

# *A Mennostaat for the Mennovolk?* Mennonite Immigrant Fantasies in Canada in the 1930s

James Urry, *Victoria University of Wellington*

In 1933 a Russian Mennonite immigrant, now resident in Manitoba, J.J. Hildebrand, read an article in the *Winnipeg Free Press* concerning the Commonwealth of Australia's attempts to settle its Northern Territory. Hildebrand wrote to Melbourne enquiring whether "an independent white settlement of a religious group of about 400,000 souls, including women and children, now scattered all over the world," could be established in northern Australia. Hildebrand wanted "complete, treaty independence" for the settlement and a guarantee that the settlers would "consider ourselves the sole owners of the territory... [with the]... exclusive right to legislate in all matters concerning this territory... for an unmixed white population of our group." The Australian government's reply to this strange enquiry was predictable: Hildebrand was informed that the idea was "quite impossible" as the "granting of [such] concessions[,] tantamount to the Commonwealth relinquishing all its rights and privileges to any portion of its territory, was not contemplated by the Government when announcing its policy for the development and settlement of Northern Australia."<sup>1</sup> Nowhere in his letter did Hildebrand reveal that the

“religious group” were Mennonites, that in reality he did not represent 400,000 people or that behind his enquiry lay a fantasy of a separate Mennonite state, reserved exclusively for Mennonites of “German” descent.<sup>2</sup>

Hildebrand, however, had already outlined his ideas in articles published in various western Canadian Mennonite German language newspapers and, in more vehement and intemperate language, in private letters circulated to leaders of the Mennonite community in Canada. As in his letter to Australia, Hildebrand proposed that Mennonites establish a separate political and economic community in a distinct territory where they could control all aspects of their affairs and exclude outsiders, particularly groups which threatened their continued “racial” purity. Here they would be free from the persecution and interference of others which had frustrated their attempts to fulfil their true destiny. The language of this Mennonite state was to be High and Low German. Self-government would be by popular democracy through the election of local, village representatives from whose ranks further representatives would be chosen just like the system of local and regional government in prerevolutionary Mennonite Russia. Congregations were to be independent but linked through a general *Bundeskonferenz*, again as in late Imperial Russia. Economic affairs were to be regulated within the state which would have its own currency, the *Menno Gulden* exchangeable at a fixed rate with the United States dollar and German *Reichsmark*. Finally he even proposed a blue, green and white flag for his new state, featuring a white dove holding a palm of peace in its beak.<sup>3</sup>

How did Hildebrand, a member of a non-resistant Christian community which had always argued for a separation of church and state, come to propose such an idea of a Mennonite state? And were his proposals the result of some aberrant, individual fantasy or did they draw upon ideas and concepts implicit in the Russian Mennonite experience before and after emigration to Canada? Was Hildebrand an isolated voice with little or no support among Canadian Mennonites? Or was he articulating ideas and sentiments widely held in certain sections of the immigrant Mennonite community in Canada during the 1930s?

J.J. Hildebrand, with his wife and only child, emigrated to Canada from the Soviet Union in 1924. Born in 1880 in the Mennonite Molochna colony in southern Russia, he had trained as a school teacher but later turned to business.<sup>4</sup> In 1906 he had set out on his own to explore Europe and North America. After travelling widely through North America, in 1909 Hildebrand sailed across the Pacific visiting Japan and Korea before returning to southern Russia by way of Siberia. Impressed by Siberia’s immense economic potential, he returned to settle in the city of Omsk where he married and established an agency of the American International Harvester Company. Later he would become involved in other successful business ventures, growing wealthy and influential. Before the First World War many Mennonites moved to Siberia to found agricultural colonies and Hildebrand soon made contact with the new settlers and offered them his advice and experience. During World War One he assisted Mennonites

called up for military service by local authorities to claim their rights to alternative service. At the political conference of Mennonites held at Ohrloff to discuss the future of the Mennonites following the overthrow of the Tsar in 1917, he represented Siberian Mennonites and chaired the important committee delegated to discuss judicial issues.<sup>5</sup> During the Civil War he negotiated for the recognition of Mennonite rights with the commanders of various warring armies and political groupings in western Siberia. Unwilling to accommodate himself to the new Soviet regime, Hildebrandt chose to emigrate to Canada.

Unlike many of his fellow immigrants to Canada, Hildebrand already knew some English and had knowledge and experience of North American conditions. He also possessed considerable administrative and business experience and a particular interest in legal matters relating to Mennonite rights, commerce and land settlement.<sup>6</sup> In spite of his obvious skills and talents Hildebrand was not offered work with the Mennonite immigrant agencies established in Canada since 1923. These were controlled predominantly by Mennonites who had come directly from Soviet Ukraine and who had been raised in the heartland of Mennonite settlement and political influence in southern Russia. Hildebrand, although born and educated in the same region, was seen as a Siberian Mennonite, and thus associated with people often thought to be somewhat backward, under-educated and unskilled.<sup>7</sup> He also lacked the important political, educational and particularly religious connections of many of the other immigrant leaders in Canada who were often related or shared common backgrounds in congregations, schools or in other administrative bodies.

After attempting unsuccessfully to farm, Hildebrand settled in Winnipeg in 1926 and became involved with a newly formed immigration and land settlement agency, Mennonite Immigration Aid (MIA). MIA was established in direct competition with the Mennonite Board of Colonization and the CPR which had arranged, directed and controlled the movement of almost all immigrants from the Soviet Union to Canada since 1923. MIA was more of a business venture than the Board of Colonization which retained features of a mutual aid organization. To this end the leaders of MIA were in contact with the Cunard Steamship Line and the Canadian National Railways (CNR) with the aim of securing for their businesses Mennonite custom. Unlike the leaders of the Mennonite Board of Colonization, two of the leading members of the MIA Board were secular Mennonites without current congregational affiliations.<sup>8</sup> The MIA's advertisements highlighted the sorry state of conditions in the USSR, expressed anti-Bolshevik and anti-Semitic sympathies, and stressed the urgency of large-scale emigration.<sup>9</sup> The aim of its leaders was to increase dramatically the numbers of Mennonites emigrating from the Soviet Union and to establish new large and compact agricultural settlements of Mennonites somewhere in Canada.

