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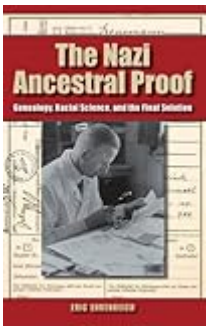

Eric Ehrenreich. *The Nazi Ancestral Proof: Genealogy, Racial Science, and the Final Solution.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. xx + 234 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34945-3.

Reviewed by Peter Fritzsche (Department of History, University of Illinois)

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Documenting Racial Hygiene

Eric Ehrenreich makes an excellent contribution to our understanding of everyday racism in the Third Reich with his book-length study of the Nazi requirement to prove "Aryan" birth. In his estimation, the vast majority of Germans provided ancestral proof or held an *Ahnenpass* or *Ariernachweis*, the racial passport that became increasingly indispensable to make a life in Nazi Germany. Ehrenreich examines the fortification of racist, eugenic, and antisemitic convictions through the practice of genealogy, which became more popular at the turn of the twentieth century once it was unhooked from the self-assertions of the nobility and made more useful by connections to racial hygiene. He exposes long-term continuities across Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi Germany: "from the 1870s," he writes, "even groups not perceived as particularly vÃ¶lkisch increasingly used racial thinking to promote the idea of common ancestry among those of German blood" (p. xiii). The theory and practice of eugenics, as a way to weed out allegedly defective genetic elements and nurture healthy bodies, also gained increased legitimacy. Intertwined with both were antisemitism and the allied, more widely held conviction that Jews were biologically as well as culturally different. Even before 1914, the game of identifying Jews who had changed their names, converted, or otherwise assimilated revealed enduring suspicions that distinctive biological characteristics marked Jews.

Ehrenreich shows how wide and how uncontroversial these ideas were in the decades before 1933. For example, in the 1920s, "while there was also no uniformity of opinion, debate generally centered not on *whether*, but to *which* degree the state should impose itself on the lives of the hereditarily ill" (p. 44). In the Weimar period, the fluency of reputable scientists with the vocabulary of race, blood, and purity was astonishing. The motor of scientific racism was eugenics, which empowered even the professional organization of civil registrars. They had overseen civil matters such as birth and marriage since 1875, and proposed via their journal, the *Zeitschrift fÃ¼r Standesamtwesen*, the use of marriage tests, health certificates, and mass sterilization, all of which the Nazis would implement. However, the journal's 1929 call for the "Ausmerzung" of the "reproductively unsuited" puts the accent on the result, not the process. Ehrenreich somewhat misleadingly translates this term as "extermi-

nation"; "Ausmerzung" could also be achieved through sterilization, which was horrific enough.

Ehrenreich's book carefully and clearly enumerates scientific racism's fallacies of logic. He acknowledges the deep roots of scientific representation, even in Nazi Germany. The ultimate failure of the "German physics" and "German mathematics" movements in Nazi Germany, which "sought to trump logical reasoning with racial ideology ... attest to the widespread consensus as to what constituted a scientifically valid assertion" (p. 2). Indeed, this understanding was widespread throughout German society. Nazi propaganda pamphlets attacked "opposing views by claiming such views contradicted experimental findings" (p. 2). Even so, no credible scientific evidence existed to undergird the concept of race, much less German blood, or inherent and inherently malevolent Jewish characteristics. Repeatedly, researchers and racial administrators confused peoples and races, the distinction being that the former was supposedly made up of admixtures of the latter, which thoroughly confused analyses of the inheritability of biological and mental characteristics.

No scientific method managed to distinguish a Jew from a non-Jew since these were socially constructed categories, but racial scientists such as Otmar von Verschuer pressed on, arguing that Jews were, as Ehrenreich puts it, in essence a "mental race," characterized by the inability to "be in touch with nature, feel selfless love, or have a sense of reverence" (p. 6). It is important for Ehrenreich to untangle these strands of nonsense because one of the questions that interests him is how a sophisticated, even scientifically literate society such as Germany could take race-based public policy seriously and how susceptible western societies in general are to "fundamentally irrational beliefs" (p. 175). The examples of "German physics" and "German mathematics" are revealing because, in Ehrenreich's view, it would not have been difficult, even in Nazi Germany, to ascertain that racial scientific ideology was fundamentally "a series of unproven assertions expressed in scientific verbiage, while the idea of the inherently 'evil Jew' transcended the bounds of even the tenuous support of racial science" (p. 173). There was in fact a powerful ideological tool to "resist" the ancestral proof requirement and, more broadly, antisemitic policy: clear scientific reasoning. Yet debates did not flare up over ancestral proof as they did over sterilization or euthanasia.

