



UNIVERSITY OF  
**WATERLOO**



# Interview with John Eicher

**James Skidmore:** Hello. My name is James Skidmore, and I'm the Director of the Waterloo Centre for German Studies, an institute at the University of Waterloo that promotes research into all aspects of the German-speaking world. To further this mandate, we've established the Waterloo Centre for German Studies Book Prize to recognize first-time authors whose scholarly work provides a substantial contribution to our understanding of German-speaking society. The shortlist for books published in 2020 has been announced, and it's my great pleasure to interview each of the six finalists about their work. Today I'm speaking with John Eicher, author of *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age*, published by Cambridge University Press. John is Assistant Professor of History at Pennsylvania State University in Altoona. His research centres on Europe's global connections in the areas of colonialism, nationalism, migration, and religion. John, welcome and congratulations on being named to the shortlist.

**John Eicher:** Thank you very much. I'm delighted to be here.

**JS:** We're happy to have you. Your book tells us the story of German-speaking Mennonite communities that migrated from Russia via Germany, initially to the US and Canada, and then on to Paraguay. And this in a period of about 70 years, from 1875 to 1945. That's a lot of uprooting and traveling in a relatively short period of time, so I'd like you to start by telling us: who were these Mennonites and why did they want to leave Russia?

**JE:** So the Mennonites, very briefly, [are] a small religious group that came out of the 16th-century Reformation in Europe, and they emerged from that promoting the tenets of non-violence, separation of Church and state, and also living a life of worldly simplicity. They took the Red Letters in the New Testament, Jesus' Word, as their departure. Of course, this is very unpopular with governments throughout Europe because they don't want a separation of Church and state at this time. They do want their citizens to be able to take up arms, and so this makes them very unpopular. They fan out across Europe trying to find governments that are amenable to their interests because they are hardworking; they till the land, they plant crops, so they do have some value as a group. Eventually, some come to the United States and what will be Canada in the 1700s, and others end up in Paraguay on the vast steps of the Ukrainian Russian territory. Here, they settle on the edges of these expanding empires.

**JE:** Eventually, throughout the course of the 19th century, the 1800s, the governments start to not only want to nationalize their land, have their land settled by these people, they also want to nationalize the people living on the land, which are the Mennonites. Russian Imperial nationalism [is] a little different than other kinds of nationalism in Europe but it emphasized, like most kinds, a consistent, unified bureaucracy; public schooling that would be taught in the Russian language; also Russian language for pretty much every sort of public activity [and] administrative work; and also certain military initiatives were put forward.

**JE:** The Mennonites in Russia don't like this, some of them at least, and they send an appeal to the government. They say, "We actually want to keep our autonomy completely." The Russian government says "No; in fact, you're speaking to us in German right now with your appeal [so] you have to learn Russian." So some of them depart for Canada. Out of a total population of about 60,000, about a third

*The Waterloo Centre for German Studies is a research institute at the University of Waterloo.*

Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1 CANADA

[wcfgs@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:wcfgs@uwaterloo.ca) / 519.888.4567, x49627 / @uWaterlooWCGS



end up leaving at some point in the 1870s and 1880s, and they settle in Canada and the United States. Others choose to remain. They say, "Actually, things are changing. The world is modernizing. We will adapt to these Russian initiatives". And so they stay behind. Some thought that it was God's call to leave to another place, [that] God is calling them out of Russia to Canada, to another frontier region. And others in a sense interpreted them staying in Russia sort of as an end of history, [as in] "We found our permanent settlement here in Russia, and God is telling us to stay." That's a quick 500-year [recap].

**JS:** But well put and very clear, the relationship between the Mennonites as a group and the state power that they have to negotiate with and live under. So the ones who then emigrated to Canada and/or the United States, what were they hoping then to attain by doing so?

**JE:** Well, the leavers wanted the same thing in Canada and the United States as they had wanted in Russia. They wanted the autonomy to be able to farm and carry on their own administration, their own Church life, on the edge of an empire. There was some debate when they were making these choices in the 1870s, whether [they would emigrate to] Canada or the United States. Canada ultimately was more appealing for a lot of them because they wanted to deal with a monarch. Mennonites at this time don't want to deal with local officials. They don't even want to deal with regional officials. They want to talk directly to a monarch and get a guarantee directly from the head of state. In the United States, it's a sort of chaotic [situation]. They sort of get a promise from individual States that they don't have to participate in the military, for instance. That's good enough for some. Plus, American land is a little nicer. But others say "No, we want to deal with the Queen, the Queen of England; we want to block settlement," so [they] can just basically buy almost an entire reservation, in a sense. And that's in a sense the way Canadians imagined it too; they would settle Mennonites as a reservation system. So a lot of them ultimately chose Canada.

