

The Mennonite Encounter with National Socialism in Latin America, 1933-1944

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In June 1933, the monthly newspaper of the young Mennonite colony of Fernheim in the Paraguayan Chaco carried an article called "The Mennonite Settlements in the Paraguayan Chaco and the National Revolution in Germany." "Although we always receive the news very late about the events in our Motherland," said the *Menno-Blatt*, "yet the heart of the Chaco settler beats faster every time he eventually hears that things in Germany are again on an upward course."¹ "The renewal movement that today is going through the whole of Germandom, both at home and abroad, has not been without influence on the German-minded [*deutschfühlende*] Mennonites in the Chaco."

On 18 May 1933, at a meeting of village representatives in the colony (*Bezirksversammlung*), Gerhard Isaak, an elderly Mennonite Brethren preacher, spoke about the "national revolution" (*nationale Erhebung*) in Germany. The gathered colony leaders decided to address a letter of greeting to the new German government.

With greatest excitement we German Mennonites of the Paraguayan Chaco follow the events in our beloved Motherland and experience in spirit the national revolution of the German people. We are happy that in Germany after a long time a government stands at the head of the nation that freely and openly professes God as Creator, which government also can lead our enslaved and broken people [*Volk*] again to a new time of flourishing, if the people calls to mind its most holy

possessions and finds its way back to the Source of all strength. With special sympathy we hear that the current government takes seriously the realization of Christian principles in social, economic, and cultural life and especially emphasizes the protection of the family as the foundation of the whole national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*] and the state.

Indeed our little Mennonite people [*Mennonitenvölklein*] experienced in person the consequences of the senseless communist idea through which Christian principles and the blessed influence of the family in national life was eliminated. Thus we cannot at all understand that the earlier governments did not clear away ruinous Communism but for years let its undermining influence work upon the German people. We thank the Almighty that in the nick of time He sent our Motherland men who attacked Communism with a strong hand and in a short time overcame it.²

The letter went on to recall the kindness of the German people in 1929, when the Fernheim colonists were refugees on their way from the Soviet Union to Paraguay, and to express gratitude and continued loyalty to *Deutschtum*. It was signed by the *Oberschulze*, or senior colony administrator, David Löwen, and by the chairman of the colony's clergy, Nikolai Wiebe, the leader of the small Evangelical Mennonite Brethren or *Allianzgemeinde* group in Fernheim.

This greeting to the New Germany is remarkable for a number of reasons: first for its omissions. Although the colonists were celebrating the accession of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist party to power, their letter makes no mention of the Nazi Party or of the *Führer* by name or title. Secondly, its very existence calls for explanation. What did these struggling Mennonite refugees in Paraguay care about one more change in government in the perennially unstable Weimar Germany?

Who were these people greeting the new government of Germany? Fernheim Colony had a population of about 2000, the majority of whom had left the Soviet Union after gathering in the suburbs of Moscow in late 1929 and creating a diplomatic incident between the Soviet Union, Canada, and Germany. The Moscow refugees had been transported to Brazil and Paraguay in 1930 as, one might say, a consolation prize, after Canada, their preferred destination, closed its doors. Another large group of Fernheim residents had escaped the Soviet Union via the city of Harbin, China, and had been delivered to South America in 1932. A handful of Mennonite families from central Poland were also settled in Fernheim. The colony was grouped into 17 villages and was 52% Mennonite Brethren (MB), 42% Mennoniten-Gemeinde (MG), and 6% Evangelical Mennonite Brethren (EMB, *Allianzgemeinde*).³

Aside from the perhaps vague well-wishes proclaimed by the adults of Fernheim in the May 1933 letter, the Nazi movement made its first vigorous impression among the youth. The young people seem to have been somewhat of a social problem at this point in Fernheim's existence. A series of incidents over a period of about a year and a half, beginning in late 1931 and ending around the

time of the letter of greeting to the New Germany in mid-1933, involved about twenty young men who were working at a large agricultural experiment station east of the colony. Written sources do not describe the trouble precisely, but refer to their "pernicious activities," which culminated in a party in the village of Rosenort at Easter 1933,⁴ after which the adults of Rosenort appealed to the colony administration for punitive action. A hearing of some sort was held in Philadelphia, the colony administrative center, under the leadership of the *Oberschulze* David Löwen. Somehow—again the details are unknown—the colony government suffered a defeat, at least in the court of public opinion.⁵

