Kirchenbücher der Menno. Gemeinden in West- und Ostpreussen," *Der Berg* 7 (1940), 83.

23. Kurt Kauenhowen, *Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes Danziger Mennoniten-Familien* (1941). Mennonite genealogists in Germany cultivated contacts abroad, sometimes printing letters from interested clan members in their periodicals or publishing in Mennonite newspapers outside the Third Reich. For example, Heinrich H. Schröder, "Suche Deine Ahnen!" *Mennonitische Volkswarte* 2 (Oct. 1936), 322-324.

behind such assertions was the belief that after the war, large populations of German-speaking Mennonites from the Soviet Union and the Americas would voluntarily repatriate to Germany. Once in their “old homeland,” these Mennonites would be required to provide proof of their Aryan ancestry, a task that local genealogists were more than prepared to assist. Influenced especially by the repatriation, beginning in 1939, of hundreds of thousands of German speakers from various parts of Eastern Europe to Nazi-occupied Poland, Mennonite family researchers increasingly turned their attention to relatives abroad.<sup>24</sup>

In 1943 and 1944, this movement took on new urgency when a large population of Mennonites from Eastern Europe in fact resettled in or near the old Reich. Having come under Nazi occupation during the German invasion of Ukraine, 35,000 Mennonites—including a disproportionate number of women and children, but also a substantial number of draft-aged men serving in “self-defense” units and cavalry squadrons organized by the SS—now evacuated westward with Hitler’s retreating armies. In the face of the advancing Bolshevik forces, these Mennonites feared a return to communist rule, preferring orderly resettlement and racial privileges in Germany and occupied Poland. “In the course of events, namely the liberation of Ukraine by German troops and the repatriation of Russian-German Mennonites to the Great German Reich,” one genealogist assessed, “the task of our research has expanded so that, if possible, we must produce comprehensive ancestral lists from today back to the first emigrants [to Russia].”<sup>25</sup> Following such calls, the Consortium for Mennonite Genealogy produced a list of more than 2,000 Mennonite families who had emigrated from the Danzig area to south

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24. On the repatriation of “ethnic Germans” from Eastern Europe, Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Robert L. Koehl, *RKFDV: German Resettlement and Population Policy 1939-1945: A History of the Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germandom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957); Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003); Isabel Heinemann, “*Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut*:” *Das Rasse- & Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003).

25. Franz Harder, “Die Auswanderungsforschung der westpreußischen Mennoniten: Ein Bericht abgestattet auf der sippenkundlichen Tagung der westpr. Mennoniten in Marienburg am 25. September 1942,” *Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes Danziger Mennoniten-Familien* 8 (Oct./Nov. 1942), 131-134. On Mennonite “resettlers” from Ukraine, Jacob A. Neufeld, *Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 235-344; Frank Epp, *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona, Man.: Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council, 1962), 351-390; Marlene Epp, “Moving Forward, Looking Backward: The ‘Great Trek’ from the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (1998), 59-75; Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 42-51; Gerhard Fast, *Das Ende von Chortitza* (Winnipeg: Regehr’s Printing, 1973), 99-147.

Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while other researchers began work on detailed source books to be published through the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (*Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete*).<sup>26</sup> When the immigrants from Ukraine eventually arrived in Danzig-West Prussia, the new Nazi province of Wartheland, and other areas, local genealogists received them with open arms. "We know that you have loyally protected your racial integrity in the Black Sea region," Kurt Kauenhowen wrote, "so that through your industry and your generosity you can now gift it anew to the German race."<sup>27</sup> Had there been a different outcome to the war, these migrants from Ukraine may well have become integrated into Nazi Germany's Mennonite genealogical community. With Hitler's fall in the spring of 1945, however, it would be a different set of ancestry experts who would help determine their fate.

### M.C.C. AND THE POSTWAR REFUGEE CRISIS

In January 1947, Orie O. Miller, executive secretary of Mennonite Central Committee, and William T. Snyder, director of its Mennonite Aid Section, dispatched a long letter of request to Herbert Emerson, director of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees.<sup>28</sup> This organization, which had been created by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938, was responsible for overseeing and regulating the movements of millions of European refugees. Miller and Snyder's request was simple. They anticipated that in a few days, a large steamship known as the *Volendam* would begin a voyage from Bremen, Germany, to Buenos Aires, Argentina, carrying some 2,300 Mennonite refugees on board. Most of these migrants had been born in Tsarist Russia or Bolshevik Ukraine, where they had lived until

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26. The end of the war prevented much of this work from being published, although some eventually appeared in Benjamin H. Unruh, *Die niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 17., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1955).

27. Kurt Kauenhowen, "Was will der Sippenverband Danziger Mennoniten-Familien: Ein Grußwort an unsere Umsiedler," *Nachrichtenblatt des Sippenverbandes Danziger Mennoniten-Familien* 9 (June 1944), 26-28.

