

## REFLECTION

# Reflections on Benjamin Goossen's Critique of Mennonites and National Socialism

*Erwin J. Wiens*

The shameful “cover up” of Mennonite complicity in Nazi horrors, propagated for decades by venerated spokesmen like Walter Quiring and B. H. Unruh, has been challenged by several Mennonite historians over the past three decades. Perhaps the most compelling critique has come from Gerhard Rempel in his essay in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*.<sup>1</sup> But it was the virtual MCC forum at the University of Winnipeg in October 2021 that brought this subject to the attention of a much wider public. MCC assembled twelve historians to present their findings, then published them in the Fall 2021 issue of *Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice*.<sup>2</sup> Their evidence demands a painful reckoning.

Benjamin Goossen was one of those historians, and he seems to have become their standard bearer. His book, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*, was published in 2017,<sup>3</sup> and during the last seven years he has published at least fourteen essays and blog posts on this subject. He has obviously made an enormous contribution to our knowledge of this period based on the evidence he has unearthed in the Nazi archives in Berlin, in the archives of the Allied refugee agencies in Germany after the war, and in the MCC archives in Canada and the United States, among other sources. However, his analysis of the evidence differs from that of some of his colleagues by focusing on the collective guilt of Mennonites.

*Chosen Nation* narrates a history of Mennonitism from the Reformation to the present, but unlike many other histories, Goossen's focus is not

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1 Gerhard Rempel, “Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetration,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84 (October 2010): 507–549.

2 *Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice* 9, no. 4 (Fall 2021). <https://mcc.org/media/document/130171>.

3 Benjamin Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

*The Conrad Grebel Review* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2022).

on how the core tenets of Mennonite faith persisted through the centuries under various political and cultural pressures. Rather, in spite of the revered accounts of Mennonite martyrs who had been cruelly executed for their alleged heresy, Goossen argues that Mennonite beliefs, shaped by time and place, had always been malleable, and therefore, “current beliefs and practices cannot be meaningfully measured against those of the religion’s earliest practitioners.”<sup>4</sup> Genealogy, however, is not malleable, and therefore “the religion’s primary vector was understood to be heredity, not belief.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Goossen’s primary vector in *Chosen Nation* traces the emergence of a ‘Racial Church’ (the title of Chapter Five), and by the end of the 19th century, Mennonites regarded themselves as a *Volk* onto themselves, a German Volk, a ‘nation’ without borders, identified by their genealogy, not their beliefs and practices. Pacifism was only one issue among others that had to adapt to time and place, both in Europe and throughout the Mennonite diaspora. Thus, during the Nazi period, Mennonites were not only tolerated but deemed to be model Aryans by virtue of their racial purity. As such, they were showered with favours and privileges, and hence, Mennonites’ collective guilt. Indeed, Goossen concludes with the rather startling statement that the Nazis’ images of Mennonitism “helped to propel the slaughter of much of Europe’s Jewish population.”<sup>6</sup>

Much of Goossen’s evidence for the Nazis’ high regard for Mennonites as model Aryans is drawn from archival records of Nazi propaganda. This is acknowledged (occasionally with a cautionary gesture) in *Chosen Nation* and in several of Goossen’s essays and blog posts.<sup>7</sup> It is well known that Mennonites in Ukraine (and millions of others in the Soviet Union in 1941) regarded the German invaders as their liberators from Stalinist terror. American historian Timothy Snyder begins his highly acclaimed book, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, by frankly stating that not till the invasion

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4 Ibid., 7.

5 Ibid., 8.

6 Ibid, 7, 8, and 146.

7 See for example “Measuring Mennonitism: Racial Categorization in Nazi Germany and Beyond,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 225-246; “A Small World Power”: How the Nazi Regime Viewed Mennonites,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* XCII (April 2018): 173-206; “Terms of Racial Endearment: Nazi Categorization of Mennonites in Ideology and Practice 1929-1945” *German Studies Review* 44.1 (2021): 27-46.

of Poland in September 1939 did Hitler's killings begin to rival Stalin's:

The Soviet Union was the only state in Europe carrying out policies of mass killing. Before the Second World War, in the first six and a half years after Hitler came to power, the Nazi regime killed no more than about ten thousand people. The Stalinist regime had already starved millions and shot the better part of a million.<sup>8</sup>

