



# Mennonite Historian

## Ending the Silence

by Ben Goossen

Why has it taken until the twenty-first century for the global Mennonite church to begin reckoning with Nazi collaboration? More than seventy years after Hitler's death and the liberation of Europe's concentration camps, only now are people publicly, extensively discussing Mennonite entanglement with National Socialism. During the 1930s and '40s, pro-Nazi movements arose among Mennonites in Brazil, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Paraguay, and Ukraine. At the height of Hitler's empire building, one fourth of Mennonites lived in the Third Reich.

The answer—as I discovered during the seven years I spent researching my book, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*—is that prominent Mennonite leaders, scholars, and institutions did not want this story told.<sup>1</sup> The most recent example is Peter Letkemann's disparaging review of *Chosen Nation* in the previous *Mennonite Historian*. Letkemann describes my book as “an interpretive essay full of factual errors.” It is “unfortunate,” he writes, that I did not “take more time to make significant changes in order to provide a more accurate and complete picture.”<sup>2</sup>

Some deciphering is necessary here. Letkemann likes neither *Chosen Nation*'s methods nor its content. He uses the term “interpretive essay” to dismiss definitions of nationalism or collaboration or pacifism that he does not share. “Take more time,” similarly, is code for Letkemann's belief that if I had only thought harder, I would have come around to his view, explaining German patriotism as the pragmatics of desperation.<sup>3</sup>

Unmentioned is that we know each other well. While I was

drafting *Chosen Nation*, Letkemann read and critiqued most chapters. My book is certainly richer for his involvement, including his boundless energy, vast knowledge, and trove of unpublished sources. But I also chose to discount much of his advice. Otherwise, *Chosen Nation* would never have been written. While Letkemann generally encouraged Anabaptist research, he consistently attempted to steer me from the “minefield” of Nazism.<sup>4</sup>

*Chosen Nation* is a work of history. It uses the tools of historical inquiry to thoughtfully examine a difficult period. My own interpretations draw heavily on the groundbreaking, prize-winning scholarship of other experts on nationalism, including Rogers Brubaker, Peter Judson, Helmut Smith, and Tara Zahra, to name a few.<sup>5</sup> The “errors” Letkemann flags are well-established concepts regularly deployed by these authorities, as I explain in *Chosen Nation*'s introduction and endnotes.

I consider Letkemann to be a personal friend, and I am willing to extend him the benefit of the doubt. I assume he does not consider his review part of a longstanding, multi-country cover-up of Mennonite-Nazi collaboration. But I also think his particular understanding of the calling and practice of history is too narrow to do justice to the full scope and importance of the Anabaptist story. Letkemann himself writes movingly about the suffering of many European Mennonites under communism.<sup>6</sup> This is true and tragic. Yet surely a nuanced and complete reading would also find Mennonites who acted as “nationalists,” “activists,” or “anti-Semites.”<sup>7</sup>

Debate about the level of collaboration dates to the aftermath of the Second World War, when thousands of Mennonite refugees sought transatlantic passage. As I show in *Chosen Nation*, virtually all had received Nazi aid as Aryans, and draft-age men served in German military units.<sup>8</sup> Yet these were “not collaborators,” according to Mennonite Central Committee's Peter Dyck, who in 1946 claimed they were “neither Russian nor German” but persecuted migrants characterized by nonresistance and comparable to Jews.<sup>9</sup> Dozens of such memos from leaders like Harold Bender, Melvin Gingerich, C.F. Klassen, Cornelius Krahn, and C. Henry Smith made their way to military officials, bureaucrats, refugee organizations, and the United Nations.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, countervailing reports trickled out. As early as 1949, files from Heinrich Himmler's SS opened a window onto refugees' wartime activities. Mennonite leaders feared that up to 95 percent would be implicated, and they drowned allegations with strongly-worded challenges.<sup>11</sup> This pattern continued for decades. During the 1950s, MCC worked to sanitize official accounts of its refugee operations.<sup>12</sup> Canadian historian Frank Epp garnered searing criticism when he broached the issue in the 1960s.<sup>13</sup>

Back in Germany, right-wing historians and churchmen defanged 1970s assessments. The multi-year controversy yielded a moratorium on discussing "a 'religious downfall' of Mennonites."<sup>14</sup> Likewise in Paraguay, the subject remained taboo until the 1980s, when international efforts to locate Auschwitz physician Josef Mengele drew unwanted attention.<sup>15</sup> Only in the 1990s was scholarship printed.<sup>16</sup>

The same logics that suppressed discourse for generations operate in Letkemann's review. Letkemann—who was born in a German refugee camp and currently manages a press "dedicated to the preservation and remembrance of Russian/Soviet Mennonite History"—has spent decades chronicling his "people."<sup>17</sup> I understand his attachment to humanitarians like Benjamin Unruh, who helped Letkemann's own family escape the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> Yet Unruh was also a self-identified National Socialist who contributed enthusiastically to SS race programs.<sup>19</sup>

Justifying Unruh and company is a dark road, requiring dangerous suspension of scholarly skepticism. Letkemann's definition of "collaboration," for instance, is so limited, it includes only the physical execution of Jews. Respected historians from Detlev Peukert and Geoff Eley to Ian Kershaw and Peter Fritzsche have long accepted that consensus among ordinary people enabled Hitler's crimes.<sup>20</sup> Yet Letkemann speaks of "individuals, mostly young men."<sup>21</sup>

He goes on to explain—arguably to excuse—their participation in mass murder. Letkemann hypothesizes that killers from Mennonite communities were "probably acting in revenge.... They were well aware that a large number of men and women of Jewish background worked as administrators, agents, and interrogators in the [Soviet government]."<sup>22</sup> The

myth that Jewish Bolsheviks carried out ethnic cleansing against Germans has been thoroughly exposed by historians Jeffrey Herf and Lorna Waddington as a cornerstone of Nazi propaganda.<sup>23</sup> The trope is frankly anti-Semitic.

