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

Ulfried Geuter

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It has been widely believed that the discipline of psychology in Germany was attacked, or even ceased to exist, under National Socialism. Yet in *The Professionalization of Psychology in Nazi Germany*, Ulfried Geuter shows that, rather than disappearing, German psychology rapidly grew into a fully developed profession during the Third Reich. Presenting his argument in the larger context of German military and economic history, Geuter makes it clear that the rising demands of a modern industrial nation gearing up for war afforded psychology a unique opportunity in Nazi Germany: to transform itself from a marginal academic discipline into a profession recognized and sanctioned by the state.

Ultimately, Geuter shows how the history of the professionalization of German psychology – its emphasis on characterology and its fraternization with the military establishment – displayed diacritical flashes of German history itself. Yet the relevance of this book goes far beyond the history of German psychology. Its conclusion – that psychology in Germany grew through its alliance with the interests of the army, industry, and the ruling regime – points toward the larger picture behind the particulars: the tangled relations between science, professional expertise, and state power in modern society.

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# The professionalization of psychology in Nazi Germany

Ulfried Geuter

Translated by Richard J. Holmes



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## Note to readers of the English edition

This translation follows the revised German edition published by Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag in 1988. The text has been abridged without affecting the argumentation or structure of the book. The reader may find more detail on some points by referring to the German text.

I would like to thank Richard J. Holmes, who not only translated the book, but also helped to condense the text. I am also very grateful to Mitchell G. Ash, who revised the entire translation and checked it with regard to the use of scholarly English terminology. At Cambridge University Press, the manuscript was read by Mary Racine, whom I also thank.

## Preface

In undertaking to produce a theoretical and historical critique of test diagnostics, I began by looking at the history of psychological tests and the reasons for their development and practical use. In the course of the work it became clear that the Nazi period was the least well researched, but at the same time the one that posed the most questions: What did psychologists do in the Third Reich? How was the field of psychology able to develop? How was it obstructed or encouraged, supported or abandoned? These questions led me into uncharted areas on which few reports existed and about which the German postwar generation knew little, except through hearsay.

A first look at the material, especially scientific publications from the Nazi period, confronted me with a multitude of facts that defied organization. There had been racist typology, but it did not seem possible to understand the history of German psychology in this period solely in terms of ideological Nazification. There had been practical, diagnostic psychology, particularly in the armed forces; there had been professional psychologists; and – in the middle of the war – examination regulations had been introduced for a certificate recognized by the state. But the history of German psychology could also not be described simply as an instrumentalization for the goals of expansion and oppression. There had been dismissals, and some scientists had been persecuted; but the common opinion that psychology had been politically subjugated did not seem to explain all the facts. What, then, were the forces acting on psychology in the Third Reich? An examination of the available sources – particularly interviews, archives, and files of universities, ministries, the armed forces, and the psychological societies – showed that a number of points could be clarified if the problem was approached from the aspect of professionalization. This seemed to have been a driving force for the development of the discipline in the Nazi period.

Such an approach was not usual. Indeed, traditional historiography of psychology was long content with an immanent treatment of general psycho-

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logical theories. Few links were drawn between theories and application, between political circumstances and developments in the discipline, or between external demands on the discipline and the attitudes and opinions of its representatives. This book can be seen to some extent as a case study showing the value of such questions.

Earlier studies on the development of science in the Third Reich frequently concentrated on leading representatives and spectacular events, such as political dismissals and the abuse of science. But just as general history has discovered the history of ordinary people, so with professionalization the history of science has begun to consider everyday research, applied science, and professional behavior. For the Third Reich this can be less disturbing than having to come to terms with the use of terror and the suffering of the victims, or with race-psychological investigations of the Polish population. It can be easier than being continually confronted with the language of the "Master Race" masquerading as science, which would be the consequence of concentrating on the relationship between Nazi ideology and psychology. But at the same time, with this approach one is confronted with the problem of the political instrumentalization of everyday science and with the frightening normality of the production and use of science under totalitarian rule.

The choice of professionalization also has a topical aspect. In recent years psychologists have been concerned to advance the professionalization of the field, but the unconsidered activities of some representatives gave rise to critical studies of this process. However, neither the critics nor the activists seemed aware of the importance of the Third Reich in this aspect of the history of German psychology.

