

The coexistence of race and anti-racism in Geoffrey Morant's anti-Nazi anthropology

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As the Nazi party rose to power in 1930s Germany, anthropologists in both England and the United States struggled to respond to Hitler's theories of pure races, Aryan-Nordic ascendancy, and the threat of racial mixing. Though most anthropologists saw the ideology as "nonsense," there was little consensus in the field on the definition of race and many scholars did not voice their opposition, hoping to keep science and politics separate.

One British anthropologist who did speak up was Geoffrey Miles Morant. An expert in biometric anthropology (the study of human variation using [statistical methods](#)) Morant wrote a book and pamphlet debunking Nazi theories. In the article "[Biometry against Fascism: Geoffrey Morant, Race, and Anti-Racism in Twentieth-Century Physical Anthropology](#)," published in *Isis: A Journal of the History of Science Society*, historian of science Iris Clever argues that Morant's use of biometry to challenge and discredit Nazi [race](#) science promoted anti-racism while supporting and reinforcing the theory of race as a biological reality.

Clever uses previously unstudied archival materials to trace Morant's scholarship starting after World War I, when he began applying statistical methods to the study of human "racial" variation under the tutelage of mathematician Karl Pearson at University College London. Racial science and [physical anthropology](#) were in crisis at the time, void of standardized methods and lacking consensus on definitions of race. Pearson sought to use statistics to standardize racial study, a novel

practice, and in his laboratory Morant embarked on projects to establish the racial makeup of groups by measuring the dimensions and capacities of skulls and skeletons.

In the 1930s, Morant came to realize that the Nazis were using pseudoscientific racial theories to justify their subjugation of Jews and other groups. Intending to refute the Nazi theory equating physical differences with language differences across Europe, Morant published *The Races of Central Europe: A Footnote to History* in 1939. In the book, Morant explained his understanding of race devised from his biometric studies, stating physical qualities fell along a bell curve of variation and that variation within races was often greater than variation between them. Clever argues that in Morant's view, there were no such things as "pure races," and yet his belief that large variation was a hallmark of racial populations supported the existence of race as a concept.

This coexistence of anti-racism and racial science in Morant's work continued after the war. In 1945, the U.N. Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) commissioned a series of reports on the scientific understanding of race. The first, led by anthropologist and close friend of Morant Ashley Montagu, argued that no mental differences existed between groups and that race was a myth. More reports followed this controversial take, and Morant wrote a pamphlet for the series in 1951. In contrast to Montagu's argument, Morant asserted that though data did not exist to prove it, mental differences were possible between races and that biometric anthropology was equipped to investigate these claims. "To Morant, race was fundamentally a statistical problem," Clever writes.

The report was Morant's last publication on anthropology; he ultimately left academia for a career in aviation medicine. His work, largely unexplored by historians thus far, "offers a lens through which to unpack these dimensions of race, anti-racism, and data in the twentieth century."

More information: Iris Clever, Biometry against Fascism: Geoffrey Morant, Race, and Anti-Racism in Twentieth-Century Physical Anthropology, *Isis* (2023). [DOI: 10.1086/723686](https://doi.org/10.1086/723686)

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