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After the Fall

Political Whitewashing, Professional Posturing, and Personal Refashioning in the Postwar Career of Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer

*By Sheila Faith Weiss**

ABSTRACT

Despite the numerous books and articles preoccupied with the formidable legitimizing role and unethical medical transgressions of the German human geneticist Otmar von Verschuer (1896–1969) during the Third Reich, scholars have neglected to focus on his career trajectory during the postwar period, especially in the years after he received the first chair of genetics on German soil in 1951. While an examination of von Verschuer's trials, tribulations, and ultimate triumph in post-1945 West Germany is fascinating in its own right, it also raises broader historical issues. First, it lays bare the professional posturing of German biomedical scientists as they attempted to retake control over their once tainted fields of research when Cold War realities opened a window of opportunity for them. Second, it reveals the fine line between adherence to professional ethics and disciplinary solidarity when scientists were faced with a potential outside threat to their profession. Finally, such an analysis demonstrates the macromechanics of professional refashioning on the part of the publicly tainted scientists as they forged a new symbiosis between their field and the politics of a new era in the interest of pursuing research.

IN FEBRUARY 1968, Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer (1896–1969), emeritus director of the Institute for Human Genetics at the University of Münster, presented a talk at the Protestant Academy in Hofgeismar, not far from Kassel. His lecture was entitled “Aspects of a Responsible Human Genetics.” This particular talk was one of the last von Verschuer gave, for on 29 September 1968 he was seriously injured in a car accident that left him in a coma until his death ten months later. What did he say to his audience?

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In the context of the terrible experience that we had [with eugenics] in the past, I would like to say that in front of any eugenic measure that might be considered . . . one . . . place a warning sign with the following words: “human integrity, human rights, love thy neighbor as thyself, and responsibility to God.” I believe that only such measures that in no way violate these fundamental bases of our life will find acceptance.

Reading these words today, it would be difficult for anyone familiar with von Verschuer prior to the end of World War II, as well as with the early history of West Germany, not to recall the famous statement of Konrad Adenauer (1876–1967), the first chancellor of the Bundesrepublik: “was interessiert mich mein Geschwätz von gestern [what do I care about my babble from yesterday]!”¹

Given von Verschuer’s nefarious professional engagement during the Third Reich, the view of human genetics he articulated at the end of his life probably engenders a certain degree of cynicism.² How did a known anti-Semite and a willing partner to the Faustian bargain with the National Socialist state come to utter such humanistic and biblically grounded sentiments? Von Verschuer’s “service to the Reich” was notorious. He participated in an extensive network of state advisory, legal, instructional, and propaganda activities in the field of Nazi racial policy: serving on the Genetic Health Court in Berlin

¹ Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer, “Gesichtspunkte einer verantwortlichen Humangenetik,” Vortrag an der Evangelischen Akademie Hofgeismar zum Thema *Die Mitverantwortung der Wissenschaft an unserer Zukunft*, 20 Feb. 1968, p. 4: private papers held by Helmut Freiherr von Verschuer, Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer’s son, Nentershausen, Germany; and <http://www.zitate-online.de/sprueche/politiker/15426/was-interessiert-mich-mein-geschwaetz-von-gestern.html>. Here and throughout this essay, all translations into English are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² The pioneering study not merely of von Verschuer, but of most important biomedical professionals under National Socialism, is Benno Müller-Hill’s classic work *Murderous Science: The Elimination by Scientific Selection of Jews, Gypsies, and Others in Germany, 1933–1945*, 2nd ed. (Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y.: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 1998). In addition, there have been several other important works dealing with the controversial human geneticist as part of the Max Planck Society’s investigation of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society under the swastika. Perhaps the most significant is the English translation of the seminal work by Hans-Walter Schmuhl, *The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics, 1927–1945: Crossing Boundaries* (Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, 259) (Heidelberg: Springer, 2008), although Schmuhl focuses on the institute, not on von Verschuer *per se*. In addition see Benoît Massin, “Mengele, die Zwillingsforschung und die ‘Auschwitz-Dahlem Connection,’” in *Die Verbindung nach Auschwitz: Biowissenschaften und Menschenversuche an Kaiser-Wilhelm-Instituten*, ed. Carola Sachse (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), pp. 201–254; Peter Sander, “Das Frankfurter ‘Universitätsinstitut für Erbbiologie und Rassenhygiene’: Zur Positionierung einer ‘rassenhygienischen’ Einrichtung innerhalb der ‘rassenanthropologischen’ Forschung und Praxis während der NS-Zeit,” in *Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses . . . : Antisemitische Forschung, Eliten und Karrieren im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Fritz Bauer Institut (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1999), pp. 73–99; Eric Ehrenreich, “Otmar von Verschuer and the ‘Scientific’ Legitimization of Nazi Anti-Jewish Policy,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 2007, 25:55–72; Ehrenreich, *The Nazi Ancestral Proof: Genealogy, Racial Science, and the Final Solution* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2007); Schmuhl, ed., *Rassenforschung an Kaiser-Wilhelm-Instituten vor und nach 1933* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003); Ernst Klee, *Deutsche Medizin im Dritten Reich: Karrieren vor und nach 1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001); Sheila Faith Weiss, *Humangenetik und Politik als wechselseitige Ressourcen: Das Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik im “Dritten Reich”* (Preprint no. 17 from the Research Program “History of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society in the National Socialist Era,” 2004); Dietmar Schultze, *Untersuchungen zum Frankfurter Teilnachlaß des Rassenhygienikers Prof. Dr. Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer* (Münster: Klemm & Oelschläger, 2008); Edwin Black, *War against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003); and Alan E. Steinweis, *Studying the Jew: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006). Some of the older literature that deals with von Verschuer includes Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988); Schmuhl, *Rassenhygiene, Nationalsozialismus, Euthanasie: Von der Verhütung zur Vernichtung “lebensunwerten Lebens,” 1890–1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); Peter Weingart et al., *Rasse, Blut und Gene: Geschichte der Eugenik und Rassenhygiene in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988); and Paul J. Weindling, *Health, Race, and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1871–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989).

in order to provide expert testimony in the cases of those threatened with sterilization; creating paternity and racial testimonials; institutionalizing a special journal designed for physicians, *Der Erbarzt* [*Genetic Doctor*]; speaking at and hosting professional conferences where the National Socialist biological worldview was defended in the international scientific arena; providing genetic and racial training of state and SS physicians in his institute—something that would prove especially useful with the onset of Germany's "racial war"; and, of course, issuing public pronouncements on the "Jewish question." He was also the head of the Division of Human Heredity in the prestigious Berlin-Dahlem-based Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, Menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik (Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics) (KWIA) and, after 1942, its second director, replacing his beloved mentor, the racial anthropologist Eugen Fischer (1874–1967). The KWIA was one of the most important biomedical research sites under the Kaiser Wilhelm Society (KWS) umbrella. Between 1935 and 1942, von Verschuer headed the University of Frankfurt Institut für Erbbiologie und Rassenhygiene (Institute for Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene), where he played a prominent role in advancing National Socialist racial policy in the Hessen region. Finally, and perhaps most infamously, von Verschuer, a world-renowned twin specialist, actively collaborated in "racial research" with his former doctoral student Josef Mengele (1911–1979) while the former was in Berlin and the latter was SS Camp Physician at Auschwitz.³

How, given his multifaceted activities under the swastika, did von Verschuer manage during the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany to secure an academic position from which he could pursue his career—becoming one of the most renowned German medical geneticists of his age—and continue to advocate for eugenics, albeit not in the form he embraced under the Nazis? If, like many of his German biomedical colleagues, he made the Faustian bargain during the Third Reich, how did von Verschuer ultimately defeat the Devil? Surely von Verschuer and the Nazi regime's other partners in white coats would have had to pay a substantial long-term price for the twelve years of exceptional professional power and prestige they negotiated under National Socialism.

Both older and more recent scholarship, however, belie this assumption for many of the scientists who were professionally active during the Nazi era—and not just those in the peculiarly tainted fields of biomedical research. Limiting ourselves to medically trained professionals, we know that a large percentage of those who occupied important positions in the Third Reich found posts after 1945—many in universities in the Western zones of occupation and numerous others in hospitals and private practices. This group included a significant number of "euthanasia" physicians who were personally responsible for the mass killing of the handicapped during the Third Reich.⁴

³ For a revisionist interpretation of the research agenda and results of von Verschuer and Mengele that questions Müller-Hill's thesis see Achim Trunk, "Two Hundred Blood Samples from Auschwitz: A Nobel Laureate and the Link to Auschwitz," in *The Kaiser Wilhelm Society under National Socialism*, ed. Susanne Heim, Carola Sachse, and Mark Walker (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), pp. 120–144.

⁴ For the biomedical sciences see Klee, *Deutsche Medizin im Dritten Reich* (cit. n. 2). For physics and engineering see David C. Cassidy, *Uncertainty: The Life and Science of Werner Heisenberg* (New York: Freeman, 1992); Klaus Hentschel, *The Mental Aftermath: The Mentality of German Physicists, 1945–1949* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007); and Michael J. Neufeld, *Von Braun: Dreamer of Space, Engineer of War* (New York: Knopf, 2007). Regarding the employment of physicians after 1945 see Klee, *Deutsche Medizin im Dritten Reich*; and Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance: "Euthanasia" in Germany, 1900–1945* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994).

Von Verschuer was perhaps the most contentious and complex biomedical scientist who rendered invaluable service in the construction, legitimation, and execution of National Socialist racial policy; it seems surprising, then, that relatively few scholars have commented on his trials and tribulations during the immediate postwar period. To be sure, Hans-Peter Kröner's excellent monograph on the nebulous position of the KWIA between 1945 and 1948 provides a very detailed description of von Verschuer's professional difficulties prior to 1951.⁵ In that year, the former Dahlem director secured the first chair for human genetics anywhere on German soil, in the Medical Faculty at the University of Münster. However, even Kröner's fine work leaves out important aspects of this story. And historians have all but ignored von Verschuer's professional trajectory after arriving at Münster.⁶

An examination of von Verschuer's personal and career development after 1945 is both fascinating in its own right and usefully sheds light on the establishment of human and medical genetics in the first decades after the war; it also adds to the scholarly dialogue regarding opportunities in the early Federal Republic for German scientists who had been prominent researchers during the Third Reich. This discussion has been brilliantly spotlighted in Cathryn Carson's recent book on Heisenberg in the postwar era. Germany's famous quantum physicist became the spokesperson for science in West Germany's public sphere—thereby helping to reshape the relationship between science and the state. If, however, Heisenberg chose to capitalize on an older German tradition of the scientist as *Kulturträger* (upholder of culture or civilization) in a new democratic order where science would now have an even larger role in political decision-making policy than it had enjoyed prior to the war, this was not an option open to all researchers.⁷ Recognition that Heisenberg was far from untarnished under the swastika notwithstanding, the situation in the postwar period was bound to be more complex for biomedical scientists than for the celebrated author of the uncertainty principle. It should not surprise us if the strategies these scientists adopted to recover their professional prestige and power would take a different shape from that of their more fortunate scientific brethren in other fields.

The case of von Verschuer speaks to several significant historical issues facing researchers in the biomedical sciences in the postwar years and the formative years of the Federal Republic. First, it lays bare their professional posturing as they attempted to retake control over their once-tainted fields of research when Cold War realities opened a window of opportunity for them. The rhetorical micromechanics of this disciplinary resolidification are worth investigating as a strategy of how scientists whose area of research was suspect during the immediate postwar period used whitewashing techniques to “clean” themselves and their beleaguered colleagues in the interest of reestablishing their prestige, power, and professional autonomy. Second, it reveals the fine line between

⁵ Hans-Peter Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik: Das Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik nach dem Kriege* (Stuttgart: Fischer, 1997) (hereafter cited as **Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik***).

⁶ The exception has been work investigating von Verschuer and his coworkers' research support. See Anne Cottebrune, *Der planbare Mensch: Die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft und die menschliche Vererbungswissenschaft, 1920–1970* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2008); and Hans-Peter Kröner, “Förderung der Genetik und Humangenetik in der Bundesrepublik durch das Ministerium für Atomfragen in den fünfziger Jahre,” in *Wissenschaft und Politik: Genetik und Humangenetik in der DDR 1949–1989*, ed. Karin Weisemann *et al.* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1997), pp. 69–82.

⁷ Cathryn Carson, *Heisenberg in the Atomic Age: Science and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010). See also Carson's fine article, “A Scientist in Public: Werner Heisenberg after 1945,” *Endeavour*, 1999, 23:31–34.

adherence to professional ethics and disciplinary solidarity when researchers in the life sciences were faced with a potential outside threat to their profession. Finally, such an analysis demonstrates the macromechanics of professional refashioning on the part of publicly tainted scientists as they forged a new symbiosis between their field and the politics of a new era.

This essay explores how, after the fall of the Third Reich, von Verschuer himself became a *Fall*—a problem case—for many of the biomedical scientists formally associated, like the KWIA director, with the Kaiser Wilhelm Society. The reason: von Verschuer's Auschwitz connections, as well as his praise for the Nazi state, had been made public in the immediate postwar period. As such, he became a professional liability for the KWS's successor umbrella organization, the Max Planck Society (MPS), and for those researchers who had been active during the Third Reich but were kept on by the MPS to head new or reconstituted institutes. The *Fall von Verschuer*, as KWS/MPS insiders knew it, was negotiated through an intricate whitewashing campaign.⁸ It had a double political purpose. It was designed further to "cleanse" other figures already thought to be "clean," at the price of rendering the tainted human geneticist politically reliable enough to return to academic life. In the process, the campaign protected the fledgling MPS from potential scandal. As we will see, although von Verschuer received a clean bill of political health from his former KWS colleagues and numerous non-German members of the international scientific community in 1949–1950, the *Fall* was truly over only after 1951. At that point, von Verschuer began to refashion himself in his capacity as Chair of Human Genetics at Münster. He emerged as a conservative postwar mandarin whose views on health and family politics were completely in step with the conservative Adenauer government.

