Nazi denialism must end

I was troubled to read the review of my book *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (“Menno-Nazi connection unconvincing,” Aug. 28, page 31), in which Barb Draper expressed scepticism that tens of thousands of Mennonites sympathized with, and benefitted from, National Socialism.

On this subject, the historical record is clear. Pro-Nazi movements developed during the 1930s and ‘40s among Mennonites in Brazil, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Paraguay and Ukraine. By the height of the Second World War, a fourth of the denomination lived in the Third Reich.

Nazi denialism is, sadly, not surprising. Just last year, *Canadian Mennonite* also published a letter (“Ukrainian survivors rebut ‘Aryan’ claims,” Nov. 7, page 9) alleging that Mennonites under Nazi rule “had not heard of Aryanism and other racial theories until well after the conclusion of the war”—a claim simply at odds with historical documents.

Nor is denialism new. In fact, during the late 1940s, prominent Mennonite leaders Peter Dyck, C.F. Klassen and Harold Bender claimed in numerous memos to the United Nations and other organizations that European Mennonites were “not collaborators,” but rather peace-loving non-Germans who had suffered “as the Jews” under Nazism.

Such claims also obscured the extent to which some North American Mennonites had flirted with Nazism. C.F. Klassen was an anti-Semite who owned shares in Canada’s largest Nazi newspaper.

Now, more than 60 years later, it is time to face our history. Church-affiliated institutions in the Netherlands, Germany and the U.S. have already begun this process. Of all countries with substantial Anabaptist populations implicated in Nazism, Canada remains the only location where Mennonites have yet to undertake a robust public reckoning.

The time has come for Canada’s churches and institutions to consider what obligation they have to the victims of Nazism, both during the last century and in this age of rising white nationalism.


Ben Goossen is a historian at Harvard University.