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# The Use and Abuse of Archaeology to Promote Nazi Nationalist Goals

**Matt Bouchard**

## **Introduction**

On June 28th, 1919 the Treaty of Versailles was signed, putting an end to World War I. The treaty called for Germany to accept full responsibility for causing the war, to disarm its military, and pay both territorial and financial reparations for the damage caused during the war. Such stipulations crippled the country both economically and morally. The combination of these factors created a foundation for the rise of Adolf Hitler and further enhanced his incredible ability to manipulate the country's motives and ideals. In the public eye, Hitler's charismatic prowess ignited a newfound hope among the German people. He spoke of strengthening the country by uniting its people in attempt to achieve a state of power similar to that which the Germans held prior to World War I. In fact, "in the pre-war (WWII) years and the initial campaigns, these claims were easy enough to reconcile" (Taberner 2008: 392). Hitler's sadistic intentions were not apparent to the general public. Instead, he was praised for his charisma and gained support through his charismatic speeches. What the German public failed to see was Adolf Hitler's master plan behind the curtain of his charisma.

By appealing to the people, and restoring a sense of pride through nationalism, Hitler and his Nazi party gained immense popularity. In this article, I explore one of the Nazi party's most influential, yet not well known or studied in depth, methods for inspiring nationalistic pride in Germany, archaeological research.

One of the main goals, and driving forces of the Nazi party was to prove that the Aryan race existed, and that the Germans were in fact that Aryan race. In order to prove this claim, Nazi officials sought to use historic research to convince the public to believe their theories. To garner further authenticity, party leaders actively targeted educated people to provide this evidence, thus turning a variety of scholarly fields into a source of informational aid to benefit Nazi goals. While it was the infrequent scholar who became fully “infected with the virus of Nazi ideology,” many “went into an ‘inner emigration’ to avoid the choice between consent and opposition” (Maischberger 2002: 210). In the end, a plethora of scholarly fields pledged their allegiance to the Nazi party, and one of the disciplines that became particularly involved was the field of archaeology. The time of the Third Reich gave prehistoric archaeology in Germany the spotlight for the first time, over the previously more popular classical archaeology, because prehistoric archaeology was “deemed more suitable for confirming the supremacist ideology of ‘the Nordic race’ ” (Maischberger 2002:210).

### **The Ahnenerbe**

The deepest involvement of prehistoric archaeology within the Nazi Party and their Nationalistic agenda came in the founding of the group known as the Ahnenerbe,

in 1935. The Ahnenerbe was established by Heinrich Himmler, a German military commander, Herman Wirth, a historian, and Richard Walther Darré, the Minister of Food and Agriculture. The goals of the Ahnenerbe were to conduct scholarly research to prove the existence of the Nordic/Aryan descendants of the present day German people. In order to gain hard physical evidence of such beliefs, they conducted archaeological excavations all over the world. Such excavations were conducted with the intent to recover any physical proof, through remains, artifacts, or entire sites, which could be presented as belonging to the superior Nordic race of the German past. Hopes were that in presenting such finds to the public, German people would truly believe themselves to be the descendants of the most superior race to ever walk the planet. Philip Kohl (1998) notes that, “nationalism requires the elaboration of a real or invented remote past” (p. 223). In the case of Nazi Germany, this completely invented past of a superior people was extremely appealing to a weak Germany in the wake of World War I.

The Five Tenets, developed by the Ahnenerbe to summarize their goals for the future of the German people, became a driving force behind the Nazi regime’s entire propaganda efforts towards creating an Aryan mindset among German citizens. While these tenets today are clearly outrageous claims, the use of archaeology and the twisting of cultural heritage made them passable as believable reasoning. The Five Tenets of the Ahnenerbe were: 1) “Kulturkreise” (also known as culture circles); 2) the social diffusion theory; 3) “Deutsche Reinheit” (also known as the pure German man); 4) “Weltanschauungswissenschaften” (also known as world view sciences); and finally 5) a

secrecy compact. Each of these Tenets worked to justify the actions the Nazi regime carried out over the course of World War II, including its invasions of neighboring countries and genocidal activities towards the Jewish community and many others. Bettina Arnold (2006) states that, “archaeological evidence under the auspices of the National Socialist (NS) regime was exaggerated, misrepresented and otherwise abused in various ways to support contemporary military and social agendas, ranging from military expansion to genocide (p.8).” Below, I look at each tenet to assess its connection to the motives of the Third Reich, the role of archaeology in justifying these motives, and the validity of the tenets themselves.

