
Land Conflict in Mexico between Mennonite Colonies and Their Neighbors

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Mennonites from Canada migrated to Mexico to pursue religious freedom by living in communities of villages called colonies.¹ Mexico welcomed them, as it believed the Mennonites would improve the economy of an unstable region. In the midst of this mutually convenient agreement with the federal government, however, Mennonites have experienced altercations with their neighbors over land use. This article situates Mennonites' land-related conflict within various changes in Mexican policy toward land and Indigenous people. It proposes that the Mennonites in Mexico, much like Mennonites in Canada, were able to continue their way of life "as a peaceful agricultural people" because Mexico's political and social structure favored them.² It shows that, in

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1 This article refers to Mennonites in Mexico who speak Low German and are descendants of Canadians who emigrated to Mexico between the 1920s and the 1940s, with the largest groups emigrating to Chihuahua and Durango between 1922 and 1926. The majority belonged to the Old Colony Mennonite Church, and a smaller number belonged to the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church. Royden Loewen's *Village among Nations: "Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916–2006* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013) provides a comprehensive overview of their history.

2 This terminology comes from Joseph R. Wiebe, "On the Mennonite-Métis Borderlands: Environment, Colonialism, and Settlement in Manitoba," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 35 (2017): 112.

many cases, Mennonite settlement in Mexico adversely affected the surrounding population—either Indigenous or *mestizo* (mixed race)—contributing to their displacement and changing the people’s ways of life.³

This article examines a few of many examples of Mennonite migration contributing to a country’s existing colonization project—that is, to a government seeking to create loyal subjects throughout its territory and to marginalize or displace existing populations in order to contribute to that country’s economic growth or capitalist expansion.

Mennonites arrived in Mexico in 1922, shortly after the government had reasserted control over Mexican territory following the Mexican Revolution.⁴ This is significant to our discussion here because the revolution was fought, in large part, over land use. Mexican people in rural areas wanted to end the hacienda (large rural estate) system. In this system, landlords held most of the power in Mexico’s rural areas because they owned most of the land. Peasants lived in a situation similar to debt peonage, of constant indebtedness and poverty. For this reason, leaders during and after the revolution made provisions for a more just land-use system.

In 1915, the federal government, under president-elect Venustiano Carranza, had passed a law that rendered any occupation of communal land illegal, even by soldiers.⁵ When Carranza became president in 1917, his government passed a new constitution that continued this commitment to the question of land use and established the conditions for a land redistribution program. Article 27 stated: “La propiedad de las tierras y aguas comprendidas dentro de los límites del territorio nacional, corresponde originariamente a la Nación.” (Land

3 In their early years of settlement in Mexico, Mennonites considered their neighbors to be of a uniform background and did not distinguish between Indigenous or *mestizo*. Andrea Dyck, “‘And in Mexico We Found What We Had Lost in Canada’: Mennonite Immigrant Perceptions of Mexican Neighbours in a Canadian Newspaper, 1922–1967” (master’s thesis, University of Winnipeg, 2007), 1n2.

4 This article joins the position of historians who claim that the Mexican Revolution ended in 1920 following a decade of violent conflict. Other relevant dates include 1917, when the Constitution was passed, and the 1926–1929 Cristero War, an armed conflict between conservative Catholics and the Mexican government. Lázaro Cárdenas, who was president from 1934 to 1940, brought stability to the country under the Mexican Revolutionary Party (PRM). Manuel Ávila Camacho, president from 1940 to 1946, created the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). His presidency began the PRI’s single-party control, which lasted until 2000. Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith’s edited collection, *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), offers more information about the way the PRI maintained power in twentieth-century Mexico.

5 Gerardo N. González Navarro, *Derecho Agrario*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 56.

and water found within national borders originally belongs to the Nation.)⁶ This highlighted the nation's inalienable dominion and implied that landowners, regardless of their background, were to be subordinate to the government. Mexican people hoped this would mean they could own the land they had already been farming.

Mexico Grants Mennonites Exceptions

As people in Mexico were experiencing a revolution, a much smaller group of people—Mennonites in Canada—were dealing with the aftermath of World War I (1914–1918). They were worried when men were drafted for military service, and some opposed the options for alternative service. Moreover, anti-German sentiment was on the rise, putting pressure on these Mennonites to educate their children in public schools in English rather than private religious schools in German. Many Mennonites found these changes to be an unreasonable attack on their lifestyle.

A group of Mennonite leaders representing those who did not want to integrate with their surrounding communities began to look for a new place to live. These leaders were pleased with the reception they received in Mexico. They were able to negotiate a special immigration agreement with Mexican president Álvaro Obregón (1920–1924) that accommodated their needs by granting them exception to multiple Mexican laws. The agreement stated:

1. You [the Mennonites] will not be forced to accept military service.
2. In no case will you be compelled to swear oaths.
3. You will be completely free to exercise your religious principles and to observe the regulations of your church, without being in any manner molested or restricted in any way.
4. You are fully authorized to establish your own schools, with your own teachers, without any hindrance from the government. Concerning this point, our laws are exceedingly liberal.
5. You may dispose of your property in any way you desire. The government will raise no objections to the establishment among the members of your sect of any economic system which they may voluntarily want to adopt.⁷

⁶ All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted. "Constitución de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos," *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, February 1, 1917, 2.

