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# Rustic Reich: The Local Meanings of (Trans)National Socialism among Paraguay's Mennonite Colonies

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Among the millions of reichsmark worth of gifts lavished on Hermann Göring and Emmi Sonnenmann at their 11 April 1935 wedding in Berlin was a bag of peanuts from the Fernheim Colony, Paraguay.[1] The colony was composed of about two thousand German-speaking Mennonite refugees.[2] In 1929, they fled Russia for Germany in the face of Stalin's war against the so-called kulak class of farmers. A few months later, the Paraguayan government invited them to settle in Paraguay's northern hinterland, the Gran Chaco, near a group of their co-religionists named the Menno Colony. The Menno Colony was settled by some 1,800 Mennonites who had voluntarily left Russia for Canada in the 1870s, and then departed Canada for the Gran Chaco in 1926 on account of state encroachment on their local culture.[3] A report in the Fernheim Colony's newspaper, *Menno-Blatt,* announced that the newlyweds were "particularly pleased" by the modest gift and that an additional 1,500 kilograms of peanuts were distributed to supporters of the Volksbund für das Deutschtum im Ausland (Peoples' league for Germanness abroad, VDA), which served as the regime's premier overseas cultural organization. VDA's head, Hans

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[1] Samuel W. Mitcham, *The Rise of the Wehrmacht: The German Armed Forces and World War II,* vol. 1 (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 91; Peter Hildebrand, "Über unsere Erdnussendung," *Menno-Blatt* (Filadelfia, Paraguay), Sept. 1935: 4–5.

[2] "Ankunft der 1. harbiner Gruppe," *Menno-Blatt*, May 1932: 6; Levi Mumaw "Relief Notes," *Gospel Herald* (United States), 24 Apr. 1930; John D. Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933–1945* (Kitchener: Pandora, 1999), 76–78.

[3] Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1982), 136 n123.



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Steinacher, was sufficiently impressed by the shipment to pen a letter extolling the colonists' commitment to the German Volk as inspiration for "new work, with double force … [for] the benefit of our great German people."[4]

Two years later, a prominent lecturer at the University of Kiel, Dr. Herbert Wilhelmy, visited the Fernheim and Menno colonies to investigate how closely Latin America's Auslandsdeutsche (Germans abroad) aligned with the global ambitions of Hitler's "New Germany."[5] Wilhelmy was unimpressed by both colonies of Volksdeutsche (ethnic Germans without German citizenship). They certainly did not measure up to the groups of Reichsdeutsche (individuals with German citizenship) that he visited on his ethnographic tour of Paraguay. Wilhelmy saw little difference between the colonies and damned them both as hopelessly religious. Moreover, his detailed report warned that they maintained a "Jewish" culture that was deceitful and embarrassing to the Reich.[6]

How did Mennonite-grown peanuts end up in the mouth of one of Hitler's closest confidants? Why did Wilhelmy look upon Paraguay's Mennonites as degenerate religious fanatics? Why was the Fernheim Colony inspired by the Nazi movement while the neighboring Menno Colony was not? What does a comparative analysis of the colonies tell us about how local sensibilities thwarted (trans)National Socialism in the Latin American context?

I argue that the reason for the colonies' different interpretations of Nazism stems from their specific migration histories—as voluntary migrants and as refugees—and the degree to which the VDA and Nazi "interpreters" successfully translated National Socialism into a local vernacular. Although the Menno and Fernheim Colonies shared a great deal in common—including their culture, language, religion, surnames, and history in Russia—they held widely different interpretations of Nazism. The voluntary migrants of Menno Colony used their local religious cohesion to reject (trans)National Socialism. Their vision of communal unity was an end in itself and had no national or transnational corollary. In contrast, the refugees of Fernheim Colony viewed (trans)National Socialism as a template for communal cohesion. In their view, communal unity was the highest form of *völkisch* unity and Christian cooperation underpinned *völkisch* cooperation.[7] Though the colonies held different interpretations of

[4] Hildebrand, "Über unsere Erdnussendung."

[5] Dr. H[erbert] Wilhelmy, "Bericht über eine [?] mit Unterstützung der Albrecht-Penk-Stiftung—Berlin, der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft und der Hänel-Stiftung—Kiel durch geführten kolonialgeographischen Forschungsreise nach Südamerika," Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin, Germany (hereafter, PA AA), R127972d, 71–79, 73.

[6] Ibid., 77.

[7] It is difficult to find an adequate English corollary for the word *völkisch*, since it was appropriated and manipulated by the Nazi regime. As Egbert Klautke, insists, "All composites that include the German term *Volk* or the adjective *völkisch* are potentially misleading in English translation." Generally speaking, it may be rendered as "nationalist," but in the Nazi era it carries militant and exclusionary overtones. See Klautke's *The Mind of the Nation: Völkerpsychologie in Germany, 1851–1955* (New York: Berghahn 2013), 7.

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Nazi Germany, Germanness, and the *völkisch* movement, each used the concepts to buttress local unity. For their part, Nazi representatives who visited the colonies wished to use the Mennonites to foster the idea of (trans)National Socialism in Latin America but they were ambivalent, if not hostile, toward local realities when they witnessed them first-hand.

By using the phrase "(trans)National Socialism," I draw attention to the Nazi Party's goal of integrating Auslandsdeutsche into the Volksgemeinschaft no matter where they physically resided.[8] During the interwar years, Nazism operated primarily as a nationalist movement in Central Europe that prioritized expanding Germany's national borders on behalf of the Volksgemeinschaft. Yet it also operated as a transnational movement that disregarded borders in its quest to unearth members of the Volksgemeinschaft elsewhere. Thus, the Volksgemeinschaft was located within the territory of an expanding German state, but was also necessarily connected to hundreds of Germans living in non-German territories around the world. The Nazi Party may have argued confidently that its Lebensraum objectives would eventually unite all Germans within a single realm, but its propaganda and appeals to Auslandsdeutsche displayed worries that Germans living abroad might understand themselves to be members of alternative communities in which they were physically embedded. The term (trans)National Socialism emphasizes the value that the Nazi movement placed on incorporating Auslandsdeutsche into a unified German nation, while also revealing the inherent ambiguity of the objective's trans-territorial means.

The means by which Auslandsdeutsche could imagine their membership in the Volksgemeinschaft is indicated by the work of historian Alon Confino. In his study of German collective memory, Confino demonstrates that individuals belonging to imperial Germany's Heimat movement (Heimatlers) interpreted the "nation as a local metaphor" whereby local and national identifications became mutually reinforcing concepts.[9] In particular, he shows how Heimatlers reframed local, communal histories and narratives in order to create a template for interpreting Germany's national history and narrative.[10] Interwar Auslandsdeutsche who aspired for a place in the Volksgemeinschaft could likewise reframe the development of their local or communal histories as a revelation of national solidarity with Nazi Germany. This insight helps explain Hermann Rüdiger's argument in the widely read 1935 *Das Buch vom deutschen Volkstum* (The book of the German *Volk*) that Mennonite colonies that were

[8] Along similar lines, Götz employs the phrase "supranational conceptualization" of Volksgemeinschaft to describe the phenomenon and compares it with national and subnational conceptions. "German-Speaking People and German Heritage: Nazi Germany and the Problem of Volksgemeinschaft," in Krista O'Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy Reagin, eds., *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 58–82.

[9] Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Wurttemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[10] Ibid., 137.

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scattered across the world and maintained their Germanness could "serve as an allegory for the entire fate of Germandom" since they maintained their German language and culture but lacked broader organization.[11] Mennonites were the perfect local, yet transnational, metaphor for the Volk.[12]

As a case study, the Menno and Fernheim Colonies are an entry point for understanding different ways that Nazi Germany, Germanness, and the *völkisch* movement were interpreted by Auslandsdeutsche during the interwar period. Of course, Paraguay's Mennonites, and thousands of other Auslandsdeutsche, are as unique as they are generalizable so this article does not presume to explain the sentiments of Auslandsdeutsche in all places and times between 1933 and 1945. It nevertheless demonstrates that although local narratives may be used to buttress national narratives (à la Confino), national narratives may also be selectively adapted to buttress local narratives or may be rejected out of hand because they deviate from them.

As a disparate group of refugees, the Fernheim colonists held no shared past and no shared narrative. Consequently, they used the postwar narrative of a broken German nation as a symbol of their local struggle for unity. Yet when Nazi emissaries offended the Fernheim Colony's religious sensibilities, Fernheimers asserted that Christian unity was the essence of German unity. The Menno colonists, by contrast, viewed German nationalism in all its forms as a metaphor for worldliness, hubris, and evil. They believed that nationalist narratives were the means by which temporal forces lead God's people, the Mennonites, astray from their path as a community of religious nomads. The nationalism embedded in "Russification," "Canadization," and now "Nazification" were seductions that had to be rejected out of hand. In other words, the Fernheim Colony repurposed a national narrative as a local one while the Menno Colony used their local narrative to reject a national one.

Latin America presents a unique setting for studying the Nazi relationship to Auslandsdeutsche. In the North American context, the regime wrote off German speakers as a lost cause while Eastern Europe's German-speaking population held the real possibility of physical annexation by the Third Reich. Between these poles, Latin America maintained the allure of being "the last free continent" for German cultural and economic expansion, yet was simultaneously impossible for the German state to invade.[13] For all the media attention

[11] Hermann Rüdiger, "Zahl und Verbreitung des deutschen Volkes," in Paul Gauß, ed., *Das Buch vom deutschen Volkstum: Wesen, Lebensraum, Schicksal* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1935), 4.

[12] For more on the German Mennonite relationship to German nationalism, see Benjamin W. Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[13] The quote references historian Stefan Rinke's book of the same name. For an overview of Nazi Germany's interest in Latin American during the Nazi period, see Gerhard Drekonja-Kornat, "Nationalsozialismus und Lateinamerika. Neue Kontroversen," *Wiener Zeitschrift zur Geschichte der Neuzeit* 6, 2 (2006): 109–18.

