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Popular and loyal to the regime: The life and work of CVDZ President Wilhelm Herrenknecht

Introduction: In 1926 Wilhelm Herrenknecht succeeded Otto Walkhoff as president of the CVDZ (today: DGZMK). His fame, however, remained well below that of his predecessor. Accordingly, today's knowledge of Herrenknecht's professional work is limited. His relationship to National Socialism has also hardly been discussed. The present contribution takes these gaps in research as an opportunity to provide a synoptic reconstruction of Herrenknecht's life and work, with special emphasis on his role in the "Third Reich".

Material and methods: The study is based on archival records from Berlin and Freiburg i. Br., Herrenknecht's published oeuvre and the memoirs of his assistant Erwin Neu. In addition, a comprehensive evaluation of secondary literature on the history of the Freiburg dental clinic and on Herrenknecht himself was carried out.

Results: Herrenknecht was a practically versed university teacher and specialist politician who strove for balance but left hardly any traces in scientific terms. However, the permanent establishment of the Freiburg Dental Institute can be attributed to him.

During the "Third Reich" Herrenknecht became a member of the NSDAP. According to sources, he was consistently loyal to the regime.

Discussion and conclusion: Herrenknecht's CVDZ presidency (1926–1928) can be classified as a prototypical interim presidency between the "Walkhoff era" (1906–1926) and the "Euler era" (1928–1954). He did not reach the importance of the two colleagues, neither in terms of professional policy nor in scientific terms.

During the Nazi era, Herrenknecht acted as a typical follower. Because of his loyalty to the line, he contributed to the acceptance of the Nazi regime – albeit without appearing as a fervent National Socialist.

Keywords: CVDZ; chloroethyl narcosis; Freiburg im Breisgau; National Socialism; NSDAP

Introduction

Wilhelm Herrenknecht served as president of the “Central-Verein Deutscher Zahnärzte” (Central Association of German Dentists, CVDZ; today: “Deutsche Gesellschaft für Zahn-, Mund- und Kieferheilkunde”, DGZMK) from 1926 to 1928. But unlike some presidents before him – such as Otto Walkhoff (1860–1934) [14, 20] – or after him – such as Hermann Euler (1878–1961) [6, 15, 18, 25, 26, 57] or Ewald Harndt (1901–1996) [19] –, Herrenknecht did not gain a prominent place in the history of the profession. Little is known about his relationship to National Socialism either. Although Wolfgang Röder presented a dissertation in 1970 that was dedicated to the dentist’s life and work, he made no reference to Herrenknecht’s role in the “Third Reich” or to his party-political orientation [53]; the same applies to most of the other secondary literature on the Freiburg university teacher available to date.

In view of this research gap, the present essay provides a concise bioergography of Herrenknecht, taking into account his (party) political stance in the “Third Reich”.

Material and methods

This paper is largely based on files from the Federal Archives in Berlin and the University Archives in Freiburg in Breisgau. In addition, the surviving memoirs of the Jewish Herrenknecht student Erwin Neu (1908–2002) as well as all of Herrenknecht’s published scientific papers were evaluated. Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of the secondary literature published to date on the history of the Freiburg Dental Clinic and on Herrenknecht as a person was carried out, including laudations, necrologies and lexical contributions, as well as individual journal articles and medicohistorical dissertations.

Results and discussion

1. Wilhelm Herrenknecht – life and career

Wilhelm Herrenknecht (Fig. 1, [48]) was born on May 19, 1865 in Nonnenweier (Baden). The various stages of his life are comparatively well

documented [1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 25, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 49, 50, 52, 58, 59]: He was the son of a farmer who later became a “Rheindammmeister” (dike master on the Rhine).