28. Orie O. Miller and William T. Snyder, to Herbert Emerson, Jan. 20, 1947, AJ/43/31, Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, France, hereafter "AN." On M.C.C., John C. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and its Service, 1920-1951* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1952); *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia, 2011). On M.C.C.'s rescue operations, see Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up from the Rubble: The Epic Rescue of Thousands of War-Ravaged Mennonite Refugees* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1991); Herbert Klassen and Maureen Klassen, *Ambassador to his People: C.F. Klassen and the Russian Mennonite Refugees* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1990); T.D. Regehr, "Anatomy of a Mennonite Miracle: The Berlin Rescue of 30-31 January 1947," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 9 (1991), 11-33. For personal accounts, see Harry Loewen, *Road to Freedom: Mennonites Escape the Land of Suffering* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2000).

coming under German occupation in 1941. In the last years of the war, they had traveled westward with the retreating *Wehrmacht*, and now, hoping to avoid repatriation to the U.S.S.R., were seeking transatlantic passage to Paraguay. Would the committee on refugees, Miller and Snyder wondered, be willing to finance this voyage? The organization's mandate after all, was to support the movement of displaced persons back to their old homelands or to new places of residence, either in Europe or overseas. In the case of the Mennonites, however, there was a major complicating factor: the question of their ethnic origin. Committee personnel followed guidelines established by the newly-formed United Nations, which excluded from refugee assistance anyone of German national background who had directly aided or voluntarily received assistance from the Nazi state. If the more than 15,000 Mennonite refugees from Eastern Europe now housed in the Allied zones of occupation were found to be German, they would be ineligible for aid.<sup>29</sup>

Seeking to inoculate against this possibility, Miller and Snyder offered a counter interpretation: the Mennonite refugees were not ethnically German at all, but a unique group with origins in the Reformation-era Netherlands. It would be better to categorize them as "Mennonite" or as "Dutch" than as German. As the M.C.C. administrators began their thirteen-page documentary appendix to this letter, "Mennonite historians in the past and present have consistently held that the Mennonites who settled first in Polish Prussia and Germany and who later migrated to the Ukraine were of Dutch origin." Over the following pages, they further argued that these Mennonites and their descendants "were not absorbed by nor did they become an ethnical part of any country in which they resisted after leaving Holland." Specific points of evidence included the fact that the Polish and Russian governments had granted their Mennonite subjects special charters not offered to other German speakers; the allegedly Dutch agricultural methods employed by Mennonite farmers along the Baltic coast and the Black Sea; and the longstanding relationship between Mennonites in the Netherlands with their coreligionists in

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29. See "Constitution of the International Refugee Organization," in *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America, 1776-1949*, vol. 4, ed. Charles I. Bevans (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), 300. On this organization, Louise W. Holborn, *The International Refugee Organization: A Specialized Agency of the United Nations, Its History and Work, 1946-1952* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1956). On the political context of refugee migration after the Second World War, Gerard Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Roger Brubaker, "Migrations of Ethnic Unmixing in the New Europe," *International Migration Review* 32 (Winter 1998), 1047-1065. On "ethnic German" migration, see Pascal Maeder, *Forging a New Heimat: Expellees in Post-War West Germany and Canada* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2011).

Eastern Europe. The authors' prize piece of evidence was a statistical analysis of Mennonite surnames. "The names of the refugees and their forefathers," they wrote, "reflects that their origin is Dutch." According to M.C.C. files cataloguing some 8,578 refugees in the American and British Occupied Zones of Germany, more than half were derived from twenty-two common Dutch family names, while the vast majority of the remaining 40-odd percent were also believed to be of Dutch origin.<sup>30</sup>

Readers will immediately note a similarity between wartime efforts to categorize these same refugees as German and M.C.C.'s bid to brand them as Dutch. This was no coincidence. Postwar debates about the ethnic composition of groups like the Mennonites did not arise out of thin air; they rather reflected a longer history of racial categorization before and during the Third Reich, including the efforts of Adolf Hitler and his functionaries to reorganize the European continent during the Second World War on an ethnic basis. Along with legions of tanks, airplanes, and machine guns, Nazi ethnologists and anthropologists had marched off to the Eastern and Western fronts. There they had spent the war sorting vast subject populations into various racial categories. Those who received favorable designations—including the vast majority of Mennonites and other German-speakers in Nazi-occupied Poland, Ukraine, and elsewhere—were given generous access to food, clothing, and other benefits, while at the same time, millions of those placed in less desirable categories, like "Russian," "Polish," or "Jewish," were subjected to persecution, forced labor, and mass murder. In the wake of the Holocaust and other Nazi terrors, administrators of the United Nations and its subsidiary agencies considered it only just to provide international assistance first and foremost to those groups who had suffered most egregiously under Nazi rule. In an era when certain political proclivities like fascism and militarism were often ascribed to entire national communities, anyone considered to be of German descent was considered party to war guilt.

