

# Wegener's Granulomatosis and the Medical Press

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## **Abstract:**

Friedrich Wegener, who described the granulomatous vasculitic disease that bears his name, has been attacked in a number of publications for his activities during World War II. This has resulted in efforts to expunge the eponymous diagnosis and to rescind previous honors by a medical society. Arguments are herein presented in defense of the late German pathologist and to examine the validity of his accusers' case.

**Key words:** Wegener, granulomatosis, medical press, eponyms

**Running head:** Wegener, granulomatosis, World War 2 crimes, nomenclature

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An *ad hoc* committee [Falk 2011] composed of members of The American College of Rheumatology, The American Society of Nephrology and the European League Against Rheumatism decided that all medical scientists should no longer use the term, Wegener's granulomatosis. We are all to be eponymous anonymous. In its stead they have instituted the scientific term, granulomatosis with polyangiitis or GPA as an alternative. (Wegener's) is to be appended for a number of years so as to ease into the transition. The American College of Chest Physicians or ACCP withdrew the honor of "Master Clinician" [Rosen 2007] as the consequence of the accusations made in a series of publications. [Woywodt 2006, 2006]

Attacks on Wegener continue to occur [Pulido 2010]. The authors conflate the activities of Wegener with those of Reiter, Hallorvorden and Spataz whose war crimes were clearly and unambiguously documented. The attacks against Wegener are invariably of the *ad hominem or guilt by association* nature. Repeatedly his detractors make statements to the effect there is no proof Wegener acted in a criminal manner yet they convict him in the next breath. Their condemnation is based largely on guilt by association and the one proven fact, his membership in the Sturm Abteilung (SA) and his membership in the Nazi Party. In one publication [Woywodt 2006], the authors state:

"At the very least, the details which we have now uncovered suggest *some degree of association* (emphasis added) with the Nazi regime. As such, his activities were certainly not unique in German scientists and physicians of his generation. However, the full facts remain uncertain because of the paucity of documents and the *absence of witnesses* (emphasis added). It is for the readers to draw their own conclusions about the extent of his involvement with the Nazi regime. The question concerning continued use of the eponym, Wegener's granulomatosis needs balanced discussion within the scientific community."

A Polish and a German investigator [Grzybowski 2010] have uncovered testimony from Wegener's denazification process. A public prosecutor from Lübeck gave the following statement:

"Dr. Wegener is a thoroughly honest, decent character who has never emerged politically in my presence. In autumn 1932 Dr. Wegener entered the ranks of SA (Sturm Abteilung) as doctor and immediately became Sturmbann (equivalent to Major) doctor by the SA medical corps. I did not know about it until January 1933 when I was myself exposed to violent political attacks because of me (sic) and my family's democratic convictions and because of my friendship with a non-aryan lawyer and notary, Spiegel, hailing from a well-known family who was murdered in March 1933

with other Jews in Kiel and when I was, furthermore, frisked on the occasion of the occupation of the Kiel Town Hall and was temporarily taken into custody. Dr. Wegener who knew my anti-National Socialist political convictions has supported me, especially during those March days of 1933 and has repeatedly preserved me from the attacks of professional colleagues coming from the circles which belonged at the time to the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei or Nazi party) and the Harzburg Front (a right wing political organization) which attempted to denigrate me. Also, when my father was dismissed in March 1933 from his post as a city counselor and Mayor of the City of Kiel in accordance with paragraph 4 for the restoration of the profession civil service (later in accordance with the modified paragraph 6) and almost all acquaintances have turned away from me and my family in a defamatory way, Dr. Wegener has remained undeterred in his friendship to me and visited my house regularly as always. Afterwards he has never made an attempt to have a political influence on me. When I happened to meet him in Hamburg on occasion of leaving the front in 1941, he emphasized his displeasure at the maladministration of the party, particularly the party bigwigs, Jew baiting and the incomprehensible treatment of Polish citizens in Litzmannstadt which he describes as inhuman. He emphasized on that occasion that he became a Wehrmacht doctor and said

he had nothing to do with the party's machinations.”

Another public prosecutor said:  
[Grzybowski 2010]]

“He, Wegener, put himself as a doctor at SA's disposal and as an idealist he was convinced at that time the propaganda aims of the NSDAP was (sic) presented in the right way. He also kept an association with a half-Jew who was a friend of his, although he knew it was strictly prohibited for SA members to have such acquaintances. He showed no understanding of the race theory. He who has race does not talk about it, was one of his sayings.”

Woywodt and Matteson [Woywodt 2006] said, regarding evidence from Wegener's denazification process:

“We found no evidence that Dr. Wegener stood trial after 1945 nor evidence that he had been imprisoned or banned from the medical profession. We managed to obtain Wegener's denazification file from the state archives in Schleswig-Holstein in which witnesses paid testimony to Wegener's conduct during the Nazi regime. It is difficult, though, to come to any conclusion, since many of these testimonies were less than complete and truthful.”

It seems likely that Woywodt and Matteson read the same documents that were read by Grzybowski and Rohrbach but obviously came to different interpretations

and conclusions. Additionally, the paper by Grzybowski and Rohrbach includes testimony from Wegener's secretary who is identified as Käthe Kollmann, not Mrs. Dietz as claimed by Woywodt and Matteson.

These affidavits show that Wegener was aware of the moral evil of the Nazis and of the bad things that were being done. He took some small but real actions to support persons suffering that evil and he decried it. Wegener's personal journey through the labyrinth of Nazi evil suggest he behaved as did many good but sadly silent Germans of that time, but they do not reveal him as an active practitioner of Nazi crimes. His small brave actions were, perhaps, the most he could accomplish given the circumstances. He was no hero but he was no villain. Wegener's critics deserve our scorn for tarring his name with unsubstantiated, over-blown accusations.

