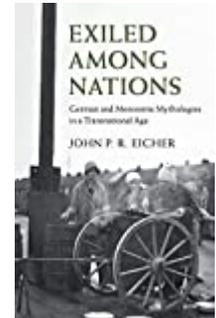


John P. R. Eicher. *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age* (Publications of the German Historical Institute). Washington, DC; Cambridge: German Historical Institute; Cambridge University Press, 2020. xvi + 337 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-48611-8.



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Published on H-TGS (March, 2021)

Commissioned by Benjamin Bryce (University of British Columbia)

Exiled Among Nations

John P. R. Eicher's *Exiled Among Nations* is an important and timely contribution to studies of nationalism, migration, religion, and transnational exchange in the turbulent period of 1870-1945. From the nucleus of two groups of German-speaking Mennonites—Anabaptists who spoke a dialect of Low German (*Plattdeutsch*) and traditionally formed self-governing farming communities—Eicher weaves a narrative that spans Russia, Germany, Canada, the United States, and Paraguay. He deepens our understanding not only of the factors that led people to migrate, but also the ways in which modern migrants and refugees made meaning out of their displacement, and how these meanings collided with the imperatives of nationalizing states.

The communities at the heart of *Exiled Among Nations* established adjacent colonies in Paraguay's western Chaco region, but arrived under very different circumstances. Inhabitants of the Menno Colony were conservative Mennonites

who migrated in order to preserve their traditional religious privileges and escape the demands of modern citizenship: national identity, secular education, and military conscription. Descended from settlers in the Russian Empire who arrived in the Black Sea and Volga regions in the early nineteenth century, Menno Colony Mennonites left the Russian Empire in the 1870s when Tsar Alexander II sought to reverse their long-standing exemption from military service. First migrating to western Canada, where they were recruited by Canadian authorities as "German pioneers" (p. 47) to settle and nationalize the land, a smaller group migrated onward to Paraguay in the 1920s to escape new legislation mandating universal English-language education. Community leaders and intellectuals, Eicher shows, narrated the group's history through a "comic plot progression" (p. 23), interpreting their migrations as evidence of witness to a divine calling. Yet while these Mennonites rejected modern national identities, their appeal to host coun-

tries was rooted in racialized conceptions of citizenship. Their settlements displaced indigenous populations in Russia, Canada, and Paraguay.

Mennonites of the nearby Fernheim Colony were also descendants of German-speaking settlers in the Russian Empire. They arrived in Paraguay, however, not as migrants but as refugees. During Stalin's collectivization campaigns of the late 1920s, Mennonites were targeted as large landowning kulaks. Thousands traveled to Moscow to demand permission to emigrate to Germany, an appeal amplified by German parties and press outlets across the (noncommunist) political spectrum. Ultimately permitted to leave the Soviet Union, the refugees arrived in Germany in November 1929 only to find themselves the objects of an international quarrel over their citizenship status. Many would have preferred to remain in Germany or travel to Canada, but in the end, this group of Mennonites too made its way to the Paraguayan Chaco, following arrangements coordinated by the US-based Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Conceiving of themselves as forced exiles, Fernheim Colony Mennonites, unlike their Menno Colony counterparts, became drawn to ethnic German nationalism. With the rise of the Nazi dictatorship, many welcomed the new regime's promise of reuniting a global German diaspora, what Eicher convincingly terms a project of "(trans)National Socialism" (p. 207). Yet efforts by the colony's leaders to coordinate repatriation to Germany came to naught by the early 1940s, the result of internal tensions as well as the disinterest of Nazi authorities.

In richly textured prose, Eicher narrates the entanglements of the two colonies, using their histories to illuminate the instability of national identities at the peak of European nationalist mobilization. Most illuminating, Eicher situates the Mennonite colonies within global political networks that incorporated the Paraguayan, Canadian, and German states as well as North American and German-based Mennonite organizations. Nationally

ambiguous, both colonies consistently fell short of the expectations placed upon them by outsiders. The MCC sought to develop the colonies as outposts of a global Mennonite community defined by virtues of industriousness, self-reliance, and democratic government. Yet the MCC proved bitterly disappointed when successive waves of Fernheim colonists departed from the Chaco in search of more hospitable territory, apparently more concerned to ease their living conditions than maintain the communal identity that the MCC envisioned. Relations between the colonies and the Nazi state proved even more contentious. Following a 1937 visit to both colonies, Nazi ethnographer Herbert Wilhelmy concluded that neither exhibited a sufficiently patriotic spirit, prioritizing religious dogma and internal leadership struggles over loyalty to the Reich. Still, the colonies came under the surveillance of US and Paraguayan authorities during the Second World War as a potential Nazi fifth column. By the end of the war, Eicher concludes, the narratives constructed by leaders in both colonies to make sense of their shifting circumstances, whether the "comic" plot of the Menno Colony or the "tragic" narrative of the Fernheimers, had unravelled. Neither group "found exactly what they were looking for in the Chaco" (p. 296) but instead developed new, unexpected forms of community.

