

DENAZIFICATION AT GÖTTINGEN
NEGOTIATING THE TRANSITION
FROM A NATIONAL SOCIALIST TO A DEMOCRATIC UNIVERSITY

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Based on a study of materials in the State Archive of Lower Saxony and the Göttingen University Archive, this paper will summarize and analyze the denazification process at Göttingen University, placing it within the context of denazification as a whole.¹ The story involves many abuses: manipulation of the system, dishonest testimony, and a variety of attempts to misrepresent and distort the Nazi past. It also illustrates the strong tendency for ex-Nazis to be readmitted to important positions in postwar German society. I will argue, however, that the process of denazification, complex, difficult, and flawed as it may have been, still assisted in the German transition to a post-Nazi, democratic tradition. In particular, it stigmatized and essentially criminalized National Socialist beliefs, so that postwar advocacy of the Nazi ideology never proved a viable and/or attractive option within German academia.

DENAZIFICATION

During the middle years of World War II, the soon-to-be-victorious Allies began planning postwar policy. They based their plans upon the assumption that “nazification” had infected a broad spectrum of the German people, coupled with the fundamental belief that National Socialist ideals were dangerous, criminal, and unacceptable for the postwar world. Therefore, they planned to counter nazification with “denazification.” Only a cleansing and re-education process, they believed, would make Germany an acceptable neighbor for postwar Europeans.²

Denazification proved controversial from the beginning. Although theoretically a joint Allied policy, it was never meaningfully coordinated across the four zones of occupation. It also proved hopelessly illusory as realities set in. The Americans, for example, thought to be the most grandiose in their intentions, did not have the personnel to read, much less process, more than a fraction of the “Fragebogen” in which Germans were required to report on their past. All sides recognized soon enough that Germany could not function as a nation, could not feed or educate or police itself, if the more than six million party members and others tainted by National Socialism were removed from the workforce. Then the Cold War set in, inclining both sides to forget the past in order to win German cooperation in the present. Many former Nazis re-emerged in positions of influence, leading to periodic scandal and causing many in the West to decry denazification as toothless and inept.³

German critics tended to view denazification as unfair, a form of victor’s justice naively implemented. Bishop Wurm of Württemberg, for example, accepted by Western Allies as a “good German,” immediately disappointed his British and American friends

by speaking out against denazification. He advocated a very narrow process directed against a tiny group of “real criminals,” and protested that any other policy criminalized political views and behaviors after the fact. He and other church leaders were fond of emphasizing the idealism with which many had joined the Nazi Party, not having recognized its criminal intentions. This had the advantage of protecting themselves, their friends, and their family members (in Bishop Wurm’s case, a son who had joined the NSDAP already in 1922 and got in trouble for falsifying his Fragebogen). Criticism of Allied plans was also intended to protect postwar church interests and political influence in the face of the one group which would come through an aggressive denazification process largely intact: those on the political left.⁴

Charles Biebel, assessing American efforts at re-education, establishes several good reasons why denazification could be expected to prove naïve and misguided:

Ironically, an alien military bureaucracy woefully prepared in language facility, historical understanding, or political acumen was expected to demonstrate the values of democracy by imposing democratic institutions on a vanquished people.⁵

Each of his claims had a basis in fact. Allied policy was implemented under military occupation. Furthermore, no Allied power, and ostensibly least so the Americans, could employ an adequate number of personnel with the desired linguistic, historical and political skills. Finally, the Allies constantly faced an ironic paradox: encouraging freedom of thought by forbidding Nazi ideas, imposing democratic principles while limiting political options. They certainly had no intention of allowing National Socialism into the postwar marketplace of ideas.

