

Measuring Mennonitism: Racial Categorization in Nazi Germany and Beyond

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In early 1944, a young Mennonite woman from Ukraine named Susanna Toews arrived in Nazi-occupied Poland. Along with hundreds of thousands of other “ethnic Germans,” including tens of thousands of Mennonites, Toews had left her childhood home to travel westward with the retreating German army.¹ While Toews considered the trek a means of escaping an advancing Red Army and a return to communist rule, her Nazi benefactors also saw it as a means of consolidating Europe’s racially valuable “Aryan” population. Once the travelers reached the wartime province of Wartheland, they were to be catalogued, naturalized, and resettled. This required, however, a vigorous bout of racial testing. “In order to become German citizens, we were interviewed many times,” Toews recalled. At a large processing center in Litzmannstadt/Łódź, racial experts touched and judged her body. “Samples of blood were taken from us, and we were questioned whether we were Jews or of Jewish descent. Twice we were X-rayed. Then we were given our German citizenship papers with all German rights.”² Among mid-twentieth-century Mennonites, Toews’ experiences were not atypical. In Hitler’s Third Reich, especially, but

also in other countries around the world, race often served as a basic rubric of social and political identification.

This article proposes the introduction of race as a category of analysis into the study of Mennonite history. While it has been little examined in relation to Mennonitism in recent years, race could be a fruitful avenue of inquiry for scholars of the religion. Mennonitism's global nature has rendered questions of transnational identity particularly salient for its members, as well as for those seeking to govern Mennonite populations. Because twentieth-century Mennonite communities were dispersed across dozens of territories and countries, members experienced racial categorization in many different contexts. Popular and official understandings of race looked very different in Depression-era California than in postwar Siberia. In some cases, Mennonites were seen as members of larger, surrounding national populations, whether "French," "Dutch," "American," or "Swiss." Or they might be lumped together with other European peoples in sweeping terms like "Germanic," "white," "Aryan," or "Caucasian." Sometimes, German-speaking Mennonites in Brazil, Poland, or elsewhere were seen as diasporic settler colonists, minority members of a foreign race, whose true homeland lay elsewhere. And at still other moments, Mennonitism appeared as a racial designation in its own right. Especially in the aftermath of the First World War, as church leaders across the globe attempted to promote a sense of common peoplehood, observers asserted that the "term Mennonite might almost as well be applied to a special race, as to a body of religious beliefs."³

Nazi Germany offers one compelling context in which to examine the relationship between Mennonitism and racial categorization. Considering the wealth of literature on racialism in the Third Reich, as well as the close association between Nazi politics and racism, this seems a particularly rich point of entry. The following pages sketch the racial categorization or categorizations of approximately 57,000 Mennonites in German-controlled Europe, especially during the period of Nazi rule between 1933 and 1945.⁴ Throughout these years, racial concepts developed by biologists, anthropologists, and eugenicists became instituted in official state capacities. Older terms like "*Volk*," which German speakers had long used to mean "people," "nation," or "folk," took on increasingly racial definitions. Like many scholars of Nazism, I have generally chosen to translate this word, when used during the Third Reich, as "race." While phrases like "racial community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*) or "racial body" (*Volkskörper*) continued to evoke older, broader understandings of peoplehood—including cul-

ture, language use, customs, professional or psychological proclivities, and kinship—such connotations were now often understood as byproducts of individuals' blood.⁵

Mennonites in the Third Reich, along with millions of other Europeans, were sifted through newly developed racial classification systems, lumped together with other people of allegedly similar origin, and assigned duties and rights based on those designations. Racial status determined individuals' employment, marriage, and citizenship opportunities, and especially during the war years, often held power over life and death. As Mennonites sorted themselves or were sorted by others through newly constructed racial lists, they nearly always received the most favorable designations. Indeed, they were generally believed to be more Aryan than the average German.⁶ But if Mennonites were consistently identified as Aryan, this does not mean they were in fact racially superior or even intrinsically distinguishable from individuals who received other racial categorizations. This article takes as its starting point the belief that race is socially constructed and historically contingent. Following sociologist Karen Fields and historian Barbara Fields, I do not assume that racism is a natural product of racial difference, but rather that racist thinking is responsible for generating notions of racial difference in the first place.⁷ By showing how racialism in the Third Reich led to the production of certain racial categories, I hope to stimulate further research into the ways that racialism and Mennonitism have informed one another.

Interwar Germany, 1930-1938

In the years preceding Hitler's rise to power, new ideas about race and racial categorization were gaining prominence in Germany and elsewhere. Rising interest in blood heredity, anthropometry (the measurement of humans), and other forms of racial science held increasing sway in academic institutions, popular opinion, and state politics. While race researchers had been conducting sophisticated studies of so-called racial groups across Europe and the world since at least the mid-nineteenth century, Mennonitism first began to emerge during the interwar years as a distinct category of racial analysis. Academic institutes such as the Kiel Anthropological Institute (*Kieler Anthropologische Institut*), founded in 1923, and Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics (*Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie,*

menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik), established in 1927, performed racial testing on Mennonite populations.⁸

The first major scientific examination of Mennonites from a racial perspective occurred in 1930, when scientists from the Kiel Anthropological Institute and the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute studied 1,271 Mennonite refugees from Siberia and other parts of the USSR, who were being held in transit camps in northern Germany. Fleeing Stalinist collectivization, these migrants received temporary housing in Germany, before moving on to Brazil, Canada, and Paraguay.⁹



Figure 1: Migrants from the Soviet Union examined in 1930 by racial scientists during their stay in north German transit camps. Such photographs allegedly demonstrated Mennonites' typically German cranial features.¹⁰

According to the academics from Kiel and Berlin, their layover in Germany provided an unusual and highly interesting opportunity to compare the racial characteristics of so-called “diasporic Germans” with their alleged “co-nationals” in Germany. “In the case of the Mennonites,” one researcher wrote, “we are confronted with isolated parts of the same racial body, which live in very different environments. It is thus possible to perform a comparison of ‘biological twins’—not of two genetically identical individuals, but of two genetically similar populations.”¹¹ Because of their ancestors’

geographic dispersion, Mennonites seemed well poised to provide valuable racial data.