**JE:** But the big irony of Mennonites and Mennonite settlement for the past 300 years is that, by settling on the edge of empire and then becoming farmers and needing to get their grain to market and needing to interact to some degree within economy, they kind of invite governments to then encroach upon their autonomy. And then they're surprised: "Oh wow, the government's here, wanting to send our kids to public school" and all these other things. So it's sort of a perpetual quest to find new frontiers in which to settle. And then a few decades later, start to fidget and worry that the government is too close and then find another one.

**JS:** Right. I always like books that have maps in them because I love getting that spatial orientation. And in yours, we see the maps of these, as you call them, reservations. I was particularly intrigued by the one of Saskatchewan. I'm from Saskatoon originally, and so it was great to see place names that I've known and to see how the reservation was fit into them, just north of Saskatoon, north of Osler, and that whole area. It made it so clear about how they wanted a place that was kind of contiguous and to themselves. And you see that there. And then in the other maps of the other regions where they settle that you're dealing with in the book, that happens again and again. And that's very interesting; that communal aspect.

**JE:** Yeah. And it's really kind of manifesting destiny on the cheap. Canada didn't have a lot of money or resources or manpower to go out and settle the West as a state-run thing. So they just came up with this block settlement idea, which is a departure from the American idea, which is just to let people loose and settle where they may. Canada creates these block settlements. Then it realizes within a couple of



decades [that] these actually don't help Canadization because it really lets them maintain their own autonomy and separation. And so they sort of quietly put that one on the dust bin. But the Mennonites still think they've got it. And this comes to a head in the First World War when the Mennonites realize [that], actually, they have less autonomy than they thought.

**JS:** With conscription and things like that for the First World War. As your book recounts this history, Canada and the US then [weren't] working out for some of these groups, and they ended up then moving again. So tell us about that.

**JE:** Right. For one thing, the ones that settle in America pretty much stay put. The ones in Canada, though, are confronted with conscription in World War I, which they successfully avoid. But the big sticking point for them really is mandatory public schooling. And Mennonites do not want mandatory English-language public schooling. And here they have some unlikely allies. Not that they ever really spoke to each other, but [they find allies] in Québec with the Québécois who want Catholic French-language schooling. But they can't come to terms with the Manitoba government. And here [it gets] very tricky because they were guaranteed autonomy by the federal government, essentially the British government, in the 1870s. But upon a revision of the law that they were not aware of, the decision for public schooling was kicked down to the provinces. So provinces set it. And the province of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, faced with so much immigration at that time and so many people that didn't speak English, they were really frightened of continuing [inaudible 00:11:45].

**JE:** So Manitoba [inaudible 00:11:52] says, "You have to do this." And after some wrangling with the government for several years, a group of Mennonites come together from Saskatchewan and Manitoba, a few thousand of them, and they start shopping around for different resettlement options in Latin America. Some end up in Mexico. They're still there to this day, in Northern Mexico, enticed by a promise from the government at that time that they could have their autonomy. This was not good enough for some because it was not literally written into the Constitution. So they went shopping in Paraguay, and they got a deal that's in the literal Constitution of Paraguay that says they can have their own autonomy, their own schools, they don't have to participate in war, etc. That was good enough for them, so they end up moving there in 1926. So really, from about 1914 to 1926, there's this big debacle in Western Canada over the Mennonites.

**JS:** And then a large portion of them migrate to Paraguay. And then in 1929, we have another group of Mennonites [who] come to Paraguay. But of course, they're coming then directly from the Russian colonies, and they're coming as refugees. Is that correct?

**JE:** That's right. The book follows the trails of both of these stories until they converge in Paraguay. Like I mentioned before, some Mennonites are fine with Imperial Russia and they adapt to this new system of Russification. And in World War I, they're labelled as German. And they don't like that, right? Because the Russian government's taking German land because they're fighting against Germany. So they go to the government and say, "We're Dutch. Look at all these old Bibles we have, and look at our last names. We're Dutch." So they get to keep their land. Germans roll into their territory in Ukraine in 1918, and they say, "Guess what, Germany? We're Germans!" And so they send a delegation to Berlin. And as long as Germany is in their territory, they're treated as Germans.

