Politics and physiology: Hermann Rein and the Nobel Prize 1933–1953

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Today, more than sixty years after he passed away, Hermann Rein (1898–1953) still is a familiar name in the history of physiology. Senior physiologists may remember his widespread textbook Einführung in die Physiologie des Menschen, (Rein, 1936) first published in 1936, which was followed up by many new editions (Bretschrieder, 1997). Some have heard of the scientific Hermann Rein Prize, which was established to honour him, and if you visit the university town of Göttingen, where Rein worked from 1932 to 1952, you might cross the Hermann-Rein-Straße. Not much is known about the fact that Hermann Rein was one of a few physiologists in Germany who, before, during and after the Second World War, was portrayed as an international representative of good German science. Thus, he was one of the most nominated German physiologists for the Nobel Prize in the first half of the twentieth century. This essay aims at shedding some light on the interface between physiology and politics in Germany during 1933–1953. The example of a scholar from Göttingen is particularly suitable for such an overview. After Adolf Hitler’s Machtübernahme in 1933, the Georg-August-University of Göttingen was – compared to its reputation in the first third of the twentieth century – no longer a strong international academic centre. Jewish professors and lecturers at the University, among them famous scholars such as the physicist Max Born and the mathematician Emmy Noether, were sacked and driven into exile, as noted in Nature in 1937:

The actual losses can now be estimated with fair accuracy. The number of teachers known to have been displaced from the universities and seats of higher learning [in Germany] is 1,684; that is about fifteen per cent of the scholars of Germany, [...]. No institution has suffered more than the University of Göttingen by the loss of distinguished members of its staff. [...] On June 30, visitors to Göttingen will celebrate a unique series of losses of learning, liberty and life. (Anonymous, 1937, p. 703).

On 30 June 1937, the University of Göttingen received international attention on its 200th anniversary. Even if a large number of the best scientists had left Göttingen by then, some of those who remained were internationally acknowledged, such as Hermann Rein:

[T]here still remain in Göttingen men of considerable distinction (to mention only four outstanding names: [Arnold] Eucken, physical chemist; [Adolf] Windaus, organic chemist and Nobel prizeman; [Ludwig] Prandtl, hydrodynamics; [Hermann] Rein, physiologist), who are continuing in the face of difficulties to maintain a high standard of scientific research and teaching. (Lambert, 1937, p. 930)

One year before this debate, German scientists and politicians started a campaign against Nature, which succeeded in banning the journal from German libraries (Hossfeld & Olsson, 2006). They claimed that Nature had criticized National Socialist Germany. However, that action was only one brick in a comprehensive strategy by the German government to isolate German science. On 30 January 1937, Adolf Hitler prohibited all German citizens from accepting a Nobel Prize. This was in reaction to the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1935 to the pacifist and concentration camp inmate Carl von Ossietzky (Crawford, 2000). However, apparently, it was still possible to propose candidates who worked in Germany for the Nobel Prize. For example, the German physiologist Albrecht Bethe nominated the physiologist Erich von Holst in 1938. Bethe knew about Hitler’s prohibition, but he tried to construct a solution. The nomination reads: ‘Although Holst is assistant at the Zoological Institute in Göttingen, and he is to my knowledge not a German citizen [Holst was born in Riga and he had studied in Danzig]. So, if he should be chosen, he may accept the Nobel Prize. It is of no doubt that he is one of the most talented and successful physiologists of the younger generation’ [Nobel Archive (NA); Bethe nomination von Holst, 1938]. Did the blacklist of the Nobel Prize have direct effects on Hermann Rein’s chances to be awarded a Nobel Prize?

In recent years, the Nobel Prize has gained scholarly attention among medical historians (for example Crawford, 2000; Norrby, 2010; Hansson & Schagen, 2014). The NA for Physiology or Medicine holds correspondence, reports and nominations of senior and junior physicians from around the world. One should bear in mind that the number of Nobel Prize nominations of a researcher does not really reflect his or her importance, but it might give a hint of his or her reputation, given that the number is high and that the nominators are
measurements were based on differences in pressure and hence velocity in two equal partitions of a breathing air sample, from one of which the CO₂ was removed by passing the air over NaOH. Simultaneously, relative O₂ density in the respiration air was recorded via its cooling effect on a heated wire. The combined arrangement allowed the continuous quantitative assessment of gas exchange and hence also respiratory quotient in respiration air of both animals and humans. Rein used it to assess for the first time the effect of the autonomous nervous system on whole animal metabolism (Mertens & Rein, 1938). The approach later became popular as 'indirect calorimetry', although other sensors for oxygen and carbon dioxide concentrations became involved. In the 12 Nobel Prize nominations, ranging from 1933 to 1952, these two achievements were stressed. Thus, the nomination by the bacteriologist and pathologist Hugo Schottmüller in 1936 is characteristic:

To me, there is no doubt that only Professor Dr. Hermann Rein [...] can be considered for this prestigious award. He is known for two ingenious inventions [...] If these inventions really can do what Professor Dr. Rein suggests, it is no doubt that they are of the highest scientific and practical value. [...] (NA; Schottmüller, 1936; see table 1)

The nominators succeeded in getting the Nobel Committee for Physiology or
Hermann Rein's political views have not yet been thoroughly examined by historians. His pacificist ideas are transparent throughout in his wartime diary. Rein and his five collaborators were able to carry on fundamental physiological research in his institute in Göttingen throughout the Second World War, despite the fact that he was not a member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei). The State Aviation Ministry had given him special status as a professor in human aviation physiology to train students in this area of medicine. This probably allowed him a privileged situation. In the memoirs of the contemporary Swedish physiologist Georg Kahlson (1901–1982), it is briefly stated that 'Rein was no Nazi' (Kahlson, 1981, p. 27), but somehow politically 'untouchable'. Kahlson's view is interesting, as he had worked under Rein for a couple of months in Göttingen in 1934 and 1936, and he was one of few Swedish professors who strongly and unreservedly criticized both Adolf Hitler as well as National Socialism in numerous publications and speeches before, during and after the Second World War.

Although he never received the Nobel Prize, Rein's international reputation remained sound in the immediate postwar years. For example, the physiologist and Nobel Prize laureate Sir Henry Dale argued, that the key persons to build up German science after 1945 should include the pharmacologist Wolfgang Heubner, the physicist Max Planck, the chemist Otto Hahn, and Hermann Rein (Schleiermacher & Schagen, 2008). In 1946, Rein became Rector of the Georg-August University in Göttingen, and then played a major role in the foundation of both the Max Planck Society (1946) and the Deutsche Forschungsrat, the precursor of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (1949). In 1952 he was appointed head of the Physiology Institute within the Max Planck Institute for medical research in Heidelberg. He died on 14 May 1953. The biography of Hermann Rein shows that at least some German physiologists were not as isolated from the international science arena as it has been assumed, in spite of the fact that politicians in National Socialist Germany actively built walls around German researchers by blacklisting renowned international institutions.

References


Additional information

Competing interests
The authors have no conflict of interests.

Funding
None.

Acknowledgements
We thank Dr Hans Rein for copies of the Hermann Rein diary, the two reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper and the Nobel Committee for Physiology or Medicine, Medicinska Nobelinstitutet, Nobels Väg 1, Solna, Sweden, for giving access to files on Hermann Rein.