Racial testing conducted among the Mennonite refugees in 1930, as well as subsequent studies among their coreligionists in Germany and the Free City of Danzig, generally yielded favorable results. By measuring hair color, eye height, nose shape, and other anthropometric factors, racial scientists identified members' characteristic features or calculated rates of Germanic blood purity. One study found a "heredity quotient" over ninety-eight percent.¹² Such findings were later confirmed by researchers employed by the German Foreign Institute (*Deutsches Ausland-Institut*), who during the 1930s conducted genealogical and ethnographic analyses of Mennonite populations in Canada, Mexico, Brazil, and Paraguay.¹³ Supposedly protected by historic prohibitions against mixed marriage with other confessions, Mennonites were believed to have preserved the purity of their bloodlines since the sixteenth-century Reformation. "Mennonitism was an originally *German* ... reform movement," one interpreter assessed. "In the world, there are a half million Mennonites. Without exception, they are of German heritage Scientific research has conclusively demonstrated that the ethnically German Mennonites, through their church discipline and religious-racial defense system, have protected one hundred percent against the dilution of their blood through the infiltration of foreign elements." According to this commentator, "There is likely no other confession in the world that demonstrates such a racially uniform character as the Mennonites."¹⁴

Following the establishment of the Third Reich in 1933, Mennonite spokespersons in Germany found such narratives a valuable means of endearing their communities to the new Nazi regime.¹⁵ Already within the first months of his rule, Hitler began instituting racialist policies, excluding Jews and other perceived non-Germans from certain aspects of public life. Perhaps the most famous legislation, known as the Nuremberg Laws, appeared in 1935. These statutes outlined a clear program for determining whom to count as Jewish and whom to assign the more favorable designation of Aryanism. According to the Nuremberg Laws:

1. A Jew is anyone who descended from at least three grandparents who were racially full Jews.
2. A Jew is also one who descended from two full Jewish grandparents, if:
 - a) He belonged to the Jewish religious community at the time this law was issued or who joined the community later.

- b) He was married to a Jewish person at the time the law was issued, or married one subsequently.
- c) He is the offspring from a marriage with a Jew in the sense of Section 1, which was contracted after the Law for the protection of German blood and German honor became effective (15 September 1935).
- d) He is the offspring of an extramarital relationship, with a Jew, according to Section 1, and will be born out of wedlock after July 31, 1936.¹⁶

Anyone who met these criteria faced steep restrictions on their personal rights. Persons considered racially Jewish could not vote or hold citizenship, they were not allowed to hold public office, practice law, or marry Aryans, and increasingly, their private property was subject to state seizure.

Enforcement of the Nuremberg Laws was not merely dependent on identifying Jews, however, but also on producing Aryans. In order to ensure favorable treatment, anyone who wished to claim Aryan status had to complete forms demonstrating their genealogical purity. Known as "Ancestry Papers" (*Ahnenpaß*) or more figuratively, "Racial Passports," these forms provided spaces for individuals to record the birth, marriage, and death dates of family members across several generations. Mennonites intending to compile Racial Passports could usually find the requisite information in congregational record books. According to one Mennonite deacon, "proving Aryan ancestry" without these documents "would never have been possible."¹⁷ On at least one occasion, a Mennonite congregation met collectively to fill out members' racial papers as a church activity, an event favorably commented upon by the local Nazi paper.¹⁸ By the mid-1930s, virtually all of the approximately 12,500 Mennonites in Germany would have carried self-constructed Racial Passports or similar papers designating them as Aryan.

Occupied Poland, 1939-1940

The Second World War provided an opportunity for Nazi Germany to radically expand its racist regime. Through the conquest of large parts of Europe, beginning in the late 1930s, Hitler's armies brought enormous new territories and populations under German control. Nazi administrators viewed occupied Poland in particular as a testing ground for the institution of new racial policies. Especially under the leadership of Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and the second most powerful man in the Third

Reich, race experts began the process of “Germanizing” Poland. Doing so required identifying those persons in the newly won territories who were suitable for absorption into the German “racial community.”¹⁹

By 1940, Himmler, as the self-appointed Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of Germandom (*Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums*), had approved the introduction of a German Racial List (*Deutsche Volksliste*), which laid out criteria for separating “ethnic Germans” from Poles. The term “ethnic German” (*Volksdeutsche*) or “racial German,” as it was sometimes translated, referred to individuals considered racially German but who did not hold German citizenship. The German Racial List identified four categories of Germans:

1. Ethnic Germans, who have actively participated in the racial struggle [and exhibited] conscious agitation for Germandom against the foreign races,
2. Ethnic Germans, who have not actively agitated for Germandom, but who have demonstrably preserved their Germanness,
3. Individuals of German Heritage, who over the years have formed connections with the Polish population, but who because of their behavior, have the potential to become full members of the German racial community,
4. Individuals of German Heritage, who have politically committed themselves to Polishness (Renegades).²⁰

