

ANALYSIS

Ngorongoro Nazi

Grzimek's racist vision of African conservation—without Africans—remains embedded in much of conservation and is ultimately destructive of both the environment and people.

Stephen Curry
April 18, 2022



Stephen Curry was CEO of Survival International for 37 years. He continues to campaign, largely through articles and social media.

More by Stephen Curry

Share

Tweet

Facebook

Print

LinkedIn

WhatsApp

Telegram

Read other stories tagged with:

Conservation

Germany

Resilience

Nature

Nazi

Ngorongoro

Tanzania

Bernhard Grzimek was the public face of wildlife conservation in Germany from the 1950s until his death in 1987. His reputation was on a level to that enjoyed by David Attenborough in Britain. He led the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) for decades—from its address at No. 1 Bernhard-Grzimek-Allee—and grew it into one of the largest and richest conservation organisations in Europe. He wrote books and articles, edited reference works and popular magazines, and made and hosted TV and feature length films, most famously “The Serengeti shall not die”, which won an Oscar in 1959. He was instrumental in securing the Serengeti and associated “Protected Areas” in Tanzania where he remains a conservation hero today.

Memorial to the “founder of the Serengeti” in Grzimek's birth city, now in Poland

Bernhard Grzimek had another face. He carefully rewrote his life between the ages of 24 and 36 and it is largely his version that is known and reproduced by the FZS, and more widely. In his revised version, he joined the German army—but never the Nazi Party—in the 1930s. In 1945, after the Germans had lost the war, he claimed to have been questioned by the Gestapo because he had given Jews some food.

The real history is different; understanding by just how much it is different needs some background context. Grzimek did not in fact join the army in 1933, but the armed wing of the Nazi Party, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA). He did so when he was 24, a mere five months after Hitler came to power. At the time the SA comprised about a million members, mostly Bavarians from southern Germany where the Nazis had their genesis and the most support. When Grzimek joined, the SA was comprised of only a small minority (some 1.5 per cent) of the population. Grzimek was not from Bavaria like most of his SA comrades, but from German-speaking Silesia in the north (now in Poland).

Signing up for the SA, the precursor of the SS, was a much bigger step than simply joining the regular army, or even the Nazi political party (the NSDAP). The SA was not a political group; it comprised the Nazi stormtroopers, the “Brownshirts” thugs, who provided physical protection at rallies, beating and often killing those who disagreed with them.

Original Nazi staff file showing Grzimek joining the Brownshirts in 1933

After the war, Grzimek lied about having been a Nazi, falsely claiming that some papers had been pressed on him which he accepted only to further his work.

It is true that joining the Nazis could be career-enhancing, but it is also true that it remained a choice. For example, Bernd Freytag von Loringhoven refused to join the Nazi party and had to abandon a career in law. He joined the regular army instead, eventually becoming adjutant to Hitler's chief of staff, and was at numerous high-level meetings with the Führer. He was actually in the bunker with Hitler as the Russians pummelled Berlin in the final days of the war. He was one of the very last to leave, with Hitler's approval. He died aged 93 in Munich, having never joined the Nazi party.

No one pressed Grzimek to join the SA, nor did anyone force him to write his articles for the virulently anti-Semitic, *Der Angriff* (The Attack), the newspaper run by Nazi chief propagandist Joseph Goebbels. It is inconceivable that Grzimek would not have read the paper he wrote for. Like many Germans he would also have read Hitler's 1925 political autobiography, *Mein Kampf*. The Nazis made no attempt to hide their racist ideology; on the contrary, they were keen to broadcast it as widely as possible. Many Germans disagreed with them but Grzimek clearly knew exactly what the Nazis stood for—he was one himself.

His own subsequent narrative about helping Jews was not a rarity. Many, perhaps most, Nazis scrambled to hide their background once their country had been defeated. It is thought Grzimek could have been helped in doing so by his lover's father, but many were even assisted by the victorious allies themselves. The term *Persilschein* (clean, like Persil detergent) was widely employed. It came to mean washed of one's Nazi past.

The Americans, in particular, quickly moved to retain many Nazis in the defeated country's organisations and structures as Germany was carved up into Russian, American, British and French sectors.

Grzimek clearly knew exactly what the Nazis stood for—he was one himself.

One particularly shocking example is top genetics researcher, Ulrich Haug, who became both president of the German Anthropological Association and head of genetics at a German university after the war. He had actually been able to join the American Society of Human Genetics during the war. Yet this man had been an architect of the Nazi “race hygiene” laws, oversaw the enforced sterilization of “mixed race” children, and argued for the same “treatment” for many others, such as the “feeble-minded”, schizophrenics, depressives, epileptics, the blind, and the deaf. He collaborated with his student, Josef Mengele, the doctor who conducted medical experiments on children in Auschwitz, partly for genetic research. In spite of his background, and being considered, “one of the most dangerous Nazi activists of the Third Reich”, von Verschuer enjoyed a top-level, post-war career—like Grzimek.

With Europe on its knees after the deadliest war the world has ever seen, the Americans wanted Nazis to keep their positions in what became West Germany partly to avoid the state's total collapse but also because they now saw former ally Russia as the new threat.

Thousands of Nazis were even given new, secret identities in the USA to assist the CIA in its anti-communist crusade and its spy network. A few, such as SS officer Wernher von Braun, were welcomed openly. Von Braun had designed the V-2 rocket that killed some 20,000 people for Hitler, about half of them the concentration camp prisoners forced to build it. He now became the architect of NASA's space programme leading to the 1960s moon landings. His Saturn rocket which carried the Apollo landers was essentially a big, modernised version of the V-2.