⁷ Calvin Wall Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 251. The exceptions were an agreement, not a contract for colonization or immigration, and so depended on individual Mexican leaders for their enforcement. For more information on some challenges associated with having an agreement, see Martina E. Will, "The Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua: Reflections of Competing Visions," *The Americas* 53, no. 3 (1997): 357n5.

These stipulations allowed the Mennonites to continue educating their children in their own schools and to avoid mandatory military service, both of which were important to them.

The agreement was signed by a president who was trying to reestablish stability and authority immediately following the somewhat dubious resolution of armed conflict by a government that had just passed a constitution guaranteeing free public education and land for all. The Mexican president was willing to sign such a generous agreement in part because he needed to populate the politically unstable region with loyal subjects who would contribute to its economy through agricultural production. The government wanted to use the Mennonite example to show that Mexico was a place where foreigners and their investments were safe.⁸

Chihuahua, one of two states where Mennonites entered into land-lease agreements, borders the United States, making it vulnerable to American interests. By 1920, when the Mennonite leaders were engaging in negotiations with the Mexican president, revolutionary fighting and an influenza epidemic had decimated the area's population, making it especially vulnerable. The state's agricultural production had fallen by three-fourths and the number of cattle by 90 percent.⁹ The government wanted to rebuild Chihuahua's economy as a way to reduce the chances of future US incursions.¹⁰

The way President Obregón concluded the agreement confirms this impression: "It is the most ardent desire of this government to provide favorable conditions to colonists such as Mennonites who love order, lead moral lives, and are industrious. Therefore, we would deem it a pleasure if this answer would satisfy you. The aforementioned privileges being guaranteed by our laws, we hope that you will take advantage of them positively and permanently."¹¹ These Mennonite immigrants, in his view, would bring order to Mexico because of their Canadian ways and, because of the exceptions granted to them, would be able to contribute to the economy with their farms, ensuring that post-Revolutionary Mexico would prosper.

The Mennonites were satisfied with this agreement and acquired land in the states of Chihuahua and Durango. There, they established colonies, or groups of villages, that to this day remain crucial to their way of life—living separately from other parts of society and closely connected with one another.

8 Will, "Mennonite Colonization," 363–67.

9 Jason H. Dormady "Mennonite Colonization in Mexico and the Pendulum of Modernization, 1920–2013," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 88, no. 2 (2014): 172.

10 Will, "Mennonite Colonization," 366.

11 Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 251.

Conflict in the 1920s and 1930s

The Mennonites' early years in Mexico included overt conflict that arose because the land they purchased had already been claimed by other people. In 1921, Mennonites from Canada acquired 225,000 acres (91,054 hectares) in two large blocks of land in Chihuahua, primarily from the Bustillos Hacienda, which belonged to Carlos Zuloaga's heirs, and a smaller tract from David S. Russek's hacienda. In Durango, they purchased 35,000 acres (14,164 hectares). These land transactions were finalized as century-long lease agreements with the government since, at that time, foreigners could not purchase land in Mexico.¹² But in Chihuahua, the Zuloagas had not been honest. Daniel Nugent observes that Mennonites paid ten times the going rate for land in Chihuahua, which pleased the Zuloagas.¹³ H. Leonard Sawatzky adds that the seller was aware that groups of people, who had likely worked on the Bustillos hacienda prior to the Revolution, were living on land the Mennonites had just purchased.¹⁴

In 1920, before the Mennonites had migrated, eight different *agrarista* settlements—a term Mennonites used for people they perceived as squatters—surrounded what would become the Manitoba and Swift Current Mennonite colonies in Chihuahua.¹⁵ The *agrarista* settlements were still there when the Mennonites arrived a year later. By that time, counting on the revolutionary promises, the settlements had filed to have the land granted to themselves.¹⁶ In September 1921, Chihuahua's governor, Ignacio Enriquez, awarded provisional possession of 7,323 hectares of Zuloagas's land to those who had made the petition. The provision became permanent in 1923 when the governor ordered that 7,344 hectares of land be expropriated, including 5,000 hectares of land that the Mennonites had bought but not yet occupied.¹⁷

12 Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 67.

13 Daniel Nugent, *Spent Cartridges of Revolution: An Anthropological History of Namiquipa, Chihuahua* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 89. Ana María Alonso details the understanding of the relationship between honor, personal relationships, and the accumulation of wealth in Northwestern Mexico in late nineteenth and early twentieth century (*Thread of Blood: Colonialism, Revolution, and Gender on Mexico's Northern Frontier* [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995], 181–85). For them, land was also a means to preserving a way of life. This would continue in the period beyond Alonso's study.

14 Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 45.

15 Walter Schmiedehaus, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott: Der Wanderweg eines christlichen Siedlervolkes* (Cuauhtémoc, Mexico: G. J. Rempel, 1948), 93–94; Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 45.

