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In memory of Hans Jakob Polotsky

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Egyptology in Nazi Germany:
Ideology, Scholarship, Careers
In the spring of 1933, James Henry Breasted, the patron of American Egyptology, paid a visit to Berlin on his way back from then Middle East. Breasted's son Charles describes what his father reported after meeting the aged Adolf Erman, his doctoral supervisor, Kurt Sethe and the other colleagues of younger days. “To my surprise, all these German friends, who in the past abhorred politics, are now deeply interested in Hitler’s new leadership, and are all in favor of him! If their judgment is to be accepted, Hitler has united Germany – an amazing and ominous achievement!”

After the demise of the Third Reich, Alexander Scharff, chairholder in Egyptology at the University of Munich, conceded that far too many Egyptologists had been followers of Hitler without any necessity. In a mere 12 years, Germany had lost the global leadership in Egyptology that it had held until the Nazis' rise to power. Egyptology as a discipline was sensibly struck by the fact that scholars were persecuted, dismissed, and forced to emigrate – a consequence of the Law for the restitution of Civil Service decreed by the new authorities on 7th of April 1933 in order to remove academic staff of Jewish origin and disloyal faculty, and regulations of the following years such as the Nuremberg racial laws. This entailed an irreversible drift of German Egyptology off the path set out before 1933, and a loss of academic terrain that could not be regained easily, in particular in the fields of linguistics, literary studies, and art.
Egyptology was also struck by the ideological constraints introduced after 1933. Since its inception, National Socialism strove for aligning the country’s institutions of higher learning with its doctrine. Universities were seen as the potential spearheads of the new nation but they were also feared for their intellectual independence and power. The new ideological restrictions made many disciplines redefine their remit and adjust. Egyptology found itself at the centre of such a debate as early as 1934 when Helmut Berve, the leading ancient Historian of the Third Reich and at the same time a high representative of the National Socialist state at Leipzig, militated against global historiography in the vein of a Leopold Ranke or Eduard Meyer.

He in turn advocated national histories, and questioned the right of Egyptology to exist henceforth as an academic discipline:

“The study of the Ancient Near East as far as it relates to peoples of a foreign race, of a nature alien to us and thus impossible to comprehend fully in its peculiarity, is doomed to resignation as soon as the problems go beyond what can be established rationally. Therefore, it fails with regard to our system of values and loosens its right to exist (...). Where the threshold of deeper questioning has been stepped upon – as in Egyptology –, serious decisions need to be taken.”

Since, according to Berve’s view, humans can only understand what they love, and love only what is akin to them,

“understanding the nature of a people of considerably different race (...) is largely impossible”.

Fig. 2: Helmut Berve

He anticipated that, in the future, “Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Germany will automatically focus on the peoples akin to us in terms of race and mind; Egyptology and Assyriology will recede into the background”. Berve denied here the extraordinary standing of German Egyptology as much as he disregarded the inherent value of intellectual achievement, and how international prestige could be gained through academic excellence. This was a marked breakaway from the tradition established in the 19th century whereby the educated elite regarded it as a cultural obligation of the modern state to serve as a benevolent patron for academic life, protecting the integrity and
autonomy of universities and the disciplines pursued there. The changes implemented now were also possible due to the specifics of the German university system where the corporative structures had little authority. Self-governance lay within the responsibility of the university’s full professors, all of whom were civil servants with life-long tenure and benefits – which made them directly dependent (also financially) on the government.

Before I return to these themes, let me make some comments on our rapidly evolving understanding of Egyptology under National Socialism. This field of scholarship is a new topic of research. Increasing documentary evidence has provided scholarship with a framework for a proper historical contextualization of the discourse within the discipline as well as the political role of individuals and institutions. At the same time, it has also shown how complex and unwieldy the topic is in many respects. The focus of recent contributions has been on two figureheads of German Egyptology that appeared to represent opposite positions, Georg Steindorff (1861-1951) and Hermann Grapow (1885-1967), in an attempt to objectify the debate.

Fig. 3: Group photo with Egyptologists in Giza, to honor the achievements of Selim Hassan. In the first row, from right to left: Banub Habachi, Hermann Grapow, Percy Newberry, Georg Steindorff, Hermann Junker and Selim Hassan. March 1933.
Fig. 3 shows the two in Giza in March 1933, next to British Egyptologist Percy E. Newberry. Steindorff, of Jewish descent and the most prominent Egyptological emigrant from Nazi Germany, in March 1939, was chairholder in Egyptology at the university of Leipzig until 1934 and a former rector of the university (1923). Spurred by the military events of 1944 that made an end of the war imminent, Steindorff formulated and had distributed, in June 1945, from his American exile, a letter naming Egyptologists who had proven themselves to be “men of honour” and such whom he accused for their involvement with Nazism. Such lists of incriminated individuals were also drafted by other Egyptologists, to mention only a letter by Ludwig Keimer to Georg Steindorff dated October 20, 1945 in which he provides a list of “Egyptological war criminals”.