One response to this irony was an attempt to turn over the denazification process as quickly as possible to German implementation. German panels, however, and the fledgling West German political system proved increasingly willing to define past behavior as not really Nazi, despite party membership or other apparent indicators of enthusiasm for the Nazi regime. Testimonials in favor of individuals under investigation came so readily, in a nationwide attempt to clean up the past, that these affidavits became derisively known as “Persilscheine” or soap certificates. The ability of almost all past Nazis to reach a satisfactory outcome, the designation that one was at worst a “Mitläufer” (one who went along with the Nazis but did not really support them), has led to the assessment that denazification was a giant “Mitläuferfabrik.”⁶ What look like Nazis when they begin the process emerge as innocents when they come out the other end. I will now look at this process as it took place in one university.

DENAZIFICATION AT GÖTTINGEN UNIVERSITY

The story of Göttingen University supports one of the Allied assumptions about German society, i.e., that “nazification” had taken place. Similarly to other German universities, Göttingen failed to be a bastion of academic values against National Socialist inroads. Student government at Göttingen came under NS control as early as 1931. Jews and “political undesirables” were driven from the faculty beginning in 1933, with virtually no protest from their colleagues, even though, for example, the world class mathematics and physics faculties were decimated in the process. In some cases the passion to be “Judenrein” exceeded even the racial laws established by the regime at Nuremberg in 1935.⁷ The curriculum changed to accommodate the National Socialist

Weltanschauung, with the introduction of “racial science” as a requirement, but also with pro-Nazi ideas emerging in nearly all disciplines. Prominent scholars, such as the theologian, Emanuel Hirsch, advocated transforming the stodgy, ivory tower into an enthusiastically Nazi “Political University.” The newly created National Socialist Faculty League (NS-Dozentenbund) achieved dominance over the faculty senate, and hiring policies became explicitly politicized. In several instances, for example, individuals with the desired political beliefs achieved professorships without benefit of habilitation, and, in some instances, even without a doctoral degree.⁸ In sum, politicization at Göttingen meant that the faculty in place by 1945 included Nazi party members, stormtroopers, SS officers, and many individuals whose careers had been based partly or even primarily upon their support of the National Socialist worldview.

As the war came to an end, Allied forces ordered universities closed. Göttingen then became the first German university to reopen its doors, with a winter term beginning 17 September 1945. Several months into that term, the new Rektor, Rudolf Smend, expressed his concerns about the necessary transition now undertaken:

Werden wir der gemeinsamen Aufgabe gewachsen sein, die uns in diesem und den kommenden Semestern gestellt ist, trotz aller Spannungen zwischen den Altersstufen, trotz aller geistigen und politischen Gegensätze, trotz aller Belastungen, die jeder von uns mitbringt? Werden die Alten sich in die Lage einer jungen Generation versetzen können, die im Dritten Reich aufgewachsen ist, und nur von diesem Dritten Reich und von keinem anderen Deutschland weiss? Wird die junge Generation den Weg zu einem anderen Deutschland unter and hinter

den Trümmern des Dritten Reiches überhaupt finden? Wird sie fähig und gewillt sein, die vielfachen Lücken ihres Schulsacks auszufüllen.⁹

Smend clearly recognized the need to step away from and reject the past, not surprisingly, since he had been handpicked as Rektor by the British. His concern about the young and the many gaps in their education, these young who had known nothing but the Third Reich, surely was appropriate. One estimate placed the ratio of Nazi students in that first term at 80%, and their willingness to change political views might well have been in doubt.¹⁰ Was Smend too gentle toward his own generation, however? He was hardly a villain in the denazification process. The British chose him because he had been relegated from the law faculty at Berlin to Göttingen ten years earlier for lack of adequate Nazi enthusiasm. He also cooperated in denazification as a regular witness. Still, in the above statement Smend is far readier to question the young than his own generation. This hints at a problem inherent in the German postwar point of view: It was difficult for Germans after the war to believe that serious cleansing was really necessary.

