

Dealing with Human Remains from Morphological Research in Nazi Germany – The Vienna Protocol

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Facts of Anatomy in Nazi Germany 1933-1945

Anatomists and Politics

- 30% of anatomists were dismissed as Jews or political dissidents
- 82% of remaining anatomists joined the Nazi Party
- Collaboration on racist theory and anatomical body procurement

Bodies

- Included increasing numbers of victims of the Nazi regime

Anatomical Education & Science

- Bodies of executed victims preferred for “freshness” in research
- Publications with studies based on victims’ bodies increased
- Teaching and research collections created using victims’ bodies

Stages of an Ethical Transgression

- Paradigm change from working with the dead to working with the “future dead” – human experimentation



Arrival of coffins with bodies of executed persons Vienna Anatomy 1943
Leopold Metzenbauer
Sammlung der Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien
– MUSA-ALT 7117/0, “Gesehen I” (Seen II)

Changes in traditional anatomical body procurement 1933-45

Legal sources, unclaimed bodies

New: Nazi victims

Deceased psychiatric patients

- include “Euthanasia” patients

Suicides

- increasingly Jewish citizens

Deceased prisoners

- more political prisoners due to Nazi laws more violence especially GeStapo
- camp prisoners: concentration camps; camps for forced laborers & prisoners of war; “natural deaths”

Persons executed in
civilian & military trials

- rising numbers due to new Nazi laws
1919-1933: ~ 200 executions
1933-1945: > 30,000; incl. women [3,963 delivered to anat dep]

August Hirt (1898-1945)



Plans for a murderous collection

Chair of Anatomy at Reichsuniversität Strassburg/Alsace, 1941- 44, SS-officer
Collaboration with *Ahnenerbe* [SS organization studying “race”] in experiments on prisoners with poison gas in Struthof/Natzweiler concentration camp

“Jewish skeleton collection” to complement existing 19th century “racial” collections

selection of prisoners in Auschwitz by SS anthropologists Bruno Beger and Hans Fleischhacker in summer 1943

Hirt gave cyanide salts to commander of Natzweiler for the murder of 86 victims

- 1946/47: Named in Nuremberg Doctors’ Trial
- 1953: indicted for murder in absentia in Metz/Alsace
- suicide in summer 1945



German anatomists used the bodies of Nazi victims in education and research, committing ethical transgressions that even included murder.

It is our duty and privilege to restore the biographies
and enable the memorialization of the victims
and give them back their names

Legacies – “Books, Bones and Bodies”

Tangibles and Intangibles

Few German and Austrian anatomists lost their positions after the war: the old teachers were the new teachers, the old researchers the new researchers. Their studies on bodies of Nazi victims were published in journals and **books** that were read around the world, and this knowledge is now integrated into the general canon of anatomy.

Bodies of Nazi victims were used in German and Austrian anatomies for many years after the war as part of institutional “material”.

For decades, there was silence surrounding these legacies.

1990s: Anonymous Burials

In the late 1980s, students in Heidelberg und Tübingen noted that **teaching and collection materials included specimens from the Nazi era.**

Following their protests and international calls for clarification, the German government ordered the investigation of all anatomy departments for specimens from the Nazi period. Max-Planck-Institutes conducted searches.

Some of these **1990s investigations** were thorough, e.g. in Tübingen and Vienna, most others were incomplete.

Specimens from bodies of Nazi victims were found and **interred in graves of honor, but anonymously.**

At the time, first specific **guidelines** on the handling of Nazi era human remains were formulated by the German Physicians' Chamber and the German Museums' Association.

Now: Reconstruction of Identities

Since then, a paradigm change occurred, recognizing the need to identify Nazi victims from human remains and historical documents, following (among other factors):

- Medical historian Paul Weindling's criticism of anonymous burials
- Research by historian Hans-Joachim Lang that proved that identities and biographies of Hirt's 86 victims can be reconstructed from historical documents

Recent examples of such work:

- Andreas Winkelmann's identification of victims from Berlin anatomist Hermann Stieve's personal research collection of histological specimens (Winkelmann, 2021)
- Investigations at Innsbruck anatomy (Czech and Brenner 2019)

Ongoing investigations of physical human remains

Despite previous investigations, more specimens from Nazi victims are **still found**, in institutional collections, as well as private ones owned by anatomists and former students. Ongoing investigations include:

- Blechschmidt collection of embryos **Göttingen** (Michael Markert, completed)
- Anatomy during National Socialism at the University of **Innsbruck**
- Univ. **Strasbourg** History of the Medical Faculty of the Reichsuniversität
- Gräberfeld X, University/City of **Tübingen**: <https://graeberfeldx.de/menschliche-koerperreste/>
- Oscar and Cecile **Vogt Neuroanatomy Collection** Düsseldorf
- Anatomy during National Socialism at the University of **Hamburg**
- Anatomical collection Friedrich-Alexander University **Erlangen-Nürnberg**
- Freie Universität **Berlin**/Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut Anthropology
- **Max-Planck-Society** specimens from NS victims

Summer 2014: **bone** fragments found on property of Free University of Berlin



in the vicinity of the former
Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institute for Anthropology, Human
Heredity and Eugenics
in Berlin Dahlem, Ihnestrasse 22

KWIs were predecessors of Max-Planck-Institutes

1942: Director KWI **Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer**,
an internationally respected twin-researcher,
was the mentor of **Josef Mengele**, who sent specimens
from Auschwitz to von Verschuer

