

**“By the Hand of a Woman”:
Gender, Nationalism, and the Origins of Mennonite History
Writing**

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Abstract: Seeking to fuse militarist German nationalism with contemporaneous efforts to unite Mennonite congregations across newly established Imperial Germany, the historian Antje Brons published a book in 1884 entitled *Origins, Development, and Fate of the Anabaptists or Mennonites: A Brief Outline Neatly Sketched by the Hand of a Woman*. Mennonite churchmen and publishers from across the theological spectrum immediately lauded her volume as the first comprehensive history of Anabaptism. Analyzing Brons’s text and its reception in Europe and North America, this article shows how the author combined traditionalist expectations about gender propriety with liberal nationalist thought in order to construct a work intended to help build denominational cohesion at home and abroad, particularly via topics of Reformation-era martyrdom, European ethnicity, and military service. The substantial impact of Brons and her book on the emergence of Mennonite historiography within a German nationalist mold makes the recovery and deconstruction of her legacy imperative.

Antje Brons was the most widely read Mennonite woman of the nineteenth century. With the exception of some sixteenth-century hymnists—whose words still appear in the *Ausbund* and *Martyrs Mirror*—she may have been the most widely read Mennonite woman of the first 400 years of Mennonite history.¹ Born in 1810 in the city of Norden, a coastal town in what is today the northwestern part of Germany, Antje Cremer ten Doornkaat grew up surrounded by wealthy, intellectual

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1. On sixteenth-century texts by Anabaptist women to be printed in the *Ausbund* and *Martyrs Mirror*, see C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds., *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 119-122, 198-201, 336-351.

Anabaptists who made their money in banking, manufacturing, farming, and shipping—and who moved effortlessly between the Dutch-speaking Netherlands and the more easterly north German states. Beyond an elementary education and Mennonite baptismal training, she had the benefit of a private tutor, developing an early passion for the written word. In 1830, she married the Mennonite merchant and politician Ysaac Brons, a German nationalist who served as a delegate to the 1848 Frankfurt National Assembly as well as the 1867 North German parliament—precursors to the formation of the German nation-state in 1871. An advocate of Mennonite participation in military service, Ysaac in 1861 also co-founded and served as president of the East Frisian Navy League, an early step in the European arms race that historians have identified as a factor in the outbreak of the First World War. Antje and Ysaac raised eight children, who in turn gave them some thirty-five grandchildren.²

Today, Antje Brons remains best known for her 1884 book, *Origins, Development, and Fate of the Anabaptists or Mennonites: A Brief Outline Neatly Sketched by the Hand of a Woman*, a 447-page tome that went through three editions by the start of the First World War.³ In recent years, she has been the subject of multiple articles and a full biography.⁴ These works have admirably described Brons's education, intellectual interests, and home life, while also emphasizing the singularity of her achievements, given the gender limitations of her day. Less well remembered, however, is the

2. Bernhard Brons, *Frau Antje Brons* (Kaiserslautern: Heinrich Köhl, 1902), 3-33, provides an overview of Antje Brons's education and domestic life.

3. These appeared as: A. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale der Taufgesinnten oder Menmoniten, in kurzen Zügen übersichtlich dargestellt* [some copies include:] *von Frauenhand* (Norden: Diedr. Soltau, 1884); A. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale der Taufgesinnten oder Menmoniten, in kurzen Zügen übersichtlich dargestellt* (Norden: Diedr. Soltau, 1891); A. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale der Taufgesinnten oder Menmoniten, in kurzen Zügen übersichtlich dargestellt*, ed. E.M. ten Cate (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1912). References in this article are to the 1884 edition.

4. Secondary literature includes Julia Hildebrandt, "Antje Brons als Mennoniten," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 23 (1965), 41-58; Heinold Fast, "Das deutsche Mennonitentum 1883: Ein brief von Antje Brons an Ludwig Keller," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 25 (1968), 6-13; Heinold Fast, "Mennonitischer 'Apostolikumsstreit': Aus dem Briefwechsel zwischen Antje Brons und Ulrich Hege über die erste deutschsprachige Mennonitengeschichte, 1884," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 41 (1984), 57-71; Katja Beisser-Apetz, *Das weiße Blatt: Antje Brons: Ein Außergewöhnliches Frauenleben im 19. Jahrhundert* (Oldenburg: Schardt Verlag, 2011); Marion Kobelt-Groch, "Neue Wege oder alte Bahnen? Gedanken und Winke zur Kindererziehung von Antje Brons (1892)," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 67 (2010), 77-85—also in English: Marion Kobelt-Groch, "New Ways or Old Paths? 'Ideas and Hints' on the Education of Children by Antje Brons (1892)," in *European Mennonites and the Challenge of Modernity over Five Centuries: Contributors, Detractors, and Adapters*, ed. Mark Jantzen, Mary S. Sprunger und John D. Thiesen (North Newton, Kan.: Bethel College, 2016), 301-312. This article responds in part to Kobelt-Groch's call in *ibid.*, 312: "It is time to raise the status of Antje Brons and her work in the general (Mennonite) consciousness, and to re-awaken research interest in her, after the promising beginnings in this area have slackened."

praise that Brons received from contemporaries as, in many ways, the originator of modern Anabaptist history writing. Consider the glowing review of her book in Germany's leading Mennonite newspaper, *Mennonitische Blätter* (*Mennonite Journal*), which just two years earlier had lamented that "we Mennonites still lack a good, basic, thoroughly-researched study of all the sources regarding the history of our denomination."⁵ In this light, Danzig Pastor Hermann Mannhardt announced what he portrayed as welcome but surprising news: "a woman" had solved "all the seemingly intractable problems standing in the way of such a work."⁶ More than a decade after Brons's death in 1902, the newly founded *Mennonite Lexicon* continued to portray her book as a foundational work, naming it the first German-language "synthetic account of the entire history of the Mennonites."⁷

What did it mean for Brons, as a woman, to write the groundbreaking text in a now well-established genre? And to what extent were the gendered aspects of her life and thought taken up in the many subsequent works devoted to the history of Anabaptism, written in Germany and beyond? These questions can help us to understand the position of a woman like Brons in her nineteenth-century Mennonite, upper-middle-class, German, and European contexts—a period for which the experiences of men remain better understood than those of women and whose history often remains told from a male-dominated perspective.⁸ If Brons's achievements were in no way representative of other Mennonite women at the time, her story can nevertheless illuminate a larger landscape of gender relations whose barriers and constraints shaped the world within which she worked. From an intellectual history perspective, this line of inquiry might also tell us something about the trajectory of Mennonite historiography into our own time. Placing Antje Brons at the discipline's origin provides one means, for example, of seeing this journal

5. H.G. Mannhardt, "Aus vergangenen Tagen," *Mennonitische Blätter*, June 1883, 46.

6. H.G. Mannhardt, "Endlich haben wir eine Geschichte der Mennoniten," *Mennonitische Blätter*, January 1885, 4.

7. Hinrich van der Smissen, "Brons, Anna," in *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, vol. 1, ed. Christian Hege and Christian Neff (Frankfurt a.M., 1913), 272. Nineteenth-century Mennonite church history was better developed in the Netherlands. This scholarship gained little traction in North America or elsewhere in Europe, however, since most Mennonite historians outside the Netherlands read German but not Dutch. Dutch-language works of an earlier vintage, such as the *Martyrs Mirror*, did achieve substantial readership among North American Mennonites well into the twentieth century, as David Weaver-Zercher has shown in *Martyrs Mirror: A Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

8. For recent scholarship on Anabaptist women in Europe, including Germany, through the nineteenth century, see Mark Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers: Nation, Religion, and Family in the Prussian East, 1772-1880* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 16-22, 50-54, 161-169; *Sisters: Myth and Reality of Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Doopsgezind Women, ca. 1525-1900* (Boston: Brill, 2014).

and the scholarly field it serves as stemming from a tradition that has always been shaped by women.

