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Mennonites and the Holocaust Syllabus

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)” (<https://goo.gl/w7zr9r>) and the “[#StandingRockSyllabus](https://goo.gl/Sjw3gh)” (<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 dissidents, 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

Ben Goossen, "[Mennonites and the Holocaust: An Introduction](https://goo.gl/c4tQVL)," *Anabaptist Historians*, February 7, 2018. (<https://goo.gl/c4tQVL>)

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

Further Reading:

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

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

Mark Jantzen, [“Whoever Will Not Defend His Homeland Should Leave It!’ German Conscription and Prussian Mennonite Emigration to the Great Plains, 1860-1890,”](https://goo.gl/uKNeXc) *Mennonite Life* 58, no. 3 (2003): online. (<https://goo.gl/uKNeXc>)

Karl Koop, [“A Complication for the Mennonite Peace Tradition: Wilhelm Mannhardt’s Defense of Military Service,”](https://goo.gl/8c7p9r) *Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 1 (2016): 28-48. (<https://goo.gl/8c7p9r>)

Further Reading:

Mark Jantzen, *Mennonite German Soldiers: Nation, Religion, and Family in the Prussian East, 1772–1880* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2010).

Wilhelm Mannhardt, *The Military Service Exemption of the Mennonites of Provincial Prussia* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2013).

H.G. Mannhardt, *The Danzig Mennonite Church: Its Origin and History from 1569-1919* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2008).

3) Mennonites and Nazism in Germany

James Regier, [“Mennonitische Vergangenheitsbewältigung: Prussian Mennonites, the Third Reich, and Coming to Terms with a Difficult Past,”](https://goo.gl/R1DBfY) *Mennonite Life* 59, no. 1 (2004): online. (<https://goo.gl/R1DBfY>)

Christiana Duschinsky, [“Mennonite Responses to Nazi Human Rights Abuses: A Family in Prussia/Danzig,”](https://goo.gl/npEXh8) *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 32 (2014): 81-96. (<https://goo.gl/npEXh8>)

Gerhard Rempel, [“Heinrich Hajo Schroeder: The Allure of Race and Space in Hitler’s Empire,”](https://goo.gl/3DM766) *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 29 (2011): 227-254. (<https://goo.gl/3DM766>)

Further Reading:

Marion Kobelt-Groch and Astrid von Schlachta, eds., *Mennoniten in der NS-Zeit: Stimmen, Lebenssituationen, Erfahrungen* (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 2017)

James Irvin Lichti, *Houses on the Sand? Pacifist Denominations in Nazi Germany* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

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

4) Nazi Visions of Mennonites

Ben Goossen, [“Mennonites and the Holocaust: Film Screening of Friesennot,”](https://goo.gl/xm667q) *Anabaptist Historians*, March 17, 2018. (<https://goo.gl/xm667q>)

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

Ben Goossen, [“Measuring Mennonitism: Racial Categorization in Nazi Germany and Beyond,”](https://goo.gl/akga8V) *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 225-246. (<https://goo.gl/akga8V>)

Further Reading:

- Ben Goossen, "[Mennoniten als Volksdeutsche: Die Rolle des Mennonitentums in der nationalsozialistischen Propaganda.](#)" trans. Helmut Foth, *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 71 (2014): 54-70 (<https://goo.gl/vQbhxh>)
- [Friesennot](#) (full movie) (Ufa, Delta-Filmproduktion, 1935).
- John Eicher, "[A Sort of Homecoming: The German Refugee Crisis of 1929.](#)" *German Studies Review* 40, no. 2 (2017): 333-352. (<https://goo.gl/2uKNoX>)

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

- James Lichti, "[The German Mennonite Resopnse to the Dissolution of the Rhoen-Bruderhof.](#)" *Mennonite Life* 46, no. 2 (1991): 10-17. (<https://goo.gl/EKwmGp>)
- Eberhard C. H. Arnold, "[Rhön Bruderhof \(Hessen, Germany\).](#)" *GAMEO*, 1959, online. (<https://goo.gl/UpSAfQ>)
- 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:

- Thomas Nauerth, "[Michael Horsch and the Rhön Bruderhof, 1936–1937: From Friend to Hostile Witness to Historical Eyewitness.](#)" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91, no. 2 (2017): 213-246.
- James Lichti, "[Rhönbruderhof.](#)" *MennLex*, online. (<https://goo.gl/cKz9Q5>)
- Emmy Barth, *No Lasting Home. A Year in the Paraguayan Wilderness* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing, 2014).

