

INTRODUCTION

And the Lord spoke to Abram: Go out from your fatherland and from your friends and out from your father's house to a land that I will show you.

And I will make you into a great nation and will bless you and make for you a great name, and you will be a blessing.

—GENESIS 12:1–2¹

Soon after dawn on June 15, 1876, several dozen families gathered on the train platform outside the West Prussian village of Simonsdorf. A morning storm had settled over the town and the surrounding fields, and as the passengers arrived, rain drummed against their carefully packed trunks. The travelers were Mennonites, pacifist Christians who for generations had farmed the rich grain lands between the Vistula and Nogat rivers and who were departing their homes to seek freedom from military service. They had booked rail tickets to Bremen and from there, transatlantic passage to the United States. Once on the new continent, they hoped to settle the western prairies where ground was flat and fertile and where their sons would not be forced to bear arms for the state. In the rain outside the station office, the emigrants embraced those who had come to see them off. Peter and Agatha Dyck, departing with five of their nine children, took leave of those who would not be boarding the train. “In this way parents parted from their children,” Peter recalled, “brothers and sisters, friends and acquaintances.” Many of those remaining behind hoped to follow soon, perhaps in the next year. Some had not yet sold their land. Others wished to complete another harvest before making the costly journey across the Atlantic. But there were also many “who due to an unfortunate lapse in judgment, had been convinced to tolerate military service,” and who now “took leave of their relatives forever.”²

Peter and Agatha Dyck were among about two thousand Mennonites who departed Germany in the 1870s. For these pacifists, emigration signaled a rejection not only of military service, but also of German nationalism. During the territorial wars that had recently led to the founding of the German nation-state, the last privileges freeing Mennonites from military participation had been revoked. As German patriotism became tied to armed service, pacifists like the Dycks considered it unconscionable to praise the “the glory of fatherland and of the nation.”³ Since the emergence

of Mennonitism in Central Europe more than three hundred years earlier, ministers had championed nonviolence as an inalienable tenet of Christianity. This belief colored nearly every aspect of daily life, providing a blanket rationale for inhabiting rural areas; for abjuring higher education and political participation; and for banning intermarriage with other confessions. By keeping among themselves, members believed external authorities would leave them unmolested. Parents admonished children to avoid “showing affinity for the military class,” forbidding martial clothing and the growing of mustaches.⁴ Any man wayward enough to become a soldier faced excommunication. Thus, in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, militarist nationalism seemed an existential threat. Citing scripture and the Reformation-era theologian Menno Simons, pacifists condemned German exceptionalism: “Are not the French and other alleged enemies also our brothers? Are they not made in God’s image and saved through the precious blood of Christ?”⁵

The vast majority of Germany’s Mennonites, however, were willing to renounce pacifism. Allowing national pride to outweigh the doctrine of weaponless “nonresistance,” 90 percent remained in the country. Belying their image as a tradition-bound minority, they demonstrated an adaptive faith—one whose most deeply held tenets were open to negotiation. Already by the mid-nineteenth century, some had begun to claim membership in a larger nation: “Love of the fatherland is a feeling as holy for us as it is for any other German.”⁶ To them, nationality seemed ontologically prior to religion. One chose to be Mennonite, but one was born German. Given their practice of Anabaptism—which allowed baptism only upon personal profession of faith—this was a significant distinction. Yet, in relation to traditional belief, it represented a theological sea change. While earlier generations had styled themselves as “pilgrims” or “wayfarers” who lived in but did not belong to the merely human kingdoms of earth, nationality now appeared a divinely ordered characteristic. “Our congregations are no longer the same as they were in Menno’s time,” one pastor explained. Since the sixteenth century, they had relinquished strict isolationism, realizing that “the Kingdom of God is supposed to be built not *outside of the world*, but *in the world*.”⁷ Military service provided a means of acknowledging and even praising the nation’s God-given nature. Nationalists ridiculed pacifists for whom German soil was “at best a place of rest on their migration through the desert,” charging that they “lacked any proper estimation of the value of noble goods like nationality and fatherland.”⁸

The emergence of a German national consciousness among some Mennonites troubles the distinction usually drawn between religion and nationalism. Scholars have long portrayed nationalism as marginalizing older religious modes of belonging.⁹ Zionism—a nationalism that emerged out of an older religious tradition, but whose character became largely secular—

seemed the exception that proved the rule.¹⁰ Yet in the twenty-first century, these phenomena appear less to have diverged than to have grown together. With conflicts across the planet fueled by extremist violence and faith-based fundamentalism, innovative explanations are imperative.¹¹ Peter and Agatha Dyck may have considered the choice to board the train in Simonsdorf a clear dichotomy between faith and patriotism. But such categories are not intrinsically oppositional. While the Dycks saw those who abandoned pacifism as entering a kind of voluntary excommunication, most who took this turn continued to call themselves Mennonite. Despite predictions that “the congregations themselves must also perish,” Prussia’s communities survived the demise of pacifism, retaining a vibrant presence in Imperial Germany.¹² The adoption of nationalist attitudes, in fact, provided them with an impressive new range of tools. Rather than assimilating into a subsuming German whole, they harnessed nationalism for their own purposes—a decision with consequences not only for their own congregations, but for the entire confession.

