

Captain George Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers and the origins of the IUSSP

Extended Abstract

F. Landis MacKellar, Population Council
Bradley Hart, Department of History, California State University, Fresno

29 April, 2014

The International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) was reconstituted in 1947 following the collapse during World War II of its predecessor, the International Union for the Scientific Investigation of Population Problems (IUSIPP). A combination of money woes and politicization of the national committees that comprised its membership had weakened the Union during the turbulent 1930s, and the chaos of war delivered the *coup de grâce*. The story of the post-War reconstitution of the IUSSP as an association of individuals by invitation, while much could be further investigated, is fairly well known as it amounts to the foundation myth of this important international scientific institution. The story of the disintegration of the IUSIPP, by contrast, has not been told.

This paper focuses on a piece of that story: the role of the Secretary General and Treasurer of the IUSIPP, the Englishman Captain George Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers. While Pitt-Rivers was not solely responsible for the organisation's demise, his madcap antics and enthusiastic involvement with Nazi racial eugenics as its Secretary-General played a considerable role in it. He destroyed his scientific career along the way and was left an embittered man.

This story can now be told thanks to the discovery of the Pitt-Rivers papers and their subsequent housing in the Churchill Archives Centre at Cambridge University, and with the support of other archival material, including the

minutes of the Regulation 18B Review Board hearing which adjudicated his wartime detention, the papers of Eugen Fischer in the Archives of the Max Planck Institute in Berlin, of Bronislaw Malinowski in the Archives of the London School of Economics, and of Raymond Pearl in the Archives of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, as well as the archives of the Eugenics Society at the Wellcome Institute in London. The Archives of the IUSSP deposited at the IUSSP Secretariat at the *Institut national d'études démographiques* in Paris are a key source. Also vital are photocopies of the contributions prepared by members of the IUSSP Working Group on the History of the Union in 1984 which are deposited in the IUSSP Archives in Paris. These resulted in the pamphlet *The IUSSP in History* distributed at the 1985 International Population Conference in Florence.

Grandson of the general whose archaeological rapacity endowed the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford, as well as cousin of Baroness Spencer-Churchill, Pitt-Rivers was one of the wealthiest men in England. He inherited an estate so large as to amount to a small agricultural empire; it was said, albeit with exaggeration, that he could ride from coast to coast without leaving his own land. His London club was the Athenaeum and he corresponded easily with the likes of T.S. Eliot, the poet; Gilbert Murray, the classical scholar; and Oscar Levy, the English-language translator of Nietzsche. His intellect was omnivorous and its appetite was gargantuan.

Pitt-Rivers was a veteran of the Great War, wounded on horseback at Ypres in August 1914 by a German bullet that left him leaning on a heavy walking stick, in pain, for the rest of his life. Perhaps it was the appalling futility of the War that led him to anti-Semitism, anti-communism, philo-Germanism, and pacifism. In 1920, he published *The World Significance of the Russian Revolution*, a diatribe against the Jewish-Bolshevik-Masonic cosmopolitan conspiracy that he blamed for the war. Pitt-Rivers later claimed that writing the Introduction to this book caused Levy, an anti-Semitic Jew, to be expelled from Britain, but there is nothing to substantiate this grandiose claim and some evidence to refute it.

1922-25 found Pitt-Rivers as assistant to Henry Forster, Governor-General of Australia (and father of his first wife). His experience with the Maori led him to a lasting interest in the inter-breeding of races.

He subsequently went up to Oxford where he studied psychology and anthropology under Bronislaw Malinowski, who described him as one of the most brilliant students he ever had. His doctoral dissertation followed further fieldwork in the South Pacific and resulted in the 1927 book *Clash of Cultures and the Contact of Races*, in which he offered the view that “primitive races” were weakened and destroyed when they came into contact with Europeans.

