

## Applied Anthropology in a Colonial Context: The Life and Work of Hugo Adolf Bernatzik

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Hugo A. Bernatzik [1] was born in Vienna on March 26, 1897 in Vienna-Döbling, the fourth of five children in an academic upper-middle-class family. His father, Edmund Bernatzik (1854–1919), was a professor of constitutional and administrative law and in 1910/11 also rector at the University of Vienna. His mother, Josephine S. A. Tourelle (1867–1949), was a wealthy medical doctor's daughter from Wiesbaden. Raised as a Protestant, Bernatzik attended a Protestant elementary school in Vienna and the Haubinda State Educational Home in Saxony-Meiningen (Lietz School). He graduated from the Bundesrealgymnasium in Mödling in October 1916. After leaving school, he volunteered for the Austro-Hungarian Imperial army during the First World War. Wounded twice in the Isonzo battles, he received the Silver Medal for Bravery, was promoted to lieutenant in the reserves in 1917 and was deployed in Albania.



Fig. 1.

Portrait of Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, 1936 in South East Asia

Private collection Doris Byer

In the spring of 1918, Bernatzik began studying medicine at the University of Vienna, which he interrupted in 1920 for financial reasons after his father's unexpected death. After graduating from the University of World Trade in Vienna, he worked as an investment advisor and manager for his relatives. Among the more important companies he founded were subsidiaries of the Marx paint factory in Gaaden near Mödling. [2] Financially independent, Bernatzik began to study again in 1930, while switching to ethnology, physical anthropology and psychology. In June 1932, he received his doctorate from the University of Vienna with the thesis "Monographie der Kassanga" (Monograph on the Kassanga). [3] Due to methodological discrepancies with the Vienna ethnological theory of cultural circles, Bernatzik habilitated at Graz University in May 1936 with the thesis "Das Leben des Individuums und die Entwicklung des Kindes auf Owa Raha und Owa Riki" (The life of the individual and the development of the child at Owa Raha and Owa Riki). As a lecturer in ethnology at the University of Graz, Bernatzik then was appointed associate professor at that university by the Reich Ministry of Science, Education and Culture of the Nazi state in 1940. [4]

After the early death of his first wife Margarethe Ast (1904–1924), Bernatzik began travelling to remote areas of Europe as well as to Africa, Australia, the South Seas and Southeast Asia: Northwest Africa 1923; Egypt and Somalia 1925; Anglo-Egyptian Sudan 1927; Romania and Albania 1926–1930; Portuguese Guinea 1930–1931 (with Bernhard Struck (1888–1971)); British Solomon Islands and British New Guinea, as well as Bali 1932–1933; Swedish Lapland 1934; Burma, Thailand and "French Indochina" (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) 1936–1937 and French Morocco 1949–1950. [5]

Initially focusing on animal observation and hunting, Bernatzik's main interests shifted from ethnography from 1927 onward. He presented his research trips in a wide range of media: he published numerous vividly written books with excellent photographs, gave

illustrated lectures and wrote a large number of radio broadcasts. The special quality of his photographs, combined with a good reportage style about exotic peoples, formed the basis for his great publishing success. He was self-taught in photography. Bernatzik produced an expedition film of the same name to accompany his publication “Gari-Gari” (1930), [6] which was shown in cinemas in Vienna and Prague in 1928. [7] The book became a bestseller, went through numerous editions and sold almost 250,000 copies. [8]

## “Drawing Tests” in Ethnographic Field Research

Bernatzik married for the second time in June 1928. Emmy Bernatzik (1904–1977), née Winkler, became Bernatzik’s congenial partner on his further travels. She studied psychology and ethnology at the University of Vienna from 1927 and was instrumental in her husband’s publishing success. Besides bringing up three daughters (born in 1930, 1939 and 1942), she fulfilled the duties of a research assistant, secretary, editor and agent for her husband, but was unable to complete her own studies. Bernatzik’s attempts to draw conclusions about central elements of everyday life from children’s drawings are particularly noteworthy. He received expert advice from the child psychologist Charlotte Bühler (1893–1974), who was laying the foundations of modern child and adolescent psychology in Vienna at the time. [9] From an ethnological point of view, it was important to Bernatzik to select children who had not yet had any contact with European culture. He chose “cultural retreats” for his research, initially in Melanesia and later in South East Asia and Europe. [10] In his book *Owa Raha* (1936), he explained his innovative method during his stay in the village of Natagera on the south-eastern Solomon Island of Owa Raha in 1932:

