
Letter to the Editor

First Symposium on “Anatomie im Nationalsozialismus” (“Anatomy in National Socialism”), Würzburg, Germany, September 29, 2010

To the Editor, *Clinical Anatomy*:

As requested by the Editor of *Clinical Anatomy*, I am reporting on the Symposium “*Anatomie im Nationalsozialismus*” (“Anatomy in National Socialism”) that took place in Würzburg, Germany, on September 29, 2010. The meeting was organized by the *Anatomische Gesellschaft* (Anatomical Society) by Christoph Redies, Professor of Anatomy at the University of Jena School of Medicine. Sixty-five years after the end of the Third Reich, it marked the first time that the anatomical society publicly discussed the subject of anatomy’s involvement with the National Socialist (NS) regime and the use of bodies of victims of political persecution for dissection and research.

William Seidelman, Professor Emeritus of the University of Toronto, Canada, and Professor of Health Sciences at the University of the Negev, Israel, and Christoph Redies proposed a public symposium in Germany after a 2009 series of reviews on the current status of research on anatomy in the Third Reich (Hildebrandt, 2009a,b,c) showed that much information on the subject was available. Most of these data had been the result of recent research by a new generation of German anatomists and historians. The *Anatomische Gesellschaft* embraced the proposal promptly and an international meeting with eight speakers and a poster session was planned accordingly.

In his introduction, Christoph Redies formulated the purpose of the symposium as the exchange of information by specialists including anatomists, historians and medical historians, the initiation of future projects and to inform the public. Redies’ explanation for the long delay of a discussion of anatomy in the Third Reich was the personal continuity of careers of anatomists, who had profited from the NS regime, into postwar academia, as well as the difficulty of these anatomists’ students to accept their esteemed teachers’ involvement with a criminal regime. Redies said the time has arrived to overcome this emotional resistance and find out the facts of this history rather than “indulge in ignorance,” aiming at the same time to refrain from facile moral judgments. He emphasized the intended scientific and scholarly manner of the meeting as well as its interdisciplinary character that could lead to insights into lessons to be learned from this history. Lessons that might help develop national and international ethical standards in anatomy as well as a more general realization that “science is not isolated from society.”

Sabine Hildebrandt, Lecturer of Anatomy at the University of Michigan, USA, gave a short résumé on the current status of research on anatomy in the Third Reich, which

showed that anatomists were supporters as well as victims of the NS regime. Many careers were disrupted because the anatomists were of Jewish descent or dissidents, while other careers thrived due to the anatomists’ active involvement in NS politics. A majority of the anatomists remaining in Germany were members of one of the NS-affiliated political groups. All anatomical institutions without exception used the bodies of NS victims for dissection and research, regardless of the anatomists’ political affiliation. Only a small percentage of the dissected victims have been identified. Many of them were German political dissidents, military deserters, or forced laborers from other European countries. In using NS victims in great numbers for their work, anatomists behaved opportunistically and unethically from a modern point of view. Hildebrandt suggested that this is due to an imbalance of clinical detachment and empathy under the influence of a criminal regime. During the following discussion, Christoph Viebig, anatomist at the University of Göttingen, proposed the term “moral detachment” for this development, which he argued could recur at any time anywhere in the world under similar conditions.

Michael Viebig, Historian at the memorial site of the former chamber of execution “*Roter Ochse*” (Red Ox) in Halle, Germany, reported on the judicial and administrative basis for the body supply of anatomical institutions with bodies from executions in the Third Reich. The initial motivation for this study had been an inquiry from anatomists at the University of Halle in 1990. This led Viebig to explore not only the body registries of the anatomical department, but also a variety of other archival sources and judicial decisions: on the federal (*Reich*) level, from courts of justice (including “*Sondergerichte*,” NS special courts), communal institutions (including cemeteries) and from university archives. These documents helped him find the exact number of executions and identities of the victims at Halle, as well as the number of bodies delivered not only to the Department of Anatomy, but also to the Departments of Forensic Medicine, Zoology, and Race Biology. The results of this study were