Exiled Among Nations makes important contributions to histories of Central European nationalism and of Germans in the world. Whereas historians such as Pieter Judson, Tara Zahra, James Bjork, and Brendan Karch have emphasized the "national indifference" of broad swaths of early twentieth-century Central Europeans, Eicher portrays a phenomenon closer to national resistance in the case of the Menno colonists, or national longing in their Fernheim counterparts. Rather than adopting nationalities for instrumental purposes, leaders of both communities invested deeply in defining their communities' relationship to nationalism, part of a larger project of attaching narrative meaning to their displacement. *Ex-*

Exiled Among Nations also complements the most recent English-language study of German-speaking Mennonites, Benjamin W. Goossen's *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (2017). Whereas Goossen traces the growing appeal of ethno-nationalism among Mennonite German citizens from the late nineteenth century through the Nazi era, Eicher shows how Mennonite national identity was even more hotly contested outside German borders. Moreover, Eicher's work offers a rich theoretical contribution to the history of religion. Seeking to blend materialist and culturalist approaches, Eicher weaves between a reduction of religion to political and economic forces and an internalist reconstruction of religious languages. He instead portrays a dynamic interaction between religiously based group identities and exogenous political change. The act of narrative construction becomes for Eicher the means by which societies bridge this gap, and therefore an object worthy of historical study in its own right. This nonreductive, dialectical approach makes *Exiled Among Nations* compelling reading.

The study might have been enhanced by further consideration of three points. First, gender is oddly absent as an analytic category throughout. Although female colonists figure briefly in a discussion of the difficulties of life in the Chaco—and women's labor is clearly manifest in photographs throughout the book—Eicher does not consider the ways in which gender structured the terms of Mennonites' collective narratives. This omission may stem from Eicher's focus on public narratives of migration circulated through sermons, newspapers, published books, and transnational correspondence, domains that were largely the purview of men. In the absence of written sources documenting women's perspectives (if such is the case), Eicher might have probed more deeply into the photographs, which are used primarily for illustrative purposes. These images—which depict, for instance, female nurses during the Chaco war (p. 149) or “a young woman in the Fernheim Colony tend[ing] to her swastika [shaped] garden” (p. 255)

—demonstrate both the limitations placed on women's roles as well as the ways in which women became active agents of nationalizing projects.

The study might also have expanded its discussion of indigeneity. Eicher notes that German-speaking Mennonites participated in successive waves of indigenous displacements, and briefly addresses missionary efforts in relationship to the colonies' competing narratives. Whereas the Fernheim Colony welcomed missionizing to the Enlhit and other local indigenous peoples as a means of giving purpose to its life in exile, Menno Colony leaders suspected that missions would primarily serve the territorial ambitions of the Paraguayan state. Nevertheless, indigenous voices are largely absent, and the social history of interactions between German-speaking colonists and indigenous peoples in Latin America remains a desideratum for further research.

Finally, the book, which concludes in 1945, leaves the reader wondering about the fate of the colonies in the postwar period. Certainly, the chronological framing is logical given the study's focus on contested nationalities, but the Chaco colonies might also shed light on the resilience or fragility of nationalist aspirations in transformed world of the Cold War. Intriguingly, Eicher notes that the Menno Colony began proselytizing to local indigenous peoples only in the 1950s (p. 155). But the reasons for this shift—an increasing sense of rootedness of Paraguay, or an end to the threat of militant German nationalism—remain unexplored. Future scholars might examine the connection of the postwar Germanies to German-speaking populations in Latin America, or the possibilities for a non-nationalist diasporic German identity in the Cold War era.

These questions, however, do not detract from this tour de force of archival research and theoretical rigor. In *Exiled Among Nations*, Eicher has written a vivid account of how seemingly peripheral groups could serve as conduits for political forces that shaped the modern world. More than a

case study, the book is an exploration of the condition of modernity itself, its pervasiveness and centripetal pull, that will speak to scholars of modern history across specializations.

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Citation: Brandon Bloch. Review of Eicher, John P. R. *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age (Publications of the German Historical Institute)*. H-TGS, H-Net Reviews. March, 2021.

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