

THE YEAR my father was imprisoned, in 1933, Hitler appointed his favourite racial scientist, Dr Eugen Fischer, as rector of the Friedrich Wilhelm University (now Humboldt University). Fischer was already the director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics (KWI-A) in Berlin, and he was one of the signatories of the "Loyalty Oath of German Professors to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist State".

By the late 1930s, with Hitler's unequivocal support, Fischer became one of the most influential scientists in the Nazis' implementation of eugenics programmes, which included the forced sterilisation and euthanising of mentally and physically disabled people. The discrimination against and murder of the Reich's Jews, which included my family, was underpinned by the science of anthropology and by eugenics in particular.

The sciences of anthropology and eugenics colluded with biologically inflected state programmes that claimed to improve the health and welfare of national populations but, in the process, sent those deemed unworthy of belonging to a race or population to their deaths.

In the words of political philosopher Giorgio Agamben: "For the first time in history, the possibilities of the social sciences are made known, and at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorise a holocaust." This is the tragic story of the complicity of Western Enlightenment thinking in the genocidal violence of the last century. A significant strand of this story, somewhat surprisingly, begins, not in the heart of metropolitan Europe, but in a remote section of the colonial periphery of southern Africa.

During my 2012 visit to Williston in search of Eugen Robinski's legacy to the town, I stumbled on the footprint of the other Eugen. Like so many of my discoveries on this journey into the past, this encounter had an uncanny quality to it.

It was on this visit that I learnt about how the mixed-race Basters, despite living under the protection of the Rhenish missionaries at Amandelboom, were dispossessed of their land in the 1860s by trekboer pastoralists and white commercial wool farmers. Losing access to their grazing lands, many had to move northwards, eventually settling in Rehoboth in South West Africa, in 1870.

In 1884, South West Africa became a colony of the German Empire, and the Rehoboth Basters were treated thereafter as an intermediary class of colonial subjects, sandwiched between the indigenous population and white German-speaking colonisers.

In 1904, following an escalation of conflict between the indigenous population and German colonial authorities, the Herero rebellion erupted and was brutally suppressed, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 24 000 to 100 000 Herero between 1904 and 1907 and 10 000 Nama.

In a letter written in 1904, the German General Lothar von Trotha outlined his strategy for dealing with this rebellion: "I believe that the (Herero) nation as such should be annihilated, or, if this is not possible by tactical measures, (they) have to be expelled from the country... This will be possible if the water-holes from Grootfontein to Gobabis are occupied. The constant movement of our troops will enable us to find the small groups of the nation who have moved backwards and destroy them gradually."

General von Trotha eventually defeated the Herero at the Battle of Waterberg in August of that year, driving them into the Omaheke Desert, where most of them died of thirst and hunger. The survivors of this massacre, the majority of whom were women and children, were herded to detention centres such as the notorious Shark Island concentration camp off Lüderitz, where they worked as slave labourers for the German military and settlers.

Prisoners were categorised into groups designating their suitability for work, and they were issued death certificates even before they died, indicating their "death by exhaustion following privation".

Many interned Herero died of disease, overwork or malnutrition, with estimates of the mortality rate varying between 45 and 74 percent. It took over a century, until July 2015, for the German government to acknowledge that General von Trotha's



ABSENCES THAT HAUNTED: The photograph of the three women that stood on a table in the Robins family's dining room in Port Elizabeth. They were the author's grandmother and two aunts who died in the Holocaust.

Nazi eugenics incubated in African laboratories

Growing up in Port Elizabeth, **Steven Robins** was haunted by a photograph in the dining room. Later he learnt the women were his father's mother and sisters, photographed in Berlin in 1937, before they were killed in the Holocaust. Robins's father, who had fled Nazi Germany, never spoke of his family. He became obsessed with finding out what happened to the women. He stumbled on facts in museums in Washington DC and Berlin, and later he found letters sent to his father and uncle from the family in Berlin. The women in the photograph could now tell their story

actions were "part of a race war" that culminated in the first genocide of the 20th century – a trial run for a genocide that would occur two decades later in Europe.

German colonial rule continued in South West Africa until 1915, when it was invaded by South African forces during the First World War. When the war ended in 1918, South Africa took over administration of the territory, a situation that continued until Namibia achieved independence in 1990.