Though many aspects of the development of psychology during the Nazi period can be understood in the light of professionalization, not all of them can. After the war not one piece of research was published on psychology in the Third Reich, so that this book represents only a first attempt to trace aspects of the history and to provide a theoretical evaluation. It does not claim to be a comprehensive analysis of the development of psychology in this period. Such an analysis would have to be based on other work. At the time of completion of the German manuscript, in November 1983, Professor Carl-Friedrich Graumann organized a meeting entitled "Psychology in National Socialism," the first academic forum at which this topic was discussed. There I discovered that Angela Benz had already written an unpublished diploma thesis in 1980 at the University of Trier ("Psychologie und Nationalsozialismus: Versuch eines Paradigmas von Wissenschaftsgeschichte"), which considered the relationship between the scientific development of the subject and Nazi ideology and politics as shown by the change in content of congress papers and the development of psychological schools. In some respects, her results overlap mine, but in only one respect (the account of conflicts within the psychological associations) has Benz drawn on documents not used here.

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Psychology in the Nazi period is a piece of the history of German psychology. History cannot be undone; at the most it can be forgotten, repressed, argued away or it can be accepted and understood as one's own history. This book is therefore aimed at psychologists. But it also seeks a place in the debates of sociologists and historians of science, which will be considered in Chapter 1.

There are still all sorts of problems peculiar to work on the Third Reich. The Berlin Senate refused me permission to consult the files of the Berlin Document Center, which include those of National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) members. Some psychologists refused to be interviewed or failed to reply when I wrote to them. I was compared to the devil for working on this topic, and more besides. But others provided much-needed encouragement. I would like to thank everyone who helped, as well as all those who were able to put up with me through the ups and downs of the project.

It was important for this work that the majority of those asked were willing to talk or write about their experiences and the development of psychology. It added detail to my picture of the period and helped me to see these people not just as objects of research, but as individuals. Various documents were kindly provided from private collections. I received generous assistance from libraries and institutions in the course of my search for documents, particularly the psychological and central libraries of the Free University of Berlin, the Berlin State Library, and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. I would like to thank the archivists who helped and advised me, in particular Rudolf Absolon, Aachen; Professor Dr. Laetitia Boehm, Munich; Mr. Glaser, Potsdam; Ms. B. Klaiber and Mr. Loos, Freiburg; Professor Dr. E. Meuthen, Cologne; Rohtraut Müller-König, Münster; Uwe Plog, Hamburg; Anne Ryfn, Poznan; Dr. Volker Schäfer, Tübingen; Dr. H. Schwabe, Halle; Professor Dr. G. Schwendler, Leipzig; Mr. Teschauer, Frankfurt/M; Günther Thomann, Erlangen; Dr. Volker Wahl, Jena; and Dr. Werner, Koblenz.

Numerous discussions with friends, colleagues, and students helped me to clarify my ideas. I thank especially Erich Lennertz, who recommended focusing my original research project on the Third Reich; he followed my research with patience and useful suggestions. Mitchell G. Ash, Siegfried Jaeger, and Rudolf G. Wagner frequently discussed my ideas and methods. After coming to Berlin in 1981, Irmgard Staeuble provided untiring help in finalizing my concept.

Siegfried Jaeger, Ursula Reinhart, and Irmgard Staeuble read the original manuscript and suggested a number of improvements. Alexandre Métraux made some important comments in the final stages.

Ulfried Geuter  
Berlin, November 1983

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Since the publication of the first German edition of this book, a number of studies on the history of science in the Third Reich have been published. It has become clearer and clearer that in the Nazi period science was neither the victim of systematic persecution nor abused against its own intentions and perceptions. Many scientists were persecuted for their origins or their convictions, while their discipline – carrying on business as usual – compromised itself and their colleagues willingly placed themselves in the service of the new regime.<sup>1</sup>

The persecution of scientists was often mistaken for the persecution of science. For example, because, as Jews, many psychoanalysts suffered under Nazi terror, the opportunities that remained for psychotherapy were ignored by many. Recent publications have made it necessary to reconsider this, giving rise to much controversy.<sup>2</sup> It seems that psychoanalysis, which was willing to accommodate itself to Nazi power, received official support.

