According to Francis Bacon, there are books that should be tasted, others that should be swallowed, and few that should be chewed and digested. These latter, one would like to add, are the ones that have had such a lasting impact on the state of our knowledge that they nourish any further thinking and writing on the subject. This applies more to Paul Weindling’s book under review here than to almost any other study in the history of medicine published in recent decades. Weindling’s truly fundamental work explains the basis of early twentieth-century medical thinking, shaped by notions of hygiene, which, elevated by the Nazis to the position of a leading science, provided the essential foundations of probably the greatest crime of the modern period. The Holocaust cannot be understood