During the 1920s Russian Mennonite immigrant settlement had taken many forms in Canada.<sup>10</sup> The preferred option was the establishment of

cohesive and exclusive Mennonite settlements but this was often frustrated by a shortage of suitable sites at affordable prices. The need to repay the travel debt forced most Mennonites to accept special deals to farm established farms where they could quickly raise funds to clear debt and acquire capital to rebuild their way of life. Some attempts were made, however, to establish group settlements. A number of immigrants in Manitoba and Saskatchewan managed to purchase farms and even village settlements from other Mennonites moving to Mexico or Paraguay, but in most other areas the only large tracts of land available were often uncultivated or in marginal areas. An ambitious attempt at group settlements occurred at Reesor in the swamps and forests of northern Ontario, but did not succeed.

Hildebrandt was a keen supporter of the idea of large-scale, cohesive and separate Mennonite settlement. As a travelling representative of MIA, he reported on the settlements at Reesor and the possibility of large-scale Mennonite settlement in the Peace River region of Alberta and British Columbia, areas serviced by the CNR.<sup>11</sup> It is obvious that as early as 1927, if not before, Hildebrand had in mind the establishment of separate, large-scale Mennonite settlements with a high degree of autonomy.<sup>12</sup> He was particularly interested in the right of Mennonites to run schools independently of provincial governments.<sup>13</sup> But the MIA had been formed too late and as emigration from the Soviet Union ceased in 1929, the organization closed sometime the following year. Hildebrand was left unemployed and in many ways cut off from the centres of power in the Mennonite immigrant community.<sup>14</sup>

The late 1920s and early 1930s were to prove a time of major crises for all the new Mennonite immigrants who had settled in Canada since 1923. After starting with great hopes, establishing themselves on farms or in business, building congregations and other community organisations and often expanding their families, the immigrants were faced with a sudden change in their economic fortunes. The economic crash of 1929 was followed by the Depression and many were forced to struggle to survive, burdened by debts and growing families. At the same time reports from friends and kinsfolk in the Soviet Union reported dreadful conditions, economic and political, with widespread arrests, collectivization and famine. To many it seemed the future held few prospects; in their old homeland their world had been destroyed and in North America economic and social conditions threatened to destroy their hopes of recreating and maintaining their distinctive society, language, and religion. If in the Soviet Union their sense of peoplehood were being destroyed by Communism, in Canada it was being eroded by adoption of the English language and through assimilation to North American ways.

When Hildebrand proposed his concept of a Mennonite state in 1933 his ideas obviously fell on sympathetic ears. His vision of a separate Mennonite order was clearly based upon his experiences of the prerevolutionary Russian Mennonite Commonwealth. In exile the Mennonite Commonwealth was increasingly being spoken of as having been a "state within a state" and a

golden age when as a people Mennonites had been fulfilled. So Hildebrand's plans clearly contained elements of the idealised way of life Mennonites believed in hindsight they had possessed in late Imperial Russia. But his proposals were also a consequence of the immigrants' frustrated efforts to reestablish this way of life in Canada during the 1920s. In as much as they contained an implicit criticism of the Mennonite institutions established in Canada and leaders who had organized emigration and resettlement during the 1920s. They were also part of a larger reaction against the Mennonite Board of Colonization that emerged in the the early 1930s.

With the end of further emigration from the Soviet Union the Board of Colonization had to reconsider its priorities and its future organisation and responsibilities. Its first priority now was to clear the immigrants' travel debts owed to the CPR and then to assist the immigrants to establish religious congregations and join conferences. But some immigrants, Hildebrand included, believed that the Mennonite emigration agencies and their leaders had failed the Mennonite people. During the 1920s they had failed to rescue the thousands of Mennonites now trapped in the Soviet Union and, as they had not settled those they had brought to Canada in proper, prosperous communities, they had exposed Mennonites to the threat of cultural assimilation, the loss of their peoplehood, and the end of their faith. Letters Hildebrand wrote at this time to leading figures in the Mennonite immigration organisations, including Elder David Toews of Rosthern and B.B. Janz of Coaldale, clearly reveal such views. He accused the leadership of being in league with big business interests, especially the CPR, that settlement policies pursued since the 1920s had been speculative and detrimental to the Mennonite community, and too much attention had been given to religious instead of social and cultural issues. Mennonites, he argued, had squandered their limited resources on establishing churches and organising religious life, instead of strengthening essential community structures for the benefit of the "people" (*Volk*). Hildebrand now appealed for a proper separation of "state" from "church," for strong, even dictatorial leadership, and to this end he proposed that Mennonites found a *Menno-Bund*—a Union of Mennonites—to pursue the idea of establishing a separate *Mennostaat* on *Mennoland*.<sup>15</sup>

The idea of a political union of Mennonites had been proposed in 1917 as Mennonites attempted to establish political unity in the brief period when it seemed democracy might emerge in Russia following the fall of the Tsar and his government. The distinction between religious and secular affairs, implicit in these discussions, reflected a trend apparent in late Imperial Russia as more educated and skilled Mennonites assumed leadership positions in an increasingly complex Mennonite world.<sup>16</sup> Education, language maintenance and political autonomy were all concerns which, although they involved the continued overview of religious leaders, increasingly concerned Mennonites who did not hold religious office. This trend towards a degree of separation between secular and religious spheres continued in Canada where a distinct

body, the Central Mennonite Immigration Committee (*Zentrales Mennonitisches Immigrantenkomitee*, or ZMIK for short), was established to control the economic and cultural development of the new immigrants. ZMIK, mainly due to a shortage of funds and the dispersal of the immigrants, failed to fulfil its early promise and in 1933 it was decided to transfer its responsibilities to the Board of Colonization and thus more to the control of the religious leadership. This decision caused considerable discussion and debate in the immigrant community and a number of Mennonites proposed alternative plans for the reform of Mennonite institutions.<sup>17</sup> Hildebrand therefore was not alone in his concerns, although his proposals were among the most radical and far-reaching.

