

Brain Research at Institutes of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society in the Context of National Socialist Injustices: Brain Specimens at Institutes of the Max Planck Society and Identification of the Victims (2017–2025) – Research Design and Methodology of the Oxford/Halle Project Team

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Introduction

The Oxford/Halle group (Paul Weindling, Michał Adam Palacz, with Aisling Shalvey and Aleksandra Loewenau) investigated the provenance of brain specimens from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes for Brain Research and of Psychiatry which came from the following groups of victims of the National Socialist regime: civilians from German occupied countries, prisoners of war (POWs) and forced labourers who died in German captivity, executed persons and victims of “social racism”.

Specimens unethically obtained from the brains of more than 300 victims were identified in the following collections:

- Julius Hallervorden’s collection of “military cases” obtained during the Second World War from German army pathologists via the Military Medical Academy in Berlin (the so-called Series M);
- Hugo Spatz’s collection of brains obtained during the Second World War from German air force pathologists (so-called Series L and Luk);
- Hallervorden’s and Spatz’s regular collections of brain sections from the Kaiser Wilhelm for Brain Research in Berlin-Buch;
- brain section collection of the German Institute of Psychiatric Research (Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Psychiatry) in Munich, including its Dissecting Lab (*Prosektur*) in Eglfing-Haar.

The assumption since the early 1980s was that unethically obtained brain specimens in the collections of Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes for Brain Research and of Psychiatry only came from “euthanasia” victims. Other groups of victims, such as Allied POWs and civilians from countries under German occupation, were overlooked until the Oxford/Halle group commenced research in 2017.

Identification of Victims

The identification of individual victims of unethical brain research in the Third Reich was a very complicated and arduous process. It could take up to several months to identify a single person. The process of identifying victims took part in four steps.

Step 1: The partially preserved accession registers and inventories of the above-mentioned collections were searched for specimens of potentially unethical provenance, e.g. typically Jewish or Polish female names on the list of Hallervorden’s supposedly “military” cases. In the case of most Series M specimens the available information at this stage were: serial number, surname, diagnosis and the institution or

location from where the brain was sent. While additional information was available for some specimens (particularly from the DFA collection in Munich), even less details were known about specimen from the L and Luk series.

Step 2: Potentially unethical specimens identified in Step 1 were then matched with original medical records, such as patient files and autopsy reports. Given that non-German names were often distorted in German documents, full identification of the victims was not an easy task and required constant comparison of the inventories with original medical records that were found in different archives all over Europe and beyond. While lists of civilian patients who died in German-occupied Poland were found in local archives in Warsaw and Lublin, their autopsy protocols were discovered among ca. 50,000 wartime pathology reports that are currently held in the German Federal Military Archives in Freiburg im Breisgau. The identification of POWs and forced labourers likewise required visits to various national archives as well as searching the records of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva and the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen.

Step 3: Additional information was sought about individuals who were conclusively identified in Step 2 as victims of unethical brain research. Various sources, such as civil registry, military and court records as well as online databases of Second World War victims were used to reconstruct a life story of each victim. Depending on the availability of data, the biographical profiles were thus supplemented with information about family background, childhood and youth, pre-war professional career and wartime persecution.

Step 4: The final step was to locate surviving relatives of the identified victims. This was done with the help of local archivists and journalists but also through social media and popular genealogy websites such as *MyHeritage* and *Ancestry*. The relatives were informed about the aims and results of the research project and in most cases were able to provide further details that were not available in other records. These personal recollections about the victims were of immense value in uncovering the persons behind the specimens. Unfortunately, surviving relatives were discovered only in a minority of cases. It is therefore hoped that the publication of the project database will facilitate reaching out to the families of the remaining victims.

Research Questions

In addition to identifying the victims and reconstructing their full biographies, the research of the Oxford/Halle group focused on unearthing the wider historical context of their death and on tracing the subsequent use of their body parts for scientific purposes. The provenance of each specimen was investigated on an individual basis, but in all cases the research was guided by the same set of questions:

- Who was the person behind the specimen?
- What were the circumstances of their death?
- How did the specimen end up in one of the scrutinised collections?

- What was the scientific interest in this specimen?
- What was the fate of the specimen after 1945?
- What happened to the rest of the body?

