

Nazism and the myth of the "master-race"

Britain's Channel Four Secret History documentary on "Hitler's search for the Holy Grail"

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Britain's Channel Four television recently broadcast the documentary "Hitler's search for the Holy Grail" as part of its *Secret History* series. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, was the chief driving force in developing the nationalist and racist myths advanced by the Nazis. The documentary showed how he was able to recruit broad layers of leading academics in pursuance of this aim.

When Himmler joined the Nazi Party in 1925, he was already a member of the *Thule* society, which believed in the greatness of German history, reaching back to the year 9AD, when the Teutonic tribes defeated the Roman army. It promoted the superiority of the Aryan race, an ancient northern European people.

These ideas formed the basis of Nazi racial philosophy that was to have such an impact on history. The programme's commentator—British historian Michael Wood—explained that, when the Nazi Party took power, Himmler sought to create an Aryan knighthood in the shape of the SS. Originally founded as Hitler's bodyguards, the SS had grown rapidly. By 1939, it was 300,000 strong. Its members would run the concentration camps and take charge of the deportations of Jews. It became the standard bearer of "racial purity" within Germany and in the campaign directed especially against the peoples in the East.

The centre of this new order of knights, an "aristocracy of soul and blood", was the Wewelsburg castle. This was Himmler's "Camelot", with SS commanders cast as the Knights of the Round Table. Rooms were dedicated to figures of Nordic history and mythology like King Arthur. Himmler's room was dedicated to King Heinrich I, founder of the first German Reich (empire). Himmler believed himself to be the reincarnation of Heinrich. Another room was set aside to house the Holy Grail, which was to be searched for all over the world.

The director of the Wewelsburg museum, Wulff Brebeck, explained that Himmler's goal was to "create a focus point of all the aspirations he had towards religion, towards science, forming a new policy".

To this end, Himmler set out to re-establish an ancient Aryan religion within Germany in opposition to Christianity, as a basis for Nazi ideology. Himmler maintained that many sacred symbols had been stolen from a more ancient Aryan religion and set out to restore them. One such symbol was the Holy Grail. One leading academic recruited to the Nazi cause was Otto Rahn, the leading German authority on the Holy Grail. He was brought into the SS to lead the search for it the world over.

Dr. Henning Hassmann of the Archaeological Institute in Dresden explained: "Himmler saw the potential of archaeology as a political tool. He needed archaeology to provide an identity for his SS. But

Himmler also believed that archaeology had a certain pseudo-religious content. There were excavations; there were myths and legends, a feeling of superiority. They believed by drawing on the power of prehistory they would achieve success in the present day."

In 1935, Himmler established a new arm of the SS, *Das Ahnenerbe* (the Ancestral Heritage Society). It was staffed by high-profile academics and headed by the Nazi Wolfram Sievers. Of the 46 heads of departments, 19 were professors and another 19 held doctorates. Amongst them were such eminent figures as Walter Wust, a leading expert on India; Ernst Schaefer, a veteran explorer; and Walter Jankuhn, an archaeologist.

Through these academics the Nazis sought to lend their propaganda the status of objective truth. The *Ahnenerbe* organised expeditions into many parts of the world—to Iceland in search of the Grail, to Iran to find evidence of ancient kings of pure Aryan blood, to the Canary Islands to seek proof of Atlantis.

In April 1938 the SS undertook its biggest and most ambitious expedition to Tibet, led by Schaefer and the anthropologist Bruno Beger. Film shot during the expedition shows Beger and others measuring the bodies of the Tibetan people and producing facemasks. Beger believed that the proportions of the human body were vital indicators of race and that "one could determine the moral and intellectual capacities through the shape of the skull", Michael Wood explained.

On 10 March 1937, SS officers gathered in Munich to listen to a lecture by Professor Wust, with the title "*Mein Kampf* as the mirror of the Aryan worldview". In it, Wust claims a "similarity between the words of the Führer and those of that other great Aryan personality, the Buddha ... the basic idea of racial identity and the sacred concept of ancestral heritage."

With the beginning of the war, the role played by *Ahnenerbe* became more sinister. It took on a grandiose scale. Entire contents of museums, scientific collections, libraries and archaeological finds were looted and shipped to Berlin or the Wewelsburg. Himmler and Sievers created a special unit—the "Sonderkommando Jankuhn"—to supervise the plunder. Professors, doctors and scholars were now directly integrated into the Nazi murder machine.

In October 1941 Sievers bought Ernst Schaefer to Dachau to photograph experiments on inmates carried out by the Luftwaffe medical officer, Rascher. One witness at the Nuremberg trials described the content of these experiments. Prisoners would be exposed to extreme vacuum pressures until their lungs exploded or extreme pain made them tear out their hair, bang their heads against

the wall or maim their faces with their fingernails. These experiments usually ended in death.