Hildebrand's call for a Mennonite *Bund*, although derived in part from earlier Mennonite experience in late Imperial Russia, also drew on the ideas of right-wing groups in Germany, including the idea of the need for strong leaders and the restriction of democratic ideals to a select few. German Mennonites, like the German people, required the inspired intervention of a strong leader, such as Adolf Hitler. In his appeal for a strong, secular Mennonite leadership, Hildebrand reflected the importance of the Führerprinzip on his thinking, and the increasing influence of Nazi ideas.<sup>18</sup>

When Hildebrand first became aware of the German National Socialist Party is unclear.<sup>19</sup> Reports of Hitler and the Nazis began to appear in the Mennonite press with increasing frequency from the early 1930s onwards and attracted the attention of the Russian Mennonite immigrants in Canada.<sup>20</sup> The German government's assistance to Mennonites fleeing Soviet Russia in 1929-30 had strengthened a growing sense of Germanness among the Mennonite immigrants, often further encouraged by fears of cultural assimilation to the English language and North American culture. At the same time, reports of the struggle between Communists and right-wing groups in the late Weimar Republic appeared in the Mennonite and local German and English press in Canada. Russian Mennonites settled or studying in Germany also informed friends and relatives in Canada of the volatile political situation, of Hitler's activities and the policies of the Nazi party.<sup>21</sup>

So, in 1933, some Mennonites welcomed Hitler's accession to power in Germany as a sign of the rebirth of a great country and a noble people with whom they now felt something in common. As well as sharing a common language, and more dubiously a common history, the immigrant Mennonites could identify with a country and a people defeated and humiliated after the First World War, and who through Hitler and his party had regained a sense of dignity and respect in the world. By identifying with the New Germany as it was often described in the Mennonite press, the immigrants, denied an identity and having lost all in war and revolution, could share in Germany's triumph and regain a sense of dignity and even destiny. All they had to do was "rediscover" their "inherent" Germanness and in this they were greatly assisted by Nazi propaganda and popular German literature containing *völkisch*

themes, often supplied free by pan-nationalist organisations in Germany. Such sources revealed to Mennonites that in Russia their separateness and cultural superiority, as well as their economic success, was not due just to faith or God blessing his chosen people, but more to their deep-seated destiny as members of the German race.<sup>22</sup>

The strongly anti-Bolshevik stance of the Nazis which identified the Soviet leadership as Jewish and Communism as a Zionist conspiracy for world domination, also appealed to some immigrants. Suddenly Mennonite suffering made sense: Mennonites were the victims of Jewish-inspired Communism. The Mennonite experience had been part of a larger cosmic struggle between races, between religion and Communist disbelief, between civilized, German-cultural values and Slav-Jewish barbarism. Such views were easily nurtured in the minds of Mennonites exposed to anti-Semitism in Imperial Russia and revolutionaries often of Jewish ancestry.<sup>23</sup> Nazi views of Bolshevism and their propaganda against Communism and the Soviet Union were easily assimilated and other Nazi ideas also found a welcome hearing. As “Germans” Mennonites could now forget about Russia as a lost “homeland” and give proper allegiance to their true Fatherland (Vaterland): Germany. As “Germans” they were members of a pure race (reines Volk) who, although long separated from the Fatherland, were descendants of a larger German diaspora who could reclaim their true destiny as “Germans-abroad” (*Auslandsdeutsche*), reassert their inherent, and inherited, ethnic Germanness (*völkisches Deutschtum*) and join the greater German community (*Volksgemeinschaft*).

In Hildebrand’s private letters and in newspaper articles published after 1932 the influence of Nazi ideas is quite apparent. Early in 1934 Hildebrand became a member of the Winnipeg branch of the newly formed Nazi Deutsche Bund Kanada and in 1938 received an award for loyal service to the Bund and the Nazi cause from the Volksbund für das Deutschtum im Ausland (League for Germandom Abroad) in Berlin.<sup>24</sup> In a series of articles written in 1934 in which he reviewed Mennonite history, Hildebrand claimed that Mennonite identity could not be based just on Christian religion as Christianity was universal. Instead he claimed history revealed that Mennonite identity was based on deeply seated “folk-instincts” which were specific to them alone. Religion and national-ethnic identity (Volkstum) were two “entirely different things.” In spite of claims by some evangelical Mennonites that there were Indian, Malay and Chinese Mennonites, in reality this was a contradiction in terms as the distinctiveness of being Mennonite was not defined by faith. True Mennonite “ethnic/folk descent” (*völkische Abstammung*) was derived from Germanness (*Deutschtum*), from a German “spiritual-culture” (*Geisteskultur*) which had existed for over 400 years, and Mennonites had been “nurtured from German root-stock in German soil.”<sup>25</sup> But this legacy was now at risk from assimilation which threatened young Mennonites and especially women. Children were attending English schools while young Russländer women and even girls were working as servants in the urban homes of foreigners, even

Jews.<sup>26</sup> These attempts to assimilate Mennonites were, he claimed, part of a world-wide Jewish conspiracy.<sup>27</sup>

If it is clear that Hildebrand had assimilated Nazi doctrines concerning race and *völkisch* ideology, was his proposal for a Mennonite state also derived from Nazi sources? While it is true that principles of racial purity were essential to Nazi views of the German nation and its people,<sup>28</sup> it is less clear that when they seized power they possessed a well formulated concept of the state. The Nazi state that developed in Germany after 1933, and which eventually evolved into a racial state which brought war and genocide to vast areas of Europe, emerged gradually from experience and through the incorporation of pre-existing structures of government.<sup>29</sup> Although Hildebrand obviously understood the utopian vision of a people and a nation propagated by the Nazis, being resident in Canada he, like most other Mennonite immigrants at that period, had no direct experience of Nazi policies or government in Germany. In the early 1930s his plans for a *Mennostaat*, while incorporating Nazi concepts, still owed as much to an idealised vision of a lost Mennonite world in Russia, as to the emergent Nazi racial-state. This can be clearly seen in the specifics of his proposals for the *Mennostaat* such as the system of local government clearly derived from prerevolutionary Russian Mennonite experience.

