

## INTRODUCTION

The difficulty is, you see, that our imagination cannot count [...]

And if I say one died - a man I have made you know and understand [...] then perhaps I have told you something that you should know about the Nazis.

Erich Maria Remarque, 1946<sup>1</sup>

The connection between Erich Maria Remarque, author of the World War I novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and anatomy in National Socialism was a woman named Elfriede Scholz. She was a seamstress, born on 25 March 1903, and was executed in Berlin-Plötzensee at noon on 16 December 1943. Her execution had followed a verdict of “aiding and abetting the enemy”; she had criticized Hitler in conversations with her neighbors, who then denounced her to the authorities. Directly after the execution her body was taken to the anatomical department of the Friedrich-Wilhelm University of Berlin and used by Hermann Stieve, chairman of anatomy, for his research. Her maiden name was Remark, and she was Erich Maria Remarque’s sister.<sup>2</sup>

I had never heard of fates like that of Elfriede Scholz, or of any involvement of anatomists with the National Socialist regime and its victims, despite my interest in this period of German history. Born not that long after World War II in a small town in Western Germany, I always felt the silent presence of the aftermath of the Third Reich around me. I grew up without Jewish neighbors and knew synagogues only as empty spaces in urban landscapes. My first school was called *Geschwister-Scholl-Schule* after Sophie and Hans Scholl, university students who had been executed because of their resistance against Hitler. Even as a six-year-old I understood the enormity of their story. The voices of the adults around me grew unusually quiet and halting when they spoke about such matters, while they tended to turn louder and exuberant for many other reminiscences

of past times. Anne Frank's diary and Wolfgang Borchert's and Heinrich Böll's pacifist writings became part of my world of ideas, and schoolteachers introduced me to the facts of National Socialism. I felt drawn to this history, as I needed to know why the people I lived with had become part of a clearly atrocious past. When I began my medical studies in the early 1980s, the first comprehensive investigations on the involvement of medicine in National Socialist crimes were published, which I followed avidly. I felt reasonably well informed. However, it was only when I started my career in anatomy that I first heard of a connection between this field and victims of the National Socialist regime. A colleague asked me about the Nazi origins of Eduard Pernkopf's atlas of anatomy, and I had no answer for him. His inquiry sent me on a quest for information, and I soon realized that the subject was much more complex than I had anticipated and needed further exploration. While many scattered facts were available, there existed no overall narrative of this past. Fortunately, quite a few of my German colleagues had by then performed more systematic investigations into the history of their anatomical departments. Also, ventures into various German archives revealed that many documents had not yet been investigated. Based on the work of recent years, a first account of the subject is possible now. This book endeavors to follow Michael Kater's demand to be "neither apologetic nor demonological, but factual, precise, and to the point."<sup>3</sup>

To understand what happened to Elfriede Scholz, it is necessary to study the many aspects of the history of anatomy in the Third Reich. The first is that this period of our past has remained unexplored for many years. The great silence in postwar Germany regarding the National Socialist (NS) involvement of medicine lasted particularly long,<sup>4</sup> and even longer for anatomy. It took the passing of the last anatomists who had been active during this time and the retirement of their loyal students before serious investigations of the individual institutions became possible.<sup>5</sup>

Based on the general background of the National Socialists' efforts to control the universities, the relationship between the new government and the anatomical departments and anatomists will be explored. Apart from the general academic administration, the NS government was involved in body procurement, recruitment of personnel, and research funding. It also attempted to control the professional societies, often with great success. However, the *Anatomische Gesellschaft*, an international anatomical society based in Germany, managed to retain its international character and its autonomy to a certain extent. At the same time, the political spectrum of the anatomists at the universities reached from political dissidents, over those persecuted for so-called "racial" reasons to the politically vague, and

finally to the convinced ideologues. Many anatomists lost their positions, and their fates ranged from professional success after forced emigration to suicide and death in concentration camps

All of the anatomists remaining in Germany used bodies of victims of the National Socialist system for medical education or research. The victims were part of the traditional body procurement and included political dissidents from inside and outside Germany, petty criminals, psychiatric patients, deserters, and many others. They served as “material” for anatomical scientific studies. Research on bodies of executed persons, which had been an established practice in German anatomy before 1933, soared during the war. It will be shown that anatomists started to realize entirely new “opportunities” of research, which, after going through distinct stages of escalation, transgressed the traditional anatomical paradigm of work with the dead: three anatomists started to include the expected death of a person, a prisoner, in their research design, thus entering the field of human experimentation.

There was only one anatomist who refused to work with the bodies of executed political prisoners, Hermann Stieve’s young assistant Charlotte Pommer. When she recognized the bodies of prominent dissidents on the dissection tables of the anatomical department in Berlin, she decided to abandon her career in anatomy. She remained the only anatomist who protested the use of NS victims in the dissection room by changing careers; all others remained silent, even if they might disapprove of the regime. They knew their work was sanctioned by law, and as long as their methods were scientifically correct, most had no other ethical or professional worries. They maintained this attitude for the rest of their lives, as the postwar history of German anatomy shows. However, distinct changes in the professional ethics of anatomy since the war have led to a change of heart in a new generation of anatomists, who realize that the history of anatomy in National Socialism has implications for contemporary medicine.

This book is meant to lay the foundation for the remaining work still to be done in the field of anatomy. Other related medical fields, which also exploited the bodies of victims of the NS system for research purposes, can only be mentioned in passing to compare them, as a full presentation of the history of disciplines like pathology, neuropathology, or forensic medicine would go beyond the scope of this book. However, the most relevant studies are quoted for those interested in further information. Among the future areas of historical investigations in anatomy are the full reconstruction of the biographies of the anatomists, regardless whether their careers were disrupted by the NS regime or whether they thrived, and the documentation of the names and lives of the victims whose bodies were used for

anatomical purposes. Such documentation will become the keystone for the necessary memorialization of the victims. As Hans-Joachim Lang said, “Forgetting them would be the victims’ final annihilation.”<sup>6</sup>

After studying this history for several years now, I believe that it represents an example of the ethical dangers inherent to a medicine that believes itself on secure moral ground and has ceased to reflect on the paradigmatic basis of its methods of gaining knowledge. This lack of doubt concerning one’s own moral convictions, the institutional culture of medicine, and the current political environment is not specific to the Third Reich. Rather, it can be seen in many other periods of the history of medicine and certainly in current medical research, education and practice.

## Notes

1. Remarque, quoted after Gelder, *An Interview with Remarque*.
2. Glunz and Schneider, *Elfriede Scholz*.
3. Kater, “Burden of the Past,” 56.
4. Caplan, “The Stain of Silence.”
5. Hildebrandt and Redies, “Anatomy in the Third Reich.”
6. Lang, *Die Namen der Nummern*, 13.

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