In the Steindorff letter, the first of incriminated individuals listed was Hermann Grapow, about whom Steindorff formulated:

“Dr. Hermann Grapow, professor of Egyptology and as member of the Berlin Academy of Science, a man of truly base character. You know him by name as a pupil and collaborator of Erman. So long as Erman lived, he posed as a democrat. Later however, especially after Sethe passed away, he showed his true colors as an arch-Nazi, and used every means to be Erman's and Sethe's successor in the professorship at the University. He persecuted everybody who did not say "Heil Hitler!" and did not follow the Nazi flag. Finally he succeeded. In my opinion there is no one who excelled Grapow in meanness, hatefulness and denunciation of those who were not of his political opinion.”
These accusations were repeated a year later, when Steindorff sent a formal letter of charges against Hermann Grapow to the American authorities who had taken Grapow into custody. With regard to Steindorff’s judgments, several colleagues have been able to demonstrate that they need to be seen in the context not only of the political position of those individuals during the Nazi period, but Steindorff’s own personal relationship with them. They were also made with the strategic view in mind whether, as potential protagonists of a new post-war German Egyptology, they could be beneficial or harmful to his own interests. In a similar vein, Steindorff’s removal as the editor of the leading German Egyptological journal, the Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde, should not be seen exclusively under an political angle – Steindorff enjoyed significant privileges in the initial years of the Nazi regime – but also in the context of a generation conflict about the question if Steindorff or others should assume the leadership in German Egyptology. Another aspect of a more accurate contextualization by recent scholarship is the surprising fact that Steindorff himself had championed ‘völkische Wissenschaft’ and posited the existence of a genuine Egyptian race with Nordic features in early Egypt; most prominently in his inauguration address as rector of the University of Leipzig in 1923, “Vom Wesen des ägyptischen Volkes”.

This academic turn helped the discipline to survive throughout the Weimar Republic, in a difficult academic context.
Under the influence of the political events in Nazi Germany and his own exile, Steindorff’s position changed and in his 1942 book, “When Egypt Ruled the East”, he assigned Semites a larger role in Egypt’s cultural development and assumed a pro-Jewish attitude. In this context, it is essential to see that after his own conversion from Judaism to Protestantism in 1885, Steindorff saw himself no longer as Jewish but as German and after 1933, did not understand the transition from a culturally to a biologically defined Jewishness.

In turn, recent contributions have attempted to portray Hermann Grapow in a more favorable light but in doing so, have demonstrably withheld evidence. In a contribution currently in press, I show that Grapow, Acting President of the University of Berlin in the
last three years of the war, was indeed at the forefront of National Socialist and SS initiatives in the Humanities, a supporter of the Nazi regime out of political opportunism rather than ideological consent. Personally, I have found myself embroiled in a debate within the discipline about how we should assess, and to what extent we may judge, the situation in academia during National Socialism.

In Egyptological post-war scholarship, the years from 1933-45 were, for many decades, passed over in silence, masked out from the consciousness of the discipline. To give you one example: Wolfgang Helck's 1967 book about “Egyptology at German Universities” mentions nowhere with a single word the 12 years of the Nazi regime and the impact it had on Egyptology, except when he remarks that Hermann Kees' collected materials for an ancient Egyptian topography were lost when his house was confiscated in 1945. The full truth is that the confiscation occurred when Kees was discharged from his professorship as a leading National Socialist at the university of Göttingen who had also been a driving force behind the expulsion of Jewish faculty.

Passing over those years went hand in hand with efforts to emphasize the academic continuity with the Egyptology before 1933; this suited a frequent historiographical tendency after the war to downplay Nazism as a mere “accident” or “footnote” of Germany history. On the other hand, 1945 was perceived as a political rupture by the discipline’s representatives, both in West Germany and the German Democratic Republic. A debate about the roles that individuals and the discipline as a whole played during the Nazi era was never initiated in a field dominated by incriminated representatives well into the 1980s, and faced with the new split of Egyptology between two German political and academic systems.

Different attitudes of how to respond to the new political situation can be discerned in the Egyptological reactions to the attack mounted by Helmut Berve. Walther
Wolf, professor of Egyptology at Leipzig and a member of the National Socialist party, authored a defense in 1937 under the title *The Nature and Significance of Egyptology*. Wolf qualified Berve’s claim. While he agreed that race was crucial for any culture, he also emphasized that previous assumptions about the race of the Egyptians relied on flawed assumptions, a clear critique of Steindorff’s ideas. Wolf also took issue with the older generation of Egyptologists, the Berlin School, who in their belief that culture manifests itself in language, had nothing to contribute to the big debates that the rise of prehistoric research had ignited. Wolf professed the belief that Egypt’s Nordic nature could be inferred from its culture; he detected Nordic features in Egyptian art and suspected that ultimately, Egyptians might be proven to be of Aryan origin and thus, Egyptology might be vindicated.