But there were other Mennonites with more direct experience of the Nazi rise to power and the possibilities of putting fascist ideas into practice. Heinrich Schroeder, a Russian Mennonite who had stayed in Germany and not emigrated to Canada, became an ardent follower of the Nazis. A school teacher, Schroeder wrote a book stressing the racial purity of Mennonite descent from "Frisians," a suitably pure Aryan people in the new classifications of the Nazi racist state.<sup>30</sup> A frequent contributor to Canadian Mennonite newspapers, Schroeder extolled Nazi ideas and policies, fiercely attacking anyone who dare doubt the Führer's genius and teachings.<sup>31</sup> Following the publication of Hildebrand's articles on the *Mennostaat*, Schroeder proposed the establishment in Germany of 100 settlements in the form of a "traditional-colony of Russian Germans". As in Russia, these settlements were to be rural villages and would conform to Hitler's stated ideal of racially-pure frontier colonies, "*rassereine Randkolonien*." The idea of a frontier settlement relates to the Nazi belief in establishing *Lebensraum* or "living-space" for the German people, usually agricultural colonies in the lands to the east and this excited Mennonite hopes that their lost colonies in Ukraine might be returned. Schroeder suggested the first of these settlements be named *Friesenheil* ("The Frisian's Greeting"? - as in, Heil Hitler).<sup>32</sup> Schroeder's views clearly reflect utopian Nazi visions which rejected modern industrialised society in favour of a return to agrarian life, accompanied by a revival of perceived pre-Christian Germanic values: blood, soil and the martial spirit.<sup>33</sup> Although one cannot conceive of anything further removed from established Mennonite values of Christian simplicity and non-resistance, in reality such profound anti-modernism appealed to many Mennonite immigrants who favoured a simple agrarian



life-style over the appeal of big-business, urban centres and North American culture.

Another Russian Mennonite deeply influenced by his time in Germany was Jacob Quiring who, in line with the Nazi practice of only using "German" names, changed his forename to Walter. After studying at Munich University and obtaining a doctorate, Quiring became a major promoter of Nazi ideas in Europe and in North and South America. If the Mennonites in North America had failed to achieve the ideal of racially pure and separated communities, those who had emigrated to the Paraguayan Chaco from the Soviet Union via Germany in the 1930s had a perfect opportunity to do so. Although in reality these settlements experienced major economic difficulties, and their inhabitants were bitterly divided between pro-German Nazis and those who rejected such associations, Quiring, who visited the colonies in the early 1930s, extolled their virtues to Canadian Mennonites. By taming the Chaco wilderness, a "German" people were fulfilling their racial destiny and had established political and cultural settlements under 'total' Mennonite control. Here was an opportunity for an independent Mennonite "state" to develop, in stark contrast to the religiously dominated and scattered immigrant Mennonite communities in Canada, whose people were in danger of being assimilated to North American culture and losing their "German" inheritance.<sup>34</sup>

While Hildebrand envisaged the regrouping of all Russian Mennonites into a separate and pure Mennonite state, at least one Mennonite letter proposed linking existing settlements together into a separate Mennonite free-trade area. J. P. Dyck of Manitoba, another keen supporter of Nazi ideas in the 1930s, suggested that Mennonites could exchange produce and become largely self-sufficient. Mennonites in Canada could produce wheat, while Mennonites in Latin America could exchange other crops. The Nazi ideal of linking all Germans living abroad, socially, culturally and economically to the German Fatherland, could thus be achieved in miniature by the Mennonites.<sup>35</sup>

Hildebrand maintained an extensive correspondence with Mennonites interested in his ideas and the newspapers which published his articles received and published a number of replies. Arnold Dyck sent Hildebrand a noncommittal letter in which he expressed sympathy for his ideas but expressed his reservations.<sup>36</sup> Dyck, however, permitted Hildebrand's articles to be printed in his own newspaper, *Die Post*. Other editors also published his material and replies, although the *Mennonitische Rundschau* editor headed some replies with the phrase "On Hildebrand's Utopia," indicating his fantastic and unrealistic aims.<sup>37</sup> Some expressions of support, however, were published. One correspondent suggested that Mennonites needed to be protected against "individualistic" Canadian society and the only way to achieve this was to bring all Mennonites together under German "protection."<sup>38</sup>

There were, however, strong arguments against Hildebrand's proposal and its reasoning. Most articulate among these was Elder Jacob H. Janzen, a

prolific contributor to the Mennonite press after his emigration to Canada in the 1920s.<sup>39</sup> He was probably the author of an extremely critical attack on the idea of the *Mennostaat* published earlier in the *Mennonitische Rundschau* in 1933, and issued a mild rebuke in an article under his own name, entitled "Eine Utopie," early in 1934.<sup>40</sup> Basically Janzen's view was that while Mennonites may have had acquired the pretensions of a state in Russia, such political connections brought with them many perils, not least concerning the issue of non-resistance, a problem raised by many critics. In his proposal for the *Mennostaat*, Hildebrand had remained somewhat vague about the contradiction between establishing and defending a territorial state and the Mennonite principle of non-resistance. He suggested that one benefit of autonomy was that Mennonites would not be forced to serve other masters in time of war and by remaining sovereign they could refuse to be drawn into the conflicts of other states. This was ridiculed by his critics.<sup>41</sup>

