

When does tobacco become more than just tobacco? An example of a country held to ransom by its past

“So many excellent men have been lost to tobacco poisoning”
Adolf Hitler, 1942

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INTRODUCTION

Visitors to Germany are confronted by its citizens' permissive attitude towards tobacco smoking. Germany is an interesting counterpoint to New Zealand where, over the last 50 years the perception of smoking and smokers has changed radically, and is clearly reflected within legislation. So what has gone wrong within a country that enjoys strong economic status despite the current financial climate, substantially better health care than NZ, and is in the forefront for developing new technology? Some of the current attitudes against legislative change to protect non-smokers and limit current smoking are linked to Germany's dark past.

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Early history

Tobacco was first introduced to Europe from the Americas in the late 1400s. Its use was limited even through the 19th century, to the extent that there were only 140 published cases of lung cancer at the turn of the century. In fact, when American Isaac Adler published a review in 1912 on the anatomy and pathology of lung cancer, he apologised for writing about such a rare and insignificant disease¹. The advent of mechanised cigarette

rolling, tobacco advertising, and the supplying of cigarette rations for World War I soldiers helped decrease cost and facilitate social acceptance of the habit across Europe and North America. The introduction of milder tobacco and flue curing made it easier to inhale the smoke, encouraging a shift to cigarettes. Cigarette consumption rose in Germany from about 8 billion cigarettes in 1910, to 30 billion only fifteen years later, and finally 80 billion in 1942². The cancer consequences were profound, as lung cancer rates increased dramatically. Autopsy records show lung cancer represented 1% of cancer deaths in 1878, 10% in 1918 and 14% by 1927³.

In the medical and scientific community, this dramatic growth of lung cancer rates was attributed to: the influenza pandemic of 1919, vehicle exhaust, chemical warfare agents used during WWI, occupational exposures (tar and diverse polycyclic hydrocarbons), malnutrition post-war, and even the upsurge of racial mixing. Some scholars doubted the reality of the increase. Authors in an article in *Medizinische Klinik* in 1930 argued that the widespread use of chest X-rays was simply increasing the number of lung cancers diagnosed². By the mid 1920s cigarettes began to come under suspicion, particularly through the work of German Fritz Lickint. In 1929, using case-series, he showed that lung cancer patients were likely to be heavy smokers. It was some of the first statistical evidence linking lung cancer and cigarettes. In 1928, German clinician Schonherr noted that many of his female lung cancer patients were exposed to “second-hand” smoke³.

Nazi era Germany

With the rise of the Nazi party (Table 1) came some of the strongest antismoking legislation and epidemiological research linking tobacco use with the evident lung cancer epidemic¹. Hitler was disgusted by the tobacco habit, claiming that Germany might never have achieved its present glory if



Figure 1: The Chain smoker: “You don’t smoke it – it smokes you”.



Figure 2: The use of cigarettes combined with swastikas on the cover of political magazine Veintitres in Argentina, 2003. The cover title “The dictatorship of the non-smokers”.

Table 1: Plotted history of events taking place during the evolution of tobacco control

<p>1925 to the 1930s</p> <p>Government devolved from democracy to conservative-nationalist authoritarian state under President and war hero Paul von Hindenburg.</p> <p>After the July elections of 1932, the Nazis were the largest party in the Reichstag, with 230 seats.</p> <p>27 February 1933 - Reichstag building set on fire, event followed by the Reichstag Fire Decree, rescinding habeas corpus and other civil liberties.</p> <p>30 January 1933 - Hitler assumes chancellorship.</p> <p>March 1933 - Enabling Act passed allowing the government (and thus the Nazi Party) legislative powers and authorised deviation from the provisions of the constitution for four years. Hitler had seized dictatorial powers.</p> <p>2 August 1934 - death of Hindenburg led to merging the offices of Reichspräsident (Reich president) and Reichskanzler (Reich Chancellor) and reinstalled Hitler with the new title Führer und Reichskanzler.</p> <p>1 September 1939 - German invasion of Poland and start of WWII.</p> <p>1940 to 1950</p> <p>7 December 1941 – Bombing of Pearl Harbour and entry of USA into WWII.</p> <p>2 May 1945 - Unconditional surrender of Germany.</p> <p>1948, Foundation of Verband de Cigarettenindustrie (Verban), later includes 10 tobacco companies, joined 1954.</p> <p>1990s</p> <p>3 October 1990 – Reunification of East and West Germany.</p>
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he had continued to smoke: "perhaps it was to this, then [that is, his giving up smoking], that we owe the salvation of the German people."

At another time, he characterized tobacco as "the wrath of the Red Man against the White Man, vengeance for having been given hard liquor." The single most important anti-tobacco institution established in the Nazi period was the Institute for Tobacco Hazards Research in Jena. In 1941, Adolf Hitler donated 100,000 Reichmarks of personal finances to fund its establishment. In 1943, researchers from the institute, Eberhard Schairer and Erich Schoniger, used questionnaires sent to relatives of 195 patients who had died of lung cancer, 555 patients who died of other cancers (mostly stomach and colon), and to healthy controls asking about the amount and duration of their smoking. The study concluded that "there is a high probability in support of the contention that lung cancer develops much more frequently in heavy smokers and is much rarer among non-smokers than expected." Later analysis showed their results to be statistically significant, with $p < 0.0000001$ ^{1,2}.