It should not surprise us that when the Nazis invaded, Mennonites and millions of others thought they had less to fear from the Nazis than from Stalinist Communism. Nor should it surprise us that during the two years of Nazi occupation, many collaborated by becoming involved in the local economy and certain administrative tasks. But it has also become indisputable that collaboration often involved much more, including active involvement in the notorious SS *Einsatzgruppen*, the Nazi killing squads.<sup>9</sup>

From the late 1940s and into the current century, accounts appeared in German-language newspapers that acknowledged such atrocities but would often maintain that a Mennonite name was not conclusive evidence that these were Mennonites.<sup>10</sup> They were renegades. They argued that long before the Nazi invasion, these thugs had already loudly disavowed any Mennonite affiliation, which they regarded as a hindrance to their careers in the local Communist agencies or to admission as a student at a technical institute. Typically when the Nazis arrived, they would switch their ideology from Communist to Fascist with alacrity and become the most eager and most useful recruits for the *Einsatzgruppen*.

Goossen, like most of his fellow historians, is sceptical of the accuracy of many of these accounts, and for him the distinction between Mennonites and renegades with Mennonite names does not vitiate their Mennonite

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8 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), x-xi.

9 The previously cited essay by Gerhard Rempel, "Mennonites and the Holocaust," is one of the most compelling accounts of Mennonite involvement in Nazi killing squads.

10 For example, see Anne Konrad, *Red Quarter Moon: A Search for Family in the Shadow of Stalin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 149-160, and notes 21 to 58. See also Harry Loewen and James Urry, "A Tale of Two Newspapers: *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* (1880-2007) and *Der Bote* (1924-2008)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, LXXXVI (April 2012).

genes, or necessarily absolve Mennonites of collective guilt. One of Goossen's most dramatic blog posts that seeks to demonstrate this point is entitled "How a Nazi Death Squad Viewed Mennonites."<sup>11</sup> It portrays a young woman, Amalie Reimer, whose brief career as an SS agent "illustrates how the concept 'Mennonite' held coveted value during the Holocaust."<sup>12</sup> She had been an agent of the Soviet secret police (the NKVD) when the Germans invaded, and normally that would have been reason enough to have her summarily shot. Yet she volunteered her services to a commando unit of *Einsatzgruppe C* and managed to persuade an SS Commandant that she had been forced to work for the NKVD under threat of imprisonment. She had described herself as a typical Mennonite with a happy childhood in a Mennonite community, until that life was shattered by Soviet Communism. That apparently saved her. Goossen reports that it would have been very easy for the SS to discover that her story was false, because among Mennonites in the Chortitza area, she was hated and despised: "they saw her as a hardened communist who had personally betrayed many fellow ethnic Germans."<sup>13</sup> But her SS interrogators were eager to believe her.<sup>14</sup>

Amalie Reimer may appear as a textbook example of a renegade with a Mennonite name, as eager to commit atrocities for an SS killing squad as for her former Soviet masters, but for Goossen her case demonstrates that Mennonite complicity was not limited to a handful of disgusting thugs. That she so easily persuaded her SS interrogators of her blatantly false story demonstrates collective Mennonite complicity. Her claim that she was forced to be an NKVD agent would have been dismissed with derision, even if she had come from one of the non-Mennonite *Volksdeutsche* colonies. But as a Mennonite, she was believable. According to Goossen, the Nazis held Mennonites in such high regard because they had always kept themselves racially pure, free of contamination by intermarriage. He quotes an SS report that concluded, "the Mennonites make the consistently best physical and spiritual impression of all the ethnic Germans assessed so far."<sup>15</sup> Goossen does

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11 "Anabaptist Historians," January 16, 2021, <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2021/01/16/how-a-nazi-death-squad-viewed-mennonites/>, (accessed April 28, 2022).

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

pose a cautionary question: “To what extent can historians trust the sociological evaluations of a genocidal murder squad?”<sup>16</sup> He acknowledges, for example, that the Nazis’ “fanatical hatred of Jews” led them “to drastically misunderstand the basic dynamics of communist society.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, he concludes that the lesson to be derived from the case of Amalie Reimer is that “To be within the Mennonite fold during the Holocaust was to wield influence.”<sup>18</sup> This, and the privileges it entailed, is deemed adequate evidence to collectively incriminate them.