THE FALL AFTER THE FALL

A National Socialist Racial Fanatic?

In the months immediately after the war, von Verschuer's situation was not entirely dire. Apparently Reichsminister Albert Speer issued an order permitting most of the KWIA's valuable inventory to be relocated out of Berlin in early February 1945 to prevent its falling into the hands of the Red Army. Although this order was rescinded soon afterward, von Verschuer exploited the chaotic state of Germany to get himself and much of the institute's inventory out of beleaguered Berlin and transported to his family estate in Solz. Von Verschuer certainly assumed that, faced with a *fait accompli*, neither the KWS nor the soon-to-arrive Allies would do anything about the matter. Essentially, he was correct.

Although the details cannot concern us here, suffice it to say that von Verschuer's friends at the University of Frankfurt, in particular the non-Party member Bernhard de Rudder (1894–1962), a pediatrician and now dean of the Medical Faculty, were eager to have him back. Naturally, his old institute in Frankfurt would have to be renamed. Nonetheless, de Rudder was hopeful that his friend would be back on the faculty in the not-too-distant future.

⁸ For a discussion of the *Fall von Verschuer* see Carola Sachse, "'Persilscheinkultur': Zum Umgang mit der NS-Vergangenheit in der Kaiser-Wilhelm/Max-Planck-Gesellschaft" (hereafter cited as **Sachse, "'Persilscheinkultur'"**), in *Akademische Vergangenheitspolitik: Beiträge zur Wissenschaftskultur der Nachkriegszeit*, ed. Bernd Weisbrod (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002), pp. 217–246; and Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Human-genetik*, pp. 97–118.

Von Verschuer was certainly happy at the prospect of setting up shop in Frankfurt again, but he also considered establishing himself professionally in the town of Tübingen. At the end of the war his friend Adolf Butenandt (1903–1995), a renowned biochemist who would later be the president of the MPS, had moved his KWI for Biochemistry to this quaint university town, where he hoped to establish a “new Dahlem” in the French Occupation Zone. Von Verschuer had grown close to Butenandt through his own scientific work at Dahlem during the Third Reich, where the two belonged to a loose association of professionals akin to an old boys’ network. Butenandt apparently gave von Verschuer hope that there was a chance for him at Tübingen. Although the situation regarding the future of the KWS was unclear in those first months after the war, von Verschuer was hopeful that he would resume his position as the head of a renamed KWIA—whether in Frankfurt or in Tübingen. That he might not be able to count on the support of old KWS colleagues never crossed his mind at this point. Why would the society not want him any longer? Von Verschuer, whose family estate was in the American zone, was interviewed by the American Counter Intelligence Corps. Far from feeling that he had cause for concern, von Verschuer took this meeting as a positive sign, since months went by without his having to testify again. The “business” surrounding him, he wrote his good friend de Rudder, “can be viewed as having been cleared up in a satisfactory manner.” Although he realized that times were hard and that “denunciations and intrigues” were a distinct possibility, he could hardly have guessed that in a matter of months he would become a scientific pariah to all but a very few close friends. An event would occur that would lead to the controversial so-called *Fall von Verschuer*.⁹

On 3 May 1946 an article appeared in the Berlin paper *Die Neue Zeitung*. It was based on information supplied by Robert Havemann (1910–1982), a Communist physical chemist who had spent time in a concentration camp and was, at the time the article was published, the temporary head of the Soviet sector branch of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society. This KWS, however, was effectively a rival institution to the Kaiser Wilhelm Society (soon to be renamed the Max Planck Society) that the British established in Göttingen under the leadership of the physical chemist Otto Hahn (1879–1968) in 1948. In addition to spelling out von Verschuer’s research connections with Mengele and Auschwitz, Havemann accused the former Dahlem director of being a “National Socialist racial fanatic.”¹⁰ The article was quickly circulated, and before long it seemed that virtually everyone knew about it.

It is not certain whether the decision to publicize this damaging information about von Verschuer was connected with Havemann’s own professional ambitions in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ). That said, we do know that about two months prior to the publication of this article Havemann took part in the “first central day of culture of the German Communist Party” in the SBZ. The premise of all the talks given at this meeting was that “culture” was a class-bound concept. In the name of “humanity” and “democratic freedom,” the speakers asserted, there should be an attempt to free art, science, literature, and the public schools from their former one-sided bourgeois understanding of culture. Havemann delivered a paper entitled “What Is the Origin of Human Intelligence?” in which he argued against the “highly exaggerated” view that human intelligence is based

⁹ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, pp. 85–93.

¹⁰ “Vertriebene Wissenschaft,” *Neue Zeitung*, no. 35, 3 May 1946; the quotation is taken from Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, p. 97.

on genetics. Moreover, maintained Havemann, genetics was at the core of Nazi racial teaching.¹¹

It is not clear from his speech whether Havemann was an outright supporter of T. D. Lysenko (1898–1976), the Soviet agrobiologist whose homespun theory stressing the inheritance of acquired characteristics became the official dogma of the Soviet Union after the war.¹² Yet even if Havemann was not an overt partisan supporter of Lysenko, he surely would have deplored the strict Mendelian assumptions of von Vershuer's research—quite apart from the former director's actions during the Third Reich. As we will see, competing theories of heredity quickly became pawns of Cold War politics.

Given the wide currency that Havemann's article enjoyed, von Vershuer felt obligated to answer the charges. He was certain that some of his former colleagues, especially the animal geneticist Hans Nachtsheim (1890–1979), were behind the report. A former colleague of von Vershuer at the KWIA, Nachtsheim was given shelter, along with his family, by von Vershuer when their home was bombed out. This aid notwithstanding, the two geneticists were soon on bad terms, as a rivalry in the postwar period appeared inevitable.¹³ Although in fact it was another KWIA member who leaked the information to Havemann, Nachtsheim, whom the Allies and non-German colleagues viewed as “clean” at the time, agreed that von Vershuer was “very politically tainted.” Interestingly, however, the future head of the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Genetics believed that it was not von Vershuer's connections with Mengele and Auschwitz that made him so. Nachtsheim asked Havemann directly: “Do you think the use of material from a concentration camp is a crime?” Nachtsheim's own view was that, since body parts and serum were regularly taken from hospitals and prisons for the purpose of research, Von Vershuer's use of the Auschwitz material would be a crime only if he knew the true nature of the notorious slave labor and death camp—and this could not be proven. Nachtsheim, for his own part, held that the former Dahlem director was terribly compromised because of the way he had unquestioningly complied with the regime's myriad requests over the years.¹⁴

Von Vershuer soon found himself surrounded by enemies, as more negative newspaper reports appeared both in Germany and abroad. Even his former Jesuit colleague Hermann Muckermann (1877–1962), who was dismissed from the KWIA in 1933 for political reasons, threw himself into the fray by asserting that in fact he represented “the true tradition of the Dahlem Institute”—part of his larger attempt to stake his own claim for the directorship of any institution that might arise from the ashes of the KWIA. In other words, even former members of the “Fischer Institute,” as the KWIA was frequently called, hoped to wrest what was left of its inventory from von Vershuer and start up anew with the blessing of the Allies.¹⁵ Von Vershuer's attempts to gain support from Max Planck, the last president of the KWS before the end of the war, and the chemist Otto Hahn, the future president of the MPS, proved disappointing. Ernst Telschow (1889–1988), the general secretary of the KWS/MPS, was particularly hard on von Vershuer,

¹¹ Robert Havemann, “Woher entsteht die Intelligenz des Menschen?” in *Handbuch der Geistesgeschichte in Deutschland nach Hitler, 1945–1950*, ed. Christoph Cobet (Frankfurt am Main: Cobet, 1985), n.p.

¹² Nikolai Krementsov, *Stalinist Science* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 158–183.

¹³ Regarding von Vershuer's concern to answer Havemann's charges see “Stellungnahme,” Archiv der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft (MPG-Archiv), I Rep IA, 3027. Information on the animosity between von Vershuer and Nachtsheim comes from oral testimony given by Helmut von Vershuer, 9 Sept. 2009.

¹⁴ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, pp. 97–100, on p. 100.

¹⁵ “Erblehre und Humanität,” *Der Kurier*, no. 70, 7 May 1946, p. 6: Archiv-MPG, I Rep. 1A, 3027.

although he had been the Nazi regime's loyal servant in all matters pertaining to the KWS during the latter portion of the Third Reich. The cold shoulder von Verschuer received from Planck, Hahn, and Telschow was doubly hurtful, since the KWS had not paid him a salary since July 1945.¹⁶ In addition, von Verschuer learned from Butenandt that he should no longer hope for a future in Tübingen. Only the Frankfurt option seemed not to be totally destroyed—or at least not yet. Following the suggestion of several individuals, von Verschuer initiated his denazification procedures in the American sector.

Just as it appeared that things had quieted down and that he would get the support of the City of Frankfurt as well the University of Frankfurt for a position there, new trouble started to brew for von Verschuer. On 25 July 1946 he received a visit from two representatives of the Counter Intelligence Corps of the American army, who placed him under village arrest. It seems that his name had remained on a list of those that the Americans wished to investigate further; it was merely an oversight that this had not occurred earlier. Suddenly, his hopes for an immediate appointment were shattered, and even his good friend de Rudder could do nothing for him. Moreover, Havemann's "torpedo," which had undermined von Verschuer's chances of a quick professional rehabilitation, would return to haunt him in a different form.¹⁷ Hoping for help from a sympathetic colleague, von Verschuer contacted the biochemist and pharmacologist Wolfgang Heubner (1877–1957), who happened to be Havemann's former boss, to see what he could do. The result of von Verschuer's request was the creation of a so-called University Commission to examine the accuracy of the article in *Die Neue Zeitung*.

Unfortunately for von Verschuer, the composition of this committee of alleged experts, formed in August 1946, was not favorable to his case. It included Nachtsheim, Havemann, and Muckermann, along with six others. Among the other scientists asked to serve was the biochemist and Nobel Prize winner Otto Warburg (1883–1970), who, despite being what the Nazis called a half-Jew, had been allowed to direct his KWI for Cell Physiology throughout the regime's existence. Also, two of the commission members who were not hostile to von Verschuer failed to participate, and his more sympathetic friend, Heubner, was prevented from attending the meeting to debate von Verschuer's level of political culpability. It is little surprise, then, that the resulting assessment of the former Dahlem director was scathing. The committee examined several of the accusations put forward in the article, all to von Verschuer's detriment. Perhaps the worst conclusion was the first one brought forth. The committee compared the quotations that von Verschuer had selected to demonstrate that he was an opponent of Nazi racial fanaticism in the defense he mounted when the article in *Die Neue Zeitung* was originally published with others taken from texts he published during the Third Reich. It found that either he truly was a racial fanatic or—far worse—that "he sacrificed his true scientific knowledge to secure the applause and good will of those in power at the time."¹⁸

Despite the University Commission's report, it again briefly looked as if von Verschuer

¹⁶ For responses to von Verschuer's solicitations see Max Planck to Otmar von Verschuer, 29 Oct. 1946; and Otto Hahn to von Verschuer, 5 Nov. 1946: MPG-Archiv, I Rep. 1A, 3027. Regarding the unpaid salary see Sachse, "'Persilscheinkultur,'" p. 221.

¹⁷ Carola Sachse, "Adolf Butenandt und Otmar von Verschuer: Eine Freundschaft unter Wissenschaftlern (1942–1969)," in *Adolf Butenandt und die Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft: Wissenschaft, Industrie und Politik im "Dritten Reich,"* ed. Wolfgang Schieder and Achim Trunk (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2004), pp. 286–319, on p. 299.

¹⁸ Karl von Lewinski to Wolfgang Heubner, 23 Dec. 1946, MPG-Archiv, III Rep. 47, Nachlass Hartmann, 1505. This letter, reporting the results of the commission's meeting, was milder in tone than the original; see Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, pp. 106–111.

would escape the worst and be able to make a career for himself in Frankfurt. On 9 November 1946 von Verschuer was officially denazified. He was categorized as a “follower” and fined 600 marks. Indeed, high officials in the Hessen Ministry of Interior were anxious that his denazification be processed as expeditiously as possible, since “the well-known tuberculosis researcher Prof. Dr. Freiherr von Verschuer” was said to be doing research with his colleague Karl Diehl (1896–1969), as well as with Butenandt, that was of “extraordinary importance” for the fight against tuberculosis—a disease plaguing the land at the time. Needless to say, he no longer remained under village arrest. He even received 30,000 marks and a laboratory from the government in Hessen to support his research on TB.¹⁹ It seemed only a matter of time until he would again be a member of the University of Frankfurt.

As 1947 opened, however, von Verschuer’s Dahlem past again caught up with him in Hessen. This time the trouble appeared in the form of representatives of the American “Office for War Crimes” who wished to investigate von Verschuer’s relationship to the junior-ranking SS officer Siegfried Liebau (1911–1981), an anthropologist who worked briefly in the KWIA and who signed the discharge papers that relieved Mengele from active duty and made his appointment at Auschwitz possible. Liebau was accused of working with the notorious Odilo Globocnik (1904–1945), Higher SS and Police Leader in Lublin in occupied Poland—a man involved in the killing of over a million Jews and in seizing the prisoners’ valuables in slave labor camps. Although several of the specific accusations against Liebau proved untrue, enough concern remained to warrant additional hearings. Havemann, the person probably most responsible for tipping off the Office for War Crimes, was so incensed when he heard the result of von Verschuer’s denazification proceedings that he openly complained to the responsible parties in Hessen. He informed the American authorities that von Verschuer was not a mere “follower” but “rather one of the most dangerous Nazi activists of the Third Reich.” Havemann accused von Verschuer of being “an unscrupulous opportunist.”²⁰

As a result of Havemann’s protests, the Minister for Culture in Hessen, Erwin Stein, took away von Verschuer’s right to use his KWIA research material, now stored in the basement of the University of Frankfurt under the protection of his colleague Boris Rajewsky (1893–1974), former head of the KWI for Biophysics. Indeed, Stein forbade von Verschuer to teach or engage in research in Hessen. There were also reports about a planned second inquiry into von Verschuer’s past, perhaps in association with a proposed second Nuremberg Doctors’ Trial that never came to pass owing to the Cold War. For the next two years, von Verschuer was dependent on his wife’s small income, derived from giving religious lessons.²¹

¹⁹ For discussions of the importance of the work on TB see Der Oberlandesgerichtspräsident: betr. Professor Dr. med. Frhr. von Verschuer, 2 Nov. 1946; Wilhelm von Drigalski to Herr Oberregierungsrat Aigener, 18 Nov. 1946; and Großhessisches Staatsministerium, Kammer Frankfurt am Main, to von Verschuer, 9 Nov. 1946: Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv (HHA), Wiesbaden, Spruchkammerakt von Verschuer. On the support from the Hessen government see Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, p. 120.

