

Reshaping the Chaco: Migrant Foodways, Place-making, and the Chaco War

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Abstract. This article explores the settlement of Russian Mennonites on the Paraguayan Chaco frontier during the Chaco War years. These colonists engaged in a range of seemingly contradictory place-making practices – from the agro-environmental and the political to the spiritual and the cultural – that served to solidify their tenuous claim to an unfamiliar and highly contested landscape. Ideas of food security – seen in terms of both production and consumption – linked these diverse exercises. In the Paraguayan Chaco, these former Russian wheat farmers experimented with new crops and foodways. Although pacifists, they supplied the Paraguayan military efforts even as they also sent their crops to Nazi Germany. Finally, as an ethnic group practising endogamy and seeking isolation from their neighbours, they unexpectedly initiated a campaign to evangelise the Chaco's indigenous population centred, in part, on reforming the latter's 'deficient' diet.

Keywords: Gran Chaco, foodways, settler, migration, place-making, Chaco War, frontier, agro-environmental, evangelisation, mission, indigenous, diaspora, Paraguay, Bolivia, Mennonite, Enlhet

In 1931, a group of Russian Mennonites – recently re-settled refugees in the Gran Chaco, a vast, semi-arid, lowland frontier at the heart of South America – celebrated their first Christmas in Paraguay.¹ As successful farmers, German-speakers and pacifists, these Anabaptist 'kulaks' ('large land-owners', in the language of the Russian Revolution) had been conspicuous targets for the Soviet government's collectivisation campaigns.² With the beginning of land expropriation in the Ukraine, large numbers of

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* The author would like to acknowledge the support of archivist Gundolf Niebuhr, subject librarian Dr Phil MacLeod and Professors Yanna Yannakakis and Thomas D. Rogers.

¹ At 650,000 km², the Chaco is approximately the size of France.

² The Russian Mennonites spoke *Plautdietsch*, a dialect of low German (*Plattdeutsch*), but, because low German is not a written language, they studied and wrote in standard high German (*Hochdeutsch*) with a gothic script. Diaries, sermons, school texts, colony documents and the colony newspaper *Mennoblatt* were all written in high German, though the Chaco Mennonites' version of the language had developed a somewhat idiosyncratic structure.

Mennonites and other ethnic Germans left their homes on the steppe and gathered outside Moscow in the winter of 1929. They demanded the right to emigrate from a region whose landscape they had thoroughly transformed since their arrival in the Russian Empire in the late eighteenth century. With the support of a US–Canadian Mennonite relief organisation (the Mennonite Central Committee) and the German government, approximately 4,000 of these refugees were temporarily brought to Germany and 1,580 relocated to the Paraguayan Chaco to establish the colony of Fernheim.³ A subsequent migration of eastern Russian Mennonites through China increased their numbers to 2,176.⁴ They settled alongside 1,765 Canadian Mennonite farmers already established in 1926 after securing extensive privileges (including freedom from military service and the right to conduct private education in German) from a Paraguayan government eager to develop its contested Chaco frontier with Bolivia.⁵

Colonist Nikolai Siemens revelled in the surreal quality of the Mennonites' first Christmas in Paraguay. His neighbours slowly emerged for food and celebration only after the 'fiery ball of the sun' had dipped below the horizon.⁶ Nearly a year into their colonisation endeavour in this unintended destination, the novel surroundings still registered a profound environmental and cultural dissonance. The familiar open plains of the Ukrainian steppe had been replaced by the Chaco's dense, thorny bush. The Mennonites had exchanged Christmas in the sub-zero temperatures of a Russian winter for the sweltering heat of the southern hemisphere's summer in a region boasting South America's highest temperatures. The contrast with the 'unforgettable' Christmas of 1930, which they had spent as welcome refugees in Germany, could not have been more apparent to Siemens as he rode home across the empty Chaco after the evening's festivities.

As much as an unfamiliar landscape, the Chaco was a contested one. A year later Paraguay was at war with Bolivia. Christmas 1932 saw Siemens play host to a group of lonely Paraguayan military officers who probably felt equally out of place on their country's western frontier, where few of their countrymen

³ 'Fernheim' means 'faraway home'. For a description of this migration by the Mennonite Central Committee's Latin America director see Edgar Stoesz and Muriel Thiessen Stackley, *Garden in the Wilderness: Mennonite Communities in the Paraguayan Chaco, 1927–1997* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1999).

⁴ William Schroeder, *Mennonite Historical Atlas* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1996), p. 149.

⁵ See note 2 above for clarification of the forms of German used by the Russian Mennonites. For debates in the Paraguayan press that preceded the Mennonite arrival see Bridget Maria Chesterton, *The Grandchildren of Solano López: Frontier and Nation in Paraguay, 1904–1936* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), pp. 97–101.

⁶ Nikolai Siemens, 'Weihnacht im Chaco', *Mennoblatt*, Jan. 1932, in *75 Jahre Mennoblatt*, CD-ROM compiled by Gundolf Niebuhr (Filadelfia: Kolonie Fernheim, 2005). Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent *Mennoblatt* references are drawn from this digitised version.

had ever set foot. Returning home that evening with an unexpected escort, Siemens laughed at the colourful image of himself ‘in the midst of armed warriors, a defenceless Mennonite’.⁷ Inspired by this ecumenical and patriotic Christmas among Catholic Paraguayans, he found himself ‘in a good mood in spite of, or perhaps because of, the war, tropical summer and loneliness’. This oscillation between pacifist rhetoric and an emphasis on Mennonite support for Paraguayans was a feature of the colonists’ worldview for the duration of the Chaco War.⁸

Three years later, on 26 December 1936, a group of 100 Mennonites gathered at their newly created mission-station. The previous Christmas they had brought food and gifts to wounded Paraguayan soldiers at nearby Fort Camacho, but with the war over the colonists directed this symbolic exchange towards their nascent missionary work with the Enlhet people.⁹ After celebrating their own Christmas they joined the Enlhet for food, singing, gift-giving and a bible-reading in the Enlhet language. The serene scene was interrupted, noted Siemens, when echoes of gunfire from a nearby Enlhet hunting party stirred the still ‘wild blood’ of the congregation.¹⁰

Eric Hobsbawm views the ‘invention of tradition’ as a crucial strategy for containing the ambivalence at the heart of the colonial encounter.¹¹ Ambivalence aptly describes the Mennonite experience in colonising the Chaco. In these scenes of ritualised exchange with foreign landscapes, military regimes and indigenous peoples, performance of the familiar alongside the unknown served as a powerful ceremony of possession. A sacred break in the year laden with symbolic potential, Christmas offered transplanted Mennonites one opportunity to enact several novel subject positions – as South American planters, Paraguayans, ethnic Germans and missionaries – in reassuringly familiar terms.

These festive occasions suggest three broader forms of place-making – on field, battlefield, and mission-field – that form the subject of my study. I begin by exploring colonists’ experiences with an unfamiliar environment and their attempts to adjust to new ways of farming and consuming. I then turn to their wartime experiences as both pacifists and profiteers during the Chaco War (1932–5), a period in which they simultaneously expressed patriotic affiliation with both Paraguay and Germany. I conclude with a discussion of Mennonite evangelical activities among the Enlhet. At first, these three categories may appear distinct or even contradictory, the subject for separate

⁷ Siemens, ‘Weihnachtsstimmung in der Kriegszone’, *Mennoblatt*, Jan. 1933.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Paul Janzen, ‘Weihnacht – Hochbetrieb’, *Mennoblatt*, Jan. 1935.

¹⁰ Siemens, ‘Weihnachten bei den Lenguas’, *Mennoblatt*, Jan. 1936. The Enlhet were previously referred to as Lengua.

¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

histories of agriculture, national identity or religion. Historians of Mennonites and other migrant communities have often taken this approach.¹² However, as I show, questions of food production and consumption cut across these distinct avenues of identity formation. Whether they were debating the relative merits of wheat and sorghum, simultaneously sending their agriculture production to the Paraguayan army and Nazi Germany, or attempting to transform indigenous diets and economies, a struggle over foodways lay at the heart of Mennonite place-making in the Chaco.

My analysis of settler life comes courtesy of *Mennoblatt*, the small German-language newspaper that the aforementioned Mennonite preacher and educator Nikolai Siemens established in October 1930, only a few months after arriving in Paraguay.¹³ Born into a Mennonite colony in the Crimea, Siemens arrived in the Chaco as an experienced pioneer. He had moved with his family to Siberia at the age of 15, part of new Mennonite colonisation initiatives in the remote Omsk district bordering Kazakhstan. Unlike his neighbours, Siemens had been educated outside the colony school system. Studies at bible schools in the cities of Orenburg (in the Urals) and Tchongrav (Crimea) flavoured the often florid prose of his *Mennoblatt* contributions.¹⁴ A tireless enthusiast for Mennonite colonisation in the Chaco, he remained *Mennoblatt*'s editor until 1955.¹⁵

Unlike Argentina and Brazil, where mass migration offers historians a plethora of immigrant newspapers to draw from, few settlers arrived in Paraguay in the modern era, and of these, most settled in temperate eastern Paraguay. With no major permanent settlements, state perspectives on the region are limited; *Mennoblatt* is thus one of the few print sources produced in the Gran Chaco at this time. While mediated by its male authorship, the paper merits a close reading for its intimate portrayal of colony life. It served a unique function as a virtual town hall and barometer of group morale for Fernheim's 2,000 inhabitants strung out in over a dozen small villages. Whether penned by the optimistic Siemens, mayors and teachers or written in the pedestrian language of colonists identified simply as 'a farmer', articles indicate a contested public arena in which all questions, from household consumption to the colony's long-term survival, were subject to intense debate. Indeed, for

¹² Especially those that study the 'völkisch' movement. See John D. Thiesen, Theron F. Schlabach and John J. Friesen, *Mennonite and Nazi? Attitudes among Mennonite Colonists in Latin America, 1933–1945* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1999).

¹³ Harold S. Bender, 'Siemens, Nikolai (1895–1958)', *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, available at [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Siemens,_Nikolai_\(1895-1958\)&oldid=110914](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Siemens,_Nikolai_(1895-1958)&oldid=110914), last access 27 Sept. 2017.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See Frieda Siemens Kaethler and Alfred Neufeld (eds.), *Nikolai Siemens: der Chacooptimist: das Mennoblatt und die Anfänge der Kolonie Fernheim, 1930–1955* (Weisenheim am Berg: Agape-Verlag, 2007).

colonists the two categories were often inseparable. In the process, *Mennoblatt*'s editor and authors gradually attempted to discursively render the foreign familiar, increasingly referring to 'our Chaco', 'our patria', and even 'our Indians'.

