

April 9, 2021

HEINRICH PETTE INSTITUTE, LEIBNIZ INSTITUTE FOR EXPERIMENTAL VIROLOGY

## Decision for name change

### *Reappraisal of Heinrich Pette's work during the National Socialist era*

**Hamburg. The Heinrich Pette Institute, Leibniz Institute for Experimental Virology (HPI) has carried the name of its founding director Prof. Dr. Heinrich Wilhelm Pette (1887-1964) since 1964. While Heinrich Pette's achievements as a researcher in the field of spinal polio are well documented, little has been known about his work during the National Socialist era. After questions about this arose both from within the HPI itself and from outside, the institute engaged in an intensive process to deal with the topic and has now decided, based on two expert reports and the knowledge gained from them, to no longer continue to carry the name "Heinrich Pette" in the future.**

Heinrich Pette joined the NSDAP in 1933 and was one of the signatories of the Vow of Allegiance of the Professors of German Universities and Institutions of Higher Learning to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist State. In addition to his work as director of the Neurologische Universitätsklinik (Neurological University Clinic) at the Eppendorfer Krankenhaus (Eppendorf Hospital, today's University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf), he was also the second chairman of the Society of German Neurologists and Psychiatrists (GDNP) from 1935. Against this background, the HPI has had the work of Heinrich Pette in the years 1933 to 1945 investigated.

A first expert opinion commissioned by the HPI on Heinrich Pette's position in National Socialism by the renowned medical historian Prof. Heinz-Peter Schmiedebach did not initially provide a clear picture of Heinrich Pette's work, as only little source material could be examined due to a very short processing period. As a result, the institute decided to start an extensive process of reappraisal and in 2015 handed over the coordination of a second expert report to Prof. Axel Schildt, then director of the Research Center for Contemporary History in Hamburg (FZH), and to the historian Prof. Malte Thießen. The aim was to bring about a firm and criticism-free basis for the future use of the name Heinrich Pette. In the final report, which was revised at the end of 2020 and is now available, three results are particularly noteworthy:

1. As a specialist in neurology, **Heinrich Pette was involved as an expert witness in hereditary health proceedings within the meaning of the Law for the Prevention of Hereditary Diseases. In a relatively large number of cases, Heinrich Pette spoke in favor of sterilization** (in seven of his 15 expert opinions identified to date): Heinrich Pette reported two patients to the Hereditary Health Court and applied for their sterilization. In five other expert opinions he supported the sterilization: based on the diagnosis of epilepsy, once based on the diagnosis of schizophrenia, and in one case based on "chronic alcoholism". Based on Nazi ideology, these clinical pictures were considered "hereditary." **Scientifically, the concept was controversial.** Eight times Pette rejected sterilization, sometimes in contrast to other experts.
2. Furthermore, the expert opinion clarifies that Heinrich Pette was not directly involved in "euthanasia" acts. Despite intensive research in

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archives, no evidence of Heinrich Pette's accompanying research on victims of "euthanasia" could be found. **What is clear, however, is Heinrich Pette's complicity in "euthanasia" crimes.** This is supported by his work in the advisory board of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Brain Research and his contacts with several persons responsible for "euthanasia" crimes. In addition, Heinrich Pette himself confirmed his complicity several times after 1945. His contacts with a co-organizer of the murders of the sick (Krankenmorde), who practiced under a false identity after the war, were the subject of a committee of inquiry of the Schleswig-Holstein state parliament in 1961.

3. The expert opinion shows that **Heinrich Pette was probably not a convinced National Socialist** despite his NSDAP party membership. Rather, he can be classified in the category of **"fellow travelers"** (Mitläufer) who joined the party for private or professional advantages without fully supporting the entire ideology.