Wilhelm Herrenknecht spent his school years in the Breisgau region, namely in Weisweil, Renzingen and finally in Freiburg, where he passed the Abitur in 1886 at the Berthold-Gymnasium (which still exists today). Wilhelm Herrenknecht was the only one of 4 siblings to complete an academic education: He studied medicine at the universities of Freiburg and Munich, passed the medical examination in July 1891 and subsequently received his medical licence. In the same year he received his doctorate – also in Freiburg – with the 37-page thesis “Beitrag zur Behandlung von carcinomatöser Stricture des Halsteils des Oesophagus” (Contribution to the treatment of carcinomatous stricture of the neck part of the oesophagus) (translated by DG) [10, 28]. In the very year, he took up an assistant post at the Freiburg University Eye Clinic, before becoming assistant physician in the surgical department of the municipal hospital in Karlsruhe in 1892. One year later – in April 1893 – he settled as a general practitioner in Donaueschingen; there he also worked as a doctor for the poor in the community.

In the same year, Herrenknecht married Mathilde de Beauclair on December 2. In the following years, his wife, who came from South America, gave birth to 7 children. After 6 years, however, Herrenknecht decided to give up his country doctor’s practice and move away with the family because his wife “could not tolerate the harsh climate in Donaueschingen” [53] and “fell so seriously ill that only a change of location promised her relief and healing” [9]. In this situation of upheaval and new beginnings, Herrenknecht also decided “on the advice of his friend Prof. [Oskar] Römer” to change disciplines and study dentistry [10, 37]. Oskar Römer (1866–1952) was already working as a private lecturer in dentistry in Strasbourg at that time.

So, in 1899 Herrenknecht moved with his family to the city of Frei-



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Figure 1 Portrait of Wilhelm Herrenknecht

burg, which was known for its warm, temperate climate. However, he completed his (brief) additional studies in dentistry at the University of Strasbourg, 90 km away, with his friend Römer. The very next year (1900) Herrenknecht passed the dental examination in Strasbourg and obtained his licence to practise dentistry. He then went on a 6-month study trip with stays at the dental institutes of the universities of Berlin, Breslau and Prague.

In 1901 Herrenknecht opened a private practice in Freiburg as a “specialist for oral and dental diseases”, which quickly earned him a good reputation. In December 1902, he received an offer from the Medical Faculty of the University of Freiburg to habilitate in dentistry and subsequently take over the management of a dental institute planned there. Herrenknecht had already been known to the Freiburg faculty since his doctorate (1901); he was also friends with the chair of surgery there, Paul Kraske (1851–1930). It had also been Kraske who had made contact with Herrenknecht in this situation and had conveyed the faculty’s offer to him. In fact, Herrenknecht submitted his habilitation thesis to the University of Freiburg in the summer of 1903. It was entitled “Über Äthylchlorid und Äthylchloridnarkose – Für Ärzte und Zahnärzte” (On Ethyl Chloride and

Term of office	Name	NSDAP Membership	Life data
1906–1926	Otto Walkhoff	+	1860–1934
1926–1928	Wilhelm Herrenknecht	+	1865–1941
1928–45, 1949–54	Hermann Euler	+	1878–1961
1954–1957	Hermann Wolf	+	1889–1978
1957–1965	Ewald Harndt	+	1901–1996
1965–1969	Gerhard Steinhardt	+	1904–1995
1969–1971	Eugen Fröhlich	+	1910–1971
1972–1977	Rudolf Naujoks	–	1919–2004
1977–1981	Werner Ketterl	+	1925–2010

Table 1 The presidents of the CVDZ (from 1933: DGZMK) who experienced the “Third Reich” as adults and their party-political orientation

Ethyl Chloride Anaesthesia – For Doctors and Dentists) [10, 29]. In July 1903 he gave his trial lecture (“On the caries of the teeth”) and in August he was appointed Privatdozent [39]. In the winter semester of 1903/04, Herrenknecht held his first regular lectures in Freiburg, and in December 1903 he was commissioned to establish a dental institute. It opened its doors in April 1904 with Herrenknecht as director. In August 1909, Herrenknecht was then appointed personal associate professor in Freiburg. In the following years, the institute was successively expanded, and in October 1912 Herrenknecht became a scheduled associate professorship. After the beginning of the First World War, he worked as a medical advisor to the XIV Army Corps; until the end of the war, he was mainly responsible for the care of oral and maxillofacial patients in Freiburg. In 1922 Herrenknecht was finally promoted to personal full professor in Freiburg. He held this position until his retirement in March 1934. Herrenknecht remained resident in Freiburg in the following period, but – unlike other emeritus colleagues of the time – he did not open a private practice, as can be

seen from contemporary dentists’ directories [45–47].