6) Mennonites and Nazism in Canada

- Ben Goossen, "[Mennonite Fascism.](#)" *Anabaptist Historians*, April 27, 2017. (<https://goo.gl/Fc2rdP>)
- Tim Nafziger, "[A Window into Antisemitism and Nazism Among Mennonite in North America.](#)" *The Mennonite*, July 30, 2007. (<https://goo.gl/1xNc8t>)
- Benjamin Redekop, "[German Nationalism Among Canadian Mennonites During the Early 1930s.](#)" *Mennonite Historian* 19, no. 3 (1993): 1-2, 9-10. (<https://goo.gl/rMcwVW>)

Further Reading:

- James Urry, "[A Mennostaat for the Mennovolk? Mennonite Immigrant Fantasies in Canada in the 1930s.](#)" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 14 (1996): 65-80. (<https://goo.gl/gVKYPZ>)
- Frank Epp, "[Kanadische Mennoniten, das Dritte Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg.](#)" *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 31 (1974): 91-102. (<https://goo.gl/JbppsW>)
- James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe—Russia—Canada, 1525 to 1980* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 185-228.
- Benjamin Redekop, "[The Canadian Mennonite Response to National Socialism.](#)" *Mennonite Life* 46, no. 2 (1991): 18-24. (<https://goo.gl/UjQ2ZM>)

7) Mennonites and Nazism in Latin America

- John Thiesen, "[The Mennonite Encounter with National socialism in Latin America, 1933-1944.](#)" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 12 (1994): 104-117. (<https://goo.gl/oWmiD1>)

John Thiesen, [“The Mennonite Encounter with National Socialism: The Example of Fernheim,”](#) *Mennonite Life* 46, no. 2 (1991): 4-9. (<https://goo.gl/LUVR1S>)

Further Reading:

John Thiesen, [Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes Among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933–1945](#) (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999).

Uwe Friesen, ed., [“Die völkische Bewegung und der Nationalsozialismus bei den Mennoniten in Paraguay.”](#) *Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay* 18 (2017).

Peter Klassen, [Die deutsch-völkische Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, Chaco-Paraguay \(1933–1945\)](#) (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1990).

8) Mennonites and Nazism in the United States

Jack Fischel, [“An American Christian Response to the Holocaust,”](#) in *Bearing Witness to the Holocaust 1939-1989*, ed. Alan L. Berger (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 127-139. (<https://goo.gl/3ex2ym>)

Rich Preheim, [“White Supremacist’s Racist ‘Faith,’”](#) *Mennonite World Review*, April 28, 2017. (<https://goo.gl/1pZeY5>)

James Juhnke, [“Ingrid Rimland, the Mennonites, and the Demon Doctor,”](#) 60 no. 1 (2005): online. (<https://goo.gl/e1pRD2>)

Further Reading:

John Thiesen, [“The American Mennonite Encounter with National Socialism,”](#) *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 27 (1992): 127–158.

James Juhnke, [A People of Two Kingdoms: The Political Acculturation of the Kansas Mennonites](#) (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1975), 137-140.

Damon Berry, [Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism](#) (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017): 74-101.

9) Mennonites and Nazism in the Netherlands

Clyde H. Farnsworth, [“Canada Revokes Citizenship of Nazi Collaborator,”](#) *New York Times*, November 12, 1991. (<https://goo.gl/uYGR8U>)

Alfred Neufeld, [“How Have We Dealt with Conflict in the Past?”](#) *Mennonite World Conference*, July 2015. (<https://goo.gl/Ufs3Vg>)

Gerlof Homan, [“‘We Have Come to Love Them’: Russian Mennonite Refugees in the Netherlands, 1945-1947,”](#) *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 25 (2011): 39-59. (<https://goo.gl/DbNBs4>)

Further Reading:

Jelle Bosma and Alle Hoekema, eds., [“Doopsgezinden tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog,”](#) *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 41 (2015).

Gerlof Homan, [“‘We Must and Can Stand Firmly’: Dutch Mennonites in World War II,”](#) *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69, no. 1 (1995): 7-36.

Alle Hoekema and Pieter Post, [Frits Kuiper \(1898-1974\): Doopsgezind Theoloog](#) (Hilversum: Verloren, 2016).

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

Gerhard Rempel, "[Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetration.](https://goo.gl/oC5aqb)" *The Mennonite*, March 1, 2012. (<https://goo.gl/oC5aqb>)

Ben Goossen, "[Becoming Aryan.](https://goo.gl/smM6Ry)" *Canadian Mennonite*, June 26, 2016. (<https://goo.gl/smM6Ry>)

Aileen Friesen, "[Soviet Mennonites, the Holocaust & Nazism.](https://goo.gl/9m1p18)" *Anabaptist Historians*, April 25, 2017. (<https://goo.gl/9m1p18>)

Further Reading:

Gerhard Rempel, "[Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetuation.](https://goo.gl/oC5aqb)" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 4 (2010): 507–549.

