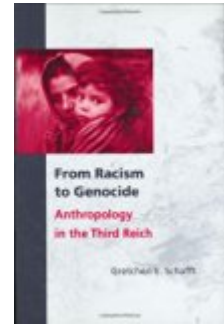


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Gretchen E. Schafft. *From Racism to Genocide: Anthropology in the Third Reich*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004. xiv + 297 pp. \$36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02930-1.

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The Real Role of the Anthropologists?

In her key article on the German race hygiene movement, Sheila Faith Weiss argued that “While there are ideological links between race hygiene and the destruction of unwanted ‘racial groups,’ it would be inaccurate to assume that individual German eugenicists or German race hygiene as a whole was directly responsible for the Holocaust.”[1] This claim has for some time represented the orthodoxy, although studies by Günz Aly, Benno Müller-Hill, Ernst Klee and others have documented a deeper involvement of racial scientists in the Nazi project than was previously thought possible. In stark contrast to Weiss, Gretchen Schafft’s basic premises are that “Many of the early [German] anthropologists became figures in the Nazi era either as gray eminences or as pioneer racist philosophers for the Holocaust” (p. 37) and that “There can be no question that anthropologists in Germany contributed to every phase of the Third Reich as a racist state. They provided theory, policy formation, enforcement and proactive engagement, and some also participated in, or their careers benefited from, the torture, maiming, and murder of victims” (p. 222). Since the publication of Max Weinreich’s *Hitler’s Professors* in 1946, we have been aware of the fact that German academics and intellectuals lent their enthusiastic support to the Nazi regime.[2] But does this mean that scholarship was fundamental to the regime’s activities? This is what Schafft wants us to believe in the case of anthropologists: “Anthropology had graduated from a descriptive science to an applied science, as important to the creation of a new state as the products of the most learned physicist or chemist” (p. 225).

Schafft’s book clearly demonstrates that anthropologists were responsible for developing theories of race that underpinned Nazi aims; for undertaking “racial examinations” in occupied territories, which would determine whether or not individuals could be considered *eindeutschungsfähig* (Germanizable); and for experimenting on inmates and their bodies in concentration camps, death camps, and university laboratories. All of this is enough to make the anthropologists’ record a disgraceful one during the Third Reich, and on this score, readers will agree with Schafft’s personal and powerful plea for today’s anthropologists to be more open about their predecessors’ record. But does Schafft overstate her case with respect to the importance of race-science in driving the actions of the Nazi regime? Can one, in other words, imagine the Holocaust having occurred without the input of anthropologists?

The original contributions of Schafft’s book are in the research she has undertaken in the archives of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology (KWIA) and, especially, the *Sektion Rassen und Volkstumsforschung* (SRV, Section on Race and Ethnicity Research) of the *Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit* (IDO, Institute for German Work in the East), a body connected to the University of Vienna. Chapter 1 is a case study that serves as an illustration of the profound immersion of anthropologists in the Third Reich’s structures. Here Schafft shows, through the detailed correspondence between leading female IDO scientists, Dora Kahlich and Elfriede Fliethmann, how the institute used “material” in the Tarnów ghetto in 1942 to undertake investigations into the racial origins

of the Jews. Since the Jews of Vienna were believed to have originated in Galicia, studying the local Jews alongside those who had been deported there would, it was believed, provide valuable comparative measurements. Schafft not only lays bare the strains in the relationships between the anthropologists and their efforts to maintain an approach that was acceptable to authorities, but compellingly explains why the studies were methodologically flawed from the outset. Kahlich and Fliethmann made notes about family structures without considering the effects that deportations and previous “actions” had had, and without considering whether their subjects might be reluctant to disclose potentially dangerous information, for example, concerning children with disabilities. Schafft is surely correct to note that the research of the anthropologists at the IDO was totally meaningless. For all the measurements taken and the villages studied, there was little analysis, nor could there be. There were no standards by which to judge Jewishness, so no conclusions ever could have been drawn from the morphological measurements. Even had it been possible from the data, the anthropologists themselves did not know how to do the simplest statistical procedures (p. 32).

However, when Schafft concludes that the anthropological investigations in Tarnów add up to “a damning picture of pseudoscience in the Third Reich,” she is on shakier ground (p. 34). The term pseudoscience is regularly used in studies of Nazism, but what good does it do, other than to reassure ourselves that today our scientific practice is authentic? After all, the anthropologists, and this is Schafft’s point, were not simply vicious ideologists like Chamberlain or Rosenberg, but were accredited and trained academics. Surely, this makes their complicity even more challenging? To dismiss their work as pseudoscience, irrespective of whether or not we now consider it meaningless, is to render what they did less threatening to the discipline that Schafft is inviting to consider its past.

Chapter 2 is a study of the KWIA and the development of anthropology in Germany before World War II. Much of this story is well known, but Schafft again provides revealing archival information that deepens our knowledge. In particular, Schafft is strong on the international dimension of race research, and much of her material concerning the Rockefeller Foundation’s funding of the KWIA is striking and shocking, though this is not the first time it has been investigated.[3] In 1932, the Rockefeller Foundation funded the twin research of two of the most pro-Nazi of the leading anthropologists, Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer and Eugen Fischer, a project

that lasted three years. It continued funding the work of Fischer until the invasion of Poland in 1939.