By the time Fischer arrived in Rehoboth in 1908, the colony had already assimilated popular eugenics ideas that racially mixed peoples were politically unreliable, potentially dangerous, and subject to cultural

degeneration and biological decay.

Although the Rehoboth Basters continued to be loyal and useful allies to German officials, the possibility of a Baster rebellion remained a worry. In 1913, Fischer's ethnography, *The Bastards of Rehoboth and the Problem of Miscegenation in Man*, was published to widespread acclaim.

Its appendix provides practical recommendations for German colonial policy, including the use of Basters as low-level officials, foremen and native police to reinforce German colonial rule. Fischer also recommends that the ban on mixed marriages and racial miscegenation in the German colonies be upheld, which would

later influence Nazi laws to promote "the protection of German blood and honour" through the Nazi Marriage Act of 1935 and what became the Nuremberg Laws.

These laws forced my father to hide his relationships with his gentle girlfriends in Erfurt.

Fischer's study in Rehoboth was also deployed by National Socialists to support the idea that the recessive genes of racially mixed populations led to physiological, psychological and intellectual degeneration.

By the late 1930s, Fischer was one of Germany's most influential scientists, with his institute in Berlin laying the foundations for Nazi eugenics that would

find their ultimate expression in the Final Solution.

In a public address on 29 July 1933, Fischer offered his position on the Jewish question. Titled "The Concept of the Volkish State, Considered Biologically", the lecture laid out the following viewpoint:

"That there are physical and intellectual differences no one can objectively deny. I am not pronouncing a value judgement when I declare this. I even go so far as to say that a nation mixed and crossed equally of Aryan and Jewish components could theoretically create a very credible culture, but it would never be the same as one that grew on purely German national soil; it would not be a German culture, but



FINDING FAMILY: The writer, right, with his brother Michael outside his father's clothing shop in Port Elizabeth.

an entirely different, half-Oriental one. Fischer's position on Jews as a foreign body in the German Volk allowed him to promote his institute as Germany's foremost architect of racial-classification policies, including the notorious "genetic and race science certificates of descent". Fischer was also appointed a judge for Berlin's Appellate Genetic Health Court, thereby helping to implement the Sterilisation Law of 1933 to combat hereditary medical conditions.

Fischer's story provides sobering lessons for science and for my own discipline of anthropology.

He was an ambitious man who believed that scientific expertise ought to determine state policies, but he had struggled to influence policy during the Weimar Republic period, because of the accountability structures of liberal democracy.

To influence policy one had to lobby and pressure parliamentarians, which was a slow and laborious process. The Nazis' rise to power presented him with unprecedented opportunities to short-circuit all of this. In no time he had a direct line to the most powerful state officials.

As director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin, Fischer and his colleagues offered to provide the Nazis with scientific expertise to guide their eugenics policies. In return, Fischer attained unprecedented access to state resources for research. Medical scientists and doctors became virtual gods during the Third Reich.

Their expertise was seen to hold the key to the modern eugenicist state so desired by the Nazis.

There are striking similarities in the ways officials and scientists such as Fischer classified European Jews and the Rehoboth Basters.

The Basters' unstable, in-between status led German colonial officials to vacillate between viewing them as loyal subjects and potentially dangerous troublemakers. Jews in Europe occupied a similar position and were often seen as constituting a political threat to the nation, either as communists, or rootless cosmopolitans and unpatriotic capitalists. Their dual loyalties meant that they could never be trusted.

Like the Basters, Jews had also tried to subvert doubts about their patriotism by fighting the wars of their political masters.

My grandfather David Robinski fought for the Germans in the First World War only to become disillusioned with the Kaiser and his military exploits.

The payback for his loyalty to Germany was the removal of his citizenship and his execution in the forests of Riga.

Through Fischer's work, a barbaric and lethal science incubated in the colonial laboratories of southern Africa had boomeranged back into the heartland of "civilised Europe".

This is an extract from *Letters of Stone* by Steven Robins, published by Penguin at a recommended retail price of R250. Robins is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Stellenbosch

Delhi's odd-even policy was a great idea, but did it work?