This article advances two main arguments. First, it suggests that Brons's book, *Origins, Development, and Fate*, offers an account of Anabaptist history coded within German nationalist language and assumptions about morality. Second, by following the reception of Brons's scholarship in Europe and North America, it traces how this model was taken up and transformed by subsequent historians of Anabaptism, who projected certain Bronsian interpretations into the twentieth century, while simultaneously rejecting others. Throughout, I hope to demonstrate how gender shaped this process, including ways that German nationalism and notions of what we might call traditionalist gender hierarchy reinforced one another. My analysis draws on the work of historians including Claudia Koontz, Lora Wildenthal, Elizabeth Harvey, Nancy Reagin, and Wendy Lower, who have shown how women eager to advance German nationalism, colonialism, and empire-building could do so in certain acceptable forms.⁹ While generally unable to, say, serve as colonial bureaucrats or as army officers, women formed large and remarkably influential associations or served on ideological as well as military front lines as nurses, educators, novelists, and historians. Placed in this context, we might see Antje Brons not as an anomaly, but rather as a woman championing what she considered a general denominational cause through the means of history writing—an undertaking she intentionally aligned with contemporary Anabaptist and also German nationalist assumptions about gender propriety.

ANTJE BRONS AS HISTORIAN

Brons's landmark book appeared at a turning point both in German national history and in the denominational life of Mennonites in Germany. The publication of *Origins, Development, and Fate* corresponded approximately with the end of the so-called *Kulturkampf*, or "Cultural Struggle," in which Chancellor Otto von Bismarck sought to bring Germany's Catholics under the thumb of the largely Protestant German Empire, established in 1871.¹⁰ Motivated by this Protestant-Catholic clash

9. Claudia Koontz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, Family Life and Nazi Ideology, 1919-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Nancy Reagin, *Sweeping the German Nation: Domesticity and National Identity in Germany, 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

10. On the *Kulturkampf*, see Helmut Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Margaret

as well as by specifically Anabaptist challenges surrounding the founding of the German nation-state—including the formal end of privileges exempting the denomination from military service—progressive, nationalist members within the country's Mennonite intelligentsia attempted to unify their approximately seventy congregations into a single empire-wide conference.¹¹ Overcoming theological, regional, occupational, and political differences, however, proved difficult. Antje Brons, having observed comparable efforts by Catholic and Protestant historians, identified history as a useful means of both cajoling wayward coreligionists and helping to defend them against external attacks. "Just as a whole nation is compromised when it loses the knowledge of its past," Brons wrote in the foreword to her book, "so is it also with a single denomination. Their members lose sight of the foundation on which they stand, and their piety and love for it drain from their hearts."¹² By acquainting her fellow Mennonites with knowledge of a common past, Brons hoped to promote a sense of cohesive Anabaptist identity and, in turn, spur collective action on matters of church interest.

Origins, Development, and Fate, is divided into eleven parts. It begins with an extended account of the early years of Anabaptism in Switzerland and Netherlands, including the persecution of believers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It then follows the fate of Mennonites in Prussia through the nineteenth century as well as the large migrations from Central Europe to Imperial Russia and North America. Brons's book thus conformed to at least two major conventions of nineteenth-century German church history. First, her emphasis on denominational coherence stretching across the title's three temporal designations—origins, development, and fate—posited an inter-generational continuity of theological ideas and social units.¹³ Second, Brons's substantial sections on Mennonites in Imperial Russia, France, Canada, and the United States tracked with contemporary efforts by Catholic and Protestant writers to cast their German-speaking coreligionists in other countries as

Lavinia Anderson, "The Kulturkampf and the Course of German History," *Central European History* 19, no. 1 (1986), 82-115.

11. See Abraham Friesen, *History and Renewal in the Anabaptist/Mennonite Tradition* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1994); Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 45-70. This article refers to the Mennonite church as a "denomination," given the familiarity of this term for North American audiences. However, the standard translation in English-language German historiography—and the term used in *Chosen Nation*—is "confession."

12. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, v.

13. On *Kulturkampf*-era Protestant and Catholic church history, see Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict*, 51-66; Rebecca Bennette, *Fighting for the Soul of Germany: The Catholic Struggle for Inclusion after Unification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Auslandsdeutsche, or Germans abroad.¹⁴ Both of these elements, if common within Germany, were largely new within scholarship on Anabaptism. Historiography written by non-Mennonites tended to be polemically anti-Anabaptist, and while more positive interpretations had begun to emerge, these were generally restricted to the Reformation era.¹⁵ Works authored within the denomination, although more favorable, remained similarly limited in scope.¹⁶

That Antje Brons's 1884 book relates Anabaptist history through a self-consciously German national lens is evident from explicit comparisons with other texts as well as from her language describing coreligionists at home and abroad. On the first count, Brons's stated literary influences include—in addition to the Bible and *Martyrs Mirror*—a host of well-known German literary figures, from the poets Friedrich Schiller and Christoph August Tiedge to theologians like Adolf Hausrath and Gustav Volkmar. Brons's foreword identifies *God in History*, an 1857 book by the biblical scholar Christian Bunsen, as her most influential academic model. Surveying the field of "German philosophy and research" from Leibnitz to Hegel, Bunsen characterized its "foundational assumption" as "the development of a philosophical recognition of world history as the development of the spirit through thought and will, according to the eternal laws of the moral world order."¹⁷ Placing herself within this

14. When speaking of migration to North America, for example, Brons ascribed the "first German settlement" to her coreligionists. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, xii. She later authored a full volume on the subject: Antje Brons, *Die Ankunft der ersten Deutschen in Amerika und ihre Ansiedlung dasebst* (Altona: Heinrich Dircks, 1893). On the concept of *Auslandsdeutsche* and its valences, see Stefan Manz, *Constructing a German Diaspora: The 'Greater German Empire,' 1871-1914* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Bradley Naranch, "Inventing the Auslandsdeutsche: Emigration, Colonial Fantasy, and German National Identity, 1848-71," in *Germany's Colonial Pasts*, ed. Eric Ames, Marcia Klotz, and Lora Wildenthal (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 21-40. On the development of diasporic thinking among Mennonites, see Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 35-44.

15. Nineteenth-century works on Anabaptism by non-Mennonite church historians are discussed in Christian Hege, *Memnonitische Geschichtsschreibung* (Leipzig: Kurt Säuberlich, 1926), 5-6.

16. According to *ibid.*, 6: "The *German Mennonites* began engaging with their history relatively late. Interest initially awoke in Germany with the publication of the first Mennonite paper, the *Memnonitische Blätter*, founded by J. Mannhardt in 1854." The only cited works to appear before Brons' book are Wilhelm Mannhardt, *Die Wehrfreiheit der Altpreussischen Mennoniten* (Marienburg, 1863); J.P. Müller, *Die Mennoniten in Ostfriesland Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst und vaterländische Altertümer zu Emden* 4, no. 2 (1881), 58-74 and 5, no. 1 (1882), 46-79; W.I. Leendertz, *Melchior Hofmann* (Haarlem: Erven F. Bohn, 1883). Van der Smissen, "Brons, Anna," also mentions Berend Carl Roosen, *Menno Symons* (Leipzig: Karl Tauchnitz, 1848); Carl Harder, *Das Leben Menno Symons* (Königsberg: E.J. Dalkowori, 1846).