There were several building stones for this re-orientation of Egyptology, such as Heinrich Schäfer’s new art history of ancient Egypt (1919ff.) in which he asserted the “Nordic nature” of the Egyptian art of the Old Kingdom.
This treatise, along with Wolf’s inaugural lecture of 1934, *Individual and Society in Egyptian Culture* and a later article of 1938, unveils the distinct will to align Egyptology with the requirements of the new ideology. One of Wolf’s claims is that the national collective (*Volksgemeinschaft*) was of predominant significance in shaping ancient Egypt, and that its culture was owed to “soil and blood” (*Boden und Blut*). The individual’s role, by contrast, is granted nothing but a subversive effect; Egyptian art is not the art of an individual artist but the art of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Wolf construes pharaoh as the realizer of forces lying dormant in the national collective where they were waiting to be set free.

![Fig. 11: Contemporary propaganda illustrating some of the ideas in Wolf’s 1934 and 1937 publications](image)

In the same vein, he explains the failure of Akhenaten’s monotheistic revolution by the very fact that the king “did not uncover ideas that were lying dormant in the depth of their racial collective, and did not fight to unfold their full potential”. This is clearly worded on
the template of the role assigned by National Socialism to Hitler. Moreover, Wolf also perceived humans as the passive object of a culture’s predestined and inevitable fate in which they have to acquiesce, hereby implicitly justifying the Nazi regime. However, his view did not pass uncontested. Alexander Scharff, professor of Egyptology at Munich, and a supporter of Steindorff’s earlier ‘völkisch’ views about ancient Egypt, dismissed Wolf's arguments.

![Image](image.jpg)

*Fig. 12: The 1928 Giza excavation team, left to right: Alexander Scharff, Maria Junker, Hermann Junker, Karl Holey, Friedrich Koch*

It is astonishing to see how bluntly he rejected Nazism in 1935 as a legitimate way of interpreting Ancient Egypt:

“In it the attempt is made to understand the Egyptian culture from a new angle of view which is apparently rooted in National Socialist ideology (...). Such slogans of today which may have a predominant significance in other areas, are of little use with regard to Ancient Egypt. It is out of the question that “race” was ever a factor in the formation of Ancient Egypt (...). It seems to me that a political event, and be it of the scale of the German revolution of 1933, can not at this moment transform our understanding of a past civilization to the extent the author would like to make us believe with his treatise which to all appearances is meant to be programmatic. Academic reasoning has always proceeded with measured steps, without being tied to particular dates.”

The range of personal and academic adaptation to the new doctrine was varied – from mere mottos placed at the beginning of books to more substantial commitments to National Socialism. Heinrich Schäfer introduced his study on Egyptian sculpture of 1936 with a quotation from Hitler's "Mein Kampf" – "I can fight only for something that I love, love only what I respect, and respect only what I at least know” –, a motto applied in what follows to Egyptian sculpture. Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr von Bissing dedicated his
Egyptian Art History of 1934 to Adolf Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess, labeled "the German warrior from the bank of the Nile" – Rudolf Hess was born in Alexandria to a German merchant and spent there the first 16 years of his life. He also introduces his monograph by a chapter "On the racial question" that refers to a speech given by Hitler.

Fig. 13: Heinrich Schäfer, Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr von Bissing, Rudolf Hess

Explicit ideological judgments can be found time and again in the Egyptological literature. In the final paragraph of his doctorate on the stelae of the Theban rock tombs of the 18th dynasty, Alfred Hermann blames the purported disastrous end of Egypt's imperial aspirations in the Amarna Age to the “slackening, and even transformation of the Egyptian racial substance (Volkskörper)”: 

“What aborted the grandiose historic attempt of the 18th dynasty [the building of an empire] was the one danger that passed unheeded: the influx of foreign blood which did not benefit the substance of the Egyptian people and deprived it of the firmness to go ahead, without wavering, on the way it had started.”

In a similar vein, Hermann Kees characterised Akhenaten as the very opposite of the Egyptian ideal of a master race:

“One is certainly wrong to portray Amenophis IV as an enthusiastic idealist who wished to turn the world’s conflicts to eternal peace by the gracious sermon of human reconciliation and who therefore declined any warfare abroad. To be a great reformer, he lacked the creative force to anticipate, in the way of a seer, issues that were fermenting and wanted to take shape, and to shape them, and not the least did his personality lack authoritative charisma, carrying the stigma of repulsive ugliness. He himself possessed too many traits that were contrary to the ancient Egyptian ideal of a master race; he was licentious, effusive, led by emotions, morally debauched and obstinate.”

Fig. 14
In Kees’ view, it was the usual Egyptian pharaoh who instead complied with the ideal of a National Socialist leader. The post-Amarna pharaohs put an end to Akhenaten’s crimes against the pre-Amarna monarchy such as Nazism abolished the Weimar republic and raised in many the hope of a restitution of the old order.

