

Edzard Ernst

Hitler's Female Physicians



Women Doctors
During the Third Reich
and Their Crimes
Against Humanity



Springer

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To Danielle

Preface

Much has been written about the Third Reich and the atrocities committed during this period. Reading about these events, one could be forgiven for assuming firstly that the Nazi killing program was an entirely male affair, and secondly that the medical profession was only peripherally involved. Both assumptions would, however, be erroneous.

The German medical profession was at the centre of these abominations. It developed the concept of race hygiene, embraced it enthusiastically, and enacted it mercilessly. In the name of healing the nation, German physicians first aimed at eradicating disease and subsequently worked towards exterminating the diseased. Their descent into inhumanity began with the involuntary sterilization of those citizens who were considered to be genetically inferior. It continued by perverting the concept of euthanasia into one of killing vulnerable patients. Eventually, the descent culminated with the mass murder of concentration camp prisoners who, because of their inability to contribute to the war effort, were considered 'useless ballast'. Collectively, these actions amount to the most serious violations of medical ethics and are unprecedented in the history of medicine.

These barbarities have been well described, exhaustively analysed, and extensively published. The impression that often emerged is that the offences were largely committed by a relatively small group of fanatic men. Yet, this notion is not entirely true. During the Third Reich, the medical profession was predominantly male. It is therefore to be expected that fewer female

doctors were involved. However, this does not mean that their contribution to the monstrosities was negligible.

My book focusses on the sizable group of female doctors who became involved in the crimes against humanity during the Third Reich. Despite the vast literature on Nazi medicine, to the best of my knowledge, no other book has attempted to cover this specific topic. As we shall see, women physicians were involved in the Nazi killing programs at all levels:

- Some acted as influential promoters of the Nazi ideology of race hygiene.
- Others participated in the murder of patients considered to be unworthy of life.
- Some were employed as doctors in concentration camps.
- Others co-operated in unspeakably inhumane medical experiments on non-consenting prisoners.

Part I of this book is a summary of the stepwise descent into inhumanity that the German medical profession undertook when it adopted the Nazi ideology. As many excellent texts have in the past addressed these issues, I deal with them rather briefly, seeking only to provide the most relevant background information. Part II consists of 38 biographical sketches of female physicians who, during the Third Reich, were involved in crimes against humanity. Based on the often scant and sometimes contradictory information available to date, they provide details about the background, training, employment, motivation, and actions of these women. The chapters also discuss the doctor's lives after the war, their prosecutions, and their right to continue practicing medicine. In both parts of the book, additional information about relevant details is added in concise form as 'boxes'.

My hope is that this book will be a valuable addition to the literature about the Third Reich. More importantly, it might be a poignant reminder how readily even the most elementary rules of ethical behaviour can be dismissed, and serve as a safeguard against it ever happening again.

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About the Author

Edzard Ernst was born in Wiesbaden, Germany. Both his father and grandfather were doctors. He graduated from medical school in 1978. In 1998, he became Professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (PMR) in Hannover, Germany and in 1990 Professor of PMR in Vienna. In 1993, he was appointed to the Chair in Complementary Medicine at Exeter, UK. In 2000, he took British nationality. Since 2012, he has been Emeritus Professor at Exeter. While his main research interest focusses on complementary/alternative medicine, he has long pursued an interest in the medicine of the Third Reich.

Abbreviations

Abitur = German high-school diploma that enables pupils to go to university.

Anschluss = the annexation of Austria by the Nazis in 1938.

BDÄ = Bund Deutscher Ärztinnen, Association of German Female Doctors.

BDM = Bund Deutscher Maedels, Association of German Girls.

Denazification = the post war process of eliminating Nazi ideology from German and Austrian society, culture, press, economy, judiciary, and politics. Individuals who had been Nazi party or SS members were removed from positions of power and influence. Suspects had to fill in forms and were given over to panels which assigned them to one of five categories:

- V. Persons exonerated
- IV. Followers. Restrictions on travel, employment, political rights, and fines could be imposed.
- III. Lesser offenders were placed on probation for two to three years with a list of specific restrictions.
- II. Offenders: activists, militants, profiteers, or otherwise incriminated persons were arrested and imprisoned up to ten years, performing reparation or reconstruction work.
- Major offenders were arrested, tried, and sentenced to death, imprisonment with or without hard labour, and specific sanctions.

Führer's Chancellery = Hitler's Chancellery, the 'Kanzlei des Führers der NSDAP', was the private chancellery of Hitler.

Habilitation = Academic degree equivalent to a Ph.D. which, in German Universities, is normally a precondition for a professorship.

Erbgesundheitsgericht = Hereditary Health Court, a court that decided whether people should be forcibly sterilized or not.

Eisernes Kreuz = Iron Cross, military decoration in the Kingdom of Prussia, the German Empire, and the Third Reich. Its design was derived from the insignia of the medieval Teutonic Order and borne by its knights from the 13th century. Today, it is the emblem of the Bundeswehr, the German armed forces.

Leopoldina = German National Academy of Sciences.

Kinderfachabteilung = special paediatric ward; these departments were established specifically for the purpose of murdering patients in the course of 'Aktion T4'.

Kriegsverdienstkreuz = War Merit Cross, decoration of Nazi Germany issued in four degrees, with an equivalent civil award.

Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Ärztebund (NSDÄB or NSD-Ärztebund) = Nazi Medical Association or National Socialist German Doctors' League was a division of the Nazi party with the mission of indoctrinating the medical profession with Nazi ideology.

Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft or NS-Frauenschaft = Nazi Women's Association or National Socialist Women's League, the women's wing of the Nazi party.

NDÄ = Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Ärztebund.

NS = National Socialist.

NSDAP = Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the Nazi party.

Nuremberg laws = 1) the Protection of German Blood and German Honour, which forbade marriages and extramarital intercourse between Jews and Germans and the employment of German females under 45 in Jewish households; 2) the Reich Citizenship Law, which declared that only those of German or related blood were eligible to have the rights and protections of citizens of the Reich.

Ostmark = the name for Austria after the 'Anschluss'.

SA = Sturmabteilung, military wing of the Nazi party.

SS-Totenkopfverbände = Totenkopf units, SS organization responsible for administering the Nazi concentration camps.

SS = Schutzstaffel, elite soldiers of the Nazis; it was declared a criminal organization by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg in 1946.

Stolperstein = stumbling block, is a small concrete cube imbedded in the pavement and bearing a brass plate inscribed with the name and life dates of victims of Nazi extermination or persecution. Such mini monuments can today be seen all over Germany.

T4 = related to the 'Aktion T4', the initial phase of the Nazi killing program.

Waffen-SS = the combat branch of the SS. The Waffen-SS became involved in numerous atrocities and was declared a criminal organization by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg in 1946.

Part I

Medicine's Descent into Inhumanity



1

Medicine in the Third Reich

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss some aspects of the Third Reich as they pertain to the subject of this book. German physicians adopted the Nazi ideology to a greater extent than any other profession. They developed some of the concepts and implemented the principles of murder on an industrial scale. Without their enthusiastic support, neither the mass ‘euthanasia’ of disabled patients, nor the Holocaust would have been possible.

The term ‘Third Reich’ was coined in 1922 by the nationalist writer Arthur Moeller van den Bruck [1]. In his publication ‘Das Dritte Reich’ (The Third Reich), Moeller envisioned the rise of an anti-liberal, anti-Marxist Germanic Empire in which all social class divisions would be reconciled in national unity under a charismatic ‘Führer’ [2].

The stark reality of the ‘Third Reich’ began on 30 January 1933, the day Adolf Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor. It brought an end to the Weimar Republic which had been plagued by political deadlock, increasing violence, and economic hardship. It took only months for the Nazi party, the NSDAP, to establish a totalitarian state that permeated Germany on all levels. The Nazis swiftly implemented their policy of ‘Gleichschaltung’, the alignment of individuals and institutions with Nazi goals and ideology. Within just a few months, the Nazis had abolished all other political parties. Basic rights were suspended, the police became an instrument of Nazi power, opponents were incarcerated, and a totalitarian dictatorship was established [3]. The Nazi ideology was incompatible with democracy. The rule of law was replaced by the ‘Führer principle’ or ‘leader principle’ [4]. Propaganda

was used extensively and crafted to appeal to general national, economic, and social goals.

The Nazi racial policy became central to many subsequent developments. It was based on a belief in the existence of a superior 'master race' and a conflict between the Aryans and inferior races, particularly Jews. The Nazi propaganda machine convinced the German people that the Jews had infiltrated society and were responsible for the exploitation and repression of the Aryan race. Social Darwinism was perverted into 'racial hygiene', which picked out non-Aryans to be first defamed, then disowned, and eventually destroyed. Nazi ideology promoted the vision of a grandiose unified German nation in which all 'inferior races' had been eradicated.

Jews were increasingly disenfranchized, marginalized, and forced to emigrate. The 'Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service' excluded them from public office. The 'Nuremberg Race Laws' passed in 1935 deprived them of their German citizenship and prohibited them from marrying non-Jews. The systematic extermination of all European Jews was secretly planned, organized, and eventually put into action.

