



Research article

The Munich Anatomical Institute under National Socialism. First results and prospective tasks of an ongoing research project

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SUMMARY

While research into the history of German anatomy under National Socialist rule has increased during the last decade, the story of one of the most important anatomical institutes of the time, the *Anatomische Anstalt* Munich, has not yet been explored. This study presents the results of an ongoing, cooperative research project at the universities of Halle and Munich and focuses on the history of the institution, its personnel and organization, and its interactions with the National Socialist regime. It reveals continuity and disruption within the institute following Munich anatomists' involvement with the regime's policies and ideology as well as their becoming victims to these policies. Also documented is the manner in which the Munich anatomy benefited from the massive increase in executions, especially during the Second World War, by receiving and using the bodies of prisoners executed at the Stadelheim prison in Munich for scientific purposes. Finally, an outlook is presented regarding planned research aiming to fully understand the history of the *Anatomische Anstalt* during National Socialism.

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1. Introduction

In September 2011, a research project was launched at the University of Halle's Institute for History and Ethics of Medicine, focusing on the history of the *Anatomische Anstalt* in Munich between 1933 and 1945. In cooperation with the Munich Anatomical Institute and the Institute for Ethics, History and Theory of Medicine at the University of Munich (LMU), the project aims at shedding light on the involvement of Munich anatomists in National Socialist policies, especially the expulsion of scientists and the use of executed prisoners for anatomical teaching and research. Archival resources exist in the University of Munich's archive (UAM), the State's archive of Munich (StAM) and the Bavarian Main State's archive (BayHStA). Research in these archives has led to the disclosure of results concerning the anatomical institute's history in the period of National Socialist rule. It has also promoted the understanding of further tasks and challenges of the project. Both aspects of the project, the results and the upcoming tasks will be presented in this article.

2. Historical background: anatomy in the Third Reich as a subject of research

Until the end of the 1980s, there was almost no research concerning the history of anatomical institutes and the involvement of anatomists in National Socialism. Although the anatomists August Hirt (1898–1945) from the *Reichsuniversität* (imperial university) in Strasbourg, Johann Paul Kremer (1883–1965), who served as a SS-physician in the concentration camps at Dachau and Auschwitz, and Herman Stieve (1886–1952) from the University of Berlin were, due to their involvement in crimes and iniquities, objects of post-war investigations, little was known about the profession's history in general (Mitscherlich and Mielke, 2009; Lachmann, 1977; Klee et al., 1988; Zimmermann, 2007). A general increase of interest in and research of the role of physicians in brutal National Socialist policies also affected the subject of anatomy. It led to first findings related to the anatomist Hermann Voss (1894–1987) from the *Reichsuniversität* in Posen and the University of Tübingen's anatomical department, as well as to a sudden cleansing of German anatomical collections (Aly, 1987; Schönhagen, 1987; Weindling, 2012). Subsequently, an intensive debate erupted on anatomist's ethics, which mainly referred to the *Atlas der topographischen und angewandten Anatomie des Menschen*, on which the University of Vienna's anatomist and active supporter of National Socialism, Eduard Pernkopf (1888–1955), had been working since 1937 (Hildebrandt, 2006).

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Ever since, historical research on German and Austrian anatomical institute's and anatomist's involvement in National Socialism has been intensified. Over the past 15 years several studies were published concerning the anatomical departments of the Universities in Bonn, Halle, Hamburg, Heidelberg, Jena, Kiel, Marburg und Vienna (Forsbach, 2006; Viebig, 2002; Rothmaler, 1990; Sommer, 2006; Redies et al., 2005; Buddecke, 2010; Grundmann and Aumüller, 1996; Aumüller and Grundmann, 2002; Spann, 1998). Also Herman Stieve and his research on executed women was a subject of intensive investigation and publications (Schagen, 2005; Noack, 2008; Winkelmann, 2008; Winkelmann and Schagen, 2009; Hildebrandt, 2013a). In June 2012, *Annals of Anatomy* released a special issue solely dedicated to research on the history of anatomy under National Socialism, which presented the latest findings and results (Hildebrandt and Redies, 2012).

3. The *Anatomische Anstalt* in Munich

The University of Munich's anatomical institute's history was not included in this wave of research. Although in the early 1990s William E. Seidelmann had already suspected the institute's anatomical collection may hold specimens from victims of National Socialism, no proof could be found concerning the specimens (Seidelman, 2012). Due to the disappearance of essential documents, no further research was pursued. The *Anatomische Anstalt* was the biggest institute of its kind in Germany – with 2 anatomical chairs and almost 4000 medical students registered in Munich in 1939/40, it was even bigger than the Berlin institute (Kästner and Thom, 1990). Still, only few aspects of its development between 1933 and 1945 have been thoroughly investigated. This is also due to the fact that the general history of the University's Faculty of Medicine is still a desideratum (Kraus, 2008; cf. Steger, 2000). A collection of biographical and bibliographical data on Munich anatomists as well as a compilation of articles dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the institute in 2009 did not contain new conclusions on the Nazi period (Egerer, 1970; Kaiser, 2009). However, some other publications related to the development of the University in the first years of National Socialist rule, to the expulsion of anatomists for racial reasons and to the role of National Socialist activist and head of the *Anatomische Anstalt* from 1942 to 1945, Max Clara (1899–1966), revealed first indications of the institute's past (Böhm, 1995; Langenbucher-Kallmünzer, 1982; Hildebrandt, 2012; Winkelmann and Noack, 2010). A more comprehensive analysis of how the anatomists at the *Anatomische Anstalt* were influenced by National Socialism and what impact this influence had on their research and teaching is still missing.