17. Christian Carl Josias Bunsen, *Gott in der Geschichte: oder, der Fortschritt des Glaubens an eine sittliche Weltordnung* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1857), xxx. On Protestant pietism as a driver of German nationalism, see Hartmut Lehmann, "Pietism and Nationalism: The Relationship between Protestant Revivalism and National Renewal in Nineteenth-Century Germany," *Church History* 51, no. 1 (1982), 39-53.

tradition, Brons's group-chronological history of Anabaptism roughly paralleled Bunsen's genealogical tracing of the "consciousness of God" among so-called Aryan and Semitic nations. She was deeply taken with his core contention that the forward march of "world history" manifested most authentically not in the bureaucratic state—as Hegel would have had it—but in the form of the Christian congregation. Bunsen in fact criticized the "ecclesial-police prohibitions" he considered typical of restrictive state authority for retarding true Christian progress—a charge that Brons felt spoke directly to the brutal persecution of Anabaptists during the Reformation, as well as, on a personal level, her husband Ysaac's humiliating exclusion from the 1838 Hannover parliament because of his denominational affiliation.¹⁸

Emphasis on congregational independence might appear ironic, given the long career of Antje's spouse in public service. By the late 1840s, Ysaac Brons had largely overcome the anti-Mennonite stigma that dogged his early career, becoming known across German lands as an advocate for political unification and bureaucratic centralization. In 1869, when Wilhelm I visited Emden to dedicate the new naval harbor in nearby Wilhelmshaven, Antje and Ysaac hosted him overnight in their lavish home.¹⁹ The Prussian king rewarded Ysaac with an ornate vase and an honorary title—tributes underscoring the politician's break with Anabaptist nonresistance.

Unlike Ysaac, most Mennonites in German lands continued to champion special privileges exempting them from armed service. Nevertheless, a growing cohort—especially in urban contexts—were willing to accept armed service in exchange for social integration.²⁰ Antje, too, favored a modern egalitarian system, in which citizens shared equal rights and duties. Like her husband, she believed that the necessity of German national unification justified abandoning nonresistant theology. When two of their sons—20-year-old Friedrich and 25-year old Claas—enlisted during the Franco-Prussian War, Antje and Ysaac prayed for a speedy victory. "I could hardly have dared to hope that we would be so lucky that you both would come through unharmed," Ysaac wrote his sons in 1871, as Prussia and its allies emerged triumphant. "Come—

18. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, ix-xi.

19. Beisser-Apetz, *Das weiße Blatt*, 110-114. On the construction of Wilhelmshaven and its importance in Germany's burgeoning naval race with Great Britain, see David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 121-143.

20. On the nineteenth-century debates between militarist Mennonites in German lands, like Ysaac Brons, and those—usually from more rural backgrounds—who continued to advocate nonresistance, see Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers*; Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 18-95.

healthy in body as well as morally sustained with unfailingly high spirits, to have participated in this great endeavor!"²¹

Antje Brons wove her support for military service into *Origins, Development, and Fate*. Hoping not to alienate but to convince pacifist coreligionists, she constructed the book, in part, as a platform to propagate her interpretation of Just War. Brons conceded that nonresistance had once been valuable. From the Reformation until the early nineteenth century, she argued, pacifism had prevented Anabaptists from participating in unnecessary wars of aggression. During Napoleon's occupation of Prussia, military exemption had protected local Mennonites from the "struggle of German against German," as Brons characterized the conflict. "Saved by this religious principle," she assessed, "none of [Anabaptism's] sons were tarnished in the service of the tyrant upon whom so many blinded Germans at that time expended such exorbitant praise, without thinking about the boundless misfortune he had brought over Germany." Again in 1812, as Napoleon invaded eastward, nonresistant Mennonites had been spared "the snowfields of Russia that became the shroud of so many thousands of men, whose blood cried out to heaven." Yet Brons considered this age of mindless slaughter to be over. She contrasted the machinations of despots like Napoleon with newer forms of defensive warfare, waged in the name of the nation:

Now a war of necessity, as Germany conducted during the wars of independence in 1870 and 1871, no one will have the courage to condemn. Who would not recognize it as moral, God-ordained, and with might call out: "It is a crusade, it is a holy war!"²²

Brons's justification for modern militarism helps to explain the seeming contradiction between her belief that Christian congregations (not the state) represented the primary loci of God's manifestation in the world, and her support for her husband's political career. Her critique of state authority was only partial. Just as she decried earlier wars as serving "tyrants" like Napoleon, Brons opposed authoritarian powers that had subjected sixteenth-century Anabaptists to martyrdom and her own husband to (temporary) political exclusion. Instead of despotic governance, she preferred administration on behalf of "the people," or—in the parlance of her time—of "national" communities. In Brons's political and geographical context, this meant rule by and for the so-called

21. Quoted in Beisser-Apetz, *Das weiße Blatt*, 119-120.

22. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, 315-316, 329-330. By contrast, recent interpretations have cast tactics and ideologies deployed during the Franco-Prussian war as precursors to colonial genocide in German South West Africa as well as German aggression during the First World War: Isabell Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

German nation as embodied in the 1871 German nation-state. She thus drew a fundamental connection between Anabaptism and German nationalism: because Brons considered human progress to emerge from nationally-based Christian congregations, she believed that a government reflecting the interests of a Christian-German "nation" could and should reciprocally demand the support of its constituents—including military service. Mennonites who refused this duty, according to Brons, not only failed to recognize the new role of *national* politics; they also betrayed their Anabaptist heritage. "In our day," she concluded,

when the fatherland once again inspires awe and expects that its sons will defend and protect it where danger threatens, it in turn corresponds to the innermost essence of the Mennonite faith, which always seeks to protect its spiritual role as an agent of healing, to also participate in case of need with weapon in hand.²³

Far from a repudiation of Ysaac Brons's political career, *Origins, Development, and Fate* in fact drew direct inspiration from his life and thought.²⁴ Antje dedicated her book to "My dear husband," whom she credited with contributing to both Mennonite church life and German unification. Readers learned of Ysaac as "Chairman of the Emden Mennonite Congregation, former representative to the German National Assembly in Frankfurt am Main, 1848, and to the foundational parliament of the North German Confederation in Berlin, 1867."²⁵ Already in its opening lines, Brons's book asserted that one could be an Anabaptist and a patriot at the same time. The foreword described her primary inspirations as: first, her husband's navigation of his Mennonite and political identities, and second, the literary works they discussed together.²⁶

For a nineteenth-century couple, Antje und Ysaac's intellectual lives intertwined in atypical ways. As narrated years later by their eldest son, Bernhard, Ysaac saw Antje as "a piece of himself." A strong-willed man, he could not abide disagreement with his wife. Yet—in Bernhard's telling—merely asserting patriarchal authority proved unsatisfying. Assuming the voice of his father, Bernhard wrote, "no, she should make his conviction her own, she should be one with him not only in action but also inwardly." Such a dynamic threatened to rob Antje of her intellectual freedom. Yet in Bernhard's assessment, exactly the opposite occurred.

23. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, 333.

24. On Ysaac, see Antje Brons, "Ysaac Brons," *Christlicher-Gemeinde-Kalender*, 1900, 43-57; W. Heinrich Brons, "Ysaac Brons, 1806-1886," *Niedersächsische Lebensbilder* 4 (1960), 54-70.

25. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, iii.

26. *Ibid.*, ix.

