The Führer of All Maladies: Cancer and the Utility of Metaphors for Its "Independence," under the Nazi Regime

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“Night owl.” “Early bird.” “Apple of my eye.” “Heart of stone.” Such metaphors are both aesthetic and intellectual pleasantries of the English language. On an aesthetic level, these sayings are entertaining and familiar. But on an intellectual/cognitive one, these metaphors have the power to shape how we visualize, frame, and think about objects and experiences in our worlds. Recently, work in science studies (which contextualizes scientific progress within society, history, and philosophy) has demonstrated that metaphors are especially useful for making sense of two particular aspects of human life. These two aspects are scientific research and disease – specifically, cancer research and disease. In her 1978 book, Illness as Metaphor, Susan Sontag argued that the dominant metaphor for cancer has ultimately become one of war. Cancer cells do not just “multiply,” as we know today – they are invasive. Cancer patients do not just “heal” – they “fight a battle.” However, this “war metaphor” for cancer was not always and everywhere so ubiquitous. In the Third Reich, for example, Nazi scientists discussed cancer in terms of independent agency. Cancer cells were viewed not on equal footing with their researchers or even with the patients they plagued, but as independent degenerates or revolutionaries that threatened the well-being of all Germans and even the unity of Nazi society as a whole. Importantly, science studies asserts that the metaphors any society adopts are informative of aspects of that society’s culture… and the Nazis and their cancer metaphors were no exception.

In Fall 2019, I designed an independent study at my university (Duke) to explore this phenomenon. I pored over German-language propaganda, books, and scientific research publications – all from the early 1930s to late 1940s, and all focused on cancer treatment, awareness, and/or laboratory research. Ultimately, I came to understand how metaphors for cancer in Nazi Germany reflected the lens through which Nazi professionals saw their own
“diseased” world. In this presentation, I will draw on my original research to explain both the origins and utility of independence metaphors for cancer in the Third Reich – and how the greater importance of such analysis is that it helps us understand the paranoia driving (and embedded in) Nazi perceptions of society overall. First, I will provide a short introduction to German cancer research, independence metaphors, and the status of cancer research under the Nazi regime. Then, I will briefly analyze the publications from four of Nazi Germany’s most prominent cancer scientists. Translating from the German, I will identify the common thread between these scientists’ “cancer language” – which, at its core, was the independence metaphor – and unpack its significance through a science studies point of view.

**Introduction to independence metaphors and German (Nazi) cancer research**

By the time Hitler rose to power in 1933, Germany had already been leading the way in cancer research for 100 years. This was mostly thanks to three skilled 19th-century German scientists: Matthias Schleiden, Theodor Schwann, and Rudolf Virchow. Highly renowned for their work on cell theory, Schleiden, Schwann, and Virchow brought unparalleled attention and resources to cancer research in Germany after they galvanized a new perspective for looking at life and disease. Today, it is common knowledge that to understand cancer, one must first understand cancer cells, and this is exactly the line of thought that these men pioneered.

Cells are autonomous beings, Schleiden, Schwann, and Virchow asserted throughout the 1800s. In their original publications, Schwann and Schleiden contended that “the ‘cell’ is the true, the ultimate individual” – and that, “once formed, [cells continue] to grow by virtue of [their] own inherent force” [1]. Virchow, who specialized in pathology, marveled at the particular power of cancer cells to influence their neighbors and propagate tumor growth [2]. Notably, Schleiden’s, Schwann’s, and Virchow’s assertion of cells’ – especially cancer cells’ –
autonomy shaped how oncologists thought of cancer very early on. And as swastikaed flags started popping up in German windows, this way of thinking only intensified.

Throughout World War II, Nazi propaganda called Jews “parasites” – and referred to communists as “invasive crusaders,” leaving no stone against non-Aryans unturned [3]. Such rhetoric ran far and wide and, eventually, straight into cancer research labs. As bombings raged and the Final Solution commenced, Nazi researchers began writing about cancer cells not just as peculiar “independents” – as Schleiden, Schwann, and Virchow had done – but as “degenerates,” as “revolutionaries,” as a different “cell race” of autonomous rebels [4]. As aforementioned, the publications from four Nazi-era scientists (Erwin Liek, Felix Grüneisen, Hans Auler, and Karl Heinrich Bauer) provide evidence for this trend. I will now describe each of them and their contributions(s) to independence metaphors for cancer in Third Reich science in turn.