²⁰ Robert Havemann to the American Military Government, Frankfurt, 23 Jan. 1947. This is discussed in Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, pp. 125–126, from which the quotations are taken.

²¹ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, pp. 94, 121–126; Schmuhl, *Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics* (cit. n. 2), pp. 366–367; Paul Julian Weindling, *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials: From Medical War Crimes to Informed Consent* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 249; and Sachse, “‘Persilscheinkultur,’” p. 219.

“Whitewashing Culture” Revised

How did von Verschuer manage to secure an academic position when his prospects in 1947 appeared so dismal? The University of Frankfurt never gave up hope that he would one day join their academic ranks. Hessen Minister Stein, however, was adamantly opposed to lifting the restrictions against von Verschuer using his former research materials. Luckily for von Verschuer, a combination of factors, designed to serve the political interests of the newly organized Max Planck Society, along with the professional careers of three of its new institute directors, also aided in the rehabilitation of the former Dahlem director. The “product” that emerged—the historically significant 1949 *Stuttgarter Denkschrift* (Stuttgart Memorandum)—would ultimately lend additional support to the case for von Verschuer’s academic employment, if not at the university all parties expected. It was a material representation of the new *Persilscheinkultur* (whitewashing culture), which differed in numerous ways from the sort of whitewashing that was seen in the months immediately after the war. It was no longer merely a perfunctory process of denial of past records and deeds that occurred under the swastika; instead, this new *Persilscheinkultur* was a conscious communicative outgrowth that scientific elites constructed for their own ends in the later postwar period. Without this more conscious whitewashing culture, postwar reconstruction would not have assumed the contours it did.²² It was this particular whitewashing culture that would allow von Verschuer to triumph in the end.

The Political Genesis of the Memorandum

On 19 September 1949, less than two weeks after the first meeting of the Bundestag (lower house of Parliament) of the new West German state, four prominent and allegedly untainted scientists met in Stuttgart to reevaluate the political culpability of von Verschuer.²³ Three were former KWS institute directors. Although as late as June 1949 von Verschuer claimed that he wanted an academic position for the good of human genetics and not for selfish reasons, Minister Stein seemed unwilling to give the green light for his reappointment at the University of Frankfurt.²⁴ According to Stein, the politically damning report of the 1946 University Commission was the most important obstacle to the former Dahlem director’s academic rehabilitation. Interestingly, in a July 1949 meeting of the Scientific Council and the Senate of the MPS the new president, Otto Hahn, and others in attendance had agreed that a reevaluation of the 1946 charges against von Verschuer by a group of prestigious researchers might aid his cause. Rajewsky was willing to organize such a committee and to inform von Verschuer about it.²⁵

The timing of this apparent show of solidarity was no accident; nor can it be considered a belated act of friendship. The MPS had already been formed in what were still the British and American zones. President Hahn realized that the French were willing to allow the

²² Sachse, “‘Persilscheinkultur,’” pp. 217–218. The title of this subsection is a translation of Sachse’s term. Her thesis, which I embrace, is novel and extremely important. By “whitewashing culture,” Sachse and I are referring (in this specific case) to the conscious use of testimonials from German biomedical scientists thought by the Allies to be untainted by Nazism in the interest of a politically beleaguered colleague (von Verschuer) as well as to protect their own positions. This whitewashing culture—the use of testimonials to prove the anti-Nazi stance of individuals—was pervasive in all the Allied occupation zones after the war; it was not limited to scientists.

²³ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, p. 132; and Sachse, “‘Persilscheinkultur,’” p. 220.

²⁴ On von Verschuer’s reasons see Bernd Gausemeier, “Rassenhygienische Radikalisierung und kollegialer Konsens,” in *Die Verbindung nach Auschwitz*, ed. Sachse (cit. n. 2), pp. 177–198, on p. 195 n 36.

²⁵ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, p. 131; and Sachse, “‘Persilscheinkultur,’” p. 229.

society to operate in their zone as well, and so its unification in a future West Germany was assured. The time was right to deal, once and for all, with the *Fall von Verschuer*.

We will recall that since July 1945 the former Dahlem director had received no salary from the KWS; Hahn claimed that it was in limbo as an organization. It was also clear that Hahn had no interest in maintaining either the tainted former KWIA or its last director within the new umbrella organization. From his perspective—and in the view of the four scientists who would meet in Stuttgart—reinstating von Verschuer could cause image problems for the fledgling MPS so severe that they might hamper the rise of vanguard biomedical research in the soon-to-be-founded Federal Republic. A few days after Rajewsky spoke to von Verschuer, it became clear that he was still a viable candidate for the position at the University of Frankfurt. Rendering him “clean” enough to take up a suitably prestigious university post—while at the same time distancing him from the MPS—seemed a solution that would satisfy all concerned.²⁶ As it turns out, the *Stuttgarter Denkschrift* would serve as an excellent example of the political and professional capital that could accrue for all concerned with the implementation of mutually beneficial rhetorical resources in a specific historical context.

The four distinguished scientists who met in Stuttgart in September 1949 were all in the field of biology, broadly defined. Von Verschuer’s longtime friend and colleague Butenandt was among them. So, too, was Rajewsky, director of the MPI for Biophysics in Frankfurt and president of the University of Frankfurt. He was admittedly less sympathetic to von Verschuer than was Butenandt. Also included in this elite group was Max Hartmann, former head of the KWS for Biology in Dahlem (the institute was moved to Hechingen in what became the West German state of Baden-Württemberg) and later head of the MPI for Biology near Tübingen. The fourth eminent scientist was von Verschuer’s supporter Wolfgang Heubner, a retired pharmacologist from the University of Berlin. Heubner, we will recall, had been unable to attend the meeting of the original University Commission in 1946 where von Verschuer was condemned as a “National Socialist racial fanatic.” In fact he had been very much opposed to the hard stand of his colleagues, but his views were not reflected in the official document given to Stein.²⁷

Although these individuals could have shown their loyalty to von Verschuer earlier—had it been a question of that—their main purpose in reassessing the former Dahlem director was to find a way to avoid bringing any embarrassment to the MPS, to their own disciplines, and possibly to themselves. But why should these presumably reputable scientists have been concerned about their reputations?

Recent research has demonstrated that these publicly untainted individuals were not as “clean” as many previously believed. Butenandt was involved with von Verschuer’s “specific protein” research, undertaken with material received from Auschwitz via Mengele. At the very least, the later Nobel Prize winner commissioned his coworker, Günther Hillmann (1919–1976), to help von Verschuer analyze the blood samples received from the notorious death and slave labor camp. That there was a more intimate research relationship between them is suggested by a letter von Verschuer wrote to Butenandt in October 1945. “It is too bad,” von Verschuer asserted in his note to the biochemist, “that our common research plans cannot be resumed at the moment, but I hope it will be

²⁶ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, pp. 131–132; and Sachse, “Persilscheinkultur,” pp. 220–221.

²⁷ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, pp. 136–137; and Sachse, “Persilscheinkultur,” pp. 220–221.

possible later.” Rajewsky had been a Party member since 1937 and a member of the Nazi Stormtroopers since 1933; he held a high-ranking position in the organization beginning in 1940. Moreover, in 1937 he took over the position of the former director of the KWI for Biophysics, Friedrich Dessauer (1881–1963), an outspoken left-liberal Catholic critic of the Nazis who was arrested by the Gestapo. Although Rajewsky was originally declared a “follower” and fined 2,000 marks, he was exonerated in a retrial.²⁸ In 1943, von Verschuer’s friend Heubner was present at conferences where seawater experiments at Dachau and sulfonamide experiments at the Ravensbrück women’s camp were discussed. Although Hartmann was never a member of the Nazi Party and seems not to have compromised himself openly, he was apparently viewed by the international scientific community as a “political child” and, as such, was not invited to the 1948 Genetics Conference in Sweden.²⁹ If these four eminent exonerated scientists could demonstrate that von Verschuer was not a real Nazi, how much better would they look? Who could possibly accuse *them* of having compromised themselves during the Third Reich?

Their own interests and those of the MPS notwithstanding, the stated purpose of the thirteen-page memorandum was to assess whether von Verschuer was politically suitable for reemployment in an academic setting.³⁰ In doing so, the authors used the document’s discourse and argumentation as a rhetorical resource to present their own definition of *Vergangenheitspolitik* (dealing with the Nazi past) and their own understanding of post-war intellectual reconstruction. Although we cannot preoccupy ourselves with all the details of this lengthy document, suffice it to say that the four scientists were concerned with five issues, all of which had been discussed in the 1946 committee report that condemned von Verschuer.

The first topic focused on whether von Verschuer was “a convinced or even a fanatical National Socialist.” Relying on a combination of questionable testimonials, reports from Nazi officials that bemoaned von Verschuer’s lack of enthusiasm, his late entry into the Party, and evidence of his active role in the Confessing Church—the semi-oppositional group within the Evangelical Church that included leaders, such as the Berlin pastor Martin Niemöller (1892–1984), who resisted the doctrinal nazification of Protestant teaching—the authors of the memorandum concluded that not only was von Verschuer not a “convinced” Nazi, but indeed he demonstrated an “oppositional internal position” to National Socialism.³¹ Then the four scientists debated the question of whether the former Dahlem director was a “racial fanatic.” Their conclusion: “despite isolated problematic statements, von Verschuer’s daily research, his scientific testimonials as well as the overall picture one gets from publications during the National Socialist rule was of a human geneticist and eugenicist who was governed by scientific and factual criteria.” In

²⁸ Schmuhl, *Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics* (cit. n. 2), pp. 386–392 (von Verschuer is quoted on p. 391); and “In dem Verfahren gegen Rajewsky,” 30 Jan. 1947, 3 June 1947, HHA, Spruchkammerakt Rajewsky.

²⁹ On Heubner’s conference presence see Ernst Klee, *Das Personenlexikon zum Dritten Reich: Wer war was vor und nach 1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005), p. 251; Weindling, *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials* (cit. n. 21), p. 260; and Sachse, “Persilscheinkultur,” p. 235. Regarding Hartmann see Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, p. 137.

³⁰ “Denkschrift,” Sept. 1949, Senckenbergisches Institut für die Geschichte und Ethik der Medizin (SIGEM) Dekanatsarchiv, Frankfurt am Main. There are numerous copies of the “Denkschrift” in various relevant archives.

³¹ Sachse, “Persilscheinkultur,” p. 232. I am greatly indebted to Sachse’s accurate and hard-hitting summaries of the issues debated by the Stuttgart group.

addition, there were reports from Jews attesting to how von Verschuer used his influence to help them.³²

The third issue focused on his work with Nazi activists. Here the authors of the memorandum found that von Verschuer, as a scientist, could not be held accountable for the racial positions and actions of his students. They differentiated between his “real students,” who allegedly demonstrated that they were scientifically and morally upright, and those who became interested in human genetics because they were National Socialist ideologues. For von Verschuer, the four authors argued, what was important was talent, not ideology.

Regarding his relationship to Auschwitz, the scientists outlined what might, until recently, have been considered our present-day knowledge of the situation based on hard evidence.³³ At the same time, however, they flatly denied that von Verschuer could have known that Mengele was anything but a camp doctor. The accusation that von Verschuer was in any way informed by Mengele about the true nature of Auschwitz, the authors concluded, “was a sly, unfounded, and indeed implausible construction.” The harsh rhetoric used by the authors on this point stood in contrast to their measured tone throughout the rest of the document. We will recall that Nachtsheim, although an opponent of von Verschuer, saw nothing wrong in using “material” obtained from Auschwitz. Only if he had known the true meaning and purpose of Auschwitz would it have been a crime. And Heubner—who, as we have seen, had attended conferences at which experiments on Ravensbrück inmates as well as on prisoners in Dachau were discussed—claimed to have known nothing about the meaning of Auschwitz until after the war. As such, he would not assume that von Verschuer knew more than he did.³⁴

Finally, the authors had to deal with the clearly compromising statements that von Verschuer made in numerous publications. Claiming to be baffled by the contradiction between the professional orientation of his research and some of his politically problematic rhetoric, they asked von Verschuer to come to Stuttgart to supply an explanation for some of his statements—especially after the passage of the Nuremberg Laws when he, “as a knowledgeable expert in the field, had a special responsibility to stand up against unconsidered measures of the state.” Von Verschuer explained away his praise of Hitler in his 1936 speech to students in Frankfurt as an expression of all their hopes at the time that there would be a real “National Socialist renewal” and that this would be applied “toward the betterment of the people.” A phrase he used in 1941, “Gesamtlösung der Judenfrage” [“complete solution to the Jewish question”] was not meant in the sense in which it was later used by those directly responsible for the “Final Solution” but, rather, in a mere “neutral” manner, the medical geneticist insisted. “These perspectives,” the four

³² “Denkschrift,” Sept. 1949, Question 2: “War Frhr. v. Verschuer ein Rassenfanatiker?”