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summarized in a poster by Rüdiger Schultka, anatomist at Halle, and Viebig titled "Executed people for the anatomy, Halle 1933–1945." Viebig clearly illustrated the specific expertise that a historian's approach can bring to the investigations of an anatomical institution, investigations that have to go much further than an exclusive look at archives of the anatomical institutes themselves. This approach was also used in the poster illustrating the collaborative study of the history of the anatomical institute in Jena "An Investigation into the Origin of Corpses Received by the Anatomical Institute in Jena during the Third Reich," coauthored by C. Redies, M. Viebig, R. Fröber, and S. Zimmermann.

Sigrid Oehler-Klein, Medical Historian at the *Akademie der Wissenschaften und Literatur* (Academy of the Sciences and Literature) in Mainz, Germany, and Volker Roelcke, Medical Historian at the University of Giessen, Germany, presented their analysis of the use of bodies of executed NS victims at the anatomical institute of the University of Giessen. They formulated the following goals for their work: the identification of the victims, the acknowledgement of the atrocities committed, and the remembrance of the victims and their history. The existence of the body registry in Giessen helped with the identification of 29 victims. Ferdinand Wagenseil, then Chairman of Anatomy, was no friend of the NS regime and a defender and supporter of persecuted students. However, he accepted the bodies of NS victims for dissection just as all his coworkers did. He disregarded human rights to fulfill his teaching requirements, a situation not unique to the NS period. Some of the bodies of the victims or parts thereof were still existent in the Department of Anatomy, University of Giessen in the 1960s.

In his contribution, Andreas Winkelmann, Anatomist at Charité Hospital and University Berlin, Germany, spoke of Hermann Stieve, Chairman of Anatomy in Berlin during the Third Reich, and his use of execution victims for research (see also: Winkelmann and Schagen, 2009). Politically anti-democratic and nationalistic, Stieve never joined the NS party but made extensive use of the bodies of execution victims, especially female ones, for his research. He studied the reproductive organs of at least 200 executed women to determine the influence of trauma to the nervous system on these organs, whereby the nervous trauma was due to imprisonment and expected execution. Thus, he used these women's death anxiety as a research variable. Although the use of the bodies of execution victims was considered ethical at the time, Stieve's actions have to be criticized as unethical from a modern point of view. Winkelmann listed the following ethical concerns from a current perspective: the use of bodies as such with its potential of disregard of the body's dignity, the use without consent as a breach of individual autonomy, the use of the executed as moral complicity with capital punishment, the use of political victims as reflecting a disregard of dignity and moral complicity with the NS regime, and finally, the use of death anxiety as a research variable as disregard for human suffering and biological reductionism in medicine. In Winkelmann's opinion, modern anatomy still has to confront its attitude toward the human dignity of the body and toward human suffering. He stated that "every anatomical use of human body parts constitutes an encounter of two biographies," an insight that may well help to formulate modern ethical standards for anatomy. During the following discussion, Roelcke pointed out the need to understand Stieve better within the concepts and ethical framework of his time, and the still existing lack of factual information on Stieve's motivation.

Thorsten Noack, Medical Historian at the University of Düsseldorf, Germany, related the results of his study of Bavarian anatomical institutes and their use of the executed between 1933 and 1948. The distribution of the bodies of the executed to individual anatomical institutions was strictly regulated by federal law. However, there were ongoing conflicts between the various institutes about the numbers of bodies allotted to each of them, especially during the years 1938–1941, when the numbers of the executed were still relatively low. This changed after 1941, when the execution rate rose and bodies were in good supply. Several executed victims have been identified, among them political dissidents. After the war, Philipp Auerbach, State Commissioner for victims of racial, religious and political persecution, conducted an investigation of the anatomical institutes with the aim to identify and remove specimens hailing from NS victims from the institutes. At the same time, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) confiscated body registries and other materials from anatomies. Noack stated that anatomists belonged to the group of "normal citizens" that effectively supported the NS regime in their daily work. In the following discussion, Reinhard Putz, Chairman of Anatomy at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany, confirmed the removal of documents from the anatomical institute in Munich by UNRRA in the postwar period.