16 Will, "Mennonite Colonization," 360.

17 Will, 360–61.

The Mennonites knew little about campesinos and their long struggle for land or about the new legal provisions to make land available for the people.¹⁸ And the campesinos were undoubtedly perplexed that the land promised to them appeared to have changed hands. Over the course of these early years of settlement, “angry confrontations” took place between the Zuloagas, Mexican peasants, and Mennonites. For example, once the Mennonites had established their communities, free-ranging cattle repeatedly destroyed their crops. Building stronger fences did not resolve the issue; the fences were cut time and again.¹⁹

In 1924, the government redistributed more land from the Zuloagas’ hacienda to the Mennonites and ordered the Zuloaga family to build a dam and reservoir so that the people living on newly redistributed land would have access to water.²⁰ The government also met the Mennonites’ expectations as it sent troops to protect them.²¹

The tract of land acquired by the Mennonites in the state of Durango also came with issues; at the same time that Mennonites were purchasing what would become the Nuevo Ideal Colony, nearby peasants were petitioning for ownership of it.²² Tensions remained even after the Mennonites settled there. At one point in the 1930s, the situation became so tense that Durango’s governor ordered the Mennonites to close their schools. In other words, he forced them to comply with Mexican law—even though the Mennonites thought they had been exempted from it. In 1936, very concerned Mennonite leaders sent representatives to Mexico City to meet with then-president President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940). The president was sympathetic to them and requested that the governor order people off the land that the Mennonites had purchased and also allow the schools to be reopened.²³

In these cases, even though the Mexican federal government was ostensibly in favor of ejidos that recognized peasant land claims, it was particularly willing to accommodate the Mennonites. Events in Durango and Chihuahua show that because the government valued the Mennonites’ economic contributions, it would use force to remove obstacles for them, even when those obstacles were other people.

18 Gerhard Rempel and Franz Rempel, *75 Jahre: Mennoniten in Mexico* (Cuauhtémoc, Mexico: Comité Pro Archivo Histórico; Museo Menonita, 1998), 299.

19 Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 68–69.

20 Will, “Mennonite Colonization,” 361.

21 Will, 368.

22 Dormady, “Mennonite Colonization” 181; Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 194.

23 Dormady, “Mennonite Colonization,” 182–83.

Mexican Government Policies

These conflicts overlapped with the beginning of a land redistribution program. In Mexico, this program was formalized through the *ejido* system,²⁴ in which groups of people could claim land based on historical occupancy patterns for Indigenous groups, provided they were recognized in writing.²⁵ Groups of peasants could also petition for land for farming or ranching simply because they did not own any land.²⁶

The Mexican government's federal *Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria* (Secretariat of Agrarian Reform) (SRA) organized land redistribution.²⁷ It worked with similar bodies on the state level.²⁸ A five-member decision-making body, the *Cuerpo Consultivo Agrario* (Agrarian Consultation Body) (CCA), would make final all decisions related to land redistribution.

In addition to creating these decision-making bodies, the government enacted the agrarian code, a series of rules for land redistribution. This code explained under which circumstances land from large landowners could be eligible for redistribution: the process would begin with a group of people coming together to file a petition asserting that they were farmers with no land and needed land to support themselves and their families. As *ejidatarios* (people liv-

24 Some scholars have incorrectly stated that this system was a return to pre-contact landholding. These include Samuel Baggett's "Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution: The Agrarian Question," *Texas Law Review* 5, no. 1 (1926): 1–9. In reality, the *ejido* system is similar to colonial-period landholding patterns common in Mexico from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries (González Navarro, *Derecho Agrario*, 29).

25 For more information about the role of Indigenous people in Mexico, see, for example, Miguel Bartolomé, "Etnicidad, historicidad y complejidad: Del colonialismo al indigenismo y al Estado pluricultural en México," *Cuicuilco: Revista de Ciencias Antropológicas* 24, no. 9 (2017): 40.

26 The Mexican situation is different from situations in Canada, the United States, or other countries as the relationships between the state and Indigenous people are not defined by treaties. For a comparative example, see Alonso's chronicle of serrano communities who settled in Northwestern Mexico on land they were given after fighting wars against Apache Indigenous people (*Thread of Blood*, 7–10).

27 This institution grew out of the Secretariat for Education's Department of Indigenous and Cultural Affairs, established in 1921. In 2003 it was renamed the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples and in 2018 the National Institute of Indigenous People. For more information, see Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *El pensar y el quehacer antropológico en México* (Puebla, Mexico: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 1994), 144–45; and Carlos Zolla and Emiliano Zolla Márquez, *Los pueblos indígenas de México: 100 preguntas*, 2nd ed. (Mexico City: UNAM, 2010), 304–11.

28 Manuel Fabila, *Cinco siglos de la legislación agraria en México (1493–1940)* (Mexico City: Procuraduría Agraria, 2005), 482.

ing on an ejido), they would have the right only to use the land, not to own it, and would be part of a collective run by an ejido leader. They were to apply just for land that could be cultivated—that is, that had sufficient access to water. The landowner also had to own more than fifty hectares.²⁹

The agrarian code was later modified to apply only to people who owned more than one hundred and fifty hectares of land—if the land required irrigation—or three hundred hectares if it did not.³⁰ Landowners could also get out of the land redistribution program if they successfully petitioned for certificates of ineligibility for land reform.

As Cárdenas's government applied this code, seventeen million hectares (forty-two million acres) were distributed among eight hundred thousand people, and agricultural productivity increased throughout Mexico.³¹ Thousands of people were now ejidatarios, with rights to cultivate land the ejidos understood to be theirs for the first time.

Although these were positive changes for Mexican peasants, the federal government irregularly implemented the agrarian code, and already wealthy landowners continued to own the best land and hold the most power in rural Mexico. Susan Walsh Sanderson's *Land Reform in Mexico: 1910–1980* explains that while land reform was a politically viable and popular decision, it was never done well.³² Moreover, people who petitioned for *ejidos* in areas that had been active in the revolution could expect better land.³³ In addition to all of this, the bureaucrats in the SRA and the CCA, as well as ejido leaders, were notoriously corrupt.³⁴ Overall, from the 1920s to the 1990s, the government sporadically redistributed land, and when it did so, the land was of varying quality.³⁵

29 Fabila, 482, 488, 491.

30 Fabila, 547.

31 Gerardo Otero, "Agrarian Reform in Mexico: Capitalism and the State," *Searching for Agrarian Reform in Latin America*, ed. William C. Thiesenhusen (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 284.

