The study of German universities and scientific institutes in the Third Reich has become a major area of scholarly interest in the last twenty years. Nearly every German university has now been subjected to detailed scrutiny, primarily by German scholars, and there has been much recent research on various disciplines, particularly the medical sciences and the historical profession. Further, major scientific institutions such as the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut (KWI) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) have been the subject of large-scale research projects involving dozens of scholars, international conferences and multi-volume studies. There has also been a surge of interest in regime-supported institutions that enlisted German scientists, most notably the "euthanasia" program ("Operation T-4"), various Ost- and Westforschung projects, and other extra-university institutions. Student life during the Third Reich has also received greater attention since the publication of Geoffrey Giles's and Michael Grüttner's studies in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively. The fate of persecuted liberal and Jewish scholars, by contrast, has not received similar detailed attention, save for the most well-known scientists, philosophers and political scientists. [1]

This gap in the emergence of detailed research into the experience of one of the most influential institutions in modern German society demands explanation. A lack of source material was never the most significant obstacle, as the political views of many professors were made clear in their own publications and these had always been accessible to anyone...
who cared to read them. American and British occupation records have been relatively open to researchers for decades, though the same could not be said about Russian and East German sources. Still, access to other important records - notably university archives and personal papers - remained restricted for many years, and most German universities suffered extensive wartime damage and in a few cases ceased to exist after 1945.

To be sure, there were a few attempts immediately after the war to explain what had happened to academic culture. The few scholars who commented on the matter, such as Gerhard Ritter, placed most of the blame to a radical minority of "outsiders" to the traditional academic establishment, Nazi students and the state's incursion into the affairs of a largely self-governing institution. But the questions of how the majority of professors adapted to the regime, how they behaved toward persecuted colleagues and students, and how they put their talents at the regime's disposal went unexamined. I would argue that most professors convinced occupation officials, denazification tribunals and the wider German public that they had in fact never abandoned "objectivity" in their teaching and research and often claimed to have either assisted Jews or at least refused to ignore scholarship by Jews. This postwar surge of philo-Semitism among German professors has yet to be studied closely. Admittedly, according to this narrative of defense and justification, a few prominent scholars did lend their prestige and talents to the regime, but most quickly realized the errors of their ways and retreated into "inner immigration" while most other convinced Nazis were political hacks and not true "scholars."

One dissenting voice from the period was that of the Latvian-born scholar of Yiddish Max Weinreich, who challenged this complacent and self-serving explanation as early as 1946 in Hitler's Professors. [2] Weinreich had collected hundreds of documents and publications demonstrating the widespread complicity of German professors with the regime. But his research was ignored in Germany and little-known in the United States. It was instead the conception of a university under siege rather than the university as willing collaborator with National Socialism that survived long into the postwar era.

It should be noted that this characterization of a persecuted university not only served professors' own interests but those of the occupiers. For American, British, French and Soviet authorities, universities, medical clinics and research institutes had to be revived for the purposes of social, political and economic reconstruction in the two Germanys and not least the emerging Cold War competition between the wartime allies. Indeed, some of the earliest skirmishes of the Cold War involved attempts by American, British and Soviet authorities to track down German scientists and others with specialized technical skills (or detailed knowledge of the Soviet Union) as their respective armies met in what would become the Soviet Occupation Zone.
In the 1960s the Nazi pasts of hundreds of university professors became the subject of considerable interest to both the West German student movement and the East German regime, which authorized the publication of detailed (and often not inaccurate) accounts of the compromised pasts of leading West German professors. The response of West German professors - defensiveness and silence - was predictable. As West German society began to examine the Nazi past in these years, scholars themselves remained content to perpetuate the myth of the persecuted university and did not welcome systematic research into their own pasts and that of their institutions and disciplines.

The end of the Cold War and a generational shift among German scholars has done much to change this situation, though new research into academic culture during and after National Socialism continues to generate controversy. In the late 1990s when younger scholars reexamined the Nazi pasts of historians like Theodor Schieder, Werner Conze, Martin Broszat and others, older scholars (that is, the students of professors with Nazi pasts now occupying the highest echelons of academia) reacted with some dismay, believing the issue to be "old news" or the criticisms to be unjustified. Their defensiveness was no doubt bolstered by the desire to protect the reputations of their former mentors and by a lurking fear that somehow their own work would be implicated as having been influenced by Nazi-era scholarship. Occasionally the issue would draw wider public interest, such as the revelation in 1995 of the true identity and Nazi past of the Aachen professor of Germanistik Hans Schwerte or the "Ibrahim debate" in Weimar-Jena in 2000 described by Marco Schrul and Jens Thomas in "Kaempferische Wissenschaft".

Younger scholars with few or no personal ties to the generation that dominated their fields in the "security of silence" (to borrow a useful term from Dirk van Laak) have clearly felt freer to investigate the pasts of luminaries such as Schieder and Conze and indeed entire institutions. These studies of Berlin, Jena and the law faculty of Bonn University fit in the tradition of the newer scholarship on universities and scientific institutes and add much detail to an increasingly complex portrait of complicity, opportunism and the institutional and intellectual boundaries between science and politics. All three studies focus on faculties and individuals. None of the essays are solely about Nazi Party organs, yet deal with them as they interacted with university faculties. The postwar purges and early histories of the postwar universities are discussed but not in great detail. Sadly, these volumes contain little about the fates of persecuted Jewish and liberal scholars and students.