³³ Scholars have long assumed that von Verschuer knew what was going on at Auschwitz, although this could not be proved. Helmut von Verschuer, the son of Otmar von Verschuer, has shown me a document that was written by his youngest sister, Gudrun von Ekesparre. In the document she testifies to having heard her parents talking with Mengele at the KWIA in 1943. According to the testimony, her mother, von Verschuer’s wife, ran out of the room terribly upset and bewildered, saying something like, “Oh, everything is so unimaginably terrible.” Helmut von Verschuer is now ready to accept that this testimony indicates that both his father and his mother knew the truth about Auschwitz: testimony of Gudrun von Ekesparre, 18 Sept. 2009; private papers held by Helmut Freiherr von Verschuer. In addition, Otmar von Verschuer’s pocket calendar states that he arrived in Solz on 10 Oct. 1944 and returned to Berlin with his daughters Sigrid (Wörle) and Gudrun on 30 Oct. 1944. According to Gudrun von Ekesparre, the talk between von Verschuer and Mengele, in the presence of von Verschuer’s wife, took place shortly after Helmut von Verschuer was conscripted on 5 Nov. 1944; private papers held by Helmut Freiherr von Verschuer.

³⁴ Sachse, “‘Persilscheinkultur,’” pp. 233–235 (the quotation is from p. 234).

men argued, helped make “some of von Verschuer’s statements understandable”—with-out, of course, changing their disapproval of them. In his discussion with the authors of the memorandum, von Verschuer apparently forgot to mention his use of the same phrase in a Nazi propaganda organ—not a scientific text—as late as 1944.³⁵ The four eminent scientists apparently made no effort to look up all von Verschuer’s publications written during the war.

The authors’ conclusions at the end of the document are worth recording in their entirety:

If we attempt to form a truly complete and objective as possible picture of the personality of Herr Prof. Freiherr von Verschuer and his actions during the Third Reich, we cannot forget that, given his field . . . his situation was made extremely difficult after 1933—more from internal [factors] than external [ones]. He had to applaud certain measures out of scientific conviction, which, in their magnitude of their application, went against his Christian values. The scientific training of his students was frustrated by unscrupulous propaganda from political [power bases]. In addition, one should not forget to what degree [demonstrating] a very clear opposition at the time was life-threatening. Under these circumstances it is not difficult to imagine that even a sincere person occasionally repeated thoughts and words that were droned into him daily.

In summary, if one compares Prof. von Verschuer’s upright posture with that of many other genetic and racial researchers, the picture sets him apart very positively, even if a few specks dim it. The positive side is the manner in which he lived his life, for example, in his professional capacity as researcher, teacher, and referee. [It] appears to count much more than the rare impulse of compliance, misjudgment or opportunism.

It would appear self-righteous [*pharisäerhaft*(!)] if, from the present perspective, we would judge a man to be hopelessly morally tainted, who, a few occurrences notwithstanding, otherwise honestly and bravely followed his difficult path and, often enough, preserved his humane and noble character. We, the undersigned, unanimously believe that Prof. v. Verschuer has all the qualities to make him predestined as a researcher and teacher of academic youth. We find the renewed dedication of this particular person to his [research] field very desirable, as we continue to find the scientific work in this area valuable and essential, despite the misuse [carried out] in the name of heredity and race. As such, in the interest of the matter at hand, we would not like to think that an experienced scholar like Prof. Freiherr von Verschuer would be shoved aside.³⁶

The memorandum, especially its conclusions, speaks volumes not only about the professional self-interest of its authors but also about the general mentality among intellectuals, in this case scientists, during the waning months of Germany’s occupation by the Allies. It is not surprising that we find commonplace—and erroneous—claims such as the notion that opposition to serving the Nazi state could have been life threatening. What was at risk for those who dared to say no to the Faustian bargain was one’s professional and financial well-being, not one’s life. Interestingly, however, the four authors articulated an issue that might have been a motivating factor in the slide of von Verschuer and others toward the moral abyss: the ethical brutalization resulting from hearing one’s own rhetorical constructions of the genetic dangers of “racial outsiders” repeated as daily propaganda.

To be sure, the memorandum was certainly a *Persilschein*, a whitewashing certificate, albeit one whose plausibility was increased by a new historical context. Were there other factors, besides those immediate ones already discussed, that made it possible for these

³⁵ “Denkschrift,” Sept. 1949, Section 5: “Öffentliche Äusserungen.” The later use of the phrase “Gesamtlösung der Judenfrage” is noted in Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, p. 141.

³⁶ “Denkschrift,” Sept. 1949.

four spokesmen for the biosciences to write such a document only three years after a very different assessment of von Verschuer had been constructed? And what does it say about the authors' understanding of both dealing with the past and postwar intellectual reconstruction?

It is true that, from the beginning, this group was more favorably inclined toward von Verschuer than the members of the 1946 committee had been. Von Verschuer and at least three of the four members of the Stuttgart group were friends of sorts, and Butenandt was a regular correspondent. There was certainly a degree of *Männerfreundschaft* (bonding of male friends) at work. After all, it is not easy to inquire after someone's wife and family and exchange other pleasantries, as Butenandt did in his letters to von Verschuer, and then sell him down the professional river, let alone accuse him of being a medical criminal.³⁷ But while *Männerfreundschaft* may have played a role in shaping the rhetorical actions of the authors of the memorandum, it was certainly not the only factor.

Ignored thus far in the historical analysis of this extraordinary document is the reaction of German scientists to the Western Allies' implementation of research regulations, as well as the matter of the mentality and group cohesion of scientists during the early postwar years. As John Krige has pointed out, immediately following the end of hostilities there were various interpretations of Allied Control Law 25 regarding the parameters of permissible scientific research in the three Western zones. German scientists resented that some prominent members among their ranks who had been active participants in the Third Reich were welcomed with open arms, especially by the Americans. Some were even carried off as intellectual booty to the United States, while less compromised scientists remained in Germany, "only to be mistrusted and monitored." As a result of these inequities, and following the introduction of the Marshall Plan in 1947, German researchers became more adamant in their demands for autonomy and showed increasing contempt for the Allied occupation.³⁸

Recent scholarship focused on the mentality of German physicists may also provide some insight into the motivations of our biologists. Physicists, and probably other academic intellectuals, were certainly tired by the end of the 1940s of being required to submit to years of often very capricious denazification procedures that varied greatly from zone to zone and even from case to case; indeed, many viewed it as a "senseless" process that recalled the "whims" of the Third Reich. In addition, years of facing posters showing horrible scenes from concentration camps with a "superimposed accusing finger pointing directly at the viewer with the legend 'You are guilty!'" appears to have had an effect on German physicists opposite to what the Allies had hoped for. While the physics community had been extraordinarily fractious during the Weimar years, there was an unprecedented level of solidarity among these scientists in the postwar period. Study of German physicists suggests that fear of having to accept the blame for the extermination of millions in the name of the German people probably led to their complete repudiation of

³⁷ This is a thesis put forward by Carola Sachse in an unpublished paper entitled "Wissenschaftskultur und Männerfreundschaft: Zur Vergangenheitspolitik der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft in der Nachkriegszeit," delivered at the German Society Association Meeting in San Diego, Oct. 2002. For a discussion of the correspondence between Butenandt and von Verschuer see Sachse, "Adolf Butenandt und Otmar von Verschuer" (cit. n. 17).

³⁸ John Krige, *American Hegemony and the Postwar Reconstruction of Science in Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 48–49; and Richard H. Beyler and Morris F. Low, "Science Policy in Post-1945 West Germany and Japan: Between Ideology and Economics," in *Science and Ideology: A Comparative History*, ed. Mark Walker (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 97–123, on p. 106.



Figure 1. A billboard poster placed by the Western Allies for all Germans to see: “26 Million Dead Accuse: In Nuremberg the Score Will Be Settled!” (Courtesy of the Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn.)

the idea of collective guilt.³⁹ How much more urgently, then, would a scientific community that could rightly be viewed as having a more direct relationship to the atrocities in the slave labor and death camps have sought to take the offensive in protecting one of its “black sheep”? This might well explain the violent rhetorical resistance against the idea that von Vershuer could have possibly known the meaning of Auschwitz. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

Finally, absent from the historical discussion of other, less immediate, motivations that

³⁹ Hentschel, *Mental Aftermath* (cit. n. 4), pp. 37, 53, 51 (quotation), 171 (quotation), 173, 113.



Figure 2. Another billboard poster: “These Dreadful Deeds: Your Fault.” (Courtesy of the Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn.)

colored the “whitewashing culture” embodied in the *Denkschrift* was the new sense of urgency regarding Lysenkoism at this time. Although this issue was not openly articulated by any of the authors of the memorandum, it would have been all but impossible to have ignored it. Lysenkoism was already a factor in Soviet society by the late 1920s; in the early 1930s it was beginning to wreak havoc within the Soviet genetics community. A few years later, Lysenko’s backing from high quarters proved dangerous and deadly. It resulted in the Soviets canceling their plans to hold the International Genetics Conference in Moscow in 1937. Lysenkoism was responsible for the execution and death in prison of several Soviet geneticists and eugenicists in the late 1930s and 1940s. At the infamous August 1948 meeting of biologists at the Lenin All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences, Lysenkoism became the official doctrine of the Soviet Union. It was sanctioned by the Central Committee and by Stalin himself. What began as a struggle between geneticists and Lysenko supporters during the 1930s and early 1940s now became part of the larger context of “Stalinist science under the conditions created by the Cold War.” The older idea that the Soviet Union would “catch up and overtake Western science” was transformed. Now the new Soviet biology was viewed as uniquely Marxist and superior to that which was practiced elsewhere. It became a weapon in the conflict between the USSR and the West.⁴⁰

And at no time since the end of World War II were tensions between the Soviet Union and the West greater than at the time Lysenkoism became state-sanctioned dogma. The year 1948 witnessed, among other things, the establishment of a pro-Communist regime

⁴⁰ Kremenstov, *Stalinist Science* (cit. n. 12), pp. 158, 178.

in Czechoslovakia, the decision to create a West German state, the introduction of the Deutsche Mark (DM) in the Western zones, and, on 24 June, the Soviet imposition of a blockade of Berlin—a brutal provocation as well as a life-or-death matter for the people in the Western zones of the city. It continued until 11 May 1949, only a few months before the *Denkschrift* was made public.⁴¹

Heightened tensions between the USSR and the Western powers, along with Soviet attempts to use biology as a weapon in the Cold War, prompted the defense in the West of Mendelian mainstream genetics and those who represented it. Von Verschuer had always claimed that his enemies—the individuals behind the intrigues to destroy him—were Communists.⁴² This was certainly true in the case of Robert Havemann. Whether von Verschuer's former KWIA colleague, the Gestalt psychologist Kurt Gottschaldt (1902–1991), had dealings with the German Communist Party prior to the Third Reich that were later hushed up is unclear. What is certain is that von Verschuer believed (and probably rightly) that it was Gottschaldt who informed Havemann about the Mengele connection.⁴³ There is suggestive evidence that von Verschuer's attempt to discredit those who attacked him as Communists would not be held irrelevant by the Americans. As Auschwitz, the source of von Verschuer's scientific "material," was in Poland, the Americans could have handed him over to officials of that country. Poland, however, had just "gone" Communist. Turning von Verschuer over to Lysenkoist forces did not seem a good strategy at a time when the Western Allies had decided to resuscitate science in their sectors. It could be viewed as "playing into the hands of the new enemy" in more ways than one: it would not only deliver an excellent scientist to the Communists; it was bound to suggest that the kind of genetics von Verschuer pursued really was "fascist," as the Lysenkoists claimed. As has already been mentioned, a second Nuremberg Doctors' Trial, one in which the Dahlem director might have been placed in the dock, was never held. It was a casualty of the Western Allies' response to the new realities of the Cold War.⁴⁴

German geneticists living in the Soviet section of Berlin, like Nachtsheim, had reason to be concerned. After the war Nachtsheim was offered a position at the Humboldt University in the Soviet sector of the city. He appeared to care little whom he worked for, as long he was able to continue his research. As he sarcastically commented to the racial hygienist Fritz Lenz, his former colleague at the KWIA, "Whether I receive East or West money is immaterial; the main thing is that I can continue my work undisturbed."⁴⁵ At first he was excited at the prospect of setting up an Institute for Genetics and hoped for research employment in an academy to be established in the Soviet-occupied suburb of Berlin-Buch. He quickly learned, however, that it did make a difference who paid one's salary. Nachtsheim at first could not believe that the Soviets were serious about supporting Lysenko—to the German geneticist he was nothing more than a dilettante. Nachtsheim obviously did not immediately see that there was more behind the Soviet push to export Lysenkoism to the former united capital city of Germany than a theory of heredity seemingly compatible with Marxism-Leninism.

Nachtsheim spoke out against Lysenkoism in public, and this quickly got him into trouble with the Communist authorities. An attack was launched against him in the press.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴² Weindling, *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials* (cit. n. 21), p. 247.

⁴³ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, pp. 124–125.

⁴⁴ Diane B. Paul, "Genetics and the Swastika," *Dimensions: A Journal of Holocaust Studies*, 1996, 10:23–28, on p. 28; and Weindling, *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials* (cit. n. 21), p. 249.

⁴⁵ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, p. 212.

He was accused, among other things, of “an astounding lack of memory of the most recent past”—a reference to National Socialism and the alleged connection between genetics and fascism. The attacks and counterattacks continued until the animal geneticist finally left the Soviet zone during the winter semester of 1948/1949 for a position at the newly created Free University of Berlin, located in Dahlem not far from the former KWIA. Nachtsheim viewed Lysenkoism as “worse than Nazi racism” and published an article arguing that the Lysenko affair was “the saddest chapter in biology of the twentieth century.” Under the swastika, Nachtsheim maintained, genetic research was merely “misused.” Moreover, he complained in a letter to Lenz that the “Communist pressure” on genetic researchers was “much worse than that of the National Socialists.” It is worth noting that the *Denkschrift* concludes by emphasizing that von Verschuer’s field was “valuable and essential, despite the misuse [carried out] in the name of heredity and race.” The authors deemed the “renewed dedication of this particular person [von Verschuer] to his [research] field very desirable.”⁴⁶ Their position is probably no accident—though the Lysenkoist problem is nowhere mentioned.

