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

Adrian Myers, Stanford University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/adrianmyers/14/
National Socialism, like most nationalist projects, looked to the past as inspiration for the future. Hitler often called for a return to the agrarian life of his German forefathers. Unsurprisingly, what might appear a relatively benign aspect of the Nazi ideal reveals more pernicious facets. Tied inextricably with the belief in this bucolic past was the belief that this past was inhabited by tall, blond, blue-eyed men, a noble “Nordic” race 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, through anthropological and archaeological research, the 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.

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 context. Simple but effective maps, interesting images, textualisation. 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 Shäfer 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.

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.

Adrian Myers is the Research and Program Assistant, VHEC

The Master Plan is available in the VHEC library.