Anabaptism began in Switzerland in January 1525, with the group around Conrad Grebel in Zurich. It did not begin a few years earlier with Thomas Müntzer or the “Zwickau prophets” in Saxony, although some of Thomas Müntzer’s followers played an important role in the early years of Anabaptism in south and central Germany.

Already in the sixteenth century the notion of a Saxon origin of Anabaptism appealed to Martin Luther, Phillip Melanchthon and Heinrich Bullinger, who each thought that identifying Anabaptist origins also laid bare the theological nature of the movement. Hence associating Anabaptism with the thoroughly defamed Müntzer seemed to stamp the movement with a violent, diabolical origin and character.

A century later, in 1615, as the tolerated Anabaptists of the Dutch Republic set about venerating the sufferings of their forebears, Hans de Ries published the first major, comprehensive Anabaptist martyrology, Historie der Martelaren ofte waerachtighe Getuygen Jesu Christi. This collection posed the issue of who was to be considered a true Anabaptist-Mennonite martyr. Putting aside the merely sectarian issues that divided the Anabaptists of the Netherlands, de Ries and his successors determined that a true martyr was someone who (1) upheld the baptism of adult believers, and (2) upheld and practiced a peaceful, nonviolent life.

The viewpoint of the Protestant reformers and the state churches, however, ruled the day among church historians for about 400 years—until the final decades of the nineteenth century—when historians began utilizing archival sources in a systematic way. In the early twentieth century critical historical work combined with Ernst Troeltsch’s influential typologies of religion to rehabilitate Anabaptism.
as a legitimate, though “sectarian,” movement of reform. By 1950 an informal North American coalition of Free Church and Mennonite historians had reasserted the general approach of the Dutch martyrologies and made a respected place for Anabaptist scholarship as a specialization within Reformation studies. Mennonite historians, led by Harold S. Bender, took the lead in identifying “genuine” Anabaptists as “sober-minded and peace-loving paragons of Christian virtue.” The movement, they insisted, originated with Zwingli in Zurich, and in turn became the source of all true Anabaptism elsewhere in Europe. Bender’s depiction later came to be called the “monogenesis” view of Anabaptist origins. In this view, all Anabaptism worthy of the name was “born” and shaped exclusively in Zurich by Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz and their immediate followers.

Following Bender’s death in 1962 a younger generation of Mennonite scholars, typified by John S. Oyer and Walter Klaassen, began to modify the exclusive emphasis on Swiss origins and the total rejection of any connection with Müntzer that had been the orthodoxy of the 1950s. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, the previous consensus unraveled still further, when “revisionist” historians, led by James Stayer and Hans-Jürgen Goertz, pointed to multiple Anabaptist origins (the “polygenesis” of Swiss, South German and Dutch streams) and a diversity of Anabaptist characteristics, depending on region and influence. The revisionists began to examine Anabaptism from a wider vantage than theological ideas, paying particular attention to social, political and economic factors. Hans-Jürgen Goertz, concerned to separate Reformation history from twentieth-century theology, emphasized anticlericalism as a primary socio-religious motive force. The revisionists, building on the scholarship of the Swiss historian, Martin Haas, held that Swiss Anabaptism in its earliest forms was ambivalent on questions of violence and political involvement, and became solidly sectarian and separatist only following the failure of the Peasants’ War at the end of 1525.

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3 Troeltsch (1931).
4 Roth (2002), 525.
5 Oyer (1964); Klaassen (1962); this mediating standpoint marked the general survey in Dyck (1967).
6 Goertz (1975).
7 Stayer, Packull, Deppermann (1975).
8 Goertz (1979); Goertz (1987).
9 Haas (1975).