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Book review of Heather Pringle, *The Master Plan: Himmler's Scholars and the Holocaust*

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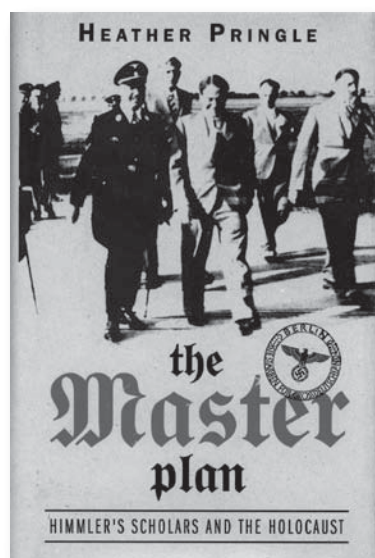


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THE MASTER PLAN: HIMMLER'S SCHOLARS AND THE HOLOCAUST

BY HEATHER PRINGLE

REVIEWED BY ADRIAN MYERS



of dominant beings. Their descendants were the supposed Aryans so esteemed in Nazi Germany.

Heather Pringle's work is a careful study of Heinrich Himmler's *Ahnenerbe*, an ostensibly scholarly organisation that aimed to prove, through anthropological and archaeological research, the global superiority of the Aryan race. Though maintaining a facade of legitimacy until the very end, the *Ahnenerbe*'s true role was to turn former scholars into liars, looters, spies, and abettors of genocide.

Pringle begins with young Himmler, a man always interested in history and archaeology. After Germany's shame and outrage at the Treaty of Versailles, he became an early conscript of Hitler's fledgling NSDAP. He was a born organiser, and a passionate and loyal supporter of Hitler. One of the few Nazis to actually read *Mein Kampf*, he was a true believer. The racial ideal of the party and Himmler's own interest in the past were a neat combination, for despite the patent irrationality in much of their doctrine, the Nazis were always intent on maintaining the pretence of reason. For Himmler, who was bent on proving a theory of a hierarchy of races, the distant past held urgent contemporary relevance.

Himmler and his acolytes believed that nearly every important advancement in world history was owed to an ancient "Northern" race – if it was "great" and in the past, they endowed it with "Aryan" status. In their view, Rome was founded by "migrants from the North", modern Japanese nobility were descendants of European immigrants, and Cro-Magnons (the early *Homo sapiens* believed to have outlived Neanderthals) "had blond hair". Opposing views were bluntly labelled "Jewish science". In the pre-war years the *Ahnenerbe* searched for ancient Nordic texts and petroglyphs, and recorded folk songs, witches'

incantations and legends. They founded their own publishing house to avoid outside academic peer review.

Pringle details how the *Ahnenerbe* became more intertwined with the goals of its parent organisation, the SS. Researchers doubled as spies, and kept keen eyes on the political as well as the prehistoric. They embarked on impressive expeditions – most famously to Tibet and Nepal, where hunter and adventurer Ernst Schäfer studied flora, fauna, geology and, most importantly, the local inhabitants: armed with callipers, and skin and eye colour charts, the team's *Rassenkunde* or "racial studies" expert Bruno Beger took notes, as well as full facial plaster castings.

As anthropologists and "racial experts", *Ahnenerbe* scholars fretted much over the supposed differences between races. In their quest to scientifically identify Jews – to classify "as many varieties of Jewishness as possible" – they spearheaded the now infamous Jewish Skeleton Collection project. It took Beger about 45 minutes to select 115 prisoners at Auschwitz to be shipped to Natzweiler camp in Alsace. Here they were measured and studied, then gassed. Due to repeated delays and supply problems, the original plan – to remove the flesh from the corpses and preserve the skeletons – never came to fruition.

That the work of the *Ahnenerbe* was flawed science is an understatement, and Himmler's goal of writing a "glorious new history of the Aryan race" – like the larger project of Nazism itself – was a fraudulent endeavour. Pringle weaves the raw product of keen original research into careful, readable prose. An impressive attention to detail runs throughout, and every new person, place, and object is accompanied by relevant contextualisation. Simple but effective maps, interesting images, and a useful "Guide to the Most Important Personalities" ensure the reader's lasting attention. In what are perhaps the most powerful pages of the book, Pringle interviews Beger himself; surprisingly, she found him alive and well, living inconspicuously in a small town in Germany. Beger's thinly veiled bigotry is a testament to the lasting effect, and indeed the continuing relevance, of that time and place.

In an irony surely lost on Beger, just as the Nazis looked to the past to shape their present and future, we now look to the Nazis themselves as the ultimate historical catastrophe; a past we never want to see repeated. Pringle's contribution towards further exposing the Janus-faced Nazi academia is a worthy contribution towards this goal.

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The Master Plan is available in the VHEC library