A comparison of universities and churches is useful here, since the western Allies were inclined to let the churches cleanse themselves. In the Hanoverian Regional Church, for example, this led to about 0.5% of the 1400 clergy being released.¹¹ The first two years of denazification at Göttingen, by contrast, resulted in the removal of 29 of 102 tenured faculty, or 28%. Another 58 junior faculty and academic assistants suffered dismissal, equaling 34% of that group.¹² Was the ratio of tainted academics to tainted clergy really 60 to 1 or 70 to 1, as these figures might suggest? On the contrary, National Socialism made deep inroads into both the Catholic and Protestant churches, as research has increasingly established.¹³ The huge difference in the swath cut by denazification is

best explained by the difference in German and Allied attitudes toward the process. “Self-cleansing” in practice meant little or no removal of people tainted by their past. As Hans-Joachim Dahms has written, a new beginning at Göttingen University “wäre kaum bemerkbar geworden, hätte man die Universität sich selbst überlassen. So musste der Anstoss zum Wandel von aussen kommen, von der Besatzungsmacht.”¹⁴

As mentioned above, the first two years of denazification at Göttingen University resulted in approximately a 30% removal of faculty. This began in the summer of 1945 when the British military, using information gained by the Public Safety Special Branch, simply developed a list of faculty to be released. Allied Control Directive #24, proclaimed by the Four Powers in January 1946, led to the creation of German Denazification Panels to assist in the process. These panels would read Fragebogen, hold hearings, and then report to Public Safety with a recommendation. All Germans who had been released by the British or who applied for significant employment (other than simple labor, for example,) had to undergo a denazification process, and the British had the final word. Control Directive #38 in October 1946 created five categories, including I (Hauptschuldige) and II (Belastete, Nutzniesser, and Aktivisten), which would be tried by the Allies. German panels would hear cases which might result in Category III, Minderbelastete, IV, Mitläufer or V, Entlastete. In October 1947 England turned more authority back to Germans, a trend accentuated by the creation of an independent Federal Republic of Germany in 1949. By the end of this four-year period, after appeals had been heard, only three faculty members at Göttingen remained in Category III. This was a serious result, since it contained a ban on further teaching. Five additional faculty ended up in Category IV, which might include a ban on teaching, or perhaps a ban on voting

and/or a fine. In 1951, no longer under British control, the government of Lower Saxony passed a “Gesetz zum Abschluss der Entnazifizierung im Lande Niedersachsen.” All individuals in Category III or IV would now be moved, without the necessity of a further hearing, into Category V. Despite this official lenience, five of the eight individuals placed in Categories III and IV were not allowed back into the Göttingen teaching corps. Two others had reached the age of retirement, so that only one, Wilhelm Ebel, actually returned.¹⁵

These figures support the general impression: Denazification began with an Allied bang and ended with a German whimper. Space does not allow significant attention to the details at Göttingen. I will sketch a handful of stories, however. Eugen Mattiat began his career as pastor of a small church near Göttingen, a pastor who joined the NSDAP in 1931. Soon associated with the enthusiastically pro-Nazi “Deutsche Christen,” he advanced in 1933 and 1934 from the Hanoverian Landeskirchenamt to the Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung in Berlin. Without benefit of doctorate or habilitation, he was then appointed Professor of Deutsche Volkskunde at Göttingen in 1938, a year after he had also become an officer in the Sicherheitsdienst of the SS.¹⁶ During denazification proceedings, Mattiat complained that his SS connection should not be held against him. He had accepted the appointment only so that he would not have to wear civilian clothes on festive occasions, he said, and “er habe nicht das Bewusstsein gehabt, Mitglied der SS zu sein.”¹⁷ Even by 1949 Mattiat’s panel refused to believe he could not recognize an SS uniform and understand something of its significance. Thus, he became one of the three faculty left in Category III. Because of his completely deficient academic credentials, he also failed to win back a place in the university, even after he

and all others became “entlastet” in 1951. Rather, he returned to his former role as a pastor.¹⁸