Pitt-Rivers’ was elected in 1929 as a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute. In 1931, perhaps because of his close association with Malinowski, he became Secretary General and Treasurer of the IUSIPP. In that capacity, he edited the Proceedings of the 1932 international population conference in London, a task he clearly relished. Having attended the World Population Conference in Geneva in 1927 where the Union was conceived, as well as the Constituent Assembly in Paris in 1928, he was no stranger to the Union. He held the Secretary General’s post until 1937, when he left it under circumstances described below.

It was inevitable that population studies, and the IUSIPP, should be infused with eugenics. The British Population Society (BPS), the British national committee member of the IUSIPP, was dominated by mainstream eugenicists, such as its President, Sir Bernard Mallet, Julian Huxley, and Sir William Beveridge (through whose good offices premises for the Secretariat were obtained at London School of Economics). This central current of the eugenics movement, personified by the Eugenics Society (of which Sir Bernard Mallet was also President and which survives today in the form of the Galton Institute) was mostly concerned with differential fertility and the tendency of the less- to out-reproduce the more evolutionarily fit. Its concerns and proposed responses were riddled with race, class, and ethnic prejudice of the day, but these were not at the core of the vision: even if there was only one race, one class, and one ethnic group, there would still be less- and more fit individuals.

The alternative current of eugenics focused less on individuals and more on races, which it believed it could define and rank along various axes with certainty. The inter-breeding of races could only corrupt the superior. “Racial hygiene,” the prevention of race mixing and miscegenation, became a key concern in these circles; in fact, a policy obsession. This view was prominent in

America but reached its apogee in Germany, where Aryan racial supremacy and the Jewish racial menace were common scientific currency by the 1930s. Yet, it would be a mistake to characterize eugenic opinion in Germany as solidly racist. The original German national committee of the IUSIPP was balanced between mainstream and racial eugenicists. However, mortality, emigration, and academic purges after the Nazi triumph of 1933 had the result that, by the mid-thirties, four committed racials held sway over the German national committee and German demography more generally: Eugen Fischer, director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics in Berlin; Fritz Lenz, Friedrich Burgdörfer, and Friedrich Zahn.

Pitt-Rivers, with the encouragement and assistance of Eugen Fischer, established close ties with German eugenicists. His main contact was Lothar Loeffler, assistant to Fischer and professor of racial hygiene at the University of Königsberg, having ostentatiously turned down a professorship in Frankfurt on the grounds that there were too many Jews in the city. Loeffler cynically wrote him that, while the best German scientists were aware that the Jews were not a race, the Party had spoken and science had to follow.

In 1933, hardly in office as Secretary General of the IUSSIPP, Pitt-Rivers applied to the Executive Committee of the IUSIPP to officially represent the Union in the International Federation of Eugenics Organisations (IFEEO). He was already officially representing the Eugenic Society at the IFEEO. The IFEEO, while headquartered in London at the time, was outside the British mainstream and, consistent with its American origins, gave priority to defence of the white race against mixed breeding. In addition, the organization's secretary, Cora Hodson, was well-known in the British eugenics establishment as an extremist advocate of eugenic sterilization and increasingly pro-Hitler views. The IFEEO was therefore skirting the ground between science and politics, and the IUSIPP Executive Committee, in its meeting of 27 June 1933, frustrated Pitt-Rivers' plan by holding that the IFEEO was a political advocacy group, not a scientific organisation, and that no officer of the Union could officially represent the organisation in such a group. It was a rebuff that Pitt-Rivers did not forget.

In 1934, Pitt-Rivers was one of the few English academics to attend the bi-centenary celebration of the University of Göttingen, which had just dismissed its Jewish faculty, an act for which he was subjected to criticism upon return.

