

03 "Cleansing of the National Body"

Medicine in Germany between 1933 and 1938

In accordance with the National Socialists' racist and biologicistic views, medicine did not primarily concern itself with care for the individual patient, but with the protection of the "national body" and, in particular, with keeping the "national genotype" pure. Human life was subjected to a relentless cost-benefit analysis. Those who could not benefit the Volksgemeinschaft lost their right to exist in the Nazi state. Shortly after having seized power in 1933, the National Socialists enacted laws regulating "genetic and racial hygiene" with a view to improving the "Aryan master race." The "genetically inferior" were to be prevented from propagating. The first infamous measure to that effect was the law of 14 July 1933 by which the state ordered the sterilization of the "hereditary sick." "Hereditary diseases" were "congenital feeble-mindedness, schizophrenia, circular (manic-depressive) madness, congenital falling sickness (epilepsy), hereditary St. Vitus' dance (Huntington's chorea), hereditary blindness and deafness, severe hereditary physical deformity, and chronic alcoholism." Scientists considered the inclusion of other diseases, which in some regions were already "illegally" included in the program. Physicians in local health authorities had to inform Hereditary Health Courts of "hereditary sick" individuals. The courts decided on the sterilization in a trial and had it executed in a public hospital - if necessary, by force. Simultaneously, intense propaganda in film, press, and schools made eugenic views widely known to the population. It is estimated that by 1940 almost 360,000 people had been sterilized in the German Reich. Furthermore, the Marriage Health Law prevented "genetically sick" people from marrying.

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