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paid to the approximately nine thousand Nazis who fled to Latin America after the fall of the Third Reich, disproportionately less attention has been paid to the 1.5 million German-speakers who lived there when the Third Reich existed.[14] Contemporary commentators were certainly fixated on the connections between Nazi Germany and the German-speaking population of Latin America,[15] and President Franklin Roosevelt even speculated that the Nazis could mobilize it as a "fifth column" to serve their bidding.[16] This fantasy never became reality, but historians on both sides of the Atlantic have concentrated much of their attention on the disorganized reality of Nazi political and military activity in Latin America.[17] Particularly notable is Müller's 1997 *Nationalsozialismus in Lateinamerika: Die Auslandsorganisation der NSDAP in Argentinien, Brasilien, Chile und Mexiko, 1931–1945*, which outlines the myriad problems faced by the Nazi government's Auslandsorganisation (Overseas organization) when it tried to promote the Nazification of the region's Reichsdeutsche.[18] Historians Hilton, and Rout and Bratzel, likewise

[14] Allan Hall, "Secret Files Reveal 9,000 Nazi War Criminals Fled to South America after WWII," *Daily Mail*, 19 Mar. 2012, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2117093/Secret-files-reveal-9-000-Nazi-war-criminals-fled-South-America-WWII.html (accessed 18 Apr. 2017); J. M. Batista i Roca, "Nazi Intrigues in Latin America," *Contemporary Review*, 1 Jan. 1941: 308. Dirk Hoerder notes the total number of German immigrants to Latin America from 1816 to immediately after the Second World War totaled about four hundred thousand. This number does not account for descendants of these individuals, which the larger figure likely includes. See his "South America," in Thomas Adam, ed., *Germany and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History, A Multidisciplinary Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Oxford: ABC CLIO, 2005), 24.

[15] See, for example, Batista i Roca, "Nazi Intrigues," 308–15; Carleton Beals, "Swastika over the Andes," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 1 June 1938: 176–86; W. L. Schurz, "The Nazis and Latin America," *Washington Post*, 17 Apr. 1939: 9. Commentators often conflated worries about Nazism in Latin America with Benito Mussolini's idea for a fascist transatlantic Latin alliance. See Genaro Arbaiza, "Are the Americas Safe?" *Current History*, 1 Dec. 1937: 29–34; Carleton Beals, "Black Shirts in Latin America," *Current History*, 1 Nov. 1938: 32–34; "Latin America Called Hotbed of Fascism," *Washington Post*, 28 Nov. 1938: X4. According to historian Max Paul Friedman, "Of the nearly 100 meetings of the joint planning committee of the United States State, Navy, and War Departments in 1939 and 1940, all but six had Latin America at the top of the agenda." Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

[16] Roosevelt broadcast his concern in a fireside chat. See Russell D. Buhite and David W. Levy, eds., *FDR's Fireside Chats* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 192.

[17] Olaf Gaudig and Peter Veit, *Der Widerschein des Nazismus: Das Bild des Nationalsozialismus in der deutschsprachigen Presse Argentiniens, Brasiliens und Chiles 1932–1945* (Berlin: Wissenschaftlicher, 1997); David P. Mowry, *German Clandestine Activities in South America in World War II* (Fort Meade: Office of Archives and History of the National Security Agency and Central Security Service, 1989); Ronald C. Newton, *The "Nazi Menace" in Argentina, 1931–1947* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[18] Jürgen Müller, *Nationalsozialismus in Lateinamerika: Die Auslandsorganisation der NSDAP in Argentinien, Brasilien, Chile und Mexiko, 1931–1945* (Stuttgart: Hanz, 1997). For a discussion of how host states pushed back against the organization's political influence over their German-speaking minorities, see Käte Harms-Baltzer, *Die Nationalisierung der deutschen Einwanderer und ihrer Nachkommen in Brasilien als Problem der deutsch-brasilianischen Beziehungen, 1930–1938* (Berlin: Colloquium, 1970).

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detail the failure of the Nazi's intelligence-gathering Abwehr apparatus in Latin America.[19] The Abwehr's major target was intelligence from the United States, and Friedman, Fox, and Lübken highlight the U.S. government's disproportionate response to the threat, which included interning and deporting 4,058 German-speaking Latin Americans.[20] Other historians, such as Grow and Pommerin, examine Germany's limited trade success in Latin America during the 1930s, but their analyses are likewise grounded at the state level.[21] In the main, historians writing on Nazi influence in Latin America have focused on political, military, and economic concerns and made the nation-state their principal unit of analysis.

There were hundreds of German-speaking enclaves, communities, and family and business networks in Latin America during the interwar years, but much less has been written about how they squared local and cultural understandings of "Germanness" with the Nazi state's conception of the term.[22] To be sure, there are national studies about the complex relationship between host states and their German-speaking minorities during the Nazi era (with an emphasis on urban contexts), but there is a paucity of fine-grained studies on the Nazi movement's effects on local, communal cultures.[23] In the

[19] Stanley Hilton, *Hitler's Secret War in South America 1939–1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Leslie B. Rout Jr. and John F. Bratzel, *The Shadow War: German Espionage and United States Counterespionage in Latin America during World War II* (Frederick: University Publications of America, 1986).

[20] Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 2, 135–66; Stephen Fox, "The Deportation of Latin American Germans, 1941–47: Fresh Legs for Mr. Monroe's Doctrine," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 32 (1997): 117–42; Uwe Lübken, *Bedrohliche Näh: Die USA und die nationalsozialistische Herausforderung in Lateinamerika, 1937–1945* (Stuttgart: Fritz Steiner, 2004).

[21] Reiner Pommerin, *Das Dritte Reich und Lateinamerika: Die deutsche Politik gegenüber Süd- und Mittelamerika 1939–1942* (Dusseldorf: Droste, 1977); Michael Grow, *The Good Neighbor Policy and Authoritarianism in Paraguay: United States Economic Expansion and Great Power Rivalry in Latin America during World War II* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1998).

[22] For German immigrant statistics in Latin America, see Walther L. Bernecker and Thomas Fischer, "Deutsche in Lateinamerika," in Klaus Bade, ed., *Deutsche im Ausland—Fremde in Deutschland, Migration in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1992), 197–200; Hartmut Bickelmann, *Deutsche Überseeauswanderung in der Weimarer Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1980); Albrecht von Gleich, *Germany and Latin America, Memorandum RM-5523-RC* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1968), 5–10; Stefan Rinke, *"Der letzte freie Kontinent": Deutsche Lateinamerikapolitik im Zeichen transnationaler Beziehungen 1918–1933* (Stuttgart: Heinz, 1996), 291–412.

[23] There are too many national-level publications to mention. A good starting point is the list footnoted in H. Glenn Penny, "Latin American Connections: Recent Work on German Interactions with Latin America," *Central European History* 46, 2 (2013): 362–94, 364 n10. See, especially, Hartmut Fröschle's edited collection, *Die Deutschen in Lateinamerika: Schicksal und Leistung* (Basel: Horst Erdmann, 1979). Notable for its breadth and depth on the topic of German-speaking exiles in Latin America during the Nazi period is Patrik von zur Mühlen, *Fluchtziel Lateinamerika: Die deutsche Emigration 1933–1945: Politische Aktivitäten und soziokulturelle Integration* (Bonn: Neue Gesellschaft, 1988). A few local exceptions include Bernd Breunig, *Die Deutsche Rolandwanderung (1932–1938): Soziologische Analyse in historischer, wirtschaftlicher und politischer Sicht, mit einem Geleitwort von Johannes Schauff* (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1983); Jürgen

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Paraguayan context, sociologist Fretz and historian Hoyer investigated the country's German-speaking settlements, but concentrated on the colonies' economic productivity and social acculturation rather than their attachments to Germany.[24] Historians Chesterton and Horst examine Mennonites' relationship to the Paraguayan state insofar as it relates to the Chaco War (1932–1935), and their attitudes toward indigenous groups, but not their relationship to Germany.[25] Mennonite historians, for their part, have described the Fernheim Colony's relationship to Nazism, but their work is concerned more with documentation than analysis.[26]

This present case study intervenes in the historiography of Nazism in Latin America by contrasting how (trans)National Socialism was mediated by two specific, local cultures. As an *idea*, Nazism could represent many things, and the colonies were but two points on a scatter plot of sentiments held by the region's German-speakers. It is not my intent here to exhaustively represent this diversity of sentiments, but rather to show that the unity offered by Nazism and experienced by Latin America's German-speakers could appear clear from afar, but was mercurial up close.

Mennonites were one of many persecuted groups that emerged from Europe's Protestant Reformation and spread across Europe and the Americas between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. In the main, they emphasized the tenants of adult baptism, personal nonviolence, and the separation of church and state. Their different interpretations of scripture and willingness

Buchenau's multigenerational family history, *Tools of Progress: A German Merchant Family in Mexico City, 1865–Present* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004); and Peter Johann Mainka, *Roland und Rolândia Gründungs—und Frühgeschichte einer Deutschen Kolonie in Brasilien (1932–1944/45)* (São Paulo: Cultura Acadêmica/Instituto Maritus-Staden, 2008). In contrast, several local studies are found in the Jewish context. Recent publications include Hans-Ulrich Dillmann and Susanne Heim, *Fluchtpunkt Karibik: Jüdische Emigranten in der Dominikanischen Republik* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2009); Falbel Nachman, "Jewish Agricultural Settlement in Brazil," *Jewish History* 21, 3/4 (2007): 325–40; Allen Wells, *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosua* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[24] Joseph Winfield Fretz, *Immigrant Group Settlement in Paraguay: A Study in the Sociology of Colonization* (North Newton: Bethel College, 1962); Hans Juergen Hoyer, "Germans in Paraguay, 1881–1954: A Study of Cultural and Social Isolation" (PhD diss., American University, 1973).

[25] Bridget María Chesterton, *The Grandchildren of Solano López: Frontier and Nation in Paraguay 1904–1936* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013); René D. Harder Horst, *The Stroessner Regime and Indigenous Resistance in Paraguay* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

[26] The first scholarly treatment of the subject was written by colony historian Gerhard Ratzlaff in 1974. Another colony historian, Peter P. Klassen, claims Ratzalff kept it "under lock and key" because Nazism remained a sensitive subject. Klassen offered the first book-length description in *Die deutsch-völkish Zeit in der Kolonie Fernheim, Chaco, Paraguay, 1943–1945: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der auslandsdeutschen Mennoniten während des Dritten Reiches* (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein e.V., 1990). Thiesen's lucid *Mennonite and Nazi?* provides a well-researched and comparative, if somewhat under-theorized treatment of Mennonite attitudes toward Nazism in Brazil, Mexico, and Paraguay.

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to migrate resulted in numerous schisms. For example, in the 1870s Tsar Alexander II introduced a slate of "Russification" policies—including military service and Russian-language schools—that prompted seventeen of the country's fifty thousand Mennonites to relocate to North America's central plains in Canada and the United States. The rest acquiesced to the Tsar's wishes, but secured caveats granting them alternative military service and private schools. Fifty years later, some of Canada's Mennonites likewise rejected Canadian public schooling requirements. They departed for Paraguay, where they created the Menno Colony. Meanwhile, Soviet oppression of its large, German-speaking minority reached a crescendo in 1929 when Stalin liquidated the country's wealthy peasants. Thousands of Mennonites were swept up in this purge, including about 3,900 who fled to Weimar Germany, where they were interned as refugees.[27] Most of the group proceeded to Paraguay and founded the Fernheim Colony. Though the two colonies were only 10 kilometers apart, they were separated by a historical gap of fifty years and their relationship remained cool over the next two decades. It was during this period that both groups, like hundreds of other German-speaking communities in Latin America, encountered a new type of nationalism, Nazism, through German propaganda and visitors. The latter often expected to find "little Germanies" scattered across the region, but instead found very little of the Germany they had in mind.

