



Legend or Truth? The supposed distance of the German pathologist Maximilian Borst (1869-1946) from National Socialism[☆]



Mathias Schmidt^{*}, Christina Graef, Dominik Gross

Institute for History, Theory and Ethics of Medicine, Medical Faculty, RWTH Aachen University, Wendlingweg 2, 52074 Germany

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ABSTRACT

The German physician Maximilian Borst (1869–1946) was undoubtedly one of the best-known and most renowned pathologists worldwide of his time. His work on tissue transplantation and cancer research set international standards. Furthermore his career in Germany was also almost unprecedented: He was appointed to a chair of pathology at a young age during the German Reich, continued his career seamlessly in the Weimar Republic and was even able to expand his career in the Third Reich. Finally, after the end of the Nazi regime, he was among the group of university teachers who were considered to be politically unencumbered.

The background to this favourable classification – and to Borst's unbroken career – was the fact that he had not joined the NSDAP in the Third Reich. Accordingly, he was considered apolitical. But is this reading tenable in the case of Maximilian Borst and does it stand up to critical historical scrutiny? What was the nature of Borst's relationship to the Nazi regime and what was his political position?

It is precisely these questions that are the focus of this article. The study is primarily based on archival sources. In addition, a systematic analysis was performed of the relevant international research literature on Max Borst's life and work and on the history of cancer research in the Third Reich in particular.

The paper comes to the conclusion that Borst demonstrably served the Nazi regime after 1933. However, Borst's closeness and loyalty to the National Socialists was not revealed through formal memberships of organisations such as the NSDAP or the SS, but rather through a number of influential positions in the field of health policy which were offered to him during the Third Reich. There is no doubt that the transfer of such functions presupposed “political reliability” and “loyalty to the line” on the part of the officeholder. Borst's often assumed inner distance to politics in general and to National Socialism in particular is just as incorrect as his alleged harassment by the Nazi bureaucratic system.

1. Introduction: Max Borst and his attitude towards National Socialism

The Munich professor Max Borst (1869–1946) (Fig. 1, [1]) is one of the best-known and most renowned scientists in the history of pathology. The eponymous “Borst-Jadassohn Epithelioma” [2] and “Borst's Small Cell” [3], which are now only sporadically cited, are reminders of this. Borst's work on tissue transplantation and his cancer research were just as groundbreaking as his classification of sarcomas (1902) [4]. Hajdu explained this recently:

“Depending on the accumulated reports on sarcomas and using available special histologic stains, Borst (1869–1946) of Germany was able to establish, once and for all, that sarcomas are malignant mesodermal tumors. He described and illustrated for the first time the

microscopy of ‘hemangioendothelioma’, ‘lymphangioendothelioma’, and ‘perithelioma’ (later known as hemangiopericytoma)” [5].

In total, Borst's list of publications includes well over 100 writings [6–8]. Numerous texts and biographies attest to Borst's “apolitical attitude” in the Third Reich and thus to his distance from National Socialism [8–11]. And it is true that Borst was not a member of the NSDAP or the SA/SS. He only belonged to associations such as the *Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt* (National Socialist People's Welfare) and the *Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Dozentenbund* (National Socialist German Lecturers' League) – affiliations that are likely to be assigned to “alibi memberships” [8]. It is also certain that Borst did not carry out any “racial hygiene” research and that, even after 1933, he repeatedly spoke out in favour of maintaining scientific standards, thereby offending NSDAP members or officials [8].

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^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: maschmidt@ukaachen.de (M. Schmidt), chgraef@ukaachen.de (C. Graef), dgross@ukaachen.de (D. Gross).



Fig. 1. Photography of Max Borst in 1929 [1].

In addition, it is reported that Borst feared for his chair in Munich due to his lack of proximity to the Nazi party. It is claimed that he had to accept numerous patronisings that made his life more difficult. The supposed distance to National Socialism was also the reason why Borst was counted among the few politically unencumbered Munich professors after the end of the Second World War [8–10,12,13].

