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# RACE AND SOIL

## Geography, ethnology, and Nazism

WOLFGANG KOPHAMEL

For decades, Franz Termer (1894–1968) was professor of ethnology at the University of Hamburg. His area of research was Central America. Between 1935 and 1962 he was also the director of the Museum of Ethnology in Hamburg. His academic career coincided with one of the most decisive periods in German history: National Socialism. He was a founding member of the famous journal *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* and admired Friedrich Ratzel and his «political geography». The concept of «blood and soil» as a historical determinant could be found in Termer's work ten years before the Nazis used it as their state's official ideology. After the fall of Nazism, he declared himself an «adversary» and «victim» of that policy. However, a careful reading of his texts reveals that he had supported National Socialism, colonialism, anti-Semitism, and racism for five decades.

Keywords: ethnography, Nazism, colonialism, Franz Termer, political geography.

I met Franz Termer in November 1966. At the time, he had already retired from his position as the director of the Museum of Ethnology and from his full professorship at the University of Hamburg. As a fourteen-year-old student excited to learn about the enigmas of ancient Central American cultures, I naively thought I could write a letter asking him to answer a number of questions. He responded with an invitation to his home. After an unforgettable afternoon with a person who, at the time, I considered a true researcher, he gave me a small book as a present: it was his bibliography, published by one of his university colleagues (Haberland, 1964).

Over two decades later, I read it again. This time I noticed a couple of things: Termer had published both before and after the Nazi era. The core of his work (almost 40 %) was published between 1933 and 1945, which surely implies that he had had the blessing of his supervisors and, ultimately, of the National Socialist regime. Secondly, I noted the absence of biographical notes about him. Surprisingly, this was still true on his 65th birthday, when a miscellany was published to commemorate him (Bierhenke,

Haberland, Johansen, & Zimmerman, 1959) and still so when he retired in 1963, prompting the publication of a «cold» list of his works in the form of a booklet (Haberland, 1964). None of these tributes included a single biographical detail, so no one had connected his figure to Nazism. Furthermore, until 2017, the

Museum of Ethnology of Hamburg described him on their webpage as an «unambiguous adversary» or «opponent» to the Nazi dictatorship. A study by Hans Fischer, Termer's student and his successor as the university chair, reached a similar conclusion (Fischer, 1990; see also Krause, Huber, & Fisher, 1991). Until the 1990s, the only published biography dedicated

to him was an obituary written by the Guatemalan geographer, Francis Gall (1969).

**«Almost 40 % of his work was published between 1933 and 1945, which surely implies that he had had the blessing of the National Socialist regime»**

### ■ THE IMPORTANCE OF FRANZ TERMER AND HIS WORK

Franz Termer was born in Berlin in 1894. He studied at the universities of Berlin and Würzburg between 1913 and 1921, barring an interruption for military service between 1915 and 1917, during World War I.

He presented his dissertation in 1920 and did his postgraduate degree (*Habilitation*) in 1923 with Karl Sapper, whom he had assisted from 1922 to 1925. In 1923 he was one of the founders of *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* [the “Journal of Geopolitics”], famous for being an inspiration to Nazi foreign policy. Indeed, his director, Karl Haushofer, had been in contact with Hitler since 1923.

Termer made his first trip to Central America between 1925 and 1929. When he returned, he obtained the extraordinary chair of Geography in Würzburg, and in 1932 he progressed to the chair of Geography, which Karl Sapper had occupied until then. Most decisive was his change to take up the chair of Ethnology in Hamburg (1935), where he remained until 1962. This chair was related to the position of director of the Museum of Ethnology. Between 1938 and 1939 he made another trip to Guatemala and, after World War II, he travelled to Central America four more times. He retired in 1963 and died in 1968, having published around 350 works. As a geographer, ethnologist, and archaeologist, Franz Termer focused on the cultures of Guatemala and its neighbouring countries.

This continuity in his professional career raises questions about the relationship between science and politics. His permanence and even promotion to prestigious chairs during the twelve years of German dictatorship raise inevitable questions, as does the fact that he remained in his position without any setbacks, after 1945. Surprisingly, Franz Termer was a clear example of a German professor who maintained the same scientific ideas across four eras in German history: the Kaiserreich and World War I, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi dictatorship, and the Federal Republic of Germany.

