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Book Review

**Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age**  
by **John P. R. Eicher**, Cambridge University Press, 2020. 356 pp. \$99.99

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Through a transnational history of a German-speaking religious diaspora, John P. R. Eicher's *Exiled Among Nations* addresses some of the most pressing themes and concepts in modern German history. Based on his award-winning dissertation, the monograph follows the movements of two German-speaking Mennonite communities that traversed several continents before finally settling in neighboring colonies in Paraguay. One group, the Menno Colony, was composed of voluntary migrants who left Imperial Russia for the Canadian plains, while the Fernheim Colony were largely refugees from the Soviet Union that settled in Paraguay after previously experiencing precarious statelessness in Germany and China. Eicher offers the reader two broad theses: on the one hand, he posits, "that diasporic groups harnessed the global spread of nationalism and ecumenicism to create local mythologies and secure evolving local objectives." Conversely, while diasporic groups instrumentalized their interactions with outsiders, "governments and aid organizations in Europe and the Americas used diasporic groups for their own purposes by portraying them as enemies or heroes in their evolving national and religious mythologies" (Eicher 1).

Rather than employing static religious or national identities, Eicher posits that "nations and religions exist as mythologies that are arranged as narratives over time" (17).

This approach brings a surprising fluidity to the notions of Mennoniteness and Germanness, and furthermore better accounts for the – at times radical – shifts in these narratives over time. Eicher’s methodological framework draws upon Northrop Frye’s Theory of Modes to interrogate how German-speaking Mennonites constructed myths of “wandering” and “exile” (22). In opposition to nationalists, Eicher classifies the various strains of Mennonite thought as separatist or associative. Each of these strains of Mennonite intellectual positions emerged out of encounters with domestic and foreign governments, aid organizations, and co-religionists abroad. Principal among these international aid agencies was the U.S.-based Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), which sought to assume the mantle of leadership for a global Mennonite consciousness. To make themselves legible to governments, the Mennonite communities periodically upsold the markers of their ethnicity or economic productivity. Throughout this period, the Menno and Fernheim Colonies were viewed alternatively by outsiders as fifth columnists, “German farmers,” and North American-style Mennonites (Eicher 293).

This work sits comfortably within the budding literature on global Germany which seeks to place modern German history within its contemporary global, transnational, and international contexts. This premium on understanding how narratives and counter-narratives emerged is vital to Eicher’s consideration of the construction of transnational German and Mennonite mythologies. Through the comparable experiences of these two

Mennonite communities, and the various outside actors who sought to control them, the deep entanglements between the local, the national, and the transnational are revealed.

This study also offers a salient decentering of the nation-state. Yet rather than simply denying the nation's importance in the first half of the twentieth century, Eicher explores how intellectuals sought to develop narratives and "make new mythologies – new rationalities – that glorified progress and homogenization." The nationalist projects of this period existed alongside "alternate trajectories" of collective identity and belonging (Eicher 290-291). As some Mennonite intellectuals found safe haven within national territories and their "imagined communities," others forged transnational solidarities and networks for the denomination.

The book begins with a lengthy introduction that lays out the theoretical and historical approaches to the study and ends with a brief conclusion. The bulk of the text consists of six chapters that trace both the movements and debates within the two Mennonite settlements. While Eicher documents these two communities across the entire era of high nationalism (1870-1945), the study predominately focuses on developments during the 1920s and 1930s.

Chapter One "No Lasting City (1870-1930)" introduces members of the future Menno Colony as they voluntarily migrated from southern Russia to the Canadian plains in the late nineteenth century. However, once slowly confronted in the 1920s by the

assimilatory educational policies of the expanding Canadian state, separatist Mennonites sought new opportunities in the frontiers of a weaker state. Unlike their associative co-religionists, who were more willing to navigate their belonging within a democratic polity, the separatists clung to the language of subjecthood, not citizenship, that had long been fostered from their historical interactions with the tsarist state and interpretations of biblical analogies. Under the sovereignty of the Paraguayan state, separatist Menno colonists found their preferred “set of privileges in exchange for their communal autonomy as subjects” (Eicher 82).