Already by the turn of the twentieth century, spokespersons in Germany had, ironically, employed the language of nationalism to reconnect with pacifist coreligionists abroad. Depicting Mennonitism as the most Germanic form of Christianity, they posited the existence of a global German Mennonite diaspora. “The German country is the fatherland of the Mennonites,” one author asserted. “Wherever the German Mennonites travel among their coreligionists, they find, so to speak, a piece of the German homeland.”¹³ Such claims, unsurprisingly, were more fiction than fact. The confession’s largest and most influential branches had developed during the Reformation, not in countries that would later form the German Empire, but in Switzerland and the Netherlands. Many early Anabaptists emphasized their religion’s voluntary nature, allowing an uneven stream of converts—often with Polish or French surnames—to bolster their ranks, not to mention a growing number of individuals of color on mission stations across Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Outside German lands, few congregations celebrated German patriotism. “The reason our forebearers left Prussia in their day was primarily religious, namely restrictions on their nonresistance,” noted one Russian-born leader. “German national ideals are foreign to us, just as are our [German-speaking] Lutheran and Catholic neighbors.” But if commentators in Imperial Russia, North America, and elsewhere dismissed German-centric accounts, many were attracted to nationalism itself. In the same years that Zionists began asserting a separatist Jewish nationality, some Mennonites presented their own confession as a national body. Conjecturing that global wanderings and endogamous marriage had created a unique people, they believed that the “national characteristics of our Mennonitism are Mennonite and not German.”¹⁴ Here was a nationalism compatible even with pacifism.

As suggested by the malleability of both religious doctrine and national precepts, static understandings of collective identity are untenable. If Mennonite theologians could both justify and oppose pacifism, if Mennonite nationalists could both embrace and reject Germanness, it makes little sense to speak of either category as coherent, limited, or unchanging. This book rejects traditional definitions of both religion and nationality, whether as immutable identity markers or as ideological forces, capable of generating uniform communities. Rather, it sees “collectivism”—the representation of social groups—as a contestatory process. Socially constructed and historically situated, religious and national cosmologies are negotiated at each moment. By examining their evolving relationships, I hope to demonstrate how diverse modes of belonging informed one another. As scholars of collectivism have shown, the boundaries of national and religious groups are seldom clearly defined.¹⁵ Members often hold multiple affiliations, while rarely expressing as much enthusiasm for particular collectivities as spokespersons would have us believe. Terms such as “German” and “Mennonite” are themselves imprecise symbols, incapable of providing comprehensive referents for the heterogeneous constituencies they claim to represent. The following pages provide a new framework for narrating collectivism—one in which global dispersion, ideological construction, and lived practice are given central importance. My aim is neither to reify collectivist myths nor to normalize their patterns of claims-making, but instead to tell a history of religion without religions, of nationalism without nations.¹⁶

Mennonites around the world have for centuries contested their collective identity. Whether in the foothills of the Black Forest or in the deserts of Mexico, anxieties about belonging made their way into sermons, prayers, dinnertime conversations, letters, poems, and disputations with God. In the age of nation-states, nationalists from Austria to Argentina maintained that all peoples harbored inalienable national characteristics, delineating global space with national units. Like members of other collectivities, Mennonites assessed such claims. On Sunday mornings, as wooden benches creaked and fingers flipped through well-worn Bibles, worshipers tested nationalist proposals against theological sensibilities. Some new ideas were welcomed, others reluctantly tolerated. Knowing when to identify as German—and when not to—frequently determined the difference between life and death. Affiliation could produce a corpse in a Kansas military prison or secure rail transport to a Siberian gulag. Even in German-controlled territory, it sometimes posed as much a burden as an asset. Surviving an SS murder squad along the Dnieper River might only preface the donning of a black shirt. A life saved, a soul lost. Ubiquitous and deadly, the question of nationality was always uncertain. From kitchen tables to the Politburo, rural pulpits to the UN, debates about Mennonites’ collective identity influenced how people thought and fought about democracy, mi-

nority rights, and self-determination. Slipping an unexpected wedge between religious and national narratives, Mennonitism exposed collectivism as decentered, multivalent, and fragmentary.

