

MEDICAL (MAL)PRACTICES UNDER THE NAZI REGIME

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Course Description

How and why did doctors become murderers under the Nazi regime? Contrary to what many believe, the answer is neither “brainwashing” nor orders from the government. Also untrue are the assertions that Nazi medical professionals simply abandoned medical ethics and that their brutal experiments were pseudo-medical/pseudoscientific. This 6-week course explores the complex reality of physicians and medical science in Nazi Germany. We will begin with the theoretical background and historical context that gave rise to German “racial hygiene”—the concept and practice that aligned medical professionals and the Nazi state. After this, we will examine the deadly results of the inversion of medical ethics: the “euthanasia” programs, the various forms of medical experimentation, and the significant involvement of physicians in the perpetration of the Holocaust. We also study the resistance, resilience, and ingenuity of Jewish physicians engaged in medical activities in ghettos and camps. Lastly, we will consider the aftermath and legacy of Nazi medical atrocities, considering the postwar fates of the “Nazi doctors,” the “Nuremberg Code” of medical ethics, and the memory and memorialization of medicine under the Nazi regime.

Learning Objectives

1. Understand doctors’ circumstances and conduct during the Third Reich
2. Relate political, professional, and ethical context to doctors’ behavior
3. Recognize the echoes of the past in present-day medical research and practice

Course Topics and Schedule

Week 1: Precursors to Nazi Racial Science

Readings: Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche, “Permitting the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Living” (1920); Gustav Boeters, “Lex Zwickau” (1924); Hans Harmsen, “Contemporary Questions of Eugenics” (1931)

Week 2: Symbiosis – The Doctors and the State

Readings: Anton Drexler and Adolf Hitler, “Program of the German Workers’ Party” (1920); the Civil Service Law (Apr. 7, 1933); the Sterilization Law (July 14, 1933); the Nuremberg Laws (Sept. 15, 1935); excerpts from the diary of anatomist Hermann Voss

Week 3: Killing as Healing – “Euthanasia”

Readings: Hitler’s “Euthanasia” Authorization Letter (backdated to Sept. 1, 1939); Letter of Dr. F. Hoelzel (Aug. 20, 1940); excerpt from Bishop von Galen’s Sermon (Aug. 3, 1941)

Week 4: Killing as Healing – Selections and Experiments

Readings: Selected documents and survivor accounts

Week 5: Medicine under Oppression and Coercion

Readings: Selected documents and survivor accounts; excerpts from memoirs

Week 6: Aftermath and Legacy

Readings: Nuremberg prosecutor’s opening statement; Nuremberg Code