Ehrenreich cannot be faulted if he does not completely explain why this was so. Scientists obviously benefited from the Nazi regime and undoubtedly shared the broad assumptions about race current in Europe and the United States. Still, in contrast to Britain and the United States, any criticism of the propositions of scientific racism was strikingly absent in Germany, where no Franz Boas contradicted von Verschuer. Moreover, Ehrenreich draws attention to the crisis mentality of German elites in the 1920s who found that racism "provided a unifying doctrine ... that was less fundamentally threatening or divisive than Marxism, political Catholicism, or even liberalism" (p. xiii). Formulated in another way, biology provided versatile technologies for national mobilization. Racism was also racial uplift: Its sponsors intended that the recognition of common roots would advance a "racist egalitarianism" "that would transcend economic and social class" (p. 135). At a time when more and more Germans looked to a brighter National Socialist future, racial categories, if not necessarily the hierarchy of value that the Nazis applied to them, found broad acceptance in the German population. How else to explain the fact that "despite the massive number of people affected, and the often complex, time-consuming, and expensive obligation, there was virtually no opposition to the ancestral proof in principle" (p. 58)? It was through *AhnenpÃ¤sse* that most Germans were exposed to, and wittingly or not strengthened, the institutionalized racism of the Third Reich.

Ehrenreich is not completely sure how to deal with antisemitism in this scheme. A much firmer pre-1933 consensus about negative eugenics can be found, although legal and administrative opposition to both sterilization (less so) and involuntary euthanasia (more so) also occurred after the seizure of power. However, prior to 1933, there was little public call for sterilization of Jews, much less their physical destruction. It was not murderous antisemitism, but the suspicion that the Jews were different, in a racial sense, that made both antisemitic policy and racial certification acceptable. Here is the paradox: Although racist eugenics was less logically coherent than hereditary health eugenics, greater numbers of "racially acceptable" Germans appear to have been willing to accept racist eugenic doctrine in order to come to terms with their own failure to act in the face of their neighbors' suffering. In other words, Ehrenreich concludes, leaning on Lothar Kettenacker, racial antisemitism was an indicator of what people sincerely hoped to be true. I find this thesis both terrifying and plausible.

Although Nazi ancestral proof is the topic of the book, the *AhnenpÃ¤sse* are not carefully examined as artifacts.

Indeed, Ehrenreich confuses the practice of repeatedly providing proof of racial bonafides and the construction of the passport. Doesn't the passport, once procured, furnish the proof? Moreover, Ehrenreich neglects to say that Germans were not issued passports by state or federal or party agencies but fabricated tables of ancestors themselves, buying the preprinted pages, seeking the certification of civil registrars and church officials for the births, marriages, and deaths of their parents and grandparents, and binding the documents together. Citizens thus constructed for themselves their Aryan identities. The physical passports are interesting because they laid the basis for personal archives. Private papers that were gathered inside the pages of *AhnenpÃ¤sse* collected by the Landesarchiv in Berlin included a four-leaf clover; a restaurant bill; a marriage license; birth announcements of children; baptismal certificates; inoculation records; divorce papers; insurance cards; Winter Relief stamps; and also a father's correspondence with his son serving on the front; official confirmation of a soldier missing in action; a letter from a fallen man's comrade describing the whereabouts of the dead "man's grave in Aleksandrwoka (village center) ... some 16 km south of Olenin which is some 60 km west of Rshew" and, from the year 1945, a welfare card for bomb victims (on which was also handwritten "refugees from the East").[1] Sometimes individuals continued to update the passports well after the end of the war. As Ehrenreich convincingly argues, racial identities became familiar and homespun. They were part of the routine administration of modern life.

Ehrenreich develops his important points without much reference to other historians; the key arguments of Cornelia Essner on racial legislation are not engaged, for example. Perhaps as a result, he does not discuss relevant distinctions between genetics and blood contagion theories, or reflect on the tension between convictions that Jews were transparently identifiable and suspicions that they were masked in the structure of assimilation. Certificates of genetic health are not analyzed either. As many as ten million Germans acquired these, and the Ministry of the Interior suspended but did not overrule its 1937 mandate that every marriage partner acquire one. These certificates destabilized the "proof" and security of Aryan ancestry since it was mostly "Aryans" who were threatened with sterilization in the absence of a certification of genetic health. How far would the Nazis have gone in purifying their own "Aryan" population after the war? I also wonder about the status of Aryan identity after spring 1943, when all the legally deportable Jews had been deported: did "Aryan" or "non-Jewish" identities change as the antisemitic signage across Germany was gradually taken down? And Ehrenreich does not discuss the concern in the Ministry of the Interior among the so-called experts for Jewish affairs that the hunt for "Jewish blood" might be going too far into non-Jewish society and hurting the regime. In any case, as it is, Ehrenreich's book is an extremely well-argued, insightful exposition of the institutionalization of racism in everyday life during the Third Reich.

Note

[1]. Landesarchiv Berlin, Sammlung F Rep. 240/1.

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