Determining how to distribute humanitarian aid, therefore, required a complex assessment of the ethnic background of potential recipients' as

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30. Miller and Snyder to Emerson, Jan. 20, 1947. On Mennonite refugees and the question of Dutch nationality, see T. D. Regehr, "Of Dutch or German Ancestry? Mennonite Refugees, M.C.C., and the International Refugee Organization," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (1995), 7-25; Abraham Friesen, *In Defense of Privilege: Russian Mennonites and the State Before and during World War I* (Winnipeg: Kindred Publications, 2006), 328-335; Steven Schroeder, "Mennonite-Nazi Collaboration and Coming to Terms with the Past: European Mennonites and the M.C.C., 1945-1950," *Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 2 (2003), 6-16; Gerlof D. Homan, "'We Have Come to Love Them': Russian Mennonite Refugees in the Netherlands, 1945-1947," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 25 (2007), 39-59; Horst Klaassen, "Nationalität: Mennonit? Mennonitische Auswanderungslager in Backnang 1947 bis 1953," *Mennonitischer Geschichtsblätter* (1997), 89-115.

well as their personal conduct during the war. In this context, M.C.C. officials sought to demonstrate their coreligionists' eligibility for external travel funding, as well as for other humanitarian services. From M.C.C.'s perspective, this was a matter of immense urgency. According to agreements made at the Yalta Conference in 1945, former Soviet citizens, including most Mennonite refugees, were subject to forced repatriation to the Soviet Union. Of the 35,000 Mennonites to arrive in Central Europe with Hitler's retreating armies, nearly half had already been rounded up by Soviet agents.<sup>31</sup> Only by leaving the European continent, M.C.C. believed, could those remaining be saved from a return to the "Red Paradise," including years of hard labor in Stalin's gulags. Regarding the question of Nazi collaboration, M.C.C. denied this charge categorically. The organization insisted that its wards were members of a global peace church who had found "the German occupation of the Ukraine as abhorrent as the rule of Communistic Russia."<sup>32</sup> Based on statements provided by M.C.C., the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees was inclined to accept this interpretation. Although the vast majority of Mennonite refugees had received significant privileges under National Socialism, and despite the fact that virtually all adult males had fought in Nazi military units during the war, the committee's American resident representative determined that the refugees were fundamentally "an un-Nazi and un-nationalistic group."<sup>33</sup> Another memo concluded: "the majority of those [Mennonites] who found themselves in Germany at the end of the war had not come voluntarily to that country. They were deported alongside other Russians to be used as slave labourers."<sup>34</sup> Most Mennonite resettlers from Ukraine had indeed faced conscription or work in manufacturing or agricultural capacities, but on average they had been treated vastly better than the millions of forced laborers in Hitler's wartime empire.

As for their ethnic composition, M.C.C. was adamant that its charges were under no circumstances to be considered German. Proving this assertion required a strange reversal of Nazi race logic. Rather than demonstrating that the Mennonites had always been part of the German race, as Nazi anthropologists had argued during the war, M.C.C. insisted that they had remained a separate, distinct ethnic group. Particularly at issue was the Nazi term "*Volksdeutsche*," usually translated into English as

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31. Benjamin Unruh to Abraham Braun, Nov. 16, 1945, Nachlaß Benjamin Unruh, box 4, folder 21, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Bolanden-Weierhof.

32. Mennonite Central Committee, "Memorandum on the Mennonite Refugees from South Russia," April 6, 1948, AJ/43/572, folder: Political Dissidents – Mennonites, AN.

33. Martha H. Biehle to Herbert W. Emerson, Aug. 9, 1946, AJ/43/31, AN.

34. Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, "Memorandum: Mennonite Refugees from Soviet Russia," AJ/43/49, AN.

“racial German” or “ethnic German.”<sup>35</sup> The Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees and other postwar refugee organizations adopted this phrase for their own purposes, explicitly excluding “ethnic Germans” from aid—and thus forcing Mennonite applicants to defend their eligibility in terms of “ethnicity.” During the war, most of Eastern Europe’s Mennonites had in fact been legally categorized as “ethnic Germans,” a status that entitled them to a wide variety of protections and rights until they formally received German citizenship, which typically occurred in occupied Poland in 1944. Initially receiving “German” or “ethnic German” status required a complex process of corporate and personal examination. Individuals wishing to receive this designation were most likely to succeed if they spoke German and had some knowledge of German folkways and political culture. Often, they had to fill out genealogical forms and were sometimes subject to blood tests, X-rays, and other anthropometric studies. Aryan status was especially easy to achieve if an individual could demonstrate his or her membership in a longstanding German-speaking community, such as the large Mennonite colonies of southeastern Ukraine. Following decades of scholarship by both Mennonite and non-Mennonite researchers in Germany presenting these communities as quintessentially German, most members in Eastern Europe had little trouble acquiring recognition as Aryans. Some Mennonite leaders even complained about the “*Volksdeutschen*” who weren’t Germans before, but who now have looked so long in their ancestry that they have uncovered a grandfather or great-grandmother of German heritage and in no time become ‘Germans’ in order to receive better lodging and care.”<sup>36</sup>

Just a few short years later, some of these same individuals proved valuable in buttressing M.C.C.’s narrative. That a number of Mennonite refugees spoke minimal German and appeared to have little German heritage yet had nevertheless received “German” or “ethnic German” status in the Third Reich seemed to demonstrate that ethnicity and citizenship eligibility were not synonymous. M.C.C.’s most persuasive testimony on this account came from a refugee named Serej Tratschow,

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35. See Doris L. Bergen, “The Nazi Concept of ‘*Volksdeutsche*’ and the Exacerbation of Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, 1939-45,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 29 (1994), 569-582.