The history of psychology in the Third Reich is confused not only with that of psychoanalysis, but also with that of psychiatry. In discussions, someone always asks whether psychologists were, like psychiatrists, involved in selecting victims for sterilization or euthanasia. In a comprehensive study of forced sterilization in the Third Reich, Gisela Bock (1986) showed how psychiatrists and other doctors made such decisions about unwilling victims at health offices and courts for hereditary health. Much material has also been collected that shows that medicine helped to rationalize the machinery of killing (Aly, Masuhr et al. 1985; Kudlien 1985), and that civil servants,

1 See Lundgreen (1985). On the ideological continuity in applied psychology see the contribution by Alexandre Métraux in Graumann (1985).

2 See Lohmann (1984), Locket (1985), Cocks (1985), and Brecht et al. (1985). See also *Psychoanalyse . . .*, 1984.

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judges, doctors, and medical staff all played a part (Aly, Ebbinghaus et al. 1985). However, none of these recent works has produced reliable evidence that psychologists were involved in these deeds.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps psychologists were just lucky that psychiatry was still completely in the hands of physicians, so that they had no professional contact with the business of killing, at least as far as we know. It remains an open question whether individual psychologists already worked in psychiatric clinics and were involved in the selection of people for euthanasia.<sup>4</sup>

With the killing of undesired members of the population, eugenics and racial hygiene came into their own. As Weingart (1985) notes, these were not *misused* by the Nazis, but their ideas were applied with murderous effectiveness (see also Müller-Hill 1984). Geneticists, anthropologists, judges, and psychiatrists all participated in the process. These professional groups therefore now approach this period in the history of their disciplines with different questions than psychologists. And yet, even though psychologists did not place their professional competence in the service of crime and murder, there is a comparable question to be asked: How does one reflect, as an expert, on the conditions and aims of one's work? To what extent is one willing to make one's expertise available to increase the effectiveness of a political or military apparatus? As Peter Lundgren remarks in his introduction to a collection of essays on science in the Third Reich (1985, p. 28), no science proved able to offer resistance to the Nazi regime solely as a consequence of its own content, despite the fond belief to this effect nurtured by some psychologists, psychoanalysts, and sociologists.

Carsten Klingmann (1985, 1985a, 1986) and Otthein Rammstedt (1985, 1986) have shown that those sociologists who stayed not merely were involved with providing the right ideology for social theory, but also were in demand as experts, primarily for gathering empirical information and for opinion research. Sociologists were active in numerous institutions of the Nazi state, right up to the Reich Security Service. Despite the high proportion of emigrants and a decline of theory, sociology was able to continue to establish

3 Aly has claimed that at the institute at Brandenburg-Görden under Professor Hans Heinze (a senior expert for the Reich Committee on Hereditary Defects) a psychologist worked on one team: a fifteen-year-old was tested by the institute's psychologist (Aly, Masuhr 1985, p. 39). Aly wrote to me that this would follow from the files of the state prosecutor in Ansbach; he had no name. The psychiatrist Carl Schneider had also requested that a post for a psychologist be established (letter 30 January 1986). Hence, the term "psychologist" was still used loosely at that time; this deserves closer inspection. The work of Gisela Bock, the most carefully researched of the recent studies, does not indicate any cooperation by psychologists in forced sterilization.

4 In the *Psychological Register* published in 1932 by Carl Murchison, 187 psychologists are listed for Germany (Vol. 3, Worcester, Mass.: Clark University Press), of which only one non-physician was active clinically, Kurt Gottschaldt, who headed the psychological laboratory of the Rhenish Provincial Children's Hospital for the Mentally Ill in Bonn from 1929 to 1933. For prisons, the only entry is a woman psychologist as head of a women's prison.

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itself academically and professionally during the Third Reich, findings that are along the same lines as those presented in this book.<sup>5</sup>

Some works on psychology in the Third Reich have appeared, in particular the essays edited by Carl Friedrich Graumann (1985), only some of which were made available to me as manuscripts while I was writing this book. They concentrate on the history of theory, particularly of holistic (*Ganzheit*) and Gestalt psychology.<sup>6</sup> In terms of *theoretical* development in the Third Reich, some psychological theories allied themselves with Nazi racial doctrines (see Geuter 1987, pp. 87ff.). This is most obvious in the case of Erich Jaensch, who made a systematic attempt to include anti-Semitism in his psychological theory and about whom two essays have appeared (Geuter 1985; Pinn 1987). However, taking the texts by the social psychologist Willy Hellpach as an example, Horst Gundlach (1985, 1987) has shown the extent to which nuances must be registered in the vocabulary of that period. What seem to modern readers to be clearly racist expressions turn out on closer inspection to be artful criticisms of Nazi views.