Wilhelm Herrenknecht died of intestinal gangrene based on enteric arteriosclerosis in 1941 after being ill for 8 weeks. His wife survived him by 11 years.

Herrenknecht was, among others, the father of the internist Mathilde (Till) Goette, née Herrenknecht (*1896) and the dentist Margaretha Rosa Alice Treibs, née Herrenknecht (1900–1980). Furthermore, he was the grandfather of Dr. Gerda Beickert, née Goette (*1929), Karlsruhe, and the great-grandfather of Wolfgang Wehl (*1953), Professor of Mechatronics and Robotics at Heilbronn University [23].

2. Herrenknecht’s scientific and professional significance

Herrenknecht was actually not the first, but already the third teacher of dentistry at the University of Freiburg – however, it was only with him that the permanent establishment of a state dental university institute was achieved [7, 24, 42, 43, 51]. Nevertheless, Herrenknecht followed in big footsteps in Freiburg: in 1891, Carl Röse (1864–1947) was the first dentist to habilitate in dentistry at the University of Freiburg. He, too, had sub-

sequently been involved in founding a dental institute. However, it did not get beyond the status of a provisional institution and did not exist for long: The continuing, glaring underfunding of the provisional institution prompted Röse to apply for leave of absence in 1894/95. In 1896 he left Freiburg for good, without having returned in the meantime. Instead, he carried out important studies on the development of caries and epidemiology at different locations. Röse is the first dentist to be nominated for a Nobel Prize (category physiology/medicine) [24].

Röse was succeeded in 1896 by Otto Bartels (1860–1943) [37]. He became interim head of the dental polyclinic there in the position of “Lector” (Lecturer) and was responsible for dental training. Since he did not possess the *venia legendi*, his lectures were designated as “taking place with the permission of the directorate of the surgical clinic” [37, 42]. But Bartels soon demanded the expansion of the poorly equipped polyclinic into an institute and his appointment as head of this institute. However, he did not succeed in achieving “a clear legal position and in general an undisputed authority” [7]. Rather, he lost the support of the faculty after persistent criticism of his professional qualifications and his (supposedly insufficient) presence in the dental polyclinic. This was also the reason why Herrenknecht was approached in December 1902 in search of a personal alternative [37]. Herrenknecht was considered “a proven colleague in many respects” due to his successful work as a practising doctor for dental and oral diseases [42]. Bartels, however, remained active in the polyclinic until the opening of the aforementioned institute and subsequently ran a practice in Freiburg for many more years.

In 1904, individual items from Bartels’ polyclinic were transferred to the new dental institute, although the majority of the inventory had to be “newly acquired” [37]. Thus, Herrenknecht finally became the first director of a permanent, state-supported university dental institute. Keffer therefore rightly calls him the

actual “father of the Freiburg Dental Institute” [37].

However, the continued existence of the institution was repeatedly threatened. The main problem was the fact that the institute was – and remained – underfunded from the beginning. Since Herrenknecht had acquired some indispensable equipment – purely out of necessity – without a commitment of funds, the deficit added up to 9,250 marks by 1908. The Ministry then informed him “that in future he would be held personally liable for overdrafts” [37].

During the First World War, Herrenknecht had to cope with an enormous number of patients. Yet he did not even have a specific jaw hospital, but only a “treatment centre for the mouth injured”. Frenk commented on this: “The workload that weighed on Prof. Herrenknecht’s shoulders during these four years is clearly demonstrated by the fact that by June 1918, almost 700 wounded with jaw injuries and over 8,000 soldiers received treatment and help in more than 50,000 sessions at the dental polyclinic. These figures do not include a large number of officers and prisoners of war” [9].

