

Dr. Benno Wolf (1871 – 1943) – a retrospective look at European caving and Nazi history

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Summary

The work, net-working and far-reaching efforts of the German Speleologist and Honorary Member of the British Speleological Association, Dr. Benno Wolf, who was exterminated by the Nazis and subsequently nearly forgotten, is described. Dr. Benno Wolf provides, in his work in speleology and nature conservation, a link between the pre-1933 and post-1945 German caving societies and many countries around the world. The German caving award named after Dr. Benno Wolf symbolizes this fact. This award has provided interesting insights into new research in the field of German nature conservation history, confounding prevailing theories.

Who was Dr. Benno Wolf?

Benno Wolf was probably born on September 26, 1871 in Dresden. He had Jewish ancestors but he and his parents were christened as Protestants. He studied law and in 1912, upon completion of his studies in Rheinland and Hessen, he came to Berlin-Charlottenburg, where he became a judge in the district court. His work in nature conservation meant that he was mainly involved with legal questions dealing with nature conservation law.

From 1898 he was intensively involved in cave research and soon became well known. Not only were his achievements in the technology of cave exploration noteworthy as being ahead of his time, for example in Slovenian vertical caves, but he was also recognised as an authority in scientific cave research through his many national and international contacts.

In Berlin Dr. Benno Wolf had attracted, as an interdisciplinary net-worker, a group of nature conservationists, geo- and bio-scientists as well as patrons and supporters, and inspired them with his enthusiasm for cave research. After the founding of the Hauptverband Deutscher Höhlenforscher [*Principal Association of German Speleologists*] had taken place in 1922 in the Steiermark (Austria), with Dr. Wolf elected as its Vice President, in 1923 the Gesellschaft für Höhlenforschung und Höhlenkunde in Berlin [*Society for Cave Research and Cave Knowledge in Berlin*] was founded upon his initiative. The membership list of the society is a venerable who's who of the speleological network which Wolf initiated, with such prominent names as Dr. Walther Arndt, Prof. Dr. Barsch, Dr. Kurd v. Bülow, Prof. Dr. Ludwig Diels, Prof. Dr. Paul Dienst, Prof. Fraatz, Prof. Dr. Götze, Prof. Dr. Otto Hamann, Dr. Max Hilzheimer, Prof. Dr. Krause, Prof. Dr. Paul Krusch, Prof. Dr. Georg Kyrle, Prof. Dr. Lehmann, Prof. Dr. Nöller, Dr. Werner Paeckelmann, Prof. Dr. Josef Pompecky (then 1st President of the society), Prof. Dr. Arthur Schlossmann, Prof. Dr. Walther Schoenichen, Dr. Walter Schriel, Dipl.-Ing. Friedrich Stolberg, Prof. Dr. Weissermel, Prof. Dr. Fritz Wieggers, Prof. Dr. Wunstorf, Prof. Dr. Ernst Zimmermann and institutions including the Zoologisches Institut und Museum der Universität Berlin and the Staatliche Stelle für Naturdenkmalpflege. Wolf had also won the support of sponsors and promoters, such as the factory owner Heinrich Kortkamp and the factory director Ludwig Posselt. Even the cave administration of the Heimkehle (Southern Harz Mts.) was a member - at that time the tragic destruction which would take place in this cave as a result of the Nazi arms production was unforeseeable.

Finally, the list included Dr. Benno Wolf, who was at that time the first secretary of the society (Wolf 1924).

Dr. Benno Wolf was also an instigator of the German cave registry and had begun calling for a uniform, systematic structuring of registry documents in 1923. In particular, Dr. Wolf possessed a valuable and extensive private library of cave literature which served him as the basis for his work on a world cave registry - a project hardly unthinkable today. This knowledge was to cost him his life as the transfer of the Nazi arms production into bomb-proof underground locations awakened the interest of the Nazi henchmen for his cave material.

Wolf secured experts from home and abroad for the cave information project, got money for research purposes and publicised a world-wide cave animal catalogue (Wolf 1934 - 1937 a,b; Wolf 1934 - 1938) which is still very valid today.

Probably because of his many international contacts within Europe and overseas, and perhaps to give him some help against the Nazi regime, he was named a BSA Honorary Member in 1936.

Wolf edited the *Mitteilungen über Höhlen- und Karstforschung*, the journal of the Hauptverband Deutscher Höhlenforscher, until 1937 and was the Chairman of the Hauptverband for many years. To avoid endangering the Association with too much political exposure, Wolf had turned the chairmanship over to his most active patron, the factory owner Dr. Julius Riemer, before the Nazis revealed their interest in speleology. But of course everyone knew that Wolf was still the unofficial head of the German cave researchers (Kater 1974).