Though subsumed under a single word, "Auslandsdeutsche," Germans abroad were extraordinarily heterogeneous in their composition.[28] Latin America's German-speakers were urban and rural, atheistic and religious, working class, middle class, and wealthy, and had emigrated as individuals, families, and groups from different states across the Northern Hemisphere: Austria-Hungary, Canada, Switzerland, the German Confederation's constituent realms, Russia, and Germany itself. Some had lived in Latin America for decades, while others were recent arrivals. Some individuals laid claim to Reichsdeutsche status while others—including the majority of Paraguay's Mennonites—were given the "second-class" designation of Volksdeutsche by the German state, which kept them from belonging to German political parties or freely returning to Germany. Altogether, the region's German-speakers were marked more by division than by unity.

The German government had long hoped to maintain connections to the Auslandsdeutsche despite their diversity. Brazilianist Glen Goodman writes, "Imperial, Weimar and Nazi governments had each imagined … Auslandsdeutsche … variously as cultural and economic footholds in a developing region, as

[27] John Eicher, "A Sort of Homecoming: The German Refugee Crisis of 1929," *German Studies Review* 40, 2 (2017), 333–51.

[28] Penny, "Latin American Connections," 370–71. See also Dirk Hoerder, "The German-Language Diasporas: A Survey, Critique, and Interpretation," *Diaspora* 11, 1 (2002): 7–44, 31–32.

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possible advocates for German interests abroad, or even as founts of a true and uncorrupted ur-Germanness."[29] During the Weimar years, Germany pursued a policy of homeland nationalism, whereby government and quasi-government organizations positioned the German state as the custodian of the world's German-speakers.[30] Organizations such as the Deutsches Ausland Institut (German overseas institute) and the VDA promoted German culture abroad and advanced strident claims that the German state should help all members of the German Volk wherever they lived.[31] In one book, published in conjunction with the Reichswanderungsamtes (Government migration office), the VDA conceded the difficulty of fulfilling this mandate: "In modern German history, there is no period in which the boundaries of nation and state overlapped completely." Despite this handicap, however, the "deepening of a [national] state of consciousness" among Germans abroad could transform Germany into a "world power" and advance its interests on economic, political, and cultural fronts. The VDA argued that an "alertness" of Germany's global connections "forms the spirit and cultural community of all Germans!"[32] Though the German state lacked a military and its borders were circumscribed by hostile powers, the VDA reconceptualized Germany's global influence to include the German-speaking diaspora.[33]

The VDA received a boost under the Nazis when its voluminous cultural and educational materials were used as vectors for overseas propaganda. Latin

[29] Glen Goodman, "The Enduring Politics of German-Brazilian Ethnicity," *German History* 33, 3 (2015): 423–38, 423.

[30] Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 117.

[31] The Deutsches Ausland Institut was primarily a research institute while the VDA worked directly with Auslandsdeutsche. The latter was initially organized as the Deutscher Schulverein (German school association) in 1880 to promote German-language schooling in Austria-Hungary. Renamed the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland (Association for Germanness abroad) in 1908, it expanded its mission after the First World War to supply a growing menu of resources to Auslandsdeutsche. Under the Nazi regime, it was renamed Volksbund für das Deutschtum im Ausland and churned out massive quantities of propaganda that promoted National Socialism and valorized Auslandsdeutsch experiences. For an overview of the Deutsches Ausland Institut and VDA mandates see Grant Grams, *German Emigration to Canada and the Support of Its Deutschtum during the Weimar Republic* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 7–14. See also Nancy R. Reagin, "German Brigadoon? Domesticity and Metropolitan Perceptions of Auslandsdeutschen in Southwest Africa and Eastern Europe," in Krista O'Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy Reagin, eds., *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 253–54.

[32] Friedrich Flierl, "Die Ausbreitung des deutschen Volkes," in Friedrich Wilhelm Mohr and Walter von Hauff, eds., *Deutsche im Ausland—im Auftrage des Reichswanderungsamtes und in Verbindung mit dem Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland* (Breslau, Germany: F. Hirt, 1923), 1, 17.

[33] Rinke reports the wish that "some [German experts] claimed that the German emigrants [to Latin America] could become compensation for the German colonies lost as a result of the Treaty of Versailles." See his "German Migration to Latin America," in Thomas Adam, ed., *Germany and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History, A Multidisciplinary Encyclopedia, Volume 1* (Oxford: ABC CLIO, 2005), 27–31, 28.

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America's Auslandsdeutsche (including about 130,000 who had arrived from Germany between 1919 and 1930) appeared to have great potential owing to its size and the presence of preexisting German networks.[34] Paraguay, especially, saw an increase in German-speakers; according to historian Stefan Rinke, it overtook Chile for third place behind Argentina and Brazil as a destination of choice.[35] Yet the Nazi government quickly learned that there was a disparity between the presence of Germans and a German presence in Latin America.[36]

Historian Dirk Hoerder reports that heterogeneous German-speaking migrants from Central and Eastern Europe carried local assumptions, beliefs, and prejudices with them overseas, and so it is hard to speak of a unified German "community" in any national context in Latin America.[37] Historian Glenn Penny adds, "In places such as Brazil, for example, the 'German' associations were almost all regional, not general—they were not organized across the different Brazilian states, rather within them."[38] The VDA's attempts to guide the continent's Auslandsdeutsche were like herding cats, since local concerns trumped national ones, and the Third Reich's ultimate destination remained unclear.

Regarding German-speaking colonies specifically, Hermann von Freeden, a senior civil servant in the Reichsstelle für das Auswanderungswesen (Government office for emigration) and co-founder of the Rolândia Colony in Brazil, complained in 1933, "Colonization in the northern part of South America can be characterized in a few words. The old German colonies [i.e., Volksdeutsche] of Pomerania in Espirito Santo [Brazil], the colony Tovar in Venezuela, and the old settlements in Peru Oxapampa and Pozuzo stagnate."[39] Continuing south, the report included mixed impressions of state-, railroad-, charity-, and capitalist-sponsored colonies in the Southern Cone, with the latter category receiving the most praise for its economic potential.[40] Freeden's

[34] Gleich, *Germany and Latin America*, 7.
[35] Rinke, "German Migration," 29.
[36] Penny, "Latin American Connections," 368.
[37] Hoerder, "German-Language Diasporas," 31. See also Anne Saint Sauveur-Henn, "Deutsche Einwanderung an den Río de la Plata während des Dritten Reiches und die Polarisierung der deutschen Gemeinschaft in Argentinien," in Holger M. Meding and Georg Ismar, eds., *Argentinien und das Dritte Reich: Mediale und reale Präsenz, Ideologietransfer, Folgewirkungen*, (Berlin: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Berlin, 2008), 57–72, 63.
[38] Penny, "Latin American Connections," 378.
[39] Hermann von Freeden, "Kolonisatorische Erfahrungen aus der Nachkriegszeit," *Archiv für Wanderungswesen und Auslandskunde: Studien und Mitteilungen zur Wanderungsbewegung der Kulturvölker* 4, 4 (1933/1934): 1–12, 1. Freeden's work on behalf of the Rolândia Colony was carried out under the auspices of the Gesellschaft für Wirtschaftliche Studien in Übersee (Society for economic studies overseas), which was the central institution for coordinating German immigration to Latin American. See Pedro Moreira, "Juden aus dem deutschsprachigen Kulturraum in Brasilien: Ein Überblick," in Elke-Vera Kotowaski, ed., *Das Kulturerbe deutschsprachiger Juden Eine Spurensuche in den Ursprungs-, Transit- und Emigrationsländern* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2015), 426; Rinke, "German Migration," 28.
[40] Freeden, *Kolonisatorische Erfahrungen*, 7.

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first-hand experience settling landless Germans predisposed him to favor group settlements with direct connections to Germany. In a subsequent publication that struck a more political tone, he concluded, "Spontaneous settlement, a settlement without organic connections to the mother country, its people and its national needs, is a loss and a waste of national resources."[41] Though both Mennonite colonies were group settlements, by Freeden's criteria the Menno Colony was an "amateur colony," the Fernheim Colony was a "charity colony," and neither possessed "organic connections" to Germany.

The VDA's first contact with the Fernheim colonists occurred in 1929 after the refugees escaped the Soviet Union for Germany. In conjunction with the relief organization Brüder in Not, the VDA provided them with food, clothing, and other supplies.[42] Now the VDA looked on the colony in the heart of South America as a strategic agrarian connection to the "homeland."[43] To colonists, the VDA's well-oiled propaganda machine was inspiring. The Third Reich represented a global community of peers that they were invited to join. With all of the power and gravitas of a major world power, the Nazi state took the geopolitical threat of global communism seriously and appeared to defend its members no matter where they resided.

The VDA's pro-Auslandsdeutsche, anti-communist sentiments were obviously attractive to the Fernheim Mennonites, but the Nazi movement's appeal went deeper still. The Fernheim colonists' history in Tsarist Russia predisposed them to view Hitler the Führer as a kind of national sovereign for the German people. Upon their baptism in Tsarist Russia, many colonists would have recited the words, "We experience the great emotion and sacred obligation of gratitude that unites us with our dear Russian fatherland … [so] we should pray both in our public services and in our private chambers for our fatherland and our emperor."[44] Added to this, historian John Thiesen writes, "The [Russian] anti-German nationalist agitation beginning in the 1890s, the expropriation laws and anti-German hysteria of World War I, and the continuing anti-German prejudice surviving even the Bolshevik Revolution all drove the

[41] Freeden, "Über die Möglichkeiten der Kolonisation für die Weisse Rasse in der Tropischen Zone," in *Comptes rendus du Congrès International de Geographie Amsterdam* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1938): 111–21, 118.

[42] Colin Neufeldt, "The Flight to Moscow, 1929," *Preservings* 19 (Dec. 2001): 35–47; Grams, *German Emigration*, 287.

[43] Grams, *German Emigration*, 287.

[44] The commentary was written by David H. Epp, a Mennonite preacher, historian, editor of the newspaper *Botschafter*, and chairman of the Russian Commission for Church Affairs. See "*Kurze Erklärungen und Erläuterungen zum Katechismus der christlichen, taufgesinnten Gemeinden, so Mennoniten genannt werden*," Al Reimer, trans. (Odessa: A. Schultze, 1897; 2d ed., Klaterinoslav: D. H. Epp, 1899; Canadian repr. of 1899 ed., Rosthern: Dietrich Epp Verlag, 1941), 176–79. Quoted in James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe-Russia-Canada 1525–1980* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 108.