The psychological service of the West German army has commissioned a history of military psychology, mainly from former Wehrmacht psychologists, which seems to confirm my comments in Chapter 9 on the mentality of army psychologists (*Deutsche Wehrmachtpsychologie... 1985*). This book completely overlooks the fact that psychology in the German army was able to thrive as a result of the war started by the Nazis. As of old, the authors seem to see the policies of militarization and war more as a gift of the gods than as a cause for reflection.<sup>7</sup>

It remains for future research to establish whether psychologists worked in psychiatric establishments and were involved in inhumane crimes there. Also, little, if anything, is known about the lives of those psychologists who stayed in Germany and offered political resistance, such as Kurt Huber and Heinrich Döker; nor is much known of someone like Theodor Lessing, who published psychological articles in the twenties and was murdered in Czechoslovakia after he fled there in 1933 because of his Jewish origins and political beliefs. There were also psychologists such as Otto Bobertag, Otto Lipmann, and Martha Muchow who broke under the burden of circum-

5 Warsewa and Neumann (1987), in a study of racial questions, arrived at the same conclusions as mine, namely, that ordinary scientific methods were used to increase productivity in the firms, but that racist ideology served largely as a cloak, though not, of course, where it led to people being worked to death. On labor psychology see also Geuter (1987a) and Métraux (note 1).

6 This book also includes a study by Mitchell G. Ash and myself ("NSDAP-Mitgliedschaft und Universitätskarriere in der Psychologie," written after this book was finished). We showed that party membership did not generally make a university career more probable (see Chapter 2). There were cases, however, that of Kurt Wilde, for instance, where political activity provided an enormous boost for a career.

7 See my review in *Psychologie heute*, H 4, (1987), pp. 78–9; a book by Riedesser and Verderber (1985) is only superficially researched in the parts concerning Germany.



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stances and put an end to their lives in 1933–4. Were there other such examples?

Joachim Wohlwill (1987) has shown that individuals could make a variety of responses; whether a psychological journal followed a path of enthusiastic conformity or carefully sought to maintain its independence depended on the attitude of the editors.

Research on the professionalization of psychology should pay more attention to the importance of psychology in teacher training,<sup>8</sup> which I barely touched on since it is an academic or semiacademic teaching activity. However, it was one of the few professional opportunities in the twenties outside the universities, although it was nowhere near as influential as military psychology was later to become.<sup>9</sup>

One last idea for further research arises from a note by Trudy Dehue (1988): in the Netherlands the occupying Germans introduced the first full university training in psychology, the “Academisch Statuut,” and Austria was forced to accept the Diploma Examination Regulations of 1941, though these were abandoned after the war. What effect did Nazism have in these and other countries on the development of psychology?

The opportunity has been taken to introduce a number of minor corrections, particularly relating to the history of the institutionalization of psychology in the universities.<sup>10</sup>

Ulfried Geuter  
La Playa, Christmas 1987

8 See Otto Ewert, “Erich Stern und die Pädagogische Psychologie im Nationalsozialismus,” in Graumann (1985, pp. 197–219).

9 Nine people in the *Psychological Register* (note 4) were active in teacher training; a further six were in youth and school psychology, two at the Central Institute for Education and Teaching in Berlin, one as a local school psychologist, and three in local youth counseling. Psychology in teacher training also affected the institutionalization of psychology in the universities. In Thuringia, which had the first chair in psychology at Jena in 1923, a law was passed in 1922 transferring teacher training to the universities, as later happened in Saxonia, Hesse and Hamburg.

10 For more detailed data see Geuter (1986).

## Abbreviations

(Additional abbreviations of sources are listed in Comments on Sources.)