"Kämpferische Wissenschaft" is the result of a large-scale project on Jena and contains essays on traditional subjects - the various faculties, the experiences of students, Rektors - and related matters that have received less attention, such as the university's relationship to the "Doppelstadt" Jena-Weimar, connections between the university and KZ Buchenwald, and the "Ibrahim controversy" of 2000. There was ample opportunity for professors to create a "Musteruniversität" given that the Gauleiter of
Thüringen was Fritz Sauckel and the possibility of forging ties with the nearby Wilhelm-Gustloff-Werke and KZ-Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora. The contribution of Jena professors to National Socialist policies was in fact extensive. To cite two of the most important examples: Jena became a prominent center for the study of "race science," the most prominent representative of which was Hans F.K. Günther. The theology faculty became a bastion of the "German Christian" movement and Walter Grundmann, a specialist in "Völkische Theologie," became the director of the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Religious Life, a research institute based in Eisenach and funded mainly by local Protestant churches.

Like the essays in "Kämpferische Wissenschaft", the contributions to "Die Berliner Universität in der NS-Zeit" cover the various faculties and the relationship between the Berlin university and the "Reichsuniversität" in Posen, rearmament, and Erinnerungskultur after 1945. Somewhat surprisingly given its high profile and physical proximity to the seat of political power, the Berlin university never stood "an der Spitze ns-spezifischer Forschung". Yet numerous scholars - notably Franz Alfred Six, Eugen Fischer, Fritz Lenz, Karl Johann Boekholt, and Konrad Meyer - formed important connections with the SS, the wider community of race scientists, the new "Reichsuniversität" in Posen, and especially to the "Generalplan Ost." These and other connections forged between Berlin professors and Nazi Party bodies and research institutes suggest that such proximity did indeed make a difference.

Mathias Schmoeckel's edited volume, "Die Juristen der Universität Bonn im 'Dritten Reich'", is comprised entirely of profiles of individual faculty members. Fortunately, most of the authors pay close attention to the postwar careers of their subjects, a welcome departure from the cursory treatment this subject usually receives. The collected essays support Hans-Paul Hoepfner's conclusion that Bonn's law faculty formed an "Insel der Seligen" not only in relation to other faculties at that institution but compared to law faculties at other universities. The Bonn law faculty, Schmoeckel concludes, formed "eine Insel der Tradition und der Wissenschaft" where a distinct "Stil der Bonner Juristen" can be discerned: an emphasis on research and excellent teaching and an "assertive independence" in political matters throughout the Third Reich (43-44).

The faculty remained politically diverse, though Schmoeckel admits that with few exceptions, the history of the faculty in the "Third Reich" is "nicht spektakulär," as there were no opposition figures and only a very few outspoken Nazis. The resistance to "Gleichschaltung" among prominent Ordinarien carried implications for the postwar period: Adolf Zycha, Richard Thoma and Ernst Friesenhahn played crucial roles in restoring the "spirit of Weimar" to the faculty without much difficulty (45). In addition, the few prominent Nazis - notably Joachim Bley, Karl August Eckhardt, and Johannes Heckel - were purged and were unable to regain their positions at Bonn.
In general, the wave of recent research on German universities and scientific institutes between 1933 and 1945 has demolished the myth of the victimized university and demonstrated that hundreds of scholars representing every discipline willingly collaborated with the regime. Yet this newer composite portrait of an academic culture as collaborator rather than victim is at the same time complex and varied. Indeed, many of the authors point out that generalizations about the political engagement of professors are difficult to make. Given the increasingly detailed and complicated portrait of universities in the "Third Reich" presented in these and other recent works, what other conclusions might now be drawn? Let me suggest several areas that have been illuminated in the studies of both Berlin and Jena and that should serve to inspire similar research for other institutions.

1. The importance of "networks" of universities, Nazi Party organs, the military, research institutes, medical clinics, and concentration camps. Academic culture in the Nazi era can no longer be viewed in isolation from this wider network of official and quasi-official bodies that required the expertise of university professors. To be sure, this process began before 1933, but it accelerated between 1933 and 1945 and its postwar reverberations need closer study. But in terms of the years of the "Third Reich" it could be argued that the regime's efforts to transform universities into servants of the "racial state" and war of expansion were very successful, particularly to the extent to which the regime could recruit scientists to its various projects.

2. The borders between politics and scholarship were porous and often blurred and it is necessary to avoid the temptation to assume that " politicized" science was in fact "unscholarly." The postwar myth of the victimized university held that most professors never collaborated with the regime and therefore "resisted" by adhering to traditional scholarly standards while avoiding political engagements. While Christoph Jahr notes that in Berlin most professors were able to find some "regime-free" niches in which to pursue unpoliticized research, close examination of both the Berlin and Jena universities demonstrates that a great deal of politicized research did indeed take place.

All modern scientific endeavors - research and the institutions that support it and the uses to which research is put - are influenced by the political and cultural contexts in which they operate, as are individual scientists themselves. As the American historian Alan Steinweis concludes in his study of Nazi-era "Jewish studies," the professors who studied Jews and Jewish culture: "They were dishonest scholars but scholars nonetheless. Their careers and their work violated the presumption that the scholar has the responsibility to use knowledge honestly and for positive ends. In the final analysis, the great failing of the Nazi anti-Semitic scholars was more ethical than intellectual." [3]

Notes:


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