His second marriage (to a medical scientist now recognised as the founder of modern thyroid research) was as strained as his relations with the British scientific establishment; he appeared more openly in public with his young mistress Catherine (“Becky”) Sharpe, a senior Churchman’s daughter, and eventually sued his wife for divorce. He toured Germany often, visiting not just academic mediocrities like Loeffler, but also less savoury figures closer to the sharp policy implementation end, like SS member and University of Jena rector Karl Astel (ironically remembered today mostly as a pioneer of the anti-tobacco movement). Pitt-Rivers corresponded with French anti-Semites like novelist and poet Georges Batault, only to later dismiss them as too soft. He met with Léon Degrelle, leader of the Belgian Rexist Party. Odd for a man of the world, Pitt-Rivers was at ease only in English; his correspondence reveals that neither his German nor his French rose much above getting by.

In 1934-36, Pitt-Rivers served as a member of the Race and Culture Committee, a group jointly convened under the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Institute of Sociology with the unstated purpose to produce a consensus report that would undermine the credibility of Nazi race ideology. Pitt-Rivers sabotaged the committee from within. Through behind-the-scenes manoeuvring, he induced the Committee to publish not only the definition of race backed by the majority, which was based on long geographical proximity and in-breeding, but an alternative definition based on ideal racial types backed by himself and his lone Committee ally, botanist Reginald Ruggles Gates. In private correspondence, Pitt-Rivers consulted with German anthropologists about the definitions of race that the Nazi Party would find tolerable and then used the exact statements his contacts proposed in his alternative definition in the report. The effect of publishing two explicitly conflicting alternate views was to render the work of the Committee useless for the purpose for which it had been convened. Yet, Pitt-Rivers’ success was short-lived. The response of the mainstream was the widely hailed *We Europeans* (1935), an anti-Nazi treatise on race authored by Julian Huxley, Alfred Haddon and Alexander Carr-Saunders.

German racial eugenics had its day in the sun at the 1935 Berlin International Population Conference, a showplace for Nazi population policy. Naked anti-Semitism, as Christopher Tietze later pointed out in a favourable review

written for the journal *Marriage Hygiene* in November 1936, had been kept off the program by the organisers. But “racial hygiene” was heavily represented, as were less controversial views on fit and unfit populations. David Glass of the BPS wrote a critique in *The Eugenics Review* issue of October 1935, citing “intellectual poverty” and “race prejudice.” A sign of the gradual disintegration of the Union, the American national committee boycotted the Conference as its political bent became clear. There was widespread determination within the Union not to repeat the mistake of parading extreme racist ideology at the next International Population Conference to be held in Paris in 1937. Intellectual muscle was provided to this position by Union members such as Franz Boas of Columbia University.

In 1936, Pitt-Rivers and Miss Sharpe visited Spain and Czechoslovakia, succeeding in being detained and deported from both for political activities. Back in England, he gave speeches and published letters asserting that Guernica had been bombed by the Republicans, not the Operation Condor *Luftwaffe*. He attended the 1937 Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg as Goering’s personal guest and took in the opera as a member of his party. Miss Sharpe took advantage of the tour to outfit herself in a *dirndl* and participate in a *Bund Deutscher Mädel* retreat.

Always a tireless and intelligent advocate of agrarian reform, Pitt-Rivers formed the Wessex Agricultural Defence Association (WADA) to campaign against tithing, the practice of forcing tenant farmers to support the Church. Standing for Parliament as an Independent Agriculturalist, Pitt-Rivers actively corresponded with Oswald Mosley, head of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), by that time the British Union. Mosley was a regular guest at the Pitt-Rivers estate. Pitt-Rivers became embroiled in a bitter personal dispute involving the Anglo-German Fellowship, a group that, despite its close Nazi ties, aimed mostly to promote friendly commercial relations and eventually blackballed Pitt-Rivers because of his extreme political views. Following this, he became increasingly involved with the British Union (although he never actually joined), as well as The Link, a more openly pro-Nazi organisation led by Admiral Sir Barry Domville.

Pitt-Rivers did not neglect his scientific activities. He published a piece on regional planning in the November 1936 issue of *Population*, the journal of the

IUSIPP. In the same issue, he published *Science of population*, a scheme of how the study of population should be organised. “Ethnogenics,” described below, held pride of place. But new scientific work was slow to come. The regional planning piece was a recycled planning document and the ethnogenics piece he had published in various forms as far back as 1933: one senses an attempt to get out what he could while he could.