At this crisis point, two of the colony's school teachers, Friedrich "Fritz" Klierer, age 28, and Julius Legiehn, age 33, were entrusted with preparing a program of youth work for the colony. Klierer was a member of the Polish group, born in 1905 at Deutsch Wymyschle, which was at that time part of the Russian Empire. From 1921 to 1926, in newly independent Poland, he studied at a German teacher training school in Łódź, and from 1926 to 1930 taught in a non-Mennonite German village somewhere near his home. Coming to the Chaco with his parents and siblings in 1930, he began teaching school again in 1931.⁶ Legiehn was born in the Ukraine in 1899 and came to the Chaco in 1930 with his wife and three children, immediately taking up employment as a school teacher.⁷

At a meeting in the village of Friedensfeld on 20 August 1933, Klierer and Legiehn presented their comprehensive program. As Klierer described it in detail, the youth of each village, called an *Ortsgruppe*, were to meet weekly, usually on Wednesday evening. The first meeting of the month was devoted to Bible study and prayer. Bible studies followed the outlines of the *Jugendbund für entschiedenes Christentum* (Christian Endeavor Society).⁸ The second weekly meeting of the month was for the study of Mennonite history, using a recent history of Anabaptism by Swiss historians.⁹ The third meeting of the month was for "addresses on the history and development of Germany in the past and in the present."¹⁰ The fourth meeting, at least during 1934, was spent in the study of etiquette, using a book from a German Baptist publisher.¹¹ The occasional fifth meeting in a month was for singing.

Klierer wrote somewhat disingenuously, "Since the choruses of the colony are devoted exclusively to spiritual songs the young people's organization also studies German folk songs. The need for this arose when we discovered on our outings and other social gatherings that we had no common treasury of songs, and consequently it was decided at one of the leaders' institutes to have all the young people's groups practice one common song every month."¹² Note how he contradicted himself here. They did have a common treasury of songs, but they were all religious songs.

Klierer elaborated on the special characteristics of his youth work in a speech originally presented to the Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam in 1936.

The chief difference between the young people's work in Fernheim and the young people's work which has been carried on hitherto in other Mennonite communities,

is to be found in the fact that it endeavors to promote our Mennonite and German cultural heritage as well as our spiritual well-being.... In addition, since the World War, we have received a new insight into the significance of God's provisions through creation for our well-being, provisions which include not only family, occupation, and state, but also the nation (*Volk*). We believe that in South America we find ourselves in a peculiar situation where the dangers of the future in this respect will be much greater than they were before the World War in Russia, in Poland, and in other countries, and for this reason we are endeavoring to arouse and strengthen the national (*völkischen*) forces in our midst, so that we shall be strong to resist the forces of degeneration which will attack us from the outside. After all we as German-speaking Mennonites belong to the great German national and cultural group, and we wish to affirm our participation in "Germandom." What the Canadian Mennonites of our neighbor colony, who left their homeland for the sake of maintaining their German schools, rather unconsciously feel, that we in Fernheim wish to make conscious and fruitful in the training of our children and youth.... The Canadian Mennonites no longer maintain a living connection with Germany, but they do maintain in traditional faithfulness their religious and national character. The Fernheim colony on the other hand endeavors to strengthen the connections with Germany which were established at the time of our escape from Russia in 1929-30, and to do this in cultural as well as in economic respects. This purpose is also one of the purposes of our young people's work.¹³

During 1933 and 1934 the *Jugendbund* was quite active, with 350 members in 13 *Ortsgruppen* on its first anniversary.¹⁴ *Völkisch* or nationalist ideas were quite prominent. On 2 October 1933, for instance, the Schönwiese *Ortsgruppe* celebrated the birthday of Paul von Hindenburg, the president of Germany and World War I hero, with military and patriotic poems and songs. Legiehn talked on the life of Hindenburg and the meeting closed with the singing of Hoffman von Fallersleben's *Deutschlandlied*, the German national anthem, "*Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles; Über alles in der Welt....*"¹⁵

Despite its isolated location in the western part of Paraguay, Fernheim received rather frequent visits from outsiders. Reports of these visits open another window on nationalistic thinking in the colony. One such visitor was Dr. Herbert Wilhelmy, a lecturer [*Privatdozent*] at the University of Kiel. In early 1937, Wilhelmy was conducting a "colonial geographic expedition" in South America, funded by the Albrecht Denk Foundation of Berlin, the German Research Society (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*), and the Hänel Foundation of Kiel.¹⁶ According to the *Menno-Blatt*, he had spent a week in Fernheim, had gone to all the villages and taken many photographs. Lectures with slides had been given in four villages, showing "wonderful landscapes, mostly from the Rhineland in South Germany."¹⁷

