

1. Introduction to “Anatomy in National Socialism” (Sabine Hildebrandt MD 4/15/14)

German anatomists used bodies of victims of the National Socialist system for anatomical purposes, a practice that is considered unethical from a modern point of view.

To understand this development, the following aspects of the history of anatomy in the Third Reich have to be considered:

- the interaction between anatomists and politics
- the political spectrum of the anatomists
- the victims, whose bodies were used for anatomical purposes
- the science of anatomy between 1933 and 1945

An analysis of this history reveals that German anatomists were involved in a gradual transformation from traditional procedures and attitudes to the commitment of inhumane acts that were facilitated by a criminal government. This development can be traced through several stages of ethical transgression:

- 1.) the initial transgression of the invasion of the intact dead human body for the purposes of science;
- 2.) new transgressions inherent in the changes in body procurement specific to the NS period;
- 3.) the escalation of these transgressions in anatomical research;
- 4.) the ultimate transgression—anatomical research on still living but “future dead” persons.

While National Socialism led to specific forms of transgressions within anatomy, the underlying forces behind these transgressions are not specific to the Third Reich but are still active in modern anatomy and medicine. As the scientific method has to remain central to new medical insights, medicine’s focus, and that includes anatomy, has to reintegrate scientific inquiry with the ethical and political dimensions of human nature. Modern anatomy can be a professional model for medical education as the anatomist and future physician learns to acknowledge the development of clinical detachment and to balance it with empathy.

Suggested reading:

Introductory article by Emily Bazelon, Slate magazine 11/2013:

http://www.slate.com/articles/life/history/2013/11/nazi_anatomy_history_the_origins_of_conservatives_anti_abortion_claims_that.html

Hildebrandt, S.; Redies, C. 2012. Anatomy in the Third Reich. *Annals of Anatomy* 194:225-227

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<http://mail.elsevier-alerts.com/go.asp?bESJ001/mCEIH36F/uBOCHS2F/xA2RI46F>