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

In 1850, Leonhard Weydmann, a Mennonite preacher in the Prussian city of Krefeld, published a biography of Martin Luther. Presenting the sixteenth-century reformer as a “German and a patriot,” Weydmann followed a trend across Europe to link nationalism and Christianity. Protestant theologians, especially, characterized the Reformation as the first great epoch of the German nation. These authors depicted the Middle Ages as a black era during which the continent surrendered to Catholic rule. In this darkness, Luther had ignited a mighty light. “There are some individuals who show the various national tribes their particular character,” Weydmann explained. By casting off the yoke of papism, Luther had taught the Germans how to be German, enabling them to become “a pure nation, one that is unvanquished, never repressed, and free of foreign influences.”¹⁷ Such accounts held appeal for Mennonites like Weydmann. While earlier generations had suffered under Protestant order (Luther himself recommended that Anabaptists “should not be tolerated, but punished as blasphemers”), progressives now claimed membership in a larger reform movement.¹⁸ Presupposing the existence of a nation to which he could belong, Weydmann cast nationality as pure, elemental, and ageless: “Just as we [Germans] do not speak a mixed language, but rather an ancient language, so have we also protected our original essential character and way of life.”¹⁹

Unlike Weydmann and his Protestant contemporaries, few present-day historians consider nations to be eternal entities.²⁰ Revisionists, rather, have portrayed them as “invented traditions.”²¹ Projected retroactively into the past only after elites developed categories like Scottish, German, or Turkish, the first nations are said to have been products of modernization and industrialization. As argued by anthropologist Ernest Gellner, “it is nationalism which engenders nations, not the other way around.”²² Modernists like Gellner hold that prior to the Napoleonic Wars, “Germans” were not really German at all. They were rather subjects of a stratified, estate-based system, in which organizing principles like religion, political rank, and economic status held more weight than language use or cultural experience. Political scientist Benedict Anderson famously employed the term “imagined communities” to suggest that nationality is less a bodily property than a state of mind.²³ Attempting to explain why individuals affiliate with enormous collectivities, most of whose members they will never meet, Anderson attributed national sentiment to the circulation of print materials, military mobilization, and other forms of identity creation.

Yet to speak of nations at all—meaning groups with common traits, language use, and histories—is misleading. Such phrasing suggests that national communities, imagined or otherwise, constitute bounded entities, whose affiliates can be reasonably distinguished from one another. It is perhaps more useful to think of nationalism as a kaleidoscope of recombining patterns.²⁴ Members always also belong to other interlocking collectivities—professional, familial, municipal, and linguistic, to name only a few. Recent scholarship on Imperial Germany has demonstrated the plurality of individuals’ allegiances. People in Bavaria, Prussia, or Wurttemberg could maintain local loyalties while also considering themselves German.²⁵ Religion has provided another avenue for deconstructing nationalism. Christian piety helped some practitioners criticize nationalist precepts, while Jews disillusioned with other European collectivities found an alternative in Zionism. Measured against religions’ spatial breadth, nationalism often appeared stifling. “We want to be children of our [German] nation and to promote and protect its well-being,” one Mennonite pastor wrote in 1911, “but our love of the fatherland should never become so shortsighted and petty that we fail to bind ourselves to our [spiritual] brethren in all lands.”²⁶ Whether Jewish, Mennonite, or otherwise, pan-confessional movements typically crossed national borders, highlighting the relative youth of nationalism. The German nation-state, after all, was far younger than its major religious communities.

But it is not enough to replace one static category with another. Just as nations are amorphous to the point of incoherence, faith formations are themselves highly contested. Undifferentiated invocations of religion—whether Islam, Buddhism, or Presbyterianism—obscure more than they reveal. Just as a self-identified German might speak more than one language, hold dual citizenship, or profess a different understanding of Germanness than another of her alleged co-nationals, Christians in various communities might not practice compatible theologies or even recognize each other as followers of the same God. What common essence unites the 2.1 million Anabaptists of today’s world? While some drive buggies and eschew electricity, others wear suits and run investment firms. Popular stereotypes of white, bearded or bonneted farmers not only elide the diversity of conservative members in the Americas; they simultaneously mask the reality that since the 1990s, most Mennonites live in the Global South and are people of color.²⁷ Writing in the context of ethnic studies, sociologist Rogers Brubaker has proposed sidestepping the vagaries of “identity” altogether. For Brubaker, ethnicity—like religion, nationalism, and other forms of collectivism—is primarily cognitive. Constructed not cumulatively among a population, but rather individually, it is called into being with each personal act of recognition. Although people may identify more closely with one ethnicity than another, constellations of allegiance constantly shift.

Moments of crisis (such as wars) or of celebration (such as holidays) can heighten the appeal of particular collectivities, while defeat or embarrassment can lower their potency. By refocusing attention from the communal to the individual, it is possible to imagine “ethnicity without groups.”²⁸ Applied to the study of national and religious history, Brubaker’s methodology allows heterogeneity to be taken seriously, without treating any iteration as normative. Like other collectivities, Mennonitism should not be understood as a single group—nor even as an amalgamation of many smaller groups. It is more revealing to ask what the idea of Mennonitism has meant for various observers, as well as how and why interpretations developed over time.