36. Heinrich Hamm, “Die Umsiedlung der *Volksdeutschen* aus Dnjepropetrowsk im September 1943,” *Nachrichtenblatt des Sippenverbandes Danziger Mennoniten-Familien* 8 (Dec. 1943), 3-4. On the relationship between genocide and welfare in Nazi-occupied Europe, Götz Aly, *Hitler’s Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007); Hermann Kaienburg, *Die Wirtschaft der SS* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2003); Christopher R. Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

who submitted his statement in Russian. "In February 1944," Tratschow wrote,

[Nazi officials] began systematically to make Germans out of us. We were being photographed, medically examined, and then we had to fill out various questionnaires, the contents of which we could not know. After all these various procedures we were told that we were now Germans. Even I, who am a Mennonite but not of Dutch descent, since I am a Russian by birth, was forced to be a German whether I wanted to accept this or not.<sup>37</sup>

Based on such reports, M.C.C. made its case: "It would be a mistake to classify our people as 'Volksdeutsche.'" C.F. Klassen, M.C.C.'s European commissioner for refugee aid and resettlement, who had been authorized to speak authoritatively on behalf of the organization, argued that the vast majority of Mennonite refugees had registered as German nationals solely in "in order to save their lives." This was done "exclusively and only," he wrote, "in order that they might protect themselves from the Bolshevik agents who are active everywhere."<sup>38</sup> At M.C.C.'s invitation, a number of refugee men provided written testimony that they had joined the trek westward only on pain of death, or that they had settled on farmland confiscated from Poles or Jews under duress.

Such statements differed radically from wartime reports, including some made by the very same people. Heinrich Hamm, for example, a Mennonite leader from Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, had welcomed his resettlement in 1943 to a formerly Jewish summer camp in occupied Poland and praised the welfare benefits that he and other Mennonites had been provided by Heinrich Himmler's Ethnic German Office (*Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*), a subsidiary of the SS. "Immediately upon arrival," Hamm reported,

every family received ample cooking appliances and three blankets per person. There are also four hospitals, multiple schools, BDM [League of German Girls (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*), a Nazi girls association], barracks, retirement homes, kindergartens, book stores, cinema, etc. The provisions are good....The majority is happy and content and thanks the *Führer* and his men that we were not allowed to fall into the hands of the Bolsheviks.... We know what it means in times such as these, when whole divisions of the German army

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37. Translated in "Statements Given by Mennonite Refugees Concerning Their 'Eindeutschung' and Stay in Poland (Warthegau)," AJ/43/572, folder: Political Dissidents – Mennonites, AN.

38. C.F. Klassen, "Statement Concerning Mennonite Refugees," AJ/43/572, folder: Political Dissidents – Mennonites, AN.

withdraw in order to help save the *Volksdeutsche* and bring us back to the country of our forefathers.<sup>39</sup>

Four years later, Hamm sang a different tune. "It is quite an erroneous idea," he wrote on M.C.C.'s behalf,

to think that all Mennonites were brought to Poland to be settled on farms. I and my family came to a camp Preussisch-Stargard in the Danzig area. Immediately representatives of various works and concerns came to fetch cheap labour... There was no difference in the way these various national groups were treated.<sup>40</sup>

Supplied with such assurances, the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees was willing to give M.C.C. the benefit of the doubt. All that remained was to demonstrate that the majority of the Mennonite refugees were not of German ethnicity. To this end, Director Emerson of the committee on refugees established a three-person task force to study the migrants' cultural background. The members of this commission were H. M. L. H. Sark, Dutch resident representative of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees; Eeltjo Aldegondus van Beresteyn, chairman of the Central Genealogical Bureau (*Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie*), the Netherlands' official genealogical institute, located in The Hague; and Johanna Hogerzeil of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees' London headquarters. Although the first shipment of refugees had already departed for Latin America, M.C.C. supplied the commission with a complete list of the passengers' names—allegedly the clearest proof of their Dutch origin. Anticipating that "there may be in Holland evidence obtainable from historical or ecclesiastical sources, which would support the cases in addition to the fact of the family name," the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees investigators chose to operate primarily on Dutch soil.<sup>41</sup> There, they consulted a number of experts in Dutch and Russian church history, working especially closely with Jan Petrus Benjamin de Josselin de Jong, a well-known anthropologist and ethnologist associated with the Central Genealogical Bureau, who opened the institute's archives and offered judgment in cases of particular ambiguity.

The most significant evidence, however, proved to be genealogical sources compiled by Mennonite family researchers during the Third Reich. Indeed, one of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees' earliest contacts with regard to the issue of the refugees' Dutch origin was the church leader and genealogist Benjamin Unruh, who during the war

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39. Hamm, "Die Umsiedlung der Volksdeutschen."