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Mennonites together with others who were classified as Germans."[45] The colonists' Russian patriotism was extinguished with the flames of the First World War but they retained the ability to imagine themselves belonging to a homeland governed by a Christian ruler. It is therefore no surprise that Hitler made an appealing focal point of strength and leadership. On a practical level, German-speaking communities across Latin America "instrumentalized" the term Auslandsdeutsche during the interwar years to serve local purposes and secure a range of economic and cultural privileges from Germany.[46] Fernheim Mennonites were enamored of Nazi Germany less because they wished to persecute Jews or foment a fifth column, and more because Nazi Germany appeared to have a benevolent and benign interest in them.

It was likely due to such sentiments that the Fernheim Colony's leadership committee, the Kommission für kirchliche Angelegenheiten (Commission for church affairs), sent a congratulatory letter to the Nazi regime in 1933. Serendipitously, it appeared that Germany had "discovered" its true direction—its mission as a nation—at the same time the Fernheim Colony was trying to discern its own mission in Paraguay. The letter states, "We German Mennonites of the Paraguayan Chaco follow the events in our dear motherland and experience in spirit the national awakening of the German people. We are pleased that after a long time a German government stands at the head of the nation, freely and openly professing God as the ruler of the world, which can lead our enslaved and battered people to new heights.[47] It went on to praise the new government's stance against communism and criticize the Weimar government's tolerance of this "ruinous" ideology. Fernheim's administrators viewed Nazi anti-communism as a "mighty deed," and as a result felt "most closely associated with [it]." The letter concluded by declaring the colony's "loyalty to the German people, to which we belong."[48]

Their position resonates with other German-speaking enclaves, communities, and regions, particularly those in Eastern Europe that were threatened with postwar nationalizing policies, but the Fernheim Colony was especially adamant in their support of the Nazis owing to their history as refugees. Importantly, the government the colonists thanked in 1933 was not the government that had helped them to escape from the Soviet Union in 1929. The letter's wording

[45] Thiesen, "The Mennonite Encounter with National Socialism in Latin America, 1933–1944," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 12 (1994): 104–17, 112. Mennonites vacillated between identifying themselves as Dutch or German to Russian authorities depending on their audience and situation. See Abraham Friesen, *In Defense of Privilege: Russian Mennonites and the State before and during World War I* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2006), 191–267. He also notes "The Mennonite addiction to autocratic rule was a long-standing one" (p. 201).

[46] Penny, "Latin American Connections," 376. Penny bases this observation on Hoerder, "German-Language Diasporas."

[47] "Die Mennonitensiedlungen des paraguayischen Chaco und die nationale Erhebung in Deutschland," *Menno-Blatt*, June 1933: 2.

[48] Ibid.

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suggests that the colonists saw greater continuity between the Nazi regime and nationalist organizations during Weimar era rather than between the Nazi government and the Weimar government. Although the money and logistics that saved them had come from Weimar, their perception of Germany was formed by organizations such as the VDA that broadcasted an anti-Weimar narrative.

The Menno colonists' sojourns in Russia and Canada, though, predisposed them to view Nazi Germany with indifference, if not suspicion. Although they could claim a Volksdeutsche identification owing to their cultural, physical, and linguistic characteristics, they did not laud Hitler's bourgeoning dictatorship or lament the passing of either the Weimar democracy or the Wilhelmine monarchy. In fact, the colony's leaders had little interest in any forms of modern governance so long as they provided a modicum of security and did not infringe on their local governance. They imagined the colony as a living extension of the early, nomadic Christian church. This "theology of migration" was not especially concerned with the church's geographical location or movement to, or from, a real or imagined homeland. The act of migrating was how God's people renewed their faith across time and space toward the "Promised Land" of heaven.[49] Concerning Paraguay—and by extension Canada, Russia, and Germany—anthropologist Calvin Redekop writes that the Menno Colony "chose the Chaco, not as the *summum bonum*, but as one of the best options for achieving their objectives—namely, avoiding further internal corruption from contact with a society that was imposing its values on them."[50] What was important was the journey, not the territory. To this end, Menno Colony leaders idealized an early modern form of government (i.e., subjecthood) wherever it could be obtained, instead of the representative or *völkisch* citizenship offered by modern nation-states. For example, the colony's Mennonites became British subjects in the 1870s to claim title to their Canadian lands. Yet by the 1920s, Canadian citizenship entailed more than simply plowing the prairie; it required rights and responsibilities such as voting, military service, and public schooling that were inimical to their insular communities.[51] This induced them to migrate to Paraguay under a set of guarantees (Law 514) that ensured their autonomy. The colonists were willing to grow the state's territory but unwilling to grow its nation. They had land and autonomy in Paraguay, so what could a nationalist German government offer that they did not already possess? On both local and transnational levels, then, Menno Colony members found Hitler's promise of a "New Germany" un-compelling.

[49] Titus F. Guenther, "Theology of Migration: The Ältesten Reflect," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 164–76, 173.

[50] Calvin Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors: Mennonite and Indigenous Relations in the Paraguayan Chaco* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1980), 90.

[51] Adolf Ens describes conservative Mennonites' relationship with Canadian authorities, in *Subject or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870–1925* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994).

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Other German-speaking settlements and communities had their own interpretations of the German nation-state. In Mexico, Austrian and Swiss nationals, as well as other groups of Mennonites from Canada, paralleled the Menno Colony in their indifference to Germany, Nazi or otherwise.[52] Business-minded Germans sensed the potential for increased trade with the homeland under the Nazis but they were wary of its aggressive geopolitics. In urban centers, exiled artists and intellectuals attacked Nazi Germany as a corruption of Germanness and established a network of anti-fascist groups.[53] Latin America's bourgeois German communities, though, were staid in their political preferences and romanticized the Kaiserreich. The Weimar and Nazi governments alienated them in equal measure. New arrivals of young and relatively poor war veterans supported the "New Germany's" aggressive geopolitics and of course the regime alienated German-speaking Jews everywhere. Such varied impressions of the German nation-state were found across Latin America, from Mexico to Chile.[54] In each situation, national interpretations bent to local or communal ones, even if state authorities convinced themselves that they were in agreement.

What most concerned Fernheim colonists was to validate that they were not a meaningless collection of refugees from the Soviet Union, but instead possessed a mandate as a German-Mennonite outpost in the Gran Chaco. Yet this narrative needed an interpreter, someone who could coherently weave together the colonists' religious history and the National Socialist narrative of a redeemed German homeland. The individual who initiated this undertaking was Fernheim schoolteacher Friedrich Kliewer. Born in 1905, Kliewer was a Mennonite who grew up as part of the German-speaking minority in Deutsch-Wymysle, Russia (now Nowe Wymyśle, Poland). Before voluntarily accompanying the Fernheim refugees to Paraguay in 1930, he absorbed a German nationalist teaching philosophy during a four-year term at a German teacher-training school in Łódź.[55] Once in Paraguay, he oversaw the colony's schools and was a frequent contributor to the colony newspaper, *Menno-Blatt*. He also

[52] See Buchenau, *Tools of Progress*, 119–21; Royden Loewen. *Village among Nations: "Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916–2006* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

[53] On political movements among German exiles in Latin America, see Mühlen, *Fluchtziel Lateinamerika*, 110–35.

[54] Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 14–22; Hoerder, "German-Language Diasporas," 27–28; Penny, "Latin American Connections," 371; A case study of Auslandsdeutsche clashes in the Argentine context is found in Sauveur-Henn, "Deutsche Einwanderung."

[55] Robert Foth, "Deutsch-Wymysle (Poland)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Deutsch-Wymysle_(Masovian_Voivodeship,_Poland) (last modified 14 Sept. 2014; accessed 15 Apr. 2017); Jakob Warkentin, "Kliewer, Frederich," *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay*, Gerhard Ratzlaff et al., eds. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 244–24; Kurt Daniel Stahl, "Zwischen Volkstumspflege, Nationalsozialismus und Mennonitentum, unveröffentlichte wissenschaftliche" (Jena: Wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit zur Ersten Staatsprüfung für das Lehramt an Gymnasien im Fach Geschichte, Universität Jena, 2007), 35.

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formed a youth group, the Jugendbund, and established a newspaper, *Kämpfende Jugend* (Fighting youth), that aimed to enlighten the colony's young people about their ties to the "New Germany."

Kliewer and the colony's *völkisch* supporters found a youth group appealing because it provided an entry point into National Socialism. The group's work revolved around weekly village-level meetings that included organized hikes, bonfires, and field trips.[56] The first meeting of each month concerned Bible devotions; the second, Mennonite history (likely in the context of German history); the third focused on the "development of Germany in the past and in the present"; and the fourth highlighted good manners and music. When there were five weeks in a month, the last meeting was devoted to learning German folksongs.[57] The goal was not to create little storm troopers to defend the Nazi state, but rather to adapt a national narrative to suit the colony's nascent local story. Thus, the Jugendbund was more interested in the *völkisch* cause for local, cultural, reasons than in the Nazi Party's legislative, racial, or military imperatives. Kliewer earnestly hoped that the Fernheim Colony, and especially its youths, would embrace their national identity and thereby achieve local solidarity as a German outpost in Latin America while strengthening their ties to Germany. By the end of 1933, the group claimed 350 participants from thirteen of the colony's seventeen villages.[58]

The entire colony recognized the Bible as the definitive source of guidance, so the Jugendbund had to make theological sense to the colonists and their leaders. It did so by arguing in the pages of *Kämpfende Jugend* that Mennonite youths' greatest earthly calling was to participate in the German nation and maintain a spiritual battle against evil. *Kämpfende Jugend* rhetorically circumvented criticism of its bellicose title through a proof texted verse, 1 Timothy 6:12, on its masthead which states, "Fight the good fight of the faith," even though the verse immediate prior to this calls Christians to a life of "love" and "gentleness."[59] Kliewer argued that the paper inspired youth to fight against their individualistic pride, "'for Christ and our German Mennonite people,' that is our slogan!"[60] *Menno-Blatt* editor Nikolai Siemens likewise deemed the paradoxical title appropriate because the youth would battle "for nonviolence as defined by Jesus Christ."[61] Schoolteacher and Jugendbund

[56] These activities are not unlike those of the Bündische Jugend that existed under the Weimar Republic, but Kliewer's agenda was decidedly *völkisch*.

[57] It is important to note that they did not focus on Mennonite, Christian, Russian, or Paraguayan songs, but rather the songs of their imagined national homeland. Friedrich Kliewer, "Mennonite Young People's Work in the Paraguayan Chaco," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 11, 2 (1937): 119–30, 127–28.

[58] Ibid., 125.