Walter Birnbaum, also appointed professor without benefit of doctorate or habilitation, found himself removed by the British in 1945. In 1946 a German panel placed him in Category III and an appeal panel in 1947 confirmed that judgment. Birnbaum, however, more clever and persistent than Mattiat, achieved the coveted Category V in November 1948. He had received his appointment in the Theology Faculty against the wishes of many faculty and students as well as the Hanoverian church. As an enthusiastic figure among the “Deutsche Christen,” however, he had the support of the education ministry and of the pro-Nazi dean of the faculty, Emanuel Hirsch. Birnbaum soon had trouble attracting students. When student numbers declined even further during the war years, he spent much of his time giving more than 500 anti-Bolshevik lectures to Luftwaffe personnel on the Russian front, designating himself Göring’s favorite lecturer. In May 1944 he sent a letter to the OKW General Staff, claiming that his Luftwaffe lectures represented an important contribution to National Socialism. Birnbaum’s postwar explanation was that all of these activities had represented his attempt to oppose and undermine National Socialism from within. He rounded up Persilscheine to support such a view and, astonishingly, his appeal panel in 1948 accepted his story. They believed (or said they believed) that he joined the “Deutsche Christen” “[um] die ‘Christianisierung der NSDAP’ in Angriff zu nehmen,” and they accepted his claim that the enthusiastic letter of 1944 had been only a “Zweckformulierung.” Introducing their judgment, this panel stated, “Geht man davon aus, dass der Betroffene eigentlich gar nicht am Nationalsozialismus interessiert war, gar nicht auf eine politische Ebene stand,” than this

tortured standing of the facts upon their head would make sense.¹⁹ Why would they begin with those assumptions, which flew in the face of all known facts about Birnbaum from 1933 to 1945? One could hardly find a more transparent desire to exonerate.

One professor at Göttingen, Wilhelm Ebel, worked his way back into the university despite his inability to escape Category IV on appeal. He was a legal historian, born in 1908 as the eighth child of a laborer. Working to support himself from the age of fourteen, he finished a doctorate in 1933 and a habilitation in 1935. Close attention to his Nazi resume helped earn him a professorship at Göttingen by 1939. He joined the Waffen SS in 1941 and worked in the racially-focused Ahnenerbe of the RSHA from 1943.²⁰ Throughout the war he managed to stay away from actual fighting, working on research projects in Berlin or Göttingen, except for one day at the front in France. For that one day he earned an Iron Cross, Second Class. His denazification file portrays him as an enthusiastic supporter of Nazi machinations in the faculty at Göttingen, also as an opportunist who pushed himself forward, threatened others, bragged of his close and useful relationship to Himmler, and hardly ever appeared in civilian dress.²¹ In 1943 he wrote to SS offices in Munich, worried about details of his uniform:

Erstens, benötige ich zur Uniform in langer Hose, in der ich oft bei Vorträgen usw auftreten muss, eine Schusswarre. Da ich hörte, dass das Säbeltragen nicht mehr zulässig ist, bitte ich Sie um Auskunft, ob und unter welchen Voraussetzungen die Beschaffung eines kurzen SS-Degens zulässig und möglich ist. Kann man ihn einfach von der Kleiderkasse bestellen oder braucht es einer Erlaubnis? Wer erteilt sie? Ich brauche den Degen dringend. . . . Zweitens, wie ist es mit der SS-Nadel?²²

Ebel then added concerns about his rank:

Drittens: Ich bin seinerzeit, im Jahr 1941, ohne meine Einwilligung zum SS-Untersturmführer der Allgem. SS ernannt worden. Man (d.h. Blech) hatte mir damals, wie Sie vielleicht wissen, gesagt, ich sollte erstmal den Antrag über die Aufnahme überhaupt unterschreiben und nach der Aufnahme an sich sollte ich mit dem Gruppenführer über den vorzuschlagenden Dienstgrad sprechen. Statt dessen, wurde ich kurzehand ernannt. Dafür sollte ich dann nach Erklärung des Gruppenführers möglichst schnell befördert werden, damit das Versehen wieder zum Teil ausgeglichen wurde. . . . Ich bitte Sie, lieber Kamerad Kleinkamp, mir doch bitte mitzuteilen, wie es mit der Beförderung in der Allg. SS in jetziger Zeit ist (wenn eines zugleich Angehöriger der Waffen-SS ist), ferner ob Berichtigungen bzw Beförderungen mit Überspringung einzelner Dienstgrade vorgekommen sind oder zulässig sind, und ferner, soweit Sie darüber aussagen können, warum in meinen Sachen seit dem Jahre 1941 nichts erfolgt ist. Ich selbst hätte meist keine Neigung, immer dem RuS nachzulaufen und nachzufragen oder gar zu drängeln. Ich bin aber jetzt vor die Notwendigkeit gestellt, im Interesse der SS und meiner Arbeit dafür Wert auf einen angemessenen Dienstgrad zu legen.²³