The Nazis’ attitude towards Ancient Egypt was more ambiguous than claimed by Helmut Berve. Egyptian art impressed the Nazis for its monumentality and continuance, bearing witness to a culture thousands of years after it vanished. In that respect, the architecture of Classical Greece and Rome were the prime model for Hitler’s “megalomania in stone”, buildings beyond time that even as ruins in the distant past would still generate a powerful myth of demise and an enduring memory. Egyptian architecture was studied by Hitler’s architect Albert Speer, and may have been one element of inspiration of some projects of Nazi architecture (cf. fig. 16).
On a personal level, the repressive measures imposed by the Nazi regime affected first and foremost Jewish faculty. A victim of the first wave of forced dismissals of Jewish faculty was in 1934 Walter Wreszinski, Professor of Egyptology and Semitic Languages at the University of Königsberg, who died prematurely only a year later.

![Fig. 17: Walter Wreszinski.](image1)

We mentioned Georg Steindorff at Leipzig who initially enjoyed significant privileges; restrictions increased since 1936, in 1938 he was expelled from the Saxonian Academy of Sciences and after the pogrom night of November 9, 1938, when more than 1,000 synagogues throughout the German Reich were burnt, he decided to emigrate to the United States. He and his wife left Germany on March 31, 1939, while Steindorff’s sister could not escape the deportation to the extermination camps.

![Fig. 18: Steindorff’s last seminar in Leipzig (9 February 1934)](image2)
Hedwig Fechheimer, an expert in Egyptian art, committed suicide when she had no longer an option to sustain herself and was threatened with deportation.

Another tragic victim of Nazi politics was Hermann Ranke who was pensioned off in 1937 because his wife was “half-Jewish” and because he was considered politically unreliable. They lost all their three children prematurely, two of whom during National
Socialism: their eldest son committed suicide in 1933, their younger son died on the Russian front in 1941, as did several younger Egyptologists.

Among the emigrants was Bernhard Bothmer, who, rejected by Switzerland, found asylum in the United States and became a specialist in Egyptian art of the Late period. The states also became the new home of Otto Neugebauer, an expert in Egyptian mathematics and astronomy. Hans-Jakob Polotsky emigrated to Jerusalem where he would establish a new paradigm for Egyptian linguistics. Rudolf Anthes decided to go to the University of Pennsylvania and declined a position in Berlin after the war. And there are many more.
National Socialism also meant the end of the Jewish patronage of the Arts that had so significantly contributed to the prestige of the Berlin Museum, most famously represented by entrepreneur and philanthropist James Simon. Simon had funded Ludwig Borchardt's excavations at Amarna and thereby given the world the Nefertiti bust – a bust that Hitler admired and whose planned return to Egypt he personally declined, intending to exhibit it in a future museum in Germany’s prospective capital city Germania.

Fig. 22: James Simon; commemorative plaque.

Ludwig Borchardt and his wife Mihi Cohen were, like James Simon, from upper-class German Jewish families in Berlin who, as their life’s main achievement, had established the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo. When Borchardt retired from the directorship of the institute in 1929 (only to see it assumed by Hermann Junker, a National Socialist), the Borchardts founded a new private institute. It was threatened by expropriation in 1938 when the Nazis confiscated all remaining property of German Jews. Attempts by Borchardts to acquire a different nationality or to find a new home abroad for the institute failed; while they ultimately succeeded in signing the institute over to a foundation in their name established in Switzerland, Ludwig Borchardt succumbed to the stress of the desperate efforts and died of two subsequent heart attacks in the August of 1938. Ludwig Borchardt was hurt most by being denied his Germanness; and his wife Mimi Cohen who had assumed honorary positions in the German
community in Cairo relinquished her positions as early as April 1933 with the following statement of remarkable clarity and prescience:

“Germans are being put into jail by other Germans for their opinions, and deported into concentration camps. Germans deny other Germans their Germanness, destroy them economically, deprive them of their honor. And the sense for such injustice seems to be stifled in most Germans. I do not want to come under suspicion to approve this, not by remaining tacit, nor by keeping my post.”

Similar was the reaction of Georg Steindorff. As a public figure, he was able to avoid repression for some time and was initially convinced that with their racial regulations, the Nazis could not have somebody like him in mind – long-converted to Protestantism, a German patriot, and former rector of the university. However, after the Nuremberg racial laws had been issued on 15th of September, 1935, he wrote to Adolf Erman in Berlin:

“The Nuremberg legislation has completely paralyzed us and cut our thread of life, it has annihilated our zest of life and my zest of work (...). I was always proud to be able to say “civis Germanus sum”, and cannot bear it to be locked up in a ghetto...We are likely to spend the few years that fate grants us with wandering all over the world, deprived of our homeland. In the place where I worked honestly for more than 40 years and where I was conferred all honours, I don’t want to and cannot stay any longer. No power of the world will me take mypride; I don’t want to be pitied, rather I pity the other. But there is one thing I have learnt in these days (...): to hate.”