In 1924, the closure of the Freiburg Dental Institute and Herrenknecht’s early retirement were considered for financial reasons. However, both were finally averted. This was made possible by a “new financial arrangement”, whereby the institute became less of a burden on the state treasury [9]: Herrenknecht had undertaken to pay all employees from clinic funds in future. In return, “the entire accounting was no longer to be handled by the university treasury, but by the polyclinic itself. Course fees also now fell to it”. In order to improve the revenue situation, an institutional and accounting link was also created with the municipal school dental clinic, which was in a far better financial position [37].

Thus, Herrenknecht succeeded in averting his dismissal – a feat of strength that was certainly appreciated by his colleagues. The Heidelberg colleague and institute director Georg Blessing (1882–1941) [10]



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Figure 2 Herrenknecht in the circle of his fellow board members (1926) (from right: Hermann Euler, Gustav Hesse, Heinrich Blum, Carl-Ulrich Fehr, Wilhelm Herrenknecht, Adolf Scheele) [16]

wrote about Herrenknecht: “He, who is so attached to his work and the fulfilment of his duties, would never have felt happy in his involuntary muse. We are pleased with him that it was possible to overcome the financial difficulties, to maintain his institute and to continue to have him as a teacher and clinic director” [1]. But the situation in Freiburg remained challenging: An “application for a [regular] full professorship in dentistry for Prof. Herrenknecht” submitted by the faculty on 26 November 1930 was rejected by the Ministry of Culture on the grounds that it was not possible to establish “new scheduled professorships” [37]. Thus, Herrenknecht remained a “personal full professor” until the end of his term of office – i.e. a professor with the personal rights, but not the position and salary of a full professor.

After Herrenknecht retired for reasons of age (1934), Fritz Faber (1887–1961) – an ardent National Socialist and member of the Waffen-SS – was appointed as his successor; this happened under pressure from influential National Socialists and against the will of the Freiburg Medical Faculty, which had shortlisted 5 other habilitated dentists [17].

Herrenknecht was a very practice-oriented university teacher who was appreciated by his students. This was expressed, among other things, in his nickname “Papa Herrenknecht” [35]. He was also considered approachable and popular in the contemporary scientific community. Above all, he was perceived as “very balanced” [53]. It was precisely this quality that put him in marked contrast to Otto Walkhoff, who had steered the fortunes of the CVDZ until 1926 and acted in a visibly autocratic manner. This had long since led to distortions in the board of the association. Referring to 1924, Hermann Euler noted: “Schaeffer-Stuckert, Dieck and Cohn had resigned from their positions on the board, partly in connection with previous differences, so that apart from Köhler and Parreidt the old guard was only represented by Walkhoff [...]. He watched all the more closely over the preservation of the old tradition and proposals that could change the internal structure of the Centralverein did not find a sympathetic ear with him” [5, 12]. In the end, continued criticism of his person prompted Walkhoff to resign from office in 1926 after 20 years; Julius Parreidt (1849–1933) [25] also

withdrew. In this situation, Herrenknecht agreed to succeed Walkhoff (cf. Tab. 1 and Fig. 2, [16]). The former immediately tried to conciliate Walkhoff: “Even if, in the opinion of very many members of the association, some of the fights of the last years would have been better left out in the interest of our profession or at least could have been conducted in a different form, this will never keep the Central Association of German Dentists (e.V.) from always gratefully commemorating the services of the two long-standing members of the board, even though Prof. Walkhoff [...] refuses to give thanks in such a hurtful way” [4]. At the 1926 General Assembly, a resolution was passed to honour Walkhoff’s many years of service by establishing a “Walkhoff Foundation” [12, 25].

Since Herrenknecht was very affable as president, it was “generally much regretted when he declined reelection in 1928” [5]. He gave his workload as the reason for the refusal. Now the previous second chairman, Herrmann Euler, was elected as the new president. Euler was to hold this position longer than any other incumbent before or after him: Only with the appointment of Hermann Wolf (1889–1978) [22] in 1954 did the “Euler era” end.