Doris Bergen, "[Protestant, Catholics, Mennonites and Jews: Identities and Institutions in Holocaust Studies.](https://goo.gl/9m1p18)" in *Holocaust Scholarship: Personal Trajectories and Professional Interpretations*, ed. Christopher Browning, Susannah Heschel, Michael Marrus, and Milton Shain (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 142-156;

Horst Gerlach, "[Mennonites, the Molotschna, and the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle in the Second World War.](https://goo.gl/9m1p18)" trans. John Thiesen *Mennonite Life* 41, no. 3 (1986), 4-9, 32.

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

Goshen College, "[Woman 'Righteous' for Saving Jewish Children.](https://goo.gl/v9SDKP)" *Mennonite World Review*, July 22, 2013. (<https://goo.gl/v9SDKP>)

David P. Boder, "[David P. Boder Interviews Anna Braun.](https://goo.gl/4RnfYM)" September 20, 1946, *Voices of the Holocaust Project*, online. (<https://goo.gl/4RnfYM>)

Gerlof Homan, "[From Danzig to Down Under: A Mennonite-Jewish Family's Escape from the Nazis to Australia.](https://goo.gl/b8ZbSz)" *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* 73, no. 1 (2012): 13-18. (<https://goo.gl/b8ZbSz>)

Further Reading:

Gerlof Homan, "[Friends and Enemies: The World War II Origins of MCC Work in France.](https://goo.gl/b8ZbSz)" *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* 71, no. 2 (2010): 7-14.

Alle G. Hoekema, "[Dutch Mennonites and German Jewish Refugee Children, 1938-1945.](https://goo.gl/b8ZbSz)" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 87, no. 2 (2013): 133-152.

12) Postwar Migration, Cover-up, and Denial

Ben Goossen, "[From Aryanism to Anabaptism: Nazi Race Science and the Language of Mennonite Ethnicity.](https://goo.gl/sTCp5M)" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90, no. 2 (2016): 135-163. (<https://goo.gl/sTCp5M>)

Steven Schroeder, "[Mennonite-Nazi Collaboration and Coming to Terms with the Past: European Mennonites and the MCC, 1945–1950.](#)" *Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 2 (2003): 6-16. (<https://goo.gl/km7HiW>)

Ted Regehr, "[Of Dutch or German Ancestry? Mennonite Refugees, MCC, and the International Refugee Organization.](#)" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (1995): 7-25. (<https://goo.gl/iQLwvE>)

Further Reading:

Horst Klaassen, "[Nationalität: Mennonit? Mennonitische Auswanderungslager in Backnang 1947 bis 1953.](#)" *Mennonitischer Geschichtsblätter* 54 (1997): 89-115.

Frank Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution* (Altona, MB: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1962).

James Urry, "[Fate, Hate and Denial: Ingrid Rimland's Lebensraum!](#)" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73, no. 1 (1999): 107-127.

13) Uncovering the Past: Recent Developments

John Roth, "[Europeans Confront Hard Truths of Nazi Era.](#)" *Mennonite World Review*, October 5, 2015. (<https://goo.gl/RViuy8>)

Ben Goossen, "[Mennonites Seek to Come to Terms with Nazi Collaboration.](#)" *Religion News Service*, March 16, 2017. (<https://goo.gl/qZ9gPu>)

Gordon Houser, Paul Schrag, and Melanie Zuercher, "[Neighbors, killers, enablers, witnesses: Conference looks at the many roles of Mennonites in the Holocaust.](#)" *The Mennonite*, March 19, 2018. (<https://goo.gl/KtTucc>)

Further Reading:

Ben Goossen, "[Ending the Silence.](#)" *Mennonite Historian* 43, no. 4 (2017): 10-12.

John Thiesen, "[Menno in the KZ or Münster Resurrected: Mennonites and National Socialism: Historiography and Open Questions.](#)" in *European Mennonites and the Challenge of Modernity: Contributors, Detractors, and Adapters*, ed. Mark Jantzen, Mary Sprunger, and John Thiesen (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2016), 313-328.

Lisa Schirch, "[How Mennonites Reckon with Our History in the Holocaust.](#)" *The Mennonite*, March 26, 2018. (<https://goo.gl/MBYcVV>)