

the most disturbing aspects of Nazism, but it also provides another key, I think, to understanding the Holocaust. Historians and social philosophers have for many years tried to reduce the sadder sides of fascism to capitalism, totalitarianism, militarism, antisemitism, or "the authoritarian personality"—all of which are central, though none is all-explaining. I tend to agree with Omer Bartov that the Holocaust is a kind of idiot's tale we can understand only in parts, never altogether,⁵ but perhaps this quest for a sanitary utopia can help us bridge the discomforting gap between the horrific crimes of the era and its pioneering—if reclusive and now forgotten—feats in the sphere of public health.

One final note on a possible misinterpretation of this book. Those who point to Nazi environmentalism sometimes extract from this the message that there is a fascist danger inherent in any state-sponsored public or environmental health protection. Anti-tobacco advocates have been labeled "health fascists" and "Nico-Nazis," the rather contrived point being that since the Nazis were purists, purists today must be Nazis.⁶ There is a Latin name for such a fallacy, the logical error is so simple. Tobacco does cause 80–90 percent of all First World lung cancers, and none of this is diminished by the fact that Nazi-era scientists were the first to prove the point. It is wise to cut down on sugar, fat, and foods preserved with chemicals, even though Nazi nutritionists issued similar recommendations.

We may be surprised by such things, but surely we cannot let them influence us in our choices of how to eat or work today. Or perhaps we should? I must admit that one reason I decided to write this book was to try to come up with an answer. Perhaps what is needed is a severing of the already frayed ties that once were said to conjoin technical and moral virtues; I'm not really sure. I am not usually one to claim that science is or even should be value-free, but I do think that if the Nazis were pioneers in cancer research, we need to know how this came about and what it means.

1

Hueper's Secret



Of course! There is a great deal being done for cancer research in Germany. In every part of the Reich there are magnificent institutes, for which the Führer has provided large sums of money.

Adolf Butenandt, Germany's postwar president of the Max Planck Gesellschaft, in a 1941 radio interview

ON September 28, 1933, Dr. Wilhelm Hueper, chief pathologist at the University of Pennsylvania's Cancer Research Laboratory, wrote to the Nazi minister of culture, Bernhard Rust, inquiring into the possibility of an academic or hospital appointment in the new Germany. Hueper had emigrated to the United States in 1923, and we know from his unpublished autobiography that he had worn the swastika on his Freikorps helmet as early as 1919. Now, only months after the *Machtergreifung* (Nazi seizure of power), the young pathologist was petitioning Nazi authorities to allow him to return to Germany to restore his bonds to German culture (*deutsches Volks- und Kulturgut*).¹

It is not always easy to distinguish between conviction and opportunism in such matters. And though the distinction may not be as crucial as we like to think, Hueper's apparent support for the Nazi regime (he ends his letter with an enthusiastic "Heil Hitler!") still comes as a shock to anyone unfamiliar with the political landscape of European cancer activism in the 1930s (see fig. 1.1). The story is a disturbing one, one that seems to violate some of our most cherished political prejudices. Hueper, after all, went on to