Antje entered a period of rigorous study, reading, annotating, and debating ancient and modern classics with her husband. As a result, she developed a distinctive voice. By steeping herself in the likes of Bunsen, Plato, and Hegel, Antje “saved her personality” from Ysaac’s subsuming advances.²⁷

Antje’s own innovations included engaging with female predecessors. Among the mostly male influences cited in *Origins, Development, and Fate*, the name Caroline Pichler stands out. A prolific novelist, Pichler was an avowed Austrian patriot, who hosted luminaries from Beethoven to Schubert in her Vienna salon. She wielded considerable cultural influence—albeit in a domestic context commensurate with contemporary understandings of womanly dignity.²⁸ The degree to which Brons internalized Pichler’s literary politics is difficult to know, but the reference confirms that she read and cherished one of the most famous female writers of her day.

Brons also discussed female Anabaptist role models. Several pages of her third chapter are devoted to a sixteenth-century woman named Elizabeth. Raised in a cloister in East Friesland, Elizabeth was shocked to learn of the murder of local “heretics.” She disguised herself as a milkmaid and left to join the Anabaptists, eventually becoming acquainted with Menno Simons. In 1549, Elizabeth was arrested for heresy and drowned. Brons felt kinship with this “female martyr,” reprinting the full transcript of her inquisition from the *Martyrs Mirror*. “When one contemplates this interrogation,” Brons wrote, “one sees how strongly this heroine of faith stood against her judges, with what inner collection, calmness, and surety she answered every question, and how embarrassed the questioners stand there.” Not only in the Netherlands and north German states, however, but “also in the south German Anabaptist congregations,” she wrote, could historians find inspiring words uttered by “women’s mouths.” Brons offered evidence in the form of hymns attributed to Helena von Freyberg and Walpurga Marschalk von Pappenheim.²⁹

If Brons wrote *Origins, Development, and Fate* as a woman and a wife, she also approached the project as a mother and a grandmother. The

27. Brons, *Frau Antje Brons*, 28.

28. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, viii. On Pichler and her context, see Ritchie Robertson, “The Complexities of Caroline Pichler: Conflicting Role Models, Patriotic Commitment, and *The Swedes in Prague* (1827),” *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 23 (2007), 34-48.

29. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, 109-115. Brons had already published one of these hymns separately, along with a short essay: “Ein Lied von Anna von Freiburg,” *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten*, May 1883, 34-35. On Helena von Freyberg, Walpurga Marschalk von Pappenheim, and their writings, see Snyder and Hecht, eds., *Profiles of Anabaptist Women*, 117-139.

book's ostensible *raison d'être* was to bequeath a knowledge of Anabaptism to "our many children and countless grandchildren," whom Brons treated as metaphorical stand-ins for the larger Mennonite church.³⁰ Depicting the denomination as a familial enterprise, comparable to one of the "tribes" or "nations" in the writings of scholars like Christian Bunsen, she frequently referenced "forebears," "forefathers," "children," and "descendants."³¹ Brons opened her book with a dual statement of genealogical authority and personal authenticity, noting: the "present-day *Anabaptists* or *Mennonites* . . . stem from that [sixteenth-century] movement already at its first origins," and: "My ancestors have belonged to this denomination since the time of the Reformation." Yet despite her Anabaptist background, she had grown up "without learning much of their history." Looking back on her childhood, Brons treated her discovery of the *Martyrs Mirror* as a kind of conversion experience. She granted Thieleman van Braght's seventeenth-century volume mystical agency, narrating how the folio on her uncle's bookshelf "drew my attention to itself." Young Antje leafed through its pages, encountering "countless copper plates depicting gruesome executions of men and women." The images made a deep impression. "I had of course already had to endure mockery because of my faith," she wrote, "and defended it from other children with angry words."³² Decades later, copies of the *Martyrs Mirror* remained expensive and generally aged. Few members in German lands—let alone young people—could read the original Dutch, and translations were rare.³³ Treating historical education as a critical stage in any Mennonite lifecycle, Brons determined to repurpose van Braght's stories for a new generation.

Her role as Anabaptist storyteller—conceived as a (grand)motherly act—paralleled what she considered the cultural duty of Germany's Mennonite "mother congregations" to care for their so-called "daughter" colonies in foreign lands. Appearing the same year that Bismarck hosted the Berlin Conference at which European powers divided Africa's uncolonized regions, *Origins, Development, and Fate* echoed public enthusiasm for German speakers in distant lands. Although the acquisition of overseas territories was new, Germany's expansion had

30. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, xii.

31. On the emergence of such ideas among Mennonites, including Brons, in Central Europe, see Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 71-95.

32. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, v-vii.

33. Only one German translation of the *Martyrs Mirror* had been published in Europe. In 1780, 1,000 copies were printed in the Palatinate; these found circulation mostly among the Amish Mennonites of Switzerland, France, and the south German states. See Gerald C. Studer, "A History of the Martyrs' Mirror," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 22 (July 1948), 163-179.

been preceded by the establishment of numerous informal settlements abroad. Tales by and about German-speaking migrants in Africa, Asia, and the Americas appeared in novels, periodical literature, traveling exhibitions, and other venues.³⁴ Often, these works invoked gendered tropes, contrasting the cleanliness and order of German settler women with the alleged squalor of local non-German populations.³⁵ Brons drew on this body of stories and images, casting her coreligionists outside Germany as quintessential “Germans abroad.” In her telling, Anabaptist and German identities went together. She noted how Mennonites in France “came into contact almost exclusively with French and thus with Catholics, running the danger of losing their German language and customs and at the same time their religion.” These families had limited access to German books, and few could send their children to schools in Alsace or Lorraine. By contrast, larger settlements in Eastern Europe—despite being surrounded by speakers of Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian—supposedly preserved their nationality and their faith through “German Bibles and congregational worship in song, sermon, and prayer.” In this manner, Brons conceptually linked Mennonites in the “German fatherland” with their “daughter congregations in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Illinois, Minnesota, and Canada,” as well as with those in Imperial Russia and their own offspring in “Canada, Nebraska, Dakota, and Kansas.”³⁶

Brons’s ideas would soon find interlocutors in each of these places. By the early twentieth century, an interwoven and increasingly sophisticated Anabaptist historiography had begun to emerge on both sides of the Atlantic. Technologies of communication and travel linked far-flung Mennonite communities more closely than ever before, with people, primary sources, and printed books circulating between Canada, France, Germany, Imperial Russia, Switzerland, and the United States. Newfound wealth from farming and business enterprises coupled with denominational institution-building—a practice common across *fin-de-siècle* Christianity—to produce publishing houses, colleges, and

34. See Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

35. See Nancy R. Reagin, “German *Brigadoon*? Domesticity and Metropolitan Perceptions of *Auslandsdeutschen* in Southwest Africa and Eastern Europe,” in *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness*, ed. Krista O’Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy Reagin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 248-266. Reagin points out that such values were often dismissed as boorishly bourgeoisie in Germany itself; *Auslandsdeutsche* in general, then, were seen to belong to an earlier stage of cultural development, deserving of praise but also tutelage from the German “Motherland.” This *Auslandsdeutsche* domesticity might be seen as a gendered manifestation of a broader trope of “German work” particularly associated with Germans abroad. See Sebastian Conrad, *Globalisation and the Nation in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

36. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, 349-355.

conference organizations. These provided sites for theological debate within and beyond Anabaptist contexts. In record numbers, Mennonite women and men entered mission work or attended seminaries, Bible schools, and universities. Some earned master's or even doctoral degrees, learning to think with the intellectual tools of a burgeoning historical profession. Those looking for works on Anabaptist history were likely to encounter Brons's *Origins, Development, and Fate*. Not all would share the political sensibilities of this book—particularly its support for military service. Nor would all agree with Brons that Mennonite congregations worldwide should be conceived within a centralized, German national framework. The globalization of her writing is a story of negotiation and reformulation, set against dynamic geopolitics and the myriad, evolving interests of a transnational denomination.

