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978-0-521-10213-1 - The Professionalization of Psychology in Nazi Germany

Ulfried Geuter

Excerpt

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Introduction

Only when it is responsible for providing psychological diagnoses for state purposes does psychology really become important.

Max Simoneit, scientific director of
Wehrmacht Psychology, 1938

It is becoming...plain that psychology has ceased to be a science for connoisseurs. With activities such as selection, evaluation, control, guidance, and care for the mental hygiene of the healthy members of our people, with aid and advice for the susceptible, the endangered and the inefficiently functioning, it is becoming deeply involved in the necessary tasks of regulating, maintaining, and strengthening the *Volkskraft* as a whole.

Oswald Kroh, chairman of the German
Society for Psychology, 1941

It is widely believed that the Nazis were opposed to science in general and to psychology in particular, with the result that they obstructed the development of psychology in every way or indeed threatened its very existence. In fact, the history of the professionalization of psychology during the National Socialist period was not one of setbacks and defeats, but one of gains and successes. This is certainly not easy for psychologists to admit, which is perhaps one of the reasons this aspect of the history of German psychology has often been passed over. After the Second World War German psychologists were more concerned with reestablishing their profession than with raising the question of the relationship between psychology and Nazism.¹ Within the discipline there was some controversy, but public discussion was

1 Baumgarten (1948) posed this question. It has not been taken up further; von Allesch (1950) merely rejected it out of hand (see Geuter 1980). One point in my 1980 article is in need of correction: the reticence of emigrants is not the result of a professional consciousness maintained across the Atlantic, as I then supposed. Cf. the archive records of my conversations with emigrants.

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prevented by professional considerations and the politics of scholarly rivalries, not to mention the general difficulties of “reappraising the past” in Germany (see Adorno 1968).² In the opinion of Schunter-Kleeman (1980), the absence of any discussion in the German Democratic Republic was due to the fact that, as in the Federal Republic, some university staff from the previous era had continued lecturing there after 1945.

When, as a reaction to the vehement student criticism of the sixties, some universities organized lecture series on the sciences during the Nazi period, psychology was not represented. Nor did the development of psychology under National Socialism receive much attention from the student movement, although the question of the social responsibility of science and the relationship between science and power was discussed.

By the end of the sixties it had become clear that science had ceased to be the preoccupation of a small elite. As early as 1963 in the United States, Derek de Solla Price had diagnosed the transition from “Little Science” to “Big Science.” The sciences had developed into large organizations and had aligned themselves with the state and – as became so apparent during the Vietnam War – with the military establishment. During the student movement students were no longer willing to leave the sciences to those in power. They criticized both the theoretical content of science and the uses to which it was put. Often this criticism was historically oriented, not least because in their search for a political theory many students rediscovered Marx and the Marxist tradition.

In Germany the students’ criticism of psychology concentrated on two questions. First, how was it possible to explain why social conditions had not been included as a theoretical category in psychology? Second, what was the social role of practical psychology; how was it used and abused for industrial, military, and state purposes? These questions were directed toward the U.S.-style psychology dominant at that time (Geuter and Mattes 1984). Because there were only a few cases of confrontation with professors who had already taught during the Nazi period, for example in Mainz, the development of psychology in the Third Reich was scarcely investigated. It was only in 1979–80 that the journal *Psychologie- und Gesellschaftskritik* took up the topic.³ It was first dealt with at a congress of the German Society for Psychology in 1982 (Geuter 1983a).

After the waning of the student movement, the history of psychology

2 Mild criticism by the young psychologist Ferdinand Merz (1960) of the role played by Leipzig holistic psychology (*Ganzheitspsychologie*), and a more outspoken criticism of that role in the East Berlin journal *Forum* (“Zur Situation . . .” 1960) was rejected by Wellek (1960) as though one essay by a professor who had lived through that period was enough to put an end to the topic of “psychology and National Socialism” once and for all (see Geuter 1980, 1983).