Paul Weindling, Historian at Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, England, spoke about the recent history of German anatomical institutes dealing with their NS history, in a talk titled "A 'Nacht und Nebel' Aktion (A 'night and fog' action): The removal of specimens from German anatomical and medical collections in the early 1990s." Weindling traced the beginnings of the inquiry into the history of medicine and anatomy in the Third Reich to the early 1980s as a confluence of American historians' investigations of German Social Darwinism and eugenics, anthroposophical criticism of "scientized medicine" and historical studies by the post-1968 German radical left. Among the latter was Götz Aly's disclosure concerning the continued existence of the Hallervorden neuropathological collection at the Eninger Institute in Frankfurt. At that time, the topic was not taken up by German mainstream academia but by medical students, who initiated investigations, e.g., at the University of Tübingen. A television report in 1989, which related the use of NS victims in medical teaching, elicited international inquiries that led to a federal investigation into the continued existence of anatomical specimens in medical collections. Although the University of Tübingen formed a commission that conducted a thorough historical study of its collections and issued a public apology, few other universities followed this example. Weindling reported that at the Universities of Frankfurt and Heidelberg the "complete removal" of specimens was advised rather than an identification and documentation of these specimens and their history. He asserted "the pattern for most universities was a shift from denial [of their NS history] to rapid disposal [of reminders thereof]," thereby forgoing the opportunities given by a wider investigation of the past. Among these opportunities, he saw the discussion of how to deal with these reminders of the past, a thorough documentation of the history and the identification of the victims. As the leader of a project identifying all victims of coercive research under National Socialism, Weindling finally declared, "each victim deserves named commemoration." During the following very lively discussion, Horst-Werner Korf, Chairman of the

Dr. Senckenbergische Anatomy University Frankfurt, Germany, questioned Weindling's sources for the actions in Frankfurt. Korf himself had never seen any evidence at the Frankfurt anatomical institute, which had been destroyed by bombs at the end of the war, which related the existence and disposal of any specimens from the NS period. Weindling explained that he had found clear documentation at other university institutions including the Dean's office. This exchange elucidated again the unique contribution that historians can provide in the investigation of specific institutes, whose own archives and collections might have been damaged by war destruction or other postwar influences.

William Seidelman reflected about his own experiences in the pursuit of the history of anatomy in the Third Reich in his contribution titled "Dissecting the history of anatomy in the Third Reich: A personal account." He started by acknowledging the great assistance he has received over time by the late Neurologist Jürgen Peiffer, the Geneticist Benno Müller-Hill and the Historian Michael Kater. Seidelman's involvement with the subject began in 1989, when Müller-Hill alerted him to the aforementioned television report on anatomical specimens from NS victims. His proposal for memorial services to be held on the disposal of the specimens received ambivalent answers from the German government, the universities, and the Max-Planck Society. Similarly, his suggestion of an outside investigating commission for the study of specimens believed to exist at Heidelberg and Munich was not met with consent. In the early 1990s, he became aware of the questions surrounding the Pernkopf atlas (Williams, 1988) and initiated an inquiry by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Israel, demanding a study of the origins of the human models used in the atlas from the Vienna university. Seidelman recalled how the Rector of the university, Professor Alfred Ebenbauer, became frustrated by incomplete answers from his own officials and decided to open an investigation, which resulted in the *Senatsprojekt der Universität Wien "Untersuchungen zur Anatomischen Wissenschaft in Wien 1938-1945"* (Project of the Senate of the University of Vienna "Investigations into the anatomical sciences in Vienna 1938-1945," Malina and Spann, 1999). The Vienna project and the Tübingen report were among the earliest intensive studies of anatomical institutes in the manner envisioned by Seidelman, and they were followed more recently by others, e.g., in Jena and Giessen. Seidelman expressed himself as very relieved to see that the day had come when a first public symposium on the subject had become possible. In another active discussion, Putz explained that he had searched the archives of the anatomical institute in Munich but not found any evidence of specimens from NS victims. Gerrit Hohendorf, Medical Historian and Psychiatrist at the Technical University of Munich, reported on the fate of anatomical and neurological specimens at the University of Heidelberg in 1960 and 1989. At Heidelberg, a memorial has been created that names the children who were victims of the research of neurologist Carl Schneider.