RECEPTION AND LEGACIES

In Germany, Antje Brons's history of Anabaptism received widespread approbation from the moment of its appearance in 1884. The book most immediately served the interests of prominent churchmen working to form a so-called *Vereinigung der Mennoniten-Gemeinden im Deutschen Reich* (Union of Mennonite Congregations in the German Empire). In the eyes of these organizers—who were predominately affluent, urban, and politically liberal—Brons's volume offered a welcome ideological treatise as well as a practical means of moving their call for German Anabaptist unity into skeptical households. "It would be good," wrote Hermann Mannhardt of Danzig, who was spearheading the drive for a nationwide conference, "if the church boards, as has already occurred in some of our rural congregations, would order a great number of copies and then warmly recommend them to their congregational members."³⁷ Upon the Union's formal establishment in 1886, Mannhardt and his coworkers gave Antje Brons and her writing substantial credit. The "book from Frau A. Brons about the history of our congregations," assessed Mannhardt in his organization's first official history, "helped not a little to enliven and promote the efforts to found a Union of German Mennonite congregations."³⁸ This conference, in turn, provided a platform to magnify Brons's thought: the Union's founding goals included "research and publications regarding the history of the Old-Evangelical congregations," an agenda that eventually included support for the first Mennonite

37. H.G. Mannhardt, "Endlich haben wir eine Geschichte der Mennoniten," *Mennonitische Blätter*, February 1885, 11-12.

38. H.G. Mannhardt, *Jahrbuch der Altevangelischen Taufgesinnten oder Mennoniten-Gemeinden* (Danzig: Edwin Groening, 1888), 110-112. See also Hinrich van der Smissen, "Vierhundert Jahre mennonitischer Geschichte," *Mennonitische Blätter*, November 1892, 165; Ludwig Keller, *Anna Brons* (Münster: Johannes Bredt, 1902).

encyclopedia, the establishment of a Mennonite Historical Society, and the first cash prize for a new concise history of Anabaptism—also authored by a woman.³⁹ Between 1890 and 1897, when the Union's news organ circulated lists of recommended books for its Mennonite constituents, the name "A. Brons" never dipped below second place, regularly billing above professional historians, active male pastors, and the likes of Menno Simons and Thieleman van Braght.⁴⁰

Unionists such as Hermann Mannhardt championed Brons's book because of its ability to appeal across a broad theological spectrum. In their efforts to unify coreligionists throughout the new German Empire while also building international bridges, leaders of the Mennonite Union required a seemingly nonpartisan document with a gripping story, engaging writing, and an inspirational message. *Origins, Development, and Fate* offered this combination, and the book drew readership from both the most progressive and the most conservative wings of the denomination. Indicative of the former was Jacob Gijsbert de Hoop Scheffer, professor at the Mennonite Seminary at the University of Amsterdam—long the Anabaptist world's seat of critical and philosophically inclined higher education. In April 1884, de Hoop Scheffer wrote to Brons, praising her volume's accuracy as well as its style: "you provide a far more exciting and inviting portrayal than that offered in the dry chronical-like books of [Steven] Blaupot ten Cate," one of the Netherland's most prominent nineteenth-century Mennonite writers.⁴¹ Three months later, the conservative elder Ulrich Hege, editor of the Baden-based *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten* (*Congregational Paper for Mennonites*), was likewise laudatory. "I have now read through your beautiful, interesting book," he reported, "and I must say I quite liked it." Hege found only one problem with the text. On pages 397 and 398, Brons had written, "The doctrine of Original Sin led to the belief that Christ supposedly had no earthly father." To Hege's eye, this sentence implied that Brons thought Jesus was more man than God, a contradiction of Scripture. He requested that she explain the matter. "I will mention your book in the next *Congregational Paper*," Hege wrote, "but first I look forward to receiving your clarifying

39. *Statut für die Vereinigung der Mennoniten-Gemeinden im deutschen Reich* (Altona: Heinrich Dircks, 1886), 2. The prize-winning book was Christine Hege, *Kurze Geschichte der Mennoniten* (Frankfurt a.M: Hermann Minjon, 1909). The author was married to Christian Hege, also a Mennonite historian known for coediting with Christian Neff the *Mennonitisches Lexikon* between 1913 and 1943.

40. The first and last installments of this list were "Wichtige Bücher und Schriften," *Mennonitische Blätter*, October 1890, 115; "Wichtige Bücher und Schriften," *Mennonitische Blätter*, December 1897, 101-102.

41. Quoted in Fast, "Mennonitischer 'Apostolikumsstreit,'" 70.

answer."⁴² Finding her response satisfactory, the Badenese elder printed a positive review—and ordered fifteen copies.⁴³

Hierarchical gender assumptions shaped Brons's reception. Her exchange with Ulrich Hege illustrates the basic precariousness of her position. Without the opportunity to lead her own congregation, administer a conference, or publish a newspaper—as was the prerogative of comparably (and usually less) talented male contemporaries—Brons lacked a fervent base of supporters. Her influence thus depended on her reputation as an author, and her writing was always subject to the scrutiny and judgment of masculine gatekeepers. Male editors, churchmen, administrators, and readers constantly evaluated Brons's piety, assessing her prose and her person to determine whether and to what extent they should promote her work. Although Brons was able to satisfy Ulrich Hege in the matter of Jesus' parentage, sometimes she was found wanting. When Brons penned a separate, stand-alone article about ancient Palestine for Hege's newspaper, he refused to print it. Although the elder praised her description of Jesus' world—drawn from the Bible, other historic writings, and scholarly literature—he chastised Brons for omitting key elements. "[U]pon mentioning the fields of Bethlehem," he complained, "you say nothing of the shepherds who guarded their flocks or of the angels from heaven who proclaimed Jesus' birth." Jotting an explanatory note to herself, Brons wrote: "A proof of how careful one has to be with such literalist people."⁴⁴

The admonition was not misplaced, given how harshly Hege had recently treated another female Mennonite author, Christine Schmutz. In 1880, Schmutz had published a religious book sympathetic to the pietist, millenarian Templer movement.⁴⁵ Her volume offended Hege's sensibilities outright, and his *Congregational Paper* carried a scathing review. Blasting Schmutz for denying the divinity of Christ—the same issue over which he questioned Brons's orthodoxy—Hege ensured her

42. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 61-62.

43. H. D., "Eine neue Mennonitische Schrift," *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten*, August 1884, 63-64. Like Hermann Mannhardt's discussion in the progressive *Mennonitische Blätter*, this review—which found Brons's book "very interesting and valuable"—described it as "the first work to depict the history of our congregations completely and in context."