Current beliefs and practices cannot be meaningfully measured against those of the religion’s earliest practitioners. Reformation-era Anabaptists, like their present-day namesakes, lived in different states, spoke different dialects, and held almost irreconcilable theologies. Emerging in the 1520s and 1530s across the Holy Roman Empire—primarily in areas that today are Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Switzerland—they were a motley bunch, characterized by pious women, rebellious peasants, scholastic ex-priests, and apocalyptic polygamists. Particularly famous were the violent Anabaptists of Münster, who after seizing the city in 1534, forcibly rebaptized hundreds of townspeople and laid plans to conquer the world in the style of Old Testament kings. While the Münsterites made strange bedfellows with pacifists like Menno Simons, they have been considered common members of a “Radical Reformation,” instigated to secure greater ecclesiastical reforms than those advocated by Protestant theologians such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin.²⁹ According to later chroniclers, a majority of Anabaptists, seeking to distance themselves from Münster, renounced participation in worldly governments as well as proselytism through the sword—while also reaffirming the tenets of adult baptism, scriptural authority, and personal discipleship. Their writings nevertheless reveal divergent viewpoints on each of these issues. Rather than distilling a single vision from the chaos of the Reformation, it is more accurate to see Anabaptism as plural and polycentric.³⁰ Even the name “Mennonite” is little more than a misnomer. Renouncing Catholicism in 1536, the Frisian priest was a relative latecomer. Although Menno—as subsequent generations affectionately called him—quickly became a prolific writer and organizer, he was not the only major Anabaptist leader, and his influence in north Central Europe was far greater than in the south. Beginning in the 1540s, it was neither Menno nor his followers but state authorities who coined the term *Mennists*, and later, Mennonites.³¹

If the first Anabaptists were disunited in even basic principles, hostile governments did not hesitate to group them together. Pronouncing the

faith heretical, Protestant and Catholic rulers dispatched bounty hunters to capture practitioners. From Bern to Amsterdam, they waged a campaign to eliminate every single Anabaptist. Those not converted or expelled were targeted for slaughter. Thousands faced drowning, beheading, or burning. After a humiliating interrogation, a lone believer might be murdered in a crowded square. Others were killed in groups—nine, ten, or several dozen at a time. Their bodies could be quartered and hung, severed heads mounted on city gates.³² At an early stage, persecution forced Anabaptists underground or out of hostile regions. Carrying their faith and a burgeoning martyrology, survivors found refuge in tolerant states like East Friesland, the Palatinate, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Even in these areas, rulers curtailed Mennonites' civil and political rights. Restrictive marriage and inheritance laws prevented communities from growing through conversion—although social marginalization did not occur entirely against their will. Fusing Christian asceticism with political necessity, many were content to live as a separate people. Espousing simplicity in speech and dress, they became known as the “quiet in the land.” One instructional handbook warned “against bearing rule according to the manner of the world . . . , as well as against all vengeance . . . , the swearing of oaths, and all worldly conformity.”³³

Statements of faith, however, were multiple and contested. Mennonitism's decentered nature—reinforced by the doctrines of lay priesthood and congregational independence—rendered communities vulnerable to rupture. There is some truth in the witticism that Anabaptist history can be told through a long list of schisms. In fact, it is often difficult to know who counted as Mennonite at all. Secessionists sometimes continued to use this name, as in the case of the Amish, who arose during the 1690s in Switzerland, France, and the south German states. At other times they did not, as in 1858 when two Baden congregations joined the pietistic Michelians.³⁴ The issue is further complicated by the ambivalence that members often held for the appellation. “I am against this label,” one Munich resident wrote, “because it gives the appearance that Menno is the founder of our confession, which is not the case.”³⁵ For a religion that touted God's authority above all else, was it not perverse to take the name of a mortal? Some found an alternative to sectarianism in overseas evangelism. Influenced by a broader movement across nineteenth-century Christianity, reformists began exporting their faith—while continuing to discourage mixed marriages in European contexts. If missionized populations in Indonesia, North America, and elsewhere were sometimes acknowledged to be Mennonite, it was only of a lower-tier variety. As implied by the growing dichotomy between white and non-white members, the religion's primary vector was understood to be heredity, not belief. At least nominally, most “old Mennonite families” continued to portray their faith as voluntary; a child facing ad-

monishment for un-Anabaptist behavior might quip that since she had not been baptized, she was not yet a member. But in reality, such jokes implied exactly the opposite—that simply being born into a Mennonite household “generally already leads to baptism and membership in our congregations.”³⁶