3 Cf. the contributions by Chroust, Geuter, Hantel, and Kienreich (all 1979), and Geuter, Mattes, and Schunter-Kleemann (all 1980).

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became mainly the domain of psychology's fundamental critics. It was logical that they should turn to the beginnings of psychology in their historical studies, focusing on the general relationship between the history of society and the history of forms of thought in psychology.⁴ Critical examination of the more recent history of psychology, however, deals with an institutionalized and professionalized discipline. It has to be borne in mind that we find a whole series of additional links between the general history of society and the history of science, some of which are of the most concrete nature. Sciences are no longer just theoretical systems; they are also social institutions. They intervene through their knowledge and their experts in social reality. They are called on to solve problems whose relevance has not been defined by science but by those outside it. At the universities they not only are research units, but are also responsible for teaching; their development depends not only on progress in the realm of theory, but on the state budget, research funds, education plans, the demand for scientific experts, and other factors.

This aspect has been receiving more and more attention from critical historians of psychology.⁵ A number of works have been published, especially in the United States, that have opened up new approaches and whose use of archival material has provided new sources for historians of psychology (see Buss 1979). This development of the critical historiography of psychology coincided with a general trend in science studies in which – at least since the work of Thomas Kuhn – sociological methods were increasingly used in the study of scientific communities. The relationship between social developments and interdisciplinary developments then received more attention.

A part of this relationship is the professionalization of academic disciplines. The influence of this process on the development of the sciences is being increasingly regarded as important, but it is seldom treated historically (MacLeod 1977, p. 166; Rüschemeyer 1980, p. 311). When authors do write about the history of professionalization, at least in the U.S. literature, they concentrate on the academic institutionalization of the discipline and do not consider the total process of professionalization as I use the term. By *professionalization* of academic disciplines I mean the process whereby specific areas of application of knowledge in a given discipline, including the associated professional roles and the education related to this activity, become institutionalized. A professionalized discipline must have a corresponding scientific occupation, a *profession*. I take this to mean a field of occupational activity requiring the application of systematic scientific knowledge, that has previously been acquired in an educational institution for this purpose and that has been documented by a certificate. This then entitles the individual to carry out certain professional activities, or is at least viewed

4 Bruder (1973), Grünwald (1980), Jaeger and Staebble (1978), Schmid (1977), and Staebble (1972).

5 For an overview of the contributions see Geuter (1981) and Geuter and Mattes (1984).

on the employment market as a prerequisite for certain employment. The professionalization of academic disciplines is influenced by the history of a society and its demand for expertise. It also depends on the theoretical development of a discipline and in turn will itself influence that development. Especially in a country like Germany, where the university system is state-organized and where many professional roles are in the public sector, this process is subjected to a tension between science and power.

During the Third Reich, when the institutions of power were endeavoring to utilize the sciences for the consolidation of their ideological, political, and military dominance, German psychology progressed on its way from being a scientific discipline to becoming a profession. Today it is a professionalized discipline, a science with its own theoretical and methodological contours, with a secure position at the universities, its own professional role, and its own system of training and qualification. But in the Weimar Republic it was divided into quarreling schools, hardly established as a profession, occupying a weak position in the universities, and without a commonly accepted educational concept. It was only with reluctance that the academic psychology of that period began to tackle practical psychological problems. Not much more than models and instruments for selection diagnostics had been developed for practical psychological use. At the Vienna Congress of the German Society of Psychology (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie – DGfPs) in 1929, the committee of the society drafted a declaration entitled “On the Fostering of Psychology at German Institutions of Higher Education,” in which it lamented the academic situation of psychology. It also demanded that, in view of the scientific advances, methodological progress, and practical importance of psychology, the number of chairs of psychology be increased (“Kundgebung . . .” 1930). At the Hamburg Congress in 1931, the society’s president, Karl Bühler, again drew attention to the fact that psychology was under pressure. Industrial psychotechnics, the major field of applied psychology in the Weimar period, was less in demand following the economic crisis. The army, which had begun to use psychology during the First World War, primarily to select specialists, was now restricted to 100,000 men by the Treaty of Versailles. Heavy weapons and military planes were forbidden, as was all cooperation with universities. In the field of pedagogical psychology the only professional openings were for lecturers at teacher training institutions. In the universities psychology was restricted by the fact that most of its proponents occupied chairs of philosophy specified for psychology or chairs of psychology together with philosophy or pedagogy. There was only one university that had a full professorship defined exclusively for psychology, in Jena. The only possible qualification was a doctorate, although at a number of universities even this was not possible for psychology as a subject in its own right. Teaching at the various institutes was not unified and was oriented largely toward the special interests and views of each professor. At the technical colleges psychologists taught in various