After these two chapters, which are so rich in original research, the rest of the book is less compelling, with the exception of chapter 4, an account of the author’s discovery in the Smithsonian Institute of the papers of the IDO. These documents allow her to recreate the institute’s work in occupied Poland measuring Jews (as a kind of *salvage ethnology*) and assessing Poles and Ukrainians for their usefulness as forced laborers. But chapters 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8, on the rise of Hitler, population selection, anthropology and medicine, the end of the war and the aftermath, and race and racism respectively, are largely derivative and are for the most part accounts of quite well-known histories interspersed with archival nuggets. In each of these chapters, Schafft presents a narrative of major events and argues that at each stage of the Third Reich’s development, the role of anthropologists was far greater than has been believed. The argument is not always convincing.

Chapter 3, for example, provides a standard history of the Nazi rise to power, and tries to show how anthropologists were willing to be *gleichgeschaltet* (coordinated) to the regime. Schafft notes that “at first, many German anthropologists, although interested in race, were not in agreement with the racial doctrines that the Nazis espoused”, but she is of course right to say that, by the late 1930s, “It is safe to assume that few, if any, anthropologists had positions in German universities who were not ideologically committed to racial studies and actions to make Germany and the Reich uniform in its population” (pp.74, 77). However, while the KWIA by the late 1930s was no doubt “tied to the state in every conceivable way,” it is not clear that its position was as vital to the regime as Schafft suggests (p. 78). Unquestionably, the anthropologists brought themselves into line, some with greater ease than others, but this fact begs the question.

The real role of the anthropologists is even less clear in chapter 5, when Schafft turns to the IDO in the context of the Holocaust. Schafft again provides background information about the war and setting up the death camps on Polish territory. She then works to persuade the reader that alongside the SS, other agencies, including anthropological ones, were responsible for the crimes that were committed. One cannot doubt that “racial experts” played an important role in assessing and selecting people for “resettlement,” whether actual or euphemistic. (Readers wanting more detail should turn to Isabel Heinemann’s study of the SS’s Race and Resettle-

ment Office.[4]) It is also the case that, as Schafft states, “The anthropologists’ statements and Hitler’s program fit hand in glove” (p. 124). But again Schafft wants to claim more; she seeks to prove that Hitler’s program was itself somehow driven by anthropologists, and it is here that she is less convincing. The actions of individual anthropologists such as Fritz Arlt and Herbert Grohmann do confirm Schafft’s claims, but overall she has to downplay the role of the SS (of which Grohmann was a member) in order to achieve her effect. In the broader context of Nazi genocidal policies, it is hard to believe that anthropologists were in the driving seat rather than “merely” conforming to the reigning ideology.

Perhaps the weakest chapters are 6 and 7. The summaries of the Euthanasia Program, medical experimentation, and the end of the war are too rapidly done. On euthanasia, Schafft overstates the role of Fischer, who congratulated himself on the way in which his earlier work had provided “the support of the racial laws,” without relating that the program was run by Brandt and Bouhler of the Führer’s Chancellery and delegated to doctors not anthropologists (p. 159). Schafft is correct to state that the Euthanasia Program’s “very concept stemmed from anthropological theory” but does not provide a sufficiently clear history of the trajectory from theory to practice; doing so would require analyzing the Nazi leadership and its goals, not only their anthropologists (p. 163).

There are a few serious errors here, too. Schafft refers to the “death camps” of Jungfernhof near Riga and Maly-Trostinec near Minsk, when the term is inappropriate in both cases. The former was an old baronial estate that was used as a concentration camp, albeit a brutal one; the latter was a site of mass executions rather than a fixed killing installation (p. 169). And she writes that after the liberation of Majdanek, the Aktion Reinhard camps of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka were liberated next, when in fact they had been closed and dismantled by the Nazis by the end of 1943 (p. 176). Her descriptions of death marches in chapter 7 are harrowing, but it is unclear what their status is in the book; were anthropologists responsible for them? While her analysis of the concept of race in chapter 8 contains some fascinating material from the papers of the American anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička that reveal how certain racist notions were not confined to Nazi Germany, it is not really clear what role this discussion plays in a book on anthropologists in the Third

Reich. Finally, Schafft claims that the GDR existed for fifty years (p. 253).

The Third Reich was indeed a “racial state.” But the racial fanaticism that lay at the heart of Nazi ideology was founded more on mysticism, the theories of Chamberlain, Rosenberg, Krieck, and others, than on science. The language of race-degeneration and stock-breeding combined with a Nordicism and mystical belief in regeneration through racial purity that owed little to science. At the end, Schafft admits that:

It took the enormous two-pronged push of Gleichschaltung and ruthless totalitarianism to narrow the field of ideas to the single voice from which anthropologists in the Third Reich spoke. If the fascist regime had not taken power in 1933, certainly the competition of ideas and beliefs would have gone on without leading to the annihilation of unprecedented numbers of people and groups. (pp. 247-248)

In other words, it was the ideology of Nazism, of course, based on false notions of race, that won the day, and anthropologists submitted to and underpinned it. But the thrust of Schafft’s argument is the opposite, that is, that anthropology was somehow responsible for Nazi ideology and the crimes committed by the regime. Despite our knowledge, deepened through Schafft’s study, of anthropologist perpetrators, it is this claim that remains unproven.

Notes [1]. Sheila Faith Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement in Germany,” *Osiris*, 2nd Series 3 (1987): p. 234.

[2]. Max Weinreich, *Hitler’s Professors* (New York: YIVO, 1946).

[3]. See also Stefan Kühl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Diane B. Paul, “The Rockefeller Foundation and the Origins of Behavior Genetics,” in *The Politics of Heredity: Essays on Eugenics, Biomedicine, and the Nature-Nurture Debate* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 53-79.

[4]. Isabel Heinemann, “Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut”: *Das Rasse und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003).

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