

# The German Chemical Society (GDCh) and Nazi Germany

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## Introduction

Should one still be concerned with the title topic 70 years after the end of World War II? This question is not easy to answer. Few contemporary witnesses who could claim to have participated in or actually recorded the events are still alive; in any case, their overview of the political situation was often limited. Those born after the war clearly lack direct experience, but they may have a more distanced, objective, and comprehensive view than the generation of their parents.

History does not just vanish and historical guilt can never make amends. The memory of every past event must be associated with an exact description of its origins and consequences, and hence involves not only science, but also the organizations representing it.

National Socialists were enthusiastic about technology and the natural sciences. Chemistry, as the science of the transformation of matter, had celebrated breathtaking triumphs in the first third of the 20th century and fitted excellently into this optimistic attitude. Furthermore, chemistry was of the highest importance in helping the Third Reich to become independent of imports from foreign countries and was crucial for the preparation of the war and its final execution. World War I with its battles of material had already been a science war;<sup>[1]</sup> for World War II,

this influence would become even stronger. Of course, all sciences and engineering were involved in the planning of the war, but chemistry played a central role; hardly any area of the war effort was able to do without the help of chemistry, for example in the synthesis of gasoline, new polymeric materials, or the availability of explosives. On the organizational side, this important role of chemistry was demonstrated by the fact that there was a “Generalbevollmächtigter” for chemistry—a manager for all questions and problems related to chemistry—but not one for physics.

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Especially when viewed against the background of total war, the activation of all forces was bound to play a decisive role. And, in this effort, the German chemical societies were of major importance in coordinating the contribution of their members to the war and its preparation.

After extensive, sometimes controversial discussions and several preliminary projects, the Board of the Gesellschaft Deutscher Chemiker (GDCh; German Chemical Society) decided in 2007 to ask Prof. Dr. Helmut Maier, a science historian at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum and an authority on the history of technology and environmental science, to investigate the history of the organizations that preceded the GDCh in Nazi Germany: the Deutsche Chemische Gesellschaft (DChG) and the Ver-

ein Deutscher Chemiker (VDCh). His studies will appear as a monograph later this year.<sup>[2]</sup>

## The Chemical Societies in Germany

Before 1945, German chemists were organized quite simply. They could essentially belong to three professional societies: the DChG, the VDCh, and the Deutsche Bunsengesellschaft für Physikalische Chemie. All these organizations had been founded during the last third of the 19th century, with the DChG, originally called Deutsche Chemische Gesellschaft zu Berlin, being the oldest (founded in 1867). A simplified summary is that the DChG was a society for (inter)national researchers in academia, whereas the VDCh represented predominantly the German industrial chemists. The leading scientific journal of the DChG was the *Berichte der deutschen Chemischen Gesellschaft*, whereas the top-tier journal of the VDCh was *Angewandte Chemie*.<sup>[3]</sup>

Although several monographs about these scientific organizations were available before Maier's study,<sup>[4,5]</sup> these were to some extent outdated and, furthermore, did not treat the role of these organizations and their top representatives between 1933 and 1945 in detail. In addition, before the political changes that took place in 1989, the authors of these books were not in a position to include the information stored in the archives of the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR; German Democratic Republic or East Germany) and the Soviet Union. Finally, many (West)

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German archives were, at least temporarily, classified as secret, and many persons who had been members of Nazi organizations had returned to their old positions. Thus, a general climate of silence and concealment was created. It was the fundamental study by Ute Deichmann that first penetrated the shroud of silence that lay over this period of the history of German chemistry.<sup>[6,7]</sup>

The GDCh was established in 1946 in the British occupation zone by a merger of the former members of the DChG and the VDCh, which, as Nazi organizations, had been forbidden after the defeat in 1945. The GDCh became a national organization for the entire Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, incorporating various chemistry organizations of the individual states of Germany.