32 Susan R. Walsh Sanderson, *Land Reform in Mexico: 1910–1980* (Orlando: Academic, 1984), 2.

33 Sanderson, 47.

34 James J. Kelly, "Article 27 and Mexican Land Reform: The Legacy of Zapata's Dream," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 25 (1994): 554.

35 The ejido system officially ended when Mexico entered NAFTA in 1994. However, groups with active petitions could continue with the ejido process, and existing ejidos would continue to have a relationship with the Mexican state through bureaucratic channels. For more information, see González Navarro's *Derecho agrario*.

Conflicts in the 1960s and 1970s

From the 1940s to the 1960s, Mexico experienced rapid urbanization and industrialization. Comparable development occurred in rural areas, in part due to the Green Revolution.³⁶ Mennonites, for their part, were able to deal with their many challenges in Mexico—such as droughts and religious divisions—without the added stress of what they perceived as interference from the government, or from conflict over land ownership.³⁷ But then, in the 1960s and 1970s, conflicts resurfaced as, in the 1920s, landowners sold Mennonites land that was already involved in the land reform process. Simmering conflicts came to a head as Mennonites expanded their land ownership in Mexico in the midst of widespread unrest in the Mexican population and a president committed to ejidos. In many cases, while having an ideological position in favor of the ejidatarios, the federal government resolved the ensuing land conflicts in the Mennonites' favor because it valued their economic contributions. In some cases, it again forcefully removed people from the Mennonites' property.

Mennonites had not needed to expand their land holdings until this time period primarily because of out-migration, even though their community had a high birth rate. Indeed, most conservative Old Colony people preferred to migrate to other countries rather than to assimilate, and some migrated to Canada seeking work when their crops did not perform well. Moreover, the Mennonites had purchased more land than was necessary for their initial population. Thus, it was not until the 1960s that the residents of the Nuevo Ideal colony in Durango and the increasingly connected Mennonite colonies in Chihuahua had grown enough that their residents needed more farm land.³⁸

36 This initiative supported health, education, and rural development in Mexico. The Rockefeller initiative partially funded this project and ensured Mexican farmers would produce profitable crops with high yields (Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 57. Technologies of the Green Revolution expanded the amount of land cultivated in Mexico in low-tech, but not necessarily low-impact, ways (Christopher R. Boyer, *A Land between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico* [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014], 5). Indeed, many of Mexico's environmental issues can be traced to these developments. Flavia Echánove Huacuja details this process with regard to corn production and includes examples of Mennonite farmers ("Políticas públicas y maíz en México: El esquema de agricultura por contrato," *Anales de geografía* 29, no. 2 [2009]: 65–82).

37 Luis Aboites Aguilar's *El norte mexicano sin algodones, 1970–2010: Estancamiento, inconformidad y el violento adiós al optimismo* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2018) provides more information about this time period.

38 Mennonite farmers had already vastly increased oat production and apple orchard production in Mexico and aligned with Mexican government goals (spurred on by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Green Revolution) to increase dairy production and

At the same time, Mexican peasants were also needing land for their own growing numbers and, as a result, were engaging in the ejido process and land occupation. Once the Mennonites realized this, they worked with local and federal officials to ensure that they would be the group retaining the maximum amount of land. The Mexican officials, for their part, were interested in the Mennonites' economic contributions and the possibility of creating positive relationships with them to ensure economic progress and a population of loyal taxpayers. Throughout the 1960s, massive unrest was brewing in Mexico. One catalyst for channeling this unrest into action was a railway worker strike in 1958, after which students and workers organized protests against widespread injustice.³⁹ Rural people began to organize outside of official channels, creating, for instance, a national union for peasants, which existed in a close relationship to the federal government. To avoid this close relationship, peasants organized through the *Central Campesina Independiente* (CCI), an independent group. This organizing was met with massive state repression, most notably expressed in the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre in downtown Mexico City.

*President Luis Echeverría, who came to power in 1970, needed to appease the population to avoid further protest.*⁴⁰ He was especially interested in doing so because as Secretary of the Interior he had orchestrated the Tlatelolco massacre—the first state violence meted out in an obvious way in an urban area against people from the working, middle, and upper classes. His administration committed itself to policies that would appear to bring about the revolutionary promises of land in rural areas, especially for Indigenous people.⁴¹ Peasants

consumption (Dormady “Mennonite Colonization,” 177). Luis Carlos Bravo Peña et al., include examples of the effects of Mennonite farming practices (“Cultura y apropiación del espacio: Diferencias en los paisajes culturales de menonitas y mestizos de Chihuahua, Mexico,” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 14, no. 2 [2015]: 90–96). Carolina Vargas Godínez and Martha García Ortega focus on Mennonites and deforestation in Southern Mexico (in “Vulnerabilidad y sistemas agrícolas: Una experiencia menonita en el sur de México,” *Sociedad y Ambiente* 6, no. 16 [2018]: 137–56). Evelyn Alarcón Quezada offers a case study about Mennonite agricultural practices in that state (in “Análisis del sistema agrario menonita, un enfoque desde la geografía sistémica, caso colonia la Honda, municipio de Miguel Auza, estado de Zacatecas” [Lic. Thesis, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, 2014]).