Of the approximately 8,500 Mennonites living in German-occupied Poland as well as the former Free City of Danzig, nearly all who did not already possess German citizenship would have been categorized in groups I and II. As fluent German speakers whose Aryan character seemed clearly identifiable, they were eligible to receive German citizenship and other benefits.²¹ In fact, until the end of the First World War, when the Treaty of Versailles drew them outside German borders, most of these Mennonites had already held German citizenship. Deeply opposed to their two-decade-long separation from Germany, many saw their reunification with the Reich as a glorious event. “The campaign in Poland has ended victoriously!” wrote the chairman of the Union of German Mennonite Congregations (*Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden*), Germany’s largest and most influential conference of Mennonite churches, whose membership already included a majority of congregations in the occupied areas. “We thank our *Führer* for his act of liberation!”²²

If the invasion of Poland and annexation of the Free City of Danzig allowed thousands of Mennonites to reclaim their former

German citizenship, it also enabled a smaller number to enter German territory for first time. In the late summer of 1939, when Joachim von Ribbentrop and Viatcheslav Molotov signed the Treaty of Non-aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, they also created a secret accord, allowing for the exchange of people categorized as German and Slavic between their respective territories. According to this agreement, "The government of the USSR will not put any obstacles in the way of Reich citizens and other persons of German heritage residing in its areas of jurisdiction, if they wish to resettle in Germany or in the other areas of German jurisdiction." The German government agreed to do the same with the "persons of Ukrainian or Belorussian heritage in its areas of jurisdiction."²³

Between 1939 and 1942, Heinrich Himmler's Ethnic German Office (*Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*) resettled hundreds of thousands of "ethnic Germans" from the Soviet Union and other parts of Eastern Europe to occupied Poland. Among these were some 500 Mennonites from the Galician city of Lemberg/Lviv/Lvov, conquered by Stalin's Red Army in 1939. Anxious to escape Bolshevik rule, these Mennonites agreed to participate in the Nazis' "Home to the Reich" (*Heim ins Reich*) program. In an explicit comparison between Hitler and Jesus, Mennonite preacher Arnold Bachman of Lemberg portrayed this move as a cultural reunification: "'Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest!' So it once sounded in the words of our savior to a tortured humanity. Today he directs this call through our unforgettable *Führer* to us, to the German people. And in bright streams, we rally to him, returning to the old homeland, which was the homeland of our ancestors."²⁴ Portraying themselves as German, Lemberg's Mennonites were able to relocate to Nazi-controlled soil. By 1941, they had been settled in a half-dozen villages in the newly created Nazi province of Wartheland.²⁵

Occupied Ukraine, 1941-1943

Germany broke its nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, when it invaded the USSR. The subsequent victories won by the German military in "Operation Barbarossa" (*Unternehmen Barbarossa*) provided Nazi race experts with yet more populations to categorize. While most of the approximately 110,000 Mennonites of Soviet citizenship remained in areas controlled by Stalin, some 35,000 Mennonite inhabitants of Ukraine came under Nazi rule. During the interwar period, many in this region had ex-

perienced dekulakization, collectivization, starvation, imprisonment, forced labor, and execution under Bolshevik rule; by the late 1930s, Stalinist authorities had instituted a policy of ethnic cleansing against German-speaking populations, including the empire's Mennonites.²⁶ Like their co-religionists in Poland before them, a majority of Mennonites in Ukraine greeted Hitler's armies as liberators. "It was a joy for us all," one inhabitant of the Molotschna Mennonite colony recalled, "as we greeted the German soldiers for the first time and were able to speak of our sufferings and express joy to them in the German language."²⁷

Hitler initially hoped to incorporate Ukraine as a permanent Nazi territory, and for two full years, his functionaries ruled the Reich Commissariat Ukraine (*Reichskommissariat Ukraine*) as a racialist colony. As in occupied Poland, racial experts sifted the population for German speakers and anyone else deemed Germanizable. In Nazi-controlled Ukraine, two main groups of anthropological researchers were responsible for cataloging and assisting "ethnic Germans." The first was Special Command R (*Sonderkommando Russland*), a subdivision of Himmler's Ethnic German Office. Representatives of this organization operated in active war zones as well as in areas under civilian administration, and were thus often among the first to reach areas of Mennonite settlement.²⁸ The second organization, known as Special Command Stumpp (*Sonderkommando Stumpp*), employed some eighty researchers and served under the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (*Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete*).²⁹ Members of both these organizations worked in the two largest Mennonite colonies of Chortitza and Molotschna, although Special Command R had a stronger presence in Molotschna, while Special Command Stumpp operated primarily in Chortitza and other villages west of the Dnieper River, since this region had come under civilian administration at an earlier date.

When these organizations located Mennonites and other "ethnic Germans," they provided them with two main types of questionnaires, each intended as a preliminary form of racial and cultural categorization. The first questionnaire, called a "Village Report," assessed the overall status and racial composition of particular communities. Each report, completed in consultation with mayors or other local leaders, provided occupiers with information about the village as a whole, including a brief outline of its history, industry, and population. In addition to identifying the number of "Germans," "Ukrainians," "Russians," "Jews," and "Others" residing in each settlement, they determined the number of German

villagers who had been “murdered,” “starved,” “exiled,” or “deported” since the First World War.



Figure 2: Heinrich Himmler (front row, third from right) at a flag raising ceremony during his visit to the Molotschna colony in 1942. Nazi officials treated Mennonite settlements as bastions of Aryanism in the occupied East.³⁰

Respondents were supposed to answer questions such as “How many German families are without a head of household?” while also giving the number “mixed marriages” between Germans and other races, including exact tallies of “men of foreign lineage,” “women of foreign lineage,” “Jewish marriage partners,” and the “number of children from the mixed marriages.”³¹ Such questions served to emphasize the suffering of “ethnic Germans” under Bolshevikism, while also casting racial mixing as unnatural.