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faculties, but only as part of the special training for engineers. They were not able to offer their own courses in psychology. At some technical colleges and universities there were no representatives of psychology whatsoever.

This situation was not in the interests of the discipline or its members. A glance at developments from 1933 to 1945 shows that the position of psychology changed very much during this period. It was able to consolidate its position as an academic discipline, to establish its own courses and examinations, and to institutionalize the first career for psychologists.

The most obvious feature was the enormous expansion of military psychology in the Wehrmacht where a large number of psychologists found employment. It was the first time that a socially important institution had created a career that was open only to qualified psychologists. At employment offices the selection procedures of the twenties were continued; the use of methods of industrial and managerial psychology in industry continued, and the first psychologists received full-time positions. In the German Labor Front industrial psychology was even given its own institute. As far as pedagogical psychology was concerned a new field of activity was created, advising on education in the National Socialist People's Welfare Organization (NSV).

In the universities the Law for the Reconstruction of the Civil Service of 7 April 1933 certainly forced many psychologists out of their jobs, but during the Nazi period as a whole the number of professors of psychology increased. The opportunities for obtaining a doctorate in psychology also improved. Finally, during the war – at a time of greatest coercion, subjugation, and complete rationalization of public life – examination regulations for a professional certificate were introduced that were based on a general consensus on the internal structuring of the subject expressed in the examination topics.

In the long struggle to become an independent university subject and a recognized profession, the Diploma Examination Regulations (Diplom-Prüfungsordnung – DPO) were a real breakthrough for psychology. In the midst of war psychology became an independent teaching subject. Every university was supposed to have its own chair of psychology. It could become a subject for doctorates and “habilitation” examinations in its own right. It provided a professional qualification to show on the job market. Yet only a year after the DPO had been decreed, the largest employers, the army and air force psychological departments, whose needs had helped to bring about its development, were disbanded. The political developments of the Third Reich nonetheless continued to leave their marks on the history of the subject.

For an investigation of the professionalization of psychology, the Third Reich is a doubly interesting period. On the one hand, there were, of course, rapid institutional developments in this period, but at the same time extreme pressure was being exerted on science. This makes the external influences and political constraints on the development of the discipline and profession

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more perceptible, leaving little room for a self-image (found not only in psychology) in which professional activity per se is reformist and humane.

Did the special relationship between science and power have anything to do with the professionalization of psychology at that time, or was it merely a temporal coincidence? Would psychology have developed at the same speed, in the same direction, and in the same way without the political changes? Why was psychology – a young, weak, and relatively unknown discipline – able to achieve professionalization in the Nazi state? Who had an interest in it?

This study will try to answer these questions. It will show how far the professionalization of psychology progressed in the Third Reich and whether it was successful in every respect. It will also consider the positive and negative factors affecting the professional development of psychology. A theoretical goal is to clarify these factors as a step toward establishing the general relationship between the history of a society, a profession, and a science.