The renaming of the "Institut zur Erforschung der spinalen Kinderlähmung" (Institute for Spinal Polio Research) to the "Heinrich-Pette-Institut für Experimentelle Virologie und Immunologie an der Universität Hamburg" (Heinrich Pette Institute for Experimental Virology and Immunology at the University of Hamburg) in 1964 was based on Heinrich Pette's significant scientific achievements in the field of virology and especially in polio research. Heinrich Pette is still considered a central player in the introduction of polio vaccination in the Federal Republic of Germany as well as an internationally recognized and trend-setting expert in this field.

"That is exactly what has made the debate about the person Heinrich Pette so difficult: Like many biographies of his time, his work cannot simply be divided into plain black or white, but there are many shades in between. The confrontation with this ambivalence - his achievements in science and as founding director of the institute on the one hand, and his decisions in hereditary health procedures on the other - was something we had to face as an institute carrying his name," explains HPI Scientific Director Prof. Thomas Dobner.

In view of the history of medicine under the National Socialism, carrying the name of a personality who had a prominent role in medicine during that time is hardly possible without criticism. "With a forward-looking and international orientation in mind, the vast majority of us feel that the name 'Heinrich Pette' is no longer appropriate or compatible for the institute," explains Prof. Thomas Dobner. After many extensive discussions with the Supervisory Board, as well as involving the Scientific Council and several historians established and renowned in the field, the institute no longer wishes to use the name "Heinrich Pette" in the future and has decided to rename it.

Katja Linke, Administrative Director of the HPI, adds: "Coming to terms with Heinrich Pette's history was a long and intensive process: the historians involved provided us with a valuable basis for addressing the future use of the name with their expert opinions, on the basis of which the institute decided to discontinue the name."

The decision to rename the institute is also supported by Prof. Matthias Kleiner, President of the Leibniz Association: "The retrospective evaluation of scientists must always consider the contemporary historical contexts of their work. Thus, the expert opinions on Heinrich Pette's role in National Socialism paint a picture of opportunism and complicity, ethically questionable expert advice, but at the same time scientific achievements and accomplishments. The honor of being the name bearer of a Leibniz Institute and thus a special role model for subsequent generations of scientists cannot be compatible with this burden and ambivalence. Therefore, I welcome the responsible reappraisal."

The Senator for Science in Hamburg, Katharina Fegebank, also agrees: "Coming to terms with Germany's past under National Socialism is of central importance in all areas of public life - and an important component of our democracy. I therefore expressly welcome the fact that HPI has extensively and critically dealt with its namesake and its role in the Nazi state in a process that has taken many years. The fact that the institute decided by a large majority to change its name is an important basis for the naming process that has now begun. The new name will be representative of the continued excellent research achievements at the institute."

A naming process has been initiated and is to be implemented by the end of 2022. Subsequently, the necessary steps for the final execution of the name change can be carried out. Until this process is completed, the institute prefers to be named after the second part of the original name "Leibniz Institute for Experimental Virology" (HPI).

The report as well as a brief presentation and classification of the most important results are published on the institute's website and can be found here: <https://www.hpi-hamburg.de/de/das-hpi/geschichte/heinrich-pette-die-ns-zeit/>

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## **HPI, Leibniz Institute for Experimental Virology**

The Leibniz Institute for Experimental Virology (HPI) conducts research into human pathogenic viruses with the aim of understanding virus-related diseases and developing new therapeutic approaches.

On the basis of basic experimental research, new starting points for improved procedures for the treatment of viral diseases such as AIDS, influenza and hepatitis, but also of emerging viral infections, are to be developed. With its main research areas, HPI covers the world's most important viral infectious agents.

Founded in 1948, the institute's origins go back to the patron Philipp F. Reemtsma and the neurologist Heinrich Pette. As a foundation under civil law, HPI is a non-profit and independent research institution that has been a member of the Leibniz Association (WGL) since 1995. The institute is funded proportionally by the German Federal Ministry of Health (BMG) and the joint research funding of the federal states, represented by the Ministry of Science, Research, Equality and Districts (BWFGB) of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. In addition, a large proportion is obtained through competitive procedures.

More information: [www.hpi-hamburg.de](http://www.hpi-hamburg.de)