Historical Outline

German physicians – those at the head of the central SS and Wehrmacht medical organizations, together with the lower-ranking medical personnel under their command, as well as the faculty of research institutes and medical schools with their distinguished academic titles – played an active role in Nazi extermination plans. Ignoring the basic tenets of medical ethics, often at their own initiative, they put their skills at the service of National Socialist ideology despite being fully aware of its criminal aims.

The SS physicians serving in the concentration camps, among them Auschwitz, played a special role. Violating the Hippocratic Oath, they participated in the mass extermination of the Jews, carried out the selection of newly arrived Jewish transports, and oversaw the killing process. They sentenced the most seriously ill and overworked prisoners in the camp hospitals to death in the gas chambers or killed them with lethal phenol injections to the heart, and then deliberately falsified their death certificates. They carried out medical experiments on prisoners and made a mockery of the medical profession in a variety of other ways. By supporting the extermination program in the camp, they earned themselves a place in history as medical criminals.

The participation of numerous German physicians in criminal medical experiments on concentration camp prisoners was a particularly drastic instance of the trampling of medical ethics. The initiators and facilitators of these experiments were Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler, together with SS-Obergruppenführer Ernst Grätz, the chief physician of the SS and police, and SS-Standartenführer Wolfram Sievers, the secretary general of the Ahnenerbe (Ancestral Heritage) Society and director of the Waffen SS Military-Scientific Research Institute. The SS-WVHA (SS Main Economic and Administrative Office, in charge of concentration camps from March 1942) had administrative and economic authority. Support in the form of specialized analytical studies came

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1 Ernst Robert von Grätz, medical school professor, member of the NSDAP and SS. Former chief physician of the SS and head of the SS Main Sanitary Office, while also head of the German Red Cross. Committed suicide in April 1945.
from the Waffen SS Hygiene Institute, directed by SS-Oberführer Joachim Mrugowsky, an M.D. and professor of bacteriology at the University of Berlin Medical School.

Experiments were planned at the highest levels to meet the needs of the army (some were intended to improve the state of soldiers’ health) or postwar plans (including population policy), or to reinforce the bases of racial ideology (including advancing views as to the superiority of the “Nordic race”).

Aside from experiments planned at the highest levels, many Nazi doctors experimented on prisoners on behalf of German pharmaceutical companies or medical institutes. Others did so in pursuit of their personal interests, or to advance their academic careers.

During the Second World War, Nazi doctors pandered to the expectations of the Third Reich leadership by supporting the regime’s demographic policies. They initiated wide-ranging research on methods of mass sterilization that would be applied to peoples regarded as belonging to a lower category. They intended to sterilize both Jews and Slavs, as is shown by the surviving correspondence and postwar testimony of such high-ranking Nazi officials as Victor Brack, the head of Hitler’s chancellery; Karl Brandt, the medical school professor who was Hitler’s personal physician and Reich commissar for health and sanitation; Adolf Pokorny, a physician; Rudolf Brandt, a legal scholar who was a personal adviser to Himmler; and Rudolf Höss², the commandant of Auschwitz. At the same time as they embarked on the mass murder of the Jews in the gas chambers, they were planning to sterilize the Slavs and the small numbers of Germans with “mixed” Jewish blood, the so-called Mischlingen.

Himmler’s staff discussed mass sterilization at a secret conference in 1941, attended by Hitler himself and other leading SS officials, including the chief SS physician, Dr. Ernst Grawitz. They debated about the best method for sterilizing vast numbers of people in the shortest possible time, using the simplest possible methods.

A conference attended by Himmler, Professor Karl Gebhardt, and Richard Glücks (the inspector of concentration camps) entrusted the search for the desired method of sterilization to Professor Carl Clauberg, an authority in the treatment of infertility who had attended international conferences of gynecologists, and worked during the war as head of the department of women’s diseases at the hospital in Chorzów (then Königshütte, Germany).

² Rudolf Höss – commandant of Auschwitz from May 5, 1940 to November 11, 1943, after which he was head of Office Group DI in the SS-WVHA, from where he was seconded to Auschwitz as commander of the SS garrison; in charge of the killing of Hungarian Jews from May 11 to July 26, 1944. On April 2, 1947, the Supreme National Tribunal in Warsaw sentenced him to death. The sentence was carried out in Oświęcim on April 16, 1947.
Himmler responded to requests from Clauberg by ordering him to carry out sterilization experiments at the concentration camp in Auschwitz. Clauberg set to work in Barracks No. 30, part of the hospital complex in the women’s camp (sector Bla) in Birkenau, at the end of 1942. In April of the following year, following orders from above, Rudolf Höss put part of Block No. 10 in the Main Camp at Clauberg’s disposal. Between 150 and 400 Jewish women from various countries were held in two upstairs rooms with their windows boarded up because they overlooked the “Death Wall” in the courtyard of Block No. 11. The labor office listed these women as “prisoners for experimental purposes” (Häftlinge für Versuchszwecke). Most of Clauberg’s subjects were women who had already given birth, and who had not stopped menstruating in the camp.

Clauberg developed a method of non-surgical mass sterilization. Under the pretext of performing a gynecological examination, he first checked to make sure that the Fallopian tubes were open, and then introduced a specially prepared chemical irritant, which caused acute inflammation. This led to the obstruction of the tubes. X-rays were used to check the results of each procedure.

