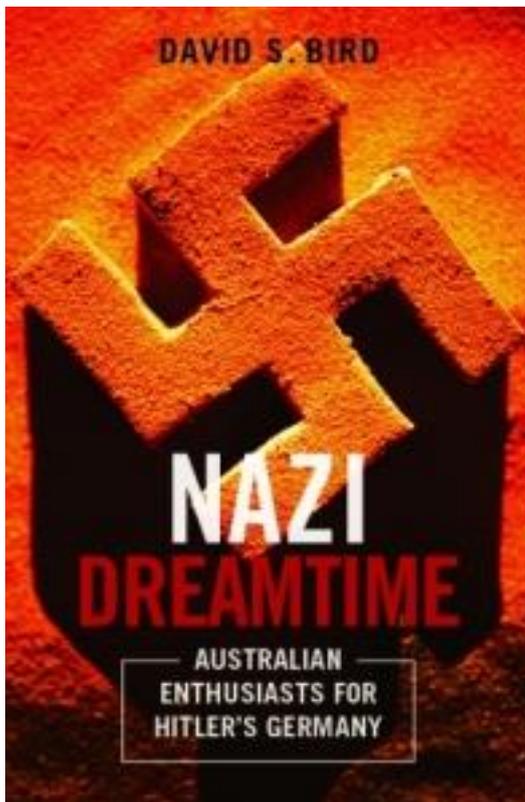


David S. Bird, *Nazi Dreamtime. Australian Enthusiasts for Hitler's Germany*. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2014. xviii + 448 pp. AUD 44. ISBN 978-1-921-87542-7. **Reviewed by Oliver Haag**, University of Edinburgh.



Engaging in the history of German National Socialism and Australian nationalism of the 1920s to the 1940s is a challenging task, requiring insights into Australian, German, as well as European history. David Bird has taken up this challenge in a meticulously researched study of the 'enthusiasm' for Nazism shown by right-wing groups of Anglo-Celtic Australians. First published in 2012 by Australian Scholarly Publishing, the book falls into two parts, the first dealing with the influence of Italian Fascism and Nazism on Australian nationalists before the seizure of Nazi power in 1933 until

the outbreak of World War II. The second part is devoted to the spread and continuous dissemination of Nazi ideas during the wartime, with an epilogue covering the juridical and social consequences for Australian Nazi enthusiasts after the defeat of the Third Reich.

Drawing on biographical analyses of influential Australian nationalists of the 1930s and 1940s, the author retraces carefully the political and social heterogeneity of Nazi enthusiasts. Some proponents of nationalist ideas were followers of National Socialism and ardent anti-Semites, while others tried to appropriate *völkisch* concepts of a 'blood and soil' theory, trying to reformulate a specifically Australian version of pan-Aryanism, *völkisch* unity and blood-based relations to

land. Particularly the nationalistic literary movement of the *Jindyworobak* and the journal *The Publicist* attracted authors who tried to construe a nativist Australian identity. This identity, the author shows, hearkened back to ideas of native cultural origin that exposed Australia as a place different from the United States and Britain, but based on Aboriginal cultures. Aboriginal Australians were not only praised for their cultural sovereignty but also hailed as the 'oldest' Aryan race and thus linked in phylogenetic commonality to Anglo-Celtic settler Australians. The critique of Aboriginal exploitation and idealisation of "tribal" traditions is explicated as a "paternalistic and *völkisch* belief" (71) that geared towards proclaiming a distinct version of Australian identity, autochthonous yet notionally connected to National Socialism.

Despite legal constraints, this enthusiasm, including the fervent anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism (with the U.S. having been equated with international Jewry), continued to infiltrate Australian nationalist circles until the end of WW II. The sheer number of followers, Bird's research substantiates, was small but intellectually influential. In a fascinating chapter on the experiences of Australian travellers to the Third Reich, the author retraces their often enthusiastic perception of *Hitlerite* Germany during the peacetime between 1933 and 1939.

For all the meticulous research, there are a few shortcomings. Being too descriptive, the author has lost the unique opportunity of revisiting the malleability of seemingly tenacious racial narratives that, in a transnational setting, could engender complex nationalist demands and patterns of diverging identities. The study could have unearthed more clearly how the transnational related to the national and eventually transformed in a nationalist environment, without losing its chauvinist grip. Nationalist ideas of race were more transnational (and less unique) than the study occasionally suggests, as with the author's pondering over the absurdity of Aboriginal Aryanism:

It is interesting to speculate what the Nazi racial philosopher and literary czar Alfred Rosenberg would have made of this theory and of

the politico-literary alliance whereby Australia's Nazi dreamers, both political and literary, espoused theories of Aryan superiority alongside those of respect for the indigenous people of the continent. This was perhaps the most significant 'flight from reality' of them all in an extraordinary year. (71)

True, the idea of common Aryanism was appropriated by Australian nationalists and thus evinced a particularly national direction, that is, to claim Australian sovereignty in Aryan 'blood brotherhood'. However, concepts of Aboriginal Aryanism were not an exceptional claim, but reflected part of (international) anthropological theories which also flourished in both academic and popular publications during the Third Reich. Austrian Nazi writer Colin Ross, for one, praised the First Australians as ancient Aryans and criticised the British destruction of Aboriginal cultures (1940:249-250). 'Australian Aryanness', in Ross' writing, is understood as an expression of primitivism that construed Aboriginal Australians not as 'cultureless savages' but, due to their fictitious primitiveness, as the ancestors of humanity. Indigenous Australians were read as a synonym for phylogenetic origin, still trapped in childlike state and therefore requiring paternal guidance.

Other German writings in nationalistic journals, such as the *Deutsche Kolonial-Zeitung*, reported – especially since the loss of the German colonies – on British atrocities against Aboriginal Australians, thereby idealising Aboriginal people as a once high-standing race (e.g., Kolbe 1919:65; Johann 1938:148-149). A more rigorous comparison with different racial theories could have added proper contextualisation to what was not necessarily a 'flight from reality'. In a similar fashion, the interplay between anti-Semitism and the backing of nativism could have been more elaborately theorised in its relationship between the disdain for (racial) migration and what might be called idealised Indigeneity.

There are also a few minor shortcomings. Although most of the German translations are immaculate, the term *Deutschesschwärmes* (27; apparently intended to describe the enthusiasm for Germany) is a serious mistake which should have been redressed in the process

of copy-editing. The use of *Herr Hitler* is also an awkward formulation. Furthermore, the labelling of Nazism as “insane racialism” (7) exposes racial hatred under Nazism as pathological (implying that all racists were insane). The connotation of abnormality, moreover, suggests the potential existence of a ‘sane’ racialism. A more careful copy-editing, particularly of the occasionally quite figurative language, could have benefitted the book.

Overall, however, *Nazi Dreamtime* produces new and valuable knowledge to the spread and appropriation of National Socialist discourses around the world and is certainly a most recommendable read for anyone interested in the history of National Socialism and its impact on foreign societies.

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