The background to this favourable classification was the aforementioned fact that Borst had not joined the NSDAP in the Third Reich. But is this simple reading justified in the case of Maximilian Borst and does it stand up to critical historical scrutiny? What was the nature of Borst's relationship to the Nazi regime and how was he actually politically classified by the National Socialists?

It is precisely these questions that are the focus of this article. At its core is the fundamental question of whether the lack of party membership and the demonstrable demand for adherence to scientific quality criteria on Borst's part constitute sufficient evidence of an apolitical attitude and even of an inner distance to National Socialism.

2. Materials and methods

Archival sources from the Federal Archives in Freiburg (BArch Freiburg), the Agency of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records (BStU), the University Archives in Munich (UA M) and Würzburg (UA W), and the Thuringian State Archives in Weimar (LATH – HStA Weimar) form the central basis for answering the above questions. In addition, a systematic analysis was performed of the relevant international research literature on Max Borst's life and work and on the history of cancer research in the Third Reich – in particular in order to trace Borst's life and work after 1933 and his relationship to the Nazi party and the Nazi regime.

3. Results

3.1. The years until 1933

Johann Baptist Maximilian “Max” Borst was born the son of lithographer Ferdinand Borst on November 19, 1869 in Würzburg and was the eldest of four children. After graduating from secondary school in 1888, he served as a volunteer for the 9th Bavarian Infantry Regiment for one year. From 1889 he studied medicine in Würzburg and Munich and became a member of the Arminia, a duelling student fraternity. In 1892 he received his doctorate in Würzburg on “The Congenital Hip Luxation”, and in 1893 he became an assistant at the Pathological Institute in Würzburg under Heinrich Rindfleisch. There he habilitated in 1897 on “The Behaviour of ‘Endothelial Cells’ in Acute and Chronic Inflammation and in the Growth of Tumours”. He published his groundbreaking work on “The Etiology of Tumours” as early as 1902.

Following on from the fundamental ideas of Johannes Müller's and Rudolf Virchow's tumour theory, he created practicable diagnostic categories which became the basis for today's classification of benign and malignant tumours as well as for common classification principles (e.g. WHO classification). In 1904 he was already appointed to a full professorship in Cologne. In 1905 he moved to Göttingen and in 1906 he was appointed successor to his former mentor in Würzburg. His groundbreaking research on tissue transplantation (with Eugen Enderlen) and the description of the “Borst-Jadassohn Epithelioma” date back to his time in Würzburg. In 1910 he was appointed Professor of General Pathology and Pathological Anatomy at the University of Munich [6–9,12–19]. One of the assistants there, Werner Hueck, was later to become Borst's successor [8]. It was also Hueck who, through obituaries and publications, was to have a major influence on Max Borst's reputation and ultimately contribute to his posthumous fame [15–17].

Borst's wife Lucrezia, née Wimmer, died of tuberculosis in 1914. In the same year Borst was called up for military service. He established the first “war pathology” in the Bavarian army and was regularly transferred back and forth between the western front and his homeland. After the defeat of the German Empire, which he, like many of his contemporaries, described in terms of “disgrace and shame”, and the suppression of the *Münchener/Bayerische Räterepublik* (Bavarian Soviet Republic), Borst himself founded an academic *Freikorps* (free corps) [8].

The uncertain political situation in Germany after the end of the First World War led to the formation of numerous right-wing radical free corps recruited from former soldiers and volunteers, and these groups can be regarded as one of the breeding grounds of National Socialism. They fought on behalf of the Berlin transitional government against Communist coup attempts and revolutionary unrest. The free corps of Colonel Franz Ritter von Epp, for example was instrumental in the extremely brutal suppression of the Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919 [20–22].

Borst's academic free corps joined the so-called *Freikorps Epp* after the defeat of the Bavarian Soviet Republic [8]. In the *Freikorps Epp*, the Munich academics were in the company of convinced anti-Semites, anti-democrats and radicals. These included, among others, Ernst Röhm, who later became leader of the SA, Rudolf Hess, Hitler's later deputy, and Oskar Dirlewanger, who became SS General and was one of the worst war criminals of the Second World War [20,22,23].