Wilhelmy's own report to the Foreign Ministry gave a more informative and less innocuous picture of his work. He commented on the poor economic conditions and reported correctly that half the population was ready to leave the Chaco. He also reported an unfavorable political climate among the Mennonites, claiming they were extreme isolationists hiding behind their "extraordinary privileges." Wilhelmy was particularly disturbed by the lack of anti-Semitism,

complaining that Mennonites knew Jewish history in detail and used Jewish first names. He criticized the Mennonites' pacifism and humility (*Demut*) and contrasted them with the Nazi "will to action" (*Wille zur Tat*). Wilhelmy's only positive comment was that the young people were more favorable to Nazism than the adults.¹⁸ Wilhelmy clearly saw his duties as more than just geographic field work; he was a Nazi evangelist. Among his activities were lectures with titles like "The New Germany and the Foreign Germans," "The First and Second Four Year Plans," "The Reconstruction of the German Economy," and "The Tasks of the SA before and after the Accession to Power." Perhaps Wilhelmy mistook utter boredom for opposition.

Wilhelmy's negative comments eventually filtered back to the colony and generated an angry response, resulting in a colony meeting (*Bezirksversammlung*) authorizing a written statement. The letter was dated 29 September 1937 and signed by the *Oberschulze* Jacob Siemens, the colony secretary Heinrich Pauls, and the bookkeeper Abram Loewen. It was directed to Mennonite leaders in Germany.

Now a few words about the position of the colony towards the New Germany. Yesterday's meeting devoted one and a half hours to discussion of this problem. The report of Dr. Wilhelmy about our life and activities here in Fernheim, about our "religious eccentricity" and our "anti-German attitude" was read. The report gave rise to various impulses. We examined ourselves in light of this report and found among ourselves many lacks and weaknesses. We can however also state that the report is greatly exaggerated and that the honorable scholar spent too little time with us and that his visit came at a very difficult time for us, so that the Doctor was able to look us over only a little. He also came to Fernheim with prejudices.... He is clearly an enemy of the Mennonites.

There was much discussion back and forth at yesterday's meeting. Many statements were made and quite a few viewpoints represented. There was much dispute about our position towards the New Germany and towards National Socialism. We asked ourselves earnestly, among other things, whether it is compatible with Mennonite principles and our conscience, for example, to sing the *Deutschlandlied* and the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* and to let our children in the school sing them. In all these questions no vote was taken, and no absolute unity in opinions was reached....

And our position towards National Socialism? We are very appreciative of it. We know and are thankful that God created National Socialism at the time of the greatest Bolshevistic danger for Western Europe. Almighty God has made the *Führer* Adolf Hitler a blessing to many nations and may He preserve him yet many years for our beloved motherland. We love the *Führer* and honor National Socialism. That shall not mislead us to be zealots in this matter, however. We want to remain neutral and passive towards politics, since as you well know it is not compatible with our Mennonite principles to occupy ourselves with politics and participate in political parties.

This position towards National Socialism is certainly not universal in our colony, as you will easily understand. The young generation is more zealous, while the

venerable older ones doubtfully shake their heads. The general thinking, though, seems to be that which is set out in the above statement.¹⁹

Here is perhaps the clearest statement ever of the Paraguayan Mennonites' feelings towards Nazism. In a way it confirms Wilhelmy's accusations, in that the Mennonites did not live up to his fanatical standards. "That shall not mislead us to be zealots," they said. Being favorably inclined towards National Socialism was not enough for him. However, Wilhelmy came at the low ebb of the nationalist movement: Fritz Kliewer had gone to Germany to graduate school in 1934, and the colony was preoccupied with its climatic and economic problems. With the impending schism one third of Fernheim's population moved to eastern Paraguay in mid-1937.

These three events—the 1933 letter of greeting to the new rulers of Germany, the founding of a nationalistic youth group, and the 1937 position statement provoked by an outside visitor—provide three windows into the long story of this Mennonite group's interaction with the racial-nationalist energy flowing from the New Germany. These are only three isolated glimpses of a much more intricate story that ended ignominiously with what, in modern urban terms, might be called a minor gang fight in March 1944. This ending of the story, which seems to be relatively well known, has assumed greatly inflated significance and unfortunately obscured the complex stream of events preceding it. The rare, although not unique, spectacle of intra-Mennonite physical violence has unjustifiably suppressed the long story of more typical Mennonite verbal and emotional truculence. Thus, I deliberately avoided the March 11 narrative.

The Mennonites of Brazil had their own encounter with National Socialism somewhat parallel to the Fernheim story. The Brazilian group, numbering about 1500 and settled in the state of Santa Catarina, came out of the same two refugee movements—Moscow and Harbin—as the Fernheim colonists, but the group which went to Brazil seems to have been much less cohesive and less organized than Fernheim. Their interaction with Nazism reflects this also. In Brazil, a *völkisch* youth group came much later and was never as prominent; there were no corporate position papers, less distinct pro- and anti-Nazi groups, and no violent confrontations like those of March 11.