The documentary shows the interrogation of Sievers at Nuremberg. He was asked about his role in the collection of skeletons for Professor Hirt at Strasbourg University. Jews held in Dachau concentration camp were selected while still alive to provide specimens. In a letter from Sievers to Himmler's adjutant Dr. Brandt, he set out how a Jew's head was to be severed from his body after he was killed and placed in conserving fluid. This was then to be sent directly to Hirt. Wood makes the point that the activities of the *Ahnenerbe* in Dachau and Auschwitz show the direct connection between their racial theories and fascist atrocities.

Scholars involved in the *Ahnenerbe* research claimed that their sole interest was the development of their specific field of study. But evidence shows they knew of, and were complicit in, the Nazis' crimes against humanity. They were SS officers in uniform and participated in close discussions within the council of *Ahnenerbe*, while scientists who would not go along with the Nazis were ostracised and victimised.

In the programme, Dr. Henning Hassmann asked whether it was acceptable for historians, archaeologists and anthropologists to utilise the opportunities they saw opened up during the Third Reich in order to further their scientific research. The posing of such a question regarding those who prostituted their science in the service of the Nazis points to a fundamental weakness of the documentary. Hitler's nationalism and racism was aimed at assembling a social force that could be used as a battering ram against Germany's powerful socialist working class. At the same time, theories of racial superiority served the interests of the ruling class in obtaining control of territories and markets, especially in the East, to overcome the restrictions laid on Germany after its defeat in the First World War.

Leon Trotsky wrote the following in his article "What is National Socialism?" in June 1933:

"The petty bourgeois is hostile to the idea of development, for development goes immutably against him; progress has brought him nothing except irredeemable debts. National Socialism rejects not only Marxism but Darwinism. The Nazis curse materialism because the victories of technology over nature have signified the triumph of large capital over small. The leaders of the movement are liquidating 'intellectualism' because they themselves possess second- and third-rate intellects, and above all because their historic role does not permit them to pursue a single thought to its conclusion. The petty bourgeois needs a higher authority, which stands above matter and above history, and which is safeguarded from competition, inflation, crisis and the auction block. To evolution, materialist thought and rationalism—of the twentieth, nineteenth, and eighteenth centuries—is counterposed in his mind national idealism as the source of heroic inspiration. Hitler's nation is the mythological shadow of the petty bourgeoisie itself, a pathetic delirium of a thousand-year Reich."

Trotsky also explained why the Nazis were able to recruit substantial layers of academics to their cause: "The immense poverty of national socialist philosophy did not, of course, hinder the academic sciences from entering Hitler's wake with all sails unfurled, once his victory was sufficiently plain. For the majority of the professorial rabble, the years of the Weimar regime were periods of riot and alarm. Historians, economists, and philosophers were lost in guesswork as to which of the contending criteria of truth was right, that is, which camp would turn out in the end the master of the situation. The fascist dictatorship eliminates the doubts of the Faustus and the vacillation of

the Hamlets of the university rostrums. Coming out of the twilight of parliamentary relativity, knowledge once again enters into the kingdom of absolutes."

In the *Secret History* documentary, Professor Colin Renfrew of the University of Cambridge touched on another fundamental issue. What had to be laid at the door of archaeologists and anthropologists, he said, was that "at the end of the Second World War, they didn't sort out the issues of ethnicity. The holocaust was so ghastly that they walked away from the issue and didn't analyse it carefully. That ethnicity, the notion of who a people is, is very much what a people wants to be and is not to be demonstrated or proved from something deep in prehistory.... Archaeologists were very late in saying this and have only been saying it very recently. Academics did not grasp the nettle with sufficient vigour."

There is truth in Renfrew's assertion. Most important from this standpoint is the re-emergence over the last period of theories that use ethnic criteria as a tool of historical analysis.

In all spheres of life within the post-war German state system, there was no real reckoning with former Nazi stooges. Judges, high ranking policemen, army officers, doctors, psychiatrists and politicians all assumed leading and respected positions in the state apparatus of the Federal Republic of Germany and, on a smaller scale, the German Democratic Republic. Things were no different regarding members of the *Ahnenerbe*. All became important scholars in post-war Germany—with the exception of Sievers who was sentenced to death at the Nuremberg trials. Any trace of their role in the SS murder machine was basically expunged.

The writer of this review had the opportunity to speak to a British archaeologist who, while visiting Germany as a student in the 1970s, met Jankuhn—who had supervised the Nazis' archaeological plunder. Although everybody knew about his past, Jankuhn continued to enjoy the reputation and lifestyle of a well-respected academic. His book on the early medieval site at Hedeby, or Haithabu, in North Germany is still regarded as a standard work.



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