### **Culture Circles**

First, looking at the concept of the culture circles, it is clear that this Tenet was the driving force for Nazi archaeology conducted during the time of the Third Reich. This Tenet is based upon the belief that if any piece of German or Nordic culture is found on foreign lands, than it belongs to the German people. In other words, if there is any archaeological site on foreign soil that resembled that of Nordic heritage, the Germans believed that the site, along with all of its contents, rightfully belonged to the people of Germany and their heritage. This theory was used as a justification of the German invasions of its neighboring countries. The Germans invaded countries like Poland reflecting the assumption that the land belonged to them originally, until it was wrongfully stolen from them by whoever was settled on it in the present day,

supporting their claims by the archaeological evidence found in these countries. The general public often took the “physical proof” at face value for justification of invasions.

Given the real world application, this Tenet is not a justified cause for the actions carried out by the Nazi party in terms of their militaristic invasions. If this concept of rightful heritage was in fact the case, than the world would constantly be at war. Civilizations have moved and settled in various lands over centuries of migration. To say that a single site, which slightly resembles that of an ancestor or has artifacts that resemble a certain ‘race’ of people, gives anyone the right to invade almost any country and ‘take back the land’ is illogical. In fact, in a counter argument to the Culture Circles theory, a famous archaeologist whose work was widely available and well accepted before Nazi times, Rudolf Virchow, conducted research to find out the “origins of the Germans on the basis of anthropomorphic and archaeological evidence” (Arnold 2006: 10). Virchow “concluded that it was impossible to say with certainty which of the tribes still to be found in this region might have given rise to the German people” (Arnold 2006: 10-11). Despite the scholarly credentials Virchow had, even before the rise of the Nazis, the public gave more support to scholars working for the Nazis because they were the ones presenting them with a feeling of pride. The Nazi regime continued to conduct studies and promote ‘detailed findings’ of Nordic evidence to support their claims about a superior race. Clearly, archaeologists working for the Ahnenerbe exaggerated their work (or let their work be exaggerated) for the benefits of acceptance and political power. German people wanted a clear “origin” and Hitler offered an answer to the long unanswered question of the heritage of the German people.

## **Social Diffusion**

The second Tenet was based around an idea not only synonymous with the Nazi regime but also with the father of American Anthropology. The social diffusion theory, supported by Franz Boas, stated social changes happen through diffusion. In instances where cultures migrate and clash with each other along the way, the belief is that there is a process of sharing ideas and material culture between the meshing groups. However, the aspect focused on by the Nazi party was the concept that when two cultures interact, ultimately the stronger culture wins over the weaker one and the ideas and practices of the stronger culture are imposed on that of the weaker. This application of social diffusion further supports the Tenet of culture circles. If the Nordic ancestors of Germany were as superior as claimed, then the presence of Nordic ruins on any land made that land Nordic, and rightfully belonged to those of Nordic ancestry, based on the theory of social diffusion. Nazi archaeology looked for physical evidence showing German people were the superior culture. In fact, prehistoric archaeology during the Nazi regime “was conscripted into identifying the cradle of the Aryan cultural progenitors in northern and central Europe, characterized by an uncompromised, pure Germaneness that would provide the template and the basis for the rebirth of the German race through a return to its origins” (Arnold 2006: 11; quoting Puschner 2002: 57).

The social diffusion theory is not an applicable theory to the history of the so-called Nordic people of Germany. A basic contradiction is if superior cultures won out

over weaker ones during times of cross-culture interaction, than why aren't all present day people Nordic? If the theory is logical and readily applicable, why would the land have to be taken back when it should have never been lost to begin with? According to this Tenet, a lesser culture should not even exist on the land of Nordic ancestry, and yet several countries reside over the so-called superior remains. This flies in the face of the twisted Nazi use of social diffusion theory and proves that the theories used by the Nazis contradicted each other.