Most of the critics clearly recognised the pro-German and Nazi leanings of Hildebrand and his supporters. In fact, opposition to Hitler, to Nazi ideas and policies and of Mennonite support for Germanness was apparent from as early as 1931. G.G. Wiens, a Russian Mennonite who had emigrated to the United States before the First World War, criticized Nazi anti-Semitism and later mocked Hitler's style of oratory, comparing him to the notorious American evangelical preacher Billy Sunday.<sup>42</sup> Wiens' comments drew a furious response from Heinrich Schroeder, who praised Hitler as the saviour of Germany and his regime as Europe's final bulwark against Communism.<sup>43</sup> These were the opening shots in a struggle between supporters and opponents of *Deutschtum* and the Nazis that were to continue publicly in the Mennonite press and privately in the community up to the outbreak of the Second World War and in which any idea of a *Mennostaat* quickly faded.<sup>44</sup>

Many Mennonite leaders attempted to contain public expressions of pro-Germanism and open expressions of support for the Nazis. The vitriolic tone of the newspaper debates was of particular concern and approaches were made to editors to restrict and even to ban articles written by certain people, apparently with little success. Behind the scenes, however, there was considerable concern within Mennonite bodies over the political intentions of some Mennonites. The crises of the late 1920s and the early 1930s caused considerable ill-will and opposition towards the Mennonite leadership and the immigrant organisations among many immigrants. A number of Mennonites were sympathetic to plans aimed at the radical reorganization of Mennonite institutions. The decision in 1934 for the Board of Colonization to assume ZMIK's responsibilities placed the central "cultural" institution of the immigrants under the Board's control. In doing so a potentially "secular" political body was brought under the authority of the religious leadership which through the conference structures continued to assert its authority over Mennonites.<sup>45</sup>

Religion and culture clearly became the major point of conflict between those immigrants who possessed a more embracing, cultural-secular view of

Mennonitism and those who argued that at its core it was a religious movement. This can be clearly seen in attitudes towards the idea of a Mennonite state and the definition of the Mennovolk. Major religious leaders in the community, including Jacob H. Janzen, argued that religion and faith and not race and culture had always been, and remained, the basis of being a Mennonite and belonging to a Mennonite community.<sup>46</sup> The dangers of the anti-democratic, anti-Anglo-Saxon and anti-Canadian tone of much of the debate also was clearly recognised. One Canadian Mennonite, a descendant of the 1870s Mennonite settlers, suggested that as a new immigrant Hildebrand did not know what he was talking about, while even one of his fellow immigrants appealed to Mennonites to accept the benefits of their new country and become good citizens.<sup>47</sup>

The newspaper reports, however, provide only a glimpse of the real debates occurring in the homes of Russian Mennonite immigrants in many parts of Canada. There is little doubt that there was widespread support for the idea of Germanness, of separation from certain aspects of Canadian society and for the maintenance of a distinctive Mennonite identity and autonomy. To a degree this involved a rejection of the host society, at least by adult Mennonites raised in prerevolutionary Russia. There was also considerable sympathy for Germany, support for its policies in world affairs and an interest in Nazi literature and doctrines, especially those which strongly emphasised anti-Communist sentiments. Through reading Nazi literature, anti-Semitic ideas and a concern with questions of racial purity became more prevalent. But only a very few Mennonites joined pro-Nazi groups or became active in fascist organizations.<sup>48</sup> Most Mennonite immigrants took a pragmatic approach to the flood of propaganda and the debates over Mennonite identity, preferring to wait and keep their options open. In principle, the idea of a *Mennostaat* certainly had appeal, but in practice it looked hopelessly unrealistic. One critic of Hildebrand's idea of a *Mennostaat* noted that Mennonites in the current situation "needed neither chimeras, nor imaginary images, but realistic treatises."<sup>49</sup> As the 1930s advanced, the "golden-years" of the Russian Mennonite Commonwealth before 1914 took on a richer hue and this past was increasingly seen as a lost age, a time of prosperity and security when the *Mennovolk* had lived a simple, separate existence under their own control. But increasingly it was a world most now understood had passed, a time and a place that never could be recreated.

Some might suggest that Hildebrand's fantasy of a *Mennostaat* is so peculiar that it is unworthy of scholarly attention. Others might argue that as his ideas obviously had so few supporters (as if such a thing could ever be measured) they should be disregarded. The presentation of the Mennonite past still can be very normative and triumphant: Good News History for the faithful flock. A single act of grace or sacrifice by an individual Mennonite is celebrated and appropriated to the history of the entire community; a single negative act or opinion is suppressed and claimed to be odd, particular and unrepresentative.

Hildebrand's vision of a *Mennostaat* was not created in isolation from his own imagination, but from his direct experience of life and presented to the Mennonite world at a particular juncture in their history. His *Mennostaat* for the *Mennovolk* drew on established Mennonite experience of peoplehood born out of their interaction with nationalism, Communism and fascism. It fed on a belief that as a cultural as well as a religious people Mennonites should control and dominate their own community institutions. All these notions first had developed in pre-revolutionary Russia.<sup>50</sup> But the idea that such notions and institutions were essential for their continued existence as a people were heightened by the loss of their land, their wealth and friends and relations in the Revolution, Civil War and the emergence of the Soviet Union. The proposal to form a Mennonite state was formulated in Canada after the apparent failure of the new immigrants to re-establish their previous way of life, in the midst of crises at home and abroad. It was, however, but one aspect of a sad and dark chapter of the history of Mennonites in Canada in the 1930s as some immigrants rejected their new-found home and sympathized with a nation they had never known, and an ideology fundamentally at odds with their established religious values.