On the other hand, the anatomical institute's way of obtaining corpses for its educational and scientific purposes have recently been investigated. The results of this research point out that corpses of executed prisoners from the Stadelheim prison in Munich were used by the *Anatomische Anstalt* (Noack and Heyll, 2006; Noack, 2012). To what extent this practice was upheld and how many victims of the wave of capital punishment in the Third Reich—more than 16,000 executions were carried out between 1933 and 1945 due to death sentences by non-military courts alone (Wachsmann, 2004)—were exploited by the anatomical institute in Munich is still unclear. The current research project carried out by the Institute for History and Ethics of Medicine in Halle, the *Anatomische Anstalt* and the Institute for Ethics, History and Theory of Medicine in Munich is dedicated to answering those questions concerning the involvement of the University of Munich's anatomical institute in National Socialism.

4. The *Anatomische Anstalt* after 1933: continuities and disruptions

The development of the Munich anatomical institute's personnel was influenced by the new regime in several ways. The institute was in a unique situation in 1933: at the time Hitler became German chancellor, every single scientist working for the institute had received his medical degree, his doctorate and his postdoctoral lecturing qualification in Munich—it was literally a *Munich* anatomy. The discrimination and dismissal of Jewish and politically suspicious persons from German public service after 1933 had a first impact on this situation. Two *außerordentliche* professors (professors not holding a chair) at the *Anatomische Anstalt* were affected by the *Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service* of April 7, 1933: Friedrich Wassermann (1884–1969) and Harry Marcus (1880–1976). Both professors were of Jewish descent. Although they had converted to Protestantism long before, they lost their employment as National Socialist anti-Semitism was not concerned with belief but rather with ancestry (UAM, E-II-3487, Questionnaire Wassermann, 12.6.1933; UAM, E-II-2375, Questionnaire Marcus, 30.5.1933). Wassermann and Marcus were able to continue their work until the end of 1935 because they had both served in the German civil service before 1914 and in the German army during the First World War. With the implementation of the Nuremberg racial laws, however, they not only lost their jobs, but were also stripped of their titles (BayHStA, MK 44481, Bavarian State Ministry for Education and Culture (BSMUK) to President of Munich University, 27.12.1935; UAM, E-II-2375, BSMUK to Marcus, 2.3.1936). Wassermann was allowed to take a position offered to him by the University of Chicago in 1937, Marcus fled to Bolivia after the German invasion of Poland in 1939 (UAM, E-II-3487, BSMUK to President, 22.10.1937; UAM, E-II-2375, BSMUK to Administration Committee of Munich University, 31.10.1952).

Those direct impacts of National Socialism on Munich anatomists blended into changes related to the retirement of chair holder Siegfried Mollier (1866–1954) in 1934. Mollier had started as an assistant at the Munich anatomy in 1889 and had taken over the directorate in 1923 without any competition for the vacancy, and this is exactly how he wanted to handle his succession. He talked to the dean of the Faculty of Medicine, named his former deputy director and current chair holder at the anatomical institute in Zurich, Walther Vogt (1888–1941), as the “best” and “only possible candidate” and even expressed his willingness “to step down immediately, if this was the formal prerequisite for the appointment of Mr. Vogt.” (BayHStA, MK 69378, Dean to BSMUK, 11.5.1934) Vogt, who was also listed as first to succeed to the anatomical chairs in Berlin and Leipzig, finally chose Munich, where he had already been employed as an *außerordentlicher* professor from 1923 to 1930. Besides one semester in Munich, Vogt had studied in Marburg where he had also received his degrees. He had worked at the anatomical institutes in Marburg, Rostock and Würzburg before he came to Munich in 1923 (BayHStA, MK 44463, Questionnaire Vogt, 30.6.1936). At the time he took office, he was the only scientist at the institute not having had taken the specific *Munich* career path and he was eager put an end to this path as soon as possible.

In his correspondence about his future assignment, Vogt complained to the BSMUK about the “complete obstruction” of all positions at the *Anatomische Anstalt* because the currently employed scientists would not be appointed by other universities for racial, scientific or other reasons. While, in this letter Vogt did not see any possibility to change this situation and maybe did not want to harm his former colleagues, whom he had gotten to know as “estimable coworkers”, a few months later he adjusted his perception to the political climate of the Third Reich: He proposed the replacement of Harry Marcus by the anatomist Adolf Dabelow (1899–1984) (BayHStA, Vogt to BSMUK, 28.6.1934; BayHStA, Vogt

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