[59] English Standard Version.

[60] Frederich Kliewer, "In eigener Sache," *Kämpfende Jugend* (Filadelfia, Paraguay), July 1934: 2.

[61] Nikolai Siemens, "Kämpfende Jugend," *Kämpfende Jugend*, July 1934: 1.

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secretary Julius Legiehn supported the paper's *völkisch* stance by arguing that the Bible's unfolding narrative of Christian peoplehood was unfurling before their eyes as German peoplehood. He circuitously tied the "wonderful diversity" of clans, nations, and languages expressed in Genesis 10:4-5 to Mennonites and other present-day Germans discovering their national "ennoblement."[62] Kliewer's Jugendbund and *Kämpfende Jugend* successfully introduced Nazi ideas to the colony because he did not violate the colony's local religious culture and instead rhetorically made *völkisch* pride the epitome of Mennoniteness.

On 5 August 1934, Kliewer left the Fernheim Colony for Germany to pursue a doctorate degree at the University of Marburg.[63] The trip, his tuition, and the finding of a substitute teacher were sponsored by the VDA.[64] His successor, Peter Hildebrand, had been trained as a teacher in a Russian-Mennonite community before fleeing to Harbin, China in 1930, where he taught German-speaking refugees. He later moved to Germany and became associated with the Nazis' Sturmabteilung and various nationalist organizations.[65] Hildebrand did not experience the difficult early years of settlement and did not try to appease the colony's religious sensibilities as Kliewer had done. He could not translate Nazism into a vernacular the colonists understood and continue to promote local unity. Hildebrand ushered in more controversy than cooperation, which made colonists suspicious of his *völkisch* credentials.

Hildebrand was more openly nationalistic than his predecessor and more knowledgeable about the Nazi Party's political goals. In July of 1934, he gave an address about the Nazi government to an assembly of colony members in its administrative center of Filadelfia. Titled "Deutschland während der nationalsozialistischen Regierung und das Interesse für das Auslanddeutschtum" ("Germany under the Nazi Government and the interest for Germans abroad") it focused on Germany's economic recovery, its education system, the "Jewish Question," and Hitler as a person and a leader.[66] In addition to this news, Hildebrand brought 800 reichsmark donated by the VDA and much "equipment of great value," including 1,800 books, medicine, land survey tools, sawmill and printing press parts, and musical instruments. Importantly, the colony received copies of the textbook *Lehrplan der reichsdeutschen Grundschule* (Curriculum of the German elementary school), which painted

[62] Julius Legiehn, "Unser Jugendbund," *Menno-Blatt*, Aug. 1934: 3–4.
[63] His dissertation was titled *Die deutsche Volksgruppe in Paraguay: Eine siedlungsgeschichtliche, volkskundliche und volkspolitische Untersuchung*. See Warkentin, "Kliewer," 244–45.
[64] Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?*, 85.
[65] Ibid., 85; Warkentin, "Hildebrand, Peter," in Gerhard Ratzlaff et al., eds., *Lexikon der Mennoniten in Paraguay* (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay, 2009), 203–4.
[66] "Zum Tierschutzmann," *Menno-Blatt*, July 1934: 2, 5; "Auszüge," *Menno-Blatt*, July 1934: 5.

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subjects such as geography and history in a patently *völkisch* hue.[67] The shipment seemed to have something for everyone, including an elevator for "one of our legless citizens, Peter Esau."[68] In this way, the VDA gained valuable publicity as an organization that cared for colonists' specific, local needs. Hildebrand quickly took up teaching at the colony's secondary school in the village of Schönwiese and he was pleased to hear the students greet him with "Heil Hitler."[69] It was an auspicious beginning.

Beyond Kliewer's promotion of Nazi Germany and Hildebrand's encouragements to embrace Nazism, there were other reasons why Fernheim Colony members were inspired by the notion that their true homeland lay in Central Europe. For one, Mennonite colonies were in the middle of a war zone. Between 1929 and 1932, Bolivia and Paraguay careened toward conflict over their Chaco border. Bolivian officials were alarmed by Mennonite immigration to the region, while rumors spread through the Paraguayan press that "German-speaking officers" from the Menno Colony were leading Bolivian patrols.[70] The rumors were unfounded, but the Mennonites' presence exacerbated a tense situation, which boiled over into war in 1932.

Much of the initial fighting was centered immediately south of the Mennonites.[71] One Bolivian biplane—perhaps confusing Filadelfia for a Paraguayan encampment—strafed the town's main street.[72] A few days later, the Paraguayan government threatened to evacuate the colonies.[73] For Fernheim Colony, this invoked a specter of violence that seemed to follow them across the world. Editor Siemens stated, "Before the mind's eye serious images appeared" of desolate Russian villages and endless refugee trains.[74] Paraguay repulsed the Bolivian advance but Paraguayan leaders now looked on the

[67] Stahl, "Zwischen Volkstumspflege," 36.

[68] "Verschiedenes," *Menno-Blatt*, June 1934: 6.

[69] Hildebrand, *Odyssee wider Willen: Das Schicksal eines Auslandsdeutschen* (Oldenburg, Germany: Heinz Holzberg Verlag, 1984), 183.

[70] The rumors were likely aroused by the knowledge that an ex-German general named Hans Kundt led the Bolivian armed forces. See Bülow, "Bericht Nr. 37. Inhalt: Paraguayisch-bolivianischer Grenzstreit," 18 Feb. 1929, 3, PA AA R78859. For more on Kundt, see Bruce W. Farcau, *The Chaco War: Bolivia and Paraguay, 1932–1935* (London: Praeger, 1996).

[71] Matthew Hughes, "Logistics and the Chaco War: Bolivia versus Paraguay, 1932–1935," *Journal of Military History* 69, 2 (2005): 411–37, 420–21.

[72] Nikolai Siemens, "Gewitterwolk am politischen horizont," *Menno-Blatt*, Aug. 1932: 1–2; The German Foreign Office in Berlin kept a close watch on these developments. See Bülow, "Bericht Nr. 194 Inhalt: Paraguayisch-bolivianischer Grenzstreit," 6 Aug. 1932, PA AA, R78861; Ernst Kundt, "Aufzeichnung, betreffend den Chaco-Konflikt zwischen Bolivien und Paraguay und die mennonitischen Kolonien im Chaco," 4 Aug. 1932, PA AA, R127502.

[73] Alejandro Quesada, *The Chaco War 1932–95: South America's Greatest War* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2011).

[74] Siemens, "Gewitterwolk." In another article, Siemens drew on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1787 poem the *Sorcerer's Apprentice* ("From the spirits that I summoned, deliver me!") to provide a poetic understanding of a nation's endless quest for military glory and its unintended consequences on civilian populations. See Siemens, "Krieg und Kriegsopfer," *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), Oct. 1932: 3.

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colonies as a critical link in their supply chain from the Paraguayan River to the front. Similar in some respects to Nazi visitors that would later tour the colonies, the Paraguayan leadership viewed both colonies as a single unit that might be amenable to participating in a nation-building enterprise. Yet the colonies responded differently to Paraguay's plans. While the Menno Colony initially equivocated and eventually supplied limited aid, Fernheim colonists committed to ongoing cooperation.[75] Paraguay emerged victorious, but the war cost the lives of some ninety to a hundred thousand combatants, disrupted the lives of the region's indigenous population, and kept the Mennonites guessing about their security.[76]

The Fernheim Colonists were also stymied by their unimproved land, which was both unfamiliar to them and located hundreds of miles from potential markets. They learned from Menno colonists who had already experimented with new crops, but they found their efforts thwarted by disease, drought, and a dearth of knowledge. From the outset, they were less prepared for farm work than Menno Colony members since their number included many professionals and educators.[77] Some families lacked a father and were dependent on child labor and the community's goodwill. Living in poorly sealed tents with a meager diet and scarce water supplies, colonists were beset by malnutrition and disease upon arrival. From the village of Schoenbrunn, typhoid fever claimed thirty-two people out of 127 within a few months.[78] During the summer, temperatures exceeded 110 degrees Fahrenheit and winter temperatures fell below freezing.[79] Drought and grasshoppers demolished the colony's yields in 1935. By 1936, the drought was so bad that the Paraguayan River was practically unnavigable.[80] Unlike the Menno colonists, they had not prepared themselves to overcome the challenge of the Chaco. Their situation was thrust upon them. Fernheim colonists increasingly believed that the Chaco was not meant for European settlement and they idealized Germany as a land that had saved them from Bolshevik tyranny and now showered them with gifts. Most importantly, Germany held the promise that they were not refugees but national brethren. Within five years, a plurality of the

[75] Gerhard Ratzlaff, *Zwischen den Fronten: Mennoniten und andere evangelische Christen im Chacokrieg, 1932–1935* (Asunción: Gerhard Ratzlaff, 2009), 41.

[76] Hughes, "Logistics," 412.

[77] Peter Rahn, "Was fehlt uns?—und wie kann uns geholfen werden?" *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), May 1931: 3–4.

[78] Wilhelm Klassen, "Painful Paths," in *The Schoenbrunn Chronicles*, Agnes Balzer and Liselotte Dueck, compilers, Henry and Esther Regehr, trans. (Waterloo: Sweetwater Books, 2009), 34; Johann Regehr, "Death in Schoenbrunn," in *The Schoenbrunn Chronicles*, Agnes Balzer and Liselotte Dueck, compilers, Henry and Esther Regehr, trans. (Waterloo: Sweetwater Books, 2009), 39.

[79] Nikolai Siemens, "Muss es im Chaco immer heiß sein?" *Menno-Blatt* (Fernheim, Paraguay), July 1931: 3–4.

[80] Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?*, 111.

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Fernheim Colony would submit a petition to the German government stating their desire to relocate to Germany.[81]

Ten kilometers away, the Menno Colony interpreted the VDA's growing interest in the colonies as a threat to their local leadership due to their dealings with the Russian and Canadian governments. They possessed a clear sense of their mission in Paraguay, but lacked an interpreter such as Kliewer. Had they wished, the colony's leadership could have used the Nazi movement as a transnational legitimation of their authority and Germany as a lucrative destination for their agricultural products. However, they saw within Nazi propaganda and the VDA's "free" school materials a new manifestation of an old threat to graft foreign identifications onto their collective narrative and educate their youth along nationalistic lines. In the 1870s, some the Menno Colony's ancestors had temporarily accepted taxpayer money from the Manitoba government to convert their private schools to public status,[82] but when Mennonites recognized the strings attached to the "free" money—such as teaching licenses and provincial examinations—their enthusiasm had cooled. Within two years, the number of public schools in Mennonite districts dropped to twenty-two and by 1883 there were only seven.[83] They had no desire for civic involvement as long as civic privileges required civic responsibilities. Presented with another Faustian bargain, the Menno Colony remained committed to their rudimentary and religious school materials.