“By a fortunate circumstance, I was able to do experiments with children of different ages who had never seen paper or pencil, had never come into contact with the mission and had remained untouched by any European influence. I gave each child a sheet of paper and a pencil, placed these children alone in a hut to prevent any influence from other quarters and left them completely free for an hour or so to draw whatever they liked best.” [11]

The results were surprising in that the quality of the drawings was comparatively high. In particular, the drawings by children aged three and over were characterized by an accurate and astonishingly realistic depiction of animals, canoes and everyday objects. [12] Comparative drawings that he made in the village of Mamarana, a Methodist mission village of the so-called Saltwater Melanesians on the island of Choiseul (Lauru), showed a completely different picture, as the Austrian Oceania expert Hermann Mückler also has noted. Only 25-year-old draughtsmen achieved a similar accuracy in the realization of the motifs. [13]

In 1936/37, the Bernatzik couple expanded their field of research to Southeast Asia and systematized their “drawing tests” with children and adults. [14] Between 1932 and 1937, this resulted in a collection of far over 500 drawings from various continents. [15] When the couple returned to Vienna in May 1937 after an 18-month expedition, the famous psychologist

Karl Bühler (1879–1963) – Charlotte Bühler’s husband – organized a comparative exhibition of children’s drawings with the Bernatzik collection at the Vienna Institute of Psychology in the summer of 1937. [16] The Bernatziks maintained a friendly working relationship with Karl and Charlotte Bühler, which was, however, interrupted by political developments. After the annexation of Austria by National Socialist Germany, the Böhlers were forced into exile. [17]



Fig. 2.

The Bernatzik couple carried out psychological tests (developed by Charlotte Bühler) on women and children of the Akha, a mountain tribe on the Burmese-Siamese border, around 1937.

Private collection Doris Byer

In 1936, Bernatzik suggested that cultural contacts, such as missionary work and school education, could have a negative influence on children’s drawing skills. His conclusions were cautious and he made them dependent on further, more detailed investigations, which he pre-announced as a plan of his own. [18] During the Second World War, however, Bernatzik radically changed his calm attitude. According to his own statements, in 1944 he placed his research findings on children’s drawings at the service of the large-scale project “War Effort of the Humanities” (“Kriegseinsatz der Geisteswissenschaften”) led by Paul Ritterbusch (1900–1945). [19] The article, which Bernatzik published in an edited volume in Stuttgart, [20] was reprinted without any change in 1953 in the Vienna museum journal “Archiv für Völkerkunde”. For Bernatzik, children’s talent for drawing depended mainly on which “race” they belonged to:

“In summary, we can conclude from our investigations: the level of development of a people’s talent for drawing and artistic talent generally goes hand in hand with the level of culture. In detail, it depends on a number of factors. Listed in order of importance, these are the link to race, gender and the individual as such, as well as the influence of upbringing and the environment. By far the greatest role is played by attachment to race.” [21]

Such statements illustrate a significant continuity in Bernatzik’s biography between “before” and “after” 1945. Apparently, Bernatzik was more fascinated by the diffuse “race” issue than by the Böhlers’ enlightened research on the psyche of children worldwide. Doris Byer (born

1942), Bernatzik's youngest daughter, who habilitated in historical anthropology and became the author of several books, has thus taken the initiative to reinterpret the rich Bernatzik collection for good reason, with the aim of making the drawings comprehensible as a universal language of humanity. [22]