40. Translated in Klassen, "Statement Concerning Mennonite Refugees."

41. R. Innes to H. M. L. H. Sark, Feb. 7, 1947, AJ/43/49, AN.

had served as the Nazi government's foremost consultant on Mennonites. "The Mennonites of *Russia*," he informed Johana Hogerzeil through a friend, "were overwhelmingly of Dutch-Low German heritage. At least 70 percent of them were Frisians (mostly East Frisians) and Flemish."<sup>42</sup> Receiving similar assurances from M.C.C.'s Amsterdam office, the three-member refugee commission quickly concluded that the

only reliable historical evidence in existence regarding the question of the Dutch origin of the Russian Mennonites can be found in regard to the Mennonite settlers in Danzig. As the Russian Mennonites are chiefly descendants of the Mennonite settlers in Danzig, all evidence of Dutch origin of the Danzig Mennonites can also be used for the Russian Mennonites.<sup>43</sup>

Chief among this material was a 1940 dissertation—written by the Mennonite scholar and Nazi Party member Horst Penner and published by the German Mennonite Historical Society (*Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein*)—entitled *Settlement of Dutch Mennonites in the Vistula Delta Area from the Middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the Beginning of the Prussian Period (Ansiedlung mennonitischer Niederländer im Weichselniederungsgebiet von der Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts bis zum Beginn der preußischen Zeit)*.<sup>44</sup>

Horst Penner's book contained several detailed lists of Mennonites living in the Danzig area prior to the first migrations to the Russian Empire, including a registry compiled at the order of King Frederick William II, as well as the records of Mennonite farmers who owned land in the Vistula Delta between 1727 and 1772. Because many of these entries included descriptions like "five German farmers," or "two non-Mennonites," the refugee task force believed them to give a relatively clear picture of early modern Mennonites' ethnic composition. Just as M.C.C. had claimed, these eighteenth-century Anabaptists appeared to constitute a closed, non-German group. Such an interpretation, in the commission's estimation, took on particular weight because Penner, "a German national-socialist, had no interest in marking these people as a specific Dutch minority within the German Reich."<sup>45</sup> In fact, this could not have been further from the truth. Following Germany's invasion of the Netherlands in 1940, racist scholars in both countries had begun to integrate Dutch history into their larger narratives about German and

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42. Benjamin H. Unruh to Fritz Lieb, Feb. 5, 1947, AJ/43/49, AN.

43. "Emigration of Russian Mennonite Refugees from Holland and Germany to Paraguay," AJ/43/31, AN.

44. Horst Penner, *Ansiedlung mennonitischer Niederländer im Weichselniederungsgebiet von der Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts bis zum Beginn der preußischen Zeit* (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1940). The commission first received a copy of this book from M.C.C.'s Amsterdam office.—Johanna Hogerzeil to T. O. Hylkema, March 4, 1947, AJ/43/49, AN.

45. Intergovernmental Commission on Refugees, "Dutch origin of the Russian Mennonites who have lately emigrated to Paraguay," March 1947, AJ/43/31, AN.

Aryan racial superiority. Among the most prominent advocates of this project was the Nazi historian Erich Keyser, none other than Horst Penner's dissertation adviser. Sponsored by the Research Center for West Prussian Regional History (*Forschungsstelle für westpreußische Landesgeschichte*), Keyser had especially sought to enlist Mennonite support in this effort. In one 1942 talk, entitled "The Research of the Historical Relationship Between the Netherlands and the Vistula Delta with Special Consideration of the West Prussian Mennonites," he encouraged members of the Genealogical Association of the Danzig Mennonite Families to provide sources illuminating their own Dutch ancestry, as well as the Dutch origins of those who had emigrated "from the Vistula Delta to Ukraine."<sup>46</sup>

If Keyser and Penner had categorized early Mennonite migrants as Dutch members of a larger Germanic family, members of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees task force now saw the descendants of these Mennonites as fundamentally non-German. Developing a system eerily similar to Nazi-era racial matrices, the commission created four separate categories for identifying Mennonites with various ethnic backgrounds. Into Category I, "prima facie of Dutch origin," they sorted 1,444 people. Based on the information provided in the *Volendam's* passenger list, all of these individuals held "genuine Dutch names" that could still be found in the present-day Netherlands. Category II, with 474 entries, comprised "East-Frisians and others who are evidently of Dutch origin on historical grounds"; that is, those whose names had once been prima facie Dutch but over the centuries had become Germanized. Category III listed 230 persons thought to be of clearly "German ethnic origin," while the final 161 names were grouped under Category IV, "Persons of whom it is certain that they are neither Dutch nor of German ethnic origin." Several of these individuals were thought to be of French or Italian provenance and were thus ascribed to the Swiss Brethren movement. In its conclusion, the commission determined that of the 2,309 Mennonites to sail with the *Volendam*, 1,918 were "undoubtedly

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46. "Niederlande – Weichselland – Osteuropa," *Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes Danziger Mennoniten-Familien* 8 (Oct./Nov. 1942), 121-126. On Keyser, see Alexander Pinwinkler, "Volk, Bevölkerung, Rasse, and Raum: Erich Keyser's Ambiguous Concept of a German History of Population, ca. 1918-1955," in *German Scholars and Ethnic Cleansing 1920-1945*, ed. Ingo Haar and Michael Fahlbusch (New York: Berghahn Books 2005), 86-99. Nazi-era research on Dutch contributions in Eastern Europe appeared in journals like *Volksche Wacht*, *Sibbe*, *Hamer*, *Ewiges Volk*, and Keyser's edited *Die Niederlande und der deutsche Osten*. See also A. Hulshof, *Tentoonstelling van Kaarten, Boeken Plaatwerken Nederland-Danzig, 15 April-15 Mei 1942* (Utrecht: Drukkerij J. van Boekhoven, 1942). Some Mennonites in the Netherlands were actively involved in this movement. See Johan Sjouke Postma's bibliography: "Bibliographie van Mennonitica," *Volksche Wacht* 2 (1941), 5-31, as well as his postwar dissertation: *Das niederländische Erbe der preußisch-rußländischen Mennoniten in Europa, Asien und Amerika* (Leeuwarden: Drukkerij A. Jongbloed, 1959).