Liek and Grüneisen

Erwin Liek was a German physician and writer, perhaps most well-known for his books *The Spread, Prevention, and Control of Cancer* (1932) and *The Struggle Against Cancer* (1934). Liek never joined the Nazi Party, but it is worth noting that he was offered the position of Reich Physicians’ Führer by Adolf Hitler himself.

Above all else, Liek argued that cancer was a “cultural disease” [5]. On a superficial level, what he meant by this was that cancer more commonly occurs in developed countries (what he referred to as “high culture”) than in developing countries. This statistical trend still stands. However, there is a much greater subtext to read into with Liek’s argument here.

In Liek’s first book on cancer – *The Spread, Prevention, and Control* – he homes in on cancer cells’ *recalcitrance*, and two of his most salient quotes are as follows: (1) “cancer cells…act [fully] independently,” and (2) it’s “no wonder that [such] cell anarchy…often ends with [a patient’s] death” [5]. A striking parallel can be drawn in these references to Nazi society.
One very real concern for the Nazis’ governmental “body” (analogous, in this case, to a cancer patient’s) was that if its individual citizens (analogous to cancer cells) rebelled, it would likely perish as well. Thus, even in 1932 – the year that Nazis infiltrated the German Reichstag – we see independence metaphors for cancer already acting as windows, however slightly, into the Nazi state.

Felix Grüneisen, general secretary of the Reich Anticancer Committee, opened these windows further with his 1933 article “Combatting Cancer in the Nazi Regime.” Therein, Grüneisen started referring to cancer patients not as “cancer patients,” but as “the cancer-sick” or “the cancer-threatened” [6]. Clearly, the independence of cancer cells was no longer just a novel metaphor for German scientists by this time, as it had been in the 1800s; it had evolved, instead, into an evil and truly threatening one. Autonomy, whether within the Nazi state or with respect to cancer cells, was starting to be seen as perilous in the Third Reich… and this notion was fully reflected in the Nazi science writing of the time.

**Auler and Bauer**

Finally, Hans Auler (Grüneisen’s successor) and Karl Heinrich Bauer (German surgeon) added to this sentiment in their oncological publications during and shortly after World War II. In 1937, Auler proclaimed that cancer cells are “revolutionaries” [7]. “The malignant cell lives only on itself,” he wrote; “it knows only the goal to grow, to multiply,” to destroy [7]. In 1949, Bauer built off such declarations of unruly independence in *The Cancer Problem*: a culmination of his years of research under the Nazi regime. Importantly, Bauer reiterated that cancer is “empowered to grow autonomously and destructively,” without regard for anything else [4].

Through such writing of undesirable revolution, autonomy, and destruction, we see that independence metaphors for cancer not only carried over from 19th-century German research but were augmented under Nazi rule. Cancer cells were seen as recklessly independent under the
Nazis – and thus became tagged with new notions of malice. Ultimately, this “revamped” independence metaphor for cancer facilitated a striking reflection of the emotionally (and racially) charged politics of the Nazi regime.

There are many more quotes I could pull from to demonstrate this point – and I hope to elaborate on them in a longer presentation or journal article in the near future. But in the interest of time at this Symposium, I will leave you all here with this:

Conclusions

I hope that from this brief exposure to Nazi “cancer language” (through Liek, Grüneisen, Auler, and Bauer), at least two key points may be taken away: (1) how independence metaphors for cancer shaped the way that Third Reich researchers thought about it, and (2) how such metaphors, both subtly and ingeniously, provide insight into the distrust and disdain for autonomy – in any capacity – that plagued Nazi society at the time.

An English-language book that I read last fall, The Nazi War on Cancer, sums this sentiment up nicely. To quote its author, Robert Proctor: “Relations between ‘science’ and ‘society’ are more complex than is commonly imagined. Even in the microcosm of Nazi cancer research we find very different ways that science can express politics, and vice versa” – especially when we look at the independence metaphors that framed how cancer, a true “führer” of deadly/enigmatic maladies¹, was discussed, written, and thought about back then [3].

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¹ This is an allusion to Siddhartha Mukherjee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer. It is a wonderful summary of the history of cancer research. I wholeheartedly recommend it to all readers, scientists and non-scientists alike.
References