Civilians from German-Occupied Countries

The majority of unethically obtained specimens identified by the Oxford/Halle group came from civilians who died in German-occupied Poland. Their deaths were not deliberate killings but they occurred in the context of a genocidal occupation. Deaths from starvation and epidemic diseases, which were largely caused by Nazi policies of mass displacement and race-based food rationing, can hardly be seen as natural causes. Although the German military occupation of Belgium and Northern France was arguably less brutal, deaths of Belgian Resistance members in German captivity were likewise a result of persecution.

The presence of 197 brains from occupied Warsaw in Hallervorden's collection of "military cases" was previously noted by historians, such as Jürgen Peiffer and Hans-Walter Schmuhl, but they wrongly assumed that these specimens came from the Warsaw Ghetto, without attempting individual identification.¹ The research of the Oxford/Halle group revealed that the majority of the brains from Warsaw actually came from Jews who died before the ghetto was created in mid-November 1940. Some of them also came from non-Jews who died in 1940 and 1941 in the Hospital for Infectious Patients at Chocimska 5 or at the St Stanislaus Hospital in Warsaw. Overall, the Oxford/Halle group was able to fully identify almost 90% of the people whose brains were supplied to Hallervorden from Warsaw.

The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Brain Research also received 43 brains from Lublin and 2 from Częstochowa. It was possible to identify all of these specimens. While the 2 brains from Częstochowa came from Polish civilians, the specimens from Lublin derived from Poles and Jews as well as from German military personnel. Thanks to the discovery of matching autopsy records in Freiburg, the identification unethically obtained specimens from German-occupied Poland was possible even if the autopsy protocol number rather than the person's surname was listed in the inventory of the Series M.

More than 150 purportedly "military" brains collected by Hallervorden came from civilian victims of a typhus epidemic that broke out in German-occupied Poland as a result of mass displacement, material deprivation and racial persecution of the Jewish population. Many of the people whose brain tissue sections ended up in Hallervorden's Series M were Jewish refugees in Warsaw. They were brutally expelled in the winter of 1939/1940 from Polish lands of the so-called *Warthegau* that were annexed to the German Reich or who escaped on their own from wartime destruction and anti-Semitic persecution in smaller towns and villages of the General Government. Abandoned to

¹ Jürgen Peiffer, 'Assessing Neuropathological Research carried out on Victims of the "Euthanasia" Programme: With two Lists of Publications from Institutes in Berlin, Munich and Hamburg', *Medizinhistorisches Journal*, 34.3/4 (1999), pp. 339-355 and Hans-Walter Schmuhl, *Hirnforschung und Krankenmord. Das Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Hirnforschung 1937-1945*, Berlin: Max-Planck-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften, 2000.

their own fate by the German authorities, these refugees were forced to live in overcrowded and unsanitary shelters that soon became breeding grounds of the epidemic. All the Jews and non-Jews who succumbed to typhus in German-occupied Poland should therefore be regarded as victims of the Nazi state's racial policies.

Allied POWs and Forced Labourers

The fact that the wartime collections of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes for Brain Research and of Psychiatry included dozens of brains of POWs and forced labourers was overlooked by previous historians. The Oxford/Halle group's research identified around 70 specimens as coming from French (including African), Polish, Soviet, British and Belgian soldiers who died in German captivity. A brain of a Swedish sailor who had been captured on board of a Norwegian tanker off the coast of Madagascar was also collected by Hallervorden. A few brain specimens were further identified as coming from deceased forced labourers who were brought to work in Germany from occupied France, Netherlands, Poland and the Soviet Union.

Autopsies of deceased POWs by German military pathologists might have been a routine procedure, but the transfer of their brains to research collections in Berlin and Munich clearly violated the spirit if not the letter of Article 76 of the 1929 Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, which obligated belligerents to honourably bury soldiers who died in captivity.² In no case was there any notification on the German side that the brain was extracted and retained for research purposes. In contrast, personal possessions of deceased prisoners were painstakingly catalogued and often returned to families through the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Only a few Allied soldiers whose brains were collected by German neuropathologists were deliberately killed by their captors. A Polish prisoner who might have suffered from a mental disorder was shot by a German guard (apparently in self-defence) during an attempted escape from an Oflag near Eichstätt in October 1939. His brain specimens ended up in Hallervorden's collection of "military cases". In April 1944 another Polish officer was most probably murdered with an overdose of barbiturates in the Psychiatric Hospital in Kaufbeuren. His brain was autopsied at Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Psychiatry's Dissecting Lab in Eglfing-Haar.

The research of the Oxford/Halle group revealed, however, that many other Allied soldiers whose brains were retained as objects of scientific interest died as a result of maltreatment, medical negligence or unsanitary living conditions in POW camps and compulsory labour detachments. Infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis and dysentery, were the most common cause of death of these victims, which reflects on the conditions in which Allied soldiers were held in German captivity. Other prisoners died after suffering major trauma in combat (e.g. gunshot wounds to the head) and there were also cases of suicide.

² Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27.07.1929, available online at: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gc-pow-1929>.

The retention of brain specimens of deceased POWs by the post-war Max Planck Institutes for Brain Research and of Psychiatry contrasted sharply with the dignified burial of the rest of their bodies and the ongoing commemoration of war dead by national and international bodies, such as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The Oxford/Halle group has therefore endeavoured to include detailed information about burial and commemoration in their biographical profiles of all identified victims.

Executed Persons

Given the complexity of legal and ethical issues involved, the Oxford/Halle group's research on the executed persons whose brains were collected by Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes between 1933 and 1945 followed a different procedure. In 1989 death sentences of some but not all of these persons were reviewed by a legal advisor of the Max Planck Society who divided them into "justly" executed, "unjustly" executed and ambivalent cases.³ In contrast, rather than reviewing these judgements from a legal perspective, the aim the Oxford/Halle group was to evaluate these death sentences from a historical perspective. The following criteria were used in order to analyse the broader political and social context of each trial.

Legal basis: Was the death sentence based on pre-1933 legislation? Or was it based on Hitler's wartime decrees that introduced harsh and arbitrary penalties for minor crimes?

Procedure: Was it a regular criminal trial before a "Jury Court" (*Schwurgericht*)? Or was it a summary trial before a Special Court (*Sondergericht*) without the possibility of appeal? Was clemency automatically denied?

Possible bias: Was it possible that the judges were biased against the accused because of their race, social status, sexual orientation or prior criminal record?

Penal responsibility: Was the accused fully capable of penal responsibility on account of mental illness, neurological disorders or other psychological factors?

Political background: Was there any political interest in the outcome of the trial? Was there any pressure to pass a harshest possible sentence? Was the trial supposed to teach the German people a lesson?

Lack of information: Is there enough information preserved in the sources to do a comprehensive review of the case?

Some of the executed persons, especially those sentenced to death for minor crimes during the Second World War, were clearly victims of National Socialist injustice. The majority of the evaluated death sentences, however, point to a grey zone at the junction of Nazi criminology, psychiatry and social racism. The publication of the database will therefore enable other historians to draw their own conclusions about these ambivalent cases.

Conclusion

³ Archive of Max Planck Society in Berlin, II. Abt., Rep. 1F, Az A-II-7a, Verification of the reasons for execution, 13.02.1989.

The Oxford/Halle group's position is that all victims, including those killed as part of "euthanasia", merit a full biography which includes the cause of death. Whether they were victims of negligence, persecution or deliberate murder, it is in the deceased person's best interest to identify the real cause of their death. The Oxford/Halle group believes therefore that there is no reason to withhold details of illness and circumstances of death from the biographical profiles of victims of brain research in Nazi Germany. Complete transparency is necessary for the proper identification of unethically obtained specimens.

Without disclosing the exact circumstances of death, one is not able to explain the link between persecution and seemingly natural death of many civilians, POWs and forced labourers whose brains were collected by neuroscientists from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes for Brain Research and of Psychiatry. The retention of these specimens for research was a type of scientific exploitation that was unethical by international standards both now and then.

The project database includes biographical profiles of all the identified victims, including the executed persons whose brains were collected between 1933 and 1945. Short biographies of all these victims will also be published in a special commemorative volume. The Oxford/Halle group's view is that it would be unethical to select only a few biographies as all victim lives have equivalent value.