As with Fernheim, the colony's newspaper opens a window onto certain occasions of this interaction. A March 1936 issue of *Die Brücke* contained an article titled "Encounter with Hitler." Two ingenuous stories are told of encounters of common people with the *Führer* at Berchtesgaden. In one, Hitler meets an eighty-year old Pastor Kuhlo, called "the father of the brass choir." Upon hearing the old man play his trumpet and asking him about his good health at such an age, Hitler found that Kuhlo, like the *Führer*, refused tobacco and alcohol. A second story described a group of nurses who, on a visit to Berchtesgaden, sang some songs for the Chancellor from his garden. Upon meeting Hitler, one of the nurses asked him where he got the courage to make his important decisions for the whole Reich.

Then the Chancellor drew out of his pocket the New Testament of Dr. Martin Luther—one could see that it was much used—and said earnestly “From God’s Word.”²⁰

These stories had been submitted by Jasche Heinrichs, a 30-year-old Russian Mennonite who had recently joined the Nazi Party.²¹ It is unknown where Heinrichs got these fabrications or whether he believed them himself. At any rate, they were certainly calculated to appeal to the religious prejudices of the Mennonites.

A statement interesting for its source in the Brazilian Mennonites’ refugee past appeared in *Die Brücke* in March 1937, a critique of Mennonite religious traditions from a Nazi perspective by a minor literary figure, Ernst Behrends. Behrends was a school teacher in Mölln in Schleswig-Holstein in northern Germany. Mölln had hosted a Mennonite refugee camp in 1929, which was the occasion for Behrends’ acquaintance with Mennonites. Since then he had written at least two novels about the Russian Mennonites, the most recent of which, *Der Rohrsänger* (The Piper), came in for review in *Die Brücke*. Editor Peter Klassen quoted a letter from Behrends:

I am a National Socialist through and through.... Decisive for me on the basis of my instinct and my knowledge is the voice of the blood, that is of the heart, that is of the conscience....²²

Klassen then printed an article by Behrends which he called “an important essay for us Mennonites.” Behrends had three judgments about Mennonites in his article called “Displeasure, Approval, Admiration.” His displeasure was with Mennonite religion:

Why then must the ‘Menno-Volk,’ who have known Bolshevism to its deepest sources and have experienced its most gruesome consequences, hold fast to the medieval principle of pacifism?

Behrends was openly scornful of religion throughout his article, but expressed his approval of the Russian Mennonites’ racial and cultural purity. Some of their traditions, such as the refusal of oaths and the election of church leaders from among the laity, he attributed to ancient German custom rather than to religious motivations. Behrends stated his admiration for the communal solidarity (*Gemeinschaftsleben*) of the Mennonites and saw them as proto-National Socialists living out the Nazi motto of *Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz* (common needs before individual needs).²³

The question of “Christianity and National Socialism” was discussed again in a short article by that title in the pages of *Die Brücke* in the May/June 1937 issue. It began:

Actually I cannot separate Christianity and National Socialism at all. For my Christianity obliges me to serve my people [*Volk*]. If I serve my people in a truly Christian way, I am a National Socialist.

The author complains of hearing Christians questioning National Socialism and uses the common argument that God has put each person into a *Volk*; the *Volk* is

part of the order of creation. This brings with it responsibilities that the Christian, of all people, should not shirk.

I mean that the Christian, in accepting God's Creation, must stand in the first ranks of those who work for the German people to fulfill their place in the world.

Several brief quotations from Hitler, favorable to religion, were given, including a statement about "positive Christianity" recalling the Nazi Party program. The author concludes,

Why then all this talk about whether Hitler is really born again [*das 'Bekehrte sein' Hitlers*]? That is no concern of ours. We must remain loyal to him for better or worse as genuine German Christians!

The article was signed "Schwester T," which probably refers to Talea Haijer, a non-Mennonite who worked as a nurse in the Mennonite settlement.²⁴

Freedom to discuss the pros and cons of the New Germany were sharply curtailed in 1938 when the Brazilian government instituted a nationalization policy that eliminated use of the German language in schools and even in church services. (The Mennonites resorted to the subterfuge of having church in Low German.) The colony's newspaper was suppressed and all non-citizens were required to register with the state governments, and pay a high fee for this privilege.

Once the war was over, the memory of the Nazi encounter was swept aside in both Brazil and Paraguay by the rapid and urgently needed upswing of economic development accompanied, especially in Paraguay, by the domination of the North American Mennonite Central Committee. Only in the last few years have some persons begun to re-examine the story.

