



Research article

The *Anatomische Gesellschaft* and National Socialism: An analysis based on newly available archival material



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ABSTRACT

The newly available scientific estate of Heinrich von Eggeling (1869–1954), long-time secretary of the *Anatomische Gesellschaft* (AG), allows a more profound analysis of how this scientific association went through the period of the “Third Reich”. At the first meeting under the new rulers in 1934, von Eggeling and Siegfried Mollier prevented their board colleague Martin Heidenhain from giving an introductory talk because they (not unjustly) feared anti-Jewish protests, but also because many anatomy professors, like other German scholars, were fervent nationalists who welcomed Hitler and largely accepted the expulsion of Jewish and other colleagues as ‘inevitable’ for national renewal. Many persecuted members nevertheless remained on the membership lists and the AG never officially introduced anti-Jewish bylaws. Eggeling and his like-minded colleagues successfully defended the international status of the AG, though not so much against the Nazi authorities but against a younger generation of anatomists who were willing to benefit from the new political situation and strived for their own *German* anatomical association.

The available archival material suggests that the motivation of the established leading members of the AG to take this specific path was not rooted in opposition to the new rulers but rather in defence of their traditional status of reputed professors running a time-honoured, world leading society. This made international reputation an important guideline for many decisions. While they did ward off attempts by the younger generation to politicise the AG, their post-war calls for an apolitical science remain ambivalent, as their own stance had not always been apolitical.

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1. Introduction

The *Anatomische Gesellschaft* (AG), founded in 1886, was – and still is – both an international scientific society and the main organising body for German anatomists. Until the 1990s, the view had prevailed within the society, that the AG had withstood the challenges of the Nazi period fairly well and had stood out from other comparable scientific societies in this respect, in particular because it had refused to become a strictly “German” society, had continued to democratically elect a five-member board, and had “protected” its Jewish members much more than others (Herrlinger, 1965; Kühnel, 1989; Schierhorn, 1980, 1986).

My previous investigation of the AG during the times of National Socialism was based on the published society proceedings

and membership lists and some additional published sources (Winkelmann, 2012). That study found that several members persecuted mostly for their perceived Jewish ancestry did leave the society during the Nazi years, if under unknown circumstances, while many persecuted members officially remained part of the society. As other scientific societies also still had Jewish members on their lists after 1939, the AG was, however, not as unique as had been claimed. The conclusion was nevertheless, that “it remains remarkable that the *Anatomische Gesellschaft* kept its international status against demands to make it a purely German society, avoided the introduction of anti-Jewish regulations and the *Führer* principle, and that it did not officially hail the new rulers during its first meetings after Nazi takeover.” (Winkelmann, 2012). The concluding hypothesis was that in 1933, none of the established chairholders in German anatomy stood out as being an influential Nazi activist and that therefore some of these established anatomists (the suggested names were von Eggeling, Mollier, and Stieve) may have had enough authority to resist attempts to align the society with the demands of the new rulers (Winkelmann, 2012).

That first study suffered from a lack of archival material and had to rely on an ‘official’ image of the society. More recently,

Abbreviations: AG, *Anatomische Gesellschaft* (Anatomical Society); NS, National Socialist; RGA, *Reichsgesundheitsamt* (Reich Health Authority); RMI, *Reichsministerium des Innern* (Ministry of the Interior).

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Hildebrandt investigated the same questions based on the Benninghoff estate. Her study revealed for the first time that one of the board members in office since 1929, Martin Heidenhain of Tübingen, was prevented from delivering his planned introductory lecture at the first meeting of the AG under Nazi rule in Würzburg 1934, because the other German board members, von Eggeling and Mollier, feared protests from other participants as Heidenhain had Jewish ancestors (Hildebrandt, 2013a). Letters from the Benninghoff estate demonstrated that Heidenhain had furiously left the meeting and had later asked for a statement of honour from the newly elected board, but without success. Hildebrandt could also show that first attempts to align the AG came not only from members but also from the *Reichsgesundheitsamt* (RGA, Reich Health Authority) and that an ideological meeting of anatomists called “Anatomienlager” in Tübingen 1942 had started an initiative by Tübingen anatomist Robert Wetzell to found a separate German body of anatomists, which, however, never materialised. Hildebrandt generally supported the above hypothesis that some established anatomists warded off attempts to closing ranks with the Nazis, but added that the decisions of the protagonists von Eggeling, Benninghoff, Mollier and Stieve “were not infallible” as exemplified by the Heidenhain case (Hildebrandt, 2013a).

With the recent discovery of the scientific estate of Heinrich von Eggeling, secretary of the AG from 1919 to 1949, in private hands (Winkelmann, 2015), the scientific correspondence of a leading figure of the AG during the years of the “Third Reich” is now also available for historical investigation. It allows a more complete description of how the AG went through these difficult years and also a deeper analysis of the motives and values, on which decisions of the main actors of the AG were based. The present study will test the hypotheses mentioned above against this newly available material, which is supplemented by several other archival sources (see below). Its main aim is not to judge but to investigate how the protagonists of the society dealt with the new political situation and to try to elucidate their reasons.