This might suggest a myopic view of an ethnic enclave in a far-flung region of Latin America. However, in addition to showcasing the adaptations of colonists, this article explores expanding neo-colonial networks that posed environmental, military and spiritual challenges to the area and its inhabitants. Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay each laid claim to the Gran Chaco – one of the Americas' most enduring borderlands – in the century following independence. But even with the expansion of military forts, mission-stations, cattle-ranching and river-ports along its periphery, the central Chaco remained the sovereign domain of semi-nomadic indigenous groups like the Enlhet well into the twentieth century.¹⁶

The novel presence of Russian Mennonites at the heart of the Chaco was part of a larger process of territorialisation; Mennonites engaged with many of the central architects of this transformation, who like themselves were foreigners yet served as proxies for state expansion in the region. The colonists purchased their land from Argentine businessman Carlos Casado. Casado bought huge sections of the central Chaco from a bankrupt Paraguayan government at the turn of the century and established a tannin industry,¹⁷ along with supporting infrastructure.¹⁸ Both colonists and the Paraguayan military would make use of his light-gauge railway and port on the Paraguay River (see Figure 1). Several foreign and national botanists, explorers and anthropologists also travelled the region in the early twentieth century, their writings constituting a form of 'scientific nationalism' in which the contested frontier was gradually re-imagined as Paraguayan space.¹⁹ When German anthropologist Hans Krieg passed through the Fernheim in the early 1930s, young Mennonite men accompanied him on forays to contact indigenous groups in the region.²⁰ In the months before the Chaco War the colonists also became familiar with Juan Belaieff (Ivan Belyaev), a fellow exile from Soviet Russia, who was scouting the region on behalf of the Paraguayan government.²¹

¹⁶ The Gran Chaco long sat at the margins of Latin American historiography. For new work see Christine Mathias, 'South America's Final Frontier: Indigenous Leadership and the Long Conquest of the Gran Chaco, 1870–1955' (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 2015).

¹⁷ Tannin, an acidic chemical compound, is used in the tanning of hides.

¹⁸ Gabriela Dalla-Corte, *Empresas y tierras de Carlos Casado en el Chaco Paraguayo. Historias, negocios y guerras (1860–1940)* (Asunción: Intercontinental, 2012).

¹⁹ See Chesterton, *The Grandchildren of Solano López*, pp. 60–78.

²⁰ Siemens, *Mennoblatt*, Aug. 1934.

²¹ Bridget Maria Chesterton and Anatoly V. Isaenko, 'A White Russian in the Green Hell: Military Science, Ethnography, and Nation Building', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 94: 4 (2014), pp. 615–48.

Figure 1. *Location of Mennonite Colonies, Forts and Transport Routes in Contested Chaco*



Source: Adapted from 'Map of Chaco War. The forts, outposts, cities of Paraguay and Bolivia' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaco_War#/media/File:Paraguay_-_%E5%89%AF%E6%9C%AC.png; last access 15 Oct. 2017), by 赤奋若. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Until recently the Chaco War had remained the major understudied conflict in Latin American history. Several edited/co-authored collections have now moved beyond an exclusive focus on causes and tactics to assess the war's cultural, social and environmental impact.²² Luc Capdevila et al.

²² Bridget Maria Chesterton (ed.), *The Chaco War: Environment, Ethnicity, and Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016). Luc Capdevila, Isabelle Combès, Nicolás Richard and Pablo Barbosa, *Los hombres transparentes: indígenas y militares en la Guerra del Chaco (1932–1935)* (La Paz: Instituto Latinoamericano de Misionología, 2010). Nicolás Richard (ed.), *Mala guerra: los indígenas en la guerra del Chaco, 1932–35* (Asunción: CoLibris, 2008).

place the silenced history of the Chaco's indigenous inhabitants at the centre of the conflict.²³ Yet other than in works by local colony historians, the role of Mennonites in the war years has received little attention. This omission is unfortunate because the quotidian exchanges between Mennonites, the military and the Chaco's indigenous inhabitants abound in the colony newspaper and provide a micro-social perspective on the war and its aftermath rarely captured by official documents.

This article also brings the experience of Latin American Mennonites (a rapidly growing community of over a quarter of a million)²⁴ into greater dialogue with Latin American history. Mennonites arrived in Latin America at times, and in places, that provide a compelling window on agro-environmental change, food security and state formation. Over the last century, they settled in frontier zones like the Gran Chaco on lands that governments considered of 'marginal' agricultural value. While the Russian Mennonites in question arrived in Paraguay immediately prior to the outbreak of the war, Canadian Mennonites settled the frontiers of Mexico and Bolivia in the wake of national revolutions and along Belize's contested border with Guatemala as that small nation gained independence. In those regions Mennonites formed endogamous, isolated and 'traditional' colonies but also became 'model producers' for domestic economies. In doing so, they consolidated and successfully leveraged a form of agricultural citizenship to sustain a conspicuous autonomy characterised by religious, educational and military exemptions. By turns considered 'Russians', 'Canadians', 'Dutch' or 'ethnic Germans', Mennonites benefitted from a racialised ideology of immigration as 'whitening' even as their settlement was conditional upon a legally sanctioned refusal to assimilate into national society. They also maintained strong connections to their brethren throughout the Americas and Europe. This simultaneous engagement with a dispersed diaspora and distinct national identities might have represented an untenable paradox for earlier scholars of an assimilationist paradigm. Recently historians have adopted a more fluid approach to the complex, but often complementary, transnational-national negotiations among Latin American migrant communities.²⁵ As one of the earliest Mennonite settlements in Latin America, the experience of Chaco colonists remains critical to understanding this evolving state-settler bargain as Mennonites – and their accompanying foodways – expanded across Latin America.

²³ Capdevila et al., *Los hombres transparentes*; Richard (ed.), *Mala guerra*.

²⁴ Conversation with Kennert Giesbrecht, editor of the newspaper *Mennonitische Post* (Steinbach, Manitoba), 13 Oct. 2017.

²⁵ Nicola Foote and Michael Goebel (eds.), *Immigration and National Identities in Latin America* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014).

Wheat and Wherewithal: Farming and Consuming in an Unfamiliar Landscape

How did Mennonites perceive an environment so different from the one they had left behind? Over a century removed from their forebears' colonisation of the Ukrainian steppe, some of these settlers, including Siemens, had taken part in Mennonite settlement efforts in Siberia in the decades before they abandoned Russia. However, they were temperate-zone wheat producers transplanted into a semi-tropical and arid region. Though the Chaco's soil was fertile, frequent droughts and sudden storms challenged a century and a half of Russian agricultural adaptations. The first years in their new colony were especially difficult for these pioneers, whose sense of space, time and social tradition was in flux.

The title of a 1931 article in *Mennoblatt*, 'Must it Always be so Hot in the Chaco?', invokes this collective desperation.²⁶ Drastic seasonal variation on the Ukrainian steppe, with long cold winters and hot summers, was replaced by year-long growing possibilities in the Chaco that disrupted work and rest patterns. One article on the 'Workday of a Chaco Woman' noted that, because there was no cold winter to enforce a *Winterruhe* (winter's rest), 'the woman here feels, and quite rightly, that she never gets to rest'.²⁷ In July 1933, at the height of a warm southern winter, Nikolai Siemens claimed that 'much seems wrong to the European that comes here from the old world'.²⁸ Here he invoked the racialised malaise we can identify elsewhere in the European colonial encounter with the tropics.²⁹ After three years in the Chaco, Siemens longed for the *Winterruhe*, which, he bleakly reflected, was now deferred until one's body was interred in the ground. He doubted this central aspect of Russian Mennonite life would resonate with a younger generation that had never known a true winter.

Articles in *Mennoblatt* with titles like 'Death in a Well' or 'Death by Lightning' drove home the message that this was a treacherous as well as unfamiliar environment.³⁰ Living in improvised dwellings, Mennonites were exposed to mosquito-borne diseases like malaria.³¹ In late 1930, a typhoid epidemic decimated newly arrived settlers in Fernheim. In three villages 32 of 127 residents died. Wilhelm Klassen took morbid poetic licence to evoke 'the pitiless, dark, eerie death [that] hovered over the grey tents of the settlers'.³² He

²⁶ Siemens, 'Muss es im Chaco immer so heiss sein?', *Mennoblatt*, July 1931.

²⁷ 'Ein Arbeitstag der Chacobäuerin', *Mennoblatt*, July 1933.

²⁸ Siemens, 'Im Chacowinter', *Mennoblatt*, July 1933.

²⁹ Julian Peard, *Race, Place, and Medicine: The Idea of the Tropics in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

³⁰ N. Wiebe, 'Tod in Brunnen', *Mennoblatt*, June 1931. Siemens, 'Tod durch Blitzschlag', *Mennoblatt*, March 1931.

³¹ Siemens, 'Malaria und seine Folgen', *Mennoblatt*, June 1933.

³² Wilhelm Klassen, 'Tiefe Weg', *Mennoblatt*, Dec. 1930.

acknowledged that the disease had probably originated not in the Chaco but in contaminated water on the long voyage up the Paraguay River. But he felt certain that a poor diet and ‘hurried work in unprecedented heat’ had contributed, making Mennonites ‘brittle, ... emaciated, ... battered’. ‘The body seems to be dying out’, Klassen continued, and ‘strength melts away like snow’. Here he drew an environmental metaphor that further emphasised disconnect with his Russian past. Emma Plett, a young girl at the time, remembers that, with so many casualties, desperate Mennonites made use of the ubiquitous Paraguayan *palo borracho* (*Ceiba speciosa*, known in English as the silk floss or bottle tree). With its distended trunk and soft-wood core, the tree was easily felled and hollowed into a makeshift coffin.³³

Despite the high losses of their initial settlement, colonists remained hopeful they would adapt to the Chaco. Neighbouring Canadian Mennonites assured them that the summer of 1930–1 had been unusually hot.³⁴ The Casado Company, whose lands they purchased, maintained an experimental farm – with test plots for a variety of crops – a short distance to the west. The Enlhet also began to work and trade with Mennonite settlers, often acting as farm labourers and guides through the dense bush.³⁵ Colonists absorbed much of this local knowledge about weather patterns, planting and landscape. As settlers like Gerhard Balzer, pictured in [Figure 2](#) working with a team of oxen in Schönbrunn village (Fernheim), began to clear and farm the land, they found that some crops thrived in spite of the Chaco’s seemingly harsh climate. These included sweet potatoes, manioc, peanuts, rice and sorghum. In the absence of fruit trees, Mennonite women used a variety of hibiscus to produce juice and jam. They replaced the abundant potatoes of the ‘old homeland’ with the yam and yucca of the ‘new homeland’.³⁶ Mennonites also embraced yerba mate, the staple Paraguayan caffeinated beverage. According to Siemens few would consider starting or finishing their workday without it.³⁷

Taking up new foods was much easier than letting go of others. ‘The loss of “proper” foodways’ forms a persistent trope of settler discourse alongside marvel at exotic products, and such bitter laments appeared regularly in *Mennoblatt*.³⁸ Like Spanish colonists three centuries earlier, who ‘would have swapped all the pineapples in the world for a regular supply of wheat

³³ Emma Salmon-Plett, *An Enduring Faith – Mennonite Stories: Their History, their Persecution* (Victoria: Friesen Press, 2013), p. 78.