His main mentor and professional support had been Karl Sapper (1866–1945), a geologist and coffee grower in Guatemala, who, in turn, advocated the ideas of Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), the architect of «anthropogeography», with whom Sapper had written his own dissertation. The underlying idea, which Termer strongly defended, was a combination of nationalism, colonialism, anti-Semitism, and racism. After 1945, Termer tried to present himself as a «victim of the dictatorship», claiming that he had never shared the Nazi’s racist ideas. However,

**«Termer posited that the main objective of a nation is to preserve “blood purity”»**

Franz Termer was a professor of ethnology at the University of Hamburg and the director of the city’s Museum of Ethnology between 1935 and 1962. His academic career developed largely during the Nazi regime and his work shows evidence that he agreed with the principles of National Socialism. The image shows Termer at home, in a photograph taken by the author on 11 November 1966.



Wolfgang Kopelman's personal collection

between 1933 and 1945 he had advocated the need for a «colonial ethnology», which had been the official line of the National Socialists. Moreover, between 1936 and 1949 he served as the chairman of the German Society of Ethnology (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde*).

Termer was also an example of how these intellectual stances promoted a doctrine as disastrous as Nazism, with profoundly negative consequences for German (and consequently European) politics. Franz Termer’s work shows the unwavering continuity of these intellectual «traditions» for half a century (1920–1970) in key decades in German history. From the beginning of the 1920s – with no dictatorial coercion – he participated in the production of ideas that ten years later would become official policy during Hitler’s dictatorship. After 1945, he maintained most of his principles, including nationalism based on racial terms. He never renounced his scientific assumptions but did try to avoid any discussion of the relationship between ethnology and Nazism.

## ■ GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION AND COLLECTIVE «DESTINY»

Ratzel's anthropogeography (Ratzel, 1897, 1901, and 1940) provided the common denominator for the ideology of both Termer and Sapper. It established a direct relationship between soil, race, climate, and history. According to this postulate, all historical changes are caused by natural factors. Race, soil, and climate act immediately, with no intermediate instances. A few years later, such «geodeterministic» thinking would be one of the pillars of Nazi ideology. Populations were considered the main agents, and based on their biology (their blood), they formed large hierarchical organisms called states. These states were considered true living organisms to the point that «state biology» was discussed (Uexküll, 1920). This deterministic conception reflected the predominance of ideology in the scientific

discourse, which led to biological explanations rather than sociological arguments being offered to explain social phenomena. From that perspective, all historical processes were defined by racial differences. In combination with their location and climate, each population would reach its ultimate destiny.

## ■ THE RACIAL NATION

Anthropogeography (*Anthropogeographie*) paved the way for active eugenics in racial policy, which imposed segregation based on ethnicity. According to this ideology, once populations were aware of the «potential of their blood» and had linked it to their «destiny», they had to try to prevail in history and violence in this process was considered inevitable and necessary. The fusion of biophysical factors (soil-race-climate) and collective racial awareness constituted what was known in German as «*das Völkische*» and the process of imposition entailed the creation of the «racial nation» (*Volkstumspolitik*). In this context, anthropogeography was freed from its academic enclosure and became a political programme which coincided with the ideas of Adolf Hitler. That is, with the expansion of his «superior race» in Central Europe: «*Blut und Boden / Lebensraum*» (“blood and soil” and “living space”).

**«“Political geography”  
promoted a deterministic  
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a concept of ethnology based on  
racial thinking»**

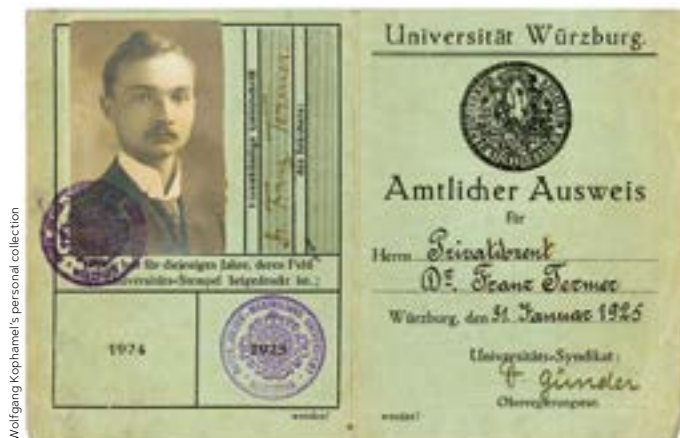
There were two obvious defects in this perspective: the open contempt for sociology and political science (due to the alleged superiority of natural sciences) and geographical determinism (because studies in this area did not analyse historical, social, economic, and political processes). Furthermore, supporters of anthropogeography, including Franz Termer ignored or despised all contemporary criticism of these matters (see, for example, Köhler, 1925; Lütgens, 1925; Sieger, 1923; Wittfogel, 1929/1970).