In summary, Borst's attitude during this period was characterised at the very least by radical right-wing conservatism and a rejection of democracy. And contrary to what is occasionally claimed [8,9], this finding clearly shows that Borst did not come to terms with the government of the Weimar Republic.

3.2. Borst's career in the era of Third Reich

When the National Socialists came to power in 1933, Borst was actually on the brink of retirement and his career had already been “made”. In the 1920s in particular, he had also sought the international stage and had earned a worldwide reputation for his expertise. As a politically conservative, extreme anti-democrat, he was probably at least calm – if not hopeful – in the face of the change of power in 1933. Since he was not of Jewish descent and had not been politically active on the left wing or democratic spectrum, he did not need to be concerned regarding the retention of his official position. In addition, he had already been co-editor of the *Münchener Medizinische Wochenschrift* since 1927 [12] – a specialist journal published by the right-wing Lehmanns publishing house with its well-known “racial hygiene” orientation [24,25]. He was also a friend of the acting dean of the Munich Faculty, the psychiatrist Oswald Bumke [8,26,27]. The professors in Munich were generally rather anti-Semitic and hostile to the Weimar Republic. This also applied to the Medical Faculty there: there was no protest of any kind against National Socialist politics or against the dismissal of Jewish colleagues [26,28].

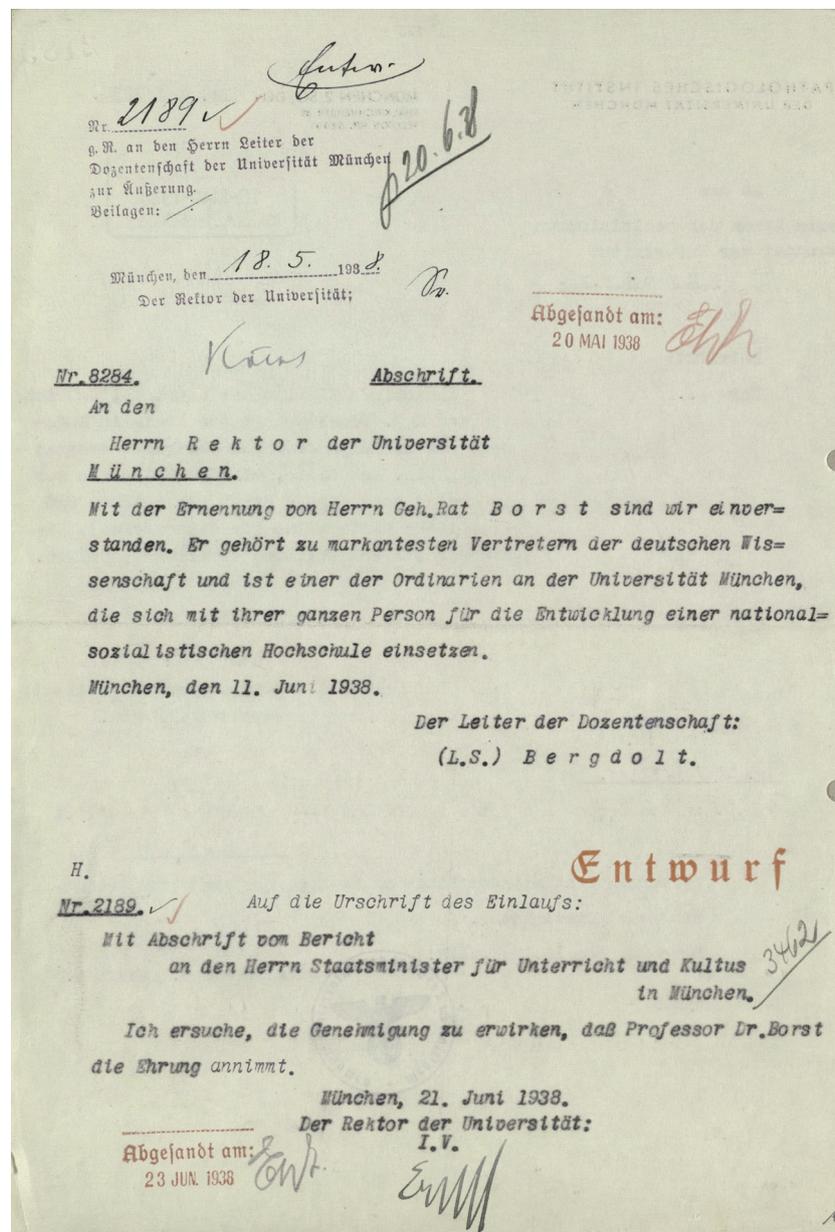


Fig. 2. Statement of the leader of the Munich Lecturers' League concerning Borst's nomination to become corresponding member of the Physician's Society Budapest (Hungary) from June 11, 1938 [37].

Directly in December 1933, Borst proved himself loyal to the new regime: After the death of the president of the *Reichsausschuss für Krebsbekämpfung* (Anticancer Committee) Borst took over the office and not only presided the *Gleichschaltung*, as Proctor put it [8,29], but also carried this out personally. The Anticancer Committee had been founded in 1931 with the task of initiating and promoting measures to combat cancer and to foster cooperation between various institutions and institutes. On December 1, 1933, a general meeting was convened, which was temporarily chaired by Borst and which elected Borst as the new chairman. A unanimously adopted amendment to the statutes aligned the organization to the *Führerprinzip* (principle of totalitarian leadership) – with Borst at its head [30]. On December 2, just one day later, Borst announced the dissolution of the *Zentralkomitee für Krebsforschung* (Central Committee for Cancer Research) in a special session. The chairman of this committee, Ferdinand Blumenthal, had already been removed from office because of his Jewish background. At the same time Borst delegated the tasks of the Central Committee for Cancer Research to the newly founded *Wissenschaftlicher Ausschuss des*