A second series of forms, including the “Questionnaire for the Genealogical Documentation of Russian-Germandom,” targeted individual families. Heads of households provided basic information about their employment status and religious affiliation, as well as their full genealogical history. Questions included: “Name and occupation of the emigrating ancestors,” “Notable experiences of the family or individual family members, especially under Bolshevik rule,” and “From which province and place in Germany did your ancestors emigrate?” This phrasing implied that Ukraine’s “ethnic Germans” had once been part of a larger, unified German

“racial community” located in West-Central Europe. While Mennonite writers in the Black Sea region had long spoken of their communities in ethnic or cultural terms—often but not always associating themselves with Germanness—these questionnaires helped reorganize such ideas under a racialist rubric. Some members now reported their point of Germanic origin as “Danzig,” while others indicated that it was “Holland.”³²

Through the efforts of Gerhard Fast, a researcher with Special Command Stumpp, the genealogical composition of the Chortitza Mennonite colony was especially well documented. A practicing Mennonite from Siberia who had escaped to Germany after the Bolshevik Revolution, Fast used his insider status to gain local support for Nazi policies. Based in the nearby city of Dnipropetrovsk, Fast spoke in Mennonite churches and homes throughout the area. “For each village we intend to prepare a report,” he informed one congregation; “we [want] to fill out questionnaires detailing kinship histories as far back as possible.”³³ In 1943, Johann Epp, a District Administrator (*Rayonchef*), whose jurisdiction included the Chortitza colony’s nineteen villages, noted that “Gerhard Fast ... has meticulously recorded all the inhabitants of our District, with the exception of the recent arrivals. He documented the entire [colony’s] genealogy, our heritage, as far as everyone knew it.”³⁴ The nature and extent of Fast’s work is further revealed in his detailed diary, eventually published in Canada after the war.³⁵

Beyond the preliminary assessments undertaken by Special Command R and Special Command Stumpp, Nazi administrators intended to fully integrate Ukraine’s “ethnic Germans” into their racial state. Beginning in 1942, the Ethnic German Office worked with the Nazi Party, the East Ministry, the *Sicherheitsdienst*, and related organizations to create a new Ukraine-specific version of the German Racial List. Noting that “no drop of German blood may be lost,” officials determined that the only exception concerned mixed marriages with Jews, in which case individuals’ Germanness was supposedly “jeopardized by the foreign content.”³⁶ According to one preliminary draft, the German Racial List for Ukraine would include three levels:

- Group 1: German heritage and German orientation
- Group 2: Partial German blood resulting from mixed marriage or a spouse in a mixed marriage with a partner of German blood and German orientation
- Group 3: Mixed breeds (marriage partner or children of mixed marriages) without German orientation³⁷

Anyone categorized in Groups 1 and 2 was to be recognized as an “ethnic German” and given German citizenship. Group 3 was also to receive German citizenship, although only on a trial basis, subject to review in ten years’ time. While some “ethnic Germans” in Ukraine were sorted through this list, the turning tide of war precluded race experts from completing the process. By late 1943, as the German military retreated westward, Himmler ordered the evacuation of all 200,000 “ethnic Germans” in the Reich Commissariat Ukraine.³⁸

Wartheland, 1944-1945

Virtually all of Ukraine’s 35,000 Mennonites accompanied the Nazi retreat westward. Between late 1943 and early 1945, before Germany’s final defeat, many of these evacuees were relocated to the German province of Wartheland, while others settled in Upper Silesia, Danzig-West Prussia, Saxony, and the Sudetenland.³⁹ In Wartheland, evacuees experienced racial categorization and processing under the jurisdiction of the Central Immigrant Office (*Einwandererzentralstelle*), headquartered in Litzmannstadt/Łódź. Through the compilation of a “genetic catalogue,” this office concluded that the “ethnic German” immigrants from Ukraine, despite being “surrounded by the biologically larger power of the host population,” had not developed “kinship with foreign races.” This was especially attributed to their “strong religious affiliation, of which Mennonites are the outstanding example.”⁴⁰ By late 1944, at least two Mennonites were employed with the Central Immigrant Office, a situation that, according to one church leader, helped to ensure preferential treatment.⁴¹

Based on racial, occupational, and educational criteria, officials at the Central Immigration Office divided “ethnic Germans” into one of three main categories: O-Cases (*Ost*), A-Cases (*Altreich*), or S-Cases (*Sonderfall*). O-Cases, considered members of an Aryan elite who could live among predominantly non-German populations without compromising their racial integrity, were to remain in the eastern territories as Germanizing colonists. A-Cases, by contrast, were designated as racially or politically less reliable. They were settled within Germany’s prewar borders, where experts believed they would be positively influenced by contact with the surrounding, predominantly German population. Those unlucky enough to be flagged as S-Cases, meaning racially or politically dangerous, were deported or assigned forced labor.⁴² In the assessment of one administrator, “The Black Sea Germans who, including the older

children, speak and write perfect German, are the most valuable population Wartheland has yet received.”⁴³ Among one group of evacuees from Chortitza, processed in the nearby province of Danzig-West Prussia, 61.8 percent were counted as O-Cases, 36.6 percent were A-Cases, and 1.6 percent were rejected.⁴⁴ Once categorized in this way, immigrants with O or A status were granted citizenship and alternately drafted into the military or put to work.