The above vignettes in their brevity do not even begin to tell the entire story of this encounter. The space available here is too short to trace the development from the friendly greetings of 1933 through mass organization in support of the New Germany to an ending in bitter controversy. These anecdotes only give some of the flavor of the rhetoric of the time. I don't know of a precise way to compare the responses of different Mennonite groups to National Socialism but, based on a careful look at what is known of the broader story, it seems that, with the probable exception of Mennonites in Germany itself, the South American Mennonites reacted the most favorably of any Mennonite group to the New Germany. I say this despite the ambivalent response to the Wilhelmy report. The fact that they found it necessary to respond at all is significant. Many Fernheimers and their friends proudly quoted Provost Martin Marczynski, a representative of the German Protestant church stationed in Buenos Aires, who visited Fernheim in 1935: "There may be no other foreign German colony which greeted the National Socialist Revolution in Germany with such joy as the Russian-German Mennonites."²⁵

The important question here is, "Why?" Why did these Mennonites respond so strongly to Nazism? What stories were they telling themselves, or allowing themselves to be told, about who they were that were compatible with National

Socialism? A certain set of conventional explanations has been put forth several times to account for this situation. It turns out that these explanations themselves require explanation. For example, the refugees' gratitude towards Germany for rescuing them from the Soviet Union is noted as a reason for their response to Nazism. Germany, though, in the Moscow incident of 1929, allowed thousands to be deported into internal Soviet exile before it finally acted to accept the fleeing remnant, and once they were in Germany, they were forced to move on to the Western Hemisphere rather than being accommodated, as a small group of a few thousand, in a country of tens of millions. Furthermore, when the Fernheimers celebrated the new Hitler government, they were also celebrating the demise of the very government that had rescued them. A Socialist administration brought them out of Moscow, and it was a Socialist member of the Reichstag, Daniel Stücklen, who was the government commissioner for Russian-German relief.²⁶ It would not be surprising if Stücklen, who was directly responsible for aiding them, ended up in a concentration camp under the Nazi regime.

A more insightful explanation offered by Paraguayan Mennonite historian Peter P. Klassen evidences a similar need for further examination. Klassen mentions the influence of powerful personalities (Kliwer and Legiehn) in a small, isolated community such as Fernheim.²⁷ While obviously true, we need to ask why the program these leaders put forward made sense to their community? What were the preconditions that allowed such persons to be heard at all?

Obviously the roots of this mental world in which Nazism made sense must be sought at first in the experience of these Mennonites, or their ancestors, in Russia. That is where this community learned to think of themselves in some way as German. We do not really have a clear view of the evolution of Mennonite identity in Russia, but most who have written on this topic have noted the importance of schools and teachers. In both Paraguay and Brazil, it was through teachers and, to a lesser extent, clergy (who were often also teachers) that National Socialism was mediated. It also appears that the Russian Mennonites came to think of themselves as German, in addition to Mennonite, at least partly because that is the story told to them by outsiders. The anti-German nationalist agitation beginning in the 1890s, the expropriation laws and anti-German hysteria of World War I, and the continuing anti-German prejudice surviving even the Bolshevik Revolution all drove the Mennonites together with others who were classified as Germans. The Mennonites' own Russian patriotism was extinguished in the process.²⁸

This Russian background, though, is not unique to the Mennonites who went to Paraguay and Brazil. It is largely shared with the *Russländer* in Canada, where it seems that Nazism had a significant although weaker impact.²⁹ What differentiated the two groups? Before turning to the more obvious chronological difference, I want to mention one more aspect of the Russian background. The largest single group within the Mennonites who went to Paraguay and Brazil in 1930 came from Siberia.³⁰ At least in Fernheim, the refugees did not settle randomly in villages; there was a considerable amount of clumping of families

from similar regional origins in the Russian Empire. (This is not just a subjective judgment but can be shown by statistical tests.) Furthermore, there seems to be a correlation between the dominance of the Siberian group in particular villages and *völkisch* leanings. Was there something unusual about the experience of Siberian Mennonites that prepared the mental ground for National Socialism? This question must remain, so far, unanswered.

There is one element of the refugee experience that distinguishes the 1929 Moscow group from the rest of the Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union of the 1920s and early 1930s. The refugees of the Moscow group were the only ones, aside from isolated individuals, who spent weeks or months in Germany. Furthermore, these weeks and months were for Germany a succession of serious political crises and controversies, of which the refugees themselves were one. The Moscow group came to Germany as a result of and in the midst of a publicity campaign instigated by leaders of German charitable organizations (including Mennonites) under the banner of "Brothers in Need." "The fate of every German is the concern of every other German" was their media slogan.³¹ Thus the German public and the refugees were each told who they *really* were.