It is no accident that at the same moment that some Mennonites began depicting themselves as a closed population, characterized by common surnames and collective memories stretching back to the Reformation, their communities appeared threatened by the rise of European nationalisms. During the eighteenth century, Enlightenment writers had begun connecting national duties and civil rights. Mennonites’ doctrine of nonresistance seemed to pose the greatest barrier. “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you,” Menno Simons had taught; “our weapons are not swords and spears, but patience, silence, and hope, and the Word of God.”³⁷ Rarely did such ideas conflict with nascent nationalism more strongly than in the expansionist kingdom of Prussia. For rulers like the Hohenzollerns, conscription provided a means of constructing new citizenship norms. While earlier militaries had comprised standing forces at nobilities’ behest, mass armies now arose out of the general population and mobilized in the name of the nation. State powers sought to induce conformity through common service, while sometimes excluding undesirable minorities, such as Jews, by restricting eligibility.³⁸ After the Partitions of Poland brought thousands of German-speaking Mennonites under Prussian control, King Friedrich Wilhelm II extended military exemption, but only in exchange for civil liberties. Although members retained pacifism, they relinquished property rights and paid steep taxes.³⁹

As a perceived exception to the rule, Mennonitism helped stabilize nationalism as a European norm—in turn becoming understood as a quasi-national entity in its own right. Privileged status provoked resentment from other confessions. Moses Mendelssohn grumbled about European Jews’ comparatively worse position, while during Napoleon’s invasion, Protestants in the Vistula Delta refused to fight unless Mennonite neighbors also joined the militia.⁴⁰ Congregants appeared to face an inexorable choice: yield to nationalism or depart the fatherland. Immigration agents in both North America and the Russian Empire capitalized on the situation, enticing farmers with promises of religious freedom and vast untilled plains. Beginning in 1788, thousands from Poland and Prussia answered Catherine the Great’s call for foreign settlers, establishing a pattern of colonization in southern Russia that would continue into the twentieth century. A Charter of Privileges granted full spiritual liberty, including exemption from conscription and oaths.⁴¹ Although concessions in North America were less generous—in 1874, the US Congress rejected a “Mennonite bill” that would

have allowed closed, Russian-style colonies—land was nevertheless cheap and military service could be avoided.⁴² Of all members in German lands, some 18,000 (roughly 45 percent) emigrated abroad during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Around half went to North America, half to the Russian Empire.⁴³

The rise of a nationalist order strong enough to drive thousands of Mennonites to foreign shores heralded for many observers a new epoch of European modernity. Associating national consolidation with cultural progression, enlightened thinkers cast pacifism as antithetical to modern civilization. “The Mennonites, who forbid the ownership of weapons, live in peaceful backwardness,” one critic wrote; “they do not honor the fatherland, because the notion of fatherland is unknown to them.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the confession’s most reactionary members affirmed such ideas, consciously positioning themselves as agrarian anti-modernists. While leaders had always questioned the morality of certain clothing, musical, and architectural styles, these discussions now acquired a chronological component. In 1847, one Königsberg elder commented unfavorably on Amish Mennonites in the south German states. “Contemporary ways of life are distasteful to them,” he wrote, noting how they grew long beards and fastened garments with hooks instead of buttons. At home, they read little more than the Bible; household appliances were “quite antiquated.”⁴⁵ Even their worship appeared outmoded, at least compared to more northerly coreligionists, who (emulating neighboring Protestants) had begun to build stylish churches, install organs, and hire salaried pastors—some of whom dressed in cassocks and delivered scholarly meditations from raised pulpits. The Amish, by contrast, sang simple songs, read sermons while seated behind a table, held meals in their service space, and knelt during prayer. As national renewal became indicative of modernity, it is no surprise that some Anabaptists considered it yet another temptation to be avoided.

While scholars have long linked the emergence of nation-states with sweeping economic transformations—from industrialization to modern capitalism—such associations are overstated. Most obviously, they fail to explain the appeal of nationalism in minimally industrialized societies. Some conservative Mennonites in Europe and the Americas appropriated nationalist strategies despite rejecting many technologies associated with modernism. Nor can these theories account for the anti-modernist strain in much of nationalist thought.⁴⁶ At a more fundamental level, nationalism and anti-nationalism, like any binary, were codependent. Religious separatism provided an opposite to which nationalists could point. And if conservative Mennonites contributed to nationalism’s production, if only through dissension, its tie with modernism must surely fall away—not because horse-and-buggy Mennonites were unmodern, but because drawing them within the modernist circle renders its boundaries meaningless. This is not

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to deny a complex bond between nationalist and modernist systems of thought. But as historian Frederick Cooper has argued, it is less useful to reify modernity as an objective condition than to analyze a “historically rooted process of making claims and counterclaims in the name of modernization.”⁴⁷ Far from a harbinger of modernity, nationalism played a more modest role.