Despite this energetic effort to improve his appearance and rank as an SS officer, Ebel assured his denazification panel that he had never actually been a Nazi. His file is representative of virtually every file in the Göttingen denazification records in this respect: He claimed to have defended academic values against others who were the *real* Nazis. Almost everyone pointed to Artur Schürmann, a professor of agriculture who served as the regional leader of the NS Faculty League, as the true leader of the Nazi

group which terrorized the university. When Schürmann's hearings took place, he made the predictable claim: He had tried to protect academic values. Furthermore, the *real* Nazis (Rudolf Smend, et al) had persecuted and driven him out with false charges of plagiarism. Finally, Schürmann's lawyer protested that the term "terror group" used against his client was emotional and undefined and should not be allowed.²⁴

Denazification was truly a flawed and abused process. I am not sure it was naïve. In particular, Allied suspicions of "nazification" seem borne out by research in the last twenty or thirty years.²⁵ Support of, participation in, and responsibility for the crimes of Nazi Germany spread pervasively throughout the professions and the German populace. It was naïve of German professors to think they had not been part of the problem, even if it was a natural self defense to deny culpability. Despite their participation in the "Political University" of the Third Reich, however, academics turned toward democracy and participated in the democratization of German universities in the postwar world. Many factors were involved. Many people, especially in the sixties generation, think structural and attitudinal change took too long. But the cleansing of German universities desired by the Allies seems to have worked. Academics did not prolong or promote a culture of National Socialism. During denazification, their lies and prevarications helped in the cleansing. National Socialism had been criminalized. One could only succeed in postwar Germany by renouncing the Nazi ideology and even denying that one had ever been a Nazi. Virtually all Göttingen professors took this step, and it was a step they could not easily reverse.

¹ I would like to thank the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung for supporting the research on this project. I would also like to thank helpful staff at the Lower Saxony State Archive and the Göttingen University Archive.

² The story of early negotiations, especially from the British perspective, can be found in the Public Record Office, Kew. See also Michael Ermarth, ed., *America and the Shaping of German Society 1945-1955* (Oxford, 1993); James F. Tent, *Mission on the Rhine: Reeducation and Denazification in American-Occupied Germany* (Chicago, 1982); Karl-Ernst Bungenstab, *Umerziehung zur Demokratie! Re-education-Politik im Bildungswesen der US-Zone 1945-1949* (Düsseldorf, 1970); as well as Marshall Knappen, *And Call it Peace* (Chicago, 1947); Constantine Figzgibbon, *Denazification* (New York, 1969); Justus Fürstenau, *Entnazifizierung* (Berlin, 1969); and Hermann-Joseph Rupieper, *Die Wurzeln der westdeutschen Nachkriegsdemokratie. Der amerikanische Beitrag* (Opladen, 1993).

³ See, for example, Tom Bower,

⁴ This story can be found in the Evangelisches Zentralarchiv in Berlin (EZA), especially in files 2/318 and 2/321. See also Clemens Vollnhals, *Evangelische Kirche und Entnazifizierung, 1945-1949. Die Last der Vergangenheit* (Munich, 1989).

⁵ Charles D. Biebel, "American Efforts for Educational Reform in Occupied Germany, 1945-1955—a Reassessment," *History of Education Quarterly* (Fall 1982), 278.