In contrast to the Mennonites fleeing the Soviet Union earlier in the 1920s, who proceeded directly to Canada by ship from Riga, and the Harbiners, who were shipped from China to France and left for South America from a French port, the persons in the 1929 group all spent at least several weeks, and sometimes months, in Germany. They were housed in vacant military bases in three small towns in northern Germany: Hammerstein, Prenzlau, and Mölln. Their experience during these weeks and months was very dissonant. On the one hand, the Russian-German refugees were the object of an outpouring of publicity and good will from many segments of the German public. In addition to the support provided by the German government in the camps, many donations of money and goods came in through the charitable organizations which had begun the whole process.

On the other hand, the refugees were vilified as "exploiters" and "murderers of the workers" in the German Communist press. In person, they encountered verbal abuse and rock-throwing attacks from gangs of Communist agitators.³² In our present setting, we don't really understand how violent the political environment of Weimar Germany was. Beatings, riots, arson, and even murder were commonplace. Political parties across the spectrum, not just the Nazis, had their own private armies. Accepted by the vast majority of the political spectrum, the Moscow refugees were confronted by political violence on the part of the Communists.

The public atmosphere in Germany during these weeks and months was one of crisis. The New York stock market crash that symbolizes the beginning of the Great Depression occurred on 29 October 1929, a month before the refugees left Moscow. Germany was already experiencing rising unemployment and declining tax revenue earlier in 1929 and, with its dependence on foreign credit, felt the effects of the crash immediately. Municipal elections took place on 17 Novem-

ber 1929, when the plight of the refugees gathered at Moscow was already a front-page story in the German press, and the non-Communist parties made use of the story against the German Communists in their campaigns.³³ Mid-1929 also marked the tenth anniversary of the Treaty of Versailles formally ending World War I. The German government had just completed a renegotiation of German war reparations, the Young plan. The Nazis and other right-wing groups, using the Young plan as an excuse, put forward by public initiative (rather than through the Reichstag) a "Law against the Enslavement of the German People," aimed at repudiating Versailles and reparations and ultimately overthrowing the parliamentary government. The violent campaign concerning the Young plan led up to a plebiscite on the Nazis' initiative on 22 December 1929, when the refugees were already in the German camps. There they were provided with newspapers and other reading material and would have been well aware of the political turmoil surrounding them.³⁴

Did the refugee group actually come in contact directly with Nazis in some way while in Germany? Not enough details about this brief period are known to say for certain, but there is some circumstantial evidence. Certainly the refugees would have had the opportunity to read the Nazi newspapers and other printed propaganda. At Prenzlau, students from Berlin came to present lectures and hold discussion groups (*Arbeitsgemeinschaften*) for the refugees in which, as one source puts it, they "brought the Germany of 1918 nearer to the farmers."³⁵ Exactly what the political persuasion of these students was can only be surmised from comments such as these. We have already mentioned the author Ernst Behrends, a professing Nazi by 1936 and possibly one already when he met the Mennonite refugees in Mölln. Schleswig-Holstein, the region where Mölln was located, became a Nazi electoral bastion in the elections of 1930.³⁶

It was during this brief sojourn in Germany, it seems to me, that the Mennonite refugees were taught how to interpret their recent experiences, at a time when they were particularly open (or vulnerable) to being told new stories about themselves. Here is where they began to learn the rhetoric of National Socialism to frame their lives for the next decade and a half.

There were certainly other important factors involved over those next fourteen years. Economic hardships and the precariousness of bare existence in the Chaco kept up a significant level of dissatisfaction until well after the end of the war. The Mennonites in the Chaco and in Brazil were isolated physically, economically, and intellectually. With the ground prepared in these various ways, the influence of individuals such as Kliever and Legiehn, could be decisive. This seems to be the root of the difference between Fernheim and Brazil, where this kind of vigorous and decisive leadership was lacking. In a small, isolated community, prepared by its recent history to understand them, the opinions of articulate leaders seemed natural and sensible to many.

The Latin American Mennonites' encounter with National Socialism left a lasting legacy of bitterness, especially in Paraguay. The above account does not even begin to tell the entire story and its brevity can be misleading. We must

remember that Nazism looks vastly different from 1993 than it did from 1933, 1937, 1940, and even 1944. At a time of extended crisis, it was the *völkisch* nationalists, among them other Mennonites, who were available to interpret the refugee experience and to provide a mental framework to make sense of current events. Only a minority were able to put together an alternative story out of traditional Mennonite and biblical materials.

Notes

¹"Die Mennonitensiedlungen des paraguayischen Chaco und die nationale Erhebung in Deutschland," *Menno-Blatt*, vol. 4, no. 6, June 1933.

