

The Monstrous and the Prosaic



We are living in an enlightened age.

Adolf Radermacher, German cancer researcher, 1942

The fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, German-Jewish émigré philosophers, 1944

THE STORY of cancer research and policy under the Nazis has tended to elude the attention of historians for various reasons, the most important being, perhaps, that it may not seem to be in anyone's interest to dredge up such things. The subject appears to fall into an "ideological gap": as with indoor domestic radon prior to the 1980s,¹ there are not strong predilections driving attention to the topic. Historical memory is selective in any event, and we seem to prefer to focus on the barbarism of the era, a move that allows us to neatly cordon off a sanctimonious "us" from a fallen "them."

The episode is intriguing, however, for the light it sheds on the experience of science and public health under the "extreme" conditions of a health-conscious dictatorship. The story is not simply one of the suppression of science or its unwilling conformity to political chicanery: public health initiatives were launched in the name of national socialism; Nazi ideals informed the practice and popularization of science, guiding it, motivating it, and reorienting it in ways we are only beginning to appreciate. The Nazi war on cancer shows that what many of us would consider "good" science

can be pursued in the name of antidemocratic ideals. Public health initiatives were pursued not just *in spite of* fascism, but also *in consequence of* fascism. It is therefore not enough to speak simply of the suppression or even the survival of science; one has to see how dictatorial ideals worked to inspire and guide the science of the time.

In these final pages, I would like to broaden this inquiry to encompass some of the legacies of Nazi-era cancer research, including the question of whether the cancer policies of the time might have had an impact on postwar cancer rates. I want to complicate how we think about quackery (not all Nazi doctors were quacks!), but I also want to draw attention to Posen's mysterious Reich Institute for Cancer Research, which seems to have served as a laboratory for biowarfare research, exploited after the war by Allied authorities. I will also say something about how we should interpret the Nazi war on cancer—and what it tells us about the nature of fascism.

I should caution, though, that my endpoint is not a very cheerful one. There is an eerie familiarity in Nazi cancer research that does not sit very well with how we customarily regard the winds that generated the Holocaust.

THE SCIENCE QUESTION UNDER FASCISM

Most people when they think about Nazi medicine think about the crimes for which the period is notorious. Nazi doctors sterilized some 350,000 Germans, murdered 200,000 mentally or physically handicapped people, and killed at least a thousand concentration camp inmates in the course of medical experiments designed to advance the cause of German military medicine. Nazi doctors collaborated in the exploitation of slave labor, and in the wholesale extermination of European Jews and Gypsies.

Nazi medical horrors are familiar, but it is also important that we recognize the political diversity and tensions of the era. We are accustomed to thinking of Nazi political culture as "totalitarian," but historians have also begun to appreciate the "polycratic"