³⁴ Siemens, ‘Muss es im Chaco immer so heiss sein?’

³⁵ Siemens, ‘Verirrt’, *Mennoblatt*, Oct. 1933.

³⁶ ‘Ein Arbeitstag der Chacobäuerin’.

³⁷ Siemens, ‘Zum Pilcomayo’, *Mennoblatt*, 1935.

³⁸ James McWilliams, *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 165.

Figure 2. *Gerhard Balzer ploughing his field, Schönbrunn village (Fernheim), 1932*



Source: Photo courtesy of Archiv der Kolonie Fernheim (Filadelfia, Paraguay).

bread’,³⁹ Mennonites pined for wheat. After the original Canadian Mennonite exploratory commission arrived at Puerto Casado in 1921, they spent a month exploring the Chaco, during which time they sowed wheat. Every Russian Mennonite who arrived in Paraguay in 1930 was presented with a bag of wheat-seed by the Casado Company. But the crop failed to thrive. In 1931 Peter Rahn wrote longingly of the great importance of ‘wringing’ from the Chaco what it still did not offer, ‘namely, our daily bread’.⁴⁰

Mennonites’ unquestioned attachment to the grain was partly financial. As agricultural specialists, they helped sustain a world system predicated on regional mono-cropping of basic commodities. Wheat – their star crop – was intimately linked to the economic order of Russian Mennonites. Over a century and a half they had transformed the Ukrainian steppe into a granary that sustained industrialising Europe.⁴¹ When Mennonites emigrated from Russia to the Canadian and US prairies in the nineteenth century they found it easy to transplant their agricultural practices, famously bringing

³⁹ Rebecca Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 54.

⁴⁰ Peter Rahn, ‘Aus unserer Kolonie’, *Memoblatt*, Jan. 1931.

⁴¹ Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), p. 313.

Turkey Red Wheat seed with them to Kansas in 1874.⁴² Through their lateral migrations across the northern hemisphere, Mennonites thus forged a global temperate wheat belt. Arriving in Paraguay few things concerned Mennonites more than the resumption of wheat production. Yet in contrast with the east–west migration between steppe and prairie, the north–south move from steppe to Chaco threatened their reputation for transforming borderlands into breadbaskets.

When Rahn spoke of ‘our daily bread’ he was also indicating its deep spiritual and cultural resonance. For Russian Mennonites the quotidian consumption of wheat flour was inextricably linked to social and religious life. Mennonite cooking – from *kjelke* (noodles), *varenyky* (perogies or stuffed dumplings), *rollkuchen* (fried bread), *portzelky* (fritters) and *platz* (coffee-cake) – included many flour-based items accumulated over centuries of migration from Holland to Prussia and the Ukraine. Within this diasporic culinary repertoire, bread held the greatest significance for Mennonite foodways. Its production was a laborious daily activity for Mennonite women. ‘With bread and salt, God sustains you’, explained Kaethe Warkentin, born in the Russian Mennonite settlement of Chortitza (Ukraine), offering one of the many Mennonite proverbs associating bread and well-being.⁴³

Zwieback, a distinctive white-flour double bun in which a smaller ball of dough is adeptly stacked on a larger one, was the ‘hallmark of Mennonite baking’.⁴⁴ Prepared by Mennonite women and consumed on a weekly basis it lent an indispensable ‘sacramental’ or ‘ceremonial character’ to all festive occasions, from weddings to funerals.⁴⁵ When toasted, *zwieback* formed a non-perishable staple that was tightly linked to survival in the minds of migrating Mennonites. In the Mennonite exodus from Russia that intensified after 1918, Mennonite women, including those who eventually settled in Paraguay, ‘baked thousands of *zwieback* and roasted them for the journey’.⁴⁶ The Russian Revolution also tightened the relationship between bread and Mennonite identity. Food ‘substituted for customary religious observance ... as a badge of ethnic identity’, while wheat scarcity made emigration to the Americas appear as a possible return to ‘abundance’.⁴⁷ Like the fictional Russian refugees of Alberto Gerchunoff’s *The Jewish Gauchos*

⁴² Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 175.

⁴³ Norma Jost Voth, *Mennonite Food and Folkways from South Russia*, vol. 1 (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2013), p. 58.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 39.

⁴⁶ Marlene Epp, ‘The Semiotics of *Zwieback*: Feast and Famine in the Narratives of Mennonite Refugee Women’, in Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta and Valerie Korinek (eds.), *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 422.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 425.

of the Pampas, Paraguayan Mennonites hoped to ‘work our own land and eat bread made from our own wheat’.⁴⁸ According to *Mennoblatt*, when Mennonite women arrived in the Chaco in 1930 they had immediately ‘kneaded clay, shaped bricks and ... in a few days, a beautiful oven, which [they] regarded with great pride and joy, was soon constructed’.⁴⁹ Yet with no locally produced wheat available, settlers were forced to fill their home-made ovens with imported flour.

In 1931, the colonists – still living in tents – welcomed an Argentine agronomist, Carlos Kempfski, to help them introduce new varieties of wheat to the Chaco.⁵⁰ This was not Kempfski’s first experience transplanting a familiar crop to a foreign climate. In the 1920s he helped Dutch authorities introduce wheat in Java. The imported flour Paraguayan Mennonites relied on was the result of another success story in Kempfski’s Argentine home, where settlers had converted the pampas into a sea of wheat. Yet he had little luck after repeat trips to the Chaco. To Mennonites’ dismay, Kempfski emerged convinced that the region was unsuitable for wheat production and identified a host of alternative crops, including sweet potatoes and manioc. The latter, he boasted, yielded 20 times more efficiently than wheat and was the ‘food of the poor’ across South America. As to the cultural fixation on wheat, Kempfski concluded unsympathetically, ‘we have here a case that demonstrates that it is many times indispensable to oblige people to [pursue] their own happiness’.⁵¹

Mennonites were not so easily persuaded to trade a familiar cash crop for the ‘food of the poor’, abandoning a market-oriented relationship to the land for one grounded in subsistence. However, they did experiment with one cash crop identified by Kempfski. Over the following decade their annual cotton production increased from 10,000 to 700,000 kg.⁵² In hopeful articles, writers regularly referred to this ‘white gold’ and marvelled at their transformation from northern grain farmers to southern cotton planters.⁵³ Yet the cash-poor colonists continued to spend a disproportionate amount of this meagre income importing Argentine wheat. An article on new foods didactically intoned that colonists should seek to ‘become

⁴⁸ Alberto Gerchunoff, *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*, trans. Prudencio de Pereda (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), p. 43.

⁴⁹ ‘Die Mennonitenfrau im Chaco Paraguay’, *Mennoblatt*, Dec. 1933.

⁵⁰ Siemens, ‘Die ersten erfolgreichen Weizenproben im paraguayischen Chaco’, *Mennoblatt*, Dec. 1931.

⁵¹ Carlos Kempfski, *La agricultura en el Chaco Paraguayo* (Buenos Aires, Librería del Plata, 1948), p. 38. Earlier published as Carlos Kempfski, *Die Landwirtschaft im paraguayischen Chaco* (Buenos Aires: Mercur, 1931).

⁵² Calvin Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors: Mennonite and Indigenous Relations in the Paraguayan Chaco* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), p. 136.

⁵³ Siemens, ‘Weißes Geld’, *Mennoblatt*, April 1934.

independent from imported white flour', while acknowledging that Mennonite women continued to bake bread on a daily basis.⁵⁴

By 1933 the issue had come to a head in a compelling juxtaposition of articles by an anonymous 'farmer' and 'farmer's son'. The former expressed frustration with volatile cotton prices and high transportation costs to distant Asunción but refused to abandon wheat. Sorghum, he scoffed, 'is a good product for cattle but not for humans'.⁵⁵ In the following edition of *Mennoblatt*, the 'farmer's son' responded stridently with what he admitted were some 'heretical views' – his turn of phrase acknowledging the spiritual appeal of bread among his fellow colonists. He ridiculed the obsessive consumption of bread with every meal, arguing that it was a habit of the 'bread-rich in pre-war Russia'. He concluded this generational critique by arguing that the 'management of consumption' would guarantee economic survival.⁵⁶ Another article, entitled 'Our Existence Question', reiterated this. 'We have to adapt to local conditions', its author, identified anonymously as 'a Fernheimer', began, 'and not necessarily want to eat what is grown abroad'.⁵⁷ Yet despite this seemingly sound advice, and the incorporation of many new products into the colonists' diet, years later Hans Neufeldt was still chastising his fellow colonists whose indulgence in 'the flour sack is destroying us financially'.⁵⁸

These colonists spoke with precision about whether a food-item recognisable as bread could be produced with varying portions of wheat flour. Such discussions took place in the context of extreme famine in the Soviet Union. In the Ukrainian Mennonite communities that these refugees had left behind women cooked beets 'normally used to feed livestock' and foraged for mushrooms. While abandoning many traditional foodways they also 'devised ways of baking even a semblance of the fluffy white or heavy rye bread that was symbolic of better times', with 'sorghum, a grain hitherto disdained ... added liberally'.⁵⁹ In a new hemisphere, Paraguayan Mennonites struggled with scarcity and came to similar conclusions. The 'farmer's son' suggested that sorghum might not leaven in a conventional way but was equally nutritious and that manioc and rice flour were acceptable substitutes for wheat. The 'Fernheimer' advocated for manioc flour (tapioca), the primary ingredient in the ubiquitous Paraguayan cheese bread, the *chipa*. Others, like the 'farmer', acknowledged that some sorghum could be substituted but felt it lacked consistency and that pure sorghum-bread 'does not

⁵⁴ 'Ein Arbeitstag der Chacobäuerin'.

⁵⁵ 'Ein Bauer', 'Unser Absatz (1)', *Mennoblatt*, April 1933.

⁵⁶ 'Ein Bauernsohn', 'Unser Absatz (2)', *Mennoblatt*, May 1933.

⁵⁷ 'Ein Fernheimer', 'Unsere Existenzfrage', *Mennoblatt*, June 1933.