## ■ RACISM AND COLONIALISM

During his entire life, Termer based his research on nineteenth-century racial theories. Thus, he posited that the main objective of a nation is to preserve «blood purity». However, different «races» did not have the same value in these postulates, and so he believed that every population (understood as a racial nation) needed to avoid «mixing». Each instance of mixing would lead to the degeneration of the «superior race» and given that culture was seen as an inherited artefact, it would also consequently degenerate. The «mixing of races» was, for him, an attack against authentic culture with the intent (and result) of «decomposing» it. To avoid this, Termer advocated for racial segregation in Central

America, which he said would protect Mayan natives from miscegenation, which he stated was the most important factor in cultural degeneration. In addition, Termer, who was an expert in Central American colonial history (his dissertation discussed this topic) praised the so-called reductionist colonial system.

These «reductions» (Termer, 1941a) were created by Spanish colonisers in the sixteenth century as settlements for Native American populations, including the Maya. To better control them, natives were forced (through military coercion) to live in these settlements, which often involved forced displacements and concentrating the population in designated locations. The parallel idea of the Jewish ghettos was not far off. This is evidence of the paradox of trying to «save» a «colonial population» from harm caused by the colonisers using a colonial method such as «reductionism». In many of his publications, Termer emphasised the importance of colonisers and showed great admiration for them. In a 1942 publication, he described «reductions» as



Franz Termer completed his doctoral studies under Karl Sapper, whom he assisted between 1922 and 1925. Sapper was Termer's main mentor and professional supporter. Above these lines, Termer's student identity card from the University of Würzburg, dating from 1925.

«one of the most valuable gifts Europe had given to Central America» (Termer, 1942, p. 8).

To this day, none of his colleagues, collaborators, or successors have deemed it important to mention or discuss such a claim. In 1950, five years after the fall of Hitler's dictatorship, Termer continued to advocate racial segregation, insisting that this sixteenth-century idea was quite «modern» (Termer, 1950, p. 327). While his research was historical and focused on Central America, he must have observed the consequences of segregation during the National Socialist dictatorship from his Hamburg home, seeing how Jews were treated in Germany after the Nuremberg racial laws had been passed in 1935.

Add to all this that many geographers and ethnologists in Germany supported colonialism, but that one of the consequences of World War I was that Germany had had to relinquish all of its colonies. Thus, geographers and ethnologists had lost «their» object of study. Therefore they considered their colonies as «stolen» and demanded their return (Sapper, 1939, p. 52).

Moreover, many Germans had become landowners in Guatemala at the end of the nineteenth century, taking advantage of the policy to promote foreign companies for the export of coffee. The consequence was the expropriation of land from farmers, who were then forced to work for the new owners; they turned the land into coffee plantations which needed a lot of manpower. Indeed, the family of the aforementioned Karl Sapper, Termer's mentor, had been «fortunate» enough to have benefited from this policy.

Termer and Sapper – as well as other geographers and ethnologists – agreed in «scientific» terms. They



claimed in different studies that the native population was better at such work than white colonisers, and that further research was needed regarding the ability of «coloured people» to work under tropical conditions. With this change in perspective, they gave a new meaning to the nineteenth-century «social question». Termer wrote in the *Hamburger Tageblatt* that instead of exterminating indigenous populations, they had to be protected to provide abundant labour in the colonies (Termer, 1941b, p. 8).

Beginning in 1929, one of Termer's concerns in his publications was the «racial purity» of the Maya. However, although Termer used «racial» terms in all his argumentations, he did not explain the theoretical basis for them in any of his works. Mixing, he stated years later (without providing any evidence), can only lead to physical and moral degeneration:

In all Ibero-American territories where the natives live in close relationship with those of mixed race, it can be observed that the character degenerates [...]. The main downfall for the natives, according to their moral qualities, are Ladinos themselves, who will be responsible for the future disintegration of the native race, in physical and spiritual terms. (Termer, 1957, p. 254)