As a personal Friend of Wegener I want to add to the affidavits supporting Wegener's character and probity [DeRemee 2010]]. He was a strong, sympathetic friend of gentle behavior.

Grzybowski, an accomplished and recognized medical historian told me he has searched archives in Poznan and Lodz. He studied hundreds of sources including articles and books about medical experimentation and genocide of Jews in the Lodz region and they revealed no incriminating evidence against Wegener.

Furthermore, there have appeared thousands of studies analyzing Nazi war crimes and many witnesses have published their diaries and Polish and American historians have found nothing against Wegener. The Wiesenthal Center in Vienna has no evidence against him.

It is relevant to revisit the conditions surrounding Wegener as a young aspiring pathologist. Germany had just emerged from the humiliating defeat of World War I. It was in chaos; inflation was rampant and the economy destroyed. Communists were attempting to take over Germany. And the SA was posed against them. The Weimar government was incapable of managing the crisis. Germans looked for someone to bring them out of the abyss. Unfortunately that man was Adolf Hitler. Millions of Germans would regret their votes for him. Half of German physicians joined the NSDAP. One fourth joined the SA. Most were unable to foresee the war and the holocaust until 1936 or even 1938.

At his denazification hearing [Forsbach 2006] Dr. Karl Schmidt, head of the ophthalmology clinics in Bonn and Strasbourg, said the following:

“I had enjoyed joining the NSDAP (Nazi Party) because I saw it as the one and only possibility to put the completely dead-end matters of domestic policy in Germany in order again. I thought I could renounce in 1933 my hitherto faulty liberal democratic

principles because democracy in its most liberal form had been essentially failing in Germany since 1918 and above all was not able to resolve the burning matters of social poverty and hardship.”

Wegener's membership in the NSDAP, the SA, and the National Socialist Physicians' Association have no connection with his merits as a physician nor do they in any way establish that he was complicit in genocide or unethical medical experimentation. To be a member of either the NSDAP or the SA did not automatically mean that Nazi crimes were approved or performed.

The psyche of the Western World is crammed with stories of the moral rot, inhumanity and evil perpetrated by Nazism. When symbols of this barbarism are raised and attributed to an individual, a sense of disgust and reflex condemnation are evoked. Such a strong reaction all but closes out any analytic rational discourse about this terrible era. Given the millions of people who belonged to the Storm Troopers and Nazi party, probabilities alone would suggest there were at least a few good people in their ranks who were caught up in a movement whose destiny was not clear. Having known Wegener, I suggest he was one of the good ones [DeRemee 2010].

The case against Wegener falls short of normal standards for good history and evidence. The accusers repeatedly use the

logical fallacy of *ad hominem argument*, or guilt by association. When the person referenced is Adolf Hitler, people are easily taken in by the argument and are less likely to be aware of the fallacy perpetrated on them than if a more benign personage had been cited.

Regarding history and evidence I would make the following points: Historical and evidentiary arguments must be rational statements and obey the laws of logic. Furthermore, their foundations should be fully and deeply questioned. Skepticism is critical in their evaluation. Historical claims are well-defined and precise. The evidence must be tortured cruelly. *An historical claim is falsifiable by the introduction of new evidence.* Conclusions based on evidence that has gaps are suspect. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Objectivity is required for good history. Conviction or opinion however inspired and in accord with current social norms is not history; anecdote is not good evidence. The accusatory papers should have been held to the same rigorous standards of proof required of any articles published in a scientific journal. We wonder why the accusers did not reveal the true findings of the denazification procedures. They said they had reviewed them and in their judgment they were “less than complete and truthful.” What was the basis of those judgments? The records reviewed by Grzybowski and Rohrbach seem quite

convincing and are at variance with the conclusions of Woywodt et al.

One of the recurring charges against Wegener is that he didn't apologize after the war. I wonder how his critics would know if in fact in some forum to some personages he detailed his war-time association with the Nazis. It could be that he felt he committed no crime and felt no shame for his deeds in World War II. It must be remembered that at the conclusion of the war, Wegener was a nobody without public stature. That was to come later. If he were, indeed, on the lam, why would he have returned to his home in Schleswig-Holstein instead of fleeing to another country such as Sweden the home of his mother and where he had kin? If he were not held in high regard, why did the students and many physicians in Lübeck celebrate a torchlight parade in honor of his retirement? Why did the medical school at Lübeck give him an honorary doctorate of medicine? It seems to me they were acknowledging in him a high level of character and competence.

One of his accusers [Woywodt 2006] states, "We wrote this article solely to bring more completeness to Wegener's

biography." Given the flawed approach, Wegener's biography is, to say the least, incomplete and in error.

The trial and conviction of Wegener in the medical press raises important issues. First, are scientific journals appropriate fora for the publication and discussions of what are essentially non-scientific issues with political overtones? Secondly, if a journal elects to participate in such discussions should they be held to the same, traditional standards of accuracy as is exercised for the usual scientific article and permit a balanced discussion of the evidence? Furthermore, when errors or omissions are discovered should not an editor be responsible to publish the error and its proximate corrections? No effort has been exerted by the medical journals that condemned Wegener, to publish mitigating or exculpatory evidence in his behalf. When the consequence of one's writings is the destruction of a person's reputation and familial legacy, it seems only fair and reasonable to insist that the evidence presented is unimpeachable, clean and accurate as required by scientific journals.

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