## “Colonial Ethnology” and Positioning in the Nazi Era

In 1936, Bernatzik began editing “Die Große Völkerkunde” (General Ethnology), in which fourteen German-speaking specialist authors were involved and which was published in Leipzig at the end of 1939. [23] With this three-volume editorial work, Bernatzik pursued applied anthropology, which was to form the basis for “modern colonization” [24] as “colonial ethnology”. [25] Bernatzik saw himself as rather apolitical and his institutional involvement in the Nazi state is difficult to assess. From December 1935 to September 1938, Bernatzik belonged to the National Socialist Motor Corps (Nationalsozialistische Kraftfahrkorps, NSKK) with the rank of a squadron leader. According to the Berlin “central file” (“Zentralkartei”), Bernatzik had been a member of the NSDAP since May 1, 1938 (membership number 6.106.337). [26] The Vienna “Gau file” (“Gaukartei”), on the other hand, listed Bernatzik as a party member since December 25, 1935, [27] an enrolment date that Bernatzik also stated in an official questionnaire in November 1938. [28] Bernatzik was therefore considered an “old fighter” (“Alter Kämpfer”) in the Nazi state and was awarded the “Ostmark medal” (“Ostmarkmedaille”) in commemoration of March 13, 1938. [29] Despite these good Nazi political credentials and connections to some high party officials, Bernatzik did not receive any of the newly vacant positions in Vienna after 1938 (head of the Institute of Ethnology, the Museum of Ethnology or the Vienna Urania). The “ancestral heritage” (“Ahnenerbe”) of the SS also refused to finance Bernatzik's research projects. The interests of his competitors prevailed.

He was subjected to competitive hostility and discrimination from colleagues and his academic reputation was damaged. [30] Bernatzik was considered to have a merely popular scientific profile and could not shake off the stigma of journalism. In addition, a campaign was launched against him after the publication of his travel book “Die Geister der gelben Blätter” (The Spirits of the Yellow Leaves) in 1938. This “diatribe” (“Schmähschrift”), as Bernatzik called it, was written by the medical doctor Helmut Gerlach, former training director of the foreign organization (Auslandsorganisation) of the NSDAP in Bangkok. The pamphlet compromised Bernatzik's work by pointing out alleged errors and deliberate falsifications. The accusations culminated in the accusation that Bernatzik had never personally met the North Siamese ethnic group Phi Thong Luang under investigation. [31] His main professional opponents in Vienna were Viktor Christian (1885–1963) and Hermann Baumann (1902–1972). [32] Bernhard Struck, head of the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology at the University of Jena, also opposed Bernatzik's career in the Nazi state. [33]

Bernatzik's most important Nazi contact was the Colonial Political Office (Kolonialpolitische Amt, KPA) of the NSDAP in Berlin, [34] which commissioned a book project on Africa from

him in September 1940. The colonial-ethnological handbook on Africa, to which 32 specialist authors from Germany, France, Italy and Belgium contributed, was intended as a scientific guide for future colonial politicians, colonial officials and settlers. [35] The Research Institute for Cultural Morphology (today: The Frobenius Institute for Research in Cultural Anthropology) at the University of Frankfurt played a key role in this book project: Adolf E. Jensen (1899–1965), Ewald Volhard (1900–1945) and Otto Zerries (1914–1999) contributed a total of six articles, while Elisabeth Pauli (1906–1984) and Hilde Klein (1904–1989) compiled the index. Bernatzik’s most intensive contact was with Jensen, whose teaching license had been revoked in 1940 due to his “political unreliability” and his marriage to a “one-quarter Jewish woman” (“Vierteljüdin”). [36]

During the preparatory work, a fierce dispute arose between Bernatzik and Richard Thurnwald over the methods of colonization, which led to Thurnwald’s withdrawal from the book project. Bernatzik saw colonial anthropology as an instrument to contain the harmful process of civilization and to protect the colonial population from “uprooting” (“Entwurzelung”). At the height of the dispute in summer 1941, Bernatzik summed up the differences in a letter to Thurnwald:

“The basic problem of your attitude consists of the view that the process of civilization continues inexorably and cannot be influenced, so to speak, with all its excesses, while I am of the opposite opinion that the process of civilization can be artificially guided into regulated channels and the excesses of uprooting, which are so harmful to the indigenous people, can be avoided.” [37]

Thurnwald, on the other hand, advocated the position of cultural change, which could not be stopped even in a colonial context. However, they agreed on the issue of the Nazis’ racial ideology, as both rejected mixed marriages between natives and colonizers for hereditary-biological reasons. [38]