Hildebrand was not satisfied with simply filling Kliewer's shoes or bringing VDA resources to Paraguay. He wanted to prove the settlers' economic and political allegiance to Germany, even at the expense of ignoring their religious convictions, which were their point of entry into the *völkisch* movement and their only other point of solidarity. A shipment of peanuts and its propaganda potential presented an ideal opportunity. Though *Menno-Blatt* does not detail how the shipment was assembled, it made for a distinct and nonperishable gift to the colony's German benefactors. Most of the peanuts were distributed to the more than 5,500 VDA-sponsored school groups in Germany as a sign of goodwill between the Fernheim Colony and the "homeland."[84] The German press gave the gesture considerable publicity, which resulted in a flood of letters to the colony. According to Hildebrand, one "enthusiastic" Hitlerjugend member wrote, "We love you because you have also sent peanuts to our

[81] Signatories requested German citizenship, promised to fit themselves into the German National State, and to "do our duty unto the utmost for the German Fatherland" since "the ten colonial years and the conditions in this country have persuaded us that we will never find a homeland here." The number of signatories was upward of 240 families. See "Application of Russian-German Colonists of the Colony Fernheim for Citizenship," 26 May 1940, quoted in translation in Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *From the Files of MCC* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1980), 56.

[82] Ens, *Subject or Citizens?*, 62–63; E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1955), 162.

[83] Ens, *Subject or Citizens?*, 63–64.

[84] Hildebrand, "Über unsere Erdnussendung."

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leader."[85] Delicious and exotic peanuts carried the flavor of empire, since most of the world's peanuts were produced in the United States and the British Empire. The idea of a "German" agricultural stronghold in the heart of South America therefore had both a culinary and geopolitical appeal. Yet the gift was more than a suggestion that Germany and the colony could mutually benefit from each other. As humble as it was, the VDA's acceptance of the peanuts validated the Fernheim colonists as real Germans and as collaborators in an emerging story of transnational German solidarity.

The disruption caused by Kliewer's departure and Hildebrand's arrival led Fernheim's leaders to reevaluate the changes that had been brought to bear on the colony's young people. Like the Manitoba government that had upset the Menno Colonists in the 1870s, the VDA believed that nationalism began in the schoolhouse.[86] According to one VDA press release, "Whoever has the youth, has the future; and he who has the schools, has the youth."[87] Hildebrand was the colony's secondary school teacher and had a strong influence on the Jugendbund and *Kämpfende Jugend*. The constellation of activities under Hildebrand's leadership provided youth with an alternative group identification to the church and created a "power center" that existed outside the colony's civil, economic, and religious realms. Thiesen observes that "competition among such social institutions for public influence has been a prominent theme in Russian Mennonite history" and Hildebrand was a new interloper.[88] Despite his Mennonite background, Hildebrand was not of the colony and was therefore likely treated with more suspicion than Kliewer had been.

Suspicion of the Jugendbund's popularity under Hildebrand's leadership, though not its *völkisch* inclinations, gained momentum throughout 1935. Parents appreciated the group's structured activities that promoted family values, but were wary of its militant overtones, which seemed to disregard Mennonite nonviolence. One January 1935 *Menno-Blatt* article written by a colonist obliquely mentioned the group's militant drift, but failed to explore its repercussions.[89] Minutes from a Kommission meeting in Filadelfia on 8 May 1935 picked up this theme by stating that the new movement portended the "risk of fragmentation in the family, community, and colony," and revealed that at least one leader found it to be "thoroughly unhealthy" for the youth and the colony.[90] Yet like

[85] Ibid.

[86] This idea was one of the VDA's founding tenets. See Jonathan Kwan, "Transylvanian Saxon Politics, Hungarian State Building and the Case of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein (1881–82)," *English Historical Review* 127, 526 (2012): 592–624, 604.

[87] "VDA Pressemitteilungen Dezember 1932," *Der VDA und die deutsche-amerikanische Press*, 5, quoted in Grams, *German Emigration*, 13.

[88] Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?*, 85.

[89] A. Braun, "Eltern hört!," *Menno-Blatt*, Jan. 1935: 2–3.

[90] "Protokoll einer KFK-Sitzung am 8. Mai 1935 in Philadelphia," Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno Pacific University, Fresno, California, quoted in P. Klassen, *Die deutsch-völkisch*, 35; and Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?*, 92.

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many Germans in Germany, the Kommission believed that Hitler stood above the fray of politics. It was the "little Hitlers" such as Hildebrand, who were to blame for National Socialism's ills.[91] In this way, the purity of the ideal remained intact despite its disordered reality. The Kommission admired Hitler and did not have a problem with Nazism so long as it worked to unify the colony, but they were wary that it threatened division. In their view, communal unity was the highest form of German patriotism, notwithstanding the opinions of Hildebrand or the VDA.

Despite all of his efforts to unite the colony under a Nazi banner, Hildebrand was terminated from his position at the end of 1935. The action was provoked by parents who were furious that one of the school's pupils had stabbed another student and had threatened several more. They called on the Kommission to look into the issue and review the school's curriculum, including its VDA-supplied reading materials. Hildebrand quickly saw the writing on the wall and resigned from his teaching position before he was dismissed.[92] The formal reasons for his dismissal, had it been carried out, were to include charges that he did not believe in Christ, did not regularly attend church services, and had spoken disparagingly about the Mennonite faith. The Kommission also accused him of arrogance, un-collegial behavior, and mockery.[93] The situation indicates that Nazism did not sit well with Fernheim's leaders and parents, not because Hitler or the *völkisch* movement were irreligious, but because some of their representatives were.

In their explanation, the colony's elected leaders reasoned that they did not dismiss Hildebrand because he was too influenced by Nazism, but because he did not exhibit enough *Volkstum* (national consciousness).[94] Writing to a Mennonite benefactor in Germany, they accused Hildebrand of working against colony unity by reporting to authorities in Berlin and the German envoy in Asunción that some of Fernheim's prominent members were anti-German. They argued that his defamation of Fernheim individuals would not be tolerated by a colony of Mennonites who held their Germanness in the highest regard. The letter praised God for uniting the German people under Adolf Hitler, but the Kommission thought that Hildebrand's political opinions were

[91] For an account of German attitudes toward Hitler and Nazi party bosses, see Ian Kershaw, "'Führer without Sin': Hitler and the 'Little Hitlers,'" *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[92] Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?*, 97–98. See also "Protokoll einer Elternversammlung in Philadelphia, Col. Fernheim zwecks Behandlung der vorliegenden Fragen unserer Zentralschule. Stattgefunden am 5. Nov. 1935," Fernheim Colony Archive, Filadelfia, Paraguay (no file number).

[93] Warkentin, "Hildebrand, Peter," 203–4. Hildebrand provided his own reasons for the dismissal, including his high level of education and his production of Schiller's *Die Räuber*, which the Kommission considered to be "corrupting." See Hildebrand, *Odyssee wider Willen*, 185–99.

[94] Like other "Volk" composites, "Volkstum" is a difficult word to render in English though it implies a sense of national character or consciousness. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn developed the concept in the early nineteenth century and it was appropriated (and argued over) by members of the Nazi's *völkisch* movement. See Klautke, 124; Götz, 65–66.

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so divisive that they were anti-German.[95] Resembling the religious debates that had divided Mennonites in the past, the Kommission felt that it was completely within their authority to determine the type of Germanness—nationalist exegesis, so to speak—that was suitable for their colony. In this way, the colonists ended up making *völkisch* unity too much of a local metaphor for it to be useful to the Nazi state.

Meanwhile, the Menno Colony maintained a transnational network of their own with co-religionists in Canada and Mexico that required no German validation. The most significant contacts they had with the broader world came from letters exchanged with friends and the news they received through the *Steinbach Post*, which was published in Steinbach, Manitoba. This was a message board for conservative Mennonites in Canada and their brethren who had elected to leave the country in the 1920s. Their Germanness lacked an ideological edge. It was not something that they decided to participate in as a political choice (the board included no letters to Germany), but rather was inscribed in the daily rhythms of life such as Bible study, church, food, and other folkways. Though the paper covered news from around the world, it struck a conservative and religious tone that mostly avoided political prescriptions. In this way, *Steinbach Post* readers were not so different from millions of German-speakers around the world who entwined local and transnational attachments while remaining uninterested in the national intrigues of the German state. Hoerder reminds us that German-speaking migrants maintained durable transcontinental networks through chain letters, community newspapers, and self-published books, histories, and genealogies.[96] Oftentimes their networks bent around the German state, connecting individuals in Eastern Europe and the Americas. Altogether, the *Post's* readership was less concerned with events in Central Europe than those in western Canada, northern Mexico, and northern Paraguay.[97]

Despite the Menno Colony's disinterest in Nazi Germany, the May and June 1936 issues of *Kämpfende Jugend* contain an illuminating perspective on one Menno colonist's attitudes toward the *völkisch* movement. In these issues, Peter J. R. Funk debated a Fernheim Colony *völkisch* supporter named P. Neufeld of Orloff on the ethics of entwining religious and *völkisch* loyalties. What is important about the exchange is that both writers appealed to scripture to advance opposing views about Germanness and *völkisch* nationalism.

In his opening gambit, Funk pointedly asked Jugendbund members to whom they owed their allegiance: Christianity or Germanness. He called on

[95] Thiesen, *Mennonite and Nazi?*, 98.

[96] Hoerder, "Local, Continental, Global Migration Contexts: Projecting Life Courses in the Frame of Family Economies and Emotional Networks," in Alexander Freund, ed., *Beyond the Nation? Immigrants' Local Lives in Transnational Cultures*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 21–43, 22.

[97] Loewen's *Village among Nations* provides an excellent description of the *Steinbach Post's* importance in the Menno Colony's transnational network.

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the Bible to make his point by noting that Joseph, Daniel, and David had all fulfilled their duties to God without needing broader help.[98] These individuals operated independently, outside of the context of the Israelite nation. Funk contended that the Bible teaches Christians to trust in God and not in human institutions. His letter was brief but its argument revealed a clear dichotomy between sacred and secular paths: God calls his people to follow a course of complete separation from broader loyalties even at the expense of persecution, which in Daniel's case meant being thrown into a den of lions. Demonstrating the elasticity of biblical exegesis, Funk used individual "heroes" as examples of the Menno Colony's collective autonomy even though Menno Colony leaders generally suppressed individualism within their constituency.

In the next issue, Fernheim's Neufeld took the opportunity to enlighten his conservative Mennonite brother on the virtues of the Jugendbund and national loyalties. He used scripture to argue that the Jugendbund fulfilled the colony's Christian duty to shield its youth from dangerous forces.[99] Neufeld drew on the Apostle Paul's letters to Titus and Timothy, written at a time when Paul was trying to give direction and clarity to a nascent and disorganized church. Applied to the modern day, Neufeld suggested that Paul would have approved of *völkisch* youth activities since they taught children the importance of broader loyalties, including those demanded by church and state.