Reichsausschusses für Krebsbekämpfung (Scientific Committee of the Anticancer Committee) – and thus to the institution which he himself headed [30–34]. Borst's election was neither a coincidence nor a political oversight. This can be seen, among other things, from the fact that Borst was confirmed in this office by health leader Leonardo Conti in 1942 following the restructuring of the committee [33].

Borst would have been due to retire in 1935, since he had reached the legal age limit of 65 years (in November 1934). But he wanted to remain in his position, and he therefore put the Faculty under pressure: The political leaders had previously offered him the opportunity to take over the establishment of a cancer research institute at the Rudolf Virchow Hospital in Berlin – a professional and political distinction which he now used as a trump card against the Faculty. The Faculty then applied for Borst to be allowed to act as his own deputy (as was the case with other professors in Munich who were to be kept in their position) [8,26,34].

For Borst, retirement in line with his age would have been an ideal opportunity to escape the regime without fuss or loss of prestige –

assuming he had a moral problem with Nazi policy and the expulsion of Jewish colleagues. Borst, however, wanted to continue under the given (socio-political) conditions. Now at the latest it becomes apparent that the Munich Faculty and the National Socialist Ministry of Science, Education and National Culture considered Borst to be loyal to the party line. If there had been negative assessments of him, he would certainly not have been able to remain in his position. Borst seemed to confirm the party's positive assumptions: From October 1935, *Privatdozent* (Docent) Gustav Borger, a convinced National Socialist and confidant of the *NSDAP Reichsleitung* (NSDAP Reich leadership), was employed as a curator at Borst's Institute. If Borst had attracted attention as being critical of the party, Borger would surely have reported this and arranged for appropriate sanctions – after all, he had good contacts and had already exerted considerable influence on decisions related to personnel policy in 1933 and 1934 [26].

Three other professors of the Faculty of Medicine who had also reached the age limit and who were not party members either remained along with Borst; on the other hand, eight professorships were newly filled [26]. From this it can be deduced that party membership after 1933 was obviously not a central or exhaustive criterion for being allowed to continue one's professorship. It was not unusual for non-party members to retain their positions – if they were considered politically reliable according to Nazi criteria.

