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## The science prior to the crime—August Hirt's career before 1941

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### ABSTRACT

August Hirt (1898–1945) has achieved macabre renown for atrocities perpetrated during his years as professor of anatomy at the Reichsuniversität Straßburg 1941–1945. Little, however, is known about his preceding scientific career. To fill this gap and to scrutinise whether he really was a mediocre scientist during his early years, as some have purported, we perused relevant historical archives and the available literature. In 1921, after medical school, Hirt started to research and teach at the Institute of Anatomy in Heidelberg, forging a steady career until becoming interim chair in 1935. He then became director of anatomical institutes in Greifswald 1936 and Frankfurt 1938 before going to Straßburg in 1941. Hirt seems to have been well-established in the community of anatomists. Some of his career advancements after 1933 were nevertheless facilitated by Nazi support.

His main scientific fields were the autonomic nervous system, in which he produced a relevant contribution to anatomical knowledge, and fluorescence microscopy. His development of a special “luminescence microscope”, in cooperation with pharmacologist Ellinger, was an important advancement in the history of microscopic technique. His early research was funded by national and international sponsoring bodies and was neither unethical nor racist. As Hirt did not publish anything after 1940, those who only knew his publications might think of him as a “good” scientist. To simply dismiss Hirt as a “pseudoscientist” would avoid the question—still difficult to answer—of how he could develop from an accepted, successful anatomist to a criminal “in the name of science”.

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### 1. Introduction

August Hirt (1898–1945), professor of anatomy at the *Reichsuniversität* in Straßburg in German-occupied Alsace-Lorraine, achieved macabre renown for atrocities perpetrated within the framework of the “*SS-Ahnenerbe*” (an SS ancestral heritage think tank) during the Nazi period. He had organised human experiments with Lost (mustard gas) in an attempt to find antidote substances to the deleterious effects of this warfare agent. In November 1942, about 180 inmates of the Natzweiler concentration camp south of Straßburg were tormented by application of Lost causing severe chemical burns and lung damage. About a quarter of them died immediately as a consequence of these experiments. Later, Hirt had 86 Jewish inmates of the Auschwitz concentration camp killed with the explicit aim of making them part of the skeletal collection of his institute. A group of 29 women and 57 men were selected, measured and photographed in Auschwitz, then transported to the Natzweiler camp. There, they were killed in the local gas chamber

in August 1943. The bodies were brought to the anatomical institute in Straßburg, where they were preserved in alcohol. Only the approaching allied armies prevented the realisation of planned “racial” research on these bodies and the production of skeletons (for more details see Mitscherlich and Mielke, 1949; Lachman, 1977; Klee, 1997; Lang, 2004; Benzenhöfer, 2010). These horrific deeds have earned Hirt the title of “Hippocratic criminal” (Kasten, 1991), of being one of the “Devil's Doctors” (Bernadac, 1978), or an “Anatomist of Infamy”, (Lachman, 1977), a term which Lachman coined in analogy to the report from the Nuremberg Physicians Trials on “Doctors of Infamy” by Mitscherlich and Mielke (1949).

Understandably, this has pushed August Hirt's earlier career into the background. As Reamey writes, “Little is known of the life of August Hirt prior to his involvement with the “*Ahnenerbe*” leading up to and during World War II” (Reamey, 2009). Was he really the “*fachlich eher mittelmäßig begabte jüngere Wissenschaftler* [young scientist of rather unexceptional professional talent]” (Bauer, 1996, p. 57), or the “*wissenschaftlich kaum bekannte Heidelberger Extraordinarius* [associate professor from Heidelberg little known in scientific circles]” (Schneck, 1993, p. 58), whose academic career was only boosted after the Nazis came to power? Is it true that Hirt “did not emerge there [in Straßburg] for the first time with

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his extremely racist ‘research’ methods”, as Hammerstein (1989, p. 505) assumes?

We hypothesised that such negative statements about the early work of August Hirt may be true, but may also possibly be biased as today’s scientists might try to distance themselves from Hirt by such statements. It has been quite common to categorise Nazi scientists as “pseudoscientists” to assure that they did not belong to the community of respectable and legitimate scientists—this, however, has often proven to be too simplistic a categorisation (Schleiermacher and Schagen, 2008). In fact, contemporary judgements on Hirt’s scientific achievements before the war tended to be less negative. For example, the dean of the Heidelberg medical faculty wrote in 1936: “Although not exceptionally creative, he never published worthless material” (UA Heidelberg PA 978). An expertise dated May 7, 1938 by Fritz Eichholtz (1889–1967), a pharmacologist from Heidelberg, reads: “In his scientific achievements, Herr Hirth [!] undoubtedly belongs among the best minds of the younger generation.” Eichholtz even goes so far as to assume that Hirt’s research “in the end . . . led to the discovery of lactoflavin [vitamin B<sub>2</sub>] by Wagner-Jauregg and Kuhn” (UA Frankfurt 145). We therefore found it interesting to examine in more detail where and how Hirt was active as an anatomist before going to Straßburg, what he had worked on prior to his involvement in the above mentioned crimes, how he was embedded in the anatomical community, what he had published and how his research was nationally and internationally received before, during and after the Nazi period.

