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The German Physical Society in the Third Reich: Local Conservatism between Co-optation and Autonomy.

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During the National Socialism regime the German Physical Society (GPS), like many other German professional organizations, faced difficult choices along the spectrum of co-optation into the Nazi power structure and autonomy from the regime. This paper examines several examples of the Society's actions which shown an seeking to maintain traditional disciplinary standards while at the same time selectively cooperating with some of the regime's expectations. The successful riposte to ardent Nazi Johannes Stark's effort to become GPS chair in 1933 showed that the GPS was able to assert its traditional disciplinary authority structure even in the face of efforts to subsume the Society under the leadership principle favored by the Nazis. The Society's later election of industrial physicist Carl Ramsauer showed the GPS emphasizing the strategic (also military) importance of physics—and also willing to accommodate the regime's demand for the exclusion of non-Aryans. Finally, the choices behind the GPS's awarding of its prestigious Max Planck Medal in the late 1930's and early 40's show that both achievement in physics and political considerations—favoring scientists sympathetic to the regime, avoiding those antagonistic to it—were taken into account. Taken together, these examples demonstrate a kind of “local conservatism” that was at some times at odds with Nazi ideology but which nevertheless avoided open confrontation and indeed selectively cooperated with the regime's agenda.