



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: B.M. Levinson, R.P. Ericksen (2022) The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University during the Third Reich]

Föllmer, M.

DOI

[10.1086/726402](https://doi.org/10.1086/726402)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

History of Humanities

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care>)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Föllmer, M. (2023). [Review of: B.M. Levinson, R.P. Ericksen (2022) The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University during the Third Reich]. *History of Humanities*, 8(2), 300-302. <https://doi.org/10.1086/726402>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

Bernard M. Levinson and Robert P. Ericksen, eds., *The Betrayal of the Humanities: The University during the Third Reich*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022. Pp. xx+600. \$40.00 (paper).

It is no longer a new insight that the humanities in Germany actively supported the Third Reich before obfuscating their role for decades after its demise in 1945. The knowledgeable critiques by the émigré scholars Aurel Kolnai in his *The War against the West* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938; here discussed by Emmanuel Faye) and Max Weinreich in his *Hitler's Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany's War against the Jewish People* (New York: Yiddish Scientific Institute, 1946) were conveniently ignored in the interest of safeguarding German universities' image. But since the 1990s, a plethora of monographs, articles, and edited volumes (here expertly surveyed by Alan E. Steinweis) have shown how all sorts of academic disciplines lent their support and participation to the Nazi project. This critical historicization has affected the reputations of numerous scientists and scholars, many of whom were prominent in the Federal Republic of Germany and, in a few cases, the German Democratic Republic. As a rule, the closer one looks at individual careers and collective networks during (but also before and after) the Third Reich, the more disturbing the picture becomes. Lutz Raphael, in an early attempt to synthesize a rapidly growing literature ("Radikales Ordnungsdenken und die Organisation totalitärer Herrschaft: Weltanschauungseliten und Humanwissenschaftler im NS-Regime," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 27 [2001]: 5–40), argued that academic disciplines and their practitioners had not so much suffered *Gleichschaltung* (synchronization from the top down) than willingly engaged in *Selbstmobilisierung* (self-mobilization)

for the “national revolution.” Raphael sketched a picture of the Third Reich as a heyday of those human and social sciences that could claim what would now be called research impact or knowledge utilization. Whoever was able to devise plans, schemes, and methods for the Third Reich’s racist and imperialist endeavors had reason to expect political recognition and external funding.

This left the humanities, for all their eagerness to contribute, in a somewhat uneasy position. While some historians drafted memoranda on how to achieve German predominance in East Central Europe by way of mass expulsion, most scholars could not prove their usefulness in similarly direct ways. What Suzanne L. Marchand, in her excellent chapter on Oriental studies, aptly characterizes as “relevance making” and “utility questioning” often amounted to rather tortured attempts to stem the tide of Nazi anti-intellectualism. Still, the Third Reich’s establishment after 1933 and initial victories during the first half of World War II opened up some attractive opportunities. Assyriologists promoted an “Indo-Germanic” worldview, Egyptologists initiated a “Committee for the Study of White Africa,” and archaeologists unearthed putative Aryan roots, as shown by Johannes Renger, Thomas Schneider, and Bettina Arnold, respectively. Nazism, certainly in Alfred Rosenberg’s and Heinrich Himmler’s ideologically similar but institutionally rival versions, tirelessly strove to reinterpret and marshal the German, European, and even global past. It was highly receptive to yet more arguments for the exclusion of Jews, which promised to justify core ideological beliefs among an educated public. This is where the study of biblical texts served an important function; Protestant theologians furthermore mattered as church functionaries and teachers of future pastors. As Christopher J. Probst, Bernard M. Levinson, and Anders Gedmar, respectively, show, these theologians favorably commented on Martin Luther’s antisemitic views, promoted a nazified interpretation of the Old Testament, and combined their expertise on Judaism during the New Testament period with calls for excluding Jews in the here and now; the few who tried to preserve a degree of academic and confessional autonomy achieved little in the predominant intellectual climate.

Gedmar stresses the importance of a network of theologians, who developed close social and emotional ties while at Tübingen before extending their collective influence to several other German universities. Zeroing in on the University of Göttingen, Robert P. Ericksen sheds further light on the pre-1933 nationalist climate, the willing cooperation with the Nazi regime, and the collective self-exculpation during the postwar period. His contribution is complemented by Anikó Szabó’s chapter on the same institution, whose focus is on the rather superficial process of denazification and the tension-ridden return of some émigré professors. While both are worth reading in conjunction, the fact that so much attention is devoted to the universities of Tübingen and Göttingen attests

to the collection's unevenness. The University of Berlin, the newly founded *Reichs-universitäten* in Strasbourg and Poznań, and various research institutes would also have merited treatment. With regard to disciplines, those devoted to prehistoric or ancient times predominate, while modern history and modern philologies are merely touched upon. The chapters by Oren Green on law, Michael Cherlin on the composer Arnold Schönberg, Franklin Lee Adler on Italian fascism (without specifically addressing the humanities), and Alvin F. Rosenfeld on antisemitism in today's American and British universities can hardly be considered ideal fits with the volume's overarching theme. There is not enough previously unpublished research and fresh interpretation for the book to convince as a scholarly collection and not enough balance and coverage for it to serve as a compendium.

How apt is the title? Levinson and Ericksen predicate the volume “on the notion that a particular strand of Western education, based on and inspired by the humanities, will make us better and more humane human beings” (1) and then stress how Nazi-era academics and universities betrayed “the Humboldtian ideal of the Enlightenment” (xviii). This is a worthy moral stance. But it renders historical understanding difficult, given how closely the emergence of the modern humanities in nineteenth-century Germany had been entwined with their mission to foster the unity, claim the continuity, and justify the superiority of the nation. Steinweis, articulating a certain disagreement with the editors, cautions against “retrojecting on the past our own sense of what the humanities are or ought to be” and states that “the humanistic values that were betrayed between 1933 and 1945 were not so much those of the German professoriate of the time than those of today's scholars working in liberal-democratic intellectual environments” (41–42). Whether such an intact liberal-democratic environment can still be assumed might also be questioned in the light of what Rosenfeld writes about the heated political atmosphere on many present-day campuses—but that is a debate for another day.