

2007

## The Nazi War on Cancer (Book Review)

Harvey Fenigsohn

*University of Massachusetts Medical School*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://escholarship.umassmed.edu/omha\\_book\\_reviews](http://escholarship.umassmed.edu/omha_book_reviews)



Part of the [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Fenigsohn, Harvey, "The Nazi War on Cancer (Book Review)" (2007). *OMHA Book Reviews*. 5.  
[http://escholarship.umassmed.edu/omha\\_book\\_reviews/5](http://escholarship.umassmed.edu/omha_book_reviews/5)

This material is brought to you by eScholarship@UMMS. It has been accepted for inclusion in OMHA Book Reviews by an authorized administrator of eScholarship@UMMS. For more information, please contact [Lisa.Palmer@umassmed.edu](mailto:Lisa.Palmer@umassmed.edu).

Robert N. Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer*. Princeton University Press, 1999. Reviewed by Harvey Fenigsohn.

In *The Nazi War on Cancer*, historian Robert Proctor asks how a nation responsible for so much death could nevertheless make outstanding contributions to the preservation of life. In this subtle, nuanced study, written in an engaging, lucid style, Proctor uncovers what he calls "the 'flip side' of fascism" (277). He discloses the hitherto little-known fact that Hitler's followers, despite all of their unforgivable crimes against humanity, implemented highly enlightened public health measures, making unprecedented advances in toxicology and epidemiology. In analyzing this paradox, he raises profound moral questions we have yet to answer. What are we to make of a nation that justified castrating thousands of "defectives," conducted sadistic medical experiments, and systematically executed millions, yet pioneered health reforms we now emulate? Concentrating on one disease, he explains that the Nazis viewed cancer as more than an organic illness. Rather, for Hitler's Germans, cancer was a metaphor for all the racial and cultural impurities they intended to eradicate in order to establish their fascist utopia.

To achieve their goals, the Germans were determined to recreate their society, and in many ways they made significant and even admirable efforts to achieve a healthy populace. Proctor asserts that the Nazis established health programs that "today we might regard as 'progressive' or even socially responsible" (5). To prove this, he makes use of impressive documentation in both German and English, drawing from both scholarly sources and popular writing.

We learn that the Nazis were dedicated environmentalists, the first to discover the many carcinogenic effects of the workplace. Proctor shows them making strenuous efforts to overcome the occupational hazards of asbestos and radiation, and to reduce the cancerous effects of preservatives, food dyes, and pesticides. Linking lung cancer to smoking, and stomach cancer to drinking, they launched aggressive propaganda against alcohol and tobacco. The Nazis also realized the nutritional advantages of high fiber, urging the consumption of fruits and vegetables and passing laws making bakeries produce only whole grain bread. Indeed, the Führer himself gave up smoking and was a confirmed vegetarian.

Though he convinces us that the Nazis were ahead of their time in improving public health, Proctor never lets us forget the grotesque barbarism of a society ruthlessly bent on achieving total physical perfection. As in his earlier work, *Racial Hygiene* (1988), Proctor shows that German medical science often reflected the pathology of racism. He describes the malign research of a truly maniacal scientist, Josef Mengele, the SS doctor of Auschwitz, who injected dyes into the eyes of living subjects to determine if brown eyes could be changed into blue ones. We are reminded that concentration camp victims were immersed in freezing water to measure precisely how long it took a person to die in icy cold conditions. Euthanasia, sterilization, and ultimately the Final Solution of genocide: all were justified as vital to the progress of National Socialism.

Ironically, if not for their political biases and racist fantasies, the Nazis would have made even greater strides in overcoming disease. Jewish physicians and scientists were in the forefront of

cancer research. Nevertheless, rather than degrade their society with non-Aryans, the Nazis purged Jews from the medical community, sentencing them to the gas chambers. No pollution, whether racial, religious, or ideological, was to be tolerated if the Übermenschen were to achieve their dream of world domination.

Most interesting is the author's concern with the troubling ethical issues raised by Nazi medical research. He wonders "how the routine practice of science can so easily coexist with the routine exercise of cruelty" (278). He points out that Nazi medical data is often viewed as "tainted," but the Allies nevertheless used this data. In fact, Josef Mengele has a paper listed in *Index Medicus*. Proctor notes that a widely consulted text on anatomy, the *Pernkopf Atlas*, made use of cadavers from the death camps.<sup>1</sup> He asks us to consider: should this work be suppressed or dedicated to the memory of the victims?

Proctor reminds us that the Nazis were aware of racial segregation in America and that we, too, once sterilized the mentally ill and abusively experimented on human subjects. We are reminded that no society can ignore the ethical implications of their scientific advances. In *The Nazi War on Cancer*, Robert Proctor makes a significant contribution to medical history and challenges us to think deeply about the complex confluence of politics, science, and morality.

<sup>1</sup> Platzer, Werner, ed., *Pernkopf Anatomy: Atlas of Topographic and Applied Human Anatomy*, trans., Harry Monsen (Baltimore: Urban & Schwarzenberg, 1989).