Mennonites and the Holocaust Syllabus

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Recent conferences held in Germany (2015), Paraguay (2017), and the United States (2018) have led to significant public discussion and academic scholarship on the history of Mennonites’ involvement with Nazism and the Holocaust. These events have revealed that individuals associated with the Mennonite church were proximate to and sometimes participated in fascism and genocide to a greater extent than has been previously known. In response to several requests, we here at Anabaptist Historians have created this “Mennonites and the Holocaust Syllabus” to disseminate basic information and suggestions for further reading. In constructing this document, we have been inspired by other recent syllabi—such as the “Black Lives Matter Syllabus” (https://goo.gl/w7zr9r) and the “#StandingRockSyllabus” (https://goo.gl/Sjw3gh)—that provide resources on topics of public import for adoption in educational settings as well as for wide circulation.

Below, recommended readings are organized by topic. This syllabus highlights short, free, web-accessible, English-language sources. Full-text links are provided. For readers wanting a deeper dive into any theme or area of interest, longer secondary sources in English, German, and Dutch are also listed under “Further Reading.” While links are given showing where and how to access the “Further Readings,” these are—unlike the primary texts—generally not available in full online and must be accessed via libraries or database subscriptions. This syllabus is intended for general consumption: please use, distribute, amend, and share however you like.

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Key Terms

Holocaust: The programmatic effort by National Socialists in the German Third Reich to exterminate Jews as a people during the Second World War. Usually dated between 1941 and 1945, this genocide drew on a much longer history of Nazi
anti-Semitism and also extended to other groups, including Roma, political
dissenters, and the physically and mentally disabled.

**Mennonites:** A Christian religious group originating in Europe during the sixteenth-
century Reformation, named after the theologian Menno Simons, and historically
associated with the separation of church and state, lay leadership, and opposition
to military service and sworn oaths. During the Third Reich, there were about
500,000 Mennonites worldwide, living primarily in Eurasia and the Americas.

**Nazism:** A political movement led by Adolf Hitler and founded in southern Germany in
the wake of the First World War. The National Socialist German Workers’ Party,
or Nazi Party, was established in 1920 and ruled in Germany between 1933 and
1945. Nazism as an ideology was characterized by anti-Semitism, anti-
communism, and a Germany first approach.

**Timeline**

**1918:** The First World War formally ends, leaving Germany and its allies defeated.
Paramilitary violence continues across Eastern Europe, spreading extremist
ideologies and affecting Mennonite communities especially in Ukraine

**1919:** Allied victors impose the punitive Treaty of Versailles, assigning war guilt to
Germany and drastically reducing its territory, including areas densely populated
by Mennonites. The German Workers’ Party is formed

**1920:** The German Workers’ Party is renamed the National Socialist Workers’ Party
(NSDAP in German), also known as the Nazi Party; Mennonites begin joining

**1921:** Famine in Ukraine following the Bolshevik Revolution and Russian Civil War
draws international assistance from new aid organizations such as Mennonite
Central Committee, or MCC

**1923:** Hitler’s first attempted revolution, the “Beer Hall Putsch,” fails in Munich. Mass
emigration of Mennonites from the Soviet Union begins

**1925:** The first Mennonite World Conference is held in northern Switzerland, depicted as
a global homecoming to the soil where Anabaptism was “born.” Anti-communism
and nonresistance are discussed

**1926:** In line with rising interest in racial science across Europe and beyond, the first
periodical for Mennonite genealogy is founded in Germany

**1927:** Communist authorities end Mennonite emigration after 20,000 of 100,000
members in the Soviet Union have already left for Canada

**1928:** Stalin introduces his First Five Year Plan, leading to massive collectivization in the
Soviet Union and violent liquidation of wealthy farmers and industrialists known
as “kulaks,” including a high percentage of Mennonites
1929: Over 10,000 Mennonite refugees seek to escape Stalin’s “Revolution from Above,” drawing attention in Germany, including extensive coverage in the Nazi press.

1930: Approximately 4,000 Mennonite refugees are given temporary shelter in Germany—where over 1,000 are examined by racial scientists—before traveling on to Brazil, Paraguay, and Canada.

1933: Hitler comes to power in Germany, now called the Third Reich; Mennonite conferences in Paraguay and northeast Germany send congratulations, praising Nazi nationalism and anti-Bolshevism.

1934: Germany’s largest Mennonite conference revises its statutes, formally abandoning nonresistance and promising obedience to the state; organizers are nevertheless unsuccessful at uniting all German congregations.

1935: The Third Reich introduces military conscription and passes the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws; these themes are both promoted in the propaganda film, *Frisians in Peril*, about Mennonites in the Soviet Union.