By 1937, the Union was in disarray. Its finances were in crisis and revival was hopeless given the inability or unwillingness of national committees to pay up. With its core U.S. funding irrevocably gone, the Union was broke. That story, with its roots in disputes between the first Union President Raymond Pearl, Social Science Research Council President Edwin Wilson, and Italian national committee President Corrado Gini, has been told before.

Pitt-Rivers, by now shunned by the pillars of British science and embraced by the German eugenics establishment, had crossed the scientific Rubicon and burned his boats. It is against this background that Pitt-Rivers’ 1937 Secretary General’s Report to the IUSIPP General Assembly in Paris is to be read.

Pitt-Rivers commenced by resigning as Treasurer, stating accurately that the financial situation was dire. He reserved, however, the office of Secretary General, and in that role made his Report.

First in order was a proposal designed to settle his scores with the British population community over the IFEO. Alexander Carr-Saunders, a member of the BPS and co-author of *We Europeans*, had organised a Population Investigation Committee under the aegis of the Eugenics Society. Sir Charles Close, President of the IUSIPP, was included on this Committee as representing the BPS. The Secretary of this Population Investigation Committee was C.P. Blacker, also a member of the BPS (and, in fact, the real power within the Eugenics Society by the 1930s). Pitt-Rivers cited the IUSIPP Executive Committee’s decision described above. The BPS was the national committee of the IUSIPP. Two members of the Population Investigation Committee, Carr-Saunders and Blacker, had been engaged in political advocacy directed against German race policy, as demonstrated by the former’s co-authorship of *We Europeans* and the latter’s public failure to endorse German eugenics. By implication, the Population Investigation Committee (indeed, it is clear Pitt-

Rivers thinks, the Eugenics Society itself) was a propaganda group and Carr-Saunders, Sir Charles, and Blacker should be allowed to participate only in their personal capacity. That of the offending trio, only Sir Charles was officially representing the BPS and therefore by extension the IUSIPP was lost in the text.

The insult of four years ago was thus avenged. If the Executive Committee of the IUSIPP could label the IFEO political rather than scientific, Pitt-Rivers could label the Eugenics Society political rather than scientific by branding as political one of its Committees. As demonstrated by the style of argumentation and his later judicial depositions, the distinction between science and politics was obsessive for Pitt-Rivers. Political positions that he agreed with (Nazi racial policy) became scientific; scientific positions that he disagreed with (British mainstream eugenics) became political. He, the disinterested scientist and student, not practitioner, of politics was entitled to determine which was which.

The Secretary-General's Report then proceeded to call for the expulsion of Spain from the Union because it had no Government. As he later defended his European travels to the 18B Review Committee, he had to go to the Continent for scientific reasons: he was losing his Committees.

In a more developed argument, Pitt-Rivers called for the expulsion of Czechoslovakia on the grounds that, despite the fact that all population experts in the country were German-speaking, none were represented on the national committee. The spectre of a non-scientific propaganda group was again raised, the implication being that the Czechoslovakian national committee was advocating for the immiseration, if not worse, of the Sudeten German minority population. Professor Antonín Boháč, head of the Czechoslovakian national committee, enlisted his assistant Mme. Alena Šubrtová to write, in French, and circulate to the General Assembly a response protesting that, while Pitt-Rivers had taken the time during his tour to confer with Mr. Konrad Henlein, leader of the Sudeten Nazi faction, he had failed to consult either Prof. Boháč or Dr. Schönbaum, in charge of social statistics. This told against Pitt-Rivers who, detained along with Miss Sharpe by the authorities and expelled from the country, had protested that he was on a

scientific fact-collecting mission in association with his role as Secretary-General of the IUSIPP.