Neufeld then challenged Funk on the Menno Colony's expression of Germanness, asking, "Had they not, after all, left [Canada] to retain their German culture?"[100] With this rhetorical question, Neufeld suggested that Funk's Menno Colony was ignorant of the real reason why they moved to Paraguay. It was not their religion but their Germanness that they wished to preserve and it was not their local form of Germanness but the Germanness that was now revealed in the *völkisch* movement.[101] Presumably, Neufeld wanted the Menno Colony to discover their true path as Christians within the *völkisch* movement, as had so many Fernheim Mennonites.

This exchange demonstrated that the colonies had very different philosophies about God and nation, which were based on their respective experiences as voluntary migrants and refugees. The Menno Colony was settled, stable, and chose to live in Paraguay to escape the pressures of nationalism. The refugees of Fernheim Colony were different; they lacked communal solidarity and hoped to foster it by melding their faith with an emerging sense of *völkisch* nationalism. On a broader level, the exchange testifies to a burgeoning sense

[98] It was altogether rare to see Menno Colony Mennonites contributing to *Menno-Blatt*. Peter J. R. Funk, "Kolonie Menno," *Kämpfende Jugend*, May 1936: 1.

[99] P. Neufeld, "Antwort auf den Artikel 'Kolonie Menno,'" *Kämpfende Jugend*, May 1936: 1–2.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Kliewer spoke to this sentiment when he claimed that the Menno Colony was part of "Germandom" even though they "rather unconsciously feel" it. See his "Mennonite Young People's Work," 126.

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among Latin America's German-speakers that (trans)National Socialism represented something new, and perhaps troubling, when it came to squaring national and religious affinities at the local level.

With Hildebrand's departure, the Jugendbund lacked a strong advocate and interest in the movement flagged. By the beginning of 1937, *Kämpfende Jugend* was downsized to a column in *Menno-Blatt* and there were rumblings that the colony's smallest church assembly, the pro-pacifist Allianzgemeinde, was against the Nazi movement altogether. Kliewer had successfully combined local and national concerns into a credible story that accounted for Christian theology and German history, but Hildebrand could not build on his successes. His overt Nazism was too aggressive and un-Christian (and therefore un-German), to a leadership committee that placed a premium on communal harmony.

It was in this context that Mennonite colonies played host to some high-profile German visitors including Josef Ponten, the novelist and former colleague of Thomas Mann; the famous African explorer Adolf Friedrich Albrecht Heinrich, Duke of Mecklenburg; and the German envoy to Paraguay, Hans Karl Paul Eduard Büsing. Their assessments of the colonies ranged from tepid approval to amused antipathy. However, the most detailed, scholarly, and damning report on the Mennonite colonies came from Wilhelmy, who visited the colony in February 1937.[102] For Wilhelmy, both Germanness and *völkisch* unity had no religious component and communal unity had always to defer to national unity.

Pontin's, Heinrich's, and Wilhelmy's visits were not unique. After the Nazi seizure of power, a small army of German scholars, journalists, and free-lance explorers fanned out across the globe to uncover the special "genius" of Germanness worldwide. Trips combined patriotism and ideology with tourism and the thrill of adventure.[103] Closed farming settlements made compelling destinations since there was a perception in Germany that emigrants who settled in urban areas or on scattered homesteads lost their Germanness.[104] Yet visitors were often surprised by what they found, even in closed settlements. Many German-speaking communities, especially those whose ancestors had left Central Europe generations before, were sometimes more "foreign" in their customs and demeanor than the racially "non-Aryan" Poles, Jews, and other minorities living in Germany who were well-integrated into German society.

[102] Richard W. Seifert, "Bericht über die Reise nach der Mennoniten-Kolonie Fernheim mit S. H. Herzog Adolf Friedrich von Mecklenburg," 15 Feb. 1936, PA AA, R127972d, 163–65. Nikolai Siemens, "Dr. Josef Ponten," *Menno-Blatt*, Oct. 1936: 6; "Ein Gesucher," "Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz," *Menno-Blatt*, Oct. 1936: 5.

[103] Elizabeth Harvey, "Emissaries of Nazism: German Student Travelers in Romania and Yugoslavia in the 1930s," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 22, 1 (2011): 135–60, 138.

[104] Thomas Lekan, "German Landscape: Local Promotion of the Heimat Abroad," in Krista O'Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy Reagin, eds., *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 159.

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Wilhelmy's early research focused on German communities in Bulgaria, but he reoriented his academic interests to South America when he became Oskar Schmieder's assistant at the University of Kiel. Schmieder was working with the Nazi regime to uncover the purported connections between geography, culture, and race.[105] Under his supervision, Wilhelmy secured government funds from the German Research Council, the Albrecht Penck Foundation of Berlin, and the Hänel Foundation of Kiel to undertake a nine-month "colonial geographic expedition" of German colonization in South America.[106] Essentially, the trip's goal was to assess the viability of German settlement in the Chaco and uncover the loyalties of Paraguay's German-speakers to the Nazi cause. Until this point, the VDA's interest in the colony had inflated colonists' sense of value as an important node of German culture and commerce. This positive relationship correspondingly elevated their sensitivity to the criticisms made by Wilhelmy, who viewed them as religious rubes. His report was a blow that laid bare the rift between colonists' self-assessment as Germans and German visitors' perceptions of the colony.

Among Latin American countries, Paraguay was a particularly fertile context for Nazi and fascist activity. Around 1930, it became the first country to claim a Nazi party outside of Germany and Austria.[107] According to Grow, "By 1939, Nazi swastikas and portraits of Hitler were being prominently displayed in German schools and business establishments throughout Paraguay."[108] Moreover, in February 1936, the ruling Liberal government was overthrown by a cadre of fascist military officers calling themselves the Revolutionarios. They proclaimed that their "liberating revolution in Paraguay is of the same type as the totalitarian social transformations of contemporary Europe."[109] Though the Revolutionarios disintegrated in less than two years, Paraguay's 1940 constitution drew heavily from twentieth-century fascist theory.[110]

[105] Ulrike Block, "Deutsche Lateinamerikaforschung im Nationalsozialismus–Ansätze zu einer wissenschaftshistorischen Perspektive," in Sandra Carreras, ed., *Der Nationalsozialismus und Lateinamerika: Institutionen—Repräsentationen—Wissenskonstrukte I* (Berlin: Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2005), 11–12.

[106] Wilhelmy, "Bericht," 71.

[107] There is a discrepancy concerning the date the organization was founded. Friedman (*Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 21) claims it was 1929, while Grow (*Good Neighbor Policy*, 52) claims it was 1931. Frank Mora and Jerry Cooney likewise use 1931. See their *Paraguay and the United States: Distant Allies* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 95. Ron Young explains that in 1928 a group of Paraguayan Nazi Party members formed an "organization center," but no official Landesgruppe (national party unit) was formed until August 1931. By 1933, there were sixty-two party members, making it the third largest in South America." See "Paraguay," *World Fascism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2006), 505.

[108] Grow, *Good Neighbor Policy*, 52.

[109] Ibid., 49.

[110] Ibid., 49–51. See also Mora and Cooney, *Paraguay and the United States*, 94–96.

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In the months preceding Wilhelmy's visit to the Fernheim Colony, he assessed the *völkisch* loyalties of fourteen German-speaking colonies in Paraguay's Alto Parana region and around Encarnación. By the late 1930s, the country claimed twenty-six thousand German-speakers out of a total population of less than one million.[111] Eastern Paraguay made for an especially important destination to study Germans because it received an influx of German immigrants after the First World War who "remained unassimilated and aloof in their new surroundings, maintaining their ethnic identity in dress and customs, continuing to speak only German, and independently operating their own German-language schools, churches, and cultural societies."[112] Taken as a whole, however, Paraguay's German-speaking population was a mixture of Reichsdeutsche, "Brazilian-Germans," and to a lesser extent "Russian-Germans," "Austrian-Germans," and "Swiss." Wilhelmy classified the San Bernardino and Altos colonies as being composed primarily of "Paraguayan-Germans," presumably since they had lived in the country the longest. Not surprisingly, he noted, "The greatest cultural and political unity prevails without doubt in the settlements of Reichsdeutsche" since "the living link to the home has been preserved, and the colonists take part in all events in Germany with a lively interest."[113] In contrast, the colonies "inhabited mainly by Brazilian-Germans and Russian-Germans … know little or nothing of Germany and are only curious about major transformations in the former homeland."[114] In an observation that foreshadowed his impressions of the Mennonites, Wilhelmy concluded that the moral level of the Russian-Germans gives "food for thought" for anyone trying to exert a Nazi influence.[115]

Wilhelmy next turned his sights on the Mennonite colonies. He encountered a Menno Colony that was entirely beyond Nazi redemption and a Fernheim Colony that tarnished the Nazi cause with their ignorant expressions of Germanness. He spent about a week in the Fernheim Colony, inspecting its villages, giving lectures on the "New Germany," and presenting patriotic slideshows of the bucolic German countryside.[116] Despite their interest in his work, his observations led him to conclude that they were not loyal Germans, at least not in comparison to the settlements of Reichsdeutsche that "met the work of the Nazis with understanding."[117] Wilhelmy believed that it was not the

[111] Grow, *Good Neighbor Policy*, 51.
[112] Ibid., 34.
[113] H[erbert] Wilhelmy, "An die Deutsche Gesandtschaft in Asuncion: Bericht über meine Reise im südlichen Paraguay," PA AA, R127972d, 69–70, 69.
[114] Ibid., 69.
[115] Ibid., 70.
[116] For a complete description of Wilhelmy's trip, see his coauthored publication with Oskar Schmieder, *Deutsche Akerbausiedlungen im südamerikanischen Grasland, Pampa und Gran Chaco*, Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen, Neue Folge 6 (Leipzig: Deutsches Museum für Ländkunde, 1938).
[117] Wilhelmy, "Bericht," 73.

