



The Nazi War on Cancer

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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