In his reflections on religion and nationalism, Conor Cruise O'Brien suggests three different kinds of "holy nationalism" which can be "ticketed in ascending order of arrogance and destructiveness." Starting with the notion of being a 'chosen people,' communities lay claim to a country and the status of a "holy nation—that is, chosen people with tenure." But, even at this stage people still believe that they exist under God's "permanent favor." When, however, they reach the stage of believing themselves to be a "deified nation," they no longer have any need for God, and begin to worship themselves.<sup>51</sup> O'Brien's stages seem tailor-made for understanding the Russian Mennonite experience. From their Anabaptist past Mennonites could claim to be a chosen people, in Russia the Mennonite Commonwealth became the basis for a holy nation, but in Canada some Mennonites could even conceive of their people shedding their ties with God and forming a deified *Mennostaat*. In terms of the latter, it is not surprising that O'Brien identifies the deified nation with Nazi Germany, where "there is no longer any entity, or law, or ethic superior to the nation... the holy nationalism of the Third Reich... [consisted of] 'The nation idolizing itself.'" Perhaps it is just as well for Mennonites that the proposal for a *Mennostaat* remained but a fantasy.

### Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented to the Conference of The Association for Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand, held at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, in December 1992. I am grateful for the helpful comments of Victor G. Doerksen, Harry Loewen, Al Reimer and John Thiesen.

<sup>1</sup>Letters in the J.J. Hildebrand Papers, Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives (from now on MHC), Winnipeg, Manitoba, Volume 3308, Folder 15. Hildebrand also enquired into the possible location of his separate Mennonite state in Angola, Dutch New Guinea and various locations in Latin America, see MHC Hildebrand Papers, scattered through various files in Volumes 2821, 3308, 3484.

<sup>2</sup>Hildebrand's claim to represent 400,000 Mennonites indicates that his pretensions for a Mennonite state extended to all Mennonites of 'German' descent located throughout the world.

<sup>3</sup>J.J. Hildebrand, "Zeichen der Zeit," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, (from now on MR) 56(13), 29 March 1934, 4-6, and his "Zu meinem 'Zeichen der Zeit,'" MR, 56(16), 19 April 1933, 11-12; see also his articles in *Die Post* (Steinbach) 20(20), 18 May 1933, 2-3. For examples of his letters to various leaders see J.J. Hildebrand Papers MHC Volume 3308, Folder 14; B.B. Janz Papers, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Canada, Winnipeg, Box 4, File 61 (Group VI) D. Private Correspondence (1925-1944), letters to Janz, David Toews, J.C. Dyck, W. Dyck.

<sup>4</sup>This account of Hildebrand's life is based on letters in his own papers in MHC, Winnipeg, Manitoba for example his letter to A.K. Thiessen dated 21 June 1934 (Volume 2821) and to C. Henry Smith in August 1939 (Volume 3308, Folder 27).

<sup>5</sup>See the report of the the work of this important section under Hildebrand's leadership in the minutes of the Ohrloff Congress in *The Mennonites in Russia from 1917 to 1930: selected documents*, ed. John B. Toews. Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1975, 458-59, 466.

<sup>6</sup>Hildebrandt had published articles on some of these themes in Mennonite newspapers even before 1914, see J.J. Hildebrand, "Die Omsker Gesellschaft gegenseitigen Kredits," *Die Friedensstimme*, 11 (24), 23 March 1913, 4; J.J. Hildebrand, "Das Privilegium des Forstdienstes," *Die Friedensstimme*, 11 (31), 20 April 1913, 9.

<sup>7</sup>Hildebrand certainly identified himself as a Siberian Mennonite, but with a sense of pride, and later wrote a history of the settlement of the region, J.J. Hildebrand, *Siberien*. Winnipeg: The Author, 1952.

<sup>8</sup>Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite exodus: the rescue and resettlement of the Russian Mennonites since the Communist revolution*. Altona: D.W. Friesen, 1962, 181.

<sup>9</sup>See the appeal to Mennonites by the Board of MIA c. 1927 in the Hildebrand Papers, MHC Volume 3484, Folder 39.

<sup>10</sup>On these settlement patterns, plans and problems see Epp, *Mennonite exodus*, Chapter 14; Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940: a people's struggle for survival*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1982, Chapter 5.

<sup>11</sup>Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 214-18.

<sup>12</sup>See his earlier opinions in J.J. Hildebrand, "Argentinien," MR, 47(46), 12 November 1924, 4-5.

<sup>13</sup>Epp, *Mennonite exodus*, 181, 299; Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 217, 234n.

<sup>14</sup>Epp, *Mennonite exodus*, 180-82; Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 194-97.

<sup>15</sup>J.J. Hildebrand Papers MHC 3308, Folder 14; B.B. Janz Papers, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Canada, Winnipeg, Box 4, File 61 (Group VI) D. Private Correspondence (1925-1944), letters to Janz, David Toews, J.C. Dyck, W. Dyck.

<sup>16</sup>For a discussion of these trends see James Urry, *Politics, peoplehood and power: aspects of the Russian Mennonite experience in late Imperial Russia, the early Soviet Union and Canada, 1880-1940*. Winnipeg: forthcoming, Chapter 1.

<sup>17</sup>See Urry, *Politics, peoplehood and power*, Chapter 3 for a discussion of ZMIK, its rise and fall and the debates concerning the future of Mennonite organisations.

<sup>18</sup>J.J. Hildebrand, "Unsere Probleme," *Bote* 11(4), 24 January 1934, 2; on the Führerprinzip and the cult surrounding Hitler see Jan Kershaw, *The "Hitler myth": image and reality in the Third Reich*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. One contemporary Mennonite observer of Hildebrand's proposal noted that while he claimed to be a new Moses to his people, in reality he merely exhibited 'Führer-ambition' and 'Führer-lust' without any 'Führer-talent', a clear reference to his perceived Nazi sympathies, Incertus, "Der Mennostaat," *MR*, 56(19), 10 May 1933, 11.

