Mennonites, Nazism, White Supremacy and the Holocaust: A Summary

Mennonite Support for German Nationalism, the Nazi Regime, and anti-Semitism
- Around 120,000 Mennonites, or about one-fourth of the world’s population, lived under Nazi rule. Many Mennonites in Germany, Poland, and Ukraine enthusiastically supported German nationalism.
- Many Mennonites viewed Hitler as a kind of “German savior” and as part of a “divine plan”
- Mennonites in Paraguay and Brazil were openly pro-Nazi during the Third Reich
- Leading Mennonites helped finance the pro-Nazi “German Paper for Canada”
- Herald Publishing House of Newton, Kansas printed the rabidly anti-Semitic Defender, with a monthly circulation reaching 100,000 (See Goosen 2018)

Mennonite Contributions to Nazi Racial Theology
- Mennonite theologians in Germany and The Netherlands advocated for racial theology in which “morals pass through blood” and race mixing was forbidden
- Mennonites saw themselves as part of God’s chosen people. John Roth notes, “The biblical motif of a “called-out people” became an argument for Aryan supremacy; references to the blood of the martyrs fused into the language of racial identity; church festivals and rituals were transformed into celebrations of the German nation.”

Mennonite Contributions to Nazi Racial Science
- From 1930-1932, scientists used Mennonite church records and measured over 1200 Mennonites’ facial features in their attempt to prove that Mennonites were among the purest “Aryans”
- German Mennonite identity was based upon genealogical research in the 1930s to illustrate a “purity of blood and culture,” asserting Mennonites as a distinct ethnic and racial group. (See Roth 2015)
- Mennonites became symbolic of how to maintain German or “Aryan” cultural traditions abroad
- Nazis used racial science to justify the holocaust (See Goossen 2017)

Mennonite Participation in Nazi Leadership
- Mennonites served in a wide variety of positions under the Third Reich, including mayors, governors, guards, police, and bureaucratic staff that oversaw the killing of Jews.
- For example, Mennonites served as guards for the Stutthof concentration camp. One was SS-Unterscharführer Kurt Janzen, who served as Blockführer and leader of the labor detachment. The other, Heinz Löwen, was one of the few guards actually tried after the war. Another likely Mennonite named Schröder was one of 20 SS guards notorious for their brutal treatment of 1,000 Jewish women forced to build dykes and were killed when they tired. (See Rempel 2012)

Mennonite Bystanders during Holocaust
- Letters and interviews with some Mennonites still alive document childhood memories of a long series of trains and wagons going by their Mennonite home, transporting Jews to a nearby concentration camp at Stutthof. “There was no question about what was happening there.” (See Rempel 2012)

Mennonite Economic Benefit from Nazi Persecution of Jews
- Mennonites recall Jews from the Stutthof camp being forced to serve as slave laborers on surrounding farms, including those of Mennonites, and being locked into the stall of the family barn at night.
- A Mennonite builder, Gerhard Epp, not only leased 300 Jewish slave laborers at Stutthof to build a new factory near the camp but also served as a general contractor to the SS to construct buildings on the premises. “It is not much of an exaggeration to say that a Mennonite built the barracks for the first concentration camp on non-German soil.” (See Rempel 2012)
- SS-Scharführer Fritz Friese, the Mennonite owner of the largest estate in the Grenzdorf B area, was a member of the General SS and an even more vicious offender. Friese personally selected the fieldworkers from his camp inmates and worked them so ferociously that he was known as the “Lord of Death and Life.” (See Rempel 2012)
Mennonites in Poland and Russia joined the Nazis in evicting Jews from their homes. Mennonites, including some Mennonite refugees, were given land, homes, furniture, and clothing from Jews who had been forced into ghettos or killed (See Goossen 2017)

Mennonite Participation in Nazi Military Execution of Jews
- Nazi-appointed Mennonite administrators Heinrich Jakob Wiebe, Isaac Johann Reimer, and other Mennonites they hired were in charge of the Zaporozhe region, including the Mennonite community of Chortitza. In this Mennonite area, 44,000 Jews were killed, many gunned down into ditches.
- In 1984, Mennonite Alexander Rempel sent an article he wrote called the “Massacre of Zaporozhia” to the Winnipeg Mennonite Heritage Centre in which he described Mennonite participants as perpetrators, and he charged Mennonite leaders with a conspiracy of silence.
- At least three Mennonite men were part of the executioner police force in Zaporozhia: Ivan Frantsevich Jantsen; Peter Jakovlevich Penner, and Peter Frantsevich Dick. (Rempel 2012)

Mennonites who suffered or opposed the Nazis
- Some Mennonites joined the resistance against the Nazis
- A number of Mennonites were executed or sent to concentration camps for political activities or for possessing Jewish heritage or cognitive disabilities.
- Some Mennonites in the Netherlands and France hid Jews. At Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, there are 40 Dutch Mennonite listed as “Righteous of the Nations” who took risks to hide Jews out of a total of 5000 Dutch listed. This seems to be a smaller proportion than other denominations.

Mennonite Justification, Denial and Cover Up of Mennonite Participation
- MCC helped Mennonite refugees under the deliberate guise to hide Nazi-affiliated Mennonites as pacifist refugees who were not German but of a distinct “Mennonite” race
- Mennonite leaders in the US and Canada knew this history but chose not to address it
- Denial and Justification include the following tactics
  - Emphasizing Mennonites’ own hardships as victims under Stalin
  - Blaming the Allies for their atrocities in WWII
  - Refocusing on Bolshevik atrocities
  - Asserting that Mennonites did not have a choice to support Hitler
  - Outright denial of Mennonite participation in Jewish massacres

Mennonite White Supremacy Leadership in the US and Canada
Some of the 20th century’s leading white supremacists and Holocaust deniers have Mennonite backgrounds.
- Ben Klassen wrote “The White Man’s Bible” and coined the term "racial holy war" after growing up in a Mennonite colony in Ukraine and reading Mein Kampf. He founded the Church of the Creator; a belief system that “whatever benefits white people is good.” (See Preheim 2017)

Implications of Mennonite Role in the Holocaust and White Supremacy
- Mennonite history books and museums leave out this significant departure from pacifism
- The Mennonite belief in adult baptism is challenged by the idea that “morals pass through blood”
- Mennonites need to go through a process of de-Nazification like other churches to address how the ideology of white supremacy impacts racism and antisemitism in the Mennonite church today
- MCC historians have not openly acknowledged their role hiding Nazi-supporting Mennonites
- Mennonites went from participating in the Holocaust to helping Palestinian refugees to denouncing Israeli occupation with no institutional attention to antisemitism and Jewish safety

Citations
- From collaboration to perpetration in The Mennonite, by Gerhard Rempel, s professor emeritus of history at Western New England University. March 1, 2012.
- Europeans confront hard truths of Nazi era in Mennonite World Review by John D. Roth and Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism, Oct 5, 2015
- Mennonite and the Holocaust: An Introduction by Ben Goossen on Anabaptist Historians February 7, 2018