of Dutch ethnic origin," while an additional 161 were neither German nor Dutch.<sup>47</sup> All of these Mennonites, therefore, fell under the scope of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees' operations. Put another way, a full 90 percent of the Mennonite refugees studied by the commission received favorable categorization as non-Germans—nearly the same percentage of Mennonite blood that Nazi demographers had identified as purely Aryan. Based on this and similar studies, M.C.C. successfully moved nearly all Mennonite refugees still in Western Europe to the Americas by 1955, most receiving screening and funding under U.N. guidelines as non-Germans.<sup>48</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Ethnicity is neither a value-neutral nor an easily identifiable category. Far from a self-evident attribute of Mennonite communities from the Reformation to the twenty-first century, ethnic identity has proved an intense topic of debate among Mennonite communities and those who study them. In many instances, the outcomes of these discussions made the difference between life and death. Appearing "ethnically German" during the Third Reich allowed tens of thousands of Mennonites in Eastern Europe to claim Aryan status, in turn rendering them immune to the incredible barrage of hatred, persecution, and genocide poured out against their Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish-speaking neighbors. Just a few years later, many of these same Mennonites received U.N. funding to travel to North and South America on the basis of their allegedly Dutch ancestry. The vast majority of those who failed to leave Europe through this scheme faced repatriation to the Soviet Union; deportation to Siberia, Central Asia, or the Far North; and years of hard labor in Stalin's gulags. For individuals in these dramatic circumstances, ethnicity was not an eternal, immutable element of identity. It was a malleable political resource, a narrative to carefully shape and strategically deploy. These Mennonites' ethnicity was neither the product of cultural isolationism nor the culmination of centuries of living separate from the world. Like all invocations of ethnicity, their claims reflected the larger political climates of the historical moments in which they were made.

Without the rise of National Socialism, discussions of "Mennonite ethnicity" might certainly have emerged elsewhere. Discussions of

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47. "Emigration of Russian Mennonite Refugees."

48. Between 1947 and 1955, M.C.C. relocated 8,158 Mennonite refugees from Europe to Canada, 4,914 to Paraguay, 1,184 to Uruguay, and 1,108 to the United States. Most of these refugees had come out of Ukraine with the retreating German army and identified as Germans during the war.—Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 391-427.

Anabaptist peoplehood are as old as the faith itself, and confessional writers across the Atlantic world had long described their communities in terms of shared language, history, and culture. Given the widespread popularity of racial science and ethnic nationalism well beyond Hitler's Germany, as well as the fact that both practices stretched back at least to the nineteenth century, it is in fact surprising that some Mennonites did not begin depicting themselves in ethnic terms earlier. Skepticism of higher education and minimal English language use among many members may help to explain the term's limited and late adoption. Alternatively, if German words like "Volk," "Volkstum," or "Völklein" are accepted as reasonable translations of "ethnicity," it has a much longer history indeed. And of course, some English-speaking commentators did refer to Mennonites as "ethnic" prior to the Second World War. Beginning in 1932, sociologists from McGill University studied Mennonites in western Canada as part of a larger examination of "ethnic communities."<sup>49</sup> These scholars undoubtedly exposed some congregants to the concept. In 1929, the Kansas historian C. C. Regier became the first known Mennonite to use it to describe fellow members.<sup>50</sup> Earlier examples surely await discovery.

Nevertheless, the sparse use of the word prior to the mid-twentieth century remains worthy of note. Not until the immediate aftermath of the Second World War did prominent church leaders systematically describe their confession with the language of ethnicity. Of the many books, dissertations, and articles produced between 1863 and 1943 that Mennonite Central Committee excerpted, recommended, or provided in full to refugee organizations as proof of migrants' non-German origins, not one employed the term ethnic.<sup>51</sup> Its initial introduction into

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49. C. A. Dawson, *Group Settlement: Ethnic Communities in Western Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1936), esp. 95-174. Other scholarly descriptions of Mennonites as "ethnic" prior to the Second World War include Marion Dexter Learned, *The Pennsylvania German Dialect* (Baltimore: Press of Isaac Friedenwald, 1889), esp. 1-20; Sarah E. Simons, "Social Assimilation," *American Journal of Sociology* 6 (May 1901), 790-822; A. F. Southwick, "Ethnic Elements of Colonial Pennsylvania and the Population of To-Day," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 6 (Oct. 1923), 234-249; V. V. Obolensky-Ossinsky, "Emigration from and Immigration into Russia," in *International Migrations*, vol. 2, ed. Walter F. Willcox (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1931), 52-53; and Robert England, "Land Settlement in Northern Areas of Western Canada (1925-35)," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 1 (Nov. 1935), 578-587.

50. C. C. Regier, "How Others See Us," *Social Science* 4 (May/June/July 1929), 321-322. The first known use by an Anabaptist (Church of the Brethren) is John Lewis Gillin, *The Dunkers: A Sociological Interpretation* (New York, 1906), esp. 104.