Hans-Joachim Lang, a journalist and historian from Tübingen, Germany, gave the final talk entitled "'To collect and process material' August Hirt and the 'exceptional opportunities to purvey corpses' for anatomical institutes during National Socialism." He reported on the close collaboration between the Strassbourg anatomist Hirt and Himmeler's "Ahnenerbe" (ancestral heritage) organization, which

enabled Hirt to gain access to bodies of the executed from concentration camps for anatomical purposes as well as living prisoners for experimental research. The anthropologist Bruno Beger selected prisoners from blocks 10 and 21 at Auschwitz *Stammlager* (main camp). They were sent to the concentration camp Natzweiler, then killed in a gas chamber and transported to the anatomical institute in Strassburg for a planned "skeleton-collection." In several years of research, Lang was able to identify and reconstruct the biographies of all 86 victims (Lang, 2007). He said, it is "not the victims have lost their human dignity, but the researchers who used them for their purposes." In 2005, a memorial inscription with the names of the victims was installed at the concentration camp Natzweiler and a headstone for the victims at the Jewish cemetery in Strassbourg. No members of the German medical community took part in these public memorial ceremonies.

The poster session included the aforementioned contributions from Halle and Jena. The anatomists Hermann Koepsell, Thomas Blessing, Anna Wegener, and Michael Stolberg from the University of Würzburg presented the first study of the Würzburg anatomical institute's use of bodies during the NS period. They documented that a significant number of these were bodies of the executed. A similar situation existed in the anatomical institute in Göttingen, as related in the poster by Historian Susanne Ude-Koeller's and Christoph Viebahn's, with the title "... agreeing to provide 500 RM for the transfer of an increased number of corpses from Wolfenbüttel." In addition, they investigated the political affiliations of leading anatomists with the NS regime. Ude-Koeller and Viebahn drew the conclusion that this history demands an even closer attention of today's German anatomists to ethical standards in body procurement. The remaining posters dealt with biographies of prominent anatomists. The Freiburg Historian Angelika Uhlmann reported on new insights into the career of August Hirt (1896-1945). Anna Wegener contributed a biography of Curt Elze (1885-1972), Anatomist in Würzburg. Andreas Winkelmann and Thorsten Noack presented a critical reading of the life of Max Clara in "Too much honor for Max Clara? The Clara cell and the Third Reich" that included a discussion of the use of eponyms derived from NS anatomists.

One of the general conclusions from this meeting is that much work still needs to be done in the field of anatomy in the Third Reich. This includes the identification of the victims, identification of the displaced anatomists, historical investigation of the anatomical institutes who have not done so yet, and a closer analysis of the postwar consequences of the history. At the same time, the contributions, especially from historians, have shown a "best practice" on how to approach historical investigations of anatomical institutes, that is in an interdisciplinary collaboration between historians and anatomists.

The meeting was well attended with over 100 listeners in the audience, including anatomists, students, and members of the public, young, and old. Press releases by Science, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, and Süddeutsche Zeitung preceded or accompanied the symposium and reflected the importance of the subject for the general public. An informal afternoon session allowed the contributors to the symposium to discuss future projects and collaborations. The atmosphere at the symposium was open and friendly throughout under the excellent leadership of Christof

Redies. The proceedings of the symposium will be published in a special issue of *Annals of Anatomy*, the journal of the *Anatomische Gesellschaft*.

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