Pitt-Rivers then digressed, noting the wisdom of a decision made in Executive Committee four years previously to bar the USSR from the Union. He cited recent reports in *Science* and *Nature* on the politically motivated persecution of the geneticist Vavilov for failure to endorse Lysenkoism. This was probably a veiled attack on J.B.S. Haldane, another member of the Committee on Race and Culture with whom he had crossed swords. Haldane, a Communist sympathiser (and later Party member) had been sparing in his criticism of Lysenko's theories. This was a frolic of the Secretary General's own; it had nothing to do with business before the General Assembly.

Appended to the Secretary General's Report was a reprint of *Science of population*. Pitt-Rivers called for a new methodological organisation of future Union activities. The existing system of three Research Commissions, he stated, was "in liquidation." This was true: there was no finance in two cases and the Chair (Gini) had walked out in the third. Pitt-Rivers cited his contribution to the Report of the Race and Culture Committee calling for a new standardized approach to terms and classifications. Based on this, he proposed the formation of a fourth Commission, "Ethnogenics," to cover "the change and conditioning of ethical [*sic*, he means ethnic] units," including the effects of "miscegenation." In the next paragraph, Pitt-Rivers goes so far as to state that it might be found that a single Commission on "ethnogenics," would suffice for the Union's scientific activities. Pitt-Rivers had previously urged the creation of "ethnogenics" as a new scientific discipline taking many of its tenets from racial eugenics combined with anthropology, so this proposal had perhaps more to do with his ego than the needs of the Union.

Pitt-Rivers approvingly quoted from the favourable review of the Berlin Conference due to Christopher Tietze (neglecting to cite the criticism of David Glass). This led him to take exception to a resolution to the General Assembly submitted in the form of a letter from the head of the American national committee, Percy Whelpton, praising the French organisers for having maintained the high scientific integrity of the programme and holding their performance out as a model for the future. This resolution reflected badly,

Pitt-Rivers submitted, on the organisers of the Berlin Conference, who had not admitted any more extraneous or political considerations than had the French.

The Secretary General's Report to the IUSIPP General Assembly of 1937 was an act of professional and scientific suicide. The following issue of *Population* briefly noted that Captain Pitt-Rivers had been replaced as Secretary General by Professor Mauco of France. Mauco was, as subsequent events outside the scope of this paper would show, no friend of Germany. Yet, ever the indefatigable scientist, Pitt-Rivers edited the Paris Conference *Proceedings*. It must have been a bitter blow to see the handful of German eugenics presentations relegated contemptuously to the last chapter of the last volume.

His scientific reputation in tatters, Pitt-Rivers continued to roar down the road to self-destruction, protected, of course, by his wealth. In late 1938, he distilled his fury over the treatment of the Sudeten Germans into *The Czech Conspiracy: a Phase in the World War Plot*, a book in which he accused the Czech government of being a tool of the international Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy devoid of legitimacy. He did not miss the opportunity to rebut Professor Boháč's response to the Secretary General's Report point by point. A critical review of the book in *New Statesman* elicited a sarcastic, consider-the-source rejoinder.

When, in early summer 1940, the Secretary of State responded to the Prime Minister's request for a list of "prominent persons" to be detained as a threat to national defence because of their Nazi sympathies, Pitt-Rivers was fourth on the list (Sir Oswald and Lady Mosley had pride of place at numbers one and two and the anti-Semitic Scottish Unionist MP A.M. Ramsay was number three). On 27 June, 1940 he was detained under Defence Regulation 18B.

Under 18B, in some ways a precursor of the American Guantanamo, detainees had no right to know the charges against them or to representation: the mere suspicion of the Home Secretary was sufficient. On 8 November, suffering emotionally and physically from his harsh conditions of confinement, Pitt-Rivers came up before a three-member 18B Review Committee chaired by Sir Norman Birkett. Of the three principal accusations against him -- membership in the British Union, going about the estate threatening his tenants with eviction if they did not oppose the sheltering of refugees ("East End Jews,

Polish Jews, and Czech communists”) on his land, and haranguing soldiers billeted in his house with pro-Hitler diatribes – it was the first that was most serious. He denied it. The second he vigorously blamed on one Coast, a youth from fascist circles who had attached himself as assistant. He countered the third by stating that he was merely expressing views and it was an outrage that a military man whose family had fought for king and country for seven generations, a man whose two sons were now under the colours, should be accused of attempting to demoralise the troops.