⁵⁸ Hans Neufeldt, 'Quo vadis Fernheim? Viehzucht', *Mennoblatt*, July 1937.

⁵⁹ Epp, 'Semiotics', p. 417.

give strength or hold together when baking'. The author of 'Our Existence Question' challenged this assumption and insisted that a well-known chemist in Asunción could be enlisted to 'scientifically' vindicate his viewpoint. In the absence of leavening, he felt a simple high-edged cake pan would suffice. His suggestion might have proved galling to the Mennonite women who actually laboured to produce the colony's bread and were well-known for maintaining and trading their yeast cultures.⁶⁰

To the outsider these discussions about everyday consumption appear mundane. But in reality they were arguments about the nature and direction of the Mennonite colonial endeavour; this was not easily separated from the science of yeast fermentation or the structural integrity of bread. The original Canadian colonists arrived in the Chaco with the Paraguayan president's demand that they transform the 'green hell' of the Chaco into a 'garden'.⁶¹ Gardening was an appropriate metaphor, intimately linked with Protestant 'ceremonies of possession' in the New World.⁶² Like the 'cultural work' of other German farmers in the South American tropics this mission intersected with 'civilizing and whitening discourses'.⁶³ Yet while the Mennonite presence implied a profound transformation of the central Chaco – from a fugitive landscape into a domesticated agrarian one – others argued that a corresponding change had to take place among the transplanted colonists. This emerging discourse of self-sufficiency jarred against a cultural relationship with a product that could now only be imported.

Some were unwilling to accept the alienation of their agricultural production and domestic consumption. In 1937, one-third of Russian Mennonites abandoned the Chaco for a new colony in East Paraguay. The desire to again grow wheat was chief among their concerns, and they were moderately successful. Those that remained in the Chaco never fully shed their attachment to wheat. When sociologist J.W. Fretz visited Fernheim in the 1950s he found that 'many housewives mix sorghum with wheat flour to produce excellent raised breads [with] mixtures of between 25 to 50% sorghum'.⁶⁴ Yet he conceded that an excessive portion of colony income was spent on imported flour and that, given the chance, colonists would prefer to farm wheat. It is equally telling that on the seventieth anniversary of Russian Mennonite settlement in the Chaco, Edgar Stoesz – a long-serving director with the Mennonite Central

⁶⁰ Voth, 'Mennonite Food', p. 77.

⁶¹ Stoesz and Stackley, *Garden in the Wilderness*, p. 1.

⁶² Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁶³ Frederik Schulze, 'Nation and Migration: German-Speaking and Japanese Immigrants in Brazil, 1850–1945', in Foote and Goebel (eds.), *Immigration and National Identities*, p. 125.

⁶⁴ J.W. Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay: The Story of Mennonite Colonization in South America* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1953), p. 136.

Committee – recounted Fernheim’s successful progress in three stages: ‘death, need and bread’.⁶⁵

‘What Sad Progress’: Pacifists and Patriots in the Chaco War

In 1932 Mennonite colonists were struggling with survival, disease and new cash crops in an isolated environment, when ‘storm clouds [appeared] on the political horizon’.⁶⁶ Juan Belaieff passed through the colony and assured Mennonites that rising tensions with Bolivia would amount to little. Shortly after, Bolivian forces surprised Paraguayans at nearby Fort Boquerón and the Chaco War began. President Eusebio Ayala’s official visit, plans for which had been announced only recently and which had produced a flurry of excitement in the colony, was postponed indefinitely and the once marginal colony found itself on the frontlines of two belligerent armies and the front pages of international newspapers.

‘Fighting still continues in the Chaco, and the Mennonites, a peaceful non-combatant people, seem to be the immediate cause of all the trouble’, wrote Roland Abercrombie in an article for the Chicago-based newspaper *The Christian Century*.⁶⁷ In this reading, Mennonite settlement in the contested Chaco on behalf of the Paraguayan government was the final provocation that led to war with Bolivia. He lamented that these Russian refugees had fallen, once again, into harm’s way. Even prior to the war, colonist Fritz Kliever noted that this ‘irony of fate’ – that pacifist refugees had been resettled in a conflict zone and perhaps provoked a war – was a recurring theme in journalistic coverage of the dispute.⁶⁸ Russian papers took the opportunity to suggest that Mennonite colonists were another sort of ‘pawn’, hostage to the interests of imperial powers and international oil companies.⁶⁹ Bolivian journalists too sought to discredit the colonists. Noting the visit of delegates from the League of Nations to the Mennonite colonies in 1933, *La Razón* argued ‘the Mennonite colonies do not deserve to be called as such’ and derided them as scarcely more than ‘ranching outposts ... a tool to achieve an effective [but] false propaganda about an alleged work of colonisation’.⁷⁰ A *New York Times* report conceded that Paraguay had ‘relied

⁶⁵ Stoesz and Stackley, *Garden in the Wilderness*, p. 89.

⁶⁶ Siemens, ‘Gewitterwolken am politischen Horizont’, *Mennoblatt*, Aug. 1932.

⁶⁷ Roland Abercrombie, ‘Peaceful Pawns in the Chaco Conflict’, *Mennonite Weekly Review* (Newton, KS), 25 Oct. 1933, reprinted from *The Christian Century*.

⁶⁸ Kliever, *Mennoblatt*, Nov. 1931.

⁶⁹ Jakob Martens, ‘La Guerra del Chaco vivida en la cárcel soviética’, in Peter P. Klassen (ed.), *Kaputi Mennonita: arados y fusiles en la Guerra del Chaco* (Asunción: Impr. Modelo, 1976), p. 103.

⁷⁰ ‘Los delegados civiles de la Liga visitaron las colonias Menonitas del Chaco Boreal’, *La Razón* (La Paz, Bolivia), 7 Dec. 1933.

considerably upon hoe and plow as well as upon armaments, [and] it has used [Mennonite] colonisation as a ... weapon'.⁷¹ Whether cynical or sympathetic, each article invoked a profound dissonance between Mennonites and war.

While the colonists' pacifist theology placed them conspicuously out of place in this bellicose environment it also offered a response. Nikolai Siemens masterfully articulated this 'anti-modern' Mennonite critique:

Storm clouds rise and rise. Lightning cuts through the sky. In place of the sought-after peace that we have searched for since the Soviet persecutions, we are surrounded by war and the cries of battle. It seems that *our* Chaco Boreal has become 'modern' with planes, cannons, munitions, enormous trucks, uniforms, armed soldiers, and platoon after platoon heading to the front as cannon fodder. What sad progress! What misery looms over *our* beloved patria, how unfortunate for *our* virgin colonies, *our* fields and *our* children! That God send a prompt and peaceful solution to this serious conflict.⁷²

He brought together pathetic fallacy, the visceral sounds of war, a despairing natural world, 'virgin' colonies engulfed in the maelstrom, an affirmation of loyalty to country and a divine plea for peace – all these elements tied together by the possessive adjective for colony, Chaco and nation. He also included a reference to the collective memory of Mennonite persecution in Russia. Yet the Mennonite situation in the Chaco was markedly different. Over the following three years, colonists proved neither pawns nor victims. Food security, rather than pacifism, structured their wartime relationship with Paraguayan forces.

In October 1932, the Paraguayan High Command petitioned the Mennonite colonies for desperately needed wagons and ox drivers to move provisions from the terminus of Casado's railway through the colonies and up to the front. The rainy season was about to begin and motorised transport floundered in the Chaco mud. After an intense debate at a general meeting of the colony, Fernheimers agreed to the request. They felt that the privileges Paraguay had granted them required a return of good faith.⁷³ Mennonite animal traction joined hastily requisitioned Paraguayan mules, horses and oxen in 'the creation of an organic army that benefitted from its own "backwardness"'.⁷⁴ Rather than petroleum, this army depended on water from a network of wells dug by Fernheim's settlers over the last two years. The colony's sorghum that a colonist scoffed was only 'good for cattle' made excellent fodder for military pack animals.

⁷¹ 'Mennonites Talk of Leaving', *New York Times*, 14 Feb. 1933.

⁷² Siemens, 'Noch weiter Gewitterwolken', *Mennoblatt*, Sept. 1932; emphasis added.

⁷³ Siemens, 'Krieg und Kriegsopfer', *Mennoblatt*, Oct. 1932.

⁷⁴ Carlos Gómez Florentín, 'Energy and Environment in the Chaco War', in Chesterton (ed.), *The Chaco War*, p. 136.

With official support, colonists enthusiastically availed themselves of entrepreneurial opportunities afforded by war. Asunción's markets, several weeks away by wagon, rail and steamship, had quite literally arrived at their doorstep. Direct sales to Paraguayan troops provided crucial income to the cash-poor colonists. On the way to pick up another costly shipment of Argentine flour, Martin Dueck and his companion loaded their ox cart with eggs to sell to soldiers heading towards the front.⁷⁵ A note from the Fernheim cooperative in 1934 documented the sale of peanuts and beans to the army.⁷⁶ Barter was also common between Mennonites and thirsty and malnourished Paraguayan soldiers. The latter were not above selling military goods for watermelon and other produce. The combined economic importance of these anecdotal and official exchanges could be felt scarcely a year into the war. In contrast to Siemens' grave predictions, an anonymous 'farmer' worried that the end of war-time markets would signal a true disaster for the colony.⁷⁷

As their decision of 1932 and Siemens' invocation of the words 'our beloved patria' indicated, the Mennonite colonists felt that they owed a show of gratitude to the Paraguayan nation. With the presidential visit indefinitely postponed, colonists expressed patriotic affiliation through food. Humanitarian aid – along with Christmas meal-time hospitality to officers – fitted comfortably within a religious framework of pacifist philanthropy. In Paraguay, as with settlements in Russia, Canada and Mexico, Mennonite colonists were freed from many central aspects of modern citizenship in exchange for farming the frontier and feeding the nation. For pacifist Mennonites in wartime, feeding wounded soldiers was a performance of this agrarian – rather than legal – form of citizenship that was contingent on their transformation of the Chaco's intractable landscape into an agricultural emporium. In 1934, Dr Juan Boettner, a German-Paraguayan doctor at Isla Poi, published an official thanks on behalf of the military hospital. A colony delegation had visited with a gift of peanuts, yams, manioc, squash, sweet buns, eggs, chickens and confectionery. The food spoke to the immediate needs of the army but it also represented a symbolic fulfilment of the long-term national vision for Mennonite colonisation. The gifts, Boettner proudly stated, were a crucial contribution of 'products of Paraguayan lands, made by Mennonite hands'.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Martin T. Dueck, 'Entre matones', in Klassen (ed.), *Kaputi Mennonita*, p. 150.