Among the contributors to the handbook was also a resistance fighter, Jean-Paul Lebeuf (1907–1994), who was imprisoned in 1941 for treason and released at Bernatzik’s request (and for lack of evidence) so that he could continue working on the project. [39] The French director of the National Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions, Georges Henri Rivière (1897–1985) and Bernatzik had covered for Lebeuf when he was identified by the Nazi occupation authorities as a “committed Gaullist” and thus as an opponent of the Vichy government. [40] Due to special personal contacts in the KPA Bernatzik and his colleagues were repeatedly classified as “indispensable” (“unabkömmlich”) for this work, which saved them from active military service. The ready-to-print manuscripts were destroyed in December 1943 during the bombing of Leipzig by the Allies, but Bernatzik secured the typeset and published the work unchanged in 1947 under the title “Afrika. Handbuch der angewandten Völkerkunde” (Africa. Handbook of applied ethnology) in the French occupation zone in Innsbruck. [41]

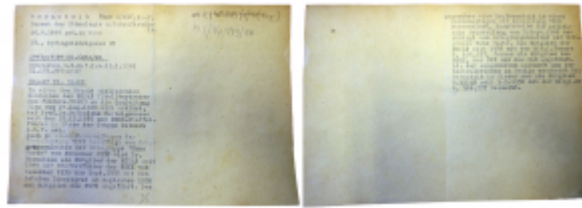


Fig. 3a and 3b.

Bernatzik's political memberships according to internal Nazi administration.

MPA Vienna, 2.7.1.4 Personnel files of the Gau Vienna:

Hugo Adolf Bernatzik

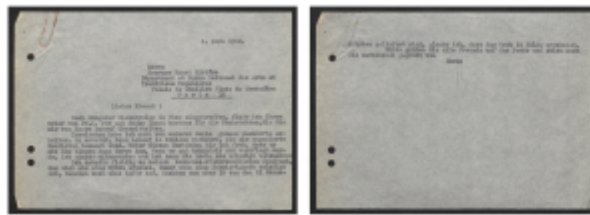


Fig. 4a and 4b.

Bernatzik covered for his colleague Lebeuf even though he knew that he was a Nazi opponent.

Vienna CHL 2.1.608. Bernatzik to Rivière, March 4,

1942

After the end of the war, Bernatzik was dismissed from his Graz professorship due to National Socialist activities. His NSDAP membership number, with a figure of six million, indicated to the Austrian authorities that he must have received it before 1938. The NSDAP had been banned in Austria since June 19, 1933. Bernatzik justified himself by claiming that he was not an “illegal” party member before the Nazi takeover, as his membership of the NSDAP had been pre-dated after that “Anschluss”. The proceedings on suspicion of high treason were discontinued in 1947 and Bernatzik was classified as “less incriminated” (“minderbelastet”). [42] Although he regained his teaching license (“*Venia legendi*”) in February 1950, [43] the political attacks continued until shortly before his early death in 1953.

In the first post-war years, Bernatzik worked on his manuscripts, which had been destroyed during the Second World War. In 1947, he published his most important ethnographic monograph, “*Akha and Meau*”, which was translated into English by the Human Relations Area Files and released in New Haven in 1970. [44] In March 1952, he was appointed associate professor at the University of Graz and worked on the publication of his last major work, “*Die Neue Große Völkerkunde*” (The New General Ethnology), which was published posthumously in Frankfurt am Main in 1954 by his wife, with the help of the Vienna ethnologist Walter Hirschberg (1904–1996), with numerous new authors and contributions. [45] In 1957, an alley was named after him in Vienna, [46] and in 1973 a commemorative exhibition was held at the Africa Museum in Bad Deutsch Altenburg to mark the twentieth anniversary of his death. [47] Bernatzik was a talented and extremely successful photographer and travel journalist. In academic anthropology, he only occupies

the place of a marginal but widely read figure in his time. [48] Whether Bernatzik's works from the period before 1938 can be regarded as early German-language contributions to the emerging "visual anthropology" would be worthy of a separate study.