Owing, then, to a constellation of factors, the *Denkschrift* produced by the Stuttgart scientists was very different from the short whitewashing certificates that had been common during the earlier years of the Allied occupation. It was, instead, the rhetorically aggressive project of self-confident scientists to counteract charges that could be addressed to a significant part of the German bioscience community. The four authors were no longer afraid to decide for themselves who was useful for the postwar reconstruction of their discipline (and postwar construction generally) and who was not. They would not leave it up to the Allied authorities. *Their* way of dealing with the Nazi past was to contextualize it historically—and through their rhetoric the scientists themselves would negotiate the context. Statements such as “It would appear self-righteous if, from the present perspective, we would judge a man to be hopelessly morally tainted” seem to express a new level of professional and moral self-consciousness. Safeguarding the establishment of the successor umbrella organization to the prestigious KWS, the Max Planck Society, might have been the immediate defensive purpose behind the construction of the *Denkschrift*, but it also afforded the authors a renewed sense of authority to speak for the interests of their discipline. The authors codified the so-called “*Schlussstrich-Mentalität*” (“drawing the line mentality”) as a form of damage control for their science.⁴⁷

Whitewash Support for a Public Whitewashing Project

Something that certainly made it easier for the academics to compose their memorandum in the manner and tone they chose was important supplemental material made available to them: the external letters of reference that the Medical Faculty of the University of Frankfurt had requisitioned in November 1948 as they considered the former Dahlem director’s reappointment. To date, no one has thought of examining these letters of recommendation in the context of the *Stuttgarter Denkschrift*. This is all the more surprising in that the document itself mentions that the opinions of its four authors were

⁴⁶ Paul, “Genetics and the Swastika” (cit. n. 44), p. 28; Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, pp. 211–216 (the quotation is from p. 214); and “Denkschrift,” Sept. 1949, Section 5: “Öffentliche Äusserungen.”

⁴⁷ Hentschel, *Mental Aftermath* (cit. n. 4), p. 49.

colored by the views of foreign colleagues regarding the alleged “scientific and (moral) integrity of von Verschuer’s research and that of his real students.”⁴⁸

As already noted, the Frankfurt Medical Faculty was never resigned to a permanent prohibition against reemploying von Verschuer. It is not entirely clear whether earlier interpretations of the critical importance of the *Denkschrift* for von Verschuer’s potential reinstatement at the University of Frankfurt are correct.⁴⁹ Among the documentation pertaining to the attempt to secure an appointment for von Verschuer, there is a letter from the former Dahlem director to Karl Wezler, dean of the Medical Faculty. It involves one of the most important administrators and leaders of the Protestant Church in Frankfurt, Dr. Otto Fricke—an oppositional clergyman who had already written a *Persilschein* for his friend von Verschuer in 1945. He knew the geneticist while he was head of the Institute for Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene in Frankfurt, when von Verschuer was an active member of his parish of the Confessing Church. According to a letter written by von Verschuer to Wezler on 7 July 1949, Fricke was informed by the Hessen Ministry of Culture that von Verschuer could be viewed as “completely politically exonerated.” It seems that the Hessen Befreiungsministerium (Ministry of de-Nazification and Compensation) had reassessed von Verschuer’s case and declared the former Dahlem director politically untainted. According to von Verschuer’s letter, the decision was an official one, and he was entrusted to let the Medical Faculty know of this change.⁵⁰ Von Verschuer does not, however, appear ever to have formally been placed in Category 5, the group of those exonerated; his “follower” status was still entered in the official denazification records, and he was never paid back the money he was fined.

If it was indeed true that the Befreiungsministerium reversed itself, the reason was never given. However, it may well have had to do with the change in the political climate relating to the Cold War. After all, things looked very different in mid-1949 than they did in late 1946, when the University Commission offered its harsh political judgment of von Verschuer, or in early 1947, when Havemann’s new attacks finally prompted Stein to issue his prohibitions against the Dahlem director. In any event, according to von Verschuer’s letter, Minister Stein’s decision as to whether von Verschuer might be reinstated at the University of Frankfurt was dependent on the assessment of the Befreiungsministerium.⁵¹ At the very least, then, Fricke, as a prominent pastor, was a mediator between von Verschuer and the Hessen Ministry of Culture at the time. Whether Fricke had a personal influence on the Befreiungsministerium, leading to its reassessment, cannot be determined at this time.

Whether Minister Stein had in fact already dropped any obstacles to considering von Verschuer for a position at the university more than two months before the four authors of the *Denkschrift* met in Stuttgart is not clear, since the letter von Verschuer wrote to Wezler stated that a “written confirmation” of what Fricke told him would be forthcoming, and there is no evidence in the files of the Medical Faculty that this confirmation ever

⁴⁸ “Denkschrift,” Sept. 1949, Question 2: “War Frhr. v. Verschuer ein Rassenfanatiker?”

⁴⁹ The two authors who have written extensively about the circumstances surrounding the *Stuttgarter Denkschrift*, Kröner and Sachse, both believe it was the memorandum that changed Stein’s mind. See Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, p. 142; and Sachse, “Persilscheinkultur,” p. 237. Although this may be true, they apparently are not aware of a very important document that implies that this was not the case: a letter from von Verschuer to Dr. Karl Wezler, 6 July 1949, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986.

⁵⁰ Von Verschuer to Wezler, 6 July 1949.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

arrived. Despite the lack of any written confirmation of the information in von Verschuier's letter, however, Wezler eventually used the recommendations from foreign colleagues to make a case for placing the medical geneticist as the Medical Faculty's top contender for the new position.

Based on a one-sided interpretation of these references from scholars outside Germany, Wezler's 9 September report to the Hessen Ministry of Culture was probably the least disinterested and unabashed *Persilschein* of all those related to the *Fall von Verschuier*. Although the former Dahlem director "did not find the courage to offer himself up as martyr to the political terror," Wezler argued, "through [his] active opposition [to the regime] to the best of his ability he is . . . exonerated according to the spirit of the Law of Liberation from National Socialism and Militarism." Moreover, the dean added, "lest anyone be of the opinion that [von Verschuier's] opposition was not open and lasting enough, he adequately atoned for it through his multi-year prohibition from working in his field."⁵²

With many positive local *Persilscheine* already secured, in November 1948 the Medical Faculty had asked more than thirty foreign experts in biology, most of them in genetics and several in the narrower specialty of medical genetics, for letters of recommendation for von Verschuier. Exactly how these documents reached the Stuttgart authors who were formulating the *Denkschrift* is not certain, although much speaks for the role of Rajewsky. When Wezler sent his 9 September letter to the Hessen Ministry of Culture, indicating that von Verschuier was the Medical Faculty's top candidate, it went first to Rajewsky's presidential office.⁵³

It seems probable that when Rajewsky received Wezler's recommendation in July, he asked the dean for copies of these references from foreign scholars. Whether Rajewsky at any point indicated to Hahn or to the other authors of the Stuttgart group that he received a letter from Wezler to the Hessen Ministry of Culture is unknown. It is probably not accidental, however, that the university president was the person who offered to form the "commission" to write the *Denkschrift*.⁵⁴

The Letters

The story surrounding these letters is complicated not only with regard to their role in the MPS plan to find a solution to the *Fall von Verschuier*. Because of the purpose for which they were written, their interpretation is also historically contentious.

Given Wezler's support of von Verschuier, it is not surprising that the list of researchers whose opinions were sought appeared to be skewed in the geneticist's favor. Several of those who wrote had been contacted earlier by the former director for a personal *Persilschein*, apparently on the advice of von Verschuier's former colleague at the KWIA, Fritz Lenz (1887–1976), who wanted to see von Verschuier maintain his position in the KWS.⁵⁵ Whether the dean asked von Verschuier for the names of some referees who were likely to be favorable or whether the tainted medical geneticist offered recommendations

⁵² Wezler to the Hessen Ministry of Culture, 9 Sept. 1949, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Sachse, "'Persilscheinkultur,'" p. 229.

⁵⁵ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, p. 102. The referees contacted by von Verschuier for a *Persilschein* are R. A. Fisher, E. Adrian, T. Kemp, and P. Popenoe: MPG-Archiv, Abt III Rep 86 A, von Verschuier Nachlass, Nos. 293, 139, 420, 551.

for referees is unknown, although it is not unlikely. Whatever the exact circumstances behind the decision to request a letter from any particular individual, the list included people from at least fourteen countries: the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Switzerland, Argentina, Austria, Spain, Portugal, and Brazil. Politically, they covered the entire spectrum, from conservative geneticists like Tage Kemp (1896–1964) of Denmark to socialist colleagues such as H. J. Muller (1890–1967). An asterisk was placed beside Muller's name, indicating that he was a Nobel Prize winner.⁵⁶

According to the letter sent out by the dean of the Medical Faculty on 8 November 1948, the geneticists were asked to write an evaluation of von Verschuer that spoke to his scientific achievements as well as offering a judgment of his "human qualities and his political posture," if they were able to comment on these matters. The dean emphasized that his "faculty put a lot of weight on the judgment of foreign specialists" regarding these two issues in particular.⁵⁷

Only twenty-one of the researchers, from nine countries, answered the dean's request. Only three of the responses received were considered negative, according to the dean's notations (signs from – to +++ were used to indicate how favorable the letters were). Those whose letters were deemed negative were the world-renowned American geneticist Muller, from Indiana University; the medical geneticist Lionel Penrose (1898–1972), from the Galton Laboratory in London; and Gunnar Dahlberg (1893–1956), from the State Institute for Human Genetics and Race Biology in Uppsala, Sweden. Von Verschuer had earlier written to Dahlberg about giving a paper at a genetics conference in Stockholm but did not then request a *Persilschein*.⁵⁸

Of the three negative assessments, the shortest and bluntest came from Penrose. It was one short paragraph. Although he claimed to have no personal knowledge of von Verschuer, he was familiar with his work in human genetics. "I have always been under the impression," Penrose concluded, "that he was a strong supporter of the racial theories, which were current in Germany during the years 1933 onwards and which I have always considered to be unscientific."⁵⁹

Muller's letter was a bit more differentiated. He mentioned that he had long been familiar with the work of von Verschuer and had met him personally when he visited Berlin in 1932–1933. "I have had much respect for the scientific work of his which I came to know about," Muller added, "especially his work with identical twins." Although he never spoke to von Verschuer about political matters, he mentioned that "Dr. von Verschuer has generally been reputed to have been Nazi in his sympathies during the whole period of the Hitler regime and to have fitted in his work and his conduct without difficulty to the wishes of that regime." The Nobel Prize winner believed it highly unlikely for a human geneticist to have served the Nazis unless he had been in "substantial

⁵⁶ The list of individuals who were asked to write a letter of recommendation can be found next to the twenty-one letters received in SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986.

⁵⁷ Wezler to Colleague, 8 Nov. 1948, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986.

⁵⁸ Wezler to the Hessen State Ministry for Culture and Education, 9 Sept. 1949, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986 (on the responses received); and von Verschuer to Gunnar Dahlberg, 15 Apr. 1948, MPG-Archiv, Abt III Rep 86 A, von Verschuer Nachlass, No. 217.

⁵⁹ Lionel Penrose to Wezler, 19 Nov. 1948, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986.

agreement” with them. “For this reason,” Muller concluded, “I do not feel that I can conscientiously recommend him.”⁶⁰

Of the three negative letters, Dahlberg’s was by far the longest and most measured—not necessarily what one might expect from someone who openly attacked Nazi racism and racial policy in his book *Race, Reason, and Rubbish*. The Swedish geneticist believed that von Verschuer was a solid scientist with a good reputation. He had a more difficult time, however, assessing his character. Dahlberg argued that von Verschuer was known for serving the National Socialist regime “without reserve,” although “one should not forget that German racial biologists were in the limelight. If I am correctly informed, it was more difficult for German racial biologists to remain neutral than for scientists in most other fields.” Although Dahlberg claimed that he did not know von Verschuer well and that therefore his judgment about his character was uncertain, he found him to be “quite opportunistic and at the same time rather ambitious. He was, however, hardly an especially bad person.” Von Verschuer, Dahlberg continued, “was not equal to the difficult [ethical] situations with which he was confronted. For that reason, I am happy that I do not need to form any conclusions about him. I would naturally be forced to condemn him, but I would not do this with a light heart, as I have a certain understanding for his situation.”⁶¹

The other eighteen letters were viewed by the dean as moderately to extremely positive. All of them, like the two negative assessments by Muller and Dahlberg, stressed von Verschuer’s scientific achievements. Most of the authors of the moderately positive responses claimed that they could not speak to von Verschuer’s political views but, like the Dane Tage Kemp, praised him as a “fine and noble character and personality.” Others, who professed to know him better, like Bruno Oetterking of the Museum of the American Indian in New York, spoke of his “high ethical and social demeanor.” Even the psychiatric geneticist Erik Essen-Möller (1901–1992), who had not been in favor of translating von Verschuer’s textbook during the war, “as it appeared . . . too alien for the Swedish mentality,” praised him as “especially nice and kind.” The medical geneticist and ophthalmologist P. J. Waardenburg (1886–1979), a Dutch colleague who was a close friend of von Verschuer until he came to feel that his German counterpart was developing a “Nazi-friendly attitude,” became convinced during the last year that he was a “responsible, sincerely religious person.”⁶²

There are two letters that are worth discussing in greater detail, one owing to its atypical praise of von Verschuer, the other because it came from a German-Jewish émigré who worked near him in Berlin and knew him and his situation well. The first is from the brilliant and world-renowned British statistical geneticist R. A. Fisher (1890–1962). Politically conservative, Fisher was president of the British Genetical Society from 1940 to 1943. Von Verschuer had approached Fisher by mail a year earlier, requesting a testimonial—of the sort he asked for from many of his one-time foreign colleagues—attesting to his position as an upright scientist. Fisher agreed. According to Fisher’s testimony to the dean in 1948, he met von Verschuer at the 1939 International Congress

⁶⁰ H. J. Muller to Wezler, 17 Jan. 1949, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986.