<sup>19</sup>It is perhaps auspicious that a copy of a German-language Riga newspaper Hildebrand purchased on the single day he spent in that city should contain a report of Hitler's release from prison after his abortive coup attempt in Munich; he preserved the newspaper and today it can be found in his papers in MHC.

<sup>20</sup>See for instance the opinion of the editor of the *Mennonitische Rundschau* of Adolf Hitler in 54(5), 4 February 1931, 11.

<sup>21</sup>"Faschismus und Bolschewismus," *MR*, 51 (8), 22 February, 1928, 3. For a detailed study of the rise of pro-German and pro-Nazi sentiments in the Mennonite press see Frank H. Epp, *An analysis of Germanism and National Socialism in the immigrant newspapers of a Canadian minority group, the Mennonites in the 1930s* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Minnesota 1965) and Benjamin Redekop, "The Canadian Mennonite response to National Socialism," *Mennonite Life*, 46, (1991): 18-24.

<sup>22</sup>On Nazi organisations and propaganda directed at Germans living abroad see Donald M. McKale, *The swastika outside Germany*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 1977, Ernst Ritter, *Das Deutsche Ausland-Institut in Stuttgart 1917-1945: ein Beispiel Deutscher Volkstumsarbeit zwischen den Weltkriegen*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1976 and Z.A.B. Zeman, *Nazi Propaganda* London: Oxford University Press, 1973, Chapters 3 and 4. On the importance of *völkisch* themes in German literature see Jost Hermand, *Old dreams of a new Reich: völkisch utopias and National Socialism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992. The impact of the Nazis on Germans and Mennonites in Canada is discussed by Jonathan F. Wagner, *Brothers beyond the sea: National Socialism in Canada*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981; James Urry, "Who are the Mennonites?" *Archives Européenne de Sociologie*, 24, 1983, 241-62; and Benjamin W. Redekop, "Germanism among Mennonite Brethren immigrants in Canada, 1930-1960: a struggle for ethno-religious integrity," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 24, 1992, 24-28.

<sup>23</sup>On Mennonite anti-Semitism, especially as it was expanded by Nazi propaganda in the 1930s, see Kenneth Dueck and Donald Froese, *Attitudes towards Jews encountered among selected segments of Mennonites in Canada*. Unpublished Research Paper, Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg 1974.

<sup>24</sup>Hildebrand's *Bund* membership number was 307, see letter to H. Herling 25 March 1935 in MHC Hildebrand Papers, Volume 4150; on his award and service record see the letters of the VDA, the *Bund* and Hildebrand in MHC Hildebrand Papers, Volume 3484. On the *Bund* see Jonathan Wagner, "The *Deutsche Bund* Canada 1934-9," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58(2), 1977, 176-200 and Wagner, *Brothers beyond the sea*, Chapter 3.

<sup>25</sup>J.J. Hildebrand, "Mennonitische Geschichte 60 Jahre später," *MR*, 57 (12-13), 21-28 March 1934, 3-4, 2. Hildebrand assembled considerable historical documentation of the granting of special Mennonite rights by various states and governments and attempted to trace the history of Mennonites to discern a secular pattern of distinctive identity in their past. One product of this was his self-published *Chronologische Zeittafel: 1,500 Daten historischer Ereignisse aus der Zeit der Geschichte der Mennoniten Russlands und Amerikas*. Winnipeg: The Author, 1945 and a massive unpublished history of the Mennonites preserved among his papers in MHC and in the Archives of the University of Calgary.

<sup>26</sup>This was to raise money to help pay off the family's travel debt. There is a sense of irony in this, as many Mennonites had employed servants themselves in Russia; now roles were reversed. To assist in 'protecting' the women and girls, special 'homes' were set-up in major cities to give

them aid, see Marlene Epp. "The Mennonite Girls' Homes of Winnipeg: a home away from home," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 6, 1988, 100-14, and F.E. Klippenstein, "'Doing what we could': Mennonite domestic servants in Winnipeg, 1920s to 1950s," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 7, 1989, 145-66.

<sup>27</sup>J.J. Hildebrand, "Mennonitische Geschichte," *MR*, 57 (14), 14 April 1934, 6-7.

<sup>28</sup>See Michael Hughes, *Nationalism and society: Germany 1800-1945*. London: Edward Arnold, 1988, 207-212; Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The racial state: Germany 1933-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

<sup>29</sup>Martin Broszat, *The Hitler state: the foundation and development of the internal structure of the Third Reich*. London: Longman, 1981.

<sup>30</sup>See H.H. Schroeder, *Russlanddeutsche Friesen*. Langensalza: Beltz, 1936. There was great interest in Mennonite genealogy in Canada and Germany in the 1930s, some of which was inspired less by a concern with tracing family links, and more in proving racial purity under the Nuremberg Laws. For a spectacular example of this work presented as scholarly endeavour, see Benjamin Heinrich Unruh, *Die niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Karlsruhe: The Author 1955). Unruh was a highly influential Russian Mennonite who also stayed on in Germany where he established links with the Nazi leadership. During the 1930s he was deeply involved in discussions concerning Mennonite history and identity published in Canadian Mennonite newspapers.

<sup>31</sup>On the extent of Schroeder's contributions to argument and debate on these issues, see Epp, *An analysis of Germanism*.

