

PERFORMANCE-ENHANCING FOODS AND DRUGS

Nazi racial theorists distinguished “negative” and “positive” eugenics: negative eugenics was designed to eliminate inferiors (by sterilization, for example), whereas “positive” eugenics was supposed to encourage the breeding of the “fit”—through financial rewards for healthy children, for example, and laws requiring scholars to be married. A similar distinction can be seen in Nazi food policy. I have already mentioned efforts to eliminate toxic contaminants and unwholesome adulterants, but there were also efforts to engineer foods with optimal nutritional value—“superfoods” that would optimize the functioning of the *Übermensch*.

Nature and “the organic” were therefore not the only themes of Nazi dietary interest. A complementary theme was performance (*Leistung*), the idea that normal corporeal capacity could be elevated through various means, including nutritional artifice. A great deal of attention was given to how different foods and drugs might increase stamina, concentration, or some other gauge of human physical or mental performance. Caffeine, for example, was studied to see whether human mental or physical efficiency could be enhanced without undue side effects; studies were also done to determine whether the caffeine added to soft drinks might be harmful to young people. Nervous folk were said not to be particularly tolerant; caffeine was also said to lead to hearing problems in certain people. A 1941 Hitler Youth handbook declared that for young people at least, caffeine was a poison “in every form and in every strength.”¹⁰⁶ (Fritz Lickint declared coffee a carcinogen, but Hermann Druckrey challenged the idea, pointing out that Lickint’s coffee beans had been roasted at an artificially high temperature, producing tars and carbonized chemicals that would not normally occur in the routine process of coffee making.¹⁰⁷ Decaffeinated coffee was widely available—and strictly regulated—by the end of the 1930s.)¹⁰⁸

Extensive studies were also done on the stimulant Pervitin, one of the most popular “uppers” of the era.¹⁰⁹ Pervitin was discovered in 1938 by a chemist working at the Temmler Drug Company in

Berlin and was rapidly promoted by people convinced that the amphetamine—like caffeine or adrenaline—could increase mental performance. The new drug helped to stave off fatigue and was said to be able to reverse some of the effects of narcotics or alcohol. Pervitin was used to cheer up cancer patients prior to surgery,¹¹⁰ and some even said it could awaken people from a coma. Pervitin became widely used in both psychiatry and psychotherapy, though in 1941, following reports of widespread abuse and chronic dependency, it was made available only by prescription. Experiments in psychiatric hospitals and concentration camps found that users could be kept awake for more than twenty-four hours, after which they fell into a disturbed sleep for up to twenty hours.¹¹¹ Enthusiasm for the drug diminished in the later years of the war, after it was found to present the risk of addiction and various unpleasant side effects. The drug clearly speeded certain tasks, but it could also hamper ability to concentrate,¹¹² and chronic use seemed to cause personality disorders similar to schizophrenia.¹¹³ While it was clear that there was some value in occasional use (e.g., by pilots on long night-flights), routine use could lead to physical collapse.

Caffeine and Pervitin were not the only mind-altering drugs explored during the war. At Dachau, Nazi doctors fed prisoners mescaline to see whether it might be possible to manipulate their opinions. The general consensus, after thirty prisoners were treated with the drug, was that it was “impossible to impose one’s will on another person as in hypnosis, even when the strongest dose of mescaline had been given.”¹¹⁴

Military objectives were the primary interest in many such studies—as when Nazi scientists gave storm troopers testosterone to see if they could be made more aggressive—but the interest in such drugs also has to be understood as part of the crackdown on addiction. Addiction research becomes a major focus in the Nazi era, as does the larger question of how to combat illicit drugs. Nazi officials cracked down hard on cocaine, heroin, and other illegal narcotics: American drug enforcement officials in the mid-1930s praised German efforts in this area as among the best in the world. Illicit drugs were not the only problem, however, as the Reich