51. These included Wilhelm Mannhardt, *Die Wehrfreiheit der Altpreußischen Mennoniten* (Marienburg, 1863); Peter M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789-1910) im Rahmen der mennonitischen Gesamtgeschichte* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911); C. Henry Smith, *The Coming of the Russian Mennonites* (Berne, Ind.: Mennonite Book

Mennonite discourse appears to have occurred primarily through the vector phrase “ethnic German” as deployed by the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees and related institutions. As M.C.C. and its allies courted these organizations’ help to bring coreligionists out of Europe, they at first emphasized refugees’ Dutch origins. Yet because the Netherlands never allowed more than a few hundred Mennonite migrants to cross its borders, and also because these individuals clearly did not speak modern Dutch, M.C.C. leaders increasingly presented their charges as members of a distinct group. “The Mennonites of South Russia have for several hundred years constituted an ethnical minority or ethnical community,” claimed one thirty-page memo, produced in 1948 by several of the United States’ leading Mennonite historians, including Harold Bender, C. Henry Smith, Cornelius Krahn, and Melvin Gingerich. These scholars argued that a specifically Anabaptist emphasis on otherworldliness had produced a global Mennonite people, inclusive of groups who claimed to trace their origins to both Reformation-era Switzerland and the Netherlands. Qualities identified as proving “that they are an ethnic minority of neither German nor Russian origin” included “racial origin, family names, religious practices and beliefs, peculiar economic institutions, [and] language and folk ways.”<sup>52</sup>

Such notions of “Mennonite ethnicity,” as espoused by M.C.C. and its supporters, were directly influenced by Nazi race science. Although the organization’s spokespersons explicitly disavowed Nazism, their discussions of refugees’ ethnic origins and practices arose in unambiguous response to conceptions of racial identity and belonging legally inscribed by Hitler’s state. Proving that the Mennonite refugees from Ukraine were not of German origin required arguing from within a set of logics developed and implemented by Nazi race offices during the Third Reich. Indeed, this debate only made sense given the immediate backdrop of the Second World War, during which Mennonites and other German-speakers in Eastern Europe had received generous benefits from Nazi welfare programs.

But M.C.C. writers did not merely respond to Nazi-era racial categories; they consciously and consistently imported data produced by Mennonite

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Concern, 1927); Jacob Quiring, *Die Mundart von Chortitza in Süd-Russland* (Munich, 1928); David G. Rempel, “The Mennonite Colonies in New Russia: A Study of Their Settlement and Economic Development from 1789-1914” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford Uni., 1933); Robert Friedman, “Dutch Mennonite Literature from Peter Peters to Johannes Deknatel, 1625-1753,” *MQR* 15 (July 1941), 187-207; C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* (Berne, Ind.: Mennonite Book Concern, 1941); John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1942); Jacob Suderman, “The Origin of Mennonite State Service in Russia, 1870-1880,” *MQR* 17 (Jan. 1943), 23-46.

52. Mennonite Central Committee, “Memorandum on the Mennonite Refugees from South Russia.”

genealogists and other researchers during the Third Reich to support their cause. Demonstrating Dutch heritage or Anabaptist distinctiveness was possible largely because Mennonite researchers in Nazi Germany had created a template for thinking about Mennonitism in racial or ethnic terms. Through forums such as the *Reports from the Genealogical Association of the Danzig Mennonite Families*, these scholars produced large amounts of racial knowledge, broadly disseminating images of Mennonitism as a church bound as much by blood as by religion. But where participants of Nazi Germany's Mennonite genealogical community had seen their confession as quintessentially German, M.C.C. worked to extricate Mennonitism from this larger context, classifying members of their faith as an independent community.

M.C.C.'s notion of "Mennonite ethnicity" was at core a form of racial essentialism. It argued that because Mennonites possessed a certain ethnic background, they were entitled to certain rights. Such thinking presupposed the assumptions that different ethnicities existed, that they could be objectively identified, and that different ethnic groups were deserving of different treatment. M.C.C. adopted this logic in the immediate wake of National Socialism—a system that had initiated a world war and plunged a continent into genocide. At the same time that tens of thousands of European Mennonites had been reaping the benefits of racial warfare, millions of their fellow humans had been tortured, brutalized, starved, injected, hung, vivisected, shot, gassed, and incinerated. A majority of Mennonites across Germany and Eastern Europe directly and often vocally supported the state responsible for this project, some individuals personally participating in the Holocaust themselves. Wartime portrayals of Mennonites as "ethnically German" were part and parcel of Hitler's crusade of mass murder, making M.C.C.'s notion of "Mennonite ethnicity" an organized denial of this history. It constituted a systematic project to cover up the collaboration of a large percentage of the confession's population with National Socialism. M.C.C.'s refutation of Mennonite complicity with Nazism, which the organization's executives and aid workers considered necessary to save the lives of their coreligionists, once again provided thousands of members with material benefits unavailable to millions of other Europeans while simultaneously absolving them of their wartime conduct.