⁷⁶ Abram J. Löwen, 'Die Fernheimer Kooperative', *Mennoblatt*, May 1934.

⁷⁷ 'Ein Bauer', 'Unser Absatz (1)', *Mennoblatt*, April 1933.

⁷⁸ Juan Boettner, *Mennoblatt*, July 1934. In February of 1935, K. Neufeld wrote of another delivery of humanitarian aid and the Mennonites' 'special relationship' with the Paraguayan command: 'Nach Camacho', *Mennoblatt*, Feb. 1935.

When the war ended in 1935, the colonists held a festival to celebrate the Paraguayan victory.⁷⁹ The assembled crowd cheered the president of the republic. Though not there in person, Ayala would reciprocate wartime loyalty with the confidence of the nation by telling the Mennonites to invite more of their own, 'because your people are always welcome to us'.⁸⁰ Whether disingenuous or heartfelt, loyalty to the Paraguayan cause made sense in 1935 as Mennonites were surrounded by thousands of troops and had established economic relations with the occupying force. However, another anecdote complicates this narrative. When soldiers brought news of a ceasefire to Fernheim, colonists hurriedly assembled a group of Mennonite schoolchildren to serenade victorious troops as they passed through the village. Yet unsure of the exact wording of the Paraguayan national anthem, the gathering proceeded to launch into something more familiar, a hearty rendition of the *Deutschlandlied* ('Deutschland über Alles').⁸¹

The awkward moment was far from atypical. Throughout the war and beyond, Mennonites – who originally considered naming their main village Hindenburg – expressed persistent affection for all things German. In October 1931 Siemens narrated a typical trip to the railway where settlers collected another load of Argentine flour.⁸² Around the fire at night wagon-drivers waxed nostalgic about 'the German mother country, where we were welcomed as guests so warmly [in 1929] ...' Germany occupied a privileged place as a waypoint in a Russian Mennonite's exodus. In Paraguay a German identity could be practical as well as nostalgic. In 1931 the German government was sending boxes of schoolbooks to the colonies and funding Mennonite teacher training in Asunción.⁸³ When two colony representatives travelled to Asunción and East Paraguay in 1931 they received support from Germans at every turn. The German ambassador arranged their meeting with Paraguayan officials and the two were comfortably quartered at the 'Hotel Munich'.⁸⁴ The property in East Paraguay that breakaway Fernheim colonists would settle in 1937 was donated by a sympathetic German landowner.⁸⁵

Just as fluency in Russian proved useful for Mennonite colonists who were able to converse with 'white Russians' like Juan Belaieff, German was something of a *lingua franca* during the Chaco War. The upper echelons of the

⁷⁹ Siemens, 'Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz!', *Mennoblatt*, July 1935.

⁸⁰ Gerhard Ratzlaff, 'An Historical-Political Study of the Mennonites in Paraguay' (M.A. thesis, California State University at Fresno, 1974), p. 128.

⁸¹ Siemens, 'Fernheim in den Friedenstagen', *Mennoblatt*, June 1935.

⁸² Siemens, 'Eine Reise von Fernheim bis Endstation', *Mennoblatt*, Oct. 1931.

⁸³ Ratzlaff, 'An Historical-Political Study', p. 143.

⁸⁴ Gerhard Isaak and Kornelius Langemann, 'Unsere Reise durch Paraguay', *Mennoblatt*, March 1931.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Paraguayan military contained many former German military officers and, in stories about the war, a linguistic ally always turned up at the opportune moment. When the Paraguayan army established itself at Trébol near Fernheim the 30,000-strong garrison put a great strain on Mennonite wells. Colonists captured the everyday presence of Paraguayan soldiers in photos like the one from 1932 that appears as [Figure 3](#). They also enforced rationing through the cooperation of General Nikolai Erne, a fellow Russo-German exile who was a ‘known friend of the Mennonites, for his ancient Baltic German stock’.⁸⁶ When Siemens brought food donations to Fort Toledo’s hospital he was welcomed by the German-speaking Dr Recalde.⁸⁷

This string of encounters was not coincidental. Nor was the fact that Paraguayan presidents Eligio and Eusebio Ayala, with whom the colonists enjoyed privileged relationships, spoke German fluently. Germans had established themselves across Latin America over the preceding century, welcomed by countries that, in the racial ideology of the day, sought to ‘whiten’ the nation through northern European immigration. German business and trade interests challenged Anglo-American capital in the Southern Cone.⁸⁸ German officers had trained the armies of Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia before the First World War and, with Germany military operations banned under the Treaty of Versailles, many returned to Latin America. The chief commander of the Bolivian forces was Hans Kundt and the upper echelons of the Paraguayan military contained many German officers. German companies like Staudt and Co. were essential to colonisation endeavours on all three sides of the Chaco.⁸⁹ Amongst ethnic Germans in the Río de la Plata region, interest in National Socialism showed a surge in the 1930s as German-speakers actively debated their place within Hitler’s global *Volksgemeinschaft*.⁹⁰ Fernheim, for all its remoteness, was no exception.

A central figure in the colony’s identification with Germany was Walter Quiring. He spent a year living in Fernheim in the early 1930s. While the agronomist Carlos Kempfski was assessing the success of transplanted wheat, Quiring, a committed National Socialist working for the German Foreign Institute, took part in an increasingly politicised conversation about the status of transplanted German communities. In the regional context of the

⁸⁶ Heinrich Friesen, ‘Trébol se convierte en un fortín militar’, in Klassen (ed.), *Kaputi Mennonita*, p. 80.

⁸⁷ Siemens, ‘Fortín Toledo’, *Mennoblatt*, March 1933, in Klassen (ed.), *Kaputi Mennonita*, p. 109.

⁸⁸ Ronald Newton, *The ‘Nazi Menace’ in Argentina, 1931–1947* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 19.

⁸⁹ Julio Lema, *Las industrias del Gran Chaco y la empresa colonizadora Staudt y compañía* (Tarija [Bolivia]: Velocidad, 1912).

⁹⁰ Newton, *The ‘Nazi Menace’ in Argentina*, p. 80; Krista O’Donnell, Renate Bridenthal and Nancy Reagin (eds.), *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

Figure 3. *Soldiers, Trébol, 1932*

Source: Photo courtesy of Archiv der Kolonie Fernheim (Filadelfia, Paraguay).

Chaco War, Mennonite colonists appeared as one more territorial incursion in a process of internal colonisation alongside ranchers, tannin industries, missions and forts. But for Quiring, they formed one part of a constellation of German satellite communities around the world.⁹¹ The ethno-nationalist concept of ‘*Volk*’ suggested that colonists had a particular duty to this transnational community alongside a network of support they could draw from. Quiring arrived with a short-wave radio courtesy of the German government.⁹² The Mennonite colonists could now follow dramatic developments taking place 11,000 km away.

Shortly after the Reichstag fire and Hitler’s consolidation of power in June 1933, Fernheim’s mayor (David Löwen) and spiritual leader (Nikolai Wiebe) signed a declaration of sympathy for his government.⁹³ They wanted Germans to know that ‘in the deep jungles of the Paraguayan Chaco, far away from civilisation and culture’, dedicated German settlers were engaged in a noble pioneer effort. In order that their declaration appear more than simple rhetoric, they attached evidence of their agricultural success. Even as colonists were sending humanitarian relief to wounded Paraguayan soldiers at Isla

⁹¹ Wilhelm Fielitz, *Das Stereotyp des wolhyniendeutschen Umsiedlers: Popularisierungen zwischen Sprachinselforschung und nationalsozialistischer Propaganda* (Marburg: Elwert, 2000), p. 179.

⁹² Ratzlaff, ‘An Historical-Political Study’, p. 144.

⁹³ D. Löwen and N. Wiebe, ‘Die Mennonitensiedlungen des paraguayischen Chaco und die nationale Erhebung in Deutschland’, *Mennoblatt*, June 1933.

Poi – a field hospital administered by the German Dr Boettner – a 1,500 kg shipment of Mennonite peanuts left Puerto Casado, bound for German schoolchildren and high-ranking officials from Goebbels to Hitler. While Boettner rejoiced at ‘products of Mennonite hands and Paraguayan lands’, the German press effused over this display of productive farming from one wayward segment of global *Volksgemeinschaft*.⁹⁴

Each of these symbolic agrarian exchanges provided material possibilities as well as a particular sense of place and purpose for Mennonite colonists in their new environment. As with their professed loyalty to Paraguay, Germanness also intersected with Mennonite concerns about food production and consumption. When a Mennonite delegation visited Casado’s experimental farm in 1934 they met with its manager Ernst Oehring, a German agronomist conducting trials with winter wheat they hoped would succeed on their farms. Arriving to find Oehring and family at work in the fields, Siemens enthused: ‘a German, no matter where in the world he is, cannot kill the day idly’.⁹⁵ Within the colony, National Socialism could also be mobilised in internal conflicts. When colonists chaffed against the strict control of Fernheim’s cooperative or considered abandoning the Chaco, the National Socialist civic slogan that stood above Hitler’s portrait in the colony hall, ‘Common Good before Self-Interest’, provided an authoritative response.⁹⁶ Hitler’s political programme even surfaced in debates about self-sufficiency and imported wheat flour. As much as a symbol of perpetual or enduring displacement, Mennonites felt that their Germanness could offer a reinigorated localism, a uniquely German way of living and farming in an unfamiliar landscape.

According to Gerhard Ratzlaff, early Mennonite support for National Socialism can be seen as a stop-gap measure for a people who were no longer Russian but not quite Paraguayan.⁹⁷ Yet during the Chaco War, Paraguayan and German loyalties were simultaneously enacted by Mennonite colonists who sent peanuts to Hitler and rations to wounded soldiers. Given the wide support for National Socialism among a large swath of Paraguayan society, these two forms of symbolic agrarian exchange were, if anything, actively complimentary as Mennonites negotiated, traded and conversed in what appeared to be a profoundly German Paraguay. In light of this, to patriotically sing ‘Deutschland über Alles’ to a victorious Paraguayan army trained and commanded by numerous German expatriates was less of a nationalist *faux pas* than it might seem. Fernheim’s support for National Socialism diminished in the wake of a well-documented internal conflict and Allied victory while Paraguayan nationalists increasingly embraced a mestizo identity

⁹⁴ Ratzlaff, ‘An Historical-Political Study’, p. 148.

⁹⁵ Siemens, ‘Chacra experimental’, *Mennoblatt*, Aug. 1934.

⁹⁶ ‘Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz’, *Mennoblatt*, Oct. 1936.