Fig. 24: Adolf Erman; Georg Steindorff
A letter from the ancient historian Helmut Berve (mentioned above) to Georg Steindorff from April 18, 1936 is a brutal expression of the new situation (here given in an English translation):

Very honored Mr. Steindorff,

It is very difficult for me to direct the following lines to you, but it must happen one day. You yourself know how the non-Aryan question has come to a head in the last year, and that out of the changed circumstances certain necessary consequences resulted like the departure of hitherto remaining gentlemen from their official position, respectively their resignation from the circle of Emeriti. In this respect the beginning of this year signifies without doubt a change of the situation which pertained in the first time after the national revolution, and also an alteration of the relationship between the Civil servants of the National Socialist state and the gentlemen who are removed from their position. Especially however, for the members of the Party themselves, a new position has resulted, which they are obligated to take into account. They can no longer account to the party for remaining in a personal relationship with the departed non-Aryan gentlemen, but must moreover clearly distance themselves personally. All private feelings or considerations have to be silent before this imperative demand of the Party to its members, one has to obey the higher law. Thus I have resolved further to sever the form of the relationship which essentially pertained between us in the last years, the common participation in the academic coffee party, and accordingly yesterday with a heavy heart declared my exit from that circle, to which I have belonged for nearly nine years. I know you think objectively enough to understand this step of mine in its necessity, as I on the other hand will indeed thankfully remember all the acts of friendliness which I have experienced from you since my arrival in Leipzig. I hope that you will not think of me in bitterness.

In this sense I greet you in farewell! Helmut Berve

A large number of Egyptologists were members of the National Socialist party, as well as different other Nazi associations and the paramilitary organizations of the SA (Sturmabteilung, storm troopers) and the SS (Schutzstaffel); additionally, many were also engaged in political activism. The first Egyptologist to join enthusiastically the ranks of Hitler's supporters was Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr von Bissing, Professor at Munich. Naively misapprehending Hitler's political goals and expecting him to restore the German monarchy, he wrote to the Führer as early as 1923: "Under your banner Germany will live, or it is doomed." One of the first supporters of the Hitler

Fig. 25: Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr von Bissing
movement in Germany, a bearer of the gold medal of the Nazi party and supporter of the SS, von Bissing's political naïveté also led to his expulsion from the movement. Concerned about the increasing number of repressive actions exerted by the Nazis after their rise to power, he complained in a letter about what he considered to be the abandonment of the true values of National Socialism.

“What one misses is a feeling of responsibility on the part of the Führer who totters like the blind man in the painting of Brueghel.(…) People say that he suffers from incurable megalomania (…) Satan has grabbed hold of him, God alone can help!”

Intended as a means to bring Hitler back to his senses, the letter almost instantly led to von Bissing’s expulsion from the party; pleas for clemency addressed to Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess and to Hitler himself were to no avail. However, at that time, von Bissing was in his 60s and a younger generation of scholars had taken the reins of German Egyptology. The most influential among them, and the most prominent Nazi Egyptologist, was Hermann Grapow (fig. 6).

A long-time researcher at the Berlin Egyptian Dictionary project, he wrote to Georg Steindorff as follows in a letter dated February 25, 1935: “I am everywhere on the outside; this is true. Nowhere am I in a position to say anything decisive, I do not belong to any scholarly corporation of stature. Soon a ‘man of fifty years’, I am sitting in my corner ‘in the shadow of titans’.” And he adds on August 15, 1935: “It is not an alluring prospect (…) to remain eliminated from any actual power and influence”. Five years later, he would not only have risen to the position of Chair in Egyptology at the University of Berlin but would also be the Dean of its Philosophical Faculty, and another three years later, Deputy President and Acting President of the University and simultaneously, Vice President and Acting President of the Prussian Academy of Arts and Sciences. The son of a Rostock grocery store owner, deliberately kept by the discipline’s leadership from assuming the chair position in Egyptology at the University of Bonn in 1927 so he could continue work on the dictionary project, had quickly ascended to a leading position of Nazi Germany, well-connected with ministers of the National Socialist government and the elite of state. Figure 26 captures this ascent in one photography – at the meeting of the Prussian Academy on January 27, 1944, Grapow converses with Prince August Wilhelm of Prussia, the son of Emperor Wilhelm II and SA Obergruppenführer (the highest SA rank), and Lieutenant General Wilhelm Philipps, Head of the Group for Weapons and Equipment Manufacture (Amtsgruppe für Industrielle Rüstung – Waffen und Gerät).
Risen to the top of command of the most important university of the Reich, and the state’s most significant Academy, Grapow saw himself as a political leader who had pledged allegiance to the Führer. In a speech given in 1940, he portrayed the academy as a modern army of academic soldiers whose members were united with in the decisive fight for Germany's future. He praised “the Führer as the man of German destiny” who would lead the nation to its next period of blossom. Grapow sanctioned – as the leading Egyptologist, for his discipline, and as the leader of the Academy and the University of Berlin, for Higher Education more generally – agendas of Nazism as a pathway for future research and teaching, as much as he accepted (like similarly Walther Wolf) the regime’s “fate-given” racist and expansionist politics. He also made sure to appear loyal to the regime, e.g., by denouncing Belgian Egyptologist Jean Capart to the Gestapo, the Nazi Secret Police, because the latter had concluded an obituary of Erman with a critical statement about Nazism. After the war, Grapow denied any involvement in wrongful acts and in a private letter in January 1946 to his publisher, written after his dismissal from the university, portrayed himself as an infatigable helper behind the scenes who, at the
risk of passing for an anti-Nazi, had provided support to embattled colleagues.