³⁹ For more information on this period, see, for example, Jaime Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture during the Long Sixties* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ Gabriela Soto Laveaga, *Jungle Laboratories: Mexican Peasants, National Projects, and the Making of the Pill* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 116.

⁴¹ “El pensamiento indigenista del Presidente Echeverría,” *Acción indigenista* 264 (June 1975): 1.

rightly understood this as an opportunity to continue to apply for new ejidos or to expand existing ones.

Conflict in Chihuahua

The factors that contributed to Tlatelolco were also in play in the state of Chihuahua in the 1960s. This period of widespread unrest, which had led to a massacre in Mexico City in 1968, also led to peasants in Northwestern Mexico to apply for new or expanded ejidos. These included ejidatarios near what are now the Santa Rita, Santa Clara, and Ojo de la Yegua Mennonite colonies.

Mennonites first settled in this area—to the north of the larger Manitoba and Swift Current colonies—in 1922. A group of Sommerfelder Mennonites had bought most of the land in this area from Russek's hacienda.⁴² They faced difficult initial years of settlement without water for wells, a problem compounded by stony soil that made it difficult to grow crops.⁴³ In 1946, the Ojo de la Yegua and Santa Rita colonies were established, bridging the distance between the Santa Clara colonies and the larger Mennonite settlements just south of them.⁴⁴ These colonies began to prosper in the 1960s and 1970s because the Mennonites had developed better well-drilling technology and improved irrigation systems.⁴⁵

The neighboring La Paz and Namiquipa *ejidos* were attuned to the expanding Mennonite settlement and agricultural technology. The Namiquipa ejido had grown so much that in 1962, it petitioned to create a new ejido, Nuevo Namiquipa.⁴⁶ When the government approved this expansion in 1965, it did not affect any of the Mennonite colonies, but when the La Paz ejido followed suit

⁴² Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 51.

⁴³ Sawatzky, 71.

⁴⁴ Cornelius Krahn and Helen Ens, "Nord Colony, Mexico," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989, rev. November 20, 2016, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Nord_Colony,_Mexico&oldid=141245.

⁴⁵ Mennonites were associated with prosperity while other farmers were not. See an analysis of newspaper articles from this time period in Royden Loewen and Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, "The Steel Wheel: From Progress to Protest and Back Again in Canada, Mexico, and Bolivia," *Agricultural History* 92, no. 2 (2018): 179–80. For a comparative example, see also Ben Nobbs-Thiessen's analysis of Bolivian Mennonites' agricultural production, titled *Landscape of Migration: Mobility and Environmental Change on Bolivia's Tropical Frontier, 1952 to the Present* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina press, 2020), 13.

⁴⁶ "Solicitud de vecinos radicados en el poblado de Namiquipa, Municipio del mismo nombre, Estado de Chihuahua, para la creación de un centro de población agrícola que se denominará Nuevo Namiquipa," *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, August 1, 1962, 16.

in 1968 and petitioned to create the La Nueva Paz ejido, it was a different story. Part of the new ejido's land was redistributed from several Mennonite farmers in 1970.⁴⁷ The same thing happened when the Nuevo Namiquipa ejido applied to expand in 1968—some Mennonite farmers' land was redistributed in 1970.⁴⁸ In 1983, farmers in the same colony then “donated” land to quickly resolve the Nuevo Namiquipa ejido's second expansion.⁴⁹

This transition depended on soft power and diplomatic compromise. Following a similar approach, some farmers, like Heinrich Klassen and Jacobo Wiebe Frosse, whose land had already been redistributed, applied for certificates to secure their remaining land against what they perceived could be further property loss.⁵⁰ They were particularly fearful of losing access to their water source, the Santa Clara river.⁵¹ Another farmer, a Mr. Peters, made himself less

47 The farmers [corrected spellings] included Heinrich [Voth Sawatzky], Tobías [Dueck], Ernesto [Loewen], Jacob [Wiebe], Jacob Voth, Heinrich Friessen, Heinrich Hildebrand, Bernard [Stoesz], Katarina Voth de Friessen and Heinrich Klassen. “Resolución sobre la creación de un nuevo centro de población agrícola que se denominará La Nueva Paz, en Riva Palacio, Chih.,” *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, September 12, 1970, 15.

48 “Resolución sobre ampliación de ejido al poblado Nuevo Namiquipa, Municipio de Namiquipa, Chih.,” *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, December 5, 1968, 14–16, states that Johan Redekop, Ernst Fehr Boehlig, Johan Wiebe Peters, David Dyck Peters, David Martens, Jakob [Teichroeb Sawatzky], Jakob Friesen Friesen, and Benjamín Froese Dyck donated land.

49 “Resolución sobre segunda ampliación de ejido solicitada por vecinos del poblado denominado Nuevo Namiquipa, ubicado en el Municipio de Namiquipa, Chih. (Reg-316),” *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, August 24, 1983, 1st section, 16–18.

50 “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 12 del predio La Campana, ubicado en el Municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.,” *Diario Oficial de la Nación*, January 2, 1984, 15–16; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 7 del predio La Campana, ubicado en el Municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.,” *Diario Oficial de la Nación*, January 2, 1984, 14–15.

