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Historical injustice in psychiatry with examples from Nazi Germany and others: ethical lessons for the modern professional

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For the first time in history, psychiatrists during the Nazi era sought to systematically exterminate their patients. However, little has been published from this dark period analyzing what may be learned for clinical and research psychiatry. At each stage in the murderous process lay a series of unethical and heinous practices with many psychiatrists demonstrating a profound commitment to the atrocities playing central, pivotal roles critical to the success of Nazi policy. Several misconceptions led to this misconduct including allowing philosophical constructs to define clinical practice, focusing exclusively on preventative medicine, allowing political pressures to influence practice, blurring roles of clinicians and researchers, and falsely believing that good science and good ethics always co-exist. Psychiatry during this period provides a most pervasive example of how science may be perverted by external politics. While the experience of psychiatry practice in Germany during the Nazi era is an extreme example, it is but one of a series of injustices that a small but prominent number of psychiatrists have perpetrated in history. It thus becomes crucial to include the Nazi era psychiatry experience as well as others, all be them of lesser scale and magnitude, in ethics training as an example of proper practice gone awry.