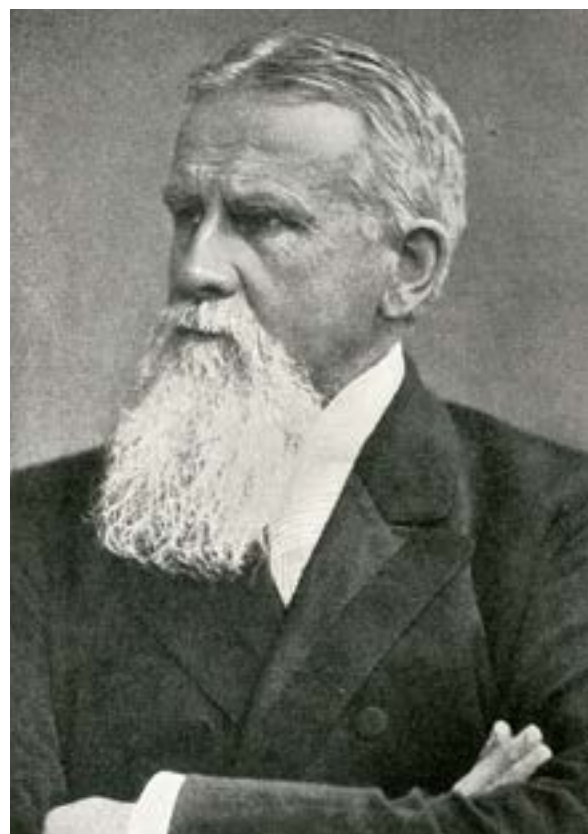


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The German geologist Karl Sapper (on the left), held the chair of Geography at the University of Würzburg until 1932, when he was succeeded by his student, Franz Termer. Sapper and his family benefited from the expropriation of lands belonging to Guatemalan farmers. In many cases, those natives were then forced to work for the new owners. Both Termer and Sapper agreed that the native population was better suited to working the fields than white colonisers. Above, Karl Sapper (standing in the centre) and Franz Termer (second from the right) at the Caballo Blanco plantation in Guatemala on 23 January 1928.

The title of a 1941 essay summarized his programme: «Factors for the conservation and decomposition of the Mayan race» (Termer, 1941c). All the terms related to *Volk* (“folk” / “nation”), such as *völkisch* or *Volkstum*, were rooted in the abovementioned idea of equating population to race. Therefore, culture also reflected this «racial» feature and, for him, the worst «threat» for race was interbreeding. Therefore, the basis of the State – as in the political theories of the modern age – was no longer a contract, economy, or tradition, but rather, a «race». Termer presented racial segregation as the only solution to preserve culture which was «modern native policy» and was also the reason he proposed applying this policy to overcome problems in Africa at the time.

Termer’s scientific ideas coincided completely with the demands of the Third Reich authorities and were in tune with the guidelines set up by Rudolf Karlowa (Karlowa, 1939), the head of colonial policy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Auswärtiges Amt*). What sets Termer apart from other authors is that he was already using these ideas a decade before the Nazis came to power.



Above, photograph of Friedrich Ratzel. For both Franz Termer and his mentor, Karl Sapper, his anthropogeography was the common denominator in their ideology. This theory established a direct relationship between land, race, climate, and history, by which all historical changes were caused by natural factors. Such geodeterministic thinking would later become one of the main pillars of Nazi ideology.

SOURCE: Ratzel (1940)

## ■ COLLABORATION WITH THE NATIONAL SOCIALIST DICTATORSHIP

A sign of his complicity with Nazism was his attitude towards Jewish people both before and after 1933. The consequences of anti-Semitism during Hitler’s dictatorship are well known (e.g., confiscation of possessions, exclusion of Jews both at the workplace and in society, Jewish exile, and condemnation to concentration and death camps, etc.). In a private letter (Termer, 1941d), Termer asked his mentor Karl Sapper whether or not he should write an obituary for Erwin Paul Dieseldorff (1868–1940), an acquaintance who had coffee plantations in Guatemala and was a private researcher of Mayan culture, but whom was of Jewish descent. However, Termer’s problem was not ethical in nature, rather, rather, he feared retaliation for having written it without official permission. However, he also knew that the family

had ancient Mayan vases, and so, in exchange for fulfilling the family's wishes, he wrote an obituary with the expectation of the donation of these ancient vases. It was all cold calculation. The letter included the sentence: «Although the Dieseldorff family was baptised in 1820, they still suffer from the defect of being Jewish». Of note, the term *defect* (*Makel* in German) was not written between quotation marks or in any way marked to indicate the writer's distance from the idea.