Apologists once commanded powers of institutional censorship. No longer. Since 2015, church-affiliated organizations in the Netherlands, Germany, Paraguay, and the United States have rigorously studied Mennonites and Nazism, yielding three edited volumes and a conference series.<sup>24</sup> With clear, extensive documentation widely available, we are finally able to ask: what responsibility—after decades of silencing—do we have to this history, and to its victims?

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## Endnotes

1. Benjamin W. Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

2. Peter Letkemann, "Book review," *Mennonite Historian* 43, no. 3 (2017): 11–12.

3. Referencing Mennonite aid worker Benjamin Unruh's wartime collaboration with SS chief Heinrich Himmler, for example, Letkemann writes: "Unruh could not but take advantage of an opportunity to speak with this powerful leader and his associates.... Unruh was in constant communication with these officials to ensure the well-being of his fellow Mennonites." *Ibid.*, 12.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Pieter Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Helmut Walser Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870–1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

6. Peter Letkemann, "Mennonite Victims of Revolution, Anarchy, Civil War, Disease and Famine, 1917–1923," *Mennonite Historian* 24, no. 2 (1998): 1–2, 9; Peter Letkemann, "Mennonite Victims of 'The Great Terror,' 1936–1938," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998): 33–58; Peter Letkemann, "The Fate of Mennonites in the Volga-Ural Region, 1929–1941," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 26 (2008): 181–200; Peter Letkemann, *A Book of Remembrance: Mennonites in Arkadak and Zentral, 1908–1941* (Winnipeg, MB: Old Oak Publishing, 2016).

7. Letkemann contests each of these labels in "Book review," 11.

8. Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 147–173.

9. Peter Dyck, "Mennonite Refugees in Germany," July 1946, FO 1050/1565, The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

10. Benjamin W. Goossen, "From Aryanism to Anabaptism: Nazi Race Science and the Language of

Mennonite Ethnicity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90, no. 2 (2016): 148–161.

11. Frank Epp, *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona, MB: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1962), 406–408; Ted Regehr, "Of Dutch or German Ancestry? Mennonite Refugees, MCC, and the International Refugee Organization," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (1995): 15–17.

12. *Ibid.*, 18.

13. Ted Regehr, "Walter Quiring (1893–1983)," in Harry Loewen, ed., *Shepherds, Servants and Prophets: Leadership among the Russian Mennonites (ca. 1880–1960)* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2003), 329–330. Epp's meticulous dissertation remains unpublished; Frank Epp, "An Analysis of Germanism and National Socialism in the Immigrant Newspaper of a Canadian Minority Group, the Mennonites, in the 1930s" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1965).

14. Diether Götz Lichdi, "Vergangenheitsbewältigung und Schulbekenntnisse der Mennoniten nach 1945," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 64 (2007): 49. See also Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 187–194.

15. Daniel Stahl, "Wie die Fernheimer lernten, über die 'Völkische Zeit' zu sprechen: Zur langen Nachgeschichte eines Konflikts," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 18 (2017): 161–186.

16. Peter Klassen, *Die deutsch-völkische Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, Chaco-Paraguay (1933–1945)* (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1990); John Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes Among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933–1945* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999).

17. "About," *Old Oak Publishing*, <http://oldoakpublishing.com/about-2/>. Letkemann identifies "people" as his preferred translation of the German "Volk," uncritically asserting that the "race" background of most white Mennonites can be described as "Flemish, Frisian, Swiss, or German." Letkemann, "Book review," 11. By contrast, one of *Chosen Nation's* main arguments is that Mennonite intellectuals developed narratives of both coherent peoplehood as well as Germanic identity in recent centuries for strategic political reasons.

18. Letkemann has written positively about Unruh: Peter Letkemann "Nachwort," in Heinrich Unruh, *Fügungen und Führungen: Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, 1881–1959* (Detmold: Verein zur Erforschung und Pflege des Russlanddeutschen Mennonitentums, 2009), 361–447.

19. Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 147–156, 166–171.

20. Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Geoff Eley, *Nazism as Fascism: Violence, Ideology, and the Ground of Consent in Germany 1930–1945* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2015); Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

21. Letkemann, "Book review," 12.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006); Lorna Waddington, *Hitler's Crusade: Bolshevism and the Myth of the International Jewish Conspiracy* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

24. Published volumes include the special journal issues: Jelle Bosma and Alle Hoekema, eds., "Doopsgezinden tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog," *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 41 (2015); and Uwe Friesen, ed., "Die völkische Bewegung und der Nationalsozialismus bei den Mennoniten in Paraguay," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 18 (2017); as well as Marion Kobelt-Groch and Astrid von Schlachta, eds., *Mennoniten*



*in der NS-Zeit: Stimmen, Lebenssituationen, Erfahrungen* (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 2017). The next academic conference on this topic, entitled "Mennonites and the Holocaust," will be held in March 2018 at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas.