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Anatomy in National Socialist Germany
– Politics, Science, Ethics and Legacies

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U Nemocnice 3, Praha 2

Abstract: The systematic exploration of the interaction between the anatomical
sciences and the National Socialist (NS) regime in Germany has only recently
begun. Anatomists, in their role as physical anthropologists and racial hygienists,
contributed to the scientific justification of the biologistic NS ideology. After 1933,
most of those anatomists who were not dismissed for “racial” or political reasons
joined the NS party. Some served as leaders in the teaching and implementation
of eugenics, and all of them profited from changes in the traditional anatomical
body procurement, which included increasing numbers of victims of the NS
regime. Among them were psychiatric patients murdered in the “euthanasia”
program, prisoners of war, slave laborers and an unprecedented number of
persons executed following civilian and military trials. Anatomists used these
bodies for teaching and research purposes. A few researchers left the traditional
paradigm of knowledge gain through work with the dead for a new paradigm of
working with the “future dead” in human experiments on prisoners who were
subsequently murdered. The victims’ remains were buried in unmarked graves,
without names. Thus anatomists were complicit in the complete physical
annihilation and destruction of the memory of the perceived “enemies” of the NS
regime. Legacies from this history reach into the present and inform ongoing
discussions on dealing with human remains from past abuses, as well as
deliberations on the use of human bodies in current medical education.

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