After presentation of the archival sources of this investigation, a detailed, largely chronological account of the events will be given, mainly following the new material of the Eggeling estate. This will be followed by an attempt at extracting the guiding motives and values underlying decisions of von Eggeling and his closer colleagues. Finally, the discussion will interpret the available historical information and embed this part of the history of the AG in the context of other comparable societies and the involved Nazi authorities.

As many members of the AG will appear in the text, basic biographical information of all those mentioned is summarised in the legend of Fig. 1 and not repeated in the text. For a general historical overview of the AG the reader is referred to the previous article (Winkelmann, 2012) and to Kühnel’s centenary report (Kühnel, 1989).

2. Archival sources and their protagonists

The main source of this investigation was the scientific estate of Heinrich von Eggeling, secretary of the AG from 1919 to 1949 (the “von” in his name will be omitted hereafter for readability). The estate is described in detail elsewhere (Winkelmann, 2015) and is now available at the AG archive of the present secretary, Prof. Friedrich Paulsen, in Erlangen. In short, the estate consists of 45 folders, mainly including Eggeling’s correspondence from 1919 to 1953 (not always complete), some additional material related to the AG (account books, membership lists, photographs, etc.), and autobiographical manuscripts. If not stated otherwise, quoted letters in this article stem from the Eggeling estate. The first number given in such quotes refers to the folder within the estate. If no other person is mentioned, Eggeling is the writer or addressee. Dates of

letters are given in the original German version. Thus, for example, “32/10.9.1939 to Stieve” refers to a letter dated 10 September 1939 written by Eggeling to Stieve, to be found in folder 32. Passages from Eggeling’s autobiographical manuscripts are quoted with folder no. 44 and page numbers. All letters of the period 1933 to 1942 and those of relevant persons after 1942 were scanned for their content and some keywords registered, which produced a searchable word document as the basis for this investigation.

Another source consulted was the estate of Curt Elze, which has not been used for historical investigations so far. The Elze estate is available at the university library in Würzburg (*Universitätsbibliothek, Handschriftenabteilung: Nachlass Elze*). It comprises 37 numbered folders and some additional boxes, is only partly inventoried and remains largely unexplored. Letters from this estate are quoted in the same way, but with the prefix “Elze:” before the folder number.

In addition to these estates, administrative records of the period were consulted at the Federal Archive (*Bundesarchiv*) in Berlin. Unfortunately, records of the RGA have been lost to bombing in 1943 (signature: R 86, inventory, p. XII). Records of the *Reichsministerium des Innern* (RMI, Ministry of the Interior) were available at least for the first years of interest (1933/1934, signature: R 1501/126406–126408). The records of the Ministry of Education and Science include some material regarding the ministerial permission to attend conferences abroad (signature: R 4901/2747), but no additional relevant information.

To enable the reader to put information from both legacies into the proper context, their two protagonists will be briefly introduced, particularly with a view as to their political position. **Heinrich von Eggeling, 1869–1954** (Figs. 1 and 3), was educated in the “school” of comparative anatomy of Carl Gegenbaur in Jena. After brief periods in Zürich, Würzburg and Straßburg, he returned to Jena in 1902, to become a professor of anatomy in 1904. After working in military hospitals during the First World War, he became secretary to the AG in 1919 and also editor of the journals *Anatomischer Anzeiger* and *Anatomischer Bericht*. He finally assumed a chair of anatomy in Breslau (today’s Wrocław) in 1922. In 1935 he retired from this position and moved to Berlin, continuing his work as secretary and editor. When bombings of Berlin intensified in 1943, he moved to Neustadt am Rübenberge, a small town near Hannover, where he died in 1954 (for more biographical detail, see Winkelmann, 2015). As for his political stance, Eggeling saw himself as an apolitical man and “never got seriously involved in politics” (44/p. 552). He favoured the monarchy (23/1.9.1949 to Kopsch), did not think much of democracy, and never joined a political party, including the NSDAP, but did vote for Hitler in at least one of the “decisive elections” (44/p. 553). His autobiographical notes, even if written after 1945, clearly reveal an anti-Semitic outlook on his professional life (see below), which was not uncommon among German professors at the time (Herbert, 2010).

After the war he claimed to have cautiously looked for contact with resistance circles during his time in Berlin – without success – but honestly admitted that he would not have been suitable as an active resistance fighter against the Nazis (17/9.1.1948 to Bluntschli). Eggeling actively looked into the Nazi past after 1945, and even wrote directly to Mitscherlich to get a copy of his report on the Nuremberg physicians trials (25/27.8.1947 to Mitscherlich; cf. Mitscherlich and Mielke, 1960). He also asked Mitscherlich about Rudolf Spanner, who had been accused of producing soap from bodies of Nazi victims in the Danzig anatomy department, but quickly saw these accusations as a mere act of denunciation when Mitscherlich informed him that Spanner was not mentioned during the trials (25/25.3.1948 to Mitscherlich). Eggeling was clearly appalled by what he read in Mitscherlich’s report about the human experiments and murders of August Hirt in Straßburg (23/4.10.1947 to Kopsch). Nevertheless, Eggeling never

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