<b>Amt BuB</b>	Amt für Berufserziehung und Betriebsführung (Office for Vocational Training and Works Management)
<b>BDP</b>	Berufsverband deutscher Psychologen (Professional Association of German Psychologists)
<b>DGfPs</b>	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie (German Society for Psychology)
<b>DINTA</b>	German Institute for (Nazi) Technical Training
<b>DPO</b>	Diplom-Prüfungsordnung (Diploma Examination Regulations)
<i>DWEV</i>	<i>Deutsche Wissenschaft Erziehung und Volksbildung</i>
<i>Ind. Pst.</i>	<i>Industrielle Psychotechnik</i>
<i>JHBS</i>	<i>Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences</i>
<b>NSD</b>	National Socialist Lecturers' League
<b>NSDAP</b>	National Socialist German Workers' Party
<b>NSV</b>	National Socialist People's Welfare Organization
<b>ObdH</b>	<i>Oberbefehlshaber des Heeres</i> (commander in chief of the army)
<b>ObdL</b>	<i>Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe</i> (commander in chief of the air force)
<b>ObdW</b>	<i>Oberbefehlshaber der Wehrmacht</i> (commander in chief of the armed forces)
<b>OKW</b>	Wehrmacht Supreme Command (Armed Forces Office)
<i>Prakt. Psych.</i>	<i>Praktische Psychologie</i>
<i>PsRd</i>	<i>Psychologische Rundschau</i>
<b>RABL</b>	Reichsarbeitsblatt
<b>RGBL</b>	Reichsgesetzblatt

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*Abbreviations*

RMWEV	Reich Ministry for Science and Education
SS	Schutzstaffel
UA	University Archive
VdpP	Verband deutscher praktischer Psychologen (Association of German Practical Psychologists)
<i>WPsM</i>	<i>Wehrpsychologische Mitteilungen</i>
<i>Z. ang. Ps</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie</i>
<i>Z. päd. Ps</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für pädagogische Psychologie</i>
<i>Z. Ps</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Psychologie</i>

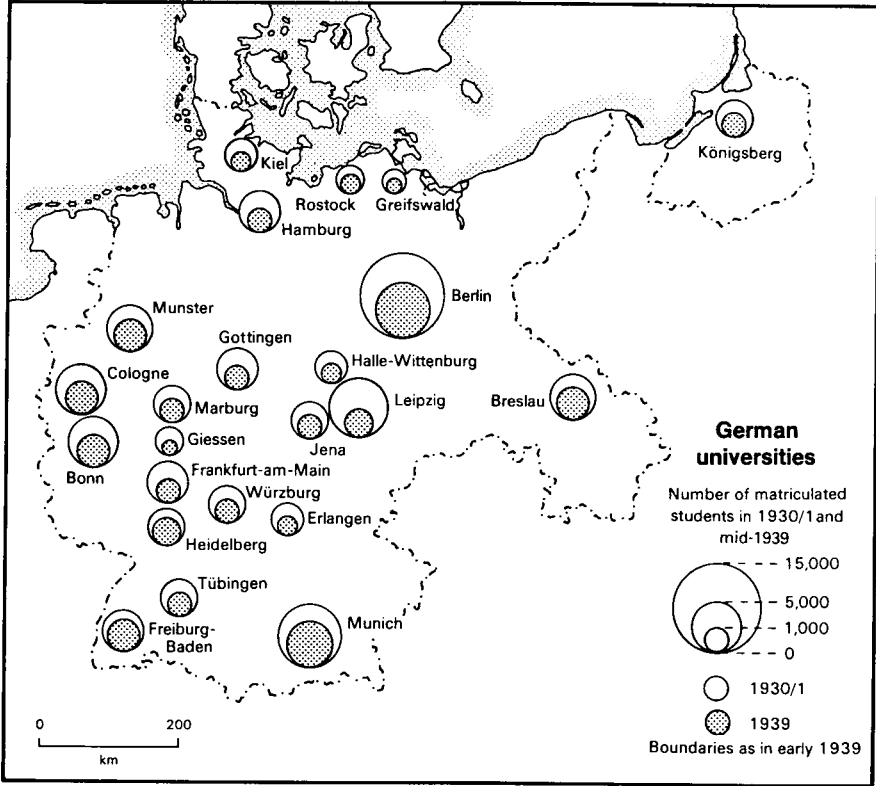
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