

# Health professionals played 'central role' in Nazi crimes: study

November 9 2023

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Credit: Jorge Sepúlveda from Pexels

Medical professionals played a "central role" in the crimes committed by the Nazis, according to a new study published Thursday, which aims to debunk "long-held misconceptions" about the scale of their involvement.

Medical atrocities during the Nazi era were not solely carried out by "a few extremist doctors" or perpetrators that acted "under coercion", according to a report published in *The Lancet* journal, described by its authors as the most comprehensive of its kind to date.

By 1945, between 50 to 65 percent of non-Jewish German doctors had joined the Nazi party, which represents a "much higher proportion than in any other academic profession," said the 73-page report.

The abhorrent eugenics and euphemistically termed "euthanasia" murder programs of the Nazis during World War II resulted in "at least 230 000" deaths, including 7,000 to 10,000 children.

Over 300,000 forced sterilizations were also performed on victims, who were labeled "genetically inferior".

Despite ample evidence to the contrary, "common misconceptions" that medicine in Nazi Germany merely amounted to "pseudoscience" still remain, the study shows.

In fact, German scientists were "part of broader international networks exploring and promoting eugenics and developing racist medical rationales" and Nazi research was sometimes integrated into the "canon of medical knowledge".

Today's understanding of "[aviation safety](#), hypothermia, and even the effects of tobacco and [alcohol use](#) on the body" is in part based on Nazi research, while "awareness of how the research was obtained is scarce".

As "coerced contributions to medicine", the bodies of Nazi victims were used for research and teaching, and sometimes kept in scientific collections "for decades after the war" without revealing the crimes involved.

## Better equipped

Scientists such as the Austrian anatomist Eduard Pernkopf achieved lasting fame after the war even though their research derived from the "bodies of victims of the Nazi regime".

The Pernkopf anatomy atlas was widely published and used until the 1990s without any reference to the origins of the images in the atlas that "very likely" depict murdered Nazi victims.

Long praised as the founder of juvenile psychiatry in Germany and awarded the Cross of Merit in 1979, Elisabeth Hecker's past remained unknown to the public until a 1995 documentary revealed that she ordered transfers of children to local killing units.

"Methods first developed" between 1939 and 1941 in an effort to kill tens of thousands of institutionalized patients by gas were later "applied to the extermination camps in Poland," according to a press release accompanying the report

The authors recommend that the study of medicine under Nazism and the Holocaust should be incorporated in health care curricula, as the lack of knowledge "apart from a vague notion of Josef Mengele's experiments in Auschwitz" today is "often surprising".

Through studying the past, [medical professionals](#) will be better equipped to "face moral and ethical medical dilemmas and their own biases, stand up to power, and protect vulnerable populations".

As examples, the report cites [difficult decisions](#) [medical staff](#) can be confronted with, such as performing triage or determining "the beginning and the end of life".

The report was carried out as part of a Lancet Commission that brought together a group of 20 international experts for the first time to examine the history of medicine.

**More information:** The Lancet Commission on medicine, Nazism, and the Holocaust: historical evidence, implications for today, teaching for tomorrow, *The Lancet* (2023). [www.thelancet.com/commissions/...ne-and-the-holocaust](https://www.thelancet.com/commissions/...ne-and-the-holocaust)

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