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colonists' Germanness that they wished to preserve, but rather their abstruse Mennonite doctrines.[118]

Wilhelmy saw the world as a battleground of competing races and ideologies, and so he interpreted the Fernheim migration to the Chaco as a conspiracy of the global Mennonite church. "The political and religious goal of colony leaders" was to implement "the dream of all orthodox Mennonites whether they live in Paraguay, Brazil, Canada, the USA, Holland or Switzerland," namely the creation of a Mennostaat (Mennonite state).[119] The colonists had nearly realized this dream by securing from the Paraguayan government a set of "extraordinary privileges," which allowed their "inviolable" preachers to extend their religious authority down to the family unit.[120] To further their goals, he reported, colony leaders practiced "Pharisaism" and dishonesty by exploiting Germany's good will for their own benefit[121] Far from being honest Germans, let alone loyal Nazis, the colonists in Wilhelmy's eyes were more similar to the Jews, who believed they were "God's chosen people." Here he discovered another conspiracy, arguing that "Jewish history dominates the Mennonites to the last detail and by giving their people Jewish names, they outwardly align themselves with the Jewish people."[122]

While the Fernheim Mennonites certainly used their German identification to save themselves from the Soviet Union and gave their children Biblical names, it was impossible to argue that there was a global conspiracy of Mennonites, or even a unified sense of Mennoniteness in Paraguay. Wilhelmy's fears resembled contemporaneous anxieties about spies and "fifth columns," and he perceived a vast conspiracy in a situation that was in fact marked primarily by disunity in the Fernheim Colony, indifference in the Menno Colony, and disorganization within the global Mennonite church. His damning report indicated that both colonies were beyond hope of Nazi redemption.

After Wilhelmy published his report, Kliewer took it upon himself to set the record straight and reassert that the members of Paraguay's Mennonite colonies, both Fernheim *and* Menno, were faithful Germans.[123] He addressed a strongly worded rebuttal to the Auswärtiges Amt (German Foreign Office) in Berlin. His tightly-spaced, eleven-page document argued that the Fernheim Mennonites were mostly concerned about their German *cultural* preservation

[118] Ibid., 77–78; "Fritz Kliewer to Landesleiter des VDA Landesverbandes Weser-Ems," 18 Nov. 1937, PA AA, R127972d, 52.

[119] Wilhelmy, "Bericht," 77.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Ibid., 78.

[122] Ibid., 77.

[123] Wilhelmy did not have the last word concerning Nazi impressions of Mennonites in Latin America. Party member and businessman Walter Schmiedehaus published a positive report on conservative Mennonites who relocated from Canada to Mexico in the 1920s, titled "Das Russlanddeutschtum in Mexiko," in the Deutsches Ausland Institut-affiliated publication *Jahrbuch der Hauptstelle für die Sippenkunde des Deutschtums im Ausland* 4 (1939): 187–94.

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and not necessarily their religious preservation. Kliewer called it "absurd" to suggest that some Mennonite religious leaders wished to create a "Menno-Staat" in Paraguay instead of identifying principally with the German nation-state. In fact, he averred, both the Menno and Fernheim Colonies were "largely the same" when it came to their sentiments regarding Mennonitentum and Deutschtum (Mennoniteness and Germanness). Kliewer's trump card was his claim that Fernheim Mennonites were "determined to send their sons to the Reich for military training" to prove their loyalty.[124] Kliewer tried to not only make Nazism intelligible to the Fernheim Colony, but also to make both colonies' abstruse brands of Germanness intelligible to a German government that supported Auslandsdeutsche in theory, but had little idea who they actually were.

Concerning the most serious of Wilhelmy's accusations—that the Mennonites were pro-Jewish—Kliewer stated, "Dr. Wilhelmy's statements on this issue are hurtful to every upright overseas Mennonite."[125] According to Kliewer, the Mennonites give their children Jewish names out of respect for the Old Testament, not present day Judaism. He challenged Wilhelmy to criticize Nazi Party leaders who had biblical names.[126] Kliewer assured the Auswärtiges Amt that the Fernheim Mennonites only wished to live in peace, a peace that assured the freedom to express both their nationality and their faith.

Wilhelmy's negative analysis of the colonies and Kliewer's questionable defense exhibit in stark relief the problems Auslandsdeutsche faced when they tried to make their Germanness intelligible to hardline Nazis. Although the colonists "appreciated" National Socialism and were "thankful" that God had created it as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, the Mennonites' traditions, religion, and culture were entirely unsatisfactory from Wilhelmy's point of view.[127] He hoped to discover a pure German enclave in the heart of South America, but concluded along with Freeden that a spontaneous settlement without "organic connections" to the homeland was a waste of resources.[128] Wilhelmy's visit revealed precisely how much the Nazi interpretation of Germanness differed from local interpretations of the concept, and how much the colonists' versions of Germanness were "contaminated" by local factors. Too much was lost in translation across so wide a geographic, cultural, theological, and historical terrain.

The Jugendbund, the peanut shipment, the VDA school materials, and even the Nazi slogan hanging in the community building "Gemeinnutz vor

[124] "Fritz Kliewer to Landesleiter," 55–61.

[125] Ibid., 59.

[126] Ibid., 60.

[127] "Jakob Siemens, Heinrich Pauls, and Abram Loewen to B. H. Unruh," 29 Sept. 1937, Paraguay Fernheim Colony 1937, IX-6-3 Central Correspondence, 1931–85, Mennonite Central Committee Files, Akron, Pennsylvania.

[128] Freeden, "Über die Möglichkeiten," 118.

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Eigennutz!" ("common need before self greed!") all demonstrated the Fernheim Colony's longing to achieve local unity through the template of *völkisch* unity. Yet for the Nazi message to stick, it needed interpreters that could deftly weave together communal and national narratives. This was increasingly difficult the further each interpreter—Kliewer, Hildebrand, and Wilhelmy—stood from the community and the closer they stood to the actual Nazi Party. Kliewer was a homegrown Mennonite Nazi who had accompanied the Fernheim colonists to Paraguay, and his ideas were accepted as a sincere attempt to improve communal unity within a preexisting religious framework. Hildebrand had Mennonite credentials but lacked a history with the group. Though he may have pushed a Nazi agenda more vigorously than Kliewer, his audience was also less responsive because he was an outsider and insincere in his religious convictions. The colony's leadership became increasingly ambivalent about his leadership as Nazi ideology threatened to cause more strife than cohesion. Wilhelmy was not a Mennonite and perhaps not even a Christian. His faith was in National Socialism and he held little hope of reconciling this position with the colony's religious sensibilities. The strongest tie that he shared with the colonists and other German-speaking groups in Latin America was that they all held some notion of Germanness, though a shared interpretation proved illusory.

Meanwhile, the Menno Colony had little interest in broad geopolitical developments and maintained that national allegiances unequivocally jeopardized their religious culture. To legitimate their decisions, they interpreted modern events in Russia, Canada, Paraguay, and Germany through an assemblage of stories chosen from the Old and New Testaments, a timespan of roughly four thousand years that meanders across the Mediterranean world, heaven, and hell. These Mennonites found ready answers to questions about Russian military conscription in first-century Jerusalem, and answers to questions about National Socialism in ancient Babylon. It was all the same; there was nothing new under the sun. External developments were interpreted through biblical exegesis and mediated by their local religious culture. In fact, the two biggest politico-religious events for Menno Colony during the 1930s included an internal power struggle between its constituent churches, which was resolved by personally appealing to Paraguayan president José Eligio Ayala,[129] and the decision to limit their aid to the Paraguayan military during the Chaco War.[130] The former event was exclusively local until they

[129] After meeting with both sides in 1934, Ayala admonished the Mennonites that "the [Paraguayan] people had the impression that the Mennonites were firmly united and considered them as an example." Interestingly, the quote reveals that Ayala hoped the anti-nationalist Menno Colony would help promote Paraguayan national unity during the Chaco War. See Martin W. Friesen, *New Homeland in the Chaco Wilderness*, 2d ed., Jake Balzer, trans. (Loma Plata, Paraguay: Cooperativa Chortitzer Limited, 1997), 435–37.

[130] Ibid., 419–37.

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approached the Solomon-like figure of Ayala, and the latter event had less to do with patriotism and citizenship than with the New Testament's injunctions against violence.

Compared to these immediate local struggles, Nazism was little more than an afterthought for the Menno Colony. They wanted to maintain a German culture without being labeled as Germans, and certainly not as National Socialists. Years later, when the Menno Colony created an archive of its history in Paraguay, it contained a single, slim binder on the Nazi period. Titled "Fernheim Nazis," the binder held printed and handwritten transcriptions of articles from various Mennonite publications, writings by Kliewer and other Nazi sympathizers, and a few unorganized historical commentaries on the Nazi episode. Except for a single sermon delivered by colony leader Martin C. Friesen in 1944, it contained no internally generated documents.[131] In other words, the Menno Colony had little to remember about Nazism, and even less to say about it.

The distinctions between how the Nazi regime and Auslandsdeutsche interpreted Germanness and *völkisch* unity are important because the two were often at odds and present new ways of narrating the German nation during the interwar years. Quite often, local notions of Germanness were more consistent and durable ("intractable" from a state perspective) than were official interpretations that emanated from Germany. This article has shown how the (trans)National Socialism projected outward from the Nazi state was a narrative tool that was used, recast, discarded, or ignored as it collided with burgeoning and long-standing local narratives. It was one possible story among many, and its survival depended upon the local legitimacy of its interpreters. Even in communities that were outwardly similar—in this case German-speaking Mennonites from Russia—their local interpretations of Germanness baffled observers who confused the communities' strategic use of the (trans)National Socialist narrative with an "awakening," or rejection, of essential German qualities.

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[131] In contrast, the Fernheim Colony maintains a relatively large archive with extensive documentation of its Nazi past.

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Abstract: This article compares two German-speaking Mennonite colonies in Paraguay and their encounters with Nazism during the 1930s. It focuses on their understandings of the Nazi bid for transnational *völkisch* unity. Latin America presents a unique context for studying the Nazis' relationship to German-speakers abroad because it held the allure of being the last prospect for German cultural and economic expansion, but was simultaneously impossible for the German state to invade. The Menno Colony was made up of voluntary migrants from Canada who arrived in Paraguay in the 1920s. The Fernheim Colony was composed of refugees from the Soviet Union who settled alongside the Menno Colony in the 1930s. Both groups shared a history in nineteenth-century Russia as well as a common faith and culture. Nevertheless, they developed radically different opinions about *völkisch* nationalism. The Menno Colony's communal understanding of Germanness made *völkisch* propaganda about Hitler's "New Germany" unappealing to their local sensibilities. They rejected all forms of nationalism as worldly attempts to thwart their cultural-religious isolationism. The refugees of Fernheim Colony, by contrast, shared little communal unity since they originated from diverse settlements across the Soviet Union. They viewed Germanness as a potential bridge to an imagined German homeland and believed that the highest goal of *völkisch* unity was to promote communal unity. Resembling other German-speaking communities in Latin America, the two colonies—which seemed identical to Nazi observers—held vastly different interpretations of *völkisch* nationalism at the height of the Nazi bid to establish transnational German unity in Latin America.

Key words: Auslandsdeutsche, communal, Germanness, Germany, Latin America, Mennonites, Nazism, Paraguay, transnational, *völkisch*

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