Approaching the history of psychology as the history of a profession has two implications. First, the concept of psychology is limited. Since I treat the development of the academic discipline and at the same time the social enterprise of psychology, as it defined itself at that time, I do not consider all theoretical or practical initiatives that could be termed psychological. This also means that the study does not touch on the development of psychoanalysis in the Third Reich, which went its own scientific and professional way. In psychology there were both open and cautious theoretical borrowings from psychoanalysis, but there was hardly any critical examination of it.⁶ The psychotherapists pursued their own professionalization in the Third Reich – with some success, to judge from the finding of Cocks (1985).⁷ Psychoanalysis was not represented at the universities either in psychology or medicine; then, as now, teaching and practical training were given at their own institutions, which were closed by the Nazis. The three major groups (Freudians, Jungians, and Adlerians) were forcibly united in the German Institute for Psychological Research and Psychotherapy, where psychotherapists were trained. I will return to this in Chapter 4.

A second implication of investigating the professionalization of psychology is that it excludes other interesting questions, such as the ideological influence of Nazism on psychology as a science and the susceptibility or resistance of

6 Brodthage and Hoffmann (1981) consider the critical treatment of psychoanalysis by psychology for the period until 1940. There was, however, implicit adoption of psychoanalytical ideas. Rothacker (1938), e.g., used Freud's theory of the unconscious without mentioning his name. The main work of personality theory, or characterology, by Lersch (1938) is also inconceivable without Freud (see Chapter 3, this volume).

7 On psychoanalysis and psychotherapy see also Dräger (1971), Lockett (1985), and Lohmann and Rosenkötter (1982).

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psychological theories to Nazi ideology. Nor will I deal with or classify the political behavior of individual university teachers. When I deal with race psychology, typology, characterology, or the political behavior of individuals, it is only in terms of questions relevant to my subject – for example, which theoretical elements made psychology practically useful or how the discipline attempted to legitimate itself in its quest for professionalization.

The historiography of psychology has placed no great emphasis on theory in the past (Graumann 1983). The reader will perhaps forgive me if, before presenting my findings, I include some general theoretical and methodological considerations. In the next section I consider earlier views of the development of psychology and neighboring disciplines in the Third Reich, as well as a more general reflection on the demands of the Nazi period on science. Then I discuss the extent to which a theoretical view of the character of the Nazi system influences the view of the development of a science, and explain my own frame of reference. The theoretical and methodological approach of this study is then developed in a section on the theory of professionalization, which also includes a model for the historical investigation of professionalization. A final section discusses the available sources.

Decline or continuity

The literature up to 1984 includes only one attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of the history of psychology in Nazi Germany. This study, written by two emigrants, Frederick Wyatt and Hans Lukas Teuber, and published in the United States in 1944, remains the best investigation of the subject. However, it is restricted to the period up to 1940 and to an evaluation of the psychological literature – necessarily so at the height of the war. It was hardly possible for Wyatt and Teuber to examine the practical activities of psychology in the war or the discipline's professionalization and institutionalization. They concentrated instead on the theoretical development of psychology and reached the conclusion that existing irrational tendencies in German psychology were strengthened by the rapidly expanding dictatorship. The greater the philosophical character of theories, in their view, the greater was the influence of Nazi ideology. For industrial, Wehrmacht, and physiological psychology they found that more exact methods were used. Apart from this paper only a few shorter essays have dealt explicitly with aspects of psychology in the Third Reich, such as the political behavior of psychologists or their adaptation to Nazism.⁸ Anglo-American studies during

⁸ Baumgarten (1948) studied the political behavior of university teachers of psychology, Wellek (1960) the political constraints on psychological schools, and Chroust (1979) the ideological-theoretical conformity of Pfahler. Geuter (1979) examined the political and theoretical behavior of psychologists faced with Nazi "seizure of power" in 1933.

and even after the war evaluated Wehrmacht Psychology⁹ and industrial psychology¹⁰ methodologically only for possible use in Britain and the United States.¹¹

This period does not fit well into the view of history held by psychologists. Where the history of psychological theory is seen as the continual accumulation of knowledge, and the history of the application of psychology is understood as the progressive humanizing of social life, periods such as the Third Reich must be disavowed. Without explicit intention, a linear view of development thus emerges. The history of psychology in the Third Reich has been very largely nonhistory, or at least not part of the history of German psychology.¹² In the only book dedicated to the history of applied psychology in Germany, the Nazi period is discounted as an “unhappy chapter in the history of psychology” and as a period of “exaggerations forced more or less successfully by political events” (Dorsch 1963, pp. 76, 90). Even in the critical literature of the seventies we find the conviction that psychology had not existed as a profession before the Second World War, and is only now in the process of establishing itself as a profession.¹³

