

journalists. But now both the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), Germany's main research funding agency, and the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft (MPG) are officially preoccupying themselves with the subject. Under external pressure, as well as from an internal sense of judiciousness, they have commissioned independent historians to reappraise their activities, or those of their predecessor organizations, during the years from 1933 to 1945, and in the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany. And there is much more to be brought to light.

The superb anthology *Autarkie und Ostexpansion* looks at the way in which German plant geneticists in several institutes belonging to the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft, the predecessor of the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, surrendered themselves to the National Socialist rulers. The 11 contributions in this edited volume describe a science that represented particularly fertile ground for National Socialist ideology and politics.

Agricultural self-sufficiency had been on the political agenda of plant scientists

long before Hitler came to power. Nazi agricultural policy, however, went one decisive step further: it linked autarchy with expansion. As the book appropriately puts it, this appeared to the plant geneticists to be "a welcome framework in which long-planned research programmes could finally be carried out".

The zealotry with which the scientists proceeded and the ultimate outcome are illustrated by the example of Wilhelm Rudorf. Several of the anthology's articles examine his double career before and after 1945. Somewhat mediocre as a scientist but loyal as a National Socialist, Rudorf was appointed director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Cultivation Research in Müncheberg near Berlin in 1935, at the explicit request of the Nazi rulers but in opposition to the experts.

The ambitious Rudorf showed his supporters his gratitude. In 1937, long before Hitler's invasion of Poland and the Soviet Union, he called on German plant cultivators "to develop or improve useful plants

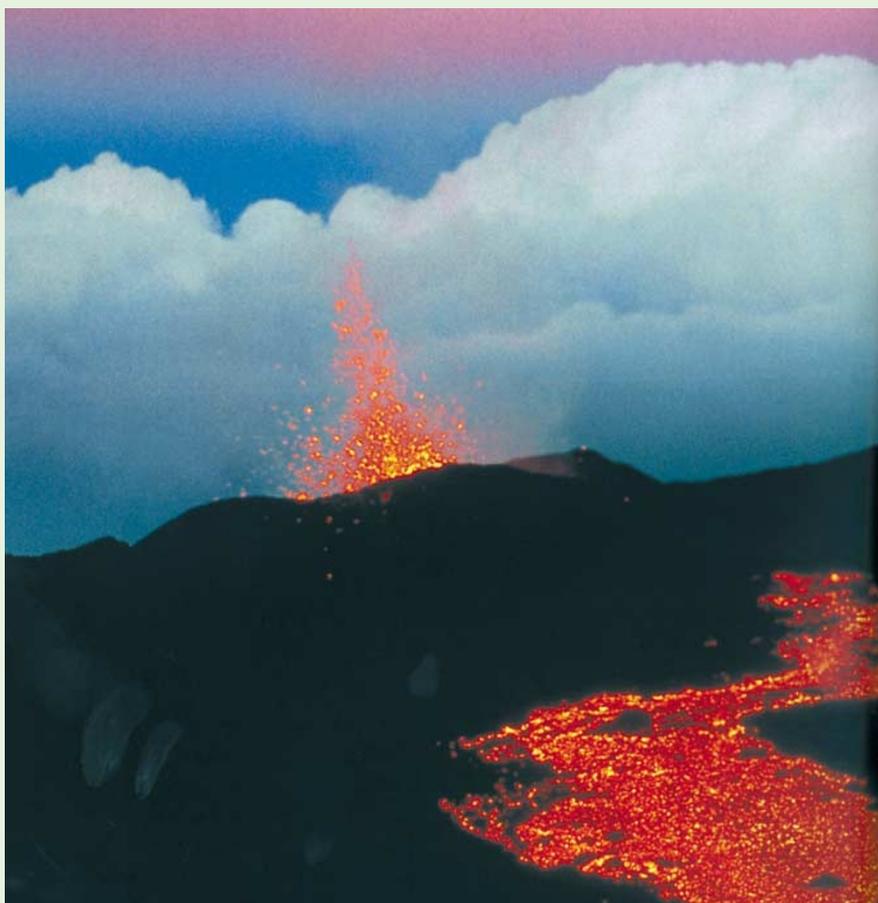
which will make it possible to populate more densely the entire northeastern and eastern territories and other border areas". And that was not all — from 1943, at the personal request of Heinrich Himmler, Rudorf helped to set up a centre for the cultivation of natural rubber in the grounds of the Auschwitz extermination camp — an impressive example of cooperation between the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft and Himmler's élite corps, the SS.

This cooperation with the Third Reich did not stop Rudorf from pursuing his career after 1945. He remained director until 1961, and until his death in 1969 was a member of the newly founded Max Planck Institute for Cultivation Research, initially in Hameln, later in Köln-Vogelsang, where the internationally renowned research institute still has its headquarters today. As director, Rudorf even prevented his colleague Max Ufer from resuming his work at the institute. Ufer had been dismissed from the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft in 1933 because he was married to a Jew. When Ufer asked to be reappointed in 1952, Rudorf agreed on condition that Ufer should not reside on the grounds of the institute because of his Jewish wife. Not surprisingly, Ufer turned down this supremely contemptible offer.

In many ways, *Autarkie und Ostexpansion* is both enlightening and shaming, and with its publication the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft has taken a positive step forward in reappraising its past. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said of Germany's biggest research organization, the DFG. Three years ago, it presented the results of an initial investigation into its own activities during the time of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. But the study, prepared by Frankfurt historian Notker Hammerstein, played down the DFG's involvement in the Nazi regime and met with criticism even from within the ranks of the DFG (see *Nature* **402**, 461; 1999).

A second attempt has now been made in the anthology *Wissenschaften und Wissenschaftspolitik*, produced at the initiative of the DFG. But this, too, is disappointing. The collection of almost 50 contributions covers a vast range of topics, including changes in the philosophy of modern physics before the First World War, 'big science' and research under National Socialism, and sociology in the Third Reich and in West Germany, to name just three. Most of the articles only scratch the surface, particularly regarding the role of the DFG in these areas. There is no doubt that the DFG, and above all its president, Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, is serious in its attempts to reappraise the organization's past. But one could have certainly wished for a more enlightening choice of authors and subjects. ■

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Mountains of fire

Few sights on Earth are more spectacular, or more deadly, than a volcanic eruption. This dramatic image shows an eruptive cone and its lava flow at the Piton de la Fournaise volcano on the island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean.

It is one of 170 photographs taken by the award-winning lensman Philippe Bourseiller that are spectacularly reproduced at a giant size in *Volcanoes* (Harry N. Abrams, \$49.95), which includes text by Jacques Durieux.