Clauberg’s accomplices were Johannes Goebel (Göbel), a Ph.D. in chemistry who was the representative of the Schering Werke and the inventor of the chemical solution that Clauberg used, and an SS orderly named Binning. His medical and nursing staff consisted mostly of female Jewish prisoners. The head physician of Block No. 10 from September 1943, with the status of block supervisor, was the gynecological surgeon Alina Bialostocka (who went by the name Brewda in camp), a Jewish woman from Poland.

These procedures were carried out in a brutal way. Complications were frequent, including peritonitis and hemorrhages from the reproductive tract, leading to high fever and sepsis. Multiple organ failure and death frequently followed. While some of Clauberg’s Jewish patients died in this way, others were deliberately put to death so that autopsies could be carried out.

Clauberg provided Himmler with regular updates on his experiments. On June 7, 1943, he wrote: “The method for the non-surgical sterilization of women that I have developed is now almost perfected... As for the questions directed to me by the Reichsführer as to when it will be possible to sterilize 1,000 women in this way, I can give the following answer today, according to the forecasts: if my research continues to yield the results it has yielded so far, and there is no reason to believe that this will not be the case, then it will be possible to report in a short time that one experienced doctor in a suitably equipped office and with the help of 10 auxiliary personnel will most probably be able

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3 The Museum Archives contain several accounts by Polish women prisoners experimented on by Clauberg.
Selected Sources

Carl Clauberg

Born in Wupperhoff on September 18, 1898. M.D., gynecologist, professor at Königsberg (Kalinigrad) University. During the war, he was director of the Women’s Disease Clinic at St. Hedwig’s Hospital in Königs- hütte (Chorzów). From the end of 1942 to January 1945, on the orders of Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler, he carried out sterilization experiments on Jewish women prisoners in Auschwitz. After the war, he remained in Soviet captivity until October 1955, when he settled in West Germany. On November 21 of that year, he was arrested, stripped of all his academic titles, and disbarred from medical practice by the German medical association. During preparations for his trial, he died in prison in Kiel on August 9, 1957.

Carl Clauberg
APMAB, Neg. No. 432.
Experimental Block 10 on the grounds of the Main Camp in Auschwitz I.

Block 10. Room 1, where women prisoners subjected to experiments were hospitalized. Postwar photo.
Josef Mengele

Born in Günzburg on March 16, 1911, a doctor of philosophy and medicine. Member of the NSDAP. Served in the Wehrmacht 1938–1940, and later inducted into the Waffen-SS. Served on the front from February to May 1943, wounded in combat. Transferred to Auschwitz at his own request to carry out medical and anthropological research. Appointed physician in the Blle Gypsy camp in Birkenau. From August to December 1944, also held the post of First Physician of Auschwitz II Birkenau Concentration Camp, with authority over all the sectors inhabited by prisoners there. In November 1944, named SS physician in the Birkenau hospital for SS men. Experimented in Auschwitz on multiple pregnancy and the conditions in which it arises, inherited traits in twins and dwarfs, and “noma” (cancrum oris, gangrenous stomatitis). Never punished for his crimes. Emigrated to Argentina in 1949; frequently changed abode to avoid pursuers. Died in Brazil in 1979.

Dr. Josef Mengele (1943)
APMAB. Neg. No. 21383/12a.
Letter of May 24, 1943, on Josef Mengele’s transfer to Auschwitz.
APMAB, Micr. No. 1613/98.
Floor plan of the ground floor of Crematorium II. The laboratory and autopsy room assigned to Dr. Josef Mengele in June 1944 are indicated at lower left. APMAB, Neg. No. 17817.
As for the experiments conducted on us by Dr. Mengele himself, I recall that they took place no more than 2 or 3 times. Prisoner doctors usually carried out the experiments on us, on his orders. They took place irregularly, every few days, on Dr. Mengele’s orders. Every few days, we were called in pairs, for instance: “Zwillinge Klein should report to this block on this day”. We walked to Dr. Mengele’s office on the grounds of the Gypsy camp. They called us for various examinations: to take blood samples, to the dentist, to the oculist.

Blood samples were taken often and I am not sure whether something might not have been injected into our organisms at the time. The oculist examinations were especially unpleasant because they put some sort of drops in our eyes and then observed what happened.

Dr. Mengele carried out only the examinations of the clinical type. He ordered us to undress and examined our whole bodies. He never carried out any procedures...

In characterizing Dr. Mengele’s attitude towards us, his patients, you could say that, in general, they were “correct”. He never beat us, and his name even served, often, as a sort of protection for us. Sometimes, for instance, some capo or SS man would be mistreating us – then we would shout at him to stop or else we would complain to Dr. Mengele, and that did the trick.

Dr. Mengele had prisoner nurses to assist him when he received us in his office. It was a big office with windows. We always went in two by two. I always went in with my brother. As for twins of different sexes, that is, a boy and a girl, then as far as I can tell, they only met each other at Dr. Mengele’s...

In our group of twins, it never occurred that someone failed to come back from being examined by Dr. Mengele. I affirm that Dr. Mengele never killed until he had finished his planned experiments on living people. He never got around to murdering anyone from our group.