After more than 21 years of professional involvement in Prussian environmental protection he - the victim of anti-Jewish discrimination - avoided being expelled from the civil service by a timely resignation.

His library of cave literature was later confiscated by the SS for armament purposes. On July 6, 1942, aged 71, he was arrested by the Gestapo and deported on the 17th Elderly Transport out of Berlin to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. There he died half a year later, on January 6th, 1943, as a result of inhuman imprisonment conditions (Stoffels 1995c). None of his cave research colleagues at home or abroad were able to help him – they did not even know where he was.

Post-1945

German cave research suffered greatly under the Nazi's political and military misuse of the discipline; some literature on this subject has come to light.

In 1947 R.G. Spöcker initiated the formation of a new and politically unencumbered German cave research society, the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Karstforschung*. Spöcker was very adamant about dealing with the unjust events of the past; in one passage in the minutes of the founding meeting in Nürnberg from September 13, 1947 it states, "*SPÖCKER thanks all those who were active in the society and recalls in particular those no longer living. Most specially, the President for many years, state district court Judge Dr. BENNO WOLF, Berlin,*

who died in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, Herr Prof. Dr. ARNDT, Berlin, who was executed by the henchmen of the Third Reich and the former Chairman Prof. Dr. HILZHEIMER, Berlin, as well as all those who had to forfeit their lives in the war years. In honour of the dead the participants of this meeting will now rise."

This new cave research society, however, soon faded away. The Verband der deutschen Höhlen- und Karstforscher e.V. (VdHK; www.vdhk.de), founded in 1955, did not initially come to terms with the past, but individual cave researchers repeatedly built on the work of Dr. Wolf. In 1995 in Iserlohn-Letmathe at the AGM of the Verband and after years of research and solid ground work within the Society, Dr. Benno Wolf was unanimously posthumously honoured - 52 years after his death. The protocol records:

Agenda Point 9: Motion to honour Dr. Benno Wolf

Unanimously, the posthumous naming of Dr. Benno Wolf as honorary member of the association was passed. Those present rose from their seats to hold a minute's silence for the cave researcher who lost his life in a concentration camp.

Agenda Point 12: Founding of a Dr. Benno Wolf Prize

It was unanimously voted to create a Dr. Benno Wolf Prize for outstanding research achievement (motion: F. Knolle, J. Obendorf, J. Götz and the association board).

With that the VdHK had finally honoured a person who, in spite of his great achievements for German and international cave research and nature conservation, had been, up to then, almost totally forgotten.

Work in Memory of the "forgotten" Dr. Benno Wolf

Unfortunately, work in memory of Nazi victims in Germany is still not complete in all areas. The Nazi offenders themselves were at first occupied with assisting each other in whitewashing their sins. They repeatedly played down their involvement in the crimes and, where possible, withheld evidence. Many unpublished works, incriminating documents and other objects of evidence, if not already deliberately destroyed in 1945 or destroyed during the War, "got lost" or have remained, until today, unobtainable. The Verband der deutschen Höhlen- und Karstforscher e.V. itself was not innocent - the work of recognising Dr. Benno Wolf and his work should to have begun much earlier (Spöcker 1986). An active Nazi, Prof. Dr. Gustav Riek, was even named an honorary member of the VdHK in 1968.

A look at historical publications since 1945 awakens the impression that Jewish cave researchers like Dr. Benno Wolf have been "actively forgotten". The offenders and hangers-on have left us with excuses, legends and prefabricated memory gaps - and in that way have provided us with the difficulty of having far too little evidence to contradict the fabricated tales of the Nazi generation.

The Dr. Benno Wolf Prize has, however, developed into a successful memorial project and has also radiated into German nature conservation - the fate of Dr. Benno Wolf is now broadly discussed. The German Stiftung Naturschutzgeschichte [*Nature Conservation History Foundation*; www.naturschutzgeschichte.de] has become active and the German Bundesumweltministerium [*Federal Ministry for the Environment*; www.bmu.de] is supporting appropriate projects; see also Frohn & Schmoll (2006).

To honour Dr. Benno Wolf a private initiative has laid a memorial plaque in front of his home in the Hornstraße 6 in Berlin-Kreuzberg in 2005. These plaques have been laid by the sculptor Gunter Demning as slightly raised paving stones bearing the names of Nazi victims. On the brass name plates on the upper sides of the paving stones the names and biographical data of the victims as well as date and place of deportation are engraved, see: www.berlin-hidden-places.de/yuba_web3/regional_en/kreuz/kreuz_gedenkst_en.htm

It is good to know that Dr. Benno Wolf is no longer forgotten.

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