Some of Goossen’s other blog posts that rely on Nazi propaganda to incriminate Mennonites collectively seem to be straining for effect. For example, his blog post entitled “The Kindergarten and the Holocaust”<sup>19</sup> attempts to portray the mutual affection between Mennonites and German soldiers. It begins as follows: “Children’s eyes sparkled in the candlelight. This was the first time many had seen a Christmas tree, aglow in the Einlage kindergarten in December 1942. Soldiers handed out wooden toys. They had spent weeks carving them—model houses, schools, churches, city halls, trucks, and trains—while convalescing at the military hospital in this Mennonite village in southeastern Ukraine.”<sup>20</sup> This account seems too cartoonish to merit discussion, but a reply to Goossen’s blog post by another historian, James Urry, does merit discussion:

Goossen relies totally on reports in Nazi German language newspapers published in Ukraine during the Nazi occupation. Although he suggests scholars must see the newspapers as examples of propaganda and use them with caution, this does [not] prevent him from drawing uncritical conclusions from them. He also uses the newspapers to add additional support for his earlier views that the story of the Mennonite past in wartime Ukraine is “chilling,” must be exposed and used by today’s Mennonites “to root out our anti-Semitic narratives.” This is not history intended to understand the past, but

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 *Anabaptist Historians*, December 11, 2018, <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2018/12/11/the-kindergarten-and-the-holocaust/>, (accessed April 28, 2022).

20 Ibid.

another example of propaganda to promote a moral crusade in the present.<sup>21</sup>

This judgment is not so easily dismissed.

In *Chosen Nation*, Goossen acknowledges that by 1938, “nearly half of all Mennonite men in Ukraine had been arrested”<sup>22</sup> and either shot or banished. In the Chortitza colony, out of a population of 11,000 Mennonites in 1914, “more than 20% were murdered, banned, starved to death, or deported by 1941.”<sup>23</sup> But since this narrative of suffering has been used to mitigate Mennonite collaboration with the Nazis, Goossen’s reference to it is guarded. As such, it ranks as #1 in his list of “Five Myths about Mennonites and the Holocaust.”<sup>24</sup>

For some readers, twenty years of Stalinist terror may nevertheless mitigate the guilt of Mennonites in Ukraine, but nothing comparable can mitigate the collaboration of many Mennonites in Prussia and the Danzig area. Some had joined the Nazi Party as early as 1934, and Goossen reports that wealthy Mennonite landowners and factory owners were among those who availed themselves of Jewish slave labor. And they cannot be dismissed as renegades with Mennonite names. Some were esteemed leaders in their communities, usually middleclass urban communities. Again, Goossen’s focus is on the Nazis’ image of Mennonites as model Aryans, but here there is more emphasis on how prominent Mennonite figures avidly promoted this image. His judgment against them is sweeping: “The positive treatment of Mennonites in Nazi-dominated Europe must be understood in direct relation to the systematic annihilation of the continent’s Jewish population.”<sup>25</sup>

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21 James Urry, “Three Thoughts on ‘The Kindergarten and the Holocaust,’” reply to <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2018/12/11/the-kindergarten-and-the-holocaust/>. Internal quotes in Urry’s response appear near the end of Goossen’s original post.

22 Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 150.

23 Ibid.

24 Goossen, “Five Myths about Mennonites and the Holocaust,” *Anabaptist Historians*, (June 14, 2018) <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2018/06/14/five-myths-about-mennonites-and-the-holocaust/>, (accessed April 28, 2022).

25 Benjamin Goossen, “A Small World Power’: How the Nazi Regime Viewed Mennonites,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XCII, no. 2 (April 2018), 175.

Class tensions now complicate the ideology of race. Already in the 1870s, “confessional advocates had cast their theology in a nationalist mold”<sup>26</sup> to promote their own agendas.” Pacifism did not suit their agenda, so it was readily foresworn. Goossen describes these “activists” as “urban, affluent, and well educated.”<sup>27</sup> Hinrich van der Smissen is one such activist, who “sought to sway state authorities, a wider public, and their own congregations on a host of political and theological issues.”<sup>28</sup> The fact that Mennonites had staunchly maintained their German language and culture wherever they settled was indisputable proof that Germany was the *Vaterland* of all Mennonites.<sup>29</sup> The progressive activists had formed a Union of Mennonite Congregations in 1886 to promote their vision of “complete assimilation” to a “non-state national church,” but, as Goossen explains, it was not Mennonites “who would abandon their distinctiveness and move into a subsuming German whole; it was the German nation, rather, that would become Mennonite.”<sup>30</sup> It is not surprising that these activists at first had little success converting most of their congregants to this vision. Even more bizarre was the activists’ contention that the stubbornness of conservative rural congregants was attributable to their “religious indifference.”<sup>31</sup> Goossen concedes that “those most adamantly opposed to the Union counted among the country’s most conscientious, strictly observant members.”<sup>32</sup> So, the accusation of “religious indifference” more accurately represented “national indifference.”<sup>33</sup>

