



The Nazi War on Cancer

By Robert N. Proctor

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Collaboration in the Holocaust. Murderous and torturous medical experiments. The "euthanasia" of hundreds of thousands of people with mental or physical disabilities. Widespread sterilization of "the unfit." Nazi doctors committed these and countless other atrocities as part of Hitler's warped quest to create a German master race. Robert Proctor recently made the explosive discovery, however, that Nazi Germany was also decades ahead of other countries in promoting health reforms that we today regard as progressive and socially responsible. Most startling, Nazi scientists were the first to definitively link lung cancer and cigarette smoking. Proctor explores the controversial and troubling questions that such findings raise: Were the Nazis more complex morally than we thought? Can good science come from an evil regime? What might this reveal about health activism in our own society? Proctor argues that we must view Hitler's Germany more subtly than we have in the past. But he also concludes that the Nazis' forward-looking health activism ultimately came from the same twisted root as their medical crimes: the ideal of a sanitary racial utopia reserved exclusively for pure and healthy Germans.

Author of an earlier groundbreaking work on Nazi medical horrors, Proctor began this book after discovering documents showing that the Nazis conducted the most aggressive antismoking campaign in modern history. Further research revealed that Hitler's government passed a wide range of public health measures, including restrictions on asbestos, radiation, pesticides, and food dyes. Nazi health officials introduced strict occupational health and safety standards, and promoted such foods as whole-grain bread and soybeans. These policies went hand in hand with health propaganda that, for example, idealized the Führer's body and his nonsmoking, vegetarian lifestyle. Proctor shows that cancer also became an important social metaphor, as the Nazis portrayed Jews and other "enemies of the Volk" as tumors that must be eliminated from the German body politic.

This is a disturbing and profoundly important book. It is only by appreciating the connections between the "normal" and the "monstrous" aspects of Nazi science and policy, Proctor reveals, that we can fully understand not just the horror of fascism, but also its deep and seductive appeal even to otherwise right-thinking Germans.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Familiar as we are with the horrific history of Nazi medicine and science, it may come as a surprise to learn that the Nazi war against cancer was the most aggressive in the world. Robert N. Proctor's thought-provoking book, *The Nazi War on Cancer* recounts this little-known story. The Nazis were very concerned about protecting the health of the "Volk." Cancer was seen as a growing threat--and perhaps even held a special place in Adolf Hitler's imagination (his mother, Klara, died from breast cancer in 1907). The Nazi doctors fought their war against cancer on many fronts, battling environmental and workplace hazards (restrictions on the use of asbestos) and recommending food standards (bans on carcinogenic pesticides and food dyes) and early detection ("men were advised to get their colons checked as often as they would check the engines of their cars..."). Armed with the world's most sophisticated tobacco-disease epidemiology--they were the first to link smoking to lung cancer definitively--Nazi doctors were especially passionate about the hazards of tobacco. Hitler himself was a devout nonsmoker, and credited his political success to kicking the habit. Proctor does an excellent job of charting these anticancer efforts--part of what he terms "the 'flip side' of fascism"--and, along the way, touches on some unsettling issues. Can an immoral regime promote and produce morally responsible science? Or, in Proctor's words, "Do we look at history differently when we learn that ... Nazi health officials worried about asbestos-induced lung cancer? I think we do. We learn that Nazism was a more subtle phenomenon than we commonly imagine, more seductive, more plausible."

Proctor is no apologist--one of his earlier books, *Racial Hygiene* is a scathing account of Nazi atrocities--but he clearly wants to engage in the complex moral discussions surrounding the fascist production of science and Holocaust studies. Proctor's thorough research, excellent examples, and dozens of illustrations are complemented by his authoritative prose. *The Nazi War on Cancer* is a fine addition to the literature on both the Holocaust and the history of medicine. --C.B. Delaney

From Publishers Weekly

In a book that plumbs both the dark and light sides of the utopian impulse, Penn State history of science professor Proctor (*Racial Hygiene*; *Cancer Wars*; etc.) takes a look at the healthy side of fascism. Hitler's government implemented many laudable public health measures, including the regulation of pesticides, asbestos and food dyes. Germany, Proctor notes, had the most aggressive anti-smoking campaign in the world, and German scientists were the first to link smoking with lung cancer. As Proctor outlines the sophistication of German medical science and the ambitions of Nazi public health policy, he asks provocative questions about the relationship between scientific culture and political culture, describing, for instance, how cancer metaphors were used to describe the "subhumans" the regime sought to exterminate as tumors on the German body. Proctor's moral compass stays true: he doesn't exonerate Nazi science but rather looks at how the cult of the Aryan race, which stressed healthy living, played out in the everyday work of scientists who concerned themselves with public health. "My intention is not to argue that today's antitobacco efforts have fascist roots, or that public health measures are in principle totalitarian," he writes. Instead, Proctor seeks to give his readers a more complex appreciation of "how the routine practice of science can so easily coexist with the routine exercise of cruelty." At this, he succeeds admirably, giving readers a thoroughly researched account of Nazi medical science and posing difficult questions about the ultimate worth of good research carried out under the auspices of evil. Illustrations.

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From Library Journal

Discovering that forward-looking health restrictions (about smoking, asbestos, radiation, and diet) were

mixed in with the monstrous policies of Nazi-era German medicine, Proctor investigates without sensationalizing. His first-rate history restores complexity and a squeamishly recognizable contemporary element to our often cartoonish picture of that time. An excellent work of scholarship that is also well told. (LJ 4/15/99)

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kimberly Hopkins:

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