It simply offered a new vocabulary with which individuals could articulate, as they always had, their place within shifting collectivities. A history confined to the Reformation—or any other period—could tell much the same story. Nor would it need to center on a religious community. Just as Mennonites of every era have negotiated competing groupings, all humans are enmeshed in social networks. Whether collectivities take the name religion, nation, ethnicity, race, or family is less a matter of kind than of context. While scholars have long sought to isolate these strands, their interwoven nature explains why such studies rarely yield satisfying results. Analyzing any one category risks effacing both the memory of its invention and the ways it evolved in relation to others. It would be more valuable to examine such groupings in situ, focusing less on ideal types than the ragged edges where collectivities trail off, turn into something else.⁴⁸ In 1911, for example, hymnists repurposed the tune of an old battle song. “Swing, brothers, swing Germania’s banner,” read the original.⁴⁹ The rewritten version: “A holy inheritance remains always for us Mennonites.”⁵⁰ Blended in harmony, political culture and spiritual tradition lost their distinctiveness. This was collectivism in its rawest form: a multivalent sound, changing pitch and timbre as it traveled from vocal chords to tongue to ear. If certain collectivities crystallized at a particular instant, they were likely to crumble moments later. Malleability, rather than hegemony, explains nationalism’s proliferation.

GLOBAL FANTASIES

A pastor in the Netherlands named Samuel Cramer piqued coreligionists’ interest in 1902 with a manifesto entitled “International Mennonitism.” Inspired by a unification movement among European Protestants, Cramer called upon Anabaptists across the globe to form a transnational bond of fellowship. From the earliest days of the Reformation until the mid-eighteenth century, he argued, they had comprised a decentralized but unified confession, bound by personal relationships and familial ties. Unlike state churches with their fixed territorial boundaries, early Mennonites had considered borders “entirely immaterial.”⁵¹ Much of Cramer’s proof rested on global dispersion. At the time, approximately 50 percent of all members resided in North America, with as many as 140,000 in the United States alone. A smaller number had traveled to South America and Austria-Hungary,

while 60,000 lived as settler colonists in Imperial Russia. Non-white converts, totaling at most a few thousand, went unmentioned. Yet while these migrations allowed Cramer to picture solidarity at a global level, it was diversity that made his injunction necessary in the first place. Whether pressured by local nationalists or enticed to assimilate, members in distant lands adopted foreign cultures. With each passing year, the Russian language made inroads among the colonies of Siberia and the Black Sea region; communities in the United States and Canada were preaching and publishing in English; and more members in France and Switzerland spoke French than ever before. Thus, for Cramer's readers, it was a truly aspirational fantasy that one day, it would "no longer be necessary to distinguish between Dutch, German, American, and Russian Mennonites," that all would set aside national differences and "recognize each other as brethren of the same tribe."⁵²

Historians of transnationalism have studied cross-border movements—whether of people, commercial goods, humanitarian aid, or ideas—to overcome narrow methodologies.⁵³ Emphasizing the conceptual and territorial instability of countries like Germany, they have demonstrated boundaries' inadequacy as rubrics of analysis.⁵⁴ Yet if figures like Cramer worked transnationally, their thinking also reflected statist frameworks. Understanding this dialectic requires attention to individual "activists."⁵⁵ Theorists of collectivism, by deemphasizing groups, have instead elevated human agency. In their telling, the political was always personal. Particular national or religious accounts developed through the propagandizing of activists, who competed with each other for populations' allegiances. "We have made Italy," one nationalist reportedly jested in 1861, after helping form a new Italian state; "now we have to make Italians."⁵⁶ Similarly in German lands, politicians committed to the idea of a unified nation institutionalized their opinions in census forms, citizenship papers, and legal codes; educators restructured school curriculums; and cultural trendsetters attempted to recast civil society, literature, art, and almost everything else in a nationalist mold.

Such tactics were not lost on Mennonite observers. Confessional advocates learned that by appropriating nationalist discourses, they could promote forms of nationalism favorable to their own agendas. After the revocation of military exemption, for example, progressive leaders in Germany sought to nationalize their coreligionists. Downplaying older accounts of Dutch and Swiss origins, they proposed the creation of a German Mennonite collectivity. Asserting that "our congregations must be *reorganized*," they initiated an empire-wide renewal movement that would emerge in full force by the 1880s.⁵⁷ Mennonite activists—who were unusually urban, affluent, and well educated—conformed to demographic patterns of nationalist activism across Europe. Emblematic was the cultured and charismatic Hinrich van der Smissen, co-pastor of the large congregation in Hamburg-

Altona. Despite his Dutch last name, van der Smissen's brand of Mennonitism was almost rabidly pro-German, and his florid essays on the confession's essentially German nature drew frequent ire from coworkers in the Netherlands. Throughout his long tenure, van der Smissen played the roles of organizer, cheerleader, and historian of the German Mennonite project. During the same years in which he helped establish a Union of Mennonite Congregations in the German Empire, he was also president of an educational institute designed to serve all congregations in Germany, as well as editor of a newspaper for German-speaking Mennonites worldwide.⁵⁸ Using the German Mennonite idea they had recently forged, leaders like van der Smissen sought to sway state authorities, a wider public, and their own congregations on a host of political and theological issues.