The hearing lasted three days. It is said that the man who represents himself has one fool for a client and the second for a lawyer. Pitt-Rivers, under 18B rules, had no choice but to defend his own case. It has also been said that lunacy is a highly effective strategy against sanity. If that is the case, there was equality of arms in the hearing room. Pitt-Rivers parried every accusation against him, serious or trivial, important or not, with logical convolutions, semantic contortions, evasion, and hair splitting. Once his point had been accepted – for example, that he was never a member of the British Union -- he insisted on pursuing it further, often to his peril. But the Committee was quick to warn that he would be better off shutting up and, perhaps charitably closed its ears. He drove the members to distraction with his claim that he was merely a scientist with no interest in politics. All of his activities on the Continent, he claimed, were an outgrowth of his scientific responsibilities as Secretary General of the IUSIPP. The scandal was that his scientific reports from the Continent, those of a military man with intimate knowledge of history and diplomacy, had been ignored by Government. When he stood for Parliament on the platform of agricultural reform, his intense and rather conspiratorial correspondence with Mosely had nothing to do with being a politician; they all arose from his being a student of politics.

In presenting its findings to the Home Office, the Committee acknowledged that Pitt-Rivers’ case had been the most difficult that they had dealt with. They described a man of the greatest learning, refinement, and patriotism who was incapable of answering a straightforward question honestly. He held radical opinions, was irrepressible, and could arouse great mischief if released. Would it not be possible, they asked the Home Secretary, to ease his conditions of confinement while nonetheless keeping some control over him?

Pitt-Rivers, through his solicitor, suggested that he might be housed in a convalescent home in Oxford and given access to the research facilities at Worcester College, of which he was a Fellow Commoner. He undertook to refrain from any controversial activity whatever and, as surety, offered his son, his former wife, and his solicitor. There was some discussion over whether he would really, as he claimed, have access to the Senior Common Room. As to the damage that he might do there along the lines that he might have done in the Officers' Mess in his home, the Committee acknowledged that Oxford dons were "a race apart" who would be able to take Pitt-Rivers in stride.

In the end, this complicated arrangement was not followed. He languished in detention until January 1942, when he was released to his sister's care (his own house having been requisitioned) and lived quietly with her for the duration of the war, respecting the terms of his release. He abandoned science altogether, complaining later to Mosley that Jews and Communists had taken it over.

Prior to his detention Becky Sharpe, who evidently shared the resourcefulness of her namesake in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and perhaps sensed that a cold wind was on the way, decamped for South Africa. Pitt-Rivers blamed the mysterious Coast for seducing her. If so, she made short work of him, for she was married in 1939 to in Cape Town in 1939. As Catherine Sharpe Taylor, she had a distinguished political career, representing suburban Wynberg for the opposition United Party from 1953-74, including stints as Shadow Minister for Education and Shadow Minister for Coloured Affairs. She died in 1992.

Pitt-Rivers took up with Stella, a young woman whose past marriages included Christopher Mainwaring Lonsdale, one of the upper-class perpetrators of the brutal February 1937 Hyde Park Hotel jewel robbery. She had enjoyed a good war in Occupied France, working for both German and English intelligence and exercising her charms with equal success on German officers and French resistance fighters before being arrested and imprisoned in England. Her MI5 interrogation officer uncharitably dismissed her as "a sewer."

Captain George Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers died in 1966. Two of his children were historically notable; one as an eminent anthropologist and the other as appellant in the Appeals Court decision that abolished buggery as a criminal

offence in England and Wales. Pitt-Rivers' obituary in *The Times* discussed merely his anthropological research and writings, with no mention of his internment. He was, it said, one who challenged conventional opinions.