SANJAY KAPOOR

FOR 15 DAYS, India's capital, Delhi, reputed to be the world's most polluted city, was subjected to motor rationing under the odd-even policy.

Cars with odd numbers plied on odd dates and vice versa. These measures, which were brought in out of desperation to control spiralling pollution, didn't just divide the city between those who owned odd or even vehicles, but also on whether the rationing of cars really cleaned up India's dirty air.

This policy was premised on the assumption that cars pollute and more cars pollute more.

From that standpoint, it made sense to remove 40 percent of the cars from the road and expect to dramatically reduce pollution. To give meaning to this policy, the city government pulled out all the stops. TV, radio spots, newspaper adverts, schoolchildren carrying posters asking people to fight pollution, trending hash tags like #oddevenindia, all gave this the feel of a mass movement.

The mercurial chief minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, used the campaign to burnish his credentials as a practitioner of alternative politics, but his detractors were not impressed.

Even Kejriwal's supporters want proof



RATIONING: Delhi's odd-even policy defused congestion, but both detractors and supporters doubt it has had much impact on pollution.

PICTURE: PRASHANTH VISHWANATHAN / BLOOMBERG

of the efficacy of the odd-even policy in reducing toxic air.

Indubitable though is the fact that the city got radically decongested with motorists surprised at the speed at which they reached their destination.

Kejriwal was quick to declare the experiment a success and thanked the people of Delhi for their co-operation.

He promised to return with another

round of the same after tweaking it.

But Kejriwal's claims were challenged by a set of data that suggested there was not much improvement in the first week of rationing and even if there was any change, then it was quite insignificant.

Another research organisation, TERI, was more generous in its assessment, but still it was more excited by the decongestion and how people were spending less

time on the road commuting so people were breathing in fewer toxins.

Delhi's High Court had many pronouncements suggesting Delhi's air is unfit to breathe. Apparently, it's worse than Beijing.

There were other gains too. Car rationing encouraged car-pooling, use of public transport and community bonding.

If the impact of car rationing on air pollution was marginal, it has a lot to do with the fact that cars' contribution to pollution is low and there have been no winter rains in the city.

A day of rain would have done more to clear the air than 15 days of car rationing.

A recent study led by the University of Surrey found that this megacity that has a population of about 28.5 million people and "no way to flush out its polluted air."

"Delhi is a toxic pollutant punch bowl with myriad ingredients all of which need addressing," claims this study. It does not have the luxury of a coastal megacity that is able to replace its polluting air through breeze from the sea.

What aggravates its problems is that the neighbouring towns are perhaps equally polluted.

Delhi's fight against pollution has been long. When the Congress government was in power in Delhi, most of the public

transport was made to run on "green fuel" or compressed natural gas. Later, all the polluting industrial units were moved to the city's outskirts.

At that time there was near universal acknowledgement that Delhi's air had cleared. Then Delhi got its metro rail system.

All these steps led to the clearing of

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There was not much improvement in the first week of rationing
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haze, but the presence of the invisible particulate matter had not gone down. Instead, it was worse.

At times, weather channels show it to be at murderous levels. The particulate matter is aggravated by large-scale construction in the city and when it mixes with vehicular pollution it becomes a serious health hazard.

Its regular inhalation causes cancer and can also lead to genetic re-ordering. In Delhi, as in many other cities of northern

India, coughs do not go away easily, like Kejriwal's.

After taking over as the city's manager, he was treated at a health spa in Bengaluru. His persistent cough was cured, but his doctors warned Delhi's pollution was behind it and it contributed to diabetes.

Kejriwal's messianic campaign has drawn derision from the party that rules the central government, BJP, who predicted at its genesis that it would not work. Was it out of envy that Kejriwal was getting all the publicity and their leader and PM Narendra Modi, who is so fond of flash bulbs, was being left out?

Perhaps, but their criticism began to mellow down when they realised people were supporting these measures.

Although his growing popularity has got him in the cross hairs of the BJP, Kejriwal is moving ahead to announce new schemes to enlarge bus fleets and build pavements in order to take cars off the road.

Kejriwal is also unfazed by the fact that this odd and even policy has limitations as similar experience in Mexico City, Beijing and Tehran has shown.

Citizens just find a way to circumvent this constraint and get back on to the road in borrowed cars as, alas, this writer has done.