

Forgotten archive shines new light on turbulent 1930s

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Previously unseen photos of Adolf Hitler at the Nuremberg Rally of 1937 have been uncovered by a Cambridge PhD student in the archive of George Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers.

Formerly a respected [anthropologist](#), Pitt-Rivers (1890-1966) was interned by Winston Churchill's government during World War Two for his support of fascism and National Socialism. He was also a prominent voice among the proponents of eugenics in the 1930s.

Now, thousands of letters, photos and documents, including Pitt-Rivers' official invite to the Nuremberg Rally, [have been brought to light](#) by Churchill College PhD student Bradley Hart.

Hart, from California, contacted the Pitt-Rivers family as part of his thesis on the eugenics movement of the 1930s.

After meeting with Pitt-Rivers' son Anthony, and learning that the [archive](#) was languishing in the family loft, Hart arranged for the historic material to be deposited at Churchill College's Churchill Archive Centre – where it has undergone extensive cataloguing and restoration.

In total there are more than 50 boxes of archive material, including ten boxes of photos and slides.

“These documents provide highly significant new insights into the dynamics of pro-appeasement and far-right groups throughout the

interwar years,” said Hart. “The significance of the archive is difficult to overestimate. Within the archive is a letter to Hitler, as well as correspondence to and from academics, eugenicists and far-right figures across Europe.

“Pitt-Rivers’ far-right views eventually took him into a strange détente with Hitler’s government, but even after the Second World War he rather implausibly maintained that his connections in Germany had been born out of scientific research, not his political views.”

Born in 1890, Pitt-Rivers inherited a large Dorset estate and became a well-known and respected anthropologist.

Paradoxically, before his strong association with the Nazi regime of the 1930s, Pitt-Rivers had been a captain of the English Army during World War I, and was severely injured in the early days of the conflict.

Following the end of the war, he turned his attentions to science, travelling to the South Pacific in the early 1920s and later producing a volume on the ‘Clash of Culture’ he witnessed there.

In addition, Pitt-Rivers was also deeply interested in eugenics and was a long-standing member and officer of the London-based Eugenics Society.

In the 1930s, he became increasingly interested in politics, standing as an independent candidate in the 1935 General Election. However, he finished second last and lost his deposit. His campaign for the North Dorset seat took him into the circles of the far right and he established contacts with Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, whom he persuaded not to run against him.

As the 1930s wore on, Pitt-Rivers developed a growing affinity for

German National Socialism, travelling to the country to lecture on British fascism and eugenics in German universities.

He met Adolf Hitler in 1937 and attended the Nuremberg Rally that year after an official invite from the Nazi government. In 1938, he wrote a personal letter of congratulations to Hitler on the anschluss with Austria.

However, his associations with the far right were to prove his undoing. In 1940, he was arrested and interned under Defence Regulation 18B as a possible threat to national security. He spent time in Brixton Prison and the Ascot internment centre before being released, more than a year later, due to his World War One injuries. He spent the rest of the war under close government surveillance.

Added Hart: “Through this archive, George Pitt-Rivers comes across as a very proud man; he believed he had the idea of fascism before Mussolini. The interest in National Socialism as a political ideology is clear to see from his correspondence; he thought he predicted the rise of it and didn’t think that Britain could win the Second World War. He was very pro-appeasement.

“What is fascinating is that eugenics drives a lot of his views. He’s very interested in sexual reform and contraception and the personal empowerment of women, but he also believed in compulsory sterilization for some.

“We must understand, though, that the 1930s was a time of great debate; indeed a sterilisation bill (for ‘mental defectives’) was rejected by the UK Parliament by 167 votes to 89 in 1931 after being put forward by a Westminster MP.

“Some of the most fascinating elements of the archive are those relating to his internment under regulation 18B. Pitt-Rivers was outraged and

launched several appeals against the decision to inter him.”

Defence Regulation 18B was the most famous of the Defence Regulations used by the British Government during World War Two. Suspending the right of habeas corpus, it allowed for the internment of people suspected of being Nazi sympathisers.

Famously, two of the first names on the 18B list presented to Churchill were members of his extended family.

The event is recorded in the diaries of Jock Colville, Churchill’s Assistant Private Secretary at the time: ‘The Home Secretary sent a list of 150 ‘prominent people’ whom he had arrested. Of the first three on the list, two – Lady Mosley and George Pitt-Rivers – were cousins of the Churchills, a fact which piqued Winston and caused much merriment among his children.’

In fact, as recently declassified papers at the National Archive show, Pitt-Rivers was a target for MI5 surveillance from the late 1920s and early 30s onwards.

Added Hart: “Through my research Pitt-Rivers emerges as a perplexing, contradictory and disturbing figure. He never apologised for any of his views, he felt he was doing what science told him. By the end of World War Two his career was essentially over.

“The archive is fascinating; not only serving as a cautionary tale, but shedding light on Anglo-German relations and how 18B was challenged – which hasn’t been brought to light before.

“However, aside from the angry person who believed that Jews were the enemy within, there is also a fascinating collection of anthropological photos, mostly unpublished, from his South Pacific work in the 1920s

including images of Maori tribal customs, as well as his correspondence with major figures in the Eugenics Society.

“I am extremely grateful to the Pitt-Rivers family for making these important resources available to me – and for future generations to consider.”

Allen Packwood, Director of the Churchill Archives Centre, said: “The strength of this archive is that it brings to life the complex and interrelated social, cultural and political debates of the turbulent thirties. At the end of the decade, Mr Pitt-Rivers was to find himself on the wrong side of history. The collection records his intellectual journey into what Piers Brendon has described as the ‘Dark Valley’: a journey that he recorded in his own stunning photographs.”

Provided by University of Cambridge

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