Even so he did not desist from anti-Semitic remarks about Georg Steindorff whom he calls "the old Rabbi from USA". An autobiographical essay published posthumously in 1973 under the title, “Meine Begegnung mit einigen Ägyptologen” (My encounters with some Egyptologists), pursues the same purpose of depicting Grapow as a well-reputed and at the same time, apolitical Egyptologist. Despite being dismissed from his positions at the university, Grapow succeeded in building a new career in the Soviet Occupation Zone and later the German Democratic
Republic where he was appointed director of a newly established Institute for Oriental Research and awarded the National Prize of the GDR.

Less driven by opportunism and more by a right wing political agenda was the career of Hermann Kees (fig. 15), professor of Egyptology at Göttingen. Alexander Scharff (who, as we saw, rejected National Socialism as an interpretative agenda for Egyptology, and who after the war portrayed his department at Munich as the anti-Nazi bastion in German Egyptology) considered Kees not to have been "a true Nazi". A document supplied by the rector of the university of Göttingen after the war when the question arose if Kees should be re-employed, calls him “not a National Socialist in the narrow sense of the term, but one of the old right-wing German nationalists with their very distinct anti-Semitic agenda”. Kees’ family belonged to the landed German nobility and had owned an estate near Leipzig, but had lost its former privileges in 1919. Kees fiercely opposed the Weimar Republic and favored the restitution of the old monarchy. He even projects the political controversies of his times back to ancient Egypt when he claims, to quote from his monograph on Egyptian funerary religion, that “Akhenaten expropriated the old Egyptian nobility”, a fact unattested for the Amarna Period but for the abolition of the monarchy in post-WWI Germany. During the Weimar Republic, Kees was the president of the ultra-conservative German National People's Party in Göttingen (Deutschnationale Volkspartei, DNVP), and since 1924, of its armed branch, the "League of Frontline Soldiers Steel Helmet", one of the many paramilitary organizations that had been formed after the German defeat in the First World War. Figure 30 is an election poster of the DNVP from the Weimar Republic, showing the French, the Bolcheviks and the Jews as the enemies of Germany.

*Fig. 30: Election poster of the German National People’s Party: “Our rulers: Who wants to get rid of them, votes (for the) German National”*
Politically active against the Weimar Republic, Kees was thus a protagonist of a right-wing party that rivalled for the conservative spectrum of voters and was amalgamated with the Nazi party in 1933. Before this happened, and immediately after the Nazis took over power in 1933, Kees joined the SA (Sturmabteilung, Storm Troopers), the armed wing of the Nazi Party.

In the same year, he established and was entrusted with the command of the SA regiment at Göttingen, and in a CV submitted to the Nazi party in 1936 prides himself on having recruited 2,100 storm-troopers for that regiment. Within the SA, Kees rose through the ranks to the position of a middle-range officer and also served as an SA instructor. No other Egyptologist decided to join as many National Socialist organizations as Kees did – apart from the SA and the Nazi party itself, six of its affiliated organizations. This was not remotely a necessity even for prominent National Socialists, and must therefore have been a deliberate decision by Kees – a visible proof of his commitment to the new regime. In assessments by the party, Kees was praised as "a good National Socialist", and when the university of Leipzig recommended him in 1933 for its vacant chair in
Egyptology, they lauded his character of steel, his personality that so fully embraced the new National Socialist state, and his outstanding relationship with the National Socialist student union. Kees was, as the committee concluded, "the very type of leader that the National Socialist state needs". Not surprisingly, then, is Kees' rise to the position of president of the Arts Division of the Göttingen Academy of Arts and Sciences. His willingness to help implement the Nazi regime of terror is visible in 1933. After the laws for the restitution of the Civil Order were put into force, the situation in the city of Göttingen was marked by severe attacks on Jews and Jewish stores. On the eve of the legislation, Albert Einstein had declared his resignation from the Berlin Academy. His Jewish colleague in Göttingen, James Frankh, the Nobel laureate in physics of 1926, resigned from his prestigious professorship, a spectacular protest against the increasing discrimination of Jewish citizens. He was hoping for the voluntary resignation of other university professors, as a token of solidarity, but this did not happen.