51 Other farmers [corrected spellings] include Johan Heide Bueckert, Franz Enns Krahn, Jacob Klassen [Fehr], Heinrich [Enns] Reimer, Jacob W. Penner [Wolfe] and Abraham Dick Friessen” (“Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 14 de Santa Rita, ubicado en el Municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.,” *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, December 21, 1983, 25–26; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo a los predios rústicos denominados Lote 12 y 13 La Campana, ubicado en el Municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.,” *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, December 30, 1983, 55–56; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 1 de La Campana, ubicado en el Municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.,” *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, December 30, 1983, 31; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 17 de Santa Rita, ubicado en el Municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.,” *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, January 2, 1984, 17–18; “Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 25 de Santa

vulnerable by deeding to his daughters—Justina Peters Boldt de Friessen and Sara Peters Boldt de Friessen—land that could have been eligible for redistribution. He received a certificate of ineligibility for the rest of his property.⁵² These Mennonite farmers came up with creative ways to avoid negative consequences of land redistribution in their own communities.

Conflict in Zacatecas

Mennonites also experienced conflict with their neighbors in the state of Zacatecas. The La Batea and La Honda colonies were started there in the 1960s by people from Durango who needed more land. In these cases, the government acted in favor of the Mennonites, in part because the peasants were organizing outside of government-approved channels.

The situation began in a similar way as the land purchases in the 1920s. A Mennonite leader from Durango, Isaac Bueckert, traveled to the state of Zacatecas to inquire about land owned by a man called Ángel Mier. After Bueckert came to a favorable understanding with the owner, he told Mier he would inquire with the SRA about any ejido claims on the land. Mier, however, did not want him to do that, so Bueckert backed away from the venture.⁵³ Rightly so, as Mier is said to have thought a group of people might petition the SRA to create an ejido there.⁵⁴ Sometime later, Diedrich Braun, another Mennonite from Durango, took up the matter with Mier and proceeded to make the purchase in spite of potential issues. In 1961, a group of Mennonites from Nuevo Ideal, Durango, moved to land on Mier's property. In 1962, they finalized their purchase of three thousand hectares of land, now called the La Batea Colony.⁵⁵

Neighboring Mexican peasants on the Niño Artillero ejido protested La Batea's establishment. For instance, they destroyed the water pipes that the Mennonites had installed for their cattle. In response, soldiers were brought in

Rita, ubicado en el Municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.," *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, January 2, 1984, 18; "Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 42 de Santa Rita, ubicado en el Municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.," *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, January 2, 1984, 19.

52 "Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 106 Fracción A del predio La Campana, ubicado en el Municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.," *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, March 26, 1984, 12–13; "Acuerdo sobre inafectabilidad agrícola, relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 106 Fracción B del predio La Campana, ubicado en el Municipio de Riva Palacio, Chih.," *Diario Oficial de la Nación*, January 2, 1984, 19–20.

53 Peter T. Bergen, *La Batea: 55 Jahre* (La Honda, Mexico, 2017), 3, 5, 6.

54 Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 182n36.

55 Bergen, *La Batea*, 73; Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 180.

to force the peasants to leave.⁵⁶ The situation worsened after Mennonites purchased land for a fourth village in 1963. In 1973, the neighboring ejido for that village, Niño Artillo, petitioned the federal SRA to include that land, which was near a water source. This was a wise move on the part of the ejido, given that the newly installed federal government appeared to be committed to rural development and land redistribution.

In line with protest movements of the previous decade, the ejidatarios also began to occupy that land. According to Peter T. Bergen, who has written the history of the La Batea colony:

Dann im Jahre 1973 kamen mehr Agraristen und siedelten in der Gegend an wo Niño Artillero heute ist. Am ersten waren sie auf der Arenas Fence. Da bauten sie Kleine Häuser aus Pappe. Zum Schauder der Mennoniten fingen diese Mexikaner an, die Felder der Mennoniten zu bearbeiten.

[Then in 1973 more *ejidatarios* came and settled where Nino Artillero is today. At first, they were on the Arenas Fence. There they built small houses made of cardboard. To the horror of the Mennonites, the Mexicans then started to work on their fields.]⁵⁷

The ejidatarios acted in this way because they believed the land was theirs and that these actions would help their claim.

Also believing the land was rightfully theirs, the Mennonites appealed to the authorities. The community's religious and secular leaders employed notaries and worked with local officials to advocate for themselves. In 1971, colony leader Isaak Dyck Thiessen, via the notary, Rodolfo Soriano Duarte, submitted documents to the SRA to encourage the CCA to deny the ejido's request. He pointed out that each Mennonite family possessed a modest amount of land not exceeding the amount allowed by the land reform program.⁵⁸

During this period, peasants attacked Mennonite crops and animals and threatened Mennonite people. Mennonite leader Jakob. K. Giesbrecht worked with local *presidente municipal* (similar to a mayor) Toño (Antonio) Herrera Bocardo to resolve these issues.⁵⁹ Isaak Dyck, who had already submitted documents to the SRA, increased his efforts on a federal level. He sent a telegram to officials in the Department of Agrarian Affairs in Mexico City explaining their situation in such abrupt terms that uses neither articles nor prepositions:

⁵⁶ Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 196.

⁵⁷ Bergen, *La Batea*, 4.

⁵⁸ Rodolfo Soriano Duarte, Report titled "Relación de las propiedades rústicas ubicadas en el predio denominado 'La Batea' de este municipio, que aparecen inscritas a nombre de los menonitas que a continuación se detalle," January 26, 1971, Ejido Niño Artillero Collection, Archivo General Agrario, Mexico City.