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[2] Byer 1999: 22; Matczak 2021: 1013.

[3] Bernatzik 1932.

[4] Byer 1999: 124.

[5] Baur 2018: 83–86.

[6] Bernatzik 1930.

[7] Anonymous 1928: 37. Cf. Faber 2014: 133.

[8] Faber 2014: 136.

[9] Byer 2002: 59–62.

[10] The Austrian-German anthropologist Richard Thurnwald (1869–1954) had already worked with drawing tests during his ethnographic field research in Micronesia and Melanesia in the years 1906–1909 (Thurnwald 1913). Bernatzik may also have been inspired by Thurnwald’s “ethnopsychological studies” see Vollgraff, 2024.

[11] Bernatzik 1936: 151. Translation by the author. However, the book was rated very negatively overall see Wedgwood 1937: 123–124.

[12] Bernatzik 1936: 166–167.

[13] Mückler 2012: 309–310.

[14] Bernatzik 1947a: 151.

[15] Bernatzik 1953: 6.

[16] Byer 1999: 107.

[17] Ash 2015: 111, 127.

[18] Mückler 2012: 310.

[19] Hausmann 2007.

[20] Bernatzik 1944, quoted from Bernatzik 1947: 85, bibliography. This wartime publication was previously unknown in Bernatzik research.

[21] Bernatzik 1953: 35. Translation by the author.

[22] Byer and Reder 2011.

[23] Bernatzik 1939. The work received numerous positive reviews in daily newspapers: Anonymous 1939: 21; Gerlach 1940: 21; Starkloff 1940: 10; Anonymous 1941: 6.

[24] Bernatzik 1939: 13.

[25] Mosen 1991: 144.

[26] BArch, R 9361-IX KARTEI / 2620703, NSDAP-Gaukartei Hugo A. Bernatzik.

[27] MPA Vienna, 2.7.1.4 Personnel files of the Gau Vienna: Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, 12.01.1948. The Gaue (singular: Gau) were the main administrative divisions of Nazi Germany from 1934 to 1945.

[28] "Yes since Dec 1935" see Vienna CHL BP 3.1.2.11. Questionnaire of the University of Graz, Hugo A. Bernatzik, 10.11.1938. Due to this discrepancy, Doris Byer doubts Bernatzik's membership of the NSDAP before 1938. She suspects that a pre-dating was arranged in Vienna's NSDAP authorities via Bernatzik's school friend and brigade leader of the NSKK, Kurt von Barisani (1895–1970), for tactical reasons cf. Byer 1999: 251–255; Byer, e-mail to the author, 15.01.2024.

[29] Baur 2018: 85.

[30] Matczak 2021: 1006.

[31] Ibid.: 1026.

[32] Ibid.: 1016, 1026–1031.

[33] Geisenhainer 2021: 819.

[34] Bernatzik 1940a, b.

[35] Rohrbacher 2022; Scheele 2023.

[36] Geisenhainer 2021: 794, 818, 820.

[37] Vienna CHL BP 2.3.1.2.21. Bernatzik to Thurnwald, 29.08.1941. Cf. Rohrbacher 2022: 119–120.

[38] Rohrbacher 2022: 121.

[39] Scheele 2023: 143.

[40] Vienna CHL BP 2.1.608. Bernatzik to Rivière, 04.03.1942. Cf. Gohm-Lezuo 2021: 454, note 35.

[41] Bernatzik 1947b.

[42] Byer 1999: 358.

[43] ASA, AdR, BMU PA Sign 10/6 Bernatzik Hugo A., fol. 78.

[44] Bernatzik 1970. The German version was reviewed quite positively by Kauffmann 1952: 154–156.

[45] Bernatzik 1954. The new edition was translated into Italian *Popoli e razze* in 1958 and into Spanish *Razas y pueblos del mundo* in 1966. In the German-speaking world and especially in Vienna, however, it was reviewed rather negatively see Haekel 1955: 123–125.

[46] Nemeč 2013: 210–213.

[47] Afrika-Museum Schloss Ludwigstorff Bad Deutsch Altenburg, N.Ö. 1973.

[48] Matczak 2021: 1063.