⁶ See, for example, Lutz Niethammer, *Das Mitläuferfabrik. Die Entnazifizierung am Beispiel Bayern* (Berlin, 1982).

⁷ For example, the university pushed into early retirement Julius von Gierke, Professor of Law and son of the widely admired Otto von Gierke. According to the Nuremberg Racial Laws, von Gierke did not have the three Jewish grandparents or Jewish religious beliefs to make him vulnerable. He was told, however, "wegen seiner nicht rein deutschblütigen Abstammung . . . seine vorzeitige Emeritierung zu beantragen." Quoted in Frank Halfmann, "Eine 'Pflanzstätte bester nationalsozialistischer Rechtsgelehrter': Die Juristische Abteilung der Rechts- und Staatswissenschaftlichen Fakultät," in Heinrich Becker, Hans-Joachim Dahms and Cornelia Wegeler, eds., *Die Universität Göttingen unter dem Nationalsozialismus*, Zweite, erweiterte Ausgabe (München: K G Saur, 1998), 117-118.

⁸ See, for example, my discussion of Walter Birnbaum in Robert P. Ericksen, "Die Göttinger Theologische Fakultät im Dritten Reich," in Becker, et al., *Die Universität Göttingen*, 80-81.

⁹ Rudolf Smend, *Göttinger Universitätszeitung*, 1:3 (1945), 1, as quoted in Walter Kertz, "Student im Wintersemester 1945/46," in Hermann Heimpel, Norbert Kamp and Walter Kertz, *Der Neubeginn der Georgia Augusta zum Wintersemester 1945-46* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 32-33.

¹⁰ The historian, Siegfried Kaehler, writing to Hermann Heimpel, 18 October 1945, as quoted in Heimpel, "Neubeginn 1945," in Heimpel, Kamp and Kertz, 23.

¹¹ See Gerhard Besier, "Selbstreinigung" unter britischer Besatzungsherrschaft. *Die Evangelisch-lutherische Landeskirche Hannovers und ihr Landesbischof Marahrens 1945-1947* (Göttingen, 1986). See also Vollnhals for a similar assessment.

¹² See Ullrich Schneider, "Zur Entnazifizierung der Hochschullehrer in Niedersachsen 1945-1949," *Niedersächsisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte*, 61 (1989), 325-346. For figures from the first year of activity, see Hans-Joachim Dahms, "Einleitung," in Becker, Dahms and Wegeler, 61.

¹³ See, for example, Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, eds., *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

¹⁴ Dahms, 60.

¹⁵ This information is based upon denazification files in the Lower Saxony State Archive. See also Dahms.

¹⁶ See Mattiat's Fragebogen from 30.7.1948, in Nds. 171 Hild, 20039, Niedersächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover (NSA).

¹⁷ Spruchgericht, XII Spruchgericht Bielefeld, 16.3.1949, in *ibid*.

¹⁸ Ironically, Mattiat owed his return to the pastorate to Bruno Benfey, a Christian pastor of partial Jewish descent who had suffered under the Third Reich but returned to his parish in Göttingen after the war. See a further description of Mattiat and these events in Robert P. Ericksen, "Religion und Nationalsozialismus im Spiegel der Entnazifizierungsakten der Göttinger Universität," *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, 7 (1994), 90-93.

¹⁹ Entnazifizierungs-Entscheidung von 3.11.1948, Nds. 171 Hild., 13231, 161 ff (NSA). See also Ericksen, "Religion und Nationalsozialismus . . ." 86-90.

²⁰ See Fragebogen, signed 27.7.48, in Wilhelm Ebel file, Nds 171 Hild.

²¹ These assertions are recorded in an Aktennotiz, 20.10.48, representing an interview with Rudolf Smend, in *ibid.*

²² Ebel to Hauptsturmführer Kleinkamp, 7.5.43, in *ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See Artur Schürmann's file, Nds. Hild 171, Nr. 20265.

²⁵ See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992); and Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933-1945* (Oxford, 1990). A number of studies now document the National Socialist attitudes and behaviors represented in various professional groups, including Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, 1985).