This historical significance was overlooked and the
bone fragments were handled routinely & incinerated



<http://manufacturingrace.org/2-the-institute>

Further discoveries in collections of Max-Planck-Institutes 2015-17



The screenshot shows the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft website. At the top left is the logo, a green square with a white circular emblem containing a profile of a head. To the right of the logo, the text "MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT" is written in a teal, sans-serif font. Below this, a navigation bar contains the links "ABOUT US | RESEARCH | NEWSROOM | CAREER | INTERNATIONAL". The main content area features a breadcrumb trail: "Homepage > Newsroom > Max Planck Society concludes general audit / victim research project to commen". Below the breadcrumb is a dark grey sidebar with three menu items: "> Science Magazine", "> Images of Science", and "> Events". The main article title is "Max Planck Society concludes general audit - victim research project to commence in June 2017" in a large teal font. Below the title are four social media icons: Facebook, Twitter, Email, and Print. To the right of the article title is a small image of a human brain slide with a text box above it that reads: "Slide of a human brain from the specimen collection of the MPI of Psychiatry, 1920s (approx. 90 x 40 mm, the name was anonymised for privacy reasons)." Below the image is another text box: "Slide of a human brain from the specimen collection of the MPI of Psychiatry, 1920s (approx. 90 x 40 mm, the name was anonymised for privacy reasons). © MPIP".

- Necessity of formal protocol of standard for the handling of human remains from potential Holocaust victims
- Existing guidelines and recommendations were often discipline-bound and did not include the voice of victims, here: the Jewish community

May 2017: Interdisciplinary and International Symposium at Yad Vashem with experts on the Jewish perspective, archeologists, anthropologists and medical historians.

VIENNA PROTOCOL

Recommendations on How to Deal With Holocaust Era Human Remains

10 Principles: focus on priority of **identification**, inclusion of **descendant community**, dignified burial and complete documentation of individual victims, in order to aid their **commemoration**.

Responsum by Rabbi Joseph A. Polak

What to do when Jewish or possibly-Jewish human remains are discovered

In collaboration with Prof. Michael Grodin, Boston University
Chief Justice, Rabbinical Court of New England; expert in medical ethics;
survivor Westerbork & Bergen-Belsen

Responsum: a scholarly legal and ethical evaluation in the Jewish tradition

The only known Responsum that deals not only with physical human remains from the
Nazi era, but also with the use of data – the Pernkopf atlas

Text hosted by Boston University Elie Wiesel Center for Jewish Studies

<http://www.bu.edu/jewishstudies/research/project-on-medicine-and-the-holocaust/recommendations-for-the-discovery-of-jewish-remains-project/>

Thoughts on dealing with collections of unknown provenance based on the experience with the legacies of anatomy in Nazi Germany

How to investigate:

- Inventory and document: *open up all cupboards*
- Study for “clues” on the specimens, from labels to genetic analysis
- Find all historical documentation, interview witnesses
- Find existing guidelines/laws
- Involve affected community and listen

What you need:

- The will to find out the truth and communicate it transparently
- Funding
- Interdisciplinary working group, including external reviewers:
 - “Morphologists”: anatomists, pathologists, histologists, anthropologists, archeologists, geneticists
 - Curators who know historical conservation techniques; also: librarians, archivists
 - Historians
- Communication with the affected community, including spiritual leaders

Further reading:

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Recommendations on How to Deal With Holocaust Era Human Remains; from a Special Symposium at Yad Vashem, May 2017

Given the likelihood of future discoveries, it is imperative that there be clearly defined policies and guidelines regarding any possible future discoveries. The enactment and implementation of such policies and guidelines are ultimately the responsibility and jurisdiction of the state or region or institution in whose jurisdiction such discoveries occur.

The basic principles for handling of such discoveries must include:

1. Immediate securing and **protection of the specimens and the surrounding site** including, where appropriate, excavation.
2. The identification and securing of any and all available **archival records** and materials related to the discovery including, where possible, the provenance of the specimen and the **identity of the victim**. Ensuring unrestricted access to these archival records for research.
3. **Notification of the legal and institutional authorities** including extraterritorial authorities such as the war graves commissions as is appropriate.
4. When the religion has been clarified, **notification of the relevant religious authorities**.
5. Engagement of **historians** with expertise in the history of the institution, the era, and the specific program e.g. anatomy, 'euthanasia', experimentation etc.
6. The engagement of expert **archaeologists and anthropologists** or other such persons with expertise in the identification of human remains.
7. Where possible, **notification of family** or relatives of the victim, or, if these cannot be determined, relevant representatives of potential victim groups must be undertaken. Anonymized and collective burials and memorials should only occur when all attempts to identify the victim have been exhausted.
8. Determination of final **resting place** for the remains, based on any potentially known wishes of the victim, and wishes of victim's family or representative.
9. **Documentation of the history and identification of the remains**, including biographies of victims. Also, exact documentation of the handling of the remains since their discovery.
10. Ongoing **Institutional commemoration** of the victim(s) based on documentation of the history of events that led to the demise of the victim; including that of the institutions and organizations involved.



Libertas
Schulze-Boysen



Renatus Flick



Elfriede Scholz



Franz Dollnig



Elise Hampel



Frank
Sachnowitz

*“Forgetting them
would be the victims’ final annihilation”*

HJ Lang



Rose
Schlösinger



Helene
Delacher



Herta Lindner



Brandel
Grub



Mildred
Fish-Harnack