But the aftermath of World War 1 and the German defeat “consolidated the idea of a global Mennonite community”<sup>34</sup> and enhanced the influence of the activists in Germany. Kurt Kauenhoven, “a leading Mennonite genealogist,” drew upon a decade of Nazi “scientific” research to show that Mennonites were more Aryan than the average German, and therefore “unusually

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26 Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 64.

27 *Ibid.*, 12.

28 *Ibid.*, 13.

29 *Ibid.*, 13.

30 *Ibid.*, 70.

31 *Ibid.*, 71.

32 *Ibid.*, 71.

33 *Ibid.*, 72.

34 *Ibid.*, 120.

predisposed to Nazi race laws.”<sup>35</sup> Fritz Kliewer, a raving antisemite from the Paraguayan diaspora, argued that Mennonites were an agrarian people, “im-buing their bloodlines with distinctive traits” and that missionaries “could spread Christianity, but never Anabaptism.”<sup>36</sup> Goossen takes care to inform his readers that the rants of these activists “were often better barometers of what their coreligionists did not believe.”<sup>37</sup> Given this, one might expect that Goossen would exempt the stubbornness of the indifferent congregants, but he seems reluctant to do so because, while they might have opposed the vision of a non-state national church, they too were beneficiaries of the Nazis’ favored treatment of Mennonites. And moreover, they too regarded themselves as a “nation” unto themselves, whether in Germany or throughout the Mennonite diaspora.

A fundamental tenet of Goossen’s critique of Mennonites is that they have always been fascists, as the title of his book, *Chosen Nation*, boldly proclaims, and this is the implicit or explicit argument of many of his academic articles and blog posts.<sup>38</sup> His introductory remark in *Chosen Nation* states his basic premise: since their inception after the Protestant Reformation, Mennonites have produced a myriad of practices and beliefs, and because of “the malleability of both religious doctrine and national precepts, static understandings of collective identity are untenable.”<sup>39</sup> Whether among horse-and-buggy Mennonites or among urban professionals, Mennonite beliefs have always been contested, but what was not contested, wherever they settled, is that they regarded themselves as a distinct *Volk*, based on their genealogy.<sup>40</sup> For Goossen, this is an adequate criterion for the accusation of fascism.

Goossen seems less deterred by the fact that definitions of fascism have also been contested, not least among respected historians. Normally the

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35 Benjamin Goossen, “From Aryanism to Anabaptism: Nazi Race Science and the Language of Mennonite Ethnicity,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (April 2016), 140.

36 Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 142–43.

37 *Ibid.*, 15.

38 For example, see “Mennonites in Latin America: A Review of the Literature,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 236–265; “From Aryanism to Anabaptism: Nazi Race Science and the Language of Mennonite Ethnicity,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (April 2016), 135–140; “Mennonite Fascism,” *Anabaptist Historians*, April 27, 2017.

39 Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 4.

40 *Ibid.*, 4–8.

term designates the most vile political ideology imaginable and conveys maximum opprobrium. It is usually associated with aggressive militarism, death cults, the *Führerprinzip*, and a murderous racism. But for Goossen, evidence of an exclusive ethnic collectivity seems sufficient. He concedes that a “stable definition” of Mennonite fascism may not be possible given its “myriad evolutions,” but nevertheless alleges that in Nazi Germany “public perception had so tightly intertwined Mennonitism with Aryanism” that it “helped propel the internment, dehumanization, and slaughter of much of Europe’s Jewish population.”<sup>41</sup> And while some “individual Mennonites” did commit heinous crimes, “more often it was the broader idea of Mennonitism—a joint racial and spatial construct—that helped facilitate genocide.”<sup>42</sup> It is remarkable that these accusations, on this basis, have not provoked more strenuous dissent among Mennonite historians.