The government's multi-pronged combination of advertising, legislation, medical therapy and economic measures is similar to current anti-smoking programmes. Nazi authorities moved to limit smoking through a combination of propaganda, public relations, and official decrees. The Ministry of Science and Education ordered elementary schools to discuss the dangers of tobacco, and Reich Health Office published pamphlets and posters warning young people not to smoke (Figure 1). Legal sanctions were put in place in 1938. The Luftwaffe, government offices, hospitals, and rest homes banned

smoking. "No-smoking" cars were established on all German trains, with a fine of two reichsmarks to be levied for violators. In 1939, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP - *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* in German) announced smoking bans in its offices, and SS chief Heinrich Himmler announced a smoking ban for all uniformed police and SS officers while on duty. In July 1943, it was made illegal for those under the age of 18 to smoke in public, and in spring of 1944, smoking was banned on all German city trains and buses^{1,2}.

The Nazi government implemented programmes to assist in quitting, including, counselling, provision of nicotine gum, and the use of silver nitrate mouthwash that made cigarettes distasteful. "Transpulmin" was injected into the bloodstream to produce a similar effect (it was believed to bond with the terpenes and other aromatic compounds in tobacco, producing an unpleasant sensation). Hypnotism was popular as was psychological counselling². The government researched ways of producing nicotine-free tobacco, and by 1940 it comprised 5% of the German tobacco harvest¹.

Did the promotion work?

A survey of 1,000 servicemen in 1944 found that while the proportion of soldiers who smoked had increased since the start of the war (only 12.7% were now non-smokers), the total consumption had actually decreased by just over 14%. Although more men were smoking, they smoked on average a quarter less tobacco than in the immediate pre-war period (23.42%). The very heavy smokers (30+ cigarettes per day) decreased dramatically from 4.4% to only 0.3%. In terms of long-term consequences, over the period 1952-90, age-adjusted cancer mortality rates for German women declined by about 17%, but age-adjusted male cancer mortality rose by 20%⁴. The gender difference can be explained by the Nazi campaign which deliberately targeted women. Tobacco was found to decrease fertility, and the primary duty of females was believed to be the bearing and caring of children. So during the war years, tobacco-rationing coupons were denied to pregnant women, and those under 25 and over 55, and restaurants and cafés were barred from selling cigarettes to female customers^{1,2}.

Post Nazi era: How bad is it really?

The anti-tobacco campaign was motivated against a backdrop of the Nazi quest for racial and bodily purity. Many of the scientists and medical personnel in the anti-tobacco campaign were also involved in eugenics programmes, medical experiments, and mass genocide so that after the war their research went largely unnoticed. The late emergence of strong evidence concerning health effects of tobacco smoking, growth of tobacco companies' influence, and the country's economic growth which increased the ability of citizens to buy cigarettes, all contributed to the attitude that prevails today⁵⁻⁷.

The German tobacco industry represented by "Verband" contained the debate of effects of smoking with the collaboration of selected scientists, health professionals and policy makers⁶. The campaigning initially focussed on emphasising the lack of sufficient evidence of the detrimental health effects of second hand smoke through publication in scientific journals as well as pamphlets for public distribution. The tobacco industry also evoked the symbolism and rhetoric of Nazi Germany to keep smoking in public places. Evidence of this type of campaigning appears as early as 1964, after the US Surgeon General's report linked smoking with cancer⁵. The tobacco industry and its front groups have labelled anti-smoking campaigners as "health fascists". The members of the German subsidiary of the US smoker's rights organisation, FORCES (Fight Ordinances and Restrictions to Control and Eliminate Smoking), discussed suing WHO collaborating Centre for Tobacco Control under German Law. This is typically used against neo-Nazis, where incitement of hatred against minorities carries a punishment of up to 5 years imprisonment (Strafgesetzbuch, Section 130).

This form of campaigning is not limited to Germany (Figure 2) but has the most bearing to this population. While there has been some move to use more recent focus such as "Antismoking Ayatollahs" and "Tobacco Taliban", the influence of Nazis in the early anti-tobacco promotion will continue to find resonance within Germany⁷. Currently, the attempt by German parliament to curtail smoking in bars and restaurants has been met with considerable outcry. On the 1st January 2008, the banning of smoking in

restaurants and bars came into effect in eight German states. Since then, a number of exemptions have been allowed, including in the tents during Oktoberfest; so in effect smoking continues uncurtailed⁶.

CONCLUSION

Germany is unique in the historical association that tobacco and the anti-smoking campaign has. Smoking has entrenched itself in the minds of the Germans as a symbol of individual rights and continues to have a flavour of rebellion attached to it. It was used during the Nazi regime by youths as a gesture of defiance and later during the country's renaissance as smoking laws were relaxed, it became part of the liberated culture. In the minds of everyday Germans, the tobacco industry's early use of Nazi symbolism

to fight the efforts of the anti-tobacco lobbyists have been effective in perpetuating the perception that by protecting the health of the non-smoker, the rights of freedom of the individual are undermined.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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