⁵⁹ Bergen, *La Batea*, 4.

Estamos quieta pacífica posesión terrenos forma colonias menonitas que representó a título dueños según documentos . . . negligencia absoluta autoridades estatales . . . tuvieron pleno conocimiento hechos situación tornase angustiosa . . . ataques a familias, cosechas y semovientes amenazas de muerte. . . invasores dicen recibir ordenes central campesina independiente . . . [Somos] pequeños propietarios ofendidos inmensa mayoría nacidos territorio nacional.

(We are peaceful own land form Mennonite colonies documents show that we are owners . . . state authorities have completely neglected us . . . they had full knowledge facts situation became awful . . . attacks on families, harvests, livestock and death threats . . . invaders claim to receive orders from the Independent Campesino Organization . . . [we are] small landowners offended the majority are born in national territory.)⁶⁰

The telegram indicated that the Mennonites were peaceful *Mexican* victims who legally owned modest amounts of land and that if they were allowed to farm their land in peace, they would continue contributing to Mexico's economy. It added a veiled threat that the invaders were taking orders from the CCI, a peasant organization unaffiliated with the governing political party, the PRI. The Mennonites, the telegram concluded, were born in Mexico, implying that they would never do such a thing.

The government resolved the ejido's position in two ways: (1) According to Bergen, "Dieses Land haben die Mennoniten hier schließlich ganz verloren. Den Agraristen war diesen Land schon versprochen bevor die Mennoniten herzogen." (In the end, the Mennonites lost this land. The ejidatarios had been promised this land before the Mennonites moved there).⁶¹ This would have been a small portion of land in the colony. (2) The government granted the remainder of the landowners in that colony exemption from future land claims; the certificates explained that while the Mennonites had come from elsewhere, their "descendientes son mexicanos por nacimiento que se dedican a la agricultura, contribuyendo con su esfuerzo y su trabajo colectivo a la producción de alimentos básicos para la población" (descendants are Mexican by birth, work in agriculture, and collectively contribute to produce basic foodstuffs for the [Mexican] population).⁶² These agreements highlighted that Mennonites were

60 Isaak Dyck, Telegram to Lic. Augusto Gómez Villanueva, Jefe Departamento de Asuntos Agrarios y Colonización, April 1973, Ejido Niño Artillero Collection, Archivo General Agrario, Mexico City.

61 Bergen, *La Batea*, 4.

62 "Acuerdo sobre Inafectabilidad Agrícola relativo al predio rústico denominado Lote 12 de la Colonia Menonita Número 4, La Batea, ubicado en el Municipio de Sombrerete, Zac. (Registrado con el número 10700)," *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, June 12, 1980, 1st section, 41–42.

now Mexicans, who were contributing to the country's economy. This reasoning obfuscated the peasants' right to land as well as the fact that the Mennonites had worked with local and federal officials, encouraging them to use force to help maintain their way of life.

La Honda

La Honda, the Mennonites' other colony in Zacatecas, also experienced land conflict with nearby ejidos.

A powerful landowner, Roberto Elorduy, who was a friend of a Mennonite leader in Durango, had sold the Mennonites land that was eligible for redistribution.⁶³ Mennonite leader Jakob K. Guenther had been worried about this in light of conflict in nearby La Batea. He expressed as much, and Elorduy reportedly responded by saying, "Life is full of struggles."⁶⁴ In spite of this, these Mennonites bought around sixteen thousand hectares in 1964.

Eleven years later, in 1975, conflict came to a head. That year, peasants who lived in areas near the La Honda Colony took advantage of the federal emphasis on land redistribution, hoping they might increase their landholdings. Initially, four or five wagons full of peasants settled nearby. As their numbers began to grow, they built homes and a school. Intending to live there permanently, they also kept livestock. Whereas the Mennonites believed this to be an occupation of land they had rightfully purchased, peasants had the opposite impression; when the J. Santos Bañuelos ejido officially petitioned to expand their ejido in 1976, they claimed that the Mennonites were illegally occupying *their* land.⁶⁵

Mennonites in La Honda, as in La Batea, worked with local government to resolve the situation. *Presidente municipal* Antonio Herrera Bocardo, who had helped Mennonites in La Batea, urged people in La Honda to be patient. He suggested that they protest while some bureaucrats visited the colony to assess the land claim. The colony took his advice, and a large number of Mennonite women and children blocked the main road, which made an impression on the officials. As a result, the state governor acted in the Mennonites' favor, ultimately using force to remove the Mexican peasants.

On May 19, 1976, the Mennonites were told to stay indoors and pray. Armed men made their way onto the colony in trucks, and their leader proclaimed over loudspeakers:

63 Peter T. Bergen, *La Honda: 50 Jahre, 1964–2014*, (La Honda, Mexico, 2014), 4.

64 Bergen, *La Honda*, 9.

65 Enrique Moreno G., Julián Márquez E. and Esteban Saucedo, "Carta al C. Gobernador Const. del Estado," January 9, 1976, Ejido J. Santos Bañuelos Collection, Archivo General Agrario, Mexico City.

Die Stimme war sehr klar und eindringlich, so dass die Mennoniten es weit und breit auch in den Häusern hören konnten. Er gebot diesen Menschen zu verlassen und die Mennoniten hier jetzt weiter in Ruhe zu lassen. Überdem gab der Sprecher bekannt, dass er von 30 anfangen würde hinunter zu zählen. Schließlich 3, 2, und dann 1! Und dann rief er: „¡Pero ya! ¡Ríndense!“ (Jetzt, übergebt euch!) Dann ertönte eine Trompete sehr laut.