⁶¹ Dahlberg to Wezler, 28 Nov. 1948, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986. For the book see Gunnar Dahlberg, *Race, Reason, and Rubbish: An Examination of the Biological Credentials of the Nazi Creed*, trans. Lancelot Hogben (London: Allen & Unwin, 1942).

⁶² Tage Kemp to Wezler, 2 Feb. 1949; Bruno Oetterking to Wezler, 18 Mar. 1949; Erik Essen-Möller to Wezler, 12 Dec. 1948; and P. J. Waardenburg to Wezler, 16 Nov. 1948: SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986.

of Genetics in Edinburgh but knew of his work many years earlier. “He had taken up the problem of distinguishing identical from fraternal twins, and was among the first to realize the importance of twin research in human genetics generally.” Fisher’s assessment of von Verschuer’s politics and political situation deserves to be quoted in full:

As he has been attacked for sympathy towards the Nazi movement, I may say that his reputation stood exceedingly high among human geneticists before we had heard of Adolph [*sic*] Hitler. It was, I think, his misfortune rather than his fault that racial theory was a part of the Nazi ideology, and that it was therefore of some propaganda importance to the Nazi movement to show that the Party supported work of unquestioned value such as that which von Verschuer was doing. In spite of their prejudices I have no doubt also that the Party sincerely wished to benefit the German racial stock, especially by the elimination of manifest defectives, such as those deficient mentally, and I do not doubt that von Verschuer gave, as I should have done, his support to such a movement. In other respects, however, I imagine his influence was consistently on the side of scientific sanity in the drafting and administration of laws intended to this end.⁶³

Before we attempt to analyze this admittedly surprising assessment, it is useful to look at the second letter. It was penned by Richard Goldschmidt (1878–1958), the iconoclastic German-Jewish geneticist who was forced to leave his position at the KWI for Biology in 1935. At the time he wrote the reference, he was teaching at Berkeley. There is no evidence that von Verschuer had appealed to Goldschmidt earlier.

Like Fisher, Goldschmidt assessed von Verschuer’s scientific credentials highly. The former Dahlem director was, in Goldschmidt’s estimation, “an exceptional scholar in his field and one of the most knowledgeable medical geneticists.” Regarding his character, the German-Jewish émigré found von Verschuer to be “a fine and sympathetic person.” He emphasized that they were collegial friends. Although Goldschmidt acknowledged that he did not really know what von Verschuer did after his own forced departure from Germany in 1935, the émigré noted that he had heard from other German colleagues that his former Berlin colleague got involved in Nazi “pseudoscientific” nonsense. “I know however,” the Berkeley geneticist added, “how difficult it must have been for a human geneticist to stand his ground without making concessions, so that the problem is whether he [von Verschuer] allowed himself to be dragged along or whether he went along. That is something German scholars must know and must be apparent in his work.” But there was a further problem in assessing this issue, Goldschmidt warned. If one finds in his work expressions such as the “ingenious acts of ‘our *Führer*,’ the outsider does not know if [von Verschuer] wrote it himself or if it was added.” Goldschmidt concluded that if the former Dahlem director was the same man he knew before he left Germany, “then I would believe what he himself has to say.”⁶⁴

What can we make of these letters of recommendation, especially the two discussed at length? That they made the Stuttgart scientists’ reassessment project much simpler than it would have been otherwise—indeed, several ideas expressed in some of the letters were incorporated into the *Denkschrift* in the authors’ own words—goes without saying. Was this a case of whitewashing within a more public whitewashing campaign?

⁶³ R. A. Fisher to Wezler, 19 Nov. 1948, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986. Information on Fisher’s role at the Genetical Society is taken from the American Philosophical Library Archives, Philadelphia, “Genetical Society of America,” Box 4, Genetics Society of America Papers: 575.06:G. On von Verschuer’s earlier request see Paul, “Genetics and the Swastika” (cit. n. 44), p. 26.

⁶⁴ Richard Goldschmidt to Wezler, 13 Dec. 1948, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986.

The answer to the question is yes—though some reflections are in order. The letters, we should recall, were written to help determine whether von Verschuer should be allowed to resume his academic career in Frankfurt. They were not designed to serve as potential intellectual resources for the memorandum, although that is one of the ways they were eventually used. There is no doubt that most of the positive letters did not look too deeply into von Verschuer's career under the swastika. To give these referees the benefit of the doubt, let us assume that the former Dahlem director's activities with Mengele had not captured their attention. Even so, every scientist willing to write a letter could at least have taken the time to read von Verschuer's Nazi publications, many of which were extremely compromising. Had the biologists done so, or had they even *claimed* to have done so, it would have been more difficult for those individuals who did not know the Dahlem director to write the letters they did without tarnishing their own reputations.

If we examine the almost unbelievably positive endorsement from Fisher, the more ambivalent testimonial of Goldschmidt, and the negative, if ambiguous, letter from Dahlberg, one common theme emerges: that it was extremely difficult for a human geneticist, especially someone holding a position like that of von Verschuer, to keep his ethical bearings during the Third Reich.⁶⁵ Interestingly, these three scientists not only held different opinions as to von Verschuer's suitability for academic employment in the postwar period; they themselves embraced varying political positions. In other words, it seems unlikely that these three very different geneticists would have made this common statement merely to whitewash von Verschuer. It is far more probable that, fearing a threat to the science of genetics from Lysenkoism, these distinguished scientists were willing to give von Verschuer the benefit of the doubt. Although there is no direct evidence that the letters of Fisher, Goldschmidt, and Dahlberg were shaped by a fear of Lysenkoism, several books and articles published at this time outlined the danger. One only has to think of Julian Huxley's *Heredity East and West*, Conway Zirkle's *Death of a Science in Russia*, and the entire issue of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* that was devoted to Lysenkoism—all published in 1949—to recognize that the international genetics community was watching developments in the Soviet Union with the greatest apprehension. Indeed, as Diane Paul has noted on a related point, "Lysenko's rise to power in the Soviet Union . . . prompted a defense of orthodox genetics in the West. Once this occurred, calling attention to geneticists' complicity with Nazism was considered by many Western scientists to be playing into the new enemy's hands."⁶⁶ As long as they did not dig too deeply into von Verschuer's activities during the Third Reich, biologists outside the "iron curtain" could write testimonials that aided his cause. Whatever his ethical transgressions in the Third Reich, von Verschuer was a valuable colleague in the necessary reestablishment of their common field in the young Federal Republic. Disciplinary solidarity was primary at this historical point in time.

⁶⁵ Fisher to Wezler, 19 Nov. 1948; Goldschmidt to Wezler, 13 Dec. 1948; and Dahlberg to Wezler, 28 Nov. 1948; SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986.

⁶⁶ Paul, "Genetics and the Swastika" (cit. n. 44), p. 28. The books outlining the dangers of Lysenkoism are Julian Huxley, *Heredity East and West* (New York: Schuman, 1949); and Conway Zirkle, ed., *Death of a Science in Russia* (Philadelphia: Univ. Pennsylvania Press, 1949). Regarding the worries of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* see <http://www.marxists.org/archive/hansen/1951/01/lysenko.htm>.

A BITTER ENDING AND A NEW BEGINNING

All the efforts of the Medical Faculty and the authors of the *Denkschrift* ultimately came to naught with regard to securing a chair for genetics for von Verschuer in Frankfurt. There were numerous reasons for this. Suffice it to say that his one pillar of support, the Medical Faculty and its dean, was no longer stable; between 1946 and 1949 three different individuals occupied this important post. Although they all supported von Verschuer's return, the last of the three, Rudolf Geissendörfer (1902–?), faced a conflict of interest that worked to the contested geneticist's disadvantage.

As it turns out, the University of Frankfurt pursued a clear policy of trying to woo back former faculty members who were discharged as "racial undesirables" during the early years of the Third Reich. One individual it succeeded in recruiting was the world-renowned Jewish dermatologist Oscar Gans (1888–1983). He had been a member of the Medical Faculty from 1930 until 1934, when he was forced to emigrate; he ultimately managed to get to India, where he worked in Bombay (Mumbai) on leprosy.⁶⁷

In 1949 Gans accepted a position as head of the Dermatological Clinic at the University of Frankfurt. Apparently he declared that "he would be forced to take the [appropriate] necessary steps" were von Verschuer to be given a professorship. Geissendörfer made it clear that the position of "this . . . valued colleague as well as the newly created situation" required him to withdraw the proposal to hire von Verschuer. It is easy to imagine the scandal the university would face if a newly reinstated world-famous Jewish colleague were to resign owing to the Medical Faculty's decision to employ someone as tainted as von Verschuer. Professional scientific interests had to give way to politics. Although President Rajewsky claimed to be caught in a conflict of loyalty when he described his difficult situation to Butenandt in April 1950, one must wonder whether he was sincere. As president, he must have known about Gans's appointment. Indeed, he did not send the materials regarding von Verschuer to Stein until after the dermatologist was reappointed. Moreover, he might well have known when he wrote his letter to Butenandt that Gans would become dean of the Medical Faculty in that same year. Finally, in 1950 the MPI director admitted to a member of the society's General Administration that he felt "more negative than positive" regarding von Verschuer.⁶⁸ Rajewsky, himself tainted, was obviously willing to use the *Denkschrift* to make a professional statement about who should judge a black sheep within his own ranks; that accomplished, however, it seems that he did not want von Verschuer anywhere near him.

Initially, the Frankfurt debacle appeared to be another, perhaps the fatal, "torpedo" for von Verschuer. The geneticist complained about his situation to his colleague Butenandt. "I might as well have talked to stones," von Verschuer lamented to the biochemist when he was called to testify before the University Commission. He felt betrayed by Muckermann, who allegedly sent him a reasonably friendly letter but delivered a damning written assessment to the commission. Totally dejected, von Verschuer even attempted to convince the MPS to organize an MPI for Human Genetics with him at the helm. Needless to say, that was not going to happen. His only opportunity to do research was through the Mainz Academy of Science and Literature, which accepted him as a member when it was

⁶⁷ Renate Heuer and Siegbert Wolf, eds., *Die Juden der Frankfurter Universität* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1997), pp. 110–113.

⁶⁸ Rudolf Geissendörfer to Boris Rajewsky, 19 June 1950, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986; and Sachse, "'Persilscheinkultur,'" p. 225.

founded in 1949. But there was a drawback, as he told Lenz: “I have to do without teaching and connections to the young.”⁶⁹

Soon, however, a new constellation of favorable circumstances would form to aid von Verschuer—this time permanently. During the war the University of Münster had been promised a professorship for genetics and racial science, but because of the chaotic conditions at the time the post was never filled. In the immediate postwar period, the British occupation authorities had enough to do in ridding the Medical Faculty of about a third of its professors. An appointment in a field like human genetics, so tainted during the recent past, could not be expected to receive high priority, especially since the candidates were themselves under a cloud of suspicion. Since the position was within the Philosophical Faculty rather than the Medical Faculty—something that was quite unusual at the time—a decision was made to turn it into a professorship for Slavic studies. However, a commission was soon formed to search for a qualified individual to fill a new chair in the Medical Faculty as well.

Realizing that the Münster position might be his last chance for a long time to get an academic chair, von Verschuer wanted to ensure that his past would not once again catch up with him. He gathered his troops around him—in other words, he used the old boys’ network to its fullest advantage. This meant, first and foremost, enlisting his retired, but still active, mentor Eugen Fischer as an intellectual resource. Although Fischer was extremely tainted owing to his particular bargain with the Nazi state—perhaps in some respects more so than his protégé—the fact that he had retired in 1942 protected the former KWIA director from any thoroughgoing investigation in the postwar period. As a part of the denazification process, he was placed in the category “fellow traveler” and fined 300 Reichmarks. Owing to his position during the Third Reich, however, there was hardly an academic in the biomedical sciences that Fischer did not know, and he was well acquainted with many faculty members in Münster. Naturally, he offered his loyal one-time student—a man he viewed as practically his own son—his help.

As it turns out, Fischer had already been contacted by the Münster Medical Faculty for his advice when he wrote von Verschuer in September 1950 to explain exactly how he could advance his own candidacy. Fischer informed von Verschuer that the Münster Commission believed that the Dahlem director was “unobtainable” for the provincial university. The commission assumed that von Verschuer would be accepting a chair in Frankfurt. But Fischer cleared up the misunderstanding. “I set [Helmut] Becher (an old friend of mine) straight and instructed him about you (scientifically, in terms of character, and as to your worldview).” Fischer also indicated to the head of the Münster Commission what the research direction of the new chair should be. He told Becher, an anatomist, that he should retain his “skull material”; the occupant of the new chair would not have need of it. Only a geneticist, Fischer emphasized to Becher, not an anthropologist, should be considered for this position.⁷⁰

Geissendörfer, while still dean of the Medical Faculty in Frankfurt, also helped the cause by informing his counterpart in Münster that, although von Verschuer could not be reappointed in Frankfurt (no reason was given), he was in every way deserving of a

⁶⁹ Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, pp. 143–144.