Postwar Europe

Racial categorization did not end with Germany's defeat in the spring of 1945. To the contrary, Allied officials sometimes used Nazi authorities' own rubrics as a means of determining the relative guilt or innocence of various populations. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, one major task of the newly established United Nations was to resolve the enormous refugee crisis caused by the war. To deal with the millions of so-called "Displaced Persons" in occupied Central Europe, the UN established an International Refugee Organization (IRO), charged with providing settlement assistance to these people. While the IRO provided aid to individuals categorized as Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews, however, its constitution excluded "Persons of German ethnic origin, whether German nationals or members of German minorities in other countries, who ... have fled from, or into Germany ... in order to avoid falling to the hands of Allied armies."⁴⁵ This provision appeared to render ineligible virtually all Mennonites resettled under Nazi auspices during the war.

Nevertheless, thousands of Mennonite refugees hoped to leave occupied Europe. Desiring to avoid repatriation to the USSR, many sought the assistance of international Mennonite organizations, especially the North America-based Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), to emigrate across the Atlantic to Paraguay or Canada. In order to bypass the IRO's "ethnic German" clause, MCC argued that the Mennonite refugees from Ukraine were in fact not German at all, but Dutch. Claiming that their ancestors had originally left the Netherlands during the sixteenth-century Reformation, MCC further insisted that its charges had been poorly treated under Nazi rule. Based on such assertions, Allied emigration officials (incorrectly) concluded "the majority of [Mennonites] who found themselves in Germany at the end of the war had not come voluntarily to that country. They were deported alongside other Russians to be used as slave laborers. As their 'German ethnic origin' is extremely doubtful, no grounds can be found and indeed

it would be a grave injustice to treat them differently from other slave workers.”⁴⁶

Just as during the war, Mennonite refugees seeking resettlement assistance had to undergo racial testing or as it was now called, ethnic categorization. Assisted by MCC employees, international resettlement officials devised various means of identifying applicants’ “ethnic” backgrounds, still described in terms of family lineage and genealogy, but also attentive to factors such as language use, cultural practices, and political allegiance. In 1947, one committee divided Mennonite refugees from Ukraine into four groups:

- Category I: Prima facie Dutch
- Category II: East-Frisians, and others, both on grounds of historical evidence of Dutch ethnic origin
- Category III: German ethnic origin
- Category IV: of other than Dutch or German ethnic origin.⁴⁷

Analyzing one group of 2,309 refugees, the committee determined that 1,918 fell under Categories I or II and were so “of undoubtedly Dutch ethnic origin.” Together with those in Category IV, fully ninety percent were thus considered eligible for aid.⁴⁸ Despite the fact that the vast majority if not all of these Mennonites had been designated as Germans by Nazi officials during the Second World War, they successfully passed as non-Germans only a short while later. Between 1947 and 1954, MCC facilitated the migration of more than 15,000 Mennonite refugees from Europe to the Americas, a majority of whom received UN funding as non-Germans.⁴⁹

Analysis and Suggestions for Further Research

Understanding the experiences of Mennonites in Central Europe during the 1930s and 1940s requires attention to racial discourses. The approximately 57,000 Mennonites discussed above, including virtually all members in Germany as well as Nazi-occupied Poland and Ukraine, underwent some form—and in many if not most cases, multiple forms—of racial categorization. Sometimes (such as through the construction of Racial Passports), Mennonites initiated their own categorization, while at other times (as at Wartheland’s Central Immigration Office), testing was completed by trained professionals. Often, racial examinations required a process of interactive cooperation in which individual

Mennonites and race experts worked together, asking and answering questions, providing and filling out forms, or physically touching each other in order to measure limbs, facial features, and hair color. With few exceptions, Mennonites in the Third Reich received the most favorable racial designations available. Nazi experts consistently identified their Mennonite subjects as valuable specimens of the Aryan racial elite.

In Hitler's Germany, the consequences of racial categorization were astoundingly far-reaching. While individuals who received positive assessments were often richly rewarded, those who scored poorly could be denigrated, disenfranchised, expropriated, deported, and killed. These divergent outcomes were closely related. People considered racially valuable often received goods taken from murdered families or services denied to the persecuted. In this way, the vast majority of the Mennonites discussed in this article, like millions of other people believed to possess German blood, became direct beneficiaries of genocide.⁵⁰ How a given individual experienced Nazi rule was not a preordained outcome, dependent on some innate quality in his or her blood. It was rather the development of racist thinking, as well as the practice of racial categorization and segregation, that determined whether a person lived or how they died.

The cases outlined in this article by no means represent an exhaustive list. As demonstrated by the racial testing of Mennonite refugees from Siberia in 1930, as well as UN discussions about the allegedly Dutch origins of some Mennonites after 1945, racial categorization neither began nor ended with the Third Reich. Rather, it was a transnational series of discourses and practices with a diverse set of causes, practitioners, and consequences. Just as when pro-Nazi researchers studied Mennonite populations in the Americas during the 1930s, racial experts often worked across state borders, and racial policies in a given country were regularly influenced by other racial practices and institutions abroad. It was in part because Germanness had such a negative connotation in the Soviet Union that most Mennonites in Ukraine were so willing to collaborate with Nazi occupiers. By the same token, postwar depictions of Mennonite migrants as ethnically Dutch held relevance because of the privileged status held by "ethnic Germans" during the war and the subsequent restrictions placed on them by UN-affiliated refugee organizations.

Analyses of the impacts of race and racial categorization on Mennonite populations must be attuned to the transfer and translation of such processes across both space and time. The study of Mennonite history would benefit from further studies in this vein.