There seems to be a commonly held opinion among psychologists that the history of psychology under the Nazi dictatorship was only a history of suffering. We find sweeping statements about discrimination and decline. There is talk of a “serious setback,” of a “*disciplina ingrata*,” of demands to do away with psychology as a “Jewish science,” or there being no decline worse than that during fascism.¹⁴ Prejudice and a lack of knowledge about

9 Ansbacher (1941, 1941a, 1949), Davis (1946), Dunlap (1946), Farago (1942), Feder, Gulliksen, and Ansbacher (1948), Fitts (1946), Gerathewohl (1950), and Kreipe (1950).

10 Ansbacher (1944, 1950) and Dunlap and Rieffert (1946). These studies were part of a U.S. and British attempt during and after the war to evaluate German science and technology for their own use. Most comprehensive was the 84-volume *FIAT Review of German Science*, which did not include psychology. (The agency responsible for this study, the Field Information Agency Technical, was attached to the Office of the Military Government for Germany–U.S.) The “FIAT Final Report 930” was a study by Viteles and Anderson (1947) on psychological training and selection of supervisory personnel at IG Farben.

11 On the German side the scientific head of the Wehrmacht Psychology, Max Simoneit, presented a rather apologetic account of its development (Simoneit 1972). Hinrichs (1981) claims to cover industrial psychology in the period from 1871 to 1945, but only touches briefly on the Nazi period, and considers only its program not its practical application.

12 “To judge from psychology’s own history books, the involvement of German psychologists with Nazism has been almost totally forgotten” (Billig 1978, p. 15). A list of such books readily comes to mind. The statement does apply not only to the treatment in textbooks. In a history of psychology at Kiel University, 1898–1965, the years from 1933 to 1945 are simply nonexistent (Volkamer 1965).

13 Cf. Kardorff and Koenen (1981, pp. 26, 92ff.), Ottersbach (1980, p. 8), and Zillmer (1980, p. 86).

14 See Schultz (1969, p. 323), Pechhold (n.d., p. 310), Wellek (1960, p. 181), and Hiebsch (1961, p. 16).

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the development of psychology in the Third Reich also seem common among historians.¹⁵ Hans Peter Bleuel (1968, p. 220), for example, assumes that psychology was decimated as a branch of science, and Hans Mommsen recently claimed that it was practically liquidated.¹⁶

The idea that fascism brought about the total decline of German psychology may stem from the fact that Nazi policies led to the loss of important German-speaking scientists such as Karl Duncker, Adhemar Gelb, David Katz, Kurt Lewin, Wilhelm Peters, Otto Selz, William Stern, Heinz Werner, Max Wertheimer, and later Karl Bühler, as well as Wolfgang Köhler, who left Germany in protest. With their expulsion and emigration, certain theoretical developments in Germany came to an abrupt end. The emigrants included most of the better-known Gestalt psychologists and the leading developmental psychologists (see Ash 1984; Mandler and Mandler 1969; Metzger 1976).

Less common are criteria or detailed statements concerning this hypothesis of decline. Misiak and Sexton (1966, p. 113) talk of a reduction in the number of professorships; Adler and Rosemeier (1970) assess the falling off of experimental methods in the thirties as a sign of a politically induced decline. How easily superficial conclusions are drawn is shown by Nussbaum and Feger (1978), who simply blame the general decrease in the number of publications in psychological journals on the “animosity towards science in the Third Reich” (p. 108), neglecting all other factors such as the military enlistment of psychologists, the ending of the publication requirement for dissertations in June 1941 (which had often been published in journals), and paper rationing. There was also the growing importance of publications outside the traditional spectrum, particularly *Wehrpsychologische Mitteilungen* and *Soldatentum*. Such quantitative results must seem dubious anyway in the light of other available findings. Treuheit (1973) reports that during the Nazi period there was a higher yearly average of psychological dissertations than during the Weimar Republic, or in West Germany until 1973.

