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## Main content

Article Preview :

Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War. By Marlene Epp. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press. 2000. Pp. 275. \$21.95.

This is a haunting, gracefully written history of the experiences of the approximately 8000 Mennonites who arrived in Canada in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the aftermath of famine, war and dislocation from their homes in the Soviet Union and uncertain years as refugees in postwar Germany. Although the book gives primary attention to women and children who found their way to Canada, one chapter discusses the approximately 4000 Mennonites who migrated to the Paraguayan Chaco before many of them, too, immigrated to Canada in the 1950s.

Women Without Men is a compelling story of mass immigration as well as a feminist reinterpretation of this chapter in Mennonite history. Epp, herself a second-generation Canadian, began this project as a doctoral thesis at the University of Toronto. In addition to mining primary sources at Winnipeg's Mennonite Heritage Centre and the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, she interviewed 34 Mennonite women and men from Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia about their immigration experiences. Additionally, she drew from oral history interviews conducted in the early 1950s by Russian Mennonite immigrant and historian Cornelius Krahn. The resulting book--which probes the Mennonites' wartime traumas, impoverishment, refugee status and efforts to adjust to a new land--is an important addition to both immigration and Mennonite historical scholarship.

The title Women Without Men aptly describes the book's subject of primarily fragmented, female-headed families on the move. Most of the Mennonites who in the 1940s trekked westward from their homes in the Ukraine to Germany and then to North or South America underwent separation from family members. Tens of thousands of Mennonite men--husbands, brothers, sons--had been exiled or murdered during Stalin's "Great Purges" in the 1930s, killed...

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Women in the Second World War took on many different roles during the War, including as combatants and workers on the home front. The Second World War involved global conflict on an unprecedented scale; the absolute urgency of mobilizing the entire population made the expansion of the role of women inevitable, although the particular roles varied from country to country. Millions of women of various ages died as a result of the war. Mennonite women had to assume roles traditionally reserved for men in their trek to Germany, whether comfortably or grudgingly, and constantly struggled against the social and material consequences associated with the imbalanced sex ratio. Epp recounts both triumphs and horrors in this regard. By the end of the Second World War, the MCC, initially set up in the 1920s to provide relief to Mennonites in the midst of civil war and famine in the Soviet Union, was sending food and clothing to war sufferers in Europe. Soon after, the MCC managed to send over a hundred workers from North America to manage relief operations in Allied military zones of Germany. Women's lives changed during World War II. The war expanded some horizons but was the source of gender-based violence in other cases. Husbands went to war or went to work in factories in other parts of the country, and the wives had to pick up their husbands' responsibilities. With fewer men in the workforce, women filled more traditionally male jobs. World War II: Women at Home. World War II: Women at Work (Images: Rosie the Riveter and Her Sisters). World War II: Women and Government. Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady, served during the war as the "eyes and ears" for her husband, whose ability to travel widely was impacted by his disability after he'd contracted polio in 1921. American Women and the Military.