**JE:** Germans leave, Brest-Litovsk, they once again find themselves in Russia. But it's not Imperial Russia. It is Soviet Russia, and they don't care about their ethnicity. They care about how much money



they make. And Mennonites have a lot of land; they're fairly wealthy. So they're sent packing on their own in a haphazard way. A lot of them make their way to Moscow. This is 1929. So it's about ten years later, after the First World War. And they're destitute; their land's been taken, they've been labelled as Kulaks, and they make an appeal to Germany. Germany says, "Oh, our foreign Germans abroad. We love you. Come stay in Germany." Great Depression hits 1929. Germany says, "Oh, we cannot afford these refugees."

**JE:** So it's at that point that Mennonites in North America, under the organization Mennonite Central Committee, MCC, discover these Mennonites and they say, "Oh, we need to help them." So between the German government and the MCC in North America, this second group of Mennonites comes to Paraguay and settles there alongside those Canadian Mennonites. And the Canadian Mennonite colony is called Menno Colony. The recent German refugee colony is called Fernheim Colony. And then there's others that escape through China, and they come and settle there too. So Paraguay sort of becomes this meeting point for voluntary migrants, the Menno Colony, and also refugees, which is the Fernheim Colony.

**JE:** I also want to mention at this point, I think it's important: in all the places they're going, these Mennonites are being identified differently. So when they come to Russia, they're identified by the Canadian government as Protestant; they're not Catholic. They're Germans, which are considered to be good farmers; they have this stereotype about them, and they're welcomed under those terms. In Paraguay, they're white settlers; and whiteness is sort of a value of the ruling elite in Paraguay. Never mind that they're not Catholic, right? Because Paraguay is a Catholic country; they like Catholicism. And also, the German works well there too. And then for the refugees, of course, coming to Germany, they're Germans and welcome them. And then [in] Paraguay, they get welcomed much the same way as the Menno Colony did. Because these governments don't really know what Mennonites are. They just know they're Germans, they're white, they're Protestant, etc.

**JS:** Interesting, isn't it? And Fernheim was named that because [it means] to be far away from home? Fern-heim? Was that the idea behind the name?

**JE:** Yeah. It's a far away home. A Fernheim.

**JS:** Right. So that then indicates kind of a desire for connection to that homeland of, say, Germany, is that so?

**JE:** Or Russia, really.

**JS:** Or Russia.

**JE:** Their idea of a homeland.

**JS:** Their idea of the homeland would have been that German enclave within Russia.

**JE:** Yeah.

**JS:** You explained in your book that these two colonies, even though they're within, what, 10 km of each other, they're really not interacting with each other.

**JE:** That's right. And that really was what got me into the project. We have two groups of Mennonite colonies here within 10 km of each other and they are not talking for about 15 years. I mean, they do a



little bit, but there's no love lost between them. They keep their distance. So why? Why is that? I guess the analytical thrust of my book is following their different narratives through time. And the reason why they don't get along is because they have different narratives about who they are as MENA Knights and why they ended up in Paraguay. So the Menno Colony is following and believes in this narrative of trusting in God to take us to a new place. They would look at the biblical stories like Israelites' Exodus from Egypt and coming to the Promised Land sort of the template for what they do. They stay in a place until worldly forces of government force them to leave. They trust in God, they find a new place, and they settle there. And so movement and resettlement is not scary. It's predictable. And in fact, it's a Holy activity. So they're fine being in Paraguay.

**JE:** The Menno Colony follows what's called a comic plot progression. So when you think of any sort of Shakespeare comedy or any movie you really see on TV, there's a problem, a crisis, and then ultimately it's resolved and something better happens to the people at the end. A tragedy is a little bit more like Hamlet. And that's what the Fernheim Colony refugees interpret their story as; they were supposed to stay in Russia forever. That was the end of their story. But, oh, guess what? We have a new story. And our new story puts the endpoint in Paraguay, which is not on our mental map, not a place we want to go to. This is a very tragic occurrence. And we don't know if this is the end of the story. Is this curtains down? We're stuck. Some of these refugees think that, and they actually sort of just ban [together]. They go to Asunción, the city, they try and go to Canada. They're like, "This thing is over."