⁷⁰ Niels C. Lösche, *Rasse als Konstrukt: Leben und Werk Eugen Fischers* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1997), p. 458 (Fischer’s denazification); and Eugen Fischer to von Verschuer, 14 Sept. 1950, MPG-Archiv, Abt III Rep 86 A, von Verschuer Nachlass, Nos. 291–298.

position and had conducted himself “without reproach” during the Third Reich.⁷¹ In addition, the Dahlem director could count on Carl Gottlieb Bennholdt-Thomsen (1903–1971), a pediatrician involved with the child “euthanasia” project in Prague under the swastika, who was dean of the Pediatric Clinic at the University of Cologne by 1949. In 1950, Bennholdt-Thomsen assured von Verschuer that the former dean of the Medical Faculty in Münster, the hygienist and eugenicist Karl-Wilhelm Jötten (1886–1958), was eager to have him there.⁷²

Just as he hoped, this time von Verschuer encountered no trouble from his tainted past. In his advocacy for von Verschuer at the time of his appointment, the dean of the Münster Medical Faculty, Carl Moncorps (1896–1952), wrote to the North-Rhine Westphalia Ministry of Culture that the proposed candidate’s research was “above any criticism.” Moreover, Moncorps suggested that von Verschuer had in no way compromised himself as an academic teacher during the Third Reich. Although there were some questions in the ministry concerning the controversial geneticist, the dean could happily report to von Verschuer in December 1950 that Düsseldorf was willing “to do without his C.V. and list of publications.” It was a great Christmas present for the former Dahlem director. In February 1951 von Verschuer accepted the chair. During the negotiations he insisted that it be called the Chair for Human Genetics.⁷³

A NEW ERA, A NEW SYMBIOSIS

During his first few years in Münster, von Verschuer was preoccupied with getting his Institute for Human Genetics up and running. He had to start from very humble beginnings, since his eight-room “institute” was housed in a barrack. (See Figure 3.) Given his professional trials and tribulations since 1945, however, this researcher who formerly would not have given such conditions a moment’s consideration was ecstatic to have anything at all.⁷⁴ It would have been hard to imagine that within a decade von Verschuer’s institute would be the leading research center in the field within the young Federal Republic. By that time it was housed in a modern building that still exists today.

The first work undertaken by von Verschuer in Münster was certainly the resumption of his twin studies, research he had begun in 1924. He quickly received financial support for this work from the German Research Council—about 40,000 DM in his first three years as director. Indeed, one of the reasons that the university was so happy to have him

⁷¹ Geissendörfer to Dr. Rohrschneider, 6 June 1950, SIGEM Dekanatsarchiv, Vererbungswissenschaft, Bd. 1: 1933–1986.

⁷² See the correspondence between Bennholdt-Thomsen and von Verschuer during the years 1949–1952: Archiv der Stiftung für Sozialgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts, Bremen (SfS), in Sammlung Erbbiologie/Humangenetik, no. 11. Especially important is Carl Gottlieb Bennholdt-Thomsen to von Verschuer, 21 June 1950, which mentions Jötten’s interest in acquiring von Verschuer for his faculty. Regarding Thomsen’s involvement in child “euthanasia” in Prague see Michael Simunek, “Getarnt-Verwischt-Vergessen: Die Lebensgänge von Prof. Dr. Franz Xavier Luksch und von Prof. Dr. med. Carl Gottlieb Bennholdt-Thomsen im Kontext der auf dem Gebiet des Protektorates Böhmen und Mähren durchgeführten NS-Euthanasie,” presented at the Institut für Geschichte der Medizin der Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, 14–15 June 2002, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.huberlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=63&count=372&recno=15&sort=beitraeger&order=up®ion=26>; and von Verschuer to Karl-Wilhelm Jötten, 28 Feb. 1956, Archiv der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, III Rep 86A, 397, Nachlass von Verschuer.

⁷³ Carl Moncorps to Kultusministerium Nordrhein-Westfalen, 25 Oct. 1950, Universitätsarchiv Münster, Akten der Medizinischen Fakultät, Bd. 22; and Kröner, *Von der Rassenhygiene zur Humangenetik*, p. 148.

⁷⁴ Von Verschuer to Adolf Butenandt, 12 Mar. 1951, MPG-Archiv, Abt III Rep 86 A, von Verschuer Nachlass, No. 209; and Sachse, “‘Persilscheinkultur,’” pp. 239–240.



Figure 3. The first Institute for Human Genetics in postwar Germany: a barrack at the University of Münster. (Courtesy of the Archive of the Max Planck Society, Berlin.)

is that it knew he would bring almost the entire inventory of the former KWIA—and the largest library and offprint collection on human genetics in Germany—to Münster. The second important research field involved the genetic evaluation of the entire *Münsterland* region, with its 2.2 million inhabitants.⁷⁵

Support for this work was secured through what was then the Ministry for Atomic Research, founded in 1955 and directed by Franz-Josef Strauß, defense minister from 1956 to 1962. Following the United Nations–sponsored First International Conference on the subject in Geneva in 1955, the atomic powers—in particular the United States—agreed to disseminate formerly classified information to advance the peaceful uses of atomic energy. Germany now confronted the perils and promises of the atomic age. Strauss’s ministry was one of the main clearinghouses for issues dealing with atomic energy. For von Vershuer and many other human geneticists worldwide, the acute problem of the nefarious effects of radioactive fallout on the human gene pool would result in numerous studies being undertaken to assess this new danger.⁷⁶ Radiation genetics, as the field was called, played a large role in von Vershuer’s institute. He personally received money from the Ministry for Atomic Energy to establish the normal mutation rate for numerous genetic traits. Following that, he would assess the current mutation rates of some two hundred pathological traits among the *Münsterland* population: their exposure to various types of radiation was primarily the result of its increased use for therapeutic and diagnostic purposes, but the technological development of industrial society also played

⁷⁵ Cottebrune, *Der planbare Mensch* (cit. n. 6), pp. 283–284 (on resumption of and support for twin research); and Otmar von Vershuer, “Das neue Institut für Humangenetik der Universität Münster,” *Homo*, 1961, 12:2–8.

⁷⁶ Wolfgang D. Müller, *Geschichte der Kernenergie in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Anfänge und Weichenstellungen* (Stuttgart: Schäffer Verlag für Wissenschaft und Steuern, 1990), pp. 1–12.

a part. In 1956, von Verschuer could be proud to have attended the First International Conference for Human Genetics in Copenhagen, where the issue of radiation genetics played a central role. It was probably the first postwar international conference in a one-time Nazi-occupied country to which the former pariah was invited.⁷⁷

Later, in the 1960s, the institute undertook experimental chromosome research on animal models. “There are many genetic problems,” von Verschuer explained, “that cannot be analyzed on human beings.” In addition to his research, von Verschuer spent time as a genetic counselor—indeed, this was one of the tasks of the institute. Beyond that, he appears to have been active in lobbying for an increase in the number of human genetics institutes at universities in the early years of the Federal Republic. In a 1961 article in the journal *Homo*, von Verschuer happily noted that the German Scientific Council held the introduction of such institutes in the medical faculties of all German universities to be an absolute necessity.⁷⁸ (See Figure 4.)

Looking beyond the research interests of von Verschuer and his colleagues in Münster, what can we say about the director’s eugenic worldview at the time? How did he understand the link between human genetics and eugenics, both theoretically and practically, in the Adenauer era? His clearest explanation of his theoretical position can be gleaned from an article published in *Die Deutsche Zeitung* on 29 March 1958:

There is no doubt that genes are also important for the mental and spiritual development of man. . . . Human beings are a psychological whole, but not in the sense of a reduction of the psychological to the biological. There are biological factors at work in the psychological realm just as there are psychological factors at work in the biological. In the mental-spiritual realm there are purely mental-spiritual factors at work besides the biological, such that the world of the intellect spirit can never be explained by the physical.

Unlike the animal, man is not merely an object of heredity and environment, but a spiritual being, who, in his subjectivity, possesses the possibility to confront and mold himself. . . . Every good gene contains the possibility of misuse. Heredity is not only a fate with which we are confronted and to which we must yield; it is also a mission that we must fulfill.⁷⁹

Freud might have had an interesting time dealing with at least one sentence in this passage: “Every good gene contains the possibility of misuse.” What is certain, however, is that the one-time biological materialist had by now fully embraced a form of spiritualism that was closely related to his religious understanding of the freedom of conscience at the core of Lutheran doctrine.

It is clear that through both his critique of biological determinism, couched in the rhetoric of religion, and his emphasis on the avoidance of genetic toxins as one way to pursue eugenic goals, von Verschuer was laying the groundwork for a new symbiosis between human heredity and politics during the early years of the Federal Republic, the period when Adenauer dominated politics. It would be erroneous to believe that the Third Reich had a monopoly on such a symbiosis, although the nefarious—indeed deadly—nature of the relationship under the swastika might lead us to think so. There had certainly been a symbiosis between human genetics and politics during the Weimar years; and if

⁷⁷ Gerhard Koch, “Probleme und Forschungsergebnisse der Humangenetik,” Bericht über den 1. Internationalen Kongreß für Humangenetik von 1. bis 6. August 1956 in Kopenhagen, *Ärztliche Praxis* [offprint], 1956, 8:3–18.

⁷⁸ Von Verschuer, “Das neue Institut für Humangenetik der Universität Münster” (cit. n. 75), p. 6.

⁷⁹ Omar von Verschuer, “Anthropologie als Wissenschaft vom Menschen,” *Deutsche Zeitung*, 29 Mar. 1958, p. 23.



Figure 4. Verschuer at age sixty. (Courtesy of Helmut Freiherr von Verschuer, Nentershausen.)

biology was a weapon in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, there is no reason to doubt that it would continue to be so during Adenauer's chancellorship (1949–1963) and that of his Minister of Economics, Ludwig Erhard (1963–1966), the architect of West Germany's "economic miracle."

Perhaps the most obvious way in which von Verschuer's human genetics and eugenic programs were intricately intertwined with the politics of the Adenauer era was with respect to issues regarding the protection of motherhood and support of the nuclear family. Written into West Germany's Basic Law was Article 6, which maintained that "marriage and family will enjoy the special protection of the state." During the early years of the Federal Republic, this stipulation was interpreted in an especially conservative manner. Legally, women enjoyed the same rights as men, but their status was clearly defined in terms of their role as wives and mothers. "The powerful ideological themes of 'Christian values,' anticommunism, and the immutable and fundamental difference between women and men that made motherhood and housewifery women's natural obligations profoundly shaped the West German discussion of 'woman's place' in the fifties."⁸⁰ As it turned out, this view of motherhood and marriage was custom tailored to the professional needs of von Verschuer in the postwar period. (See Figure 5.)

Following the World Health Organization, Verschuer understood health not merely as the absence of disease. It also included the "social well-being of the individual." In Verschuer's estimation, the well-being of the family was a prerequisite for an individual's social well-being. This was not far from Adenauer's position in the early years of the Federal Republic. "The family," explained one representative of the chancellor's political party, the Christian Democrats, is the "fundament of the social organization of life. Its *Lebensraum* [living space] is holy." In *Eugenik: Kommende Generationen in der Sicht der Genetik* [*Eugenics: Future Generations from a Genetic Point of View*], published in 1966, the Münster director stressed the importance of marriage from a eugenic standpoint; he also emphasized that the purpose of this institution was procreation. Somewhat earlier, von Verschuer had commented on the perils of certain trends in his own society in this regard. Romantic marriages, he argued, were dangerous in that they could lead to an obsession with love and sex, without children. Partnerships or temporary bonds, von Verschuer asserted, "are but the last signs of degeneration" in sexual egoism. He saw another danger for the nuclear family in the alleged influence of large cities on sexuality. For von Verschuer, urban life led to an artificial awakening of sexual desire outside marriage. More perilous still was the attitude that sexuality was a "normal biological need that must be fulfilled." This, the director exclaimed, "is a totally irresponsible view!"⁸¹ It need scarcely be said that von Verschuer's opinions on this subject reflect the ubiquitous religiously based conservative and gender-biased views on family policy of the Adenauer era.

Naturally, von Verschuer understood his task as a genetic counselor as advising couples as to the dangers—or lack thereof—of founding a family. He suggested that partners use the time of their engagement to visit a counseling center and did not neglect to remind his readers that his own institute provided such services. His attitude as to whether a couple

⁸⁰ For the World Health Organization's definition of health see <http://www.who.int/suggestions/faq/en/index.html>; for some of the West German statutes concerning the family see <http://www.iuscomp.org/gla/statutes/GG.htm#6>; and Robert G. Moeller, *Protecting Motherhood: Women and the Family in Postwar Politics of West Germany* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1993), pp. 70, 78 (quotation).

⁸¹ Moeller, *Protecting Motherhood*, p. 65; and Otmar von Verschuer, *Eugenik: Kommende Generationen in der Sicht der Genetik* (Witten: Luther, 1966), pp. 41, 77.