Occasionally it is explicitly claimed that psychology and Nazism are incompatible. Metzger writes that it is characteristic of autocratic regimes “that they are, without exception, full of distrust and aversion against this science” (1965, p. 112). Damage to psychology under such a regime must then have something to do with the nature of the discipline itself. Metzger (1979) goes on to specify the incompatibility of Gestalt psychology and Nazism, although

15 Gerhard Grimm (1969), in a survey of German universities in the Third Reich, mentions Oswald Kroh only for psychology under the heading “NS-Ideology and Science.” Richard Grunberger (1971) cites the example of Erich Jaensch only to illustrate the relationship between academic interests and political attitudes.

16 In a talk held at the Dies academicus of the University of Hamburg on the fiftieth anniversary of the book burning, 16 May 1983.

forty years earlier he had tried to demonstrate their compatibility.¹⁷ Arnold (1970, p. 29) also sees a fundamental contradiction between democracy/psychology and dictatorship/animosity to psychology, and draws parallels between conditions in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Elsewhere, he cites the dissolution of psychological services in the army and Luftwaffe in 1942 as proof that the practical influence of German scientific psychology after 1933 had also been suspended (1959, p. 298).

We find similar views in neighboring disciplines. Lepsius (1979) claims that the history of professorships and scientific societies shows that sociology was nonexistent in the Third Reich.¹⁸ Schelsky calls this view the creation of a historical and disciplinary legend (1980, p. 417); Klingemann (1981, 1986) contradicts the hypothesis, claiming that sociology also served the practical functions of securing order and providing ideological support. Psychoanalysts are also beginning to separate themselves from the traditional idea of their discipline's nonexistence in the Third Reich (Lockot 1985; Lohmann and Rosenkötter 1982). Cocks's investigation (1985) shows that psychotherapy became stronger in the Third Reich because of its practical usefulness and, in his view, was able to pursue its three professional tasks of research, practice, and training.

The idea of a discipline's incompatibility with Nazism guards against unpleasant questions. When a political dictatorship cannot admit psychology as a scientific discipline (as Arnold indicates), then we do not even need to ask whether there was any demand for ordinary psychology, whether its use furthered the development of the profession, or whether there were perhaps mechanisms governing the relationship between the discipline and society that were not limited to that period.

It is strange that the question of normality (and thus of continuity) is also disregarded in the historiography of psychology by those who see psychology as having been completely subservient to the Nazi state. Fritsche speaks of the "*Gleichschaltung* of psychology in the Third Reich, i.e. its total ideological and political subjugation as a science" (1981, p. 9). The Nazis used psy-

17 Metzger (1938, 1942) then wanted to use the Gestalt laws of perception to back up the *völkisch* view of the state (see Chapter 5, this volume). These essays and one other I found (Metzger 1938a) are not mentioned in the Metzger bibliography (*Psychologische Beiträge*, 5 (1960), pp. 283ff.). Asked about the 1942 essay in 1979 (I did not yet know about the others) Metzger replied that this had been his "school-boy" position; he had not written the essay to get the professorship in Münster, 1942 (Z, f. 189). Metzger wanted to send me a comment when he had seen the essay again – he no longer had a copy. Unfortunately, he died on 20 December 1979 before he could do so. The two essays in 1938 appeared in the journal of the Nazi Teachers' League in Halle-Merseburg. In 1937–8 Metzger was stand-in for a chair in Halle. A first interpretation of these essays appeared in Geuter (1983a, p. 102); cf. in more detail Prinz (1985).

18 See also Schoenbaum (1968, p. 307, n. 64), who claims that though other scientists fell from grace as individuals, sociology was the only discipline to meet with displeasure as a whole. I think that academic theology and philosophy deserve to be examined in this respect.