

06 Science and Racism

The role of anthropology in Nazi "racial policy"

As a discipline focusing on the biological differences among human beings, anthropology was especially vulnerable to racist patterns of thought. During the Nazi period it played an important role by providing the Nazi racial doctrine with (pseudo)scientific legitimacy, especially with regard to anti-Semitism. Moreover, anthropologists were also directly involved in the persecution of Jews, Roma and Sinti, and other minorities. In September 1939, the Natural History Museum Vienna used the opportunity to examine and photograph 440 stateless Jewish men interned in Vienna's Prater stadium. While the examined men were eventually murdered in the Shoah, thousands of photos, hair samples, and plaster casts ended up in the museum's collections. Anthropologists regularly wrote (well-paid) expert opinions to determine whether a given individual belonged to a fictitious "Jewish race" or not. For the parties concerned, the result of such an examination could amount to a question of life and death. Anthropological expertise also played an important role in the persecution of the Roma and Sinti. In Vienna's Main Public Health Office, a special anthropological unit, headed by Dr. Werner Pendl, was responsible for the examination of Jewish "Mischlinge" (half breeds), Roma and Sinti, and members of other ethnic minorities. Ultimately, the racist policies and legislations in Nazi Germany could only be legitimized because science provided seemingly exact methods for the categorization of human beings into different "races."

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