Apart from their technical expertise and knowledge of relevant languages, people, and geography, the key asset these Nazis brought to the Americans was their virulent anti-communism. It is important to note that one of Hitler's primary objectives had always been to expand Germany's *Lebensraum* (living space) to the east, taking the land, including Russia, and evicting, killing or enslaving the “Slavic race” living there.

With the war over, the Holocaust could not be ignored, of course, so two dozen top Nazis were indicted for war crimes at the Nuernberg trials. Just ten were eventually hanged. Compare this number with the almost one thousand concentration camps and sub-camps, and the 42,500 institutions which had a hand in the genocide.

Related

Seeds of Discontent: Kenya's Seed Law Undermines Farmers' Resilience

Tonkiye in West Africa: Soft Power Rhetoric, Hard Power Reality

Humour as a Form of Resistance in the Kenyan Gen Z Process

Gen Z's Political Coming of Age: Breaking Cycles through Alternative Systems

Bernhard Grzimek was one of very many Nazis who enjoyed an illustrious post-war career, and there does not seem to be much, or even any, indication that his *Persilschein* washed away his Nazi beliefs.

Grzimek believed that those with a genetic disability should be sterilised. He thought there were too many people in the world, and regularly signed off letters, in Latin(!), "I believe human progeny should be reduced". He didn't mean his own, of course; those who inveigh against "overpopulation" never do. The Nazis devised ways to reduce the population of non-Nazis (sterilizing or killing them), but also to multiply their own "Aryan" offspring. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, devised the *Lebensborn* programme to boost the number of "racially pure" babies. He wanted all his soldiers to have at least four children: Grzimek duly fathered his quota.

Thousands of Nazis were even given new, secret identities in the USA to assist the CIA in its anti-communist crusade and its spy network.

Grzimek saw no problem about collaborating with violent dictators other than Hitler, such as Idi Amin or Mobutu Sese Seko. With unashamed arrogance, he pontificated in his *Auf den Mensch gekommen*, "As a conservationist I pass no judgement on . . . the politics of such men. . . . We are fighting for things that are much more important . . . than changing forms of government and world views"! Tragically, the same creed resonates in many environmentalist circles today.

The Frankfurt Zoo Society had a 2,000 word biography on Grzimek on its website when I accessed it a few years ago. It made no mention of his Nazi background. The "[history](#)" page of the site has now disappeared.

One of Grzimek's sons was killed in 1959 when filming "The Serengeti shall not die". The small plane he was piloting hit a vulture and crashed. Its zebra stripe camouflage to make it less visible to animals worked rather too well. The film's title is noteworthy: what was supposed to threaten the Serengeti was of course the local Africans who had always lived there. Grzimek outlived his son by nearly 30 years (and married his own widowed daughter-in-law). The ashes of both father and son now lie at the Ngorongoro crater in Tanzania.

Father and son Grzimek and their Oscar-winning, "The Serengeti shall not die" Bernhard Grzimek remains famous for securing the Serengeti Protected Areas: this meant kicking out the Maasai pastoralists whose herds had grazed these plains for centuries. There's a disturbing evocation here: the Nazi *Lebensraum* policy also stole "lesser" peoples' lands because "master humans" had—to echo Grzimek—"much more important" plans.

More Maasai are threatened with eviction nowadays, to make room for safari tourism and to facilitate the big game hunting parties of United Arab Emirates' royalty. They are from Ngorongoro, practically within sight of the Grzimkes' grave. Bernhard would doubtless be delighted.

Grzimek's legacy lives on: the German government has long supported plans for a Ngorongoro without Maasai and it heavily funds Frankfurt Zoo Society projects in Tanzania and Peru. It appears neither to recognise nor to be troubled by the strident historical echoes.

Bernhard Grzimek remains famous for securing the Serengeti Protected Areas: this meant kicking out the Maasai pastoralists whose herds had grazed these plains for centuries.

Grzimek is far from the being the only conservationist to downplay or hide his past; it is common. History matters, which is why so many work so hard to rewrite it. And judging from exchanges I have had with the head of FZS, the ideology behind many establishment German conservationists remains little changed today.

However, it is not just in Germany and Tanzania where racism remains embedded in much of conservation. Of course there are plenty of conservationists who see this and think it wrong; unfortunately they usually keep quiet in order not to damage their careers. Defenders of Bernhard Grzimek claim that is why he had to join the Nazis. He never stopped lying, it is time everyone else did.

Grzimek's vision of African conservation – without Africans – remains ultimately destructive of both the environment and people. It's time to bring the land back into the control of local peoples and stop those who think they're "master humans" from damaging our world.

Read Next



Humour as a Form of Resistance in the Kenyan Gen Z Protests
Mikhail Nyamweya
August 25, 2025

So, Who is a Terrorist in Kenya?
Willy Mutunga
July 28, 2025

Grief's Inheritance: A Lesson in Hindsight for Gen Z
Oyunga Pala
July 17, 2025

- [About](#)
[Partnerships](#)
[Newsletters](#)
[Join the Herd](#)
[Write for us](#)
- [Series](#)
[Topics](#)
[Countries](#)
[Publishing Partners](#)
[Contributors](#)
[Funding Partners](#)
- [Facebook](#)
[Twitter](#)
[Instagram](#)
[LinkedIn](#)
[YouTube](#)