

It is difficult to write on this topic without participating in a kind of moral drama—the sort that boils down to questions such as whether “good can come from evil.” I am always troubled by such questions, because they seem to stem from a kind of scarecrow image of fascism and a wooden, ahistorical image of science. I should make clear at the outset that it is not at all my goal to *praise* those scientists who, despite obstacles, managed to continue scientific work throughout the Nazi era. There is a tendency in Nazi science historiography to treat the survival of science—such as there was—as proof of the indomitable spirit of the intellect, but my concern is more to ask: what is science that it so easily flourished under fascism? What was it about German fascism that encouraged the progress of (certain kinds of) science, and why has this part of the story been lost to historical memory?

There is an image we have of fascism as a totalizing ideology: Nazi rhetoric and values are seen as having penetrated every crevice of German intellectual life. But that is a misconception, at least in part. Science was often tolerated as a faithful and neutral servant, an engine of economic and military power, blind to politics. Many fields of scholarship did turn out cheering squads for fascism, but just as frightening are the legions of subservients who continued to work quietly, reassured by the myth of cloistered neutrality. Through this lens, the “good science” of the Reich becomes evidence not of heroic ideological innocence but of a blind-eyed failure to reflect and resist—“irresponsible purity” in Herbert Mehrtens’s aptly crafted phrase.³

I am one of those who believe it is important for scholars to be able to defend their choice of research projects. I should note that I would never have written the present book had I not already explored the more heinous aspects of Nazi medical crime in my first book, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), which can be regarded as a kind of prolegomenon to the present book. There I showed that many of the most brutal health initiatives came from physicians, that physicians were never coerced into collaborating with the regime, that

doctors were not pawns but pioneers when it came to Nazi policies of racial extermination.

My focus here is less on Nazi racial crime than on the activities of health activists lost to memory by virtue of their association with this terrible time. The point is not to rescue lost gems of wisdom or to exploit the past for the present, but rather to explore the troubling phenomenon of “quality science” under Nazism: science that we might well celebrate as pathbreaking were the circumstances of its origins peeled away, but also run-of-the-mill science that, like Hitler’s watercolors,⁴ is not obviously and indelibly a Nazi product.

Do we look at history differently when we learn that Nazi leaders opposed tobacco, or 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. We learn that the barriers which separate “us” from “them” are not as high as some would like to imagine. We learn that there are chilling parallels between those times and ours. But we also get a better sense of why so many Germans—and especially German doctors—welcomed the Nazi movement. Nazism was not about just Nordic supremacy or humiliating and then killing the handicapped; it was not only about territorial expansion or murdering Jews and Gypsies. It was all of these things in spades, but it was also about making jobs and cleaning up the streets and long-term care for the “German germ plasm.”

Nothing in this excuses or balances—and if I thought it did, I would not have written this book. Nazism rightly stands as the low-water mark in twentieth-century moral culture, the ultimate refutation to ethical relativism and solipsistic egoism. Nothing anyone can say will change this. What I do hope to show, however, is that fascism is nuanced and complex, and that its appeal went deeper than we are usually willing to admit, and in different directions. Nazism was popular not just because Germans hated Jews. Antisemitism was central to Nazi ideology, but it was not the only or even the main reason people flocked to the cause. People saw