<sup>32</sup>H. H. Schroeder, "Entwurf für die Begründung einer Erbhofsiedlung 'Traditionskolonie der Russland-Deutschen,'" *MR*, 57(37), 12 September 1934, 3-4; the reference to Hitler is from his *Mein Kampf*. On the Nazi salute interpreted as an ancient German salutation see W. Quiring, 'Der deutsche Gruss,' *Bote*, 11, 24 October 1934, 2. A chilling footnote to the idea of "Friesen" frontier village is the establishment of Friesendorf in Nazi-occupied Ukraine in 1942. This replaced Stalindorf, one of the settlements in the Judenplan in an area with long Mennonite associations. The Jewish population was removed and exterminated to establish this new German settlement in the Lebensraum of the Nazi empire, see Meir Buchsweiler, *Volksdeutsche in der Ukraine am Vorabend und Beginn des Zweiten Weltkrieges - ein Fall doppelter Loyalität?* Stuttgart: Bleicher Verlag, 1984, 285, 349, 368, 382.

<sup>33</sup>See Henry A. Turner, "Fascism and modernization," in Henry A. Turner, ed., *Reappraisals of fascism*. New York: New Viewpoints, 1975, 121-124; Nazi views as to tradition and modernization were extremely contradictory and are open to conflicting interpretations. For a review of the recent literature, see Thomas Saunders, "Nazism and social revolution," in Gordon Martel, ed., *Modern Germany reconsidered 1870-1945*. London: Routledge, 1992, 159-77.

<sup>34</sup>Quiring's initial reports on Paraguay appeared in the period 1933-34; see also his *Deutsche erschliessen den Chaco*. Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1936 and *Russlanddeutsche suchen eine Heimat: die deutsche Einwanderung in den paraguayischen Chaco*. Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1938; see also Peter P. Klassen, *Die deutsch-völkische Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, Chaco, Paraguay 1933-1945. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der auslandsdeutschen Mennoniten während des Dritten Reiches*. Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1990. On the influence of Nazi ideas in Paraguayan Mennonite communities and among other Russian Mennonite immigrants in Mexico and Brazil, see John D. Thiesen, "The Mennonite encounter with National Socialism in Latin America, 1933-1944," in Abe J. Dueck ed., *Canadian Mennonites and the challenge of nationalism*. Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1994, 145-64.

<sup>35</sup>J.P. Dyck, "Ein allgemeiner, mennonitischer, wirtschaftlicher Verein," *MR*, 58(44), 30 October 1935, 6-7. On the Nazi concern with linking Germans across the world into support for the Nazi cause see Zeman, *Nazi Propaganda*, 79-80.

<sup>36</sup>Letter from Dyck to Hildebrand in MHC, J.J. Hildebrand Papers Vol 3308 dated 12 February

1933.

<sup>37</sup>MR, 56(19) 10 May 1933, 11.

<sup>38</sup>B[.B.]W[arkentin], "Analysis zum Mennonitischen Problem," MR, 57 (14), 4 April 1934, 2; Warkentin, from Kitchener in Ontario, corresponded with Hildebrand on this issue, see J.J. Hildebrand Papers, MHC, Volume 3308.

<sup>39</sup>See Henry Paetkau, "Jacob H. Janzen: 'a minister of rare magnitude,'" *Mennogespräch*, 6(1), 1988, 1-4.

<sup>40</sup>Incertus, "Der Mennostaat," Jacob H. Janzen, "Eine Utopie," *Bote*, 11(3), 17 January 1934, 1.

<sup>41</sup>Hildebrand, "Zeichen der Zeit,"; Incertus, "Der Mennostaat." The issue of Mennonite non-resistance also became a controversial issue for the immigrants during the 1930s with some, often holding pro-German and Nazi sympathies, defending the use of force to "protect" the Russian Mennonite settlements in the Civil War (the *Selbstschutz*) and calling for a rethink of the principles of non-resistance, see Al Reimer, "*Sanitätsdienst und Selbstschutz*: Russian-Mennonite nonresistance in World War 1 and its aftermath," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 11, 1993, 143-44.

<sup>42</sup>G.G. Wiens, "Ein neues Deutschtum?" MR, 54(5) 30, September 1931, 4; G.G. Wiens, "Judenangst," MR, 55 (26), 29 June 1932, 2-3; Wiens described Hitler as one "who struts, rages, waves, jumps and goes off like a firework."

<sup>43</sup>H. Schroeder, "Judenangst," MR, 55(33), 10 August 1932, 4-5.

<sup>44</sup>Epp, *An analysis of Germanism*; Epp, *Mennonite exodus*, 320-25; Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 548-64.

<sup>45</sup>See Urry, *Peoplehood, politics and power*, Chapter 3.

<sup>46</sup>J. H. Janzen, "Kirche und Staat," *Bote*, 11, 6 June 1934, 1; B.B. Janz, "Streiflichter auf die mennonitische Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft," MR, 58(14-21), 3 April - 22 May 1935; Janz to Hildebrand, 2 October 1935 in B. B. Janz Papers Box 4 (File 61); see also Jac. Thiessen, "Ueber die Einheit der Mennoniten," MR, 57(41), 10 October 1934, 2-3 and Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 527-29.

<sup>47</sup>P.H. Enns, "Es stimmt nicht," MR, 57 (22), 30 May 1934, 4; "Die neue Heimat," MR, 59 (11), 11 March 1936, 6-7.

<sup>48</sup>On these organisations and Mennonite involvement, see Wagner, *Brothers beyond the sea*; see also Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The swastika and the maple leaf: fascist movements in Canada in the thirties* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1975, and Martin Robin, *Shades of right: nativist and fascist politics in Canada 1920-1940*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

<sup>49</sup>Incertus, "Der Mennostaat," 11.

<sup>50</sup>I stress this point because Wagner has claimed that Mennonite *völkisch* roots were established in the eighteenth century in Prussia before their migration to Russia, see Jonathan F. Wagner, "Transferred crisis: German volkish thought among Russian Mennonite immigrants to Western Canada," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, 1, 1974. 206; Wagner appears to have confused Mennonite rhetoric concerning their identity during the 1930s, with the historical facts. On the predominantly Russian origin of such notions see Urry, *Peoplehood, politics and power*, Chapter 1.

<sup>51</sup>Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Godland: reflections on religion and nationalism*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988, 41-42.