

Benjamin W. Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. 266. Hardcover, \$65.95.

Were Mennonites of the nineteenth and twentieth century victims, beneficiaries or perpetrators of oppression? Popular sentiment has tended to emphasize the victimization of Mennonites, especially those who lived during revolutionary Russia, or the Stalinist era, or were displaced during the upheavals of the Second World War. But in a recent study that examines Mennonite experience with German nationalism, Benjamin W. Goossen has proposed an alternative thesis. He does not deny that Mennonites were victims of oppression, but in the context of German nationalism, he is interested in highlighting the innumerable ways in which Mennonites benefited from, or were even complicit in, acts of violence and oppression. Whether in Germany, Ukraine, diasporic Paraguay or Canada, Mennonites were inexorably drawn to German-nationalistic sensibilities, benefitted from Nazi racial ideology, and in some cases participated in acts of genocide. The thesis is not new. Since the 1970s, scholars have brought to light a number of examples of Mennonite support for German-nationalist policies and examples of Nazi sympathies. What sets this book of seven chapters apart from previous studies is its wealth of new

detail, its transnational scope, and its attentiveness to what the author observes as Mennonite nationalism and exceptionalism.

The book begins by narrating how Mennonites of Dutch descent living in Prussia were first drawn to German nationalism in the nineteenth century, and how they managed to revise their own history in a way that placed them at the centre of Germany's national character. The author describes in detail Mennonite strategies for inculcating nationalist feelings in the context of family ties, educational endeavours, and efforts toward a German-wide Mennonite church union.

The heart of the book weaves a rather troubling narrative of Mennonite support for German nationalism in the context of the two World Wars. Here Goossen gives attention to how Mennonites demonstrated much enthusiasm regarding their country's military aspirations, and to the ways that they also benefitted from and sometimes even participated in Nazi racial policies. Mennonites living in the East likewise associated with nationalistic impulses. In 1918, and again in 1941, Mennonite colonists living in Ukrainian territory welcomed the invading Germans as liberators. Meanwhile in the West and even across the Atlantic, Mennonites were dreaming of returning to Ukraine with visions of a new homeland under Adolf Hitler.

The final chapter of the book examines the way in which post-war aid and the politics of repatriation under Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) continued to favour nationalistic sentiments, whether of a German or Mennonite brand. Goossen focuses on MCC's work in developing a Mennonite Resettlement Program in which about 280,000 German-speaking immigrants from various parts of the Soviet Union (*Aussiedler*) were assisted as they adjusted to a new life in the West. He concludes that this work was not only German-centric, but in a global era reflected MCC's inability to take seriously people of colour and those living in the Global South.

Goossen's study is a helpful reminder that collective identities are never static or immutable and highly vulnerable to nationalistic forces. However, it does not go far enough in explaining the ambiguities of human motivation and experience. In the real world we are all guilty by association. Anyone who owns a cell phone or pays taxes has blood on their hands. In times of war, populations rarely avoid the double curse of being both victims and beneficiaries of violence. Here I wish the author would have been more forthcoming in addressing this complexity.

A further shortcoming of the book is that it identifies Mennonite activity with German nationalism at almost every turn. So those

who are nostalgic about their eastern places of birth are implicated. So also is MCC's work in supporting the naturalization of East European "ethnic Germans" who suffered deportation as a consequence of the Second World War. Goossen sees this engagement as "a continuation of Nazi race policies," since the program assumed that West Germany was a homeland for "returning" diasporic German speakers. Of course the author can make an historical connection of this kind. Historical connections abound, but is one really to conclude from this that MCC workers who were helping immigrants of the former Soviet Union settle in German lands in the 1980s and 1990s, were motivated by Nazi ideology? Associations of this kind are bewildering.

This study is valuable in bringing to light the power of nationalism and the extent to which national and colonial ideologies are capable of shaping collective identities and religious beliefs. The book, often brilliantly, demonstrates that Mennonites were not only victims, but also beneficiaries and perpetrators of violence. Unfortunately, many of the book's inferences and conclusions lack nuance, and do not give enough attention to the complexities and ambiguities of human experience.

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