How the language of "Mennonite ethnicity" blossomed into a widespread discourse during the second half of the twentieth century is one of the great untold stories of Anabaptist history. That its origins are polyvalent is clear. Given the rising prevalence of the word "ethnicity" among more general populaces in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere, vast numbers of Mennonites with little or no connection to

M.C.C.'s postwar operations had ample opportunities to encounter such terminology. The new discipline of "ethnic studies," arising during the late 1960s and associated with progressive causes from Civil Rights to identity politics, cemented it as a legitimate object of scholarly inquiry, eventually securing university and government sponsorship.<sup>53</sup> And yet, the influence of the immediate postwar era on subsequent generations' use of the language of "Mennonite ethnicity" was not insignificant. M.C.C.'s dealings with international refugee organizations were never limited to personal letters or internal communiqués. These deliberations, including questions of national origins and ethnic identity, reached tens of thousands of refugees, aid workers, and donors. Confessional periodicals such as *Mennonite Life*, *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, *Der Mennonit*, *Mennonitische Welt*, and *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch*—all edited by individuals directly involved in Nazi-era genealogical research or M.C.C.'s transatlantic relief efforts—publicized the refugees' plight among Mennonite congregations, while mainstream news sources like *Time* magazine and *The New York Times* reached broader publics.<sup>54</sup> This story became a cause célèbre for Mennonite Central Committee and the international Anabaptist community generally, as testified by the popularity of books like *Up from the Rubble* and *Henry's Red Sea*.<sup>55</sup> Seventy years on, migrant memoirs and biographies of the era's M.C.C. leaders continue to appear.

But this is not a tale of tainted origins. To the contrary, its primary implication is that concepts like "race" and "ethnicity" are products of their times. Contemporary uses of such words can certainly evoke earlier meanings, but they are not bound by them. Just as connotations of the term "ethnic German" flipped from positive in the Third Reich to negative during the postwar period, or as M.C.C. invoked older ideas about Anabaptist peoplehood to justify the new language of "Mennonite ethnicity," present-day applications of such terms can be fresh, unexpected, even liberating.

The Mennonite church is long past due for a debate about the nature and significance of "Mennonite ethnicity." I do not mean a discussion

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53. On white ethnic movements and scholarship in the postwar era, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). Among Mennonites, James Urry, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Imperial Russia Revisited," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 2 (2010), 229-247; Leo Driedger and Calvin Redekop, "Sociology of Mennonites," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1 (1983), 33-63; Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, "Mennonites in Unexpected Places: Sociologist and Settler in Latin America," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 28 (2010), 203-224.

54. For example, "Plain People," *Time*, Feb. 10, 1947, 27; "Mennonite Issue in Germany Ends," *The New York Times*, Feb. 15, 1947, 8.

55. Dyck and Dyck, *Up from the Rubble*; Barbara Claassen Smucker, *Henry's Red Sea* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1955).

about what makes some members “ethnic,” nor one about when such “ethnicity” first developed. Rather, scholars, church leaders, and congregants should think seriously and critically about how the language of “Mennonite ethnicity” functions in our own world. In which situations does this term arise? Who uses it, and to what ends? Does it serve the good of the church and the mission that Mennonites, as Christians, are called to by the Gospel?

At the risk of defining an ever-changing term, I wish to suggest that today, in our own historical moment, the language of “Mennonite ethnicity” functions much as it did in the late 1940s, when M.C.C. briefly elevated it to an official ideology. In the twenty-first century, it frequently undergirds white supremacy. I say this not because some aspects may bear some traces of Nazi ideology, but rather because the changing demographics of a global church have once again rendered it exclusionary. At a time when two-thirds of the world’s 2.1 million Anabaptists live in the Global South and are people of color, “Mennonite ethnicity” refers primarily to white, wealthy members in Europe and the Americas who believe themselves descended from the first Anabaptists of the Reformation. Contributing to the construction of a racial hierarchy in the church, this term teaches “ethnically Mennonite” children that they are more special than their non-white coreligionists, while telegraphing to non-“ethnic Mennonites” that they are not as authentic.<sup>56</sup>

Along with many other agents of white supremacy, the language of “Mennonite ethnicity” is keeping Anabaptist communities both deeply segregated and deeply unequal. Most notably, it enables “ethnic Mennonites” to tell themselves that they are members of a historically persecuted minority. Despite the fact that most Mennonites from Europe and the Americas are extremely privileged by global standards, stories of “ethnic Mennonite” martyrdom have allowed many of them to emphasize victimhood while remaining silent about their own current positions of power.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, the myth that “Mennonite ethnicity” is a

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56. Recent scholarship to critically engage issues of Mennonite ethnicity and race has included Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Weaver, *A Table of Sharing*. See also Lucille Marr, “The History of Mennonite Central Committee: Developing a Genre,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005), 47-58; John A. Lapp, “The Global Mennonite/Brethren in Christ History Project: The Task, the Problem, the Imperative,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 15 (Fall 1997), 283-290.

57. On this debate, John D. Roth, “The Complex Legacy of the *Martyrs Mirror* among Mennonites in North America,” *MQR* 87 (July 2013), 277-316, as well as the December 2006 and Spring 2007 issues of *Mennonite Life*. On the logic of white supremacy among some Mennonites and others in the United States, Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 7.

product of cultural isolation allows white members to praise their separation from the world, including nonparticipation in war—a stance that too often ignores their embeddedness in systems of inequality within and beyond the church.

The original justification for creating “Mennonite ethnicity” was humanitarian. Perhaps that is sufficient grounds for letting it go.