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Epp, Marlene. *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. Pp. viii + 275; illus. CDN\$21.95 (cloth). ISBN: 0-8020-8268-8.

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Women without Men: Refugees of the Second World War by Marlene Epp makes substantial contributions to so many aspects of Canada's history, it is difficult to know where to start. Most obviously, the work deepens our understanding of what happened to the female-led Mennonite families who fled the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Her work, however, does much more. Epp places the stories of these families firmly within the literature on the history of immigration and of the experience of refugees, the history of the Second World War, the history of postwar Canada, the history of the family, and the history of gender relations. The work clearly delineates the international connections between these themes, taking readers from the Soviet Union to Germany, and eventually to Canada and Paraguay, where many Mennonite refugees sought out new lives. Along the way, Epp skilfully weaves the personal stories of struggle, violence, loss, and triumph on the part of many Mennonite immigrant women into the larger fabric of social change in Europe and Canada during and after the war.

Epp is particularly successful in placing the story of the Mennonites who fled the Soviet Union into the significant body of literature on gender in historical context. She breaks ground in this area in at least two respects. First, she brings an analysis of gender to the literature on the Mennonite experience, a body of work that has traditionally not considered it. Second, she focuses on why and how attitudes towards gender roles mattered for the predominately female-led families fleeing the war torn Soviet Union. Thousands of Mennonite men — fathers, brothers, uncles, sons — were sent to Stalin's work camps leaving "women without men" to ensure the safety and survival of families. 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. Many women slid confidently and comfortably into the role of family head, fought for their family's survival against unbelievably difficult odds, and made it safely to Canada or Paraguay. Other experiences of Mennonite women fleeing the Soviet Union were not nearly as redeeming. In particular, Epp details the

ever-present threat and reality of rape that circumscribed the lives of every female refugee. Not only does Epp's sensitive accounting of this violence add to our understanding of the use of rape as a wartime tactic to restore order to gender roles and to assert male dominance, her use of personal narratives sets the account apart. By closely analyzing letters, memories, and memoirs of Mennonite refugees, Epp makes a compelling case for our acknowledgement of rape as a wartime strategy perpetrated specifically and deliberately against women. Rape aimed to punish, degrade, and control women perceived to be vulnerable. Particularly as they were understood to be "without men," Mennonite women were clearly viewed by many Soviet soldiers as there for the taking.

The survival of families, despite such unspeakable horrors, testified to the strength and resilience of these Mennonite women. Even though they endured so much as they fled the Soviet Union, Epp makes clear that this journey was in many ways just the beginning of a long and challenging road ahead. The transition to a new home had its own considerable perils. Awaiting those refugee families who made it successfully to Germany, were representatives of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) based in Akron, Pennsylvania with Canadian headquarters in Kitchener, Ontario. 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.

It was to various MCC camps set up in Germany, Holland, and Denmark, that the Mennonite immigrants came for relief, both temporary and longer term. It was in the camps that the striking number of female-headed families was noted. Testifying to the centrality of the gendered thinking that continued to shape the experience of these women and their children, MCC camp worker Walter Gering's description is typical: "There are any number of young mothers with 4-5 small children looking out into the future with apprehension. They have no money, no home and no able-bodied husband and father to provide a living" (72). Paternalistic attitudes, paired with quarrels and tensions over religious observances, often coloured already uneven relations of power between camp workers and refugees.

To qualify for assistance, Mennonite refugees had to prove their suitability for emigration to the International Refugee Organization. They did this by demonstrating that they were neither Soviet nor German by nationality. For many refugees, this process was unsettling and injurious to their sense of national identity. It was, however, only the beginning of a long process by which questions of identity and belonging continued to haunt Mennonite refugees. Since Canada had accepted a large number of Mennonite immigrants in the 1920s, it was the preferred destination for the postwar refugees. Canada, however, was not exactly welcoming. Those unwilling to wait or concerned about their chances of gaining access to Canada emigrated to Paraguay. In an intriguing chapter in the story of the postwar Mennonite refugees, Epp recounts what happened to these families. Labelled by relief workers as *schwache* or weak families since many were female-headed, these refugees encountered in South America what their Canadian-bound counterparts did not: the "green hell." Despite established colonies of Mennonites in Paraguay, new female-headed refugee families worked to carve houses and

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farms out of untouched jungle. Some had the implements, know-how, and the strength to do so. Many others did not. Again, gender played a critical role in constructing how these weak families were understood. In a setting in which patriarchal values were most prominent, these families stood out as emasculated, weak, and destined for failure. Those female-headed families that thrived in Paraguay often paid a price for that success. Viewed with jealousy and suspicion, such success could be short lived and bittersweet.

The challenges faced by Mennonite refugees in Canada were different. They were, nonetheless, equally capable of producing uncertainty, distress, and defiance. Non-traditional configurations of Mennonite families stood out as different and in need of “fixing.” Canadian Mennonite traditions or religious observance often clashed with newcomers’ ideas of piety, as did ideas regarding who deserved assistance and encouragement and who was deemed outside the boundaries of social propriety. Some Mennonite women whose husbands had disappeared but had not been confirmed dead, for example, often drew the condemnation of their Church congregations when they dared to pursue unsanctioned relations with men. By attempting to circumscribe the lives of immigrant Mennonite women and their families, and often to exclude them from positions of power and authority in the congregations they belonged to, Church fathers brought to bear the full weight of postwar patriarchal surveillance and control.

Women with Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War deserves a wide readership. Historians of postwar Canada, of gender relations, of the family, of immigration and refugee studies, and of war should consider this volume a must-read. That these seemingly divergent communities of interest would all benefit from this study testifies to the remarkable accomplishment of Epp’s scholarship.