²"Mennonitensiedlungen... und die nationale Erhebung."

³Peter P. Klassen, *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay: Reich Gottes und Reich dieser Welt* (Weirerhof: Mennonitische Geschichtsverein, 1988), pp. 94-96, 320. The MG group related to the General Conference Mennonite Church in North America.

⁴Easter in 1933 was on April 16.

⁵Walter Quiring, *Die erschliessen den Chaco* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1936), pp. 182-183; Fritz Kliewer, "Mennonite Young People's Work in the Paraguayan Chaco," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 11 (April 1937): 121.

⁶"RE: FRIEDRICH KLIEWER, with aliases Fritz Kliewer, Federico Kliewer," 5 October 1945, U.S. State Department decimal files (DF) 862.20234/11-1545, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁷"RE: JULIUS FRIEDRICH LEGIEHN, alias Julius Legiehn," 30 October 1945, DF 862.20234/11-2945.

⁸For the identification of the German *Entscheidenes Christentum* with the American "Christian Endeavor" movement see Arno Pagel, "Entschiedenenes Christentum," in Franklin H. Littell and Hans Hermann Walz, eds., *Weltkirchen Lexikon: Handbuch der Ökumene* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1960), p.335.

⁹Samuel Geiser, Daniel Lerch, and Samuel Geiser, *Die Taufgesinnten-Gemeinden: Eine kurzgefasste Darstellung der wichtigsten Ereignisse des Täuferturns* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1931).

¹⁰Kliewer, "Mennonite Young People's Work," p. 127.

¹¹Albert Hoefs, *Wass lieblich ist und wohl lautet: ein Buch über den guten Ton* (Kassel: J.G. Oncken Nachfolger, n.d.).

¹²Kliewer, "Mennonite Young People's Work," p. 128.

¹³Kliewer, "Mennonite Young People's Work," pp. 125-127.

¹⁴Kliewer, "Mennonite Young People's Work," p. 125.

¹⁵Friedrich Kliewer, "Die Mennoniten im Chaco feiern Hindenburgs Geburtstag," *Menno-Blatt*, vol. 4, no. 11, November 1933.

¹⁶Manfred Kossok, "Die Mennoniten-Siedlungen Paraguays in den Jahren 1935-1939 (Zur politischen Rolle der Auslandsdeutschen in Südamerika)," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 8 (1960): 368-371. Kossok, an East German historian, had access to a number of German Foreign Ministry documents from the East German Central Archives in Potsdam about Wilhelmy's expedition. I have only recently obtained a copy of these documents on microfilm from what is now

the German Federal Archives - Potsdam Branch, too recently to make good use of them for this presentation. The *Menno-Blatt* briefly mentioned Wilhelmy's visit, but the rest of our information comes via Kossok.

¹⁷"Verschiedenes," *Menno-Blatt*, vol. 8, no. 2, February 1937.

¹⁸Kossok, "Mennoniten-Siedlungen Paraguays," p. 369.

¹⁹Jacob Siemens, Heinrich Pauls, and Abram Loewen to B. H. Unruh, 29 September 1937, folder "Paraguay Fernheim Colony 1937", Mennonite Central Committee Archives, AMC-IX-6-3, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana.

²⁰"Begegnun mit Hitler," *Die Brücke*, March 1936, vol. 5, no.3.

²¹Heinrichs received a Party membership number of 3924430 on 4 February 1935. His is the only clear case of a Mennonite membership in the Party in Brazil. Heinrichs was born on the Apanlee estate near the large Mennonite colony at Molochnaia in the Ukraine on 12 February 1906. He was apparently an electrical engineer and came to Brazil in late 1932 or early 1933 to work in radio construction in Blumenau. Senate, *Nazi Party Membership Records*, part 3 (December 1946), p. 89; Peter Klassen, "Auf der Brückenwacht," *Die Brücke*, January 1935.

²²Peter Klassen, "Der Rohrsänger," *Die Brücke*, March 1937, vol. 6, no. 3. On Behrends see Hans Erke, "Ernst Behrends," *Schleswig-Holsteinische Schulzeitung* (Mitteilungsblatt des Nationalsozialistischen Lehrerbundes Gau Schleswig-Holstein), 11 Juli 1936, vol. 84, no. 28, pp. 448-450; and Hans Bahrs, "Ernst Behrends zum 90. Geburtstag: Dank und Groß nach Mölln," *Schleswig-Holstein*, issue 5, 1981, pp. 12-14.

²³Ernst Behrends, "Missfall, Beifall, Bewunderung," *Die Brücke*, March 1937, vol. 6, no. 3. reprinted from *Deutsche Post aus dem Osten*, 1936, no. 12.

