

Genetic and Racial Theories



We have the duty, if necessary, to die for the Fatherland; why should we not also have the duty to be healthy? Has the Führer not explicitly demanded this?

Robert Hofstätter, antitobacco activist, 1939

BIOLOGICAL determinism was one of the pillars of Nazi ideology. Nazi philosophers argued that biology is destiny and that “diseases” as diverse as diabetes and divorce are genetically anchored. The Nazi imagination ran wild in this territory, claiming racial, genetic, or “constitutional” predispositions for every conceivable human talent and disability. Criminality was said to be heritable—and not just criminality, but specific forms of crime (rape, embezzlement, etc.). The racial zealot Hans F. K. Günther claimed that the tendency to divorce was heritable, and Fritz Lenz of Munich went so far as to argue that the tendency to believe in Lamarckism—the doctrine of the inheritance of acquired characteristics—was inborn. The most prominent Lamarckians were Jews, he suggested, in consequence of their inborn drive to assimilate, to blend in—a kind of human variant of the “animal mimicry” common in the rest of the animal kingdom.¹

CANCER AND THE JEWISH QUESTION

Consistent with this ideology, a number of German physicians argued that cancer, too, was a genetic disease, a disease to which different individuals and races were susceptible in differing de-

grees. The idea that cancer runs in families was already an old one, dating back at least to Friedrich Hoffmann’s postulate, circa 1700, of a *haereditaria dispositio*.² Statistical explorations of cancer’s heritability proliferated in the nineteenth century (always rather crude, one must say), and by the early years of the twentieth century, evidence had accumulated that certain cancers of the eye (retinoblastoma), colon cancers, and at least some breast cancers could be passed from parent to offspring via the germ cells.³ Twin studies fueled the idea that at least some cancers might be heritable, and by the 1930s a multitude of such studies claimed to have proven a genetic predisposition.⁴ Certain families were said to be immune: a 1938 study of one Croatian noble lineage claimed to have found that among 133 members of this well-documented family there was not a single instance of cancer over a period spanning nearly two hundred years.⁵

Early hints of the idea that chromosomal events might be involved in carcinogenesis began to be discussed in the 1910s and 1920s, following the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics in 1900 and the work of Theodor Boveri and others. Fritz Lenz, the Munich-based racial hygienist, suggested in 1921 that cancers must arise from the mutation of somatic cell tissues by external agents (X-rays and alcohol, for instance),⁶ but the most important advocate of the mutation theory was a young Heidelberg surgeon by the name of Karl Heinrich Bauer—a man whose career reveals the forgotten but formative role played by eugenics in the progress of certain sciences.

Best known today as the first postwar president of the University of Heidelberg and founding director of Germany’s National Cancer Institute (in Heidelberg in 1964), Bauer was also an avid and early supporter of eugenics, albeit of a fairly innocuous stripe. His 1926 book on racial hygiene called for sterilization of inferior stocks and marital bans, while opposing the “craziness of certain racial fanatics” who proposed the wholesale elimination of “lives unworthy of living.”* He was not a big believer in cancer’s

* Karl Heinrich Bauer, *Rassenhygiene: Ihre biologischen Grundlagen* (Leipzig: Quelle und Meyer, 1926), p. 207. Bauer was relatively modest in his earliest eugenic proposals: he followed Bonhoeffer, for example, in arguing that sterilization would be appropriate only for a “small circle of diseases”; compare also his opposition to