⁹⁷ Ratzlaff, ‘An Historical-Political Study’, p. 140.

rooted in the use of the Guaraní language.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, Mennonites continued to engage Paraguayaness through Germanness over the following decades, especially in relation to dictator Alfredo Stroessner, himself of German descent and a strong supporter of Mennonite colonisation.⁹⁹ It was a move common to several immigrant groups across Latin America in the post-war era, when promoting ‘foreignness’ as an asset in the service of national goals marked a shift from the assimilationist stance of earlier governments.¹⁰⁰

Mennonite Mission and Indigenous Foodways in the Post-War Chaco

In the closing months of the war, Siemens embarked on a military-sponsored tour of the Chaco that hinted at the post-war place-making strategies of Mennonites. Waiting at Fort Camacho for his escort, he visited the cemetery and drew a comparison between the pioneer struggles of Mennonites and Paraguayan casualties. Both exercised a spatial and symbolic claim on the Chaco as they literally ‘embed the dead in this country’.¹⁰¹ As much as festive occasions, funerals could also be a place-making strategy, particularly when Mennonite dead were entombed in Paraguayan *palo borracho* trees. While Christmas framed novel encounters in a reassuringly familiar combination of ritual and language, grave-sites made an enduring claim for what was in fact a recent and tenuous occupation of space. In this gruesome accounting, both Paraguayans and colonists had purchased their dubious claims to the Chaco through mortal sacrifice.

Paradoxically, Siemens’ travels also revealed that Paraguayans and Mennonites were not owners of an empty frontier, but occupiers of an indigenous landscape that had been violently altered by war.¹⁰² Reaching the Pilcomayo, Siemens and his escort met with indigenous peoples of the Chaco including the displaced Toba and the Nivaclé. The culmination of the trip was a visit to a Salesian mission-station to the Nivaclé. Siemens described a productive settlement with a well-structured labour force in which everyone appeared ‘happy and satisfied in his duty’. He left convinced that the Salesians’ ‘perseverance in the work must sooner or later bear fruit’.

⁹⁸ For the internal conflict, see Thiesen et al., *Mennonite and Nazi? For Paraguay’s post-war Guaraní nationalism* see Chesterton, *The Grandchildren of Solano López*, pp. 138–46.

⁹⁹ Royden Loewen, *Horse-and-Buggy Genius: Listening to Mennonites Contest the Modern World* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), p. 167. Loewen’s Mennonite interviewees described Stroessner’s active support for their colonies. Chesterton links Stroessner’s support to Mennonites’ ‘Germanness’: *The Grandchildren of Solano López*, p. 146.

¹⁰⁰ Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, ‘Motherlands of Choice: Ethnicity, Belonging, and Identities among Jewish Latin Americans’, in Foote and Goebel (eds.), *Immigration and National Identities*, p. 141.

¹⁰¹ Siemens, ‘Zum Pilcomayo’.

¹⁰² See Capdevila et al., *Los hombres transparentes*.

As much a place of an utterly foreign indigenous culture, the mission environment was also a place of nostalgic return for Siemens. Before leaving Fernheim he had been unsure if the Salesian mission was run by Dutch or English missionaries, but he noted that a ‘proper German’ greeted him at the gate. At dinner that night, he was ecstatic to be offered ‘correctly marinated German pears’ for dessert. The assembled party sang German songs and an exhausted Siemens fell asleep wrapped in ‘warm German woollen blankets’.¹⁰³

At the time of Siemens’ visit Mennonite colonists stood on the verge of their own belated mission-work with the Enlhet. Over the following decades, this would expand into a large-scale evangelisation and land redistribution programme involving several indigenous groups. Scholarship on the indigenous–Mennonite encounter, largely produced by colony historians and other Mennonites, often has a ‘triumphalist or apologetic tenor’.¹⁰⁴ Beyond those works ‘no systematic historical research has been done on Mennonite–indigenous relations’.¹⁰⁵ Such an in-depth study is beyond the scope of this article, which is based to a great extent on *Mennoblatt*; as a source, this colony newspaper offers an inherently singular perspective on that exchange. However, I suggest that the tensions between Mennonite and indigenous foodways emerging from newspaper accounts can reveal the rationale and limits of early Mennonite proselytisation. Placed in dialogue with the above accounts of farming and war-time production, *Mennoblatt*’s reporting on mission-work deepens our perspective on Mennonite place-making in the Chaco as a broader struggle over foodways.

While Mennonites immediately looked to the Enlhet as a source of labour, trade and knowledge, the indigenous presence received sporadic treatment in *Mennoblatt* during the first years of settlement. Dr Boettner’s deft linkage of sovereignty and labour (‘Paraguayan lands, Mennonite hands’)¹⁰⁶ ignored the indigenous hands and lands that made possible the humanitarian donation of food to Isla Poi. The encounter between sedentary, Russian Mennonite farmers and a semi-nomadic indigenous people would seem to lend itself to hyperbole on the part of colonists. A May 1931 photo from colony archives

¹⁰³ Siemens, ‘Zum Pilcomayo’.

¹⁰⁴ Ben Goossen, ‘Mennonites in Latin America: A Review of the Literature’, *Conrad Grebel Review*, 34: 3 (2016), p. 258. For the triumphalist reading see Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay*. Colony historian Peter Klassen offers a mild critique of early sedentarisation attempts but, as a member of the colony, defends Mennonite–indigenous labour relations against criticism by Paraguayan anthropologist Miguel Chase Sardi and others. Peter P. Klassen, *Die Mennoniten in Paraguay: Begegnung mit Indianern und Paraguayern*, vol. 2 (Bolanden-Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1991); English translation by Gunther H. Schmitt: *Mennonites in Paraguay*, vol. 2, *Encounter with Indians and Paraguayans* (Kitchener: Pandora, 2002).

¹⁰⁵ Erick Langer, ‘Indigenous Peoples and the Chaco War: Power and Acquiescence in Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina’, in Chesterton (ed.), *The Chaco War*, p. 133.

¹⁰⁶ Juan Boettner, *Mennoblatt*, July 1934.

depicts a gathering of Enlhet and Mennonites, some seated, others standing, in front of Enlhet grass dwellings (Figure 4). Mayor Franz Heinrichs (far right) stands casually with jacket open and a hand on the shoulder of the Enlhet man next to him. Two other Enlhet hold stylised poses with bows drawn and aimed towards the camera. To the viewer the photo appears orchestrated to represent a fundamental incommensurability, the unprecedented and curious meeting of two radically different cultural, spiritual and social systems. Yet such reflections are absent from early issues of *Mennoblatt*.¹⁰⁷

While the 1931 photograph evokes a colonial narrative of first contact, the preceding half-century provided the Enlhet with an impressive array of experience for assessing the possibilities and perils of the Mennonite presence. The travels of anthropologist-explorers Alfred Métraux and Hans Krieg were a continuation of the host of ‘exploratory commissions’ that passed through the Chaco, alternatively forging alliances and engaging in hostilities with indigenous groups along the way.¹⁰⁸ The tannin industry at Puerto Casado and other key ports along the Paraguay River relied on indigenous labour, while the Anglican missionary Barbrooke Grubb conducted mission-work among the Enxhet (southern Enlhet) from 1889 as part of the broader efforts of the South American Missionary Society.¹⁰⁹ These extractive, exploratory and evangelical regimes coloured the Enlhet’s subsequent experience with the Mennonites.

It is clear from accounts of the early days of the Chaco War that indigenous labour was already critical to the colonies. On 29 July 1932 Bolivian planes strafed Filadelfia. When planes flew over the colony again on 3 August, Siemens noted the Enlhet labourers’ panic with a paternalistic calm.¹¹⁰ They ran from place to place, taking cover on Mennonite patios and woefully proclaiming in the mixture of Spanish, German and Enlhet that had become the improvised language of indigenous–Mennonite exchange, ‘Boliviano, es kaputi menonita, es kaputi lengua, todo kaputi!’¹¹¹ The phrase implied a shared suffering for Mennonite and Enlhet. In reality their wartime experiences diverged sharply. The strafing was the only direct attack on the colonies during the war. When Bolivian soldiers arrived in Fernheim in the early days of the conflict they presented colonists with a note informing them that the colony was now under Bolivian control.¹¹² Mennonite property and position

¹⁰⁷ Klassen, *Mennonites in Paraguay*, vol. 2, p. 68.

¹⁰⁸ Hans Krieg, *Chaco-Indianer: ein Bilderatlas* (Stuttgart: Strecker und Schröder, 1934). Alfred Métraux, ‘Ethnography of the Chaco’, in Julian H. Steward (ed.), *Handbook of South American Indians*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1946), pp. 197–370.

¹⁰⁹ Barbrooke Grubb, *An Unknown People in an Unknown Land* (London: Seeley and Co., 1911).

¹¹⁰ Siemens, ‘Gewitterwolken am politischen Horizont’.

¹¹¹ Klassen (ed.), *Kaputi Mennonita*, p. 76.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Figure 4. *Early Encounter of Mennonites and Enlhet, Schönbrunn village (Fernheim), May 1931*



Source: Photo courtesy of Archiv der Kolonie Fernheim (Filadelfia, Paraguay).

were officially guaranteed by both the Paraguayan and Bolivian military even if, as oral histories with Mennonite colonists make clear, Mennonites were victims of sexual assault and theft on the part of Paraguayan soldiers stationed nearby.¹¹³ In contrast, for the indigenous peoples of the Gran Chaco, the war was a demographic disaster that resulted in mass displacement.¹¹⁴ While the fighting was centred near the Mennonite communities in the early years of the war, many indigenous inhabitants fled to remote regions. As the front moved away, the Enlhet returned to the relative safety of the colonies. Their decision to congregate in Fernheim and limit their traditional spatial mobility was not a free one. The choice was between two equally belligerent armies (both ‘whites that kill’) and Mennonites (‘whites that do not kill’).¹¹⁵ With additional post-Chaco War migrations, a haphazard, ad hoc and largely un-narrated interaction was replaced by a profusion of discourse on indigenous life, custom and future in *Mennoblatt*. This emerged alongside a concerted and unabashedly paternalistic Mennonite effort to regulate indigenous labour and begin religious indoctrination.

¹¹³ For example, Else Klassen, ‘Los soldados’, in *ibid.*, p. 121.

¹¹⁴ Klassen (ed.), *Kaputi Menmonita*, p. 76. For the war’s effects on distinct indigenous communities see Richard (ed.), *Mala guerra*.

¹¹⁵ Ernesto Unruh and Hannes Kalisch, ‘Salvación – ¿rendición? Los Enlhet y la guerra del Chaco’, in Richard (ed.), *Mala guerra*, p. 112.