**JE:** Others say, "No. God has called us here for a reason. Maybe the reason is to help Paraguay in the Chaco War." So they supply the Paraguayan Army in their war against Bolivia between 1932 and 1935. Others say, "No. God has called us here to proselytize to Indigenous people." So they scurry around and set about trying to proselytize to Indigenous people in Paraguay's Gran Chaco. And others say, "Well, this is just a waiting room. The Nazi government is on the rise in Germany; they plan to march east at some point, they might reinvade Russia and give us our old homeland back. And then we can go back to Russia and then we get restored. This is just a temporary challenge from God." So, while the Fernheim Colony is screwing all around, making connections with all these different groups, the Menno Colony is just going about its daily life, farming. And they don't really have much to talk about. Because they're here in Paraguay for what they believe are very different reasons.

**JS:** Right. That is so incredible. And you put it so well. And, in your book, it comes out so clearly; the competing understandings of who the groups are both from the side of the groups and from the side of their host governments or from the state authorities that surround them. You have to tell us the story, though, about the Fernheim Colony sending Göring a sack of peanuts on the occasion of his wedding. What was going on?

**JE:** Yeah, the Fernheim Colony is brushed with fame. They had a schoolteacher that was sent to them by the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, which is the Association for Germans Abroad in the Nazi government. The schoolteacher was sent to them; he had a Mennonite background, he was a Nazi, and he starts teaching and preaching the word of Nazism in the colony. And he has an idea, because the Fernheim Colony grows peanuts, to assemble a large amount of peanuts and send them to Germany as a goodwill offering. I think it was about two tons. So it's actually pretty good.

**JS:** That's a big sack.





**JE:** Yeah. And they distribute them to schoolchildren in Nazi Germany, and they also send them to some higher-ups including Hitler; he got a sack. And Hermann Göring, who is the commander of the Luftwaffe, one of the big henchmen in the regime; he gets his on the occasion of his birthday in 1935. This is a big coup for the Fernheim Colony because they're like, "Wow, we're physically now, in a sense, in touch with the leadership of the Nazi elite." This makes them feel really good, that they're an important sort of node in this transnational German network. And from the German side it's good because all the peanuts in the world are grown in America or British or French colonies; so now they have access to empire, right? The peanuts. But the whole thing quickly turned sour. This Nazi teacher, he was called on the floor by the Fernheim leadership; he wasn't going to Church, he was saying bad things about them, and they actually ejected him. They sent him back to Germany not because he was too much of a Nazi but because, in their opinion, he wasn't being German enough. He was sowing discord, he wasn't fitting in with their group. And that's anti-German. And that's anti-Nazi. Because we're all in this together. So the terms under which he was sent home are very bizarre, because they don't think he's being Nazi enough or völkisch enough.

**JS:** Yeah. It's an incredible story that you tell in the book, because, again, [of] this interaction between state actors and the Mennonite colonies. When we read it, it's history that happened. But I'm wondering, what can it tell us about today? Does it have any implications for us today? Because we live in a world [where] migration is happening in different ways around the globe and, for many, it's called a crisis. I don't know if that's really the proper term, but it's certainly on people's radar. And I'm wondering, do we learn anything from the story of these colonies that we can apply to today's situation?

**JE:** That's a great question. I think that an important thing from all of this is that it helps us understand [or] interrogate the narratives that both governments and immigrant groups tell about themselves. So in Germany, in my story, Germany welcomes these refugees in 1929. They say, "Come to Germany, we welcome you as Germans abroad." They're basically saying, "We are a nation that welcomes Germans specifically." They're telling a story about themselves: "We are this kind of country." And Canada says in 1926, when the Mennonites leave to Paraguay, they say, "We are a nation that rejects religious separatists. This is now a part of our narrative. We promote Canadization first." And so I think what my book does is it helps us remain aware of the mythologies. Because these are mythologies that groups tell about themselves that [they] live inside.