(His voice was very clear and emphatic, so that the Mennonites far and wide could hear him in their homes. He told these people to leave the Mennonites alone so that they could live here [in La Honda] in peace. Over the loudspeaker, he announced he would count down from 30. Finally, 3, 2, and then 1! And then he called: “¡Pero ya! ¡Ríndense!” [Now, surrender!] Then a trumpet sounded very loudly.)⁶⁶

The armed men took the peasants and their goods away. The next day, soldiers stationed themselves in the place where the ejidatarios had been living. One Mennonite family remembers soldiers saying that they

hatten gemeint, dass sie sich auf etwas Furchtbares bereit gemacht hatten und dann hatten sie gesagt, dass dies noch nichts gewesen war. Die Mennoniten aber waren dankbar, alles so friedlich verlief. Denn sie gönnten ihnen nicht Böses.

(had prepared themselves for something terrible and they said that this was nothing. The Mennonites were grateful that everything had been so peaceful because they did not harbor ill will toward them.)⁶⁷

The ejidatarios had hoped that occupying the land for which they had petitioned would ensure that it would be granted to them. The Mennonites, however, felt that since they had purchased the land, it was theirs. So they worked with local officials and accepted this use of force in order to be able to continue their way of life.

To prevent further conflict, the Mennonites in La Honda petitioned for certificates of ineligibility for land redistribution. As part of this process, multiple officials advocated on their behalf. Antonio Herrera Bocardo described the Mennonites as taxpayers who contributed to the nation's economy and as people who helped the nation by peacefully working, farming, and producing foodstuffs.⁶⁸ A bureaucrat named Fernando Ruiz Castro, perhaps one who had

⁶⁶ Bergen, *La Honda*, 21.

⁶⁷ Bergen, *La Honda*, 21–22.

⁶⁸ Antonio Herrera Bocardo, Letter to Joel Luevanos Ponce and Arturo Medrano Cabral, Comisión Agraria Mixta, April 24, 1979, Ejido J. Santos Bañuelos Collection, Archivo General Agrario, Mexico City; Antonio Herrera Bocardo, Letter to Joel Luevanos Ponce and Arturo Medrano Cabral, Comisión Agraria Mixta, May 2, 1979, Ejido J. Santos Bañuelos Collection, Archivo General Agrario, Mexico City.

seen the protest, also lauded the Mennonites. He highlighted the community's cleanliness and its economic contribution in terms of livestock, dairy production, and industrialized agriculture;⁶⁹ he praised their education system, nutritious diet, and personal hygiene; and he pointed out that the Mennonites in La Honda saved their money in local banks in the towns of Rio Grande or Miguel Auza and that the colony paid federal and state taxes. He concluded that “debido a los reglamentos tan estrictos de su religión, no causan nunca problemas o conflictos a las Autoridades, y cuando las hay generalmente las resuelven en forma interna y pacíficamente” (given their strict religious rules, they never cause problems or conflicts with the authorities, and that when there are problems, they resolve them internally and peacefully).⁷⁰

In October of 1979, the SRA granted Mennonite landowners the certificates that rendered their land ineligible for further redistribution, and the ejidatarios never returned.⁷¹

Learning from a Long View of Capitalist Expansion

At various points between the 1920s and the 1980s, the Mexican government appeared to have resolved land disputes through land redistribution to ejidatarios, by granting certificates of ineligibility for land redistribution to Mennonite farmers and by sending armed officials to employ force to resolve situations in the Mennonites' favor. As we saw in Santa Rita and in La Batea, conflict has often arisen over specific pieces of land that have access to water.

These examples are the result of the Mennonite colonies privileging separation from the rest of society through an agricultural lifestyle. Moreover, the way that the Mennonites colonies have explicitly or implicitly lived out federal goals in terms of agricultural policy has led to visible prosperity for some Mennonites in Mexico.⁷² In the process, the way many Mennonite colonies are structured in Mexico has prevented others from achieving the same level of prosperity. In other words, the Mennonite colonies in Mexico have engaged in capitalist

69 Fernando Ruiz Castro, Report on the Colony in What Was Known as the La Honda Hacienda, n. d., Ejido J. Santos Bañuelos Collection, Archivo General Agrario, Mexico City.

70 Castro.

71 Herrera Bocado, Letter, May 2, 1979; “Acuerdo sobre Inafectabilidad Agrícola, relativo al conjunto de predios rústicos denominado Fraccionamiento La Honda, ubicado en el Municipio de Miguel Auza, Zac.,” *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, October 1, 1979, 2nd section, 12–13.

72 Francisco J. Llera, Ángeles López-Nórez, Lucina Arroyo, Elizabeth Bautista, Gisel Valdez, Tania Amaya, “Cultura de Trabajo Colaborativo y Desarrollo Local. Análisis sobre las Actividades Emprendedoras Colaborativas en Grupos Menonitas y No-Menonitas en Chihuahua, México,” *Cultura científica y tecnológica* 14, no. 63 (2017): 16–35.

expansion and are one of many groups from within or outside of Mexico that have colonized parts of the country, displacing others in the process.

We would do well to learn from these examples and engage in reparations to counter our own participation in these systems and to right our relationships with our neighbors.