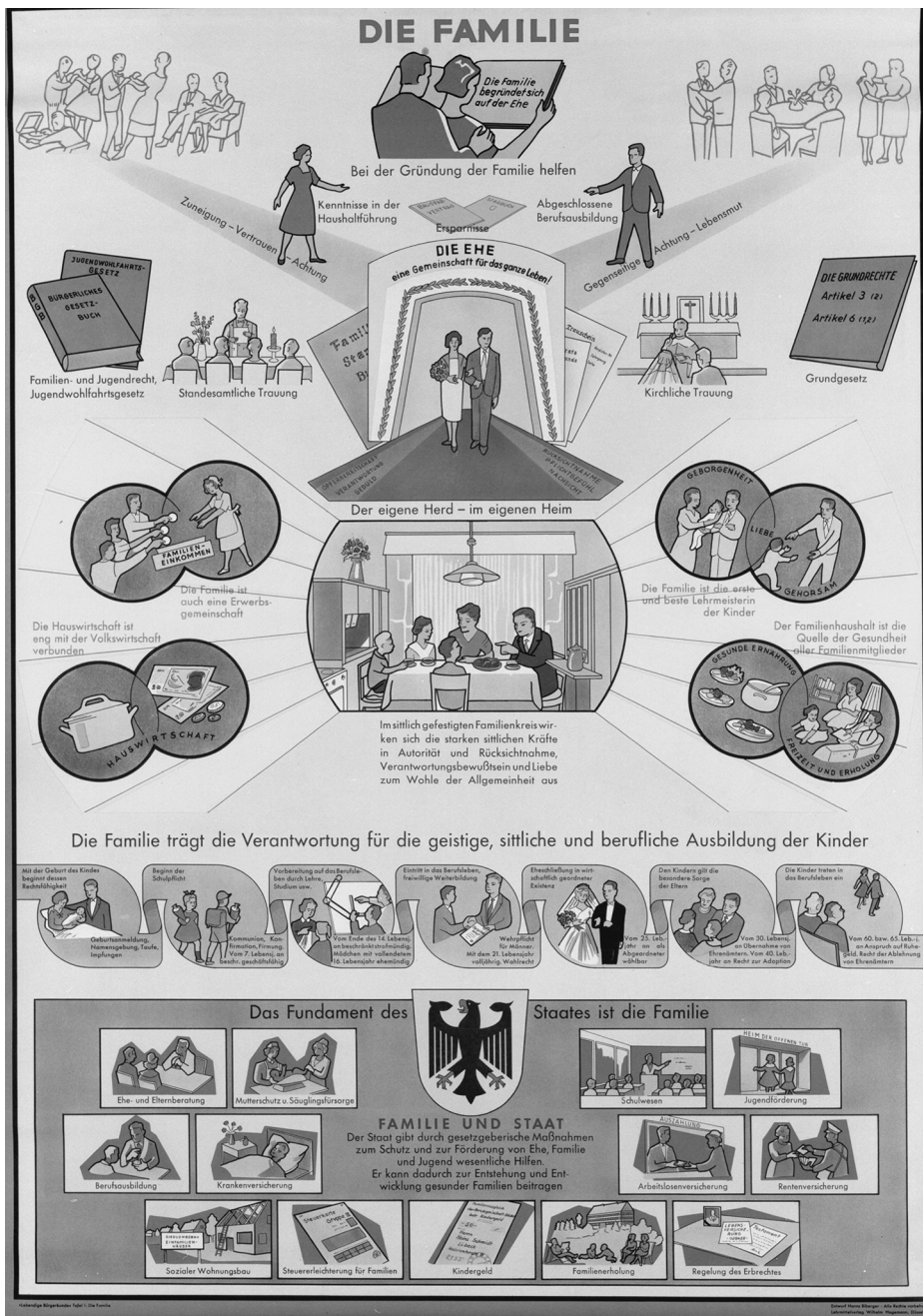


Figure 5. A poster created by the West German Ministry for Family and Youth Affairs in the 1950s, demonstrating the importance of the nuclear family. The text under the woman taking the man's arm: "Marriage: a community for life." The comment in the middle of the poster: "In the morally stable family circle—the strong ethical strength of authority and consideration, of responsibility and love—has a positive impact for the good of the whole." Next to the insignia of the Federal Republic, the eagle, the poster reminds its viewers: "The family is the foundation of the state." (Courtesy of the Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn.)

who already had a handicapped child should refrain from having more offspring became much more optimistic in the postwar period than it had been earlier.⁸²

Interestingly, the Münster director no longer feared the long-range dysgenic impact of racial mixtures. After becoming an adherent of the iconoclastic views of the French Jesuit philosopher and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), von Verschuer abandoned the notion that racial crossing leads to degeneration. Once he accepted Teilhard's view of convergent evolution (i.e., everything in the universe that comes together leads, by necessity, to greater complexity and a higher state of consciousness), von Verschuer could no longer condemn racial mixtures on genetic grounds. Indeed, he publicly announced his support of Teilhard's theories in a 1962 paper delivered at the Academy of Science and Literature in Mainz.⁸³ Like his Roman Catholic counterpart, von Verschuer also sought to integrate the natural sciences and religious experience—in his case, from a Protestant perspective.

As the main German Protestant Church, in addition to the West German state, was making its voice known on pro-family and eugenic issues during the 1950s and 1960s, it was natural for von Verschuer to involve himself with its efforts. In the early postwar years, apparently before von Verschuer became active in church politics pertaining to eugenics, the Protestant Church in West Germany discussed the issue of voluntary sterilization. Although there were various opinions on the issue, in general the church returned to what had been the position of the *Innere Mission*, the social welfare arm of the Protestant Church, in the early 1930s. In the waning years of the Weimar Republic it had supported voluntary sterilization, and von Verschuer attempted to provide a theological defense for that position.⁸⁴ In the postwar period, however, the representatives of the Protestant Church stressed the danger of overestimating the possibility of genetic damage as a means of preventing a liberalization of sterilization policy for other purposes. However, the church refused to see the mandatory sterilization procedures undertaken during the Third Reich as illegal; it also declined to support any monetary compensation for those forcibly sterilized—a position completely in line with that of the Ministry of Finance.

Von Verschuer did involve himself in what was called the “eugenic circle” of the Protestant Church. Founded in 1959 and active until 1968, this group was formed to prepare a Protestant response to possible laws related to eugenic issues that the government might draft. In particular, it was concerned with the themes of birth control and the liberalization of abortion for all but the so-called medical indication—in other words, when the life of the mother was in grave danger. The group was composed of theologians and physicians. Only von Verschuer had been involved with a similar commission in the late Weimar years. The geneticist Lothar Loeffler (1901–1983), a former “old fighter” within the Nazi Party and a man who declined to head von Verschuer's institute in Frankfurt during the Third Reich because it appeared to him to be too Jewish, was also part of the eugenic circle. He, like von Verschuer, worked at the KWIA under Fischer.

⁸² Von Verschuer, *Eugenik*, p. 42.

⁸³ Omar von Verschuer, “Gefährdung des Erbguts—ein genetisches Problem,” *Abhandlung der Mathematisch-Naturwissenschaftlichen Klasse der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz*, 1962, 3 (Sonderdruck). Von Verschuer presented his talk on 2 Mar. 1962. I am grateful to Helmut Freiherr von Verschuer for making this offprint available to me.

⁸⁴ Sabine Schleiermacher, *Sozialethik im Spannungsfeld von Sozial- und Rassenhygiene: Der Mediziner Hans Harsen im Centralausschuß für die Innere Mission* (Husum: Matthiesen, 1998); and Schmuhl, *Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics* (cit. n. 2), pp. 97–98.

Between 1957 and 1966 he served as an expert on questions surrounding radiation genetics.⁸⁵

One of the hotly debated issues was the so-called liberalization of abortion employing the “medical indication.” In this case, liberalization was discussed in the context of whether a woman who was raped should be forced to carry her fetus to term. Although we do not have von Verschuer’s specific position on this issue, we know that the eugenic circle accepted that abortion should be permitted in such a case only after “it was clearly established through a court” that a rape actually took place. The group, including von Verschuer, rejected any kind of “social indication” based on economic or psychological grounds.⁸⁶ On the other hand, the Münster medical geneticist endorsed voluntary sterilization on eugenic grounds, both within the circle and in his treatise *Eugenik*.⁸⁷ While this position initially had no impact on the government, by the beginning of the 1960s any physician who sterilized an individual on eugenic grounds no longer needed to fear punishment. Among the other issues debated in this Protestant circle was the question of whether the state should keep records of individuals suffering from genetic disorders. Some pointed to the misuse of such information during the Third Reich; others pointed to the possible benefits of such records.⁸⁸ Again, we do not know von Verschuer’s official position on this issue. Considering, however, that he kept a large genetic register in his institute on the individuals he examined as part of his *Münsterland* study, it seems likely that he would have been in favor of such action.

Von Verschuer became more involved with both the eugenic circle and other church-related activities after his retirement in 1965. It was precisely during this time that human geneticists, theologians, and ethicists worldwide—not just von Verschuer and his Protestant eugenic circle—were confronted with a new challenge: the impact of the 1962 Ciba Conference in London known as “Man and His Future.” Although the details of this important conference are intricate, suffice it to say that numerous world-renowned Anglo-Saxon geneticists, including H. J. Muller, Julian Huxley (1887–1975), J. B. S. Haldane (1892–1964), and Joshua Lederberg (1925–2008), met together with prominent sociologists and psychologists to discuss issues such as the possibility of genetically altering the human race and improvements in the biological sciences that would allow direct manipulation of the hereditary material. The reason for these utopian proposals was the proposition that, with humankind facing tremendous dangers from the new technological world, new technological solutions and ways of thinking were necessary if the human race was to avoid disaster.⁸⁹

Owing in no small part to the still fresh memory of the Third Reich, German geneticists, philosophers, and theologians were especially critical of these proposals, and a journalistic summary of their dangers was written and popularized by Richard Kaufmann in his 1964 book *Die Menschenmacher [Cloned]*. Von Verschuer was one of the most vocal critics of

⁸⁵ Uwe Kaminsky, “Zwischen Rassenhygiene und Biotechnologie: Die Fortsetzung der eugenischen Debatte in Diakonie und Kirche, 1945 bis 1969,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 2005, 116:204–241, esp. pp. 221, 224, 224–225; and Müller-Hill, *Murderous Science* (cit. n. 2), p. 87 (on Loeffler).

⁸⁶ Kaminsky, “Zwischen Rassenhygiene und Biotechnologie,” pp. 227, 230.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231, esp. n. 88. See also von Verschuer to W. Giessen, 2 Apr. 1964, SfS, Bestand von Verschuer, No. 015; and von Verschuer, *Eugenik* (cit. n. 81), p. 56.

⁸⁸ “Früherfassung und Frühbehandlung körperlicher und geistig-seelischer Schäden,” *Informationsdienst des Diakonischen Werkes: Sozialhygienische Rundschau Nr. V. 1967*, SfS, Bestand von Verschuer, No. 016.

⁸⁹ The German translation of the 1962 Ciba Conference Proceedings in London is found in Robert Jungk and Hans Josef Mundt, eds., *Das umstrittene Experiment: Der Mensch*, trans. Klaus Prost (Stuttgart: Deutscher Bücherbund, 1968).

these utopian plans. He voiced his views not merely within the context of the Protestant eugenic circle but also in his book and in articles and lectures. Indeed, the Münster director had already addressed the dangers of such proposals several years before the topic was formally discussed within the eugenic circle at its June 1967 meeting in Frankfurt under the heading: “How do you assess the possibility of directly altering the hereditary substance of man?”⁹⁰

Von Verschuer’s answer can be summed up in Adenauer’s 1957 campaign slogan, “No Experiments.”⁹¹ This time, the Münster director was going to be on the scientifically and morally correct side of the issue. If the Anglo-Saxon scientists had not learned from the Nazi past, he, von Verschuer, would show that he had. His response demonstrates his attempt to construct the new symbiosis between the science of human heredity and politics during the Adenauer era, as well as to articulate the high level of responsibility for life that he and other German human geneticists embraced.

Biologically speaking, the Münster director complained, human beings are far too complex for one to link individual genes to normal psychological or mental traits. Therefore, manipulation of the genetic substance could not guarantee an increase in mental capacity, even if that were desirable. Any attempt to compare advances in the realm of atomic physics with those possible in molecular biology is misleading, von Verschuer added. “Even when we know the genetic alphabet, the path to its application is as long as the alphabet to Goethe’s *Faust*.” Leaving aside the practical impossibility of such utopian plans, he continued, the ethical problems involved are so daunting that no responsible human geneticist could contemplate such action. First, any plan for artificial selection would presuppose knowledge of what a valuable and a valueless human being is. Moreover, any attempt to derive knowledge of whether an individual is a carrier of so-called valuable genes would look at only a portion of what makes up a human being and derive a general conclusion regarding his or her worth from that. Any experimentation with human beings is ethically off-limits, von Verschuer argued.⁹²

CONCLUSION

Like many other scientists and professionals who were “reintegrated” into West Germany, von Verschuer never publicly confessed to the significant role he played in advancing the Nazi cause. Von Verschuer’s egregious ethical transgressions make his silence particularly troubling. By the end of his life, the contentious human geneticist had deftly refashioned himself into a respected conservative academic. In so doing, he helped shape the symbiosis between human genetics and politics in the young Federal Republic. Human genetics would now serve the interests of those pursuing an atomic energy program and the pro-nuclear family policies of the Adenauer administration. Researchers in von Verschuer’s Münster Institute—as well as at other centers, such as Nachtsheim’s Max Planck Institute for Comparative Genetics and Hereditary Pathology—would receive financial support from the West German state, often from the German Research Council.

But in addition to reminding us that the interface of science and politics is always

⁹⁰ Richard Kaufmann, *Die Menschenmacher: Die Zukunft des Menschen in einer biologisch gesteuerten Welt* (Hamburg: Fischer, 1964); and J. Fischer to von Verschuer, 2 Jan. 1967, SfS, Bestand von Verschuer, No. 016.

⁹¹ Moeller, *Protecting Motherhood* (cit. n. 80), p. 211.

⁹² Niederschrift über die Sitzung des Eugenischen Arbeitskreises am 9/10.6.1967 in Frankfurt unter Vorsitz von Präsident Pf. Dr. Schober, SfS, Bestand von Verschuer, No. 014, pp. 4–6.

complex and interesting—even when it does not occur in the context of a totalitarian regime—the example of von Vershuer brings into focus one variety of micro power politics exerted by German scientific researchers in the postwar restoration of their disciplines. As the case of Heisenberg mentioned at the beginning of this essay reminds us, there was certainly more than one way in which tainted scientists sought to refashion themselves in the early years of the Federal Republic. However, in his decision to negotiate and reshape the public sphere—to become, as it were, the spokesperson for *science* through much of the history of West Germany—Heisenberg was undoubtedly exceptional. Most German genetic researchers, such as von Vershuer and Nachtsheim, were content merely to continue to work. Unlike Heisenberg, they did not covet the public spotlight.

Those historians who find John Krige's argument regarding the "coproduction of [American] hegemony" in postwar continental Europe convincing might wish to reflect on how the development of medical genetics in West Germany in general, and the case of von Vershuer in particular, serves as yet another example of scientists' role in the construction of a new type of empire—one "built on consensus, not coercion." Although the Stuttgart Memorandum whitewashing campaign that enabled von Vershuer to establish his postwar career was professionally self-centered and politically ambiguous, there can be little doubt that it functioned to produce a form of "consensual hegemony" that served both the power interests of the fledgling Federal Republic and those of its major protector.⁹³ Scholars will wish to explore other person- and discipline-specific strategies of accommodation employed by German scientists at a time when the very future of their enterprise in their homeland looked exceptionally bleak. Such work will inevitably add texture to our understanding of Cold War science.

⁹³ Krige, *American Hegemony and the Postwar Reconstruction of Science in Europe* (cit. n. 38), pp. 253, 260.