![Image](image.jpg)

*Fig. 32: James Frankh. The telegraph relieving the first six Jewish faculty of their duties.*

On the contrary, 42 university professors published a manifesto in which they condemned Frankh’s resignation as an act of sabotage and called for an even faster implementation of the “necessary measures of cleansing”. This happened instantly; one day after the publication of the manifesto, the first six Jewish professors were relieved of their duties. Kees signed the manifesto, and according to a note from his denazification files at Göttingen he commented on the dismissal of his colleagues as follows: “Thank God we are rid of the Jews!” Kees himself was dismissed from his university positions in 1945; and when in 1949 the university's senate considered his request to return to university service, it
concluded that its moral obligations to those emigrants who had been harmed by Kees and had now returned to Göttingen outweighed the loss that Kees' resignation would mean to the university.

I will briefly mention three other cases of National Socialist Egyptologists that assumed senior academic or museum positions. Günther Roeder, director of the Pelizaeus Museum at Hildesheim and from 1943-5, director of the Egyptian Museum in Berlin – the two major Egyptian collections that existed at the time in Germany –, was like Kees a member of the Nazi Party and member of the SA, where he held the rank of a troop commander and served as an instructor, but by contrast to Kees, appears to have been politically little active. This allowed for his reinstitution as museum director in 1947.

In many ways a mystery is Siegfried Schott, who substituted as professor of Egyptology in Heidelberg in the last three years of the war and was later a full professor at Heidelberg and Göttingen. In his post-war “J’accuse” letter, Steindorff describes him as "an admirer of Hitler and a gentleman"; other sources characterize him as a loyal Nazi and politically naïve. Among all Egyptologists drafted to the Wehrmacht, Schott was the highest-serving officer, taking part in the French and North African campaigns, and released there from active service as a major in 1943.

A striking rupture in Schott's biography seems to be evident in the fact that he was, in his 20s, a member of a circle of expressionist painters (ex. woodcut “Theatre”, 1921). This art was later stigmatized as “degenerate art” by the very Nazis to whom Schott had pledged allegiance, and seven of Schott’s own works of art were among those publicly defamed by the Nazis.
An important role in the political goals of National Socialism in the Middle East was assigned to the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo before its closure in 1939, after the outbreak of the war. The institute’s director, Hermann Junker, was a Catholic conservative, who joined the Nazi Party and, as Steindorff writes, kept the doors of the Cairo Institute always open for high Nazi officials. Junker’s and the institute’s role in the promotion of National Socialism has only recently been brought to light. In the summer of 1933, the German Archaeological Institute decided to align its policies with the requirements of the Nazi state, and its Cairo branch became a center of National Socialist propaganda and activism in the Middle East. Junker himself pledged “to step up against the inflammatory and atrocity propaganda mounted by Germany’s enemies and international Jewry”
against the National Socialist state”. Within an Egyptian society that, by and large, was opposed to the racial ideologies of National Socialism and not anti-Judaic, Junker saw it as his task to “enlighten” the Egyptians about the Jewish danger, and to instrumentalize to that aim the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. The political role of the institute becomes very visible in a court case in 1934 that the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda labeled the “Kairoer Judenprozess”. It had the following background: In June 1933, the president of the German community in Cairo and member of the local chapter of the Nazi party had an anti-Semitic pamphlet printed, entitled “About the Jewish question in Germany”. An Italian Jewish businessman, Umberto Jabes, had taken the author to court in Cairo for defamation and incitement to racial hatred. Two Egyptian courts rejected the charge for formal reasons – how could the plaintiff, living in Cairo, be affected by developments in Germany? During the trial, the German Archaeological Institute accommodated the Nazi propagandist sent from Berlin to report from court and to celebrate the verdict in the most abominable terms of Nazi ideology, as a “German victory over World jewry, agitators and well-poisoners”. Its members (Junker, Hermann) as well as Hermann Kees who also witnessed the trial in Egypt applauded its outcome.

Junker’s contacts with influential protagonists of racist and anti-Semitic ideologies reach many years back to his time at the university of Vienna, pointing to a long-cherished personal disposition. The most prominent among those old friends was the prehistorian Oswald Menghin who also excavated in Egypt and authored anti-Jewish books, and who was instrumental in the removal of Jewish faculty from Austrian universities when in March 1938, he became Minister of Education during Austria’s annexation to the Reich. His name appears on the first list of Austrian war criminals published in 1945.
Junker is now known to also have entertained a personal friendship with the Nazi Minister of the Interior, Wilhelm Frick, who visited Junker at the Institute in 1934; one of the masterminds behind Nazi legislation, sentenced to death in the Nuremberg trials and executed in 1946. In April 1939, yet another member of the inner circle of the Nazi regime makes his way to Egypt: Joseph Goebbels, the minister of propaganda of the Third Reich, paid a visit to the German community in Cairo and the German Institute.
Goebbels gives a detailed account of the visit in his diaries, including the unforgettable impression that the great Sphinx of Giza left on him: "And of a sudden, I find myself standing in front of the mysterious head of the smiling Sphinx. I am all churned up. Rarely in my life has a sight shaken me as this one. Most often in such cases, there is disappointment. Here reality surpasses imagination." Exceptionally, there is footage of his visit and a guided tour by Hermann Junker through the Giza necropolis (fig. 39).