In late 1934, Siemens began a discussion with Walter Quiring about the status of the Enlhet as a 'Chaco-Proletariat'.¹¹⁶ The language was suggestive for Mennonites, who had been targeted as *kulaks* after the Russian Revolution. The 'sinister civilisation has done its bit', he began; 'these are no longer the uncorrupted people from the past'. Nor were the Enlhet the pliable labour force that Mennonites had initially expected. According to Siemens, the Enlhet, once 'innocents of the bush', now preferred the easy target of cattle poaching to hunting deer or labouring on Mennonite farms. As a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church – which since the mid-nineteenth century had encouraged temperance among members previously known for their brewing and distilling – Siemens also criticised alcohol consumption among the Enlhet. Alcohol was an imported social evil, he began, 'by which a strong work force gradually perishes'. The latter comment revealed the economic as well as spiritual nature of his unease.

Siemens' references to 'corruption' also mirror those of anthropologist Hans Krieg, who passed through the Mennonite colonies in the years before the war in search of 'uncontacted' tribes and was equally dismissive of what he viewed as 'degeneracy' on the part of indigenous communities that had engaged with the outside world.¹¹⁷ Yet corruption could also signify an increasing sophistication. It becomes clear on reading his article 'Fernheimer Proletariat' that Siemens was principally concerned with maintaining a steady and inexpensive labour supply. Early Enlhet work on Mennonite farms had been organised around barter. The Enlhet, he lamented, 'now appreciate the value of money', demanding higher prices for the baskets and rope they produced. His concern betrayed the fact that, in the minds of colonists, the 'Indian question', exacerbated by war, was intimately linked to their own 'existence question'.

In March 1935, Walter Quiring offered a response to Siemens entitled 'Masters and Servants', in which he envisioned a new relationship between religion and labour that could govern Mennonite–indigenous relations in the Chaco.¹¹⁸ 'The era of cheap labour is irrevocably past', he decisively proclaimed; 'the German Mennonites have made an honourable name as colonisers, and now they have the chance to show whether they can solve a different, non-economic problem, the Indian question, satisfactorily'. In Quiring's interpretation, the *Indianerfrage* was a moral, rather than an economic, one. He argued that Mennonites had a duty to spread Christianity among the indigenous groups of the Chaco. Yet by his very logic the two could not be so easily

¹¹⁶ Siemens, 'Fernheimer Proletariat', *Mennoblatt*, Nov. 1934.

¹¹⁷ Erick D. Langer, *Expecting Pears from an Elm Tree: Franciscan Missions on the Chiriguano Frontier in the Heart of South America, 1830–1949* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 251.

¹¹⁸ Walter Quiring, 'Herren und Knechte', *Mennoblatt*, March 1935.

separated. Rather, a paternalistic spiritual leadership stood poised to validate a problematic labour relationship.

Such paternalism was not limited to *Mennoblatt*. Schoolchildren who had once learned Paraguayan songs and followed the progress of 'our *patria*' in class now submitted reports about 'our Indians'.¹¹⁹ The 'field work' that produced this assignment might have been informed by the visit that an anonymous 'central-schooler' and his brother made to a new indigenous encampment, which they shared with *Mennoblatt* readers in an article entitled 'A Visit to our Neighbours'.¹²⁰ The siblings rebuked an initial gesture of hospitality, expressed an anxious desire to leave, felt coerced into remaining, ate sparingly of what they later derisively described as a 'wonderful meal', exchanged a gift and beat a hasty retreat. The encounter reflected some of the profound discomfort and curiosity that reverberated through the colony at the large-scale presence of displaced indigenous communities.

Formal planning accompanied these unscripted exchanges. On 1 February 1935 Fernheim's mayor petitioned the Ministry of the Interior for the right to begin mission work among the Enlhet.¹²¹ He spoke to the Mennonites' agrarian and religious role in the spatial incorporation of the militarily secure Chaco. 'The purpose of this exercise', the document stated, 'is to more firmly *bind* these savages ["*Wilden*"] to the soil in order to bring them to gradually be useful citizens of the Paraguayan state'. Mennonites insisted that to achieve this sedentarisation in 'the right way' it was necessary to educate the Enlhet as devout Christians. As the accompanying debate between Siemens and Quiring revealed, these concerns with regulating indigenous mobility and religious conversion could not be separated from Mennonite interests in securing reliable labour.

The colonists' petition was approved. From late 1935 onwards, nearly every issue of *Mennoblatt* documented their fledgling mission. In September, the colony held a 'Missionsfest' fundraiser.¹²² In November, *Mennoblatt* reported on the formation of an organisation that would become known as 'Light to the Indians'.¹²³ Ninety-seven colonists representing the three church denominations in Fernheim pledged their support.¹²⁴ In the same month an Enlhet cacique named Antonio, who had given the Mennonites assurances that he

¹¹⁹ K. Neufeld, 'Unsere Indianer', *Mennoblatt*, Jul. 1935, in Klassen (ed.), *Kaputi Mennonita*, p. 110. Emphasis added.

¹²⁰ 'Ein Zentralschüler', 'Ein besuch bei unsern Nachbarn', *Mennoblatt*, May 1935.

¹²¹ 'Zur Indianer-Mission im Chaco', *Mennoblatt*, Feb. 1935.

¹²² Gerhard Giesbrecht, 'Missionsfest in Gnadenheim', *Mennoblatt*, Sept. 1935.

¹²³ Siemens, 'Licht den Indianern!', *Mennoblatt*, Nov. 1935.

¹²⁴ Harold S. Bender, A.E. Janzen and Ewald Goetz, 'Licht den Indianern (Light to the Indians)', *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, available at [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Licht_den_Indianern_\(Light_to_the_Indians\)&oldid=121219](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Licht_den_Indianern_(Light_to_the_Indians)&oldid=121219), last access 2 Oct. 2017.

would locate potential converts, brought 16 Enlhet settlers to the mission. Missionary Abraham Ratzlaff joyously narrated this arrival to *Mennoblatt's* readers.¹²⁵

Despite the triumphant tone of these articles, competing understandings of mobility and landscape challenged the Mennonite attempt to graft their settled agrarian lifestyle onto a semi-nomadic indigenous community. During his post-war tour of the Chaco, Siemens reflected that Mennonites' pioneering sacrifices and the Paraguayans' wartime casualties both served to 'embed' the dead in the land and, with them, each party's spatial claim to the Chaco. The Mennonite missionaries, as Fernheimer's mayor confidently stated, were also committed to the twin goals of sedentarisation and evangelisation in order to physically 'bind' the semi-nomadic Enlhet 'to the ground'. For settled agriculturalists the idea of being 'interred in' or 'bound to' the soil may have suggested an intimate connection to landscape. But these metaphors and practices of a sedentary society sat uncomfortably with Enlhet culture, which privileged mobility over property and treated the death of an individual not as a permanent claim to memorialised space but, rather, as an injunction to destroy the possessions of the deceased and vacate the site.¹²⁶ This disconnect was equally apparent in Mennonite missionaries' attempts to discourage infanticide – a practice they viewed as 'savage' but which reflected the exigencies of mobile indigenous society.¹²⁷

Tensions in the Mennonite–Enlhet encounter arose most clearly around access to food. 'The way to the heart is through the stomach', Siemens told readers in a mission report.¹²⁸ He had certainly observed this during his earlier visit to the Nivaclé mission.¹²⁹ Yet the platitude concealed a doubt. Not all food sources were valued equally. This much was revealed in the colonists' own struggles over consumption and their affective bond with wheat flour. It was equally evident in Siemens' earlier criticism of alcohol consumption and poaching among the Enlhet and the revulsion of the 'central-schooler' at being offered an indigenous meal. Mennonites' growing concern with indigenous foodways and 'appropriate' forms of consumption can be seen in the repeated distinction between food that the Enlhet obtained independently from the Chaco (bush food) and the sources controlled by the Mennonite missionaries (mission rations).

Food security formed a practical, rather than spiritual, appeal of the mission for the Enlhet. When cacique Antonio first arrived to negotiate with

¹²⁵ A. Ratzlaff, 'Die Lenguas kommen', *Mennoblatt*, Jan. 1936.

¹²⁶ John Renshaw, *The Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco: Identity and Economy* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 171.

¹²⁷ Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors*, p. 163.

¹²⁸ Siemens, 'Licht den Indianern!', *Mennoblatt*, Nov. 1935.

¹²⁹ Siemens, 'Zum Pilcomayo'.

missionaries Abraham Unger and Abraham Ratzlaff he was offered water for his yerba mate that the missionaries had hauled to the site. The hospitable gesture masked a deeper conflict. Siemens criticised indigenous poaching of Mennonite cattle but he also acknowledged that indigenous water sources were threatened as expanding Mennonite herds consumed ground water the Enlhet traditionally stored in reinforced depressions in the bush.¹³⁰ Missionaries soon enlisted colonists to dig a well at the mission-site and offered the Enlhet daily rations including beans, yerba mate and their prized wheat flour.¹³¹ However, when ration-supplies ran short, missionaries worried that, with little else to hold them there, the Enlhet would disperse into the bush or find work in nearby villages.¹³²

Indeed, the Enlhet arrived and departed at times indicating that they considered a stay in the mission-station part of their larger foraging activities. In December of 1935, seven men, four women and two children were reported as having settled in the mission, but they only did so after departing from their winter hunting grounds.¹³³ The same unnamed author displayed a hint of frustration when he claimed that, on occasion, the Enlhet were 'taken by their *Wanderlust*'. The *Wanderlust* that gave rise to this particular comment was the annual harvest of *algorrobo*, from whose sugary pods the Enlhet produced the alcoholic brew known as *chicha*. Rather than the imported evil described by Siemens, local alcohol production and consumption formed a central element in Enlhet cultural practice. The missionaries' use of the German term *Wanderlust* attributed a fanciful and romantic nature to what were in fact seasonal gathering practices on the part of the Enlhet. According to the Mennonites, whose own forefathers produced and consumed alcohol until a mid-nineteenth century religious move towards temperance, the Enlhet felt this movement outside the confines of the mission to be a return to their 'golden freedom'. It left the missionaries wondering when, if ever, they might direct the Enlhet 'to a higher purpose'.¹³⁴ The supplementing of mission rations with a host of traditionally procured foodstuffs produced further discomfort among the ration-dispensing missionaries. This much was evident in Siemens' account of the 1936 'Christmas with the Enlhet', in which he had pointedly acknowledged the gunfire from a nearby hunting party that interrupted the festive meal.¹³⁵ Ultimately the importance of the bush for foraging remained crucial for the Enlhet, while the allure of mission life was conditional.

¹³⁰ Siemens, 'Licht den Indianern!' *Mennoblatt*, Nov. 1935.

