



Invited review

August Hirt and “extraordinary opportunities for cadaver delivery” to anatomical institutes in National Socialism: A murderous change in paradigm

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SUMMARY

German anatomical institutes always had problems obtaining sufficient cadavers for research and training. In the National Socialist (NS) period this changed. Universities could count on “extraordinary opportunities for cadaver delivery.” Most frequently tacitly, many bodies were those of victims of NS crimes. Scientists increasingly exploited the exceptional political situation to systematically supplement their institutional collections. Their endeavors to fill the, in their terms, “lamentable gaps” in their collections took on truly bizarre forms. In Austria, Jewish cemeteries were plundered for racial-political expansion of anatomical collections. A change in paradigm was merely the next step: intentional murder for the benefit of NS-oriented science. In December of 1942, anatomists meeting in Tübingen discussed plans for “material acquisition.” August Hirt, director of the anatomical institute at the Reichsuniversität in Strasbourg, was to develop guidelines. There was express reference to “Auftrag Beger,” which had already been conceived although not yet realized: at the behest of Hirt and the SS-scientific organization, “Ahnenerbe,” the anthropologists Bruno Beger and Hans Fleischhacker selected 86 Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz in June of 1943 and deported them to the concentration camp at Struthof near Natzweiler, where they were murdered. The bodies were delivered to the anatomy department in Strasbourg for preparation and used as anatomical specimens. The Reichsuniversität Strasbourg was considered a center of excellence for Nazi ideology. For modern scientists, the elucidation of these criminal acts is not exhausted in the search for an answer to the questions of perpetrator, place, modus operandi or motive. A suitable memorial to the victims must go beyond mere quantification.

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1. Introduction

On November 13, 1942, August Hirt (Fig. 1), a Professor of Anatomy at the Reichsuniversität Strasbourg, wrote a letter outlining the elements of a change in paradigm. In this letter, Hirt complained of professional stress related to an anatomical conference [The original refers to an “Anatomenlager.” The meeting took place 2–13, November in 1942. Shortly before, Hirt had been in Berlin

and spoken to the “Ahnenerbe” directorate on November 2, 1942. In an official memo on the topic, one can read: “Prof. Hirt kann erst seinen Bericht nach Rückkehr von Tübingen machen.” (Prof. Hirt can prepare his report only after his return to Tübingen.) Hirt took the train from Berlin to Tübingen and from there, after a brief stay, returned to Strasbourg. It has not been possible to find more information on the “Anatomenlager” or about who participated in it. Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch), NS 21/905.] in Tübingen: “There, a proposal was made that anatomists should collect and process materials as already specified in “Auftrag Beger.” Others are gradually becoming aware that something could happen here (...).” In handwriting, Hirt had added:

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Fig. 1. August Hirt (1898–1945). Hirt went into hiding in the Black Forest after the war and shot himself with a pistol on June 2, 1945. Photo: Lang.

“I have been commissioned to compose guidelines for the collection of materials for all German anatomists [August Hirt to Wolfram Sievers, Letter of 13.12.1942 – BArch, NS 21/904].”

The recipient of the letter, Wolfram Sievers (Fig. 2), was the director of the SS research association “Ahnenerbe” founded in 1935. Its most important function was to prove the privileged origin and superiority of the “Aryan race” (see Kater, 2000). Initially, the organization had been focused on the humanities, but, after the start of the war, its emphasis had shifted to the field of biological sciences. August Hirt was to play an important role. After positions in Heidelberg, Greifswald and Frankfurt am Main, he



Fig. 2. Wolfram Sievers (1905–1948). Sievers was condemned to death in the Nuremberger Doctors’ Trials and executed on June 2, 1948.

became chairman of the anatomical institute at the newly founded Reichsuniversität at Strasbourg on October 1, 1941 [Universitätsarchiv Frankfurt, Abt.1, Nr. 18a Akten des Rektors, August Hirt]. SS-Untersturmführer Hirt met Sievers on November 23, 1941, at the founding festivities of the Reichsuniversität, and Sievers succeeded in gaining the commitment of the ambitious medical scientist as a part-time department head for the newly founded “Ahnenerbe” institute for military scientific research. [A journal entry by Wolfram Sievers of 10.12.1941 documents the beginning of the cooperation between “Ahnenerbe” and Hirt. Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden (HHStAW), Abt. 461, Sonderband (SB) II, Nr.1. – in July of 1942 the Institut für wehrwissenschaftliche Zweckforschung was founded in “Ahnenerbe” and Hirt was named director of the Department H (Hirt). Staatsarchiv Nürnberg (StAN), NO-422.] Under the guise of a military enterprise this institute carried out experiments on humans, in particular on prisoners in concentration camps.

One must understand the framework of these institutions to fully comprehend the implications of Hirt’s letter to Sievers. The fundamental basis of agreement between Hirt and Sievers can be constructed as follows; they viewed themselves as pioneers paving new pathways for the collection and processing of materials of interest to anatomists. Hirt referred to “Auftrag Beger,” in which this innovation was apparently first mentioned, and, as he himself had taken on the duty of formulating a set of guidelines for the acquisition of material for all German anatomists, one may assume that “Auftrag Beger” would achieve exemplary importance.

“Auftrag Beger” represented a radical transformation among the changes in scientific activity that had already ensued in the anatomical institutes, the results of which were also characteristic for the Third Reich. From the onset of the war, the storage facilities of the respective anatomical institutes for cadavers had rapidly filled. Robert Wetzel, the director of the anatomical institute in Tübingen, spoke of “extraordinary opportunities for the delivery of cadavers [Robert Wetzel on 11.8.1943 to the Rector of the University at Tübingen – Universitätsarchiv Tübingen (UAT), 117c/495].” Careful perusal of the entries in the body register there reveals that this increase was by no means only due to combat. Namely, approximately two thirds of the delivered bodies were those of forced laborers, political prisoners and prisoners of war who had met with a violent death (Schönhagen, 1987; see p. 123). Examinations of the body registers in the institutes of other universities reveal a similar picture (e.g., see Redies et al., 2005). This was also the case for the Reichsuniversität Strasbourg. The anatomical institute there received dead bodies from the concentration camp at Struthof near Natzweiler [Hirt on 20.10.1942 to Sievers: “Das Institut zahlt pro Leiche eine Ablieferungsgebühr von RM 10 – an die Mannschaftskasse des KL Natzweiler” (For each dead body, the institute contributes the amount of 10 Reichsmark to the personnel cash box at the concentration camp Natzweiler.) – BArch, NS 21/905].

Thus the delivery of bodies of victims of the NS regime to an anatomical institute was not exceptional in itself during the NS period. However, “Auftrag Beger” represented a completely different pattern. It was no longer a matter of a passive acceptance of “material,” but rather of playing an active role in the acquisition. It represented a change in paradigm.

2. Science and SS

At his first meeting with Sievers, on the occasion of the opening of the university in Strasbourg, Hirt mentioned a collection of skulls which had been established by the anatomist Gustav Schwalbe at the close of the 19th Century in the then German University of Strasbourg [No protocol of this meeting exists. However, this subject arises automatically from the directly following cooperation.]. This collection was now to become a part of racial research, and form

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