Herrenknecht had succeeded in steering the CVDZ into calmer waters. He was helped in this by a close network of colleagues with whom he maintained friendly relations, including Oskar Römer, Georg Blessing, Ernst Jessen (1859–1933) [10], Hermann Euler and Ottomar Jonas (1885–1956) [10].

In scientific terms, however, Herrenknecht clearly lagged behind earlier presidents of the CVDZ such as Willoughby D. Miller (1853–1907) [13] or the aforementioned Walkhoff. Even among the 9 presidents thematised in this series who experienced the “Third Reich” as adults, he was the only one without significant research contributions. Röder, who in 1970 wrote the only monograph on Herrenknecht to date and sketched him rather uncritically from a historiographical point of view and largely dispensed with shades of grey, also counted him

“not among the great scholars of dentistry” [53]. Herrenknecht’s publications clearly showed “that he was more concerned with the tasks of a practical dentist than with scientific problem points” [9]. It is worth mentioning that Herrenknecht made chloroethylene anaesthesia (already developed in the 19th century) known in dentistry. It was probably against this background that Georg Blessing dedicated the publication “Die Entwicklung der Lokalanästhesie in der Zahnheilkunde” (The Development of Local Anaesthesia in Dentistry) to him on his 60th birthday [2]. In 1910, Herrenknecht was one of the first specialists to point out “that apical foci can develop into a general disease such as rheumatism” [27]. In addition to anaesthesia and chloroethylene anaesthesia [29, 30, 32], his main areas of work were the connections between general medicine and dentistry – especially “focal diseases” – and the subject area of oral and dental hygiene and prophylaxis [31, 33, 34].

In his long career, Herrenknecht published hardly more than 30 articles [53] – thus, also in quantitative terms, he remained clearly behind Walkhoff (over 160 publications), Euler (over 240 publications) or Wolf (over 180 publications). Nevertheless, Herrenknecht produced several academic students who later became professors, such as Walter Adrion (1891–1960) [10], Hermann Becks (1897–1962), Erwin Neu, Curt Scheidt (1901–1964) [10] or Eugen Wannenmacher (1897–1974) [10].

Herrenknecht received the Baden Cross of War Merit in 1916, the Iron Cross II Class on the white-black ribbon in 1917 and the Cross of Honour for War Participants in 1935 for his service in the First World War. His most important professional awards were the honorary doctorate (Dr. med. dent. h.c.) by the University of Freiburg (1920) and his honorary membership in the CVDZ (1930).

3. Herrenknecht’s relationship to National Socialism

Like all German universities, the University of Freiburg was brought into line politically after the National So-

cialists came to power; this was accompanied by the disenfranchisement of Jewish lecturers [41, 56].

Herrenknecht behaved in a conformist manner in the “Third Reich” from the very beginning. It is recorded that he dismissed his Jewish assistant and pupil Erwin Neu, hired in 1929, on April 11, 1933 without any attempt at a petition – with reference to a letter from the Ministry of Education, “stating that all Jewish employees are to be dismissed from their posts” [41]. In contrast, Hans Rehm (1903–1967) [10] had at the same time courageously campaigned for Neu’s temporary retention at the Freiburg clinic – although, unlike Herrenknecht, he was not Neu’s superior, so that his petition probably carried less weight. Incidentally, Rehm was to become director of the Freiburg dental clinic himself much later – in 1947.

Both facts – Rehm’s ultimately unsuccessful attempt to intervene on Neu’s behalf and Herrenknecht’s lack of effort – are mentioned by Neu himself in his autobiographical memoirs [44].

Rehm’s advocacy for Neu was not an unusual reaction: Elsewhere, too, “Aryan” superiors tried from 1933 onwards to keep their Jewish assistants in office, at least for a certain time, in the form of such petitions – mostly with specific references to their indispensability for clinical procedures or to their earlier war service as front-line fighters. The best-known example of this is provided by Professor Hermann Schröder, director at the Berlin Dental Institute: He stood up for his Jewish assistant Konrad Lipschitz (1878–1935), who was thus able to remain in office until October 1935 [55]. Fritz Trebitsch (1897–1990) also retained his position at the Berlin Institute until 1935 after an intervention by Schröder [38]. The same applies to his Jewish assistant Fritz Munz (1895–1986) [55].