¹³¹ Anon., 'Zur Indianermission im Chaco', *Mennoblatt*, Dec. 1935.

¹³² A. and A. Ratzlaff, 'Indianerkost', *Mennoblatt*, March 1936.

¹³³ Anon., 'Zur Indianermission'.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Siemens, 'Weihnachten bei den Lenguas'.

The Mennonite–Enlhet relationship underwent a drastic reconfiguration in the years following the Chaco War. As the contradictions of their relationship grew with their proximity, the mission station emerged as one strategy for managing the different spatial demands of each group. Incorporation was to take the form of sedentarisation, permanent agriculture and housing, enclosure of private property and Christianisation. These were the stated goals of the Mennonite settlers in their 1935 petition in which they made a nimble rhetorical leap from their support of the Paraguayan forces during the war to their mission-work among the Enlhet in its aftermath. Yet *Mennoblatt* reveals a much greater ambivalence in the Enlhet’s own dexterous juggling of the new Mennonite mission and traditional foraging in the bush. Mennonite attempts to reform Enlhet food practices also cast into high relief their own precarious culture of production and consumption. The irony was particularly apparent when Mennonite missionaries attempted to substitute locally foraged food for imported flour – a product that they repeatedly failed to produce in the Chaco. Tellingly, their continued status as ‘model farmers’ was often dependent on semi-nomadic indigenous labour. These tensions remained central as, over the following decades, Mennonites forged relationships with other indigenous groups in the Chaco based on a logic of wage-labour and settled cash-cropping.

Conclusion

In his exhaustive study of rural Paraguay J.M.G. Kleinpenning argues that the central Chaco scarcely changed from the early colonial period to the end of the nineteenth century.¹³⁶ By the 1930s the situation had changed drastically. The fledgling colony of Fernheim became a node upon which the Paraguayan and Bolivian armies, missionaries, anthropologists, agronomists, national socialists and displaced indigenous groups converged, each exerting distinct but overlapping claims to place. The settler discourse of *Mennoblatt* provided one vision of the central Chaco as a space in which colonists, participants in this neo-colonial process, re-articulated those relationships towards their own ends. Their responses are particularly compelling because they were hardly inevitable. The Canadian Mennonites who established neighbouring Menno Colony in 1926 never founded a newspaper, refused to support the Paraguayan military, spurned connections with Nazi Germany and initiated mission-work only two decades after the founding of Fernheim’s paternalistic ‘Light to the Indian’. In contrast to their isolationist neighbours, Fernheimers negotiated seemingly incompatible subject positions – as pacifists and patriots – through the notion of humanitarian aid, while acknowledging their duty to the

¹³⁶ J.M.G. Kleinpenning, *Rural Paraguay 1870–1963: A Geography of Progress, Plunder and Poverty*, vol. 1 (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2009), p. 464.

Paraguayan nation in agrarian terms that infused their subsequent evangelical endeavour. Ironically, they interpreted an extensive list of privileges that explicitly freed Mennonites from state intervention as justification for a patriotic, and profitable, participation in the war effort. Surrounded by soldiers and then by displaced indigenous groups, these hasty articulations of colonist identity, as citizens and missionaries, were highly relevant ways of being in place.

In contrast, Fernheim's interest in Germany in the 1930s appears as a refusal of the specificity of place and a prizing of ethno-nationalism over localism. It mirrored the dietary preferences of Mennonite colonists, who soon successfully produced much of what would constitute a healthy and balanced diet in the Chaco but insisted on continuous and costly transfusions of Argentine wheat. Colonists spoke to their deep connection with Germany when they interpreted their new surroundings in reference to Schiller's poems, hung portraits of Hitler in the colony hall or celebrated 'German nights' in their villages. Yet their German nationalism was no more inevitable than a Paraguayan or missionary identity: the Russian Mennonites had left Prussia nearly a century before German unification. Rather, the geo-political climate of the 1930s facilitated this profitable reinvention of Germanness in Paraguay by which Mennonite colonists redefined themselves as part of a global *Volksgemeinschaft*. What tied this distant, comforting ideological affiliation to other forms of place-making was its everyday utility in the Chaco. Mennonites, who spoke little Spanish, confidently and intimately addressed fellow missionaries, military authorities, ministers, large landowners and even the president of Paraguay in German, and it was as fellow Germans that they informally exchanged peanuts for school materials and teacher training.

In the 1930s, the Mennonite decision to join a crowded mission-field alongside Anglicans, Franciscans and Salesians appears unremarkable. Yet for a sectarian and ethnically homogenous religious group that enforced endogamy among members and sought freedom from external influence through physical isolation and political privilege, their attention to their missionary obligations is slightly more unexpected. The missionary 'duty' of colonists was an invented tradition that offered linked answers to material, moral and existential questions about indigenous labour and the Mennonites' purpose in the Chaco.

These overlapping survival strategies provided the Mennonite colonists with a range of potential resources as they struggled with crop failures, war, an 'existence question' and an 'Indian question' in the early years of their settlement. Through Christmas celebrations, burial practices and discourses of self-sufficiency colonists sought to contain that uncertainty. At times they highlighted the artificiality of new foodways, as when colonist Peter Rahn marvelled at his own rapid transition from 'a Russian grain farmer' to a 'South

American [cotton] planter'.¹³⁷ At other moments they insisted upon the deep historical justification for relationships that were in reality equally novel. By recasting themselves as planters, patriots, Germans and missionaries, Mennonites also invoked a particular way of 'being in place' intimately connected to the ways they farmed and consumed. *Mennoblatt* provides a unique window on the process by which Mennonites laid claim to the foreign, and highly contested, environment of the Gran Chaco.

While this article has elected to engage in a close reading of a migrant community newspaper, it would be a mistake to overemphasise the singularity of the Mennonite case. Certainly Paraguayan Mennonites settled in a particularly remote region at an especially conflictive moment, and their early work with the Enlhet would lead to one of the largest non-governmental indigenous land redistribution projects in Latin America. Yet Siemens' attempts to reconcile new ways of producing and consuming through print culture finds several compelling parallels, including Alberto Gerchunoff's celebration of an invented 'Jewish Gaucho' identity on the Argentine pampas two decades earlier. Furthermore, in their simultaneous articulation of national and transnational identities, Mennonites resembled not only fellow 'ethnic German' enclaves across the Río de la Plata region but also Japanese, Arab and Jewish immigrants who celebrated imperial expansion, Arab nationalism and Zionism respectively in the inter-war years. Such nationalism in the diaspora did not necessarily imply a political project of 'return' but, rather, offered migrants ways of reconciling themselves to new positions within Latin American nations. Finally, in negotiating a form of telluric citizenship based on their agrarian production, Mennonites adopted a place-making strategy (of agricultural work as 'cultural work') employed by a diverse panoply of immigrants.¹³⁸ As such, the Mennonite 'example' contributes directly to a broader discussion of immigrant identity and foodways in modern Latin American history.¹³⁹ By introducing, producing and adopting foods to sustain their settlements and 'feed the nation', such migrants sought to make their conspicuous presence more palatable to host societies and their own communities alike.

¹³⁷ Peter Rahn, 'Was fehlt uns? – und wie kann uns geholfen werden [*sic*]', *Mennoblatt*, May 1931, proposed this idea to fellow colonists at an early stage. It was repeated on the fifth anniversary of Russian Mennonite settlement in the Chaco in Johann Löwen, 'Fünf Jahre Chaco', *Mennoblatt*, May 1935.

¹³⁸ Frederik Schulze, 'Nation and Migration: German and Japanese-Speaking Immigrants in Brazil, 1850–1945', in Foote and Goebel (eds.), *Immigration and National Identities*, p. 125. Julian Lim, 'Chinos and Paisanos: Chinese–Mexican Relations in the Borderlands', *Pacific Historical Review*, 79: 1 (2010), pp. 50–85.

¹³⁹ Brazil provides a particular rich example both in farming regions as well as in the mass marketing of immigrant dishes – from Syrian-Lebanese *kibe* and Japanese *yakisoba* to German *spätzle* – as regional cuisine.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Este artículo explora el asentamiento de menonitas rusos en el Chaco paraguayo durante los años de la Guerra del Chaco. Dichos colonos se involucraron en una serie de prácticas aparentemente contradictorias – desde prácticas medioambientales y políticas hasta espirituales y culturales – que sirvieron para solidificar su tenue reclamo sobre un paisaje no familiar y altamente disputado. Las ideas de seguridad alimentaria – vista tanto en términos de producción como de consumo – vincularon estos diversos ejercicios. En el Chaco paraguayo, estos antiguos agricultores rusos de trigo experimentaron con nuevos granos y novedosos patrones de producción y consumo de alimentos. Aunque pacifistas, ellos apoyaron con sus productos a los esfuerzos militares de Paraguay, y también enviaron sus granos a la Alemania Nazi. Finalmente, como grupo étnico practicante de la endogamia y que buscaban el aislamiento de sus vecinos, ellos inesperadamente empezaron una campaña para evangelizar a la población indígena del Chaco centrada, en parte, en mejorar la dieta ‘deficiente’ de estos últimos.

Spanish keywords: Gran Chaco, patrones de producción y consumo de alimentos, colono, migración, conformación del lugar, Guerra del Chaco, frontera, agro-medioambiental, evangelización, misión, indígenas, diáspora, Paraguay, Bolivia, menonita, Enlhet

Portuguese abstract. Este artigo explora o assentamento dos Menonitas Russos na fronteira do Chaco paraguaio durante os anos da Guerra do Chaco. Esses colonos praticaram uma série de ações aparentemente contraditórias de construção de lugar – desde práticas agro-ambientais e políticas até espirituais e culturais – que serviram para solidificar sua tênue reivindicação de um ambiente que além de desconhecido, era também altamente disputado. Ideias de segurança alimentar, em termos de produção e consumo, conectaram todos esses exercícios de construção de lugar. No Chaco paraguaio, esses outrora agricultores russos de trigo experimentaram novas plantações e costumes alimentares. Apesar de eles serem pacifistas, eles abasteceram o esforço militar paraguaio mesmo que também enviavam suas colheitas à Alemanha Nazista. Por fim e inesperadamente, já que se tratava de um grupo étnico que praticava a endogamia e buscava o isolamento de seus vizinhos, eles iniciaram uma campanha para evangelizar a população indígena do Chaco, um esforço centrado em parte no intuito de reformar a dieta ‘deficiente’ deste grupo.

Portuguese keywords: Gran Chaco, costumes alimentares, colono, migração, construção de lugar, Guerra do Chaco, fronteira, agro-ambiental, evangelização, missão, indígenas, diáspora, Paraguai, Bolívia, Menonita, Enlhet