A significant number of Egyptologists who would shape German Egyptology after the war, earned their doctorate and the right to teach at universities (the habilitation) between 1933-45. In order to earn these degrees and to find university employment, the candidates needed to demonstrate their loyalty with the Nazi state. Some people refused: Hans-Wolfgang Müller, after the war professor in Munich, lost his employment in 1937 because his wife was Jewish and because of his anti-Nazi stance. Rudolf Anthes' employment at the museum in Berlin was suspended in 1939 because of his membership in a Masonic lodge; Bernhard von Bothmer (later a curator at the Brooklyn Museum) was denied his PhD in Berlin because of his opposition to the Nazi state (fig. 22). Some of their colleagues chose to take their degrees but to largely withdraw to their private lives and not exhibit any political interests (such as Elmar Edel and Eberhard Otto, later professors at Bonn, Hamburg, Heidelberg. Most of the upcoming Egyptologists, however, showed some active engagement with National Socialism, such as Hellmut Brunner (later
a professor in Tübingen) or Fritz Hintze (after the war, a professor in East-Berlin) who was a squad leader in the Hitler Youth. Siegfried Morenz, eminent scholar of Egyptian religion and later professor at Leipzig, became as a doctoral student an academic employee of the church-affiliated “Institute for the study and the elimination of Jewish influence on German Church Life”, only weeks after his teacher Georg Steindorff had been forced to emigrate.

Fig. 40: Hellmut Brunner, Fritz Hintze, Siegfried Morenz

A particularly grave case in this respect is Erich Lüdeckens who later became a professor at the University of Würzburg and an authority on Demotic texts. Lüdeckens joined the Waffen-SS, the armed wing of the SS, as early as 1933. At the Nuremberg trials, the Waffen-SS was treated as a criminal organization due to its affiliation with the National Socialist party and its involvement in war crimes. In 1938, Lüdeckens was conscripted by one of the four "SS Death's Head Regiments, special units of the SS who

Fig. 41: Erich Lüdeckens in SS uniform; application to the Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt of the SS to marry Toos Venenbos
originally were established at the Nazi concentration camps and employed as concentration camp personnel, and who were also deployed for special operations behind the front lines. Lüddeckens himself was first deployed as a section leader in Haag in the Netherlands, and later, as a Waffen-SS Squad commander, as a specialist during the plundering of Communist archives in the Ukraine.

Was there any clear opposition to National Socialism by German chairholders in Egyptology? In 1946, Alexander Scharff (fig. 12) portrayed his institute in Munich as the anti-fascist centre of German Egyptology, and he did indeed support younger Egyptologists who suffered discrimination and repression because of their Jewish origin and their political opposition to the Nazi state. At the same time, he entertained excellent personal relationships with the Nazi leadership of the university, a political manoeuvring that may have been the secret to the degree of latitude with which he was able to operate.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a return of numerous scholars to Egyptian professorships that had, in varying degrees, been politically active for National Socialism. They played a decisive role in the making of German post-war Egyptology. The ‘völkisch’ ideas of the 1920s and the racial ideas of National Socialism continued by some to be propagated until the 1980s. Wolfgang Helck, to give one example, reiterated for more than 30
years the idea that the New Kingdom empire disintegrated as a consequence of the excessive influx of Semitic blood that weakened Egypt’s strength and subverted its mentality. He also used otherwise tabooed terms such as ‘völkisch’ and ‘andersvölkisch’.

It is instructive to contrast the actual post-war Egyptology with two situations: the different profile that German Egyptology would have developed without National Socialism, and without the losses incurred by emigration and death. Different again the profile, had the Nazis been able to avert their defeat. By 1943, Grapow had assumed the undisputed leadership of German Egyptology and had lined up Egyptology for a number of initiatives of the Nazi state to instrumentalize the Humanities for its political goals: The ‘Aktion Ritterbusch’ (War Deployment of the Humanities) was intended as a precursor to a prospective research infrastructure in a post-war National Socialist state. A ‘Committee for the Study of White Africa’ was intended to provide racial and colonialist justification to post-war claims of a National Socialist state to North Africa. An SS publication project intended to create study guides for all disciplines taught in the Third Reich had as its goal to align post-war instruction in the Humanities with National Socialist ideology. Grapow had firmly positioned himself and under his direction, Egyptology as a discipline to serve Higher Education in the future National Socialist state.

Concluding remarks – conversations with Miriam Lichtheim in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Fig. 44: Miriam Lichtheim (1914-2004) – passport photo from 1941 and photo from ca. 1999
Select bibliography