Unlike Samuel Cramer's vision of religious internationalism, pro-German activists offered a more restricted model. Coding Anabaptism within the language of German nationalism, they portrayed members as archetypal Germans. "Do not almost all Mennonites," one proponent asked, "wherever they may live—in Russia, in Switzerland, in Alsace-Lorraine, Galicia and Pomerania, in the United States and in Canada, in Mexico and Paraguay, yes even in asiatic Siberia and Turkestan—speak the same *German* mother tongue? Are not the Mennonites, wherever they go, also the pioneers of German language, customs, and culture?"⁵⁹ Depictions of Mennonitism as the German confession par excellence reflected a fascination emerging across the country's public sphere for "diasporic" colonists. Especially after 1884, with Germany's procurement of territories in Africa and the Pacific, citizens followed their alleged co-nationals' march across the globe.⁶⁰ Settlers in Togo, North Dakota, Palestine, Brazil, or China were said to perform "German work," a trope—deployed in racist contrast to native populations—associating them with efficiency and productivity.⁶¹ In 1904, the sociologist Max Weber famously linked the "Protestant ethic" of ascetic Christianity with a "spirit of capitalism." Mingled with ethnic chauvinism, Weber's analysis implied that the diligence of German speakers abroad and especially of German-speaking Mennonites—"whose otherworldliness is as proverbial as their wealth"—allowed them to tame foreign lands (and foreign peoples) while fortifying them to retain German values and customs.⁶²

Mennonites outside Germany, for their part, rarely considered themselves German colonists. After all, those most opposed to nationalism had been likeliest to emigrate. With few exceptions, the attribute German nationalists most admired about external communities—their ability to promote German culture abroad—meant little or nothing to settlers themselves. Most had departed for religious freedom or to pursue economic opportunity. If a majority continued to speak German—persisting in some cases across more than ten generations—this reflected less a political loyalty to Germany than a desire to distinguish their congregations from surrounding



German nationalist Mennonites emphasized the order, diligence, and industry of their coreligionists abroad, portraying settlements in other countries—such as this farm in south Russia’s Molotschna colony—as bastions of diasporic Germandom.

non-Mennonite populations. In the same way that conservative Amish and Mennonites in North America refused to wear printed clothing, grow mustaches, or use electricity, many avoided English as a worldly language. Old German dialects, such as the “Pennsylvania Dutch” spoken from Virginia to Ontario, or the “Low German” of Imperial Russia’s colonies, were cultivated for separatist reasons and not as part of an imperialist lingua franca. When faraway Mennonites did meet counterparts from German lands, culture differentiated as often as it united. At “every turn,” one minister from Holstein wrote of an 1868 tour across the United States, “it was evident [we] had come into a new world; the familiar home customs were unknown here, perhaps even gave offense. And then the Pennsylvanian language—how strange it sounded to the newcomer!”⁶³ Similarly in the Russian Empire, spokespersons often presented themselves as a “little Mennonite nation,” typically contrasted with “other nations,” including nearby Catholic and Protestant German speakers.⁶⁴ “The difference between us and our German neighbors was so great,” reasoned one leader, “that a period of over 100 years brought virtually no amalgamation through marriage.” Considering Germany’s expansionism both theologically and politically bank-

rupt, many rejected “the notion of being an ‘outpost of Germanism in the east.’”⁶⁵

German nationalist Mennonites—in the awkward position of having to convince coreligionists abroad that they were in fact German—faced remarkably similar challenges at home. That activists like Hinrich van der Smissen expended such energies toward unifying their own congregations suggests a deep-seated ambivalence or even hostility on the part of most members in Germany. Historians Pieter Judson and Tara Zahra use the term “indifference” to describe people unmoved by nationalist appeals. Portrayed as the inverse of activism, indifference has likewise been theorized through the language of agency. According to Judson and Zahra, it “refers to the attempt to maintain a degree of choice in one’s life, in historical situations where such choices are being drastically limited, either by official fiat or local activist pressure.”⁶⁶ Engaged in an ideological tug-of-war, indifferent persons attempt to maintain independence from larger collectivities, while activists seek to draw them in. When German nationalist Mennonites formed their national Union in 1886, only seventeen of the empire’s seventy-one congregations joined. Unionists designed creative methods of attracting participation. Generating fears about shrinking birth and marriage rates, they tied membership to mutual aid programs and spun romantic tales of Reformation-era unity. But despite their efforts, many kept a distance.