44. Quoted in Fast, "Mennonitischer 'Apostolikumsstreit,'" 61, 63. Brons eventually published a sizeable book on ancient Palestine: Antje Brons, *Skizzen und Bilder aus Palästina kurz vor und nach unserer Zeitrechnung und aus der Geschichte des Christentums von Frauenhand* (Emden: W. Haynel, 1895). On the emergence and nature of historical writing about the ancient Holy Land in modern Germany, see Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

45. Christine Schmutz, *Samenkörner der Wahrheit, ausgestreut für wahrheitsliebende Herzen* (Eberbach: J. Wieprecht). On Schmutz's book and its reception, see Marion Kobelt-Groch, "'Ahnungsvolle Blicke in die selige Ewigkeit': Ein Gedicht von Christine Schmutz (1838-1906)," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 68 (2011), 161-176.

book's censure by the entire Baden conference.⁴⁶ Unlike Christine Schmutz, Brons possessed both the skill and desire to accommodate herself to readers with vastly different theological views. Admittedly, a gulf separated her liberal, worldly position from the fundamentalism of interlocutors like Ulrich Hege. Yet Brons was committed to building German Mennonite unity, and she willingly censored herself to achieve this goal. It certainly did not hurt that she regularly donated cash and other goods to conservative causes, including a free shipment of her book for the Baden conference's traveling ministry program. Such efforts paid off. During the same years when traditionalists like Hege were forming ideological lines against the newly established Union of Mennonite Congregations in the German Empire, they welcomed Brons's book—whose chapters she had laced with pro-Union subtext—into their homes and churches. "I would be pleased," Hege decided, "if it were distributed in all our Mennonite congregations, since they exhibit such lack of knowledge and a great ignorance of our history."⁴⁷

Considering the limitations imposed by this patriarchal context, Brons achieved impressive visibility. With the exception of the last deaconess of the Danzig congregation, who died the same year Brons was born, it is possible she was the only Mennonite woman in German lands to hold a formal congregational position during the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Although possibly referring to a male relative of the same name, an 1889 document produced by the church council of the Emden Mennonite Congregation lists "A. Brons" as a member of the deaconate.⁴⁹ Given Antje's close working relationships with Emden pastor J. P. Müller and her son, Bernhard, who had served as congregational chairman since 1872—as well as the fact that she was widely known in print as "A. Brons"—it seems likely that the document does refer to her.

Whether or not this is the case, by the late nineteenth century, Mennonites across Europe were discussing expanded roles for women in religious leadership. Even among conservatives, proposals for changes such as the re-establishment of deaconess positions received

46. Ulrich Hege, "Samenkörner der Wahrheit, ausgestreut für wahrheitsliebende Herzen von Christine Schmutz (in Rappenaue)," *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten*, March 1880, 23-24.

47. Quoted in Fast, "Mennonitischer 'Apostolikumsstreit,'" 63.

48. Christian Neff, "Diakonisse," in *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, ed. Hege and Neff, 435.

49. Kirchenrath der Mennoniten Gemeinde zu Emden, "Einladung zur Betheiligung an einer Ehrengabe für die Waldenser bei Gelegenheit der 200jährigen Feier ihrer Rückkehr in die Heimat nach der Vertreibung," June 20, 1889, Christian Neff Nachlaß, box 24, folder 190, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Bolanden-Weierhof, Germany. Antje Brons was the chief organizer of this funding drive, which raised 880 Marks for the Waldensian church. Hinrich van der Smissen, "Schreiben der Waldensertafel," *Mennonitische Blätter*, October 1889, 112-113.

consideration.⁵⁰ Brons certainly benefited from this trend in other contexts. In 1890, the membership of Germany's Mennonite Schooling and Educational Association was opened to women—a modification apparently made for Brons's specific benefit, since she was the only female member.⁵¹ Two years later, the organization's leadership—enamored with her cash donations and recent denominational history—invited her to write a booklet commemorating its twenty-fifty anniversary.⁵² This encounter might be contrasted with Brons's first authorial experience three decades earlier, when she had translated and edited a collection of sixteenth-century Anabaptist writings. While a progressive, historically-minded pastor in distant provincial Prussia agreed to publish the volume, which commemorated the 300th anniversary of Menno Simons's death, its title page bore the pseudonym "Th. B."⁵³

Brons's self-assurance grew with her deepening German nationalist activism. Beyond supporting the career of her husband, Ysaac, Antje became a political organizer in her own right. In 1850, she helped found a women's society that aided soldiers and citizens suffering from the First Schleswig War. When hostilities erupted between Prussia and Austria in 1866, Brons chaired a Women's Association for Wounded German Soldiers, providing services to German-speaking fighters on both sides of the conflict.⁵⁴ Her advocacy for women's welfare and education—including the establishment of a secondary school for girls in Emden⁵⁵—served both to mobilize women for nationalist causes and to raise the profile of women within national society. In 1873, when Brons published a second book, she once again omitted her own name. Yet with the attribution "By the Hand of a Woman," she now emphasized rather than hid her gender.⁵⁶ Only eleven years later, with the appearance of *Origins, Development, and Fate*, would Brons publish under her own name. By this time, her record of service—denominationally and in a wider public sense—was firmly established. "No work [toward Mennonite unity] in the last 50 years occurred without being guided by the inner and pious

50. See for example D.H., "Die Diakonisse," *Gemeindeblatt der Mennoniten*, August 1885, 68-69.

51. Kobelt-Groch, "New Ways or Old Paths?" 302-303.

52. Antje Brons, *Gedanken und Winke über die Frage, wie wir das Wohl unserer Kinder fördern können* (Kaiserslautern: Buchdruckerei M. Blenk & Cie, 1892).

53. Th.B. [Antje Brons], *Stimmen aus der Reformationszeit* (Danzig: Edwin Groening, 1861).

54. Hildebrandt, "Antje Brons als Mennoniten," 53.

55. This is notable, given that Germany's only Mennonite secondary school was all-male.

56. Von Frauenhand [Antje Brons], *Laienevangelium und Erste Entwicklung des Christenthums nach der Apostelgeschichte mit Rücksicht auf die vorchristliche Zeit* (Emden: W. Haynel, 1873). Also translated into Dutch: *Leeken evangelie en eerste ontwikkeling van het Christendom volgens de Handelingen der Apostelen in verband met den voor-Christelijken tijd* (Amsterdam: A. Winkler Prins, 1902).

participation of Frau Brons," assessed her friend and former pastor, Samuel Cramer, upon Brons's passing. "To east and west and wherever German-speaking people were to be found went her letters and often also her aid."⁵⁷

Cramer may have been right about Brons's letters and her money, but there were clear limits on her body. Despite being named an architect of the Mennonite Union and official historian of the Mennonite Schooling and Educational Association, it was her son Bernhard, and not Antje herself, who represented the family at conference planning meetings. The first chairman of the Mennonite Union, pastor Hinrich van der Smissen of Hamburg, described Bernhard's role thus:

He was a leading participant in the formation of the Union of Mennonite Congregations in the German Empire, and he dedicated his best strength with full love and dedication. Especially at the members' assemblies, he was among the most decisive speakers, who stood up for the strengthening of Mennonite self-consciousness with intelligent counsel and with a free hand in full agreement with his mother, whom he regarded highly.⁵⁸

Antje's influence thus depended not on personal charisma, but on ideals, intradenominational connections, and deep pockets. Even as she remained excluded from masculine spaces, Brons gave generously to Mennonite and Mennonite-affiliated causes. As of January 1886, for instance, she had donated 3,000 Marks to the new Union. Together with the 1,000 Marks provided by Bernhard, this constituted more than the total contributions of the fifteen congregations that had already volunteered preliminary dues.⁵⁹ Antje's bodily non-participation in German Mennonite unification resembled her earlier exclusion from efforts to form a German Empire. In 1848, when her husband had served as a delegate to the Frankfurt Parliament, Antje traveled from Emden to Frankfurt under the "protection" of her pastor. Upon arrival, she watched from an observers' section in St. Paul's church as Ysaac and the other male delegates debated the proposed nation-state.⁶⁰ If German national culture provided a model for Brons's engagement as a woman in Anabaptist politics, the social limits indicative of nationalist activism were reproduced in her Mennonite world.

57. Samuel Cramer, "Frau Brons," trans. from Dutch in Brons, *Frau Antje Brons*, 38-39.

58. Hinrich van der Smissen, "Brons, Bernhard," in *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, ed. Hege and Neff, 273.