1936: Organizers of the Mennonite World Conference in the Netherlands agree to avoid the “political” topic of Nazism to appease German delegates. A small breakout group makes a peace declaration after German delegates leave.

1937: Mennonites in Germany disavow prior affiliations with neo-Hutterite pacifists known as the Rhön Bruderhof, dissolved by the Gestapo. Expelled members move to England with help from Mennonites abroad.

1938: Germany begins expanding as it absorbs Austria and anti-Semitic violence escalates during the infamous Kristallnacht. Extreme anti-Semitic pronouncements become more common among Mennonites in Germany.

1939: The Second World War begins in Europe with the joint invasion of Poland by Germany and the Soviet Union. Mennonites from Poland, Danzig, and Galicia come under Third Reich rule. MCC begins relief work in Germany.

1940: Nazi occupation of the Netherlands brings tens of thousands more Mennonites under German auspices. Racial scholars, including several Mennonites, begin integrating Dutch into histories of Aryan colonization in Eastern Europe.

1941: Simultaneous beginning of the Holocaust and Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. 35,000 Mennonites in Ukraine welcome German occupation. Mobile killing units, some with Mennonite members, carry out genocide across Eastern Europe.

1942: Mennonite Central Committee operations in Germany, France, and occupied Poland end with the entry of the United States into the war; MCC representatives are repatriated to the United States.
1943: Germany’s Eastern Front begins collapsing. German-speaking colonies in Ukraine that have been built up as model colonies—including the Mennonite Molotschna and Chortitza settlements—begin retreating westward with the Wehrmacht and SS.

1944: Mennonite leaders collaborate with Nazi bureaucrats and the SS to resettle nearly all of Ukraine’s Mennonites in the new model province of Wartheland in occupied Poland. They also envision resettlement of Mennonites from overseas.

1945: The Third Reich collapses with the end of the Second World War. Approximately 45,000 Mennonite refugees seek shelter in Denmark and occupied Germany and Austria, fearing deportation to the Soviet Union.

1946: Mennonite Central Committee begins new programs in Europe, including refugee operations. MCC leaders like Peter Dyck begin telling military and UN officials that Mennonites are non-German pacifists who suffered under Nazism.

1947: The first refugee ship after World War II sails for South America with over 2,000 Mennonites on board. Over the following eight years, MCC will help relocate over 15,000 Mennonites to the Americas, most claiming to be non-Germans.

1948: Mennonite World Conference is held in the United States. German delegates express regret at having supported Nazism but claim to have participated in collective “resistance.” International Mennonite aid to Germany redoubles.

1949: West Germany is established with a new Basic Law, including provision for conscientious objectors, the first time such exemption is not based on religious exemption. Peace work begins to emerge among local Mennonites.

**Readings by Topic**

1) General Overviews


Coverage of “Mennonites and the Holocaust” conference by *Anabaptist Historians*, held at Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas on March 16-17, 2018. (https://goo.gl/8nWFYm)

Further Reading:


Ben Goossen, ed. *German Mennonite Sources Database*, Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas, online. (https://goo.gl/5WLc3i )
2) Background: Mennonites and German Nationalism


Further Reading:

3) Mennonites and Nazism in Germany


Further Reading:
Diether Lichdi, Mennoniten im Dritten Reich (Weierhof im Bolanden: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1977).

4) Nazi Visions of Mennonites

Clip from Friesennot (English subtitles) (Ufa, Delta-Filmproduktion, 1935). (https://goo.gl/ss2rdF)

Further Reading:
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Friesennot (full movie) (Ufa, Delta-Filmproduktion, 1935).


5) Neo-Hutterites: The Third Reich’s Only Anabaptist Pacifists


Hans Meyer, “Hans Meier tells how the Gestapo raided the Rhön Bruderhof in 1933 [sic.; it was 1937. -Ed.],” YouTube, online. (https://goo.gl/oc7uzh)

Further Reading:
- James Lichti, “Rhönbruderhof,” MennLex, online. (https://goo.gl/eKz9Q5)

6) Mennonites and Nazism in Canada


Further Reading:

7) Mennonites and Nazism in Latin America

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Further Reading:

8) Mennonites and Nazism in the United States


Further Reading:

9) Mennonites and Nazism in the Netherlands


Further Reading:
10) World War II and the Holocaust: Mennonites as Witnesses and Perpetrators


Further Reading:
Jacob Neufeld, Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life und Communist and Nazi Rule (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

11) World War II and the Holocaust: Mennonites as Victims and Helpers


Further Reading:

12) Postwar Migration, Cover-up, and Denial

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Further Reading:


13) Uncovering the Past: Recent Developments


Further Reading: