

also asked that all work of the commission be halted, including preparations for future meetings.²⁰⁵ Aschenbrenner politely refused, offering instead to consider any recommendations Conti might have of qualified physicians to join the commission. Aschenbrenner recognized that the tobacco question was "a very dear one" for the Reich Health Führer (*sehr am Herzen liegt*), and urged him to collaborate with the commission rather than opposing it.²⁰⁶

Conti, though, had already made clear his antitobacco sentiments in many speeches and publications; he had also already barred the commission's parent association from advertising the International Tobacco Congress (scheduled for September 25–30 in Bremen but aborted after the outbreak of war) in German medical journals.²⁰⁷ In August or September of 1941, Conti forced one of the guiding lights of the commission, a Dr. Johannes Bresler of Kreuzburg ("the Nestor of medical tobacco research," in Aschenbrenner's estimation) to withdraw from the Hygiene Division, prompting Aschenbrenner to accuse the Reich Health Führer of threatening the "basic freedom of research" (*Grundsatz der freien Forschung*).²⁰⁸ Conti met with Philipp F. Reemtsma in December of 1941 and warned that he would hold the tobacco magnate personally responsible if Aschenbrenner's group did not cease all medical research.²⁰⁹ It is not yet clear whether Reemtsma cut his financial support (he did attempt to distance himself from the association), but we do know that by 1941 the association was hurting. The cancellation of the International Tobacco Congress had deprived it of most of its income, and the outbreak of war had further dried up donations from countries no longer friendly to Germany.²¹⁰

The tobacco health war of the Nazi era ended up as a battle between the (pro-tobacco) Economics Ministry and the (antitobacco) Ministry of Interior represented by Conti's powerful office. The issue was brought before Goebbels's ministry, where Conti's side was taken and the argument was made that since health research was properly the realm of Conti's office, Aschenbrenner's medical commission was "a clear attack on the rights of the Reich Health Führer." The error (Goebbels said) was with the Economics Ministry for having failed to consult with the Interior Ministry earlier in the process.

Aschenbrenner had strong friends in high places, however, and was not so easily silenced. When Franz Wirz, a Conti ally, protested to Aschenbrenner that tobacco industry scientists were not qualified to conduct medical research, Aschenbrenner responded that the chemists and biologists associated with the industry—like Adolf Wenusch—were more familiar with the medical aspects of tobacco than anyone. Aschenbrenner mocked Wirz in his capacity of organizing the rose-hips harvest in Bulgaria and said that if the Germans were to give up the commission, it would simply go over to the Italian-run Internationale Zentralstelle für Tabak, based in Rome—and Germany would lose influence. Wirz said this was unlikely given that no one would knowingly cross Germany, now the superpower of Europe.

It is one measure of the power of German tobacco that someone like Aschenbrenner could stave off the repressive hand of Leonardo Conti, the most powerful man in German medicine and one of the most potent figures in all of Nazi Germany. What is also remarkable, however, is how the struggles of these years foreshadowed similar struggles in Britain and the United States in the 1950s. In both cases, evidence of a tobacco hazard was demonstrated by respected physicians; in both cases, the tobacco industry moved to counter the research as "unscientific." The attention of top-ranking governmental health officials was attracted in both cases, and in both cases the industry responded with a campaign to defame antitobacco forces as "antiscientific fanatics."

The comparison is not a perfect one, however, on several counts. For one thing, there is the fact that many of Germany's leading antitobacco activists were also war criminals. At the same time he was taking steps to curtail medical research by tobacco propagandists, Leonardo Conti was actively organizing Germany's "euthanasia operation"—the sole purpose of which was to murder some 200,000 physically and mentally handicapped people. Astel campaigned against tobacco, while also traveling to psychiatric hospitals urging doctors to murder their patients. Hitler himself funded Astel's antitobacco institute in March of 1941—only two months after his henchmen had met at Wannsee to plan the Final Solution.