In Chapter Two “A Sort of Homecoming (1929-1931),” Eicher introduces the very different circumstances of the future Fernheim Colony. Unlike the voluntary migrations of the Menno Colony, this Mennonite community was forced into exile by Stalin’s emergent policy of dekulakization. Their additional precarity as refugees made this group of German-speaking Mennonites more reliant upon the interventions of states, such as Germany that viewed them as *Auslandsdeutsche*, or aid agencies that aimed to incorporate them into an international religious network. The first two chapters exhibit how both governments and aid organizations sought to incorporate the Mennonite communities within their own national or international projects of classifying their polities according to indicators of race, class, religion, and citizenship. Nevertheless, this nationalist mythmaking was hardly ever in lockstep with the local articulations and desires of the Mennonites themselves.

With the Menno and Fernheim Colonies established in Paraguay, Chapter Three “Troubled Tribes in the Promised Land (1930-1939)” explores the local conditions of the Mennonite settlements by surveying their relationship to their environment, their divergent roles in the Chaco War, and their attitudes towards the indigenous populations of the Gran Chaco region. Between 1932 and 1935, Bolivia and Paraguay fought for control of the Gran Chaco region, a sparsely populated yet resource-rich territory. Unlike the Menno residents who feared the loss of their hard-fought autonomy from the state, the Fernheimers “were willing to aid the Paraguayan army because they had worked with governments before and wanted to thank the country that welcomed them as refugees” (Eicher 152). Moving beyond the Chaco War, Chapter Four “Mennonite (Di)Visions (1930-1939)” shifts its focus to the United States and the engagement of the MCC with each colony. As the Mennonite Central Committee aspired to foster transnational religious solidarity under its leadership, the two colonies failed to unify under a shared understanding of Mennoniteness and remained indifferent to – or even divided over – impositions from the MCC.

Evocatively, Eicher turns his attention to Germany in Chapter Five “Peanuts for the Führer (1933-1939)” and shows that the Menno and Fernheim Colonies were perceived as enclaves of “racial comrades” by the nascent Nazi state. Finally, Chapter Six “Centrifugal Fantasies, Centripetal Realities (1939-1945)” demonstrates “how the Fernheim Colony’s collective narrative reached a point of crisis (and violence) between 1937 and 1944 as

colonists became divided between those who continued to believe that they should remain in Paraguay, as per the wishes of the MCC, and those who thought they should relocate to Europe under Nazi jurisdiction” (Eicher 28). In stark opposition to their Fernheim neighbors, the Menno colonists remained elusive and indifferent throughout the 1930s and 1940s to Nazi attempts at fostering a global Germanness along racial lines.

The book’s clear arguments make it easily accessible to specialists and non-specialists alike. Eicher consults an impressive array of primary sources, including archives in Canada, Germany, Paraguay, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Making extensive use of the local archives of the Mennonite colonies themselves and the published works of their leadership, Eicher reconstructs the internal dynamics and debates within these communities that led to their very different approaches to the Paraguayan state and National Socialism in Germany. Nevertheless, the interested reader could certainly supplement Eicher’s monograph with another recent study by Benjamin W. Goossen on German Mennonites during the era of high nationalism [Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era, 2017]. Where Eicher employs the framework of mythologies, Goossen explores religious and national affinities through the prism of collectivism. Both authors offer original readings of German nationalism, one more reflective of the dynamics of religiosity and local vernaculars. *Exiled Among Nations* deserves to be widely read by seasoned specialists, graduate students, and interested general readers. Scholars of German history, global history,

and diaspora studies will all greatly profit from John Eicher's illuminating study.



### Works Cited

Eicher, John P. R. *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a*

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