Indeed, there were a number of clearly National Socialist-oriented and active individuals, including professors, who were not party members. Karl Frik, for example, the leader of the German Roentgen Society [35], or Walter Stoeckel, who was Magda Goebbels's gynaecologist and one of the leading German gynaecologists of the 20th century. Stoeckel was nevertheless one of the leading Nazi physicians, held respected positions in the Nazi apparatus (e.g. a position on the Scientific Advisory Board to Karl Brandt, who was responsible for the health system in 1944), was awarded the Goethe Medal in 1941 and also maintained a friendly relationship with Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels [36].

Borst was also characterized as a politically loyal and reliable partner by various service and party offices both in Munich and nationwide (Fig. 2) [37]. The following example is an excerpt from a typical political assessment:

“Due to his development, he cannot be described as a National Socialist in terms of ideology and politics. However, he stands by the Führer [Adolf Hitler] with his whole personality and acknowledges the great achievements of the [NS] movement. He supports everything demanded of him by the party [NSDAP]. He is absolutely open to the promotion of a university reform in the National Socialist sense and was therefore consulted by the leading office of the Lecturers' League to cooperate on individual issues” (translated by DG) [34].

But Borst's scientific and political commitment to the National Socialists went even further: he was elected vice-president of the International Union Against Cancer (today: Union for International Cancer Control, UICC) in 1935 [31,38]. This means he was not only active in political and scientific functions of NS-Germany, but also on the international stage, and thus helped to make National Socialism and especially NS-politics internationally presentable and allowable. And furthermore in 1937 he gave a lecture in Berlin at the International Congress for Medical Postgraduate Work, at which the founding of an International Academy for Medical Postgraduate Work was agreed. Representatives from a total of 22 countries were involved in the further planning of the academy, which was officially founded in April 1938. In addition to Borst, German representatives included the well-known National Socialists Kurt Blome and Karl Haedenkamp [39]. Blome had been the representative of the *Reichsärzteführer* (Reich Doctors' Leader) for medical training since 1935, and in 1939 became deputy director of the *NS-Ärztbund* (National Socialist German Doctors' League), deputy director of the *Hauptamt für Volksgesundheit* (Main Office for People's Health), and deputy Reich Doctors' Leader. Haedenkamp, on the other hand, was in charge of supervising the

elimination of Jewish and socialist doctors. He was also editor of the *Deutsches Ärzteblatt*, head of the Foreign Department of the Reich Medical Association, and foreign consultant to the Reich Doctors' Leader. Borst thus worked closely with two leading NS multi-functionalists who were actively involved in the Third Reich's health policy [8,40,41].

In 1936/37, Borst was also responsible for the conception of the DFG's tumour research programme. Borst's comrades-in-arms here were the bacteriologist Hans Reiter, President of the Reich Health Agency and a member of the NSDAP since 1931, and Werner Jansen, a doctor and writer and one of Heinrich Himmler's favourite authors [42], who had belonged to the party since 1933. Here, too, the “political and scientific intersection of consensus among the three [...] participating physicians was sufficiently great [...]” [34]. Borst himself initiated the project on the “Hereditary predisposition to human cancer” [43]. Among the scientists supported by the programme was Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer, racial hygienist and mentor to Josef Mengele. Von Verschuer dealt with cancer in twins. He also dedicated a contribution to his colleague Borst in the 50th volume of the *Zeitschrift für Krebsforschung*, which was simultaneously an anniversary edition for Borst's 70th birthday [34].

The aforementioned examples show that Borst not only belonged to the network of leading NS physicians, but also acquired their trust and esteem.

Borst also took part in the 3. *Arbeitstagung Ost* from May, 24–26 1943 at the Military Medical Academy in Berlin. Fritz Fischer gave an introductory report on the effects of sulfonamides in human experiments under the direction of Karl Gebhardt in the Ravensbrück concentration camp [44]. It became clear that the test subjects were concentration camp prisoners, but there was no criticism or protest on the part of the plenum – and thus also none on the part of Borst [45].

Borst retained his positions until the end of the Third Reich. In 1945, the US military government counted him among the group of politically unencumbered persons – probably because he had not been a member of the NSDAP. However, Borst would no longer witness the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany: He died in a car accident in Murnau on October 19, 1946 at the age of 76 [8].

4. Discussion

Some authors have described Borst as something close to a political oppositionist. According to their argumentation, he had found himself in a kind of “inner opposition” to the Nazis. Accordingly, Borst had assumed the aforementioned offices and functions in order to protect these from strong National Socialist influence; he had also taken personal risks and had accepted harassment [8–11]. His willingness to assume politically powerful positions is thus stylised by these authors into a heroic, selfless act. This view is based primarily on Borst's formal lack of party affiliation, which caused the military government to claim him unencumbered after 1945 (Fig. 3) [46]. Only his death in 1946 hindered him to continue his career in post-war Germany, like many politically involved German scientists did [47], e.g. the pathologists Herwig Hamperl and Carl Krauspe [48,49].

The evidence for Borst's classification as a political opponent is extremely thin. This will be illustrated and critically discussed in the following, using four such assertions as examples:

- 1) Babaryka, for example, expressed the blanket thesis that Borst had remained in his position out of altruism in order to protect science and cancer research in particular from ideologization by the National Socialists [8]. In view of Borst's curriculum vitae, this assertion can hardly be upheld. In reality, Borst was eager to cooperate with leading National Socialists who had consolidated their ideological orientation, without there being any signs of dissonance or conflicts regarding decision-making on his part. Borst conformed to the party line in every respect – with the result that he was allowed

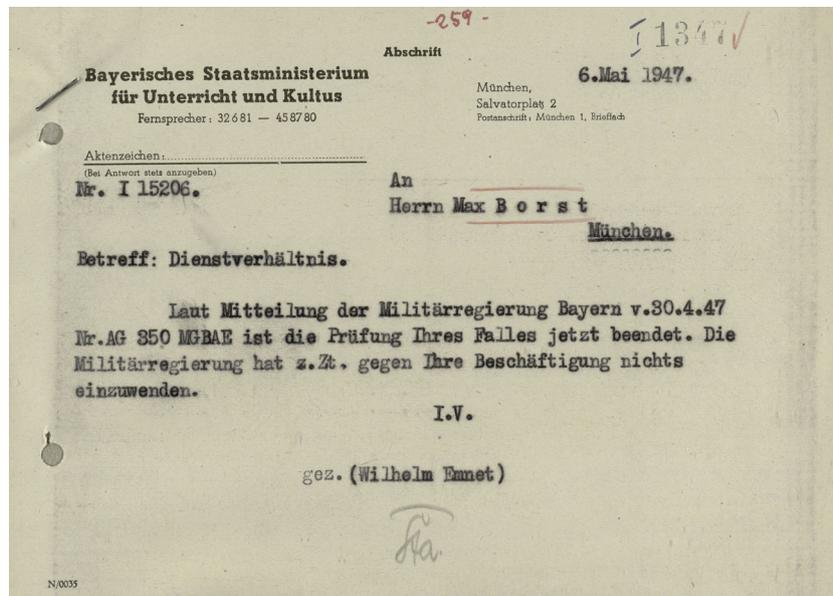


Fig. 3. Letter from the Bavarian Ministry of Education and Culture to Max Borst of May 6, 1947 [46].

to retain his positions or was even explicitly confirmed in office. It is precisely this background which explains the fact that Borst was awarded the Goethe Medal for Art and Science in 1939 on the occasion of his 70th birthday [50]. This medal was awarded to a total of only 406 hand-picked persons under Hitler [51]. In light of this, it would be more logical to regard Borst as a personal profiteer of his own influential leadership rather than as a protector of science.

- 2) Similarly doubtful is the claim that Otto Warburg's appointment to the Anticancer Committee was associated with a high personal risk for Borst. It is true that Borst had brought the "Jew" Warburg onto the scientific committee of the Anticancer Committee in 1942, an action which Moser, for example, interpreted as a sign of special civic courage [52]. But a closer look reveals that Borst's risk in this regard was extremely low and that he had a score to settle: Nobel Prize winner Warburg was one of the few scientists of Jewish descent who had been allowed to retain their position after 1933 – probably because he was expected to provide a cure for cancer or at least to do groundbreaking preliminary work. Kurt Blome, among others, had tried to have Warburg and Borst dismissed in 1941 to gather control over cancer research. And yet it was precisely the *Kanzlei des Führers der NSDAP* (Chancellery of the Führer of the Nazi Party/Hitler's Chancellery) that had taken steps to successfully prevent this. This shows that Warburg enjoyed a certain amount of support. Warburg was later declared a "quarter Jew" parented by a "half-Jew" [52–54]. In light of this political signal, it was no real risk for Borst to appoint Warburg to the Anticancer Committee in 1942.
- 3) Occasionally it is claimed that Borst used his influence to enforce strict scientific criteria and to counter purely politically motivated decisions, e.g. when professors were being appointed. One German Internet source, for example, states:

"One year after the National Socialists came to power [...], Borst did the Würzburg Pathology a last service by campaigning for professional qualifications took precedence over party ideological aspects in the election of a successor for the emeritus Martin Benno Schmidt, and that with his Munich pupil Hermann Groll a worthy candidate was appointed to the renowned Würzburg Chair of Pathology" (translated by MS) [55].

But, especially in the case of Groll, there is also a very different and more plausible interpretation: A look at Groll's scientific work shows that he was clearly ranked lower than others on the list of proposed candidates. The Munich Faculty had listed Gruber

(Göttingen) in first place, Ceelen (Bonn), Klinge (Münster) and Leupold (Köln) in second, and Groll and Siegmund (Stuttgart) in third. One of the reports states that Groll had only 31 published works since 1921, and seven of these did not have him as an author but had been written under his supervision. Groll seemed to be sympathetic to Nazi ideas, but was not a National Socialist. This was also true of Gruber, who was said to be an opportunist [56]. Nevertheless, it was Groll rather than a scientifically better-known rival who was appointed to Würzburg. One of the reasons for this was Borst's very positive report, which highlighted Groll's nationalist convictions and "straight character" [56]. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that Groll was one of Borst's academic protégés: it is well-known that patronage – i.e. loyalty relationships between mentor and mentee – play an important role in such appointments.

It is also well known that Borst was asked to assess the scientific expertise and political reliability of colleagues. For example, he supported the loyal National Socialist Carl Krauspe [49,57]. Such tasks also demonstrate that it is scientifically untenable to re-interpret Borst as a subversive opposition figure.

- 4) Finally, it is rumoured that Borst was subjected to harassment by the Nazi bureaucratic system due to his distance from the party – for example, in his efforts to obtain permits to travel abroad [8]. This argument also seems exaggerated: Obtaining permits, e.g. for visits abroad, was a very regular, sometimes bureaucratic or obstacle-laden administrative task which all other scientists also had to undertake. Furthermore, Borst received permission to travel abroad on various occasions – precisely because he was considered to be reliable and loyal to the regime. If this had not been the case, he would have been forbidden to do so. This was something, which happened from time to time, e.g. in the case of Franz Volhard, former dean of the Medical Faculty in Frankfurt am Main [58,59]. In any case, there are no concrete references in the relevant files to particular harassment by the Nazi bureaucratic system. Instead, Borst received a permit in 1940 allowing him thereafter to travel to talks in foreign countries as long as the topics related to his scientific field [60]: He thus no longer needed to ask for permission.

5. Conclusion

It remains to be emphasized that Borst was quite consensual in his cooperation with convinced and powerful National Socialists and that

they classified him as politically reliable. It is possible that his primary interest was actually in cancer research. He was also certainly interested in adhering to scientific standards, but this interest did not lead to any critical or even subversive behavior towards the political system. Rather, Borst demonstrably served the Nazi regime after 1933. However, it can be said that his loyalty to the National Socialists is not revealed through formal memberships in the NSDAP, SA or SS, but through his taking up of influential positions concerning health policy. Borst was considered suitable for these leading functions not only because of his professional aptitude, but also because of the “political loyalty” attributed to him by the National Socialist regime. He thus belonged to those scientists who placed themselves in the service of the Nazi regime.

Borst’s assumed inner distance from National Socialism is thus just as much a legend as the variously-reported harassment by the Nazi administration which he is said to have experienced.

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