With regard to the Second World War, there is still much research to be done. Very little is known about the effects of racial categorization among the approximately 2,000 Mennonites in Nazi-occupied France or the approximately 70,000 Mennonites in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands.⁵¹ Very little work has been done on the way that racial categories in Allied countries, including the United States, Canada, and the Soviet Union influenced local Mennonites' participation in or conscientious objection to the war effort. With the exception of several important studies on German-speaking Mennonites in Latin America, almost nothing has been written about the racial categorization of Mennonites in the Global South during the Second World War.⁵²

Methodologically, there is also significant room for new work. This article has focused primarily on the ways that Mennonites were categorized by official state actors. For the most part, it has not taken into account definitions or categories developed by Mennonites themselves, either in internal religious contexts or as a means of influencing external actors. There is much to be written about the ways that both popular and scientific understandings of Mennonites' ethnic, racial, and cultural affiliation developed and evolved over time. It would be valuable to know how physical practices of anthropometry influenced or were influenced by various ideological and theological understandings of race, as held by Mennonites as well as non-Mennonites in different countries. How did older cultural or national understandings of terms like "*Volk*" continue to inflect notions of peoplehood during the Third Reich? And how did explicitly racialized interpretations give way to ones more focused on ethnicity after the war? Given the rapidly changing global demographics of the present-day Mennonite church as well as the historic power disparities between white and non-white members, it might be particularly useful to examine the spaces of interaction and disjuncture between invocations of "ethnic Mennonitism"—including stories of Swiss, Dutch, and German origins—and the ways that racial or racially inflected terms have been used to depict, disenfranchise, or empower non-whites, including more than one million non-white Mennonites across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, over the last five centuries.⁵³

Historians' task is not to determine the racial origins and characteristics of Mennonite populations or of Mennonitism as a whole. Rather, we should begin to think about the ways that discourses of race have been used to advance some Mennonites' objectives or to assert power over others. When and why has Mennonitism emerged as a salient category of racial analysis, and in what ways have Mennonites participated in or opposed the development and

institutionalization of racialist policies? Only by asking and answering these questions can we begin to atone for the crimes of the past and to address the injustices of our present.

Notes

- ¹ The sources for this article were collected during the research process for my book, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, in press) with funding from the Fulbright Commission, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and Harvard University. An earlier version of this article was presented at the “Mennonites, Medicine, and the Body” conference, held at the University of Winnipeg from October 23 to 24, 2015. I wish to thank Rachel Waltner Goossen, Miriam Rich, Royden Loewen, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments. Thanks to Peter Letkemann and John Thiesen for providing primary sources. Except where otherwise noted, all translations are my own. While all qualifications in brackets are mine, italicized words are emphasized in the original documents.
- ² Susanna Toews, *Trek to Freedom: The Escape of Two Sisters from South Russia during World War II* (Winkler, Manitoba: Heritage Valley Publications, 1976), 32. Further firsthand accounts by Mennonites from Ukraine of racial testing in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe can be found in AJ/43/572, folder: Political Dissidents – Mennonites, Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine.
- ³ C. Henry Smith, quoted in Kurt Kauenhowen, “Bücher, die uns angehen,” *Mitteilungen des Sippenverbandes Danziger Mennoniten-Familien*, August 1937, 144. On Smith, see Perry Bush, *Peace, Progress, and the Professor: The Mennonite History of C. Henry Smith* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015).
- ⁴ Most of the Mennonite population figures used in this article are adapted from Christian Hege, “Die Verbreitung der Mennoniten in der Welt,” in *Gedenkschrift zum 400 jährigen Jubiläum der Mennoniten oder Taufgesinnten, 1525-1925* (Ludwigshafen am Rhein: Der Konferenz der Süddeutschen Mennoniten, 1925), 282-287.
- ⁵ On the relationship between racial science and Nazism’s rise and rule, see Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Paul Weindling, *Health, Race, and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Detlev Peukert, “The Genesis of the ‘Final Solution’ from the Spirit of Science,” in *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945*, ed. David F. Crew (New York: Psychology Press, 1994).
- ⁶ On Mennonites in the Third Reich, see Diether Götz Lichdi, *Mennoniten im Dritten Reich* (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1977); Hanspeter Jecker and Alle G. Hoekema, eds., *Testing Faith and Tradition* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 123-130; James Irvin Lichti, *Houses on the Sand? Pacifist Denominations in Nazi Germany* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Astrid von Schlachta, “‘in unbedingter Treue’...‘keine Verfechter der Wehrlosigkeit.’ Volksgemeinschaft, Staatstreue und das Bild,

