LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TO THE EDITOR:

Nick Hopwood’s defense of Robert Richards’s position (Isis, 2009, 100:863–867) that Ernst Haeckel was neither an anti-Semite nor an avatar of Nazism would need much more clarification as to what source material he is referring to. I know of nothing in the Haeckel literature that could possibly lead one to come to such revisionist conclusions, as I have pointed out in a number of articles that have been posted on the Internet and in eSkeptic Magazine (Ferris.edu/ISAR/Gasman Controversy; eSkeptic, 10 June 2009). I have challenged Richards to substantiate his assertions in this regard many times—all to no avail—and I would be most interested to hear from Hopwood at greater length as to what has led him to conclude that Richards’s assertions in these matters are correct; this is especially true since Hopwood’s apparent reliance upon the writings of Uwe Hoßfeld at the Haeckel Archives refers to research that is highly problematic and that falls far short of making the case that Haeckel and Nazism are not related.

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TO THE EDITOR:

My review (Isis, 2009, 100:863–867) concentrated on matters that have attracted less attention, but I did write that Robert Richards “persuasively rebuts the widespread views that Haeckel was a rabid anti-Semite and proto-Nazi.” That is a brief summary of complex issues, on which Daniel Gasman presented the case for the prosecution in 1971 and Richards offers a more convincing, if also sometimes one-sided, defense.

Gasman’s strongest evidence for Haeckel’s anti-Semitism is an 1893 interview with the Austrian journalist Hermann Bahr. Haeckel lauded the contribution of educated Jews to German culture, but also justified anti-Semitism. He argued that nationalist feeling demanded assimilation, and he supported restrictions on the immigration of Russian Jews. Not unusually among German mandarins, he combined occasional anti-Semitic outbursts with tolerance toward Jews—and anti-Semites. Though Haeckel told Bahr that anti-Semitism was “a question of race,” the interview does not touch on the evolutionary theories of hierarchy and struggle that fed the new, racial anti-Semitism. Richards acknowledges that Haeckel’s mature anthropology placed the “Semitic” below the “Indo-Germans,” and—in a response to Gasman (http://home.uchicago.edu/~rjr6/Bibliography1.htm)—makes what I take to be the crucial point: Haeckel wrote hundreds of pages against Christianity, especially Catholicism, but just a few pages deal with Judaism and comment (more negatively than Richards accepts) on the Jews. Haeckel could be described as rabidly anti-Christian, even rabidly anti-religious; antisemitism was not a driving concern.

Haeckel was a liberal nationalist for most of his life, and a pacifist on the eve of World War I, but between 1914 and his death in 1919, aged eighty-five, he moved to the right. Richards explains that he publicly justified military atrocities and might have mentioned that he supported the Fatherland Party, which prepared the ground for radical right-wing agitation during the Weimar Republic. Yet the main battles of Haeckel’s most active years were so associated with liberalism that Nazi followers often had to excuse his politics as well as his association with socialists and Jews. He promoted biologization in general and racial hygiene in particular, but his Darwinism and monism were exploited in politically various ways. While they underpinned some Nazi doctrine and practice, there was no fundamental, and certainly no exclusive, affinity; before 1933, they were probably most popular among liberals and on the left. Under National Socialism influential voices dismissed Haeckel and Saxony banned his books. But in this polycratic dictatorship that did not stop Darwinists at a major hub of racial hygiene from celebrating him as the founder of their biological worldview. My review suggested that Richards might have made this clearer. I cited Uwe Hoßfeld’s research because he has valuably taken the lead in unearthing new documents and venturing useful interpretations.

Haeckel was complicated and his legacy contested, so the evidence is contradictory. It needs to be weighed carefully and considered fully—more fully, obviously, than I can here in the allotted five hundred words. But we also need to move on—not away from politics, but toward richer analyses. Rather than repeating the mantra of Haeckel’s alleged Nazism or treating German evolutionism as largely a projection of his inner self, historians might more productively explore the practices and pressures that made his career and reputation. Recovering these will more convincingly integrate his biography into modern German history.

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