**JE:** In the United States now, for instance, we have a lot of different narrative threads we could be pulling on right now. And right now, you see attention between two different, totally legitimate threads in American history to pull on. One is from this 1890s Ellis Island sort of narrative of, "Give me your tired, your poor. We welcome people no matter who you are." And then there's also this 1920s isolationist nativist narrative that says, "No, we don't want more immigrants." Both narratives rely on history, or use history, in their rhetoric. And we can kind of get swept up into thinking [that] this is a contemporary issue, this is something that we're dealing with now, this is unique. And I think, too, refugee crises are often framed as being unique, right? They're not. In a world of nation-states, where this line lines up with this line perfectly, this country's here, and there's no blank space on the map – there's going to be refugees. That's just a fact. So we have to accept that.

**JE:** So what the book does [is] it helps us understand nationalist narratives; it helps us understand group narratives, refugee narratives. And I think that's relevant today too because [if] you take a group like, recently, Syrian refugees, they're often lumped. National names [inaudible 00:28:19] refugee status.



We've sort of formed this simple idea of who they are in our mind, and then we think, "Oh, yeah, that's good" or "No, that's bad." But, Syrian refugees, some of them are Christian. Some of them are Muslim. Some are different kinds of Muslim. They have different professions. They're obviously different genders. Some of them may have lived in Turkey for a decade. So are they Syrian? Are they Turkish-Syrian? To what degree do we really know these people? And I think my book challenges us to, when we look at immigrants and refugees, to see them less as a block and try and figure out individual or smaller group stories that they're saying about themselves. And I think we'll all understand each other better.

**JS:** Well, certainly that's the hope. But this is exactly right. We see these groups as homogeneous blocks. And your book lets us understand that they're not homogeneous blocks; they have their own politics, and they have their own issues and things that they're thinking about and concerned about, and a diversity among them. And that's wonderful. Final question for you, and this is just something completely different. What are you currently reading in your field or just generally that you like and that you want to tell others about?

**JE:** Well, it's not really a book. Right now, I'm reading about a thousand narratives that were recorded in the 70s from survivors of the 1918 Spanish flu that were gathered from across Europe. They were gathered in the 1970s by a popular author named Richard Collier, and he quickly wrote a book. It's pretty good, but it just takes some of the narratives and stacks them on top of each other. And it sort of reads in a fast-paced, popular way. I have that collection gathered from across ten different European countries; and I'm reading them, and then I'm entering them into a database so it makes it easily searchable. It's fascinating reading, especially now during the pandemic, because [of] the way people talk about this pandemic; they talk about it in very local terms. Someone writing in rural Sweden wasn't quite sure if there was also flu in Southern Sweden. Or they had heard maybe that it had come from France. So they're thinking of it in purely local terms. And that means that there's no blaming an outgroup and there's no real nationalism. I think, in our current pandemic and with COVID, we're like, "Well, what are the Japanese doing? How are they handling it in India? Oh, I think Finland is doing so much better than us or England or Israel or whoever." So that's been really interesting.

**JE:** And also, their reliance on local cures. There are so many different local cures that these people are using. They're inhaling tar, they're drinking alcohol, they're using camphor. In the documents, I have sensed that it's kind of empowering to them; that they can do stuff, they can make stuff, they can find stuff. And maybe the person dies, but they were empowered to be able to try something. And I think when you have something like a vaccine, it becomes the single and possibly scarce cure. And that creates a lot of tension. "Will I have access to it? Do I need a booster," etc. So, for as miraculous as modern therapies are, like a vaccine, if they're not immediately widely and cheaply available – so people have access and feel empowered to have it – then you might have some problems.

**JS:** Well, that's fascinating. I have to admit, I have never thought of inhaling tar as a cure for anything.

**JE:** Yeah. And that's the other thing; when you read these things, be very suspicious of any figures you see from the 1918 flu. It's my impression [that] a lot of people probably died trying to cure themselves just as much as maybe [from] the flu. So, yeah, they would put their heads over a vat of tar and just huff as much as they could. It's ridiculous.

**JS:** The cure is worse than the disease.



UNIVERSITY OF  
**WATERLOO**



**JE:** Yeah.

**JS:** Well, again, thank you, John, for being here today. I just want to repeat that the title of your book is *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age*, and you've done a wonderful job explaining to us how these mythologies developed and the impact they had in terms of the lives of these colonies. So thank you very much for being here.

**JE:** Thank you. Thanks for inviting me. Loved it.

*The Waterloo Centre for German Studies is a research institute at the University of Waterloo.*

Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1 CANADA

[wcs@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:wcs@uwaterloo.ca) / 519.888.4567, x49627 / @uWaterlooWCS