59. "Einzeichnungsliste für den Verein deutscher Mennoniten: Erste Liste (Eingänge bis zum 1. Januar 1886 gemeldet)," *Mennonitische Blätter*, January 1886, 8.

60. Beisser-Apetz, *Das weiße Blatt*, 68-69.

And yet Brons's writing was successful, at least in part, precisely because of her gender. Rather than rendering *Origins, Development, and Fate* unusable to patriarchal churchmen, her self-presentation in fact telegraphed values desirable from ascendant Anabaptist as well as German nationalist perspectives. Male reviewers and correspondents extolled Brons's femininity. It was her "piety," "patience," and "harmoniousness" that, in their eyes, had enabled her to make such a noteworthy contribution. References to Brons virtually always stressed her womanliness, identifying her as "Frau Brons" or otherwise invoking domesticity. Antje's entry in the *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, for example, opens by describing her as "Brons, Anna [sic], born Cremer ten Doornkaat, wife of the honorable merchant Isaak Brons." Meanwhile, her husband Ysaac's substantially shorter description, written by the same author, begins: "Brons, Isaak, born on April 3, 1886 in Emden, chairman of the Mennonite congregation there until 1872."⁶¹ She was defined by marital status, he by church service. While Antje's article included a modest picture of her in a bonnet, Ysaac, the politician, received a nearly full-page standing portrait. The firm but positive gendering of Antje Brons emerges clearly in Samuel Cramer's obituary:

This important woman, who may serve as a model to others, was such a talented and singular as well as harmoniously developed and truly feminine personality, who contributed to the new awakening of German Mennonitism certainly no less than any of the men who worked toward this goal, and who also did so much good in her other work, not just through her position and wealth, not even simply through her clear judgement and her great energy, but above all because she was so...[sic] good.⁶²

Brons's womanly goodness, in other words, served as a mark of her readability. The apparent innocence of her writing resonated with church leaders. They viewed *Origins, Development, and Fate*, like the author herself, as unadulterated. If Brons's volume represented the "fruit of a grandmother's leisure hours," as she claimed, it deserved not critical skepticism, but doting acceptance.⁶³ This lenient approach might be contrasted with treatment by one of the book's few non-Mennonite

61. Van der Smissen, "Brons, Anna," 271; Hinrich van der Smissen, "Brons, Isaac," in *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, ed. Hege and Neff, 273.

62. Cramer, "Frau Brons," 37.

63. Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung und Schicksale*, xii. This was Hermann Mannhardt's position in "Endlich haben wir eine Geschichte der Mennoniten," 4.

reviewers, who felt it “could not quite stand up to scholarly critique.”⁶⁴ Such a feminine offering spoke to the domestically-defined denomination, not the masculine academy.

The international reception of *Origins, Development, and Fate* also reflected its gendered, nationalist trappings. By the end of the nineteenth century, Anabaptism’s demographic, financial, and educational weight had shifted from Europe to the far side of the Atlantic, concentrating especially in the United States.⁶⁵ Like the general reliance of the fledgling US historical profession on German scholarly models, Mennonites in North America maintained robust ties with counterparts in Central Europe.⁶⁶ Antje Brons’s book—enmeshed within the ideology and context of Imperial Germany and the Mennonite Union—was strategically positioned to help initiate a new transnational era of Anabaptist history writing. Well into the twentieth century, the Mennonite Church’s global landscape remained disproportionately shaped by leaders in or from Germany; by German-speakers familiar with literature produced in Europe; and to a remarkable extent, by Brons’s personal friends. Men like Hermann Mannhardt, Hinrich van der Smissen, and the historian Christian Neff persisted as giants of institutional life through the 1920s and beyond. They and their cohort published foundational works of history and theology; they oversaw the training of new pastoral elites; they organized international aid efforts; and they generated long-lived opportunities for intellectual exchange, such as Mennonite World Conference. Within the United States, immigrants from Germany counted among the most influential early Mennonite historians, including John Horsch, Carl Justus van der Smissen, and Ernst Correll. Others, such as Harold Bender and Cornelius Krahn, earned their doctorates in Germany—attractive as the home of celebrated Reformation historians like Ernst Troeltsch and Walther Köhler. While traveling to or studying in Germany, academic pilgrims simultaneously forged relationships with an older, revered generation of denominational historians.

64. Bernhard Pünjer, “Sekten, Separation, Richtungen innerhalb des Protestantismus,” *Theologischer Jahresbericht*, 4 (1885), 268. See also Aug. Werner, “Kirchengeschichte von 1700 an und Allgemeines,” *Theologischer Jahresbericht* 5 (1886), 300-302.

65. Brons’ book also influenced early Mennonite history writing in Imperial Russia, such as P.M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Brüderschaft in Russland (1789-1910) im Rahmen der mennonitischen Gesamtgeschichte* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911), 71. Abraham Friesen has outlined the broader reception of Germany’s Anabaptist historiography—particularly the works of Ludwig Keller—in the Russian Empire: *In Defense of Privilege: Russian Mennonites and the State Before and During World War I* (Winnipeg, Man.: Kindred Productions, 2006), especially 51-79. Because North American historians disproportionately shaped Anabaptist historiography after the First World War, this essay emphasizes developments in the United States.

66. Peter Novik, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 21-46.

Overviews of Anabaptist history produced in the United States through the mid-twentieth century drew on Antje Brons's *Origins, Development, and Fate*. Accounts of the development of this literature have identified two basic trajectories, roughly corresponding to the Old Mennonite and General Conference traditions. Most recently, historian David Weaver-Zercher has contextualized these strands within the split between "modernist" and "fundamentalist" factions of Protestant Christianity, with General Conference historians tending to fall on the modernist side and some Old Mennonite scholars being more influenced by fundamentalist positions.⁶⁷ This inexact dichotomy loosely paralleled the contemporaneous fracture running through Germany's congregations—a chasm that Antje Brons, despite her own liberal views, had successfully bridged. Having held appeal for progressives as well as conservatives in Imperial Germany, her book likewise spanned divides in North America. On the Old Mennonite side, a young Johannes—soon John—Horsch was among the first to reference Brons, citing her in his monograph, *Short History of the Mennonites* (1890).⁶⁸ Across the aisle, Cornelius Wedel—longtime president of the General Conference's Bethel College in Kansas—published a six-volume history of the world, from creation to the twentieth century. His third installment, *The History of the Dutch, Prussian, and Russian Mennonites* (1901), relied heavily on *Origins, Development, and Fate*.⁶⁹ The better-remembered C. Henry Smith, also writing from a General Conference perspective, sourced the material on modern Europe for his first book, *The Mennonites of America* (1909), primarily from Brons.⁷⁰ Smith's best-known work, *The Mennonites* (1920), identified Brons as the "author of a comprehensive and authentic history of the Mennonites," although he deemed Wedel's newer opus the superior work.⁷¹ Rounding out this group was Harold Bender, who, like his father-in-law John Horsch, wrote from an Old Mennonite perspective. Bender's landmark

67. Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror*, 181.

68. Johannes Horsch, *Kurzgefaßte Geschichte der Menmoniten* (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1890), 108.

69. C.H. Wedel, *Abriß der Geschichte der Menmoniten: Die Geschichte der niederländischen, preußischen und russischen Menmoniten* (Newton, Kan.: Schulverlag von Bethel College, 1901), 3-4. Wedel's textbooks—widely used by Mennonite young people—went through eleven editions in two languages across more than half a century.