By no means do we intend to rehabilitate Hirt, and not the least in the sense of “good researcher–bad person”. Neither do we intend to produce an explanation for Hirt’s perversion of the Hippocratic Oath. We assume that it is virtually impossible to “explain” such a transformation from “medical scientist to medical killer” (Kasten, 1991), certainly on an individual psychological level. Therefore, we will also abstain from describing aspects of Hirt’s personality and character, as some have done (see, e.g., Kasten, 1991; Lachman, 1977). The French physician François Bayle even based the following judgement of Hirt on his physiognomy and handwriting: “Constructed like this, with the rigor and quality of his scientific thinking, contrasting with his violent, cynical and amoral nature, Dr. Hirt could not but associate himself with characters like Himmler and Sievers . . .” (Bayle, 1953, p. 318). We suppose that such psychological predictions “after the fact” are not helpful at all. Rather, we have focused on filling the aforementioned gap in Hirt’s portrayal, primarily to scrutinise whether he really was a rather mediocre scientist during his early years in academia.

We will give a detailed, largely chronological account of Hirt’s life and career until 1939 and will then analyse his scientific achievements of this period and their reception within the scientific community. We will not go into detail about his last years, but will briefly look for connections between his earlier scientific research and his increasingly criminal activities after 1939. We base our account and analysis on the available literature, including Hirt’s own publications, and on a thorough search of the relevant historical archives. German quotes from archival sources have been translated by the authors.

## 2. Hirt’s career

### 2.1. Personal background and education

August Erwin Theodor Hirt was born in Mannheim on April 29, 1898, the son of the plasterer (later “liquor manufacturer”) Johannes Hirt and his Swiss wife Charlotte, née Rastenberger. He was born as a Swiss national and only took on German nationality after completion of his studies in 1921. At the time of data acquisition for his personnel file at the University of Greifswald, probably

1935, Hirt was without religious confession, although he had earlier been baptised a Protestant (UA Heidelberg PA 4235, PA 978; Drüll, 1986, p. 115).

Hirt attended elementary school for three and a half years in Mannheim, then changed to a humanistic *Gymnasium* (secondary school). In 1914, his school education was interrupted as Hirt volunteered for war service with the 2. *Badisches Grenadier Regiment*. His military deployment ended with a bullet wound through the upper and lower jaws in 1916 and a medal for the wounded in black (which was generally awarded for one or two injuries). This war injury must have been quite distinctive: during his period of tenure in Greifswald he was rumoured to have a cleft palate (UA Greifswald MF 107). Rolf Hochhuth, who in his play “*Der Stellvertreter* [The Deputy]” characterised Hirt as a cruel and callous SS doyen, refers to him as the “*Geierkopf mit zerschossener Kinnlade* [head of a vulture with a bullet hole in his chin]” (Hochhuth, 1963). Despite the ongoing war, the endured injury allowed Hirt to complete his *Abitur* (A levels) in July 1917 and to immediately proceed to studies in medicine at the University of Heidelberg, which he completed with state board exams on March 5, 1921.

In July 1923, Hirt married Frieda Maria Häffner (born in 1898), the daughter of a bridge engineer. The couple had a daughter born in 1925 and a son born in 1929 (UA Heidelberg PA 4235).

### 2.2. Advancement in Heidelberg and first political activities

Directly after his medical exam, Hirt began his career in anatomy as a medical intern at the anatomical institute of the University of Heidelberg under its director Hermann Braus (1867–1924), who was succeeded in October 1921 by Erich Kallius (1867–1935). Heinrich Münter (1883–1957) and Hermann Hoepke (1889–1993) were colleagues of Hirt at the anatomical institute during this period. Hirt had already completed his dissertation on “*Der Grenzstrang des Sympathicus bei einigen Sauriern* [The sympathetic trunk in some saurians]” with “*magna cum laude*” under Kallius’ supervision in January 1921. In December of the same year, he received his physician’s license. Over the next years, Hirt made himself a steady career at the institute of anatomy in Heidelberg. In 1922, he became the second prosector. His habilitation thesis “*Über den Faserverlauf der Nierennerven* [On the course of nerve fibres to the kidney]” was completed and accepted in 1925, and in 1930, he became *außerordentlicher Professor* (associate professor) of anatomy (UA Heidelberg PA 4235). Hirt was involved in teaching medical students. He lectured on the nervous and locomotor system, led first aid seminars and dissection courses and taught scientific methodology (UA Heidelberg Rep. 27/504). After Kallius’ sudden death in January 1935, August Hirt even took over the interim directorship of the Heidelberg anatomy department until November 1935. It was remarkable that Hirt was made the temporary director instead of Hermann Hoepke who was nine years his senior and who had been associated with Kallius for much longer. Grundmann assumes that the university preferred Hirt because of Hoepke’s “non-Aryan relatives” as well as Hirt’s SS membership (Grundmann, 2008). Kallius’ permanent successor, however, was Kurt Goerttler (1898–1983). The fact that Hirt was not considered for the chair of anatomy was justified by the dean in a letter of January 20, 1936 to the dean in Königsberg, “. . . that we do not want advancement within the same institute to become the custom” (UA Heidelberg PA 978).

Hirt and his long-time Heidelberg mentor Kallius were politically and ideologically close. A testimony to this is the “Gumbel case”. The far-left pacifist Emil Julius Gumbel (1891–1966) taught statistics as a *Privatdozent* (private lecturer) at the economic faculty of the University of Heidelberg. In 1924, his critical stance toward the judiciary and the military incited the anger of the Nazi dominated student body, conservative university circles, and the public. Kallius intervened as then current rector with the dean of

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