

Benjamin W. Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2017. 288 pp. \$49.50. ISBN 9780691174280.

Benjamin Goossen's *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and German Nationalism* outlines the intricate and entangled realities of identity, race, and politics in the context of European Mennonites—both those who remained in Europe and those who migrated to Russia and the Americas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Central to Goossen's thesis is the inherent instability, or, more positively, pliability of identity and how identity gets shaped by the sociopolitical forces of a given time and place. While Mennonites emerged with a sharp antagonism to the dominant expressions of both church and state during the European reformations, their later heirs and leaders positioned Mennonite identity in relation to German national identity. By the nineteenth century, this included leveraging German nationalism as an attempt at ecclesial unity (31), articulating Mennonite history resembling German national hymns (61). This was not always a linear development with divisions and conflicts between rural and urban congregations in Germany or between German and diasporic congregations abroad. In Russia, Mennonites claimed Dutch ancestry to avoid Russian suspicion of Germans, while later making German claims in the face of the Russian Revolution in order to garner the support of the Nazi army. This pliability even leads to a notion of "Mennonite nationalism," allowing Mennonites to remain disconnected with *anything* undesirable when gaining passage out of Europe to the Americas.

In Canada, Goossen's work has already received negative reviews on the grounds of historical inaccuracies⁷ and confessional failings.⁸ How is one to evaluate these claims in relation to the field of Mennonite and Anabaptist mission? An interesting subtext to this book is how the migrant nature of Mennonite history relates to those populations Mennonites encounter. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, Mennonite migrants were regularly characterized by their ability to turn their environment toward their own interests, interests that were often shown to align with German ideals or values. As Mennonites established themselves in Russia and the Americas, Wilhelm Mannhardt—a prominent academic and the first Mennonite in Germany to receive a doctoral degree—published extensively on the alignment of Mennonite colonies with German ideals. He praised them for the agricultural acumen and the purity with which they kept themselves in foreign

⁷ Peter Letkemann, *Mennonite Historian* 43, no. 3 (2017): 11–12.

⁸ Barb Draper, *Canadian Mennonite*, Aug 15, 2017, <http://www.canadianmennonite.org/stories/review-mennonite-nazi-connection-unconvincing>, accessed September 28, 2017. I was not sure how to describe Draper's criticism. I called it "confessional" because it seemed she found Goossen's argument incompatible with her overall *sense* of who Mennonites are and have been.

lands (38–41). The promotion of these ideals continued in other forms, which were later contrasted to “barbaric” or “primitive” practices of locals in Russia (101–2) or Paraguay (117). Later, the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization utilized notions of racial purity to advocate for Russian Mennonites as valuable immigrants since they had refrained from miscegenation (116). The most extreme form of these notions is seen in the work of Fritz Kliever—a Mennonite educator in Paraguay—who stated that while missionaries could readily spread *Christianity*, the idea “that an Indian could become a Mennonite is a thing of impossibility” (142). One Nazi ethnographer considered Mennonites “at the pinnacle of all German settlers in Russia. . . . Wherever they settle, the Mennonites are the unquestioned leaders of the Germans” (152). While notions of in-group purity and superiority are not unique to Mennonites, Goossen teases out Mennonite forms of this trait.

For every claim and example Goossen makes about Mennonite identity there are counterclaims and examples. Yes, have the conversation about historical accuracies. And, yes, have the conversation about the diversity of anecdotal experiences and accounts. But do not neglect to have the conversations about a tendency among Mennonites of European descent in the past two centuries to accept, nurture, and benefit from forms of nationalism and self-understanding that have led to the disregard, abuse, and even outright violence toward communities they have come into contact with. These conversations are important not only for uncomfortable reflections on Nazi alignment but also in more “positive” expressions, with Mennonites believing they know best about peace, advocating for “third-way” positions that fail to side with the vulnerable, or simply taking pride in “simple” and humble lifestyles. Rather than defending against inaccuracies and limitations, resources available to search out and expose tendencies toward privileging and valuing one people group over another should be readily (even if critically) embraced. Goossen’s work offers one such resource. Inasmuch as Mennonites have offered a glass of water in Christ’s name, Mennonites have also played a part in the worst of human judgments. The integrity of a future Mennonite witness may depend on the church’s ability to account for both.

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