The Chemische Gesellschaft der DDR (CGDDR; Chemical Society of the German Democratic Republic) was founded in 1953, retaining, incidentally, also some of the personnel who had been employed in Nazi Germany.<sup>[8]</sup>

### The DChG and VDCh in Nazi Germany

Today, the Nazi period is known to many people in terms of its terrible end, and of the war that preceded it; fewer are familiar with the way that it arose. The Nazi dictatorship, with its boundless lawbreaking, its violence, and its anti-Semitism, began immediately after Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor of the Reich on January 30, 1933. The Nazis implemented their program with, for example, the laws of “Gleichschaltung” (the subjugation of all aspects of life of Germany to the Nazi pattern) and “Ermächtigung” (empowerment, which gave all rights to the Nazi government and party). These included the infamous Law for the re-establishment of the civil service, which for many—and in particular Jews—meant the immediate removal from their professions. This phase, in particular, is the one in which National Socialism firmly established its power, and which Maier describes with

a thoroughness that one has not previously encountered for the chemical societies. For these, “Gleichschaltung” often meant “Selbstgleichschaltung”, that is, voluntary submission to the Nazi ideology such as the Führer principle, a fact that was often denied after the end of the war. Indeed, for the chemical organizations, “Selbstgleichschaltung” was hardly a problem, since many of the concepts later enforced by the Nazis were already on the DChG/VDCh agenda before 1933.

### The closer the year 1939 approached, the stronger the involvement of the chemical organizations in genuinely military projects grew

The few years before the beginning of the war are characterized by an ever deepening penetration of National Socialist principles into everyday life—whether these concerned the Aryanization of the chemical societies or the establishment of an order and administration system inspired by the military, which was so typical of the Nazi years. The closer the year 1939 approached, the stronger the involvement of the chemical organizations in genuinely military projects grew, such as the introduction of defense chemistry (“Wehrchemie”) as a topic of university education, or the development of gas- and air-defense systems.

Marginal developments concerned the establishment of a “German Chemistry” or the supposed proof that scientists of “the Nordic race” were largely responsible for progress in chemistry. The actual war years were determined by the growing contribution of the DChG and the VDCh to the total war. These efforts concerned, for example, the collection of scientific data for the Wehrmacht and for war-related research. Similar to the looted art that is currently the subject of much discussion, the chemical organizations were involved in robbery, in this case of scientific libraries and whole laboratories, from the occupied countries.

Maier’s book addresses the personal fates of the Nazi victims to a much lesser extent than the books by Ute Deichmann<sup>[6]</sup> and Lothar Jaenicke<sup>[7]</sup>—in this sense it is a “colder” text. Nevertheless, the human victims of National Socialism are documented, with Maier concentrating largely on the members of the above-mentioned professional societies, whether these were innocent members who were persecuted or murdered, or dedicated Nazis who lost their lives in the war planned and initiated by them.

Helmut Maier’s book is a major contribution to our coming to terms with the darkest chapter of the history of German chemistry; it frees these years from the veil of oblivion.

- [1] E. Vaupel, *Chem. Unserer Zeit* **2014**, 48, 460–475.
- [2] H. Maier, *Chemiker im “Dritten Reich” – Die Deutsche Chemische Gesellschaft und der Verein Deutscher Chemiker im NS-Herrschaftsapparat*, Wiley-VCH, Weinheim, **2015**.
- [3] Concerning the history of *Angewandte Chemie* see F. Diederich, *Angew. Chem. Int. Ed.* **2013**, 52, 2714–2742; *Angew. Chem.* **2013**, 125, 2778–2807.
- [4] W. Ruske, *100 Jahre Deutsche Chemische Gesellschaft*, Verlag Chemie, Weinheim, **1967**.
- [5] W. Jaenicke, *100 Jahre Bunsen-Gesellschaft, 1894–1994*, Steinkopff, Darmstadt, **1994**.
- [6] U. Deichmann, *Flüchten, Mitmachen, Vergessen. Chemiker und Biochemiker in der NS-Zeit*, Wiley-VCH, Weinheim, **2001**. See also Ute Deichmann’s chapter on the DChG and the VDCh in *Physiker zwischen Autonomie und Anpassung* (Eds.: D. Hoffmann, M. Walter), Wiley-VCH, Weinheim, **2007**, p. 459, and also U. Deichmann, *Angew. Chem. Int. Ed.* **2002**, 41, 1310–1328; *Angew. Chem.* **2002**, 114, 1364–1383.
- [7] L. Jaenicke, *Profile der Biochemie*, Thieme, Stuttgart, **2007**; L. Jaenicke, *Profile der Zellbiologie*, Thieme, Stuttgart, **2010**. These books describe the lives of German (bio)chemists forced into emigration; they were often members of the DChG and the VDCh.
- [8] The history of the CG is not treated by Maier. It would also be desirable to investigate the history of this organization in detail from the present viewpoint.