### **Pure German Man**

The third Tenet is the idea of the pure German man. This theory was based around the idea that the German people were in fact the most pure race. Furthermore, it presented the idea that German ancestors had survived all the tests of time and had evolved into the most superior culture during their migration to present day Germany. The theory also suggests that along the migration, several smaller branches of the culture were created and settled, and this was the reason why the ancestors of the Aryan race were so spread out, not only in Germany. This theory ties directly into the culture circles and social diffusion tenets. It offers a cause to why there are so-called Nordic archaeology sites in other countries, like Poland. If people believed in the pure German race, than they would believe that his settlements and ancestors were all over the world, and not just in Germany. Furthermore, creating such beliefs supported the ideas of social diffusion: if Nordic remains exist on foreign soil, it was the right and obligation of current German people to take those sites back. Creating such a strong



sense of ancestry and heritage in the German public further enabled Hitler to continue his efforts in constructing support for his ideas of the Aryan race.

As stated previously, the German people during the time of the Third Reich were looking for a sense of purpose. Their low levels of morale and nationalism left them impressionable to these new ideas that could restore a sense of pride. Macdonald (2006) writes that,

[p]eople explicitly and implicitly orient themselves in relation to the past and to its physical legacy, to their understandings and enactments of 'heritage' and 'identity', and to the ways in which such understandings and enactments may in turn feed back into the ways in which certain histories, and certain material culture, come to be represented and understood (p. 13).

While looking for a sense of purpose, people often find this purpose in the heritage of their families and the heritage of their country. Adolf Hitler knew this and manipulated the idea of the pure German man to provide answers to the German people who were seeking that sense of purpose and by doing so not only created a sense of purpose, but a strong feeling of heritage and pride.

### **World View Sciences**

The fourth Tenet used by the Nazi regime, and arguably the most imprinted into present day interpretations of the Nazi party, was that of the worldview sciences. It was under the guise of this theory that Germany allowed Hitler to carry out one of the most brutal acts of genocide ever known to mankind. The concept of worldview sciences is that certain characteristics of man were inherited through race and heredity. Arnold (2006) argues that

The defining characteristic of the National Socialist state was the emphasis placed on biological solutions to social problems, including poverty, alcohol and drug addiction, mental illness, and criminality (p. 12).

This belief, that such problems were in fact genetically determined, gave justification to the extermination of all the individuals who didn't fit Hitler's ideal race or social portrait. Despite the level of immorality and genocide, few people opposed Hitler's ideals. The people of Germany had become so brainwashed in the ideas that they were the superior race, that when Hitler presented the ideas of exterminating the lesser peoples, not enough people seemed to care, and the actions were carried out. If his claims were in fact true, following Hitler's master plan would rid Germany of the poor, the criminals, the alcoholics, and even the handicapped. The country would be left with the purist race possible. These claims were built on pseudoscience. If your father is a criminal, there is no biological evidence to make the claim that you will inevitably follow in his footsteps.

Despite its arrogance this theory worked at the time. With hindsight, it is shocking to see how people can be manipulated to believe certain things about society and themselves. The German people actually believed that they were a superior race, but this very concept is completely flawed, built on twisted partials of cultural heritage and pseudoscience. That such claims were accepted by the German culture truly highlights how desperate the citizens were for purpose and how they were willing to support almost any form of leadership if it meant restoring a purpose within themselves. When heritage is used to support acts of genocide, it is a blatant abuse of Nationalism. There is no better example of such Nationalistic abuse than in relation to

the worldview sciences Tenet and its applications to the “lesser” races of Germany. The fact that over eleven million people were murdered for the goal of developing an Aryan race is not a proud moment in the heritage of the German people. Despite their level of Nationalism at the time of the Holocaust, the fact today is that now the Holocaust has become an enormous part of German heritage and history. This fact alone prevents them from ever becoming a perfect race of people, regardless of whether or not their Nordic ancestry is true or false.