70. C. Henry Smith, *The Mennonites of America* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1909), 80.

71. C. Henry Smith, *The Mennonites: A Brief History of their Origin and Development in both Europe and America* (Berne, Ind.: Mennonite Book Concern, 1920), 114, 314. This book went through five editions by 1981 and was still selling several hundred copies a year into the 1990s. See Keith L. Sprunger, "C. Henry Smith's Vision of Mennonite History," *Mennonite Life* 50, no. 1 (1995), 4-11.

essay, *The Anabaptist Vision* (1942), gave as its inspiration a “line of interpretation” popularized by Brons and her associates.⁷²

The specific impact of Brons’s ideas is less important for North American Mennonite historiography than the general emergence of an Anabaptist historical consciousness in Imperial Germany, with which she was intimately involved. Mennonite authors abroad were more likely to reference other, slightly later works—such as the voluminous writings of the Münster archivist Ludwig Keller, a close colleague and confidant of Brons—than her *Origins, Development, and Fate*.⁷³ Keller’s scholarship on the Reformation era was more sophisticated and up-to-date than Brons’s interpretations. For later periods, writers based in North America had access to better sources on transatlantic migration and settlement than did Brons. And among the devoutly nonresistant Mennonite historians of the early twentieth century, Brons’s full-throated promotion of military service fell on deaf ears. None were swayed by her opinions on the matter or even appear to have found them worthy of public comment.

If *Origins, Development, and Fate* helped to spark a transnational movement, its template was quickly overwritten. Brons’s reception in the United States, in one sense, is a story of pacifist authors reclaiming Anabaptist history from her militarist approach. Even the most direct importations of Bronsian concepts often had more to do with debates unfolding in North America than with promoting her particular brand of nationalism. Cornelius Wedel, for example, structured his textbook series around the idea of “Congregational-Christendom,” a framework shared by Brons and Keller; but his major concern was rendering modern culture and scholarship accessible to local coreligionists.⁷⁴ And yet, precisely the notion of an apparently neutral, context adaptable, and globally resonant form of Anabaptist storytelling had animated Brons’s quest to promote denominational cohesion—a project she conceived in the context of and explicitly modeled on German national unification.

72. Harold Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18, no. 2 (1944), 73. On this document and its intellectual heritage, see Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1897-1962* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1998), 306-331. Bender’s characterization of Anabaptism as grounded in discipleship, fellowship, and pacifism remains influential—a trinity reformulated most recently in Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2017).

73. For Keller’s influence on Horsch, Wedel, and Smith, see Robert Friedmann, “John Horsch and Ludwig Keller,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 21, no. 3 (1947), 160-174; Friesen, *History and Renewal*, 112-127; James C. Juhnke, “*Gemeindechristentum* and the Bible Doctrine: Two Mennonite Visions of the Early Twentieth Century,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57, no. 3 (1983), 206-221; Perry Bush, *Peace, Progress, and the Professor: The Mennonite History of C. Henry Smith* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2015), 134-139.

74. See Juhnke, “*Gemeindechristentum* and the Bible Doctrine,” 212.

CONCLUSION

The life and legacy of Antje Brons should matter to present-day Anabaptists. Widely hailed as the first comprehensive denominational history, her 1884 book, *Origins, Development, and Fate of the Anabaptists or Mennonites*, arguably initiated a disciplinary field now served by a robust ecology of academic journals, monograph series, college courses, and online publishing. While relatively few Anabaptist historians have read Brons's works or would even recognize her name, she and her ideas illuminate the dawn of our craft. Knowing why that tradition exists and what ends it has served should inform our relationship to it.

For Brons, historical inquiry was not a depoliticized endeavor. She harnessed scholarship to advance a self-consciously nationalist agenda, cloaked in the language of denominational interest. If readers mistook Brons's book as ideologically unbiased or adapted its contents to meet their own needs, they in fact fulfilled her major objective. She considered efforts to mobilize a nationally unified Germanic church most effective if undertaken from points of assumed common ground. In the United States, interlocutors like John Horsch, Cornelius Wedel, C. Henry Smith, and Harold Bender each wrote against the militarism of their coreligionists in Germany—occasionally questioning whether those who accepted armed service were still Mennonite at all. Yet more typically, they saw debates about nonresistance as separable from Brons's larger, and to their minds admirable, goal of encouraging Anabaptist unity. North American scholars tended to reference Brons in positive terms; they uncritically reproduced information from her book, as long as it did not directly promote armed service; and they continued to maintain relationships with European colleagues likewise engaged in linking church history with Anabaptist politics. That this effort emerged in tandem with and even out of German militarist nationalism remains one of the central ironies of modern Mennonite history writing.

On one hand, we might see Brons as a laudable pioneer of women's engagement in denominational leadership. She both highlighted the voices of earlier influential women and made space for her own ideas in political and religious environments rife with exclusionary gender boundaries. Yet her notions of women's roles in church and society also served many of the dominant interests of her time, helping both to reinscribe certain forms of patriarchy and to link acceptable forms of gender advancement with German nationalist causes. Brons's work unquestionably aided and abetted a still-prominent tradition of praising the order, diligence, and efficiency of white, Germanic Mennonites—including white Mennonite women—that evoke unflattering contrasts with people of non-Germanic heritage, among them and perhaps especially women of color. Such tropes remain inextricably entangled

with one of the historic roles of the Mennonite Church as an agent of white religion and promotor of European racial supremacy.⁷⁵

At a time when most members of the global Mennonite Church are individuals of color who live in the Global South, Bronsian narratives emphasizing demographic continuity from the Reformation to the present are deeply out of place.⁷⁶ They were, of course, anachronistic from the outset. Mennonites of color lived during Brons's own lifetime on mission stations across multiple continents, while formal colonialism initiated by Imperial Germany implicated citizens in segregation and, eventually, genocide. *Origins, Development, and Fate*, with its seemingly unproblematic group-chronological methodology, in fact coheres only within nationalist logics and the discriminatory ends they serve. During the generations since the late nineteenth century, the paths of Anabaptist historiography have been many and varied. Current practices and preoccupations reflect a host of intermediary figures, topics, and schools of thought, few with primary lineage in the early German Empire. Nonetheless Brons's shadow remains on us so long as our histories — scholarly or otherwise — continue to tout European roots and the global dispersion of an "ethnic" Mennonite people.⁷⁷ A woman stands at the origins of modern Mennonite history writing; it is surely worth remembering that she was a militarist, German nationalist woman.

75. See Philipp Gollner, "How Mennonites Became White: Religious Activism, Cultural Power, and the City," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (April 2016), 165-193; Benjamin W. Goossen, "From Aryanism to Anabaptism: Nazi Race Science and the Language of Mennonite Ethnicity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (April 2016), 135-163; Benjamin W. Goossen, "Measuring Mennonitism: Racial Categorization in Nazi Germany and Beyond," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016), 225-246; Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 96-212.

76. On ethnic diversity in the global Mennonite church, see the five-volume Global Mennonite History Series: John A. Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder, eds., *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts: Africa* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2006); Hanspeter Jecker and Alle G. Hoekema, eds., *Testing Faith and Tradition: Europe* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2006); Jamie Prieto, *Mission and Migration: Latin America* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2010); John A. Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder, eds., *Churches Engage Asian Traditions: Asia* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2011); Royden Loewen and Steven Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace: North America* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2012).

77. My thinking follows a new wave of Mennonite scholarship concerned with the ways that church leaders and others have marshalled power to reinforce hierarchies of gender and race, including Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity* (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia, 2011); Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Stephanie Krehbiel, "Pacifist Battlegrounds: Violence, Community, and the Struggle for LGBTQ Justice in the Mennonite Church USA" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2015); Drew G.I. Hart, *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2016).