- das von den Mennoniten herrschen sollte," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 72 (2015): 117-132.
- ⁷ Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso Books, 2012).
- ⁸ On these institutes as well as the general development of racial science in Germany, see Uwe Hoßfeld, *Geschichte der biologischen Anthropologie in Deutschland: Von den Anfängen bis in die Nachkriegszeit* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2005).
- ⁹ On this event in German politics and public opinion, see James Casteel, "The Russian Germans in the Interwar German National Imaginary," *Central European History* 40, no. 3 (2007): 429-466; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 319-321. See also John Eicher, "Diaspora Hermeneutics: Mennonite Refugee Narratives Between the World Wars," in *New Perspectives in Diasporic Experience*, ed. Connie Rapoo, Maria Luisa Coelho and Zahira Sarwar (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014).
- ¹⁰ Image from *ibid.*, Tafel VI.
- ¹¹ Friedrich Keiter, *Rußlanddeutsche Bauern und ihre Stammesgenossen in Deutschland* (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1934), 1.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 31. See also Jakob Stach, "Zur Einführung der Sammlung," in Christian Kugler, *Großliebental* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1939), viii.
- ¹³ Karl Götz visited and assessed Mennonite communities in Canada and Mexico. See Karl Götz, "Sippenkundliche Randbemerkungen zu einer Amerikareise," *Jahrbuch für auslandsdeutsche Sippenkunde* 3 (1938): 115-129; Karl Götz, *Deutsche Leistung in Amerika* (Berlin: Franz Eher, 1940). Walter Quiring conducted similar work among Mennonites in Paraguay and Brazil. See Walter Quiring, *Deutsche erschliessen den Chaco* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1936); Walter Quiring, *Russlanddeutsche suchen eine Heimat* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1938); Walter Quiring to Ernst Kundt, November 10, 1936, R 127/518, Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin.
- ¹⁴ Benjamin H. Unruh, "Die ev. Mennoniten: Eine kurze konfessionskundliche Auskunft," ca. late 1939, Nachlaß Christian Neff, box 23, folder 21, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Bolanden-Weierhof.
- ¹⁵ See Helmut Foth, "Wie die Mennoniten in die deutsche Volksgemeinschaft hineinwuchsen: Die Mennonitischen Geschichtsblätter im Dritten Reich," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 68 (2011): 59-88; Benjamin W. Goossen, "Mennoniten als Volksdeutsche: Die Rolle des Mennonitentums in der nationalsozialistischen Propaganda," trans. Helmut Foth, *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 71 (2014): 54-70; Gerhard Rempel, "Heinrich Hajo Schroeder: The Allure of Race and Space in Hitler's Empire," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 29 (2011): 227-254.
- ¹⁶ Translated in Wm. Laird Kleine-Ahlbrandt, *Bitter Prerequisites: A Faculty for Survival from Nazi Terror* (West Lafayette, IN: Perdue University Press, 2001), 7. On Mennonites and Jews in the Third Reich, see Helmut Foth, "Juden, Täufer, Mennoniten: Ein Überblick über ihre 500 Jahre währende Beziehungsgeschichte," *Mennonitischer Geschichtsblätter* 70 (2013): 23-54; Diether Götz Lichdi, "Minderheiten, die sich lange fremd bleiben: Mennoniten und Juden in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus," in *Freikirchen und Juden im 'Dritten Reich,'* ed. Daniel Heinz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck &

- Ruprecht, 2011), 65-76; Gerhard Rempel, "Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetration," *MQR* 84, no. 4 (2010): 507-549.
- ¹⁷ Gustav Reimer, "Die Kirchenbücher der Menno. Gemeinden in West- und Ostpreussen," *Der Berg*, 1940, 83. On the relationship between genealogy and Aryanism in the Third Reich, see Eric Ehrenreich, *The Nazi Ancestral Proof: Genealogy, Racial Science, and the Final Solution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 76-142.
- ¹⁸ See Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: Inter marriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 311.
- ¹⁹ On the Nazi occupation of Poland, see Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Robert L. Koehl, *RKFDV: German Resettlement and Population Policy 1939-1945: A History of the Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957); Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
- ²⁰ Quoted in Staatliches Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, ed., *Sterbebücher von Auschwitz*, vol. 1 (Munich: Saur Verlag, 1995), 112.
- ²¹ On the German Racial List and its implementation in Nazi-occupied Poland, see Isabel Heinemann, "Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut:" *Das Rasse- & Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003), 260 ff.
- ²² Emil Händiges, "Zur Heimkehr der befreiten Volksgenossen ins Reich," *Mennonitische Blätter*, October/November 1939, 65. Enthusiastic responses to German conquest and annexation by Mennonite leaders from the occupied regions appear on subsequent pages.
- ²³ Quoted in Willi Kosul, *Die Bukowina und ihre Buchenlanddeutschen*, vol. 2 (Oberding: Reimo-Verlag, 2012), 234.
- ²⁴ "Rundschreiben," January 21, 1940, Vereinigung, box 3, folder 1940 Januar-Juni, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Bolanden-Weierhof. On the resettlement of Mennonites from Lemberg, see Horst Gerlach, "The Final Years of Mennonites in East and West Prussia, 1943-45," *MQR* 66, no. 2 (1992): 242-244. On Mennonites in Poland, see Peter Bachmann, *Mennoniten in Kleinpolen: 1784-1934* (Lemberg, 1934); Erich L. Ratzlaff, *Im Weichselbogen: Mennonitensiedlungen in Zentralpolen* (Winnipeg, 1971).
- ²⁵ Emil Händiges, "Kurzbericht über unsere Reise in die Gemeinden in Wartheland und Südostpreussen vom 23. Oktober bis 3. November 1941," November 14, 1941, Vereinigung, box 3, folder 1940 Juli-Dezember, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Bolanden-Weierhof. Additionally, several families of Mennonite "re-migrants" from Brazil also settled in the Nazi east. See Benjamin Unruh to Verband der Russlanddeutschen, October 20, 1939, R 127/518, Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin.
- ²⁶ See Terry Martin, "The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing," *Journal of Modern History* 70 (1998): 813-861; Terry Martin, "The Russian Mennonite Encounter with the Soviet State 1917-1955," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 20 (Winter 2002): 5-59.
- ²⁷ J. Janzen, "Eine Schilderung aus dem Leben der Schwarzmeerdeutschen im Gebiet Molotschna (Ukraine)," March 16, 1944, R 69/215, Bundesarchiv, Berlin. On Mennonites in Nazi-occupied Ukraine, see Jacob A. Neufeld,

- Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); Gerhard Rempel, "Himmler's Pacifists: German Ethnic Policy and the Russian Mennonites," Gerhard Rempel Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, KS; Horst Gerlach, "Mennonites, the Molotschna, and the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* in the Second World War," *Mennonite Life* 41, no. 3 (1986): 4-9.
- 28 On Special Command R, see Eric C. Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- 29 On Special Command Stumpp, see Eric J. Schmaltz and Samuel D. Sinner, "The Nazi Ethnographic Research of Georg Leibbrandt and Karl Stumpp in Ukraine, and Its North American Legacy," *Holocaust & Genocide Studies* 14, no. 1 (2000): 28-64.
- 30 "Flag raising ceremony," 1942, CA-MHC-351-15.0, Mennonite Heritage Centre. Used with permission.
- 31 Various "Dorfberichte" are archived in R 6/621, Bundesarchiv, Berlin. On these village reports and their context, see Schmaltz and Sinner, "The Nazi Ethnographic Research"; Richard H. Walth, *Flotsam of World History: The Germans from Russia between Stalin and Hitler* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2000).
- 32 Copies of the "Fragebogen zur sippenkundlichen Aufnahmen des Russlanddeuschturns" filled out by Mennonites in occupied Ukraine are archived in R 6/621, Bundesarchiv, Berlin.
- 33 Reproduced in Gerhard Fast, *Das Ende von Chortitza* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Regehr's Printing, 1973), 15.
- 34 Quoted in Benjamin H. Unruh to Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennoniten-Gemeinden, January 7, 1944, Nachlaß Benjamin H. Unruh, box 4, folder 21, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Bolanden-Weierhof.
- 35 Fast, *Das Ende von Chortitza*.
- 36 Quoted in Meir Buchsweiler, *Volksdeutsche in der Ukraine am Vorabend und Beginn des Zweiten Weltkrieges: Ein Fall doppelter Loyalität?* (Suttgart: Bleicher Verlag, 1984), 367. On Nazi rule in Ukraine, see also Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia, 1941-1945: A Study of Occupation Policies* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).
- 37 Kinkeln, "Vermerk über die Sitzung im Reichsinnenministerium am 23.11.42," November 23, 1942, R 6/110, Bundesarchiv, Berlin.
- 38 "Übersicht über die Herkunft und den jetzigen Aufenthalt der Volksdeutschen nach dem Stand v. 15.12.43," R 69/222, Bundesarchiv, Berlin.
- 39 On the evacuation of Mennonites from Ukraine to occupied Poland, see Peter Dyck and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up from the Rubble* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 87-99; Frank Epp, *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona, MB: Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council, 1962), 351-390; Marlene Epp, "Moving Forward, Looking Backward: The 'Great Trek' from the Soviet Union," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998): 59-75; Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 42-51; Fast, *Das Ende von Chortitza*; Horst Gerlach, "Rußlanddeutsche Umsiedlung 1943/44 nach Westpreußen und dem Wartheland," *Westpreußen-Jahrbuch* 29 (1979): 145-154.

- ⁴⁰ EWZ-Kommission XXVII-Sonderzug Gesundheitsstelle, "Bericht über die Durchschleusung der Russlanddeutschen im Warthegau," June 29, 1944, R 69/418, Bundesarchiv, Berlin. On Wartheland, see Catherine Epstein, *Model Nazi: Arthur Greiser and the Occupation of Western Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- ⁴¹ Benjamin Unruh to Vereinigung der Deutschen Mennonitengemeinden, November 21, 1944, Nachlaß Benjamin H. Unruh, box 4, folder 21, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle, Bolanden-Weierhof.
- ⁴² On the racial processing and settlement of "ethnic Germans" in occupied Poland, see Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, 184-204; Koehl, *RKFDV*.
- ⁴³ Hangel to alle Ortsgruppenleiter, Amtskommissare, Betreibsleiter und Betriebsführer des Kreises Konin, February 8, 1944, R 69/222, Bundesarchiv, Berlin.
- ⁴⁴ "Erfahrungsbericht über die Erfassung der Russlanddeutschen im Gau Danzig-Westpreussen," February 26, 1944, R 69/418, Bundesarchiv, Berlin.
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- ⁴⁶ Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, "Mennonite Refugees from Soviet Russia," ca. December 1946, AJ/43/49, folder: Eligibilité des Mennonites, Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine.
- ⁴⁷ H.M.L.H. Sark, E.A. van Beresteyn, J.C.J. Hogerzeil, "Dutch origins of the Russian Mennonites who have lately emigrated to Paraguay," February 24, 1947, AJ/43/462, folder: Mennonites, Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine.
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- ⁴⁹ According to MCC's figures, 8,158 European Mennonites relocated to Canada, 4,914 to Paraguay, 1,184 to Uruguay, and 1,108 to the United States. See Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 423.
- ⁵⁰ See Götz Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007); Doris L. Bergen, "The

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- ⁵¹ On Mennonites in Nazi-occupied France, see Lichdi, *Mennoniten im Dritten Reich*, 139-140. On Mennonites in the Netherlands and the Second World War, see Gerlof Homan, "'We Must and Can Stand Firmly: Dutch Mennonites in World War II,'" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69, no. 1 (1995): 7-36; Elisabeth I.T. Brussee-van der Zee, "Broederschap en national-socialisme," *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 11 (1985): 118-129; as well as the special 2015 issue of *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen*. On Nazi race policies in occupied France and the Netherlands, see Heinemann, "Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut," 305 ff.
- ⁵² These include John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes Among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933-1945* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1999); Peter P. Klassen, *Die deutsch-völkische Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, Chaco-Paraguay (1933-1945)* (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1990).
- ⁵³ Recent works that critically engage issues of Mennonite ethnicity and race include Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Alain Epp Weaver, *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2011). See also Lucille Marr, "The History of Mennonite Central Committee: Developing a Genre," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 47-58; John A. Lapp, "The Global Mennonite/Brethren in Christ History Project: The Task, the Problem, the Imperative," *Conrad Grebel Review* 15, no. 3 (1997): 283-290.