Aileen Friesen seems to be one exception. In a recent article in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Friesen cites nine instances where Goossen’s data is skewed.<sup>43</sup> For example, in the Fall 2021 issue of *Intersections*, Goossen describes how MCC had duped the IRO into funding the first ship of refugees to Paraguay.<sup>44</sup> Friesen checked his sources and found that he had inflated the amounts. She also writes: “It should be noted that scholars can only identify several dozen specific perpetrators, a far cry from Goossen’s tens of thousands of Mennonite collaborators.”<sup>45</sup> In Goossen’s contribution to the Fall 2021 issue of *Intersections*, he accuses the MCC of facilitating the escape of Nazi war criminals, and portrays it as little different from the underground ratlines that helped high-ranking Nazis escape to Argentina and Paraguay—except that MCC conducted its illegal activity under the guise of a relief agency.<sup>46</sup>

The crux of this story (as Goossen and others have explained) is that Mennonites fleeing the Soviet Union had been granted German citizenship

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41 Goossen, “From Aryanism to Anabaptism,” 139.

42 Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 145–146, 157.

43 Aileen Friesen, “Screening Refugees: Mennonite Central Committee and the Postwar Environment,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 96 (July 2022): 381–416.

44 *Ibid.*, 400.

45 *Ibid.*, 400 and 383. See also other references to Goossen’s work on pages 385, 401, 404, 408, 409, 410, and 414.

46 Benjamin Goossen, “MCC and Nazism, 1929–1955,” *Intersections*, 9, no. 4: 3–12.

when they crossed into the Reich at the end of their trek. According to the international refugee agencies in Germany, this proved they were Nazi collaborators, not victims, and therefore they were excluded from the “deserving” refugees who were entitled to Allied aid. But the Soviet Union claimed they were Soviet citizens, and as such subject to repatriation and punishment as traitors. Peter Dyck and other MCC staff therefore claimed that these refugees had accepted German citizenship “under duress.”<sup>47</sup> They were neither German nor Soviet citizens but a separate nation unto themselves, of Dutch ancestry. Goossen regards this as a shameful ploy. In an earlier essay, he had already argued that it amounted to a “systematic project to cover up the collaboration of a large percentage of the confession’s population with National Socialism.”<sup>48</sup>

Peter Dyck knew too well that the Allied refugee agencies recognized no category other than “national” in determining who was entitled to certain rights, including the right to remain alive. He had no recourse but to cast his defense of Mennonites in the only terms they deemed relevant—race or nationality. Goossen himself acknowledges this when he writes, “in an era when certain political proclivities like fascism and militarism were often ascribed to entire national communities, anyone considered to be of German descent was considered party to war guilt.”<sup>49</sup> Yet it is this political proclivity that Goossen now invokes to accuse Mennonites collectively of being a party to war guilt.

There is no disputing that some Mennonites had committed ghastly crimes, and that some of these found their way to MCC refugee centres after the war, wringing their hands and telling stories about how they had been forced to join the Nazis. And some of them were among those whose escape to Paraguay and eventually to Canada was facilitated by the MCC. How accountable can we hold the MCC for that? Aileen Friesen gives a more nuanced account of the “evolving set of principles” that confronted MCC workers “in the cacophony of post-war Europe.”<sup>50</sup> Rules and the interpretation of the rules varied month to month, from country to country, and from agent

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47 Ibid., 8.

48 Goossen, “From Aryanism to Anabaptism,” 160.

49 Ibid., 150.

50 Friesen, “Screening Refugees,” 385.

to agent. In that milieu, MCC's relatively stable criterion was to save lives.

In the turmoil after the German surrender in May 1945, historians have calculated that there were at least eleven million refugees in Germany fleeing the Soviet Union and the eastern provinces of the Reich, fleeing into, not out of the country that had lost the war and lay in ruins. They were a huge problem for the allied British, American, and Soviet military administrations. Another three million Germans had also become homeless after British/American carpet bombing had reduced their cities to piles of rubble. Mennonites accounted for only a small fraction of these. Roughly 35,000 had begun the eight-month trek out of southern Ukraine in the fall of 1943 when the German army began its retreat, of whom only 12,000 made it as far as the MCC refugee centers and eventually to Paraguay and Canada. The rest, mostly widows and children, were "legally" repatriated to prison camps in the Siberian gulag alongside millions of other Soviet nationals. Goossen acknowledges that many did not survive their first winter there, and the rest faced decades of hunger and other deprivations. Friesen seems to think that in the chaos after the war, with millions of refugees scrambling for relief, saving 12,000 lives was more urgent than prosecuting known and unknown criminals. Goossen isn't so sure.

*Erwin J. Wiens taught English Literature at the University of Ottawa and Heritage College in Gatineau, Quebec.*