

much water, as can be seen in postwar readings of the von Brehmer affair.

Wilhelm von Brehmer was one of the more controversial figures to become the target of Nazi antiquackery. Brehmer was an "organic" physician who maintained that cancer was an infectious disease caused by a microorganism (the "cancer bacterium"), that cancer cells could be detected by an "alkaline shift" in the blood, and that tumors could be successfully treated by blood transfusions and a chemotherapeutic agent consisting of mercuric cyanide and extracts from Chinese rhubarb. Academic cancer specialists were understandably skeptical: the contagion theory of cancer had been on the wane since the turn of the century, and Brehmer's bid to revive it—with support from Gauleiter Julius Streicher and others in the "Paracelsian wing" of the party—was widely regarded as false or even fraudulent. The issue came to a head in 1936, when a struggle arose over whether Brehmer was to be included in the German delegation sent to the International Congress of Pathology in Brussels. Brehmer wanted to present his findings at the congress, but Max Borst, the Munich pathologist who headed the delegation (he was also head of the Reich Anticancer Committee), opposed his inclusion on the grounds that it would embarrass German scientific medicine. Borst and others on the delegation resolved to boycott the meeting unless Brehmer were excluded; Borst also took the rather bold step of requesting a judgment from Hitler on the matter (he actually wrote a lecture explaining the controversy to the Führer).¹⁰ Hitler ordered an inquiry at the Nuremberg party congress of 1936; Leonardo Conti headed the commission and, after an investigation, rejected Brehmer's theory.¹¹ Brehmer was barred from attending the Brussels meeting and lost much of his influence from that time.

What is interesting about the Brehmer story is how differently it has been told by people with differing politico-medical agendas. Among advocates of alternative cancer therapeutics, for example, the incident has been turned into a tale of maverick, unorthodox science versus closed-minded Nazi obstinacy. David Hess in his book *Can Bacteria Cause Cancer?*, for example, states that Brehmer's blood microbe theory after the war "remained unpopular,

particularly among the former Nazi doctors who continued to practice and influence German medicine."¹² The implication is that Nazi dogmatists opposed the radical novelty of Brehmer's theory (which Hess clearly finds persuasive), an interpretation which ignores the fact that Brehmer had allies of the most despicable sort—like Julius Streicher, publisher of *Der Stürmer* and one of the most rabid antisemites the world has ever known (Streicher helped Brehmer establish his "Tumor Research Institute" at the Theresien Hospital in Nuremberg in 1935 where he was also head of the "Paracelsus Institute").¹³

There are also those, though, who take the suppression of Brehmer as evidence of the courage some doctors showed in standing up to Nazi ideology. Wolfgang Weyers in his recent *Death of Medicine in Nazi Germany*, for example, takes Brehmer's suppression as a sign of how "opposition to the Nazis was not only possible, but at times could be successful"¹⁴—ignoring the fact that Brehmer's opponents were generally as Nazi as his supporters, and that Brehmer saw himself as a victim of Nazi terror.¹⁵ Borst, it is true, was not a member of the Nazi party, but he did preside over the *Gleichschaltung* of Germany's Anticancer Committee¹⁶ and cannot be regarded as an opponent of Nazism. Hermann Druckrey was an ardent Nazi and an active opponent of von Brehmer (and a very good scientist, I should add). It should also not be forgotten that it was Leonardo Conti, the SS officer and future Reich Health Führer, who ultimately silenced Brehmer to save the science of the Reich from embarrassment. Brehmer was the victim of neither Nazi stodginess nor anti-Nazi orthodoxy; both accounts come up short.

What the story really shows is that health officials—in Germany, as elsewhere—often found it difficult, then as now, to sort out cancer fads from cancer facts. The confusion also illustrates the importance of distinguishing *Germans* from *Nazis*: Brehmer encountered opposition from German doctors—some of whom were Nazis (Druckrey and Conti) and others who were not (Borst). The same can be said for his supporters. It might be comforting to believe that good science tends to travel with good politics (however one defines either term), but that is unfortunately wishful thinking.