While Herrenknecht remained inactive in the Causa Neu in 1933, he turned to the Ministry of Culture on his own account in the same year. Specifically, he wanted to obtain a financial promotion at the Freiburg Institute: In a letter at the end of 1933,

Herrenknecht declared his support for the new National Socialist leadership and implied that he had been considered politically dissident in the Weimar Republic. According to Herrenknecht, his political unpopularity had prevented his promotion to full professor in 1930. Specifically, he expressed his gratitude that the National Socialist government had put an end to the previous unsatisfactory conditions. Finally, he asked that the financial disadvantages described be taken into account when determining his pension [59].

At the time of this letter – at the end of 1933 – Herrenknecht had not yet joined the party. In fact, membership was not possible at this stage: The NSDAP had received a veritable flood of applications for membership, especially immediately after the Reichstag elections in March 1933. Since a large proportion of them were thought to be political opportunists – the National Socialists referred to them pejoratively as “Märzgefalle- ne” – the party imposed a membership ban in May 1933. This was only relaxed again in the spring of 1937 and it was at this time that Herrenknecht joined the NSDAP (admission 01.04.1937; no. 4,715,504) [3].

Unlike his successor in office in Freiburg, Fritz Faber [10], Herrenknecht did not make any pro-National Socialist statements to the outside world. Nevertheless, he was obviously politically loyal until the end of his life. This is also evident from the fact that the National Socialist Reich dentist leader Ernst Stuck (1893–1974) personally honoured Herrenknecht with an obituary in 1941, which only happened in individual cases. There he stated: “We lose [...] a professional comrade with constant devotion to his work and a person with high qualities of mind and heart” [58].

Conclusions

The facts presented lead to the conclusion that Herrenknecht was a typical interim president. This is already evident from the short, only 2-year term of office (1926–1928), while the “Otto Walkhoff era” had previously lasted about 20 years (1906–1926) and the term of office of Herren-

knecht’s successor, Hermann Euler, even spanned the years 1928 to 1954 (with an interruption in the post-war period).

This finding becomes even clearer when one takes a retrospective look at the professional policy achievements that can be attributed to the respective presidents: Walkhoff’s term of office included the establishment of the Abitur (A level) as a prerequisite for studying dentistry (1909) and the introduction of the right to obtain a doctorate in dentistry (1919) – two milestones in the professionalisation process of dentists [11, 14, 20, 21]. Under Euler’s leadership, further significant progress in professional policy was achieved: He not only steered the centralised DGZMK through the “Third Reich”, but also took part in the reconstitution of the DGZMK in 1949 in the post-war period, in the gradual reintegration of the German specialist representatives into the international scientific community and in the solution of dental dualism, i.e. in the abolition of the competing profession of non-academic “Dentisten” and the integration of the already licensed Dentisten into the dental profession. The latter was implemented in 1952 in the Federal Republic of Germany after several years of preparation – with the help of the DGZMK [15, 16, 18, 25, 26].

Herrenknecht’s professional merit merely consisted in pacifying the professional society as the successor to the autocratic Walkhoff and leading it into calmer waters, as well as securing the continued existence of the Freiburg Dental Institute, which was at times in great danger.

In scientific terms, Herrenknecht was not up to the aforementioned colleagues. His publications were more aids for practitioners than pioneering scientific achievements. Nevertheless, he was considered a committed teacher who was popular with his students and aroused the interest of some of his academic pupils in a university career.

Politically, Herrenknecht can be classified as a typical follower. He implemented the repressive anti-Jewish university policy in his area without any signs of resistance and also

showed himself to be politically loyal in other ways. Herrenknecht did not openly appear as an ardent National Socialist; but through his loyalty to the line, he ultimately contributed to the acceptance of the Nazi regime – like many Germans in positions of responsibility.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest within the meaning of the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

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