Ben Goossen. *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. 266 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

"Religious nationalism": what could that possibly mean? In his controversial new book, *Chosen Nation*, Harvard scholar Ben Goossen insists that, historically, "ethnic" Mennonites have perceived themselves as a "religious nation." "In the same years," he writes, "that Zionists began asserting a separate Jewish nationality, some Mennonites presented their own confession as a national body. … Here was a nationalism compatible even with pacifism" (3). For many years, says Goossen, Zionists were alone in their claim to be a nation set apart by ethnicity and faith. Recently, however, faith-based and often violent fundamentalism has been on the rise, and it is time, he contends, for Mennonites to acknowledge their own historical entanglement in exclusivist ethnic ideology. Doubtless this held true during the era of the Third Reich, when most German Mennonites accepted or even supported the Hitler regime.

Early in his book, Ben Goossen muses on the transience of any collectivity such as the state, or an ethnic grouping such as Mennonites. Collectivities are fluid, constantly changing. "If certain collectivities crystalized at a particular instant, they were likely to crumble moments later" (11). It might be more valuable, says Goossen, to study social groupings at "the ragged edges" where they "trail off, turn into something else" (11). In other words, labelling a group of constantly changing individuals as any sort of collectivity is an act of imagination.

This research method seems to be based on an extreme form of individualism (or deconstructionism) in which collectivities are as much fiction as fact. The political, writes Goossen, is always personal. Mennonites at one time visualized themselves as a global religious and ethnic entity – and perhaps they still do. This, says Goossen, is a fraud. Goossen even accuses Mennonite historians of positing a "creation myth" (200) of Swiss and Dutch origins – a myth because an Anabaptist-Mennonite collectivity has no concrete reality.

Chosen Nation begins with the history of German Mennonites. This is a story that has already been well covered by Mark Janzen in his book *German Soldiers* (see *Roots & Branches* July 2013), and Goossen is retelling this history from a slightly different perspective. Before modernization and official statehood, German Mennonites resided mostly in three clusters: the northwest, northeast, and south of German lands. These settlements were clearly distinct from each other in terms of culture, economy, and so on. Theology and Dutch heritage were some of the unifying factors. Eventually, overseas – and later continental – missions became a common interest.

Then the national myth of a German diaspora emerged, with the myth of a Mennonite diaspora on its heels. Mennonites, like Germans, began to perceive themselves as a global peoplehood, scattered, certainly, but with a transcendent ethnic and religious commonality. German Mennonite leaders such as Carl Harder and Wilhelm Mannhardt, progressive and assimilationist yet true believers in a Mennonite "nation," began repatriating the past to create a Mennonite identity. Goossen calls men such as this "activists," spokespersons who urge on a collectivity that may not even exist. They are often met, writes Goossen, by "indifference" – individuals in that so-called collectivity may simply ignore the ideologues and get on with their own lives.

The "activists," however, kept up the barrage of ideology, creating the Mennonite Union, based in Berlin, in 1881. The Union's goals were to unify Mennonites in a common cause and

attach them to the newly formed German state established in 1871. And even though the majority of German Mennonites paid no heed to the Union as an organization, the Union's backing of military service and salaried clergy gained support. "We have come to believe," it declared, "that the principle of nonresistance is untenable in a modern state" (qtd 90). German Mennonites eventually bought into the myth of "Mennonite Germanness": during World War I, only one-third of their enlisted young men chose non-combatant service.

At this point, Goossen's perspective veers off into greater personal bias. For example, he makes the first of many allegations against Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), which, he argues, was deeply enmeshed in the imposture of ethnic Mennonite exclusivity. MCC, Goossen writes, was guilty of adopting a myth of a Russian Mennonite golden age when it helped create a "Mennonite state" for refugees in Paraguay.

And then things got much worse. During the time of the Third Reich, German Mennonites submitted to racial testing in order to prove their Aryan purity. "Mennonites and others often were not merely the subjects of Nazi racism, but also its authors" (122). Union chair Emil Händiges reported to Reich bureaucrats, "Today the German Mennonites perform military duties without any qualifications" (127). Mennonites indulged in writing family histories and studying genealogies, says Goossen, in order to demonstrate their ethnic German fitness. Perhaps the most vocal Mennonite supporter of the fascist regime – another would be Walter Quiring – was Benjamin Unruh. "Today," he said, "the vast majority of ethnically German Mennonites across the whole world stand on the side of Adolf Hitler" (150). Unruh declared his pleasure on meeting with Heinrich Himmler, the psychotic leader of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS).

Goossen saves some of his harshest judgements for Mennonite survivors of the Soviet totalitarian regime. In 1941 German forces invaded Russia. While occupying the Ukraine, Himmler improvised a Holocaust on its Jewish inhabitants. Even though Nazi leaders – and B. H. Unruh as well – were shocked by the ruins of former Mennonite enclaves in the Ukraine – Goossen argues that Mennonites enthusiastically cooperated with SS forces. Mennonite relationships with Jews had previously been good, writes Goossen, but now anti-Semitism became common. Goossen contends that many Mennonites participated in ethnic extermination; that Himmler formed a Mennonite cavalry; that Mennonite church services pandered to the German invaders. When Mennonites joined retreating German forces in 1943, they stole wagons and equipment from Ukrainian locals, claims Goossen, and their men served as self-defence forces on the Great Trek westward. Goossen's accusations are broad, with little room left, perhaps, for historical balance. He pays scant attention to the fact that Soviet Mennonites, devastated by Stalinist totalitarianism, were consumed by the need for survival.

In Goossen's estimation, Mennonite behaviour after World War II scarcely improved. He concedes that Soviet Mennonite refugees were involved in an "accidental nationalism": in order to claim refugee status, they were forced to describe themselves as neither Russian nor German. For expediency's sake, their "nationality" was defined as "Mennonite." Nevertheless, Goossen declares that MCC, capitalizing on its reputation as a provider of aid, played the race card in its efforts to rescue Mennonite refugees. MCC activist Peter Dyck, says Goossen, argued that the situation of ethnic Mennonites was similar to that of Jews. Other allegations: MCC tested Russian Mennonite refugees for their "Mennoniteness" much as the Third Reich had tested for Aryanism; MCC fell short by bringing Nazi party members to North America; that globally, MCC had an "ambition for centralized control" (183). American Mennonite leader Harold Bender, who according to Goossen argued for a romanticized "Anabaptist vision," is also

accused of pandering to ethnicity. “We are the children of our past,” said Bender, “and that past both calls and qualifies us for the task of a world-wide peace action today” (187).

A final parting shot is reserved for the repatriation of Soviet ethnic Germans to Germany – the so-called *Aussiedler*. “This program reflected both a condemnation and a continuation of Nazi race policies” (195). The result of the program, writes Goossen, was disappointment: Soviet refugees, finding European culture alien to their own experience, failed to mix and adapt.

With this, Benjamin Goossen returns to his research method and to his contention that collectivities are so fluid as to defy definition: “[C]ollectivist narratives rarely resulted in coherent ‘imagined communities’” (207). And he returns to his central thesis: “The development of Mennonitism as an imagined global collectivity would be unintelligible without the parallel rise of German nationalist discourses” (201). He concludes that only with the lucid examination of collectivist forces “will we be able to imagine nationalism without nations, religion without religions” (212). Goossen may be echoing Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s speculation on a “religionless Christianity,” but it might be asked if any institution, even the smallest committee, can survive without boundaries and some form of exclusivism. Nevertheless, *Chosen Nation*, provocative and one-sided as it might be, is already inciting a greater self-scrutiny of the Mennonite story.