²⁴Schwester T, "Christentum und Nationalsozialismus," *Die Brücke*, May/June 1937, vol. 6, no. 5/6. On Haijer see Peter Pauls, Jr., *Mennoniten in Brasilien*, unpaginated biographies section following p. 240.

²⁵"Deutscher Geist im Chaco," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 29 April 1936, vol. 59, no. 18, p. 7-8.

²⁶Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, *Fügung und Führung im mennonitischen Welthilfswerk 1920-1933: Humanität in christlicher Sicht* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1936), p. 4.

²⁷Peter P. Klassen, *Die deutsch-völkisch Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, Chaco, Paraguay 1933-1945: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der auslandersdeutschen Mennoniten während des Geschichtsverin*, 1990), p. 25.

²⁸David G. Rempel, "The Expropriation of the German Colonists in South Russia during the Great War," *Journal of Modern History* 4 (1932): 49-67; John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets, and Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982), pp. 51-55, 74-76; John B. Toews, "Brethren and Old Church Relations in Pre-World War I Russia: Setting the Stage for Canada," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 2 (1984): 42-59; John B. Toews, "Early Communism and Russian Mennonite Peoplehood," in John Friesen, ed., *Mennonites in Russia, 1788-1988: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), pp. 265-287; James Urry, "The Russian Mennonites, Nationalism and the State 1789-1917," paper presented at the symposium on Canadian Mennonites and the Challenge of Nationalism, Winnipeg, May 1993, and to be found in printed form elsewhere in this issue.

²⁹In Canada, in contrast to Paraguay, there was articulate opposition to Nazism early on by major leaders such as B. B. Janz and Jacob H. Janzen. Most published pro-Nazi opinion came from outside Canada: B. H. Unruh, Walter Quiring, Heinrich Schroeder. Many Russländer became citizens of Canada relatively quickly, something that did not happen in Paraguay. Benjamin Redekop, "The Canadian Mennonite Response to National Socialism," *Mennonite Life* 46 (June 1991): 18-24.

³⁰Lists of passengers on ships going from Germany to Paraguay give the former place of residence in the Soviet Union for each family: "Liste des Transportes nach Paraguay ab 15. März 1930," folder 11 "G. G. Hiebert reports; 1930 lists of transports," box 11, Mennonite Central Committee Archives, AMC-IX-3-3, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana; "List of Members of Transport II for Paraguay leaving Mölln, April 16, 1930," folder 2 "Transport lists and misc. corr. 1930," box 2, AMC-IX-3-1; "List of Members of Transport III for Paraguay leaving Mölln, May 11, 1930," folder 13 "Lists of members of transports to Paraguay, 1930-34," box 50, Harold S. Bender papers, AMC-Hist.Mss. 1-278, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana; "List of Members of Transport IV for Paraguay, leaving Mölln, July 12, 1930," folder 13, box 50, Bender papers. This analysis leaves out the Harbin group, since similar data is not available for them.

³¹Quoted in Harvey L. Dyck, "Collectivization, Depression, and Immigration, 1929-1930: A Chance Interplay," in Harvey L. Dyck and H. Peter Krosby, eds., *Empire and Nations: Essays in Honour of Frederic H. Soward* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), p. 156.

³²H. J. Willms, ed., *At the Gates of Moscow, or God's Gracious Aid through a Most Difficult and Trying Period* (Abbotsford, BC: Committee of Mennonite Refugees from the Soviet Union, 1964), p. 102; Maria Quiring, "Bin ich Nationalsozialist? Bewhare!" *Der Bote*, vol. 5, no. 49, 7 December 1938.

³³On the municipal elections see Harvey L. Dyck, *Weimar Germany and Soviet Russia 1926-1933: A Study in Diplomatic Instability* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 177.

³⁴Willms, ed., *At the Gates of Moscow*, p. 99; Siegfried Kraft, *Die rußland-deutschen Flüchtlinge des Jahres 1929/30 und ihre Aufnahme im Deutschen Reich: Eine Untersuchung über die Gründe der Massenflucht der deutschen Bauern und ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis der Behandlung volksdeutscher Fragen im Weimarer Zwischenreich* (Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde einer Hohen Philosophischen Fakultät der Martin Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) (Halle/Saale: Eduard Klinz Buchdruck-Werkstätte, 1939), p. 81.

³⁵Kraft, p. 62. Kraft says the students belonged to "einer Gruppe der Jugendbewegung."

³⁶Rudolf Heberle, *From Democracy to Nazism: A Regional Case Study on Political Parties in Germany* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1945), p. 32. Heberle's region is Schleswig-Holstein.