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The Nazi Diet



Your body belongs to the nation!
 Your body belongs to the Führer!
 You have the duty to be healthy!
 Food is not a private matter!

Nazi slogans

Food was important for the Nazis. The healthy and powerful state required healthy and powerful bodies, and a proper diet was often taken to be the key to bodily strength. Nazi nutritionists mounted a frontal attack on Germans' excessive consumption of meat, sweets, and fat, and argued for a return to "more natural" foods such as cereals, fresh fruit, and vegetables. The emphasis upon bodily purity and natural healing was one source of the interest, but, as in the case of occupational medicine, questions of performance at work, at sport, and in the bedroom were also central—as was the quest for agricultural self-sufficiency. Nazi leaders wanted tough, lean, high-performing man-machines; a proper diet would reduce the incidence of ailments such as cancer and heart disease but would also increase labor productivity, maternal performance, and military muscularity. Moreover, it would aid in the regime's effort to free Germany from dependence on foreign food imports, a not-inconsequential aspect of the Nazi party's drive for economic independence.

It is not surprising that an improper diet was said to contribute to cancer at this time, since diet was popularly held to account for nearly every human malady.¹ Dietary theories of cancer were

boosted by the fact that the digestive tract was the most commonly afflicted site of the body, in Germany as in many other countries prior to the explosive growth of smoking. Swiss and German statistics from the mid-nineteenth century suggested that between a third and half of all cancer deaths stemmed from stomach cancer,² and Dormann's ambitious autopsy study of the early 1930s came up with similar figures.³ Gastric malignancy was the leading cause of cancer death in the United States, too: a 1937 study of American physicians found that stomach and liver cancer together claimed more lives than any other kind of tumor, followed by cancers of the colon, breast, prostate, and so on down the list.⁴

No one really knows why stomach cancer was so common in the 1920s and 1930s—or even why incidence rates plummeted in the decades after the Second World War. In Germany today, age-adjusted death rates are less than a quarter of what they were in the early years of the century. The decline is a worldwide phenomenon—even in Japan, where gastric malignancy was, until recently, the number one cause of cancer death (lung cancer assumed first place in the 1990s, following the rapid increase in cigarette smoking). The decline of stomach cancer is almost certainly real, and not the product of better diagnostics or some other bias, since Germany by the 1920s led the world in autopsies and was thereby able to confirm the site of origin of many tumors.

One factor contributing to soaring stomach cancer rates must have been the dismal quality of food. Highly salted, often fermented, and not infrequently rotten, the meats, vegetables, and grains of the era were often tainted by molds, fungi, bacteria, and other potentially cancer-causing agents. People did eat fresh meat, but they also ate a lot of meat that had been salted, dried, or smoked. We know today that cancer-causing aflatoxins are common in the molds that grow on grains and many nuts; we also know that contamination from such substances was common in the early part of the century. (The stomach bacterium *Helicobacter pylori* has been shown to be a cause of gastric cancer—though little is known about how prevalence rates of infection may have changed over time.) We know that foods were often adulterated with spectacular colorants and preservatives, including vivid coal