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German Race Laws

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J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia

Scholarship and Critical Assessment

Michael D.C. Drout
EDITOR

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See also **Dwarves; Elves; Finland, Literary Sources; Folklore; German: Modern; Literature and Folktale, Russian; Mythology for England; Mythology, Germanic; Old Norse Literature; "On Fairy-Stories"; Oral Tradition; Ylfe, Alfr, Elf**

GERMAN RACE LAWS

The German Race Laws (*Nürnberger Gesetze*) were enacted on September 15, 1935, at the Nazi Party's national convention in Nuremberg; they were intended to further limit the rights of Germany's Jews following the "protective laws" prohibiting Jews from working in civil service positions (1935). The *Reichsbürgergesetz* (Reich Citizens Law) defined as Jewish anyone with three Jewish grandparents and reduced those so identified to "subjects" (*Staatsangehörige*) rather than "citizens" (*Staatsbürger*); citizens derived their political rights from their ability to demonstrate "Aryan" (i.e., non-Jewish) descent. The *Gesetz zum Schutze des deutschen Blutes und der deutschen Ehre* (Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor) outlawed sexual relations between Jews and gentiles. These laws and further measures culminated in the *Reichskristallnacht* of November 9–10, 1938, when the SA (Nazi storm troopers) attacked Jewish businesses, after which Jews began to be placed in *Schutzhaft* ("protective custody"), that is, concentration camps.

That Tolkien was aware of these laws is apparent in two letters of July 25, 1938, sent to Sir Stanley Unwin, who had arranged for the German publication of *The Hobbit* by Rütten & Loening of Potsdam. The German publisher was obligated to inquire after Tolkien's racial heritage prior to publishing his novel. Tolkien's reaction to this request was registered in the cover letter to Unwin; calling the inquiry after his heritage an "impertinence" and the German Race Laws "lunatic" (*Letters*, 37), he sent two possible replies to Unwin, with the request that his publisher decide which the German publisher should receive. The reply that remains in Unwin's files is a strongly worded refusal by Tolkien to provide the requested information. The letter contains the following arguments: (1) that *Aryan* denotes Indo-Iranian (including Gypsy!) speakers, not gentiles, (2) that the inquiry is actually about possible Jewish ancestry and that Tolkien "regret[ed] that [he had] no ancestors of that

gifted people (i.e., the Jews)," (3) that he is of English and German extraction and considers himself an English subject, (4) that he has heretofore viewed his German ancestry with pride, but that such "impertinent and irrelevant inquiries" discourage this feeling, and (5) that while the inquiry is obviously required by German law, it is both improper to apply such laws to citizens of other countries and irrelevant to the quality of *The Hobbit*, which is the basis of the decision to publish it (*Letters*, 37–38). No German translation appeared until 1957.

Tolkien's views on racialism are clear in two other letters written to his son Christopher while the latter was stationed in South Africa in 1944, in which he criticizes Apartheid (*Letters*, 73) and anti-German hysteria (*Letters*, 93). Tolkien's espousal of Germanic mythology, the same sources misappropriated by the Nazis, has led to accusations of fascism (see the articles by Chism, Straubhaar, and Yates, for examples); however, his use of the same sources should not cause him to be identified with those whom he accused of "ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making forever accursed" the sources and their "northern spirit" of courage in adversity, which he so admired (*Letters*, 55).

CAROL A. LEIBIGER

Further Reading

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See also **Germany; Judaism; Mythology, Germanic; Nazi Party; Northern Courage; Old Norse Literature; Philo-Semitism; World War II; Race and Racism**

GERMAN: MODERN

Tolkien's knowledge of Modern German was excellent. As a matter of fact, his father's ancestors had come to England from Germany in the eighteenth century, although Tolkien always considered himself first and foremost an Englishman. When approached in 1938 by the German publishers Rütten & Loening