### **Secrecy**

The last of the Ahnenerbe's Tenets was a goal of secrecy. This Tenet was never presented to the public, as it was a goal of higher up officials of the regime to ensure the use and effectiveness of the previously mentioned four Tenets. The goal of the confidential Tenet was to make sure Nazi propoganda impacted the people of Germany without them necessarily knowing they were pawns in the broader scheme being played out by the Third Reich. Needless to say, it was highly successful. In fact, the Ahnenerbe's secrecy code was so highly protected that it had to be burned during WWII by the Nazi party and today very little remains known about it.

In Bettina Arnold’s work ‘The Past as Propaganda’, she quotes Hitler himself in a conversation he had with Himmler by saying, “Why do we call the whole world’s attention to the fact that we have no past? It’s bad enough that the Romans were erecting great buildings when our forefathers were still living in mud huts...” (Arnold 1990: 556). Hitler knew the Germans had a weak background in heritage. This is

precisely why the Ahnenerbe needed the Fifth Tenet of secrecy. The public could not know that these claims of Nordic heritage were mere exaggerations, or else the entire operation would fall through and the citizens would no longer trust them. Hitler won over the German people by restoring their Nationalism and giving them a purpose that they had forgotten during their economic struggles.

### **Amt Rosenberg**

Another influential force in the archaeological propaganda effort of the Nazi regime was the Amt Rosenberg. The Rosenberg movement was a more concise group of scholars working with Rosenberg to prove his theories of the Nordic people. Rosenberg believed that the people of Germany were descendants of the people of the fabled Atlantis civilization. He believed strongly that the German people were the most pure and superior race. Likewise, Rosenberg supported the genocidal acts conducted by the Nazis because he believed that the Jews were an evil race and were tainting the rest of the world. Rosenberg's beliefs relate closely to those of the Tenets of the Ahnenerbe, specifically in the idea of a master race.

Despite having a wide level of support during Nazi rule as an academic, Rosenberg's theories were completely flawed. To believe a nation is superior is one thing, but to believe to be descendants of Atlantis is crossing the line into fantasy. Nevertheless, this idea of fantasy was still appealing to many people at the time. The lost city of Atlantis challenges the imagination and with any type of physical proof many would be quick to believe Rosenberg. Who wouldn't want to find out they descend

from Atlantis? And with any kind of proof, people accepted Rosenberg's work as genuine. Despite the argument of the level of credibility and sanity in Rosenberg's claims of the lost city, it's undeniable that Rosenberg had a tremendous influence on the Nazi regime's genocidal actions. At the time when the party leaders wanted their citizens to feel pure and superior, any evidence of a race or religion suggesting it was unfit or impure, allowed those in positions of power to remove the unfit and impure.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Through the uses of exaggerated archaeology and heritage manipulation, the Nazi party was able to create one of the most powerful political regimes of all time. The combined efforts of the Ahnenerbe, Amt Rosenberg, and other Nazi-backed archaeological scholars created a strong sense of Nationalist pride and purpose which allowed the Nazi politicians to engage in sadistic activity unbeknownst to the public, while still garnering their undying support and loyalty. With hindsight, it's easy to shame and criticize those who were brainwashed and supported an evil regime. However, it is necessary to take into account the perspective of the citizens of Germany at the time. In short, the fact was that the purpose and heritage of the German people was unclear and in some cases completely absent. Hitler used that absence of purpose to his benefit to create a strong sense of Nationalism. The citizens of Germany, like balls of clay, were molded by the Nazi's structural beliefs all the while concealing the true motives of the Third Reich. During the time of the Third Reich, archaeological evidence gave physical proof to the Nazi propaganda. Through combination of intangible

propaganda and tangible archaeological heritage the Nazi Party was able to create unprecedented political and social ideals. The immense popularity of these concepts made the Nazi Party all that much more powerful and with this power, the party was able to create a model human based on the idea of the perfect Aryan race embraced by the majority of people in Germany. All these efforts allowed the Nazi party to conduct one of the most abusive acts of heritage to date, in order to strengthen and achieve Nationalist ideas. The underlying sadistic motives were “concealed” and actualized at the same time with blind popular support.

***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Anthropology and University of New Hampshire.***

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