Another episode was related to Franz Boas (1858–1942), a famous German anthropologist who was also Jewish. Boas had emigrated to the USA in 1886 and promoted ethnology. Termer admired Boas to the point that, in 1931, he devoted an academic homage article to him. Eight years later, in 1939, in a letter of reply by Max Planck (president of the prestigious Prussian Academy of Sciences), Termer accused Franz Boas of being «one of the worst enemies of the Third Reich in North America, one who takes any and every occasion to direct his Jewish defamations against us» (Termer, 1939). This was because Boas had received a memo signed by Termer with the Nazi salute («*Heil Hitler!*») and had returned it to Termer, refusing to accept letters signed in such a way.

Indeed, Termer's trip to Central America between 1938 and 1939 bluntly proves his collaboration with the dictatorship. Once in Guatemala, the «Foreign Organisation» of Hitler's party (the NSDAP-AO<sup>1</sup>) provided Termer with accommodation, transportation, and contacts. He wrote a letter to his wife in the following terms:

It was very kind of the Foreign Organisation to pave the way for me. What I care about the most is the fact that in the office they treat me in a charming and accommodating way. (Termer, 1938)

In other words, he was a guest of the «party», i.e., of the German government. This would not have



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**«There is no doubt that,  
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been the case had there been the slightest doubt about his political attitudes.

## ■ NATIONALISM

Nationalism is a pervading matter in Termer's publications. According to the ethnologist, Germans working abroad were a special mirror of patriotic values under the motto «German work and spirit». German schools abroad were a positive manifestation of the country beyond its borders. They were also open to «nationals», although those students would never reach the same level of knowledge as Germans. In that sense, Termer warned Germans that they should not mingle with the population of those countries, so as to prevent degenerative effects. It is well known that

Germans competed with North Americans in Central America, where the USA were received with great admiration because of their achievements. However, Termer did not hesitate to republish in 1958 a 1936 essay about North American and German research using the same nationalistic terminology.

## ■ CONCLUSIONS

Although Termer is relatively unknown today, he still played an important role in the past because of his office and duties. He had access to a lot of information (especially on international matters) which was unavailable to others, and he participated in many administrative decisions, such as staff recruitment. Even his chair was a privilege at a time when others were losing their academic positions because of Hitler's policies. Moreover, he was also allowed to travel and publish, which would not have been possible without state compliance.

He, and his work, displayed a deep interest in colonial history and a strong personal and institutional connection with his mentor, Karl Sapper. Termer was noted for his positive view of colonialism, rooted in Ratzel's anthropogeography. He defended «racial» ideas that were the basis for colonialist «geopolitics». His conformity with Ratzel's

<sup>1</sup> Initials of Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei – Auslandsorganisation (“Foreign Organisation of the National Socialist German Workers Party”, commonly known as the Nazi party).

Wolfgang Kophamel's personal collection



Franz Termer was noted for his positive view of colonialism, rooted in Ratzel's anthropogeography. His «racial» ideas were the basis for colonialist «geopolitics». In the pictures on these pages, workers in the German-owned Guatemalan coffee plantations in 1925.

assumptions (the Organic Theory of the State) led to an anti-liberal political stance that provided a solid basis for his cooperation with the Nazis. «Political geography» did not only promote a deterministic concept of the State («geodeterminism»), but also a concept of ethnology based on racial thinking. One of his main objectives was to promote an active and colonialist racial policy, based on the ideas of segregation and blood purity.

Radicalisation of German geographers' and ethnologists' discourses was one of the consequences of World War I, the results of which had been devastating for Germany. The loss of the country's colonies, stipulated in the Treaty of Versailles, was one of the factors that had caused them to become so incredibly unrepentant and this gave wings to an increasingly totalitarian and exclusionary form of nationalism. Furthermore, these radical tendencies preceded the Nazi «blood and soil» policy without being imposed by the dictatorship itself.

The «organic» understanding of the State led to geographical determinism, which ignored the results of sociology and of *Staatswissenschaften* («political science»). Termer's thinking, attitudes, and publications presented a Ratzelian synthesis of political geography and racial ethnology that was in collusion with the guidelines of the Nazi authorities, highlighting the regime's difficult and sometimes disastrous relationship between science and politics.

The international scientist Richard Hartshorne (1899–1992) recognised that German «political geography» had made significant advances compared to the rest of social sciences and expressed respect for these achievements. But there is no doubt that, with its support for colonialism, racism, and nationalism,

political geography (or «geopolitics») was a precursor to Nazism. Until the emergence of Nazism, different critical and alternative approaches were debated in all the aforementioned academic fields (geography, ethnology, sociology, and political science). However, Termer's work shows evidence of theoretical restraint. The problem was not a lack of academic diversity and plurality, but the decision to ignore that plurality. ☹

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