Activists’ accounts were certainly self-serving. Indeed, they were often better barometers of what coreligionists did *not* believe. But it would be incorrect to suggest that conservative Mennonites, either in Germany or abroad, were truly indifferent toward questions of affiliation. The concept of indifference was first developed by nineteenth-century nationalists, who employed it as a pejorative, intended to shame populations into performing nationalist acts. It thus presupposed a dualistic interpretation in which persons were either inside or outside of nationalism. As the history of Mennonitism demonstrates, however, there was no normative path from which skeptics could deviate. Religious, national, and other collectivities intermingled to such a degree that individuals’ choice was not whether to associate with some larger grouping, but which one to adopt. It may be useful to think of each person as an activist in his or her own right, all advocating different narratives to suit private agendas. Even those wary of progressive change could agitate for stasis or for the strengthening of a given tradition.⁶⁷ By reasserting conventional practices against the perceived dangers of nationalism and modernity, conservative Mennonites made and remade their communities. Just as traits like piety and modesty required cultivation, collective practices and cultural artifacts—such as barn-raising or broad-brimmed hats—developed in response to shifting conditions. Only in the era of electricity have oil lamps become a choice; only with the invention of

automobiles did buggies become conservative. Less a retrenchment than the initiation of a crusade, opposition to change was itself new.⁶⁸

Collectivism, of course, was never an ideological free-for-all. Embedded in larger fields of contestation, individuals were constrained by the situations in which they found themselves.⁶⁹ After the First World War, for instance, anti-German sentiment prompted Mennonites across Eurasia and North America to disassociate from Germanness. Inoculating against external prejudices, many embraced a Zionist-like form of religious nationalism. “Just as every star has its place in the heavens,” one writer argued, “we have our place in the constellation of nations.”⁷⁰ Combining Jewish nationalist terminology with Wilsonian self-determination, leaders won support from the League of Nations and multiple governments to establish a semi-autonomous “Mennonite State” in rural Paraguay. During the Third Reich, a growing cadre pinned its hopes on the new German state. Echoing Hitler’s call to “turn our gaze toward the lands in the East,” pro-Nazi Mennonites asserted membership in a four-hundred-year-old “racial church”—an Aryan version of the Jewish “antirace”—entitled to a share of the *Führer*’s spoils.⁷¹ But global violence swung the pendulum once again. In the aftermath of the Second World War, more than 15,000 refugees shed their Aryan identity papers to secure transport across the Atlantic, most gaining UN assistance and entry into Canada or Paraguay’s “Mennonite State” as non-Germans. One final turn: Beginning in the 1970s, the mass repatriation of nearly all Mennonites from the Soviet Union to West Germany reflected a widespread belief in members’ German roots. The trick for historians, then, is not to discover who belonged to which group when, but rather to understand how larger events rendered certain affiliations desirable, whether German, Mennonite, or otherwise.⁷² While these cases reveal the fluidity of group loyalty, they also highlight the limitations of elective affinity in the era of nationalism.

Mennonite history underlines the fragmentary nature of religious and national collectivities. That so many actors disagreed so fervently about the confession’s true character suggests that depictions of coherence constituted a malleable resource. Members as well as outsiders could draw on such discourses, molding them to fit divergent needs—often redefining what it meant to be Mennonite in the first place. While German-centric accounts cast congregants abroad as diasporic nationals, observers both within and beyond German borders offered alternative readings. Colonists in Russia, Canada, or Paraguay were neither intrinsically German, diasporic, nor even Mennonite. Only in relation to broader hermeneutic systems did these terms acquire meaning. Forms of belonging rested on no permanent foun-

dation. Nevertheless, collectivist language held immense power. If strategically deployed and liberally received, it could structure self-conceptions and world outlooks, circumscribing entire communities' range of political and intellectual motion. Individuals' decisions to affiliate with particular nations (or with no nation) rarely reflected free expressions of will. More often, local circumstances, personal histories, and collective expectations embedded subjects within rich but limited matrixes. As particular words or material objects—head coverings, flags, blond hair—developed significance, members engaged a process of mutual religious and national production. The resulting constellations aligned differently for each observer, as well as across time, evolving with the passage of years, decades, and centuries.

In 1876, when Peter and Agatha Dyck embarked from Bremen on the ocean liner *Rhein*, their voyage marked not just one family's journey from Germany to the United States, but also a critical moment in a string of confession-wide transformations. Subsequent events would reshape again and again the ways that Mennonites across the world perceived their nationality and their religion. In the summer breeze on the deck of the *Rhein*, the Dycks considered their departure a rejection of militarism and the threat it posed to pacifist theology, not an affirmation of German nationalism. The travelers could not have anticipated the myriad stories that future generations would tell about their emigration, the contradictory objectives it would be called upon to justify.

Once Germany's shoreline dipped below the horizon, the emigrants gathered in the *Rhein's* dining compartment to send thanks to God. For his sermon text, Peter Dyck chose Genesis 12:1–4.⁷³ Like thousands of migrating Mennonites before and afterward, he and his listeners recalled the story of Abram, in which God calls the patriarch to enter the land of Canaan. Like Abram, the worshipers had answered their Lord, abandoning home and entering an unknown territory. They were apprehensive about what lay ahead, and yet filled with hope. Just as Abram's journey had presaged the creation of a new people, the emigrating Mennonites believed that God would reward their faith. Their congregations would flourish, and they would become a blessing and a great nation. Exactly how this process would unfold remained to be seen.