



Alan Steinweis. *Studying the Jew.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. 204 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02205-8.



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Establishing the Nazis' Intellectual Bona Fides

In his new book on “Jewish studies” in the Third Reich, Alan Steinweis seeks to provide an “intensive analysis of the intellectual qualities of antisemitic scholarship” in National Socialist Germany (p. 2). His primary method is examining the works of prominent scholars in the variety of interdisciplinary academic fields that together constituted Nazi-era “Jewish studies.” As Steinweis notes, his book is in many respects a continuation of a project initially started by Max Weinreich in 1946 with his path-breaking work, *Hitler's Professors* (1999). Steinweis's work adds further support to the understanding that many pre-eminent scholars in Nazi Germany, in a wide variety of academic disciplines, produced works that directly supported Nazi anti-Jewish measures.

One of the important things that Steinweis does is demonstrate the intellectual roots of much of this antisemitic scholarship. These lay both in Christian anti-Jewish polemics and pre-Nazi historical and sociological studies of Jews. Ironically, Jewish scholars did most of the latter. Steinweis also provides a very useful overview of the development of National Socialist Jewish Studies within an institutional framework provided by nazified

university faculties and new academic institutes developed by the National Socialist regime. The latter included historian Walter Frank's Institute for History of the New Germany and Alfred Rosenberg's Institute for Research on the Jewish Question.

Most of the book's chapters are dedicated to discrete academic spheres. The second chapter deals with efforts to establish the racial characteristics of Jews by physical anthropologists and geneticists. The third chapter is on religious studies; the fourth, on historical studies; and the final chapter, on sociology. The second chapter is understandably the longest. As the book subsequently demonstrates, the effort to “prove” that Jews constituted a threatening “racial group” was the primary goal of scholars in every field of Nazi-era “Jewish studies.” Given the high status of the “hard sciences,” the imprimatur of their approval was central to Nazi claims that their anti-Jewish policies were based on rational ideas.

Steinweis' book is well researched, well written and contributes much to our knowledge of academics in Nazi Germany. It is, however, unsatisfying in one respect. One of Steinweis's stated goals is to further our under-

standing of why scholarship, “predicated on the search for enlightenment and truth, was produced in the service of an ideology of exclusion and domination” (p. 5). A key question in this regard relates to the self-understanding of scholars involved in this research, many of whom were clearly brilliant people. Why did they support Nazi racial policies with their talents?

Steinweis seems to give two contradictory answers, only one of which is convincing. Early in his book, Steinweis notes the “sloppiness and arbitrariness of the racial thinking on which [Nazi antisemitic] measures were based” (p. 23). Indeed, he shows that across disciplines, when it came to discussing the “Jewish question,” scholars failed to acknowledge conflicting evidence and often used patently illogical reasoning. Apparently no compelling scholarly reason existed to support the claim that science had proven Jews posed a “hereditary threat” to the German *Volk*. Accordingly, the motive of self-interest seems a persuasive explanation for these scholars’ behavior. Indeed, in his epilogue, Steinweis writes, “[i]n the final analysis, the great failing of the Nazi antisemitic scholars was more ethical than intellectual” (p. 156). This implies that German scholars were able to use properly the tools of scholarship as they understood them but chose not to do so. Steinweis supports this understanding by showing throughout his book that many scholars began to produce ideas coinciding with the regime’s view of Jews only after 1933.

Steinweis also seems to argue, however, that many of the scholars were simply unaware of the illogic inherent in their assertions about Jews. Indeed, with regard to the “hard scientists”—geneticists, physical anthropologists, and the like—Steinweis claims that a distinction between science and pseudoscience “did not exist in the minds of those scientists at the time” (pp. 52-53). In other words, they could not comprehend that they were spreading ideas that today would be considered “pseudoscientific.” This assertion is difficult to believe.

Germany in the first third of the twentieth century was home to scientists of the caliber of Albert Einstein (who published his paper on the special theory of relativity in 1905). By 1933, Germans had received more Nobel prizes in science, including the life sciences, than members of any other nationality. Moreover, the life scientists in particular must have been aware of the growing number of (non-German) scholars in the 1930s who

disputed the claim that science had “proven” the link between “race” and culture, the key assumption underlying the assertion that Jews constituted a hereditary threat to Germans.[2] Were scientists of this caliber really incapable of judging the credibility of a “scientific theory” based on the nature of the data used to support it and its internal logic? It is possible. But because Steinweis does not take into consideration the sophistication of scientific practice in Germany in the first third of the twentieth century, it is hard to buy this assertion without further discussion.

The foregoing criticism aside, however, Steinweis effectively and convincingly outlines the origins, growth and practice of “Jewish studies” in Nazi Germany. His book offers an important addition to the growing body of literature on the role of intellectuals in generating support for the Nazi regime.[3]

Notes

[1]. Max Weinreich, *Hitler’s Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany’s Crimes against the Jewish People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[2]. See, for example, Edward Reuter, *Race Mixture: Studies in Intermarriage and Miscegenation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1931); Cedric Dover, *Half-Caste* (London: Martin Seeker and Warburg, 1937); Herbert S. Jennings et al., *The Scientific Aspects of the Race Problem* (London: Catholic University Press, 1941). See also Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[3]. For example, on Slavic studies, Michael Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastwards: A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); on cultural anthropology, Hanjost Lixfeld, *Folklore and Fascism: The Reich Institute for German Volkskunde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Kristie Macrakis, *Surviving the Swastika: Scientific Research in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); on law, Redaktion Kritische Justiz, ed., *Der Unrechts-Staat. Recht und Justiz im Nationalsozialismus* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1983); Monika Renneberg and Mark Walker, eds., *Science, Technology and National Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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