Hitler introduced compulsory military service in 1935 and swiftly started his military build-up. The invasion of the demilitarized Rhineland in 1936 was followed by the 'Anschluss' of Austria in 1938. With the 'Munich Agreement', France and Great Britain, hoping to preserve peace, granted the incorporation into the Reich of the Sudetenland in September 1938.

However, hopes for peace were short-lived; the Second World War began with the invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. It provided the cover for systematic killing programs, first aimed at the disabled and other 'ballast existences', but soon at anyone who did not comply with the Nazi ideology.

From then on, war utilitarianism dominated all aspects of German life. It was characterized by collectivism and informed by the belief that certain individuals could be defined as less valuable according to, for instance, their inability to contribute sufficiently to the advancement of the 'Volk' in general and the war effort in particular. Goebbels' propaganda proclaimed that Germany was destined to rule the world and expand by military force. The racially superior German population would, according to Goebbels, establish permanent rule in Europe and beyond.

Women played vital roles in the Nazi's aggressive population policy. It encouraged 'racially pure' women to bear as many Aryan children as possible. They were needed first for the war effort and later for populating the vast regions conquered in the East. During the war, the Nazis encouraged the active engagement of women in a variety of activities aimed at supporting

the war effort. Thus, more women became physicians, a profession that had hitherto been almost entirely off limits.

The German medical profession seemed captivated by Nazi ideology. A higher percentage of physicians than of any other profession were members or sympathizers of the Nazi party. Prior to the Third Reich, unemployment had been rife among doctors. The Nazis promised to radically change this situation and to re-establish the physicians' power, income, status, and honour. Most German doctors were enthusiastic about such prospects and willingly followed Hitler. Resistance to the Nazis and their ideas amongst the German medical profession was rare and presented no significant obstacle to the Nazi's success [5].

The 'Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Ärztebund' (National Socialist German Physicians' League) had been established in 1929. Many physicians became 'nazified' even before 1933, and Nazi doctors contributed more to the nefarious regime than any other profession [6]. Already by 1936, more than 30% of German doctors belonged to the Nazi party [7]. Membership grew fast; in the Rhineland, for example, the proportion of party members among doctors increased from 37% in 1936 to 56% in 1944. By the end of the Third Reich, in 1945, more than 7% of all German physicians had even become members of the SS (the figure for the general population was less than 1%) [8].

German physicians contributed to Nazi ideology on all levels. They propagated the theory of 'race hygiene' certifying non-Aryans as genetically inferior. Putting theory into action, they cleansed Germany of those citizens who were denounced as imperfect, incurable, or weak. Nazi physicians claimed to heal the 'racial' disease that allegedly threatened to contaminate the 'Volkskörper', the body of the German people.

The medical profession was essential for organising and running the program of forced sterilization (Chap. 4). Subsequently, it participated in outright murder (Chaps. 5 and 6). Under the Nazis, German doctors enabled:

- the medicalization of social and political problems,
- the devaluation and dehumanization of sick children, women, and men,
- the indoctrination of other health professionals with Nazi ideology,
- the bureaucratization of the role of medicine,
- the repression and fear of non-compliance with dictates,
- the disregard for medical ethics and human rights.

Nazi physicians willingly applied:

- quarantine (ghettoization),
- exclusion (emigration),
- extermination (genocide),

as ‘treatments’ that were deemed to be prerequisites for the health and survival of Germany [9].

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2

Female Doctors of the Third Reich

In this chapter, I will briefly describe the role women played in German healthcare during the Third Reich. In Germany, women were first admitted to medical schools only in 1888. Female doctors were a tiny minority when the Nazis seized power in 1933. By the start of the war, their number had increase substantially and they became more and more important to the Nazi state.

Adolf Hitler saw emancipation as a Jewish invention, and he felt that women were destined to stay at home, look after their husbands, and have children: “We do not feel it is right for women to penetrate the world of men, but we feel it is natural for these two worlds to remain separate” [1]. The natural task of the German woman was to give birth to as many children as possible and thus serve the nation by contributing to the spread of the ‘Aryan race’ and assisting the war effort. Motherhood was constantly and enthusiastically glorified as an ideological ideal [2].

In order to make motherhood more appealing to women, the Nazis created a cult around the theme and endlessly praised women for their essential contribution to German society. However, the start of the war changed the situation profoundly. Increasingly, women now had to take on the various roles of their husbands, many of whom were fighting at the front. As the war demanded more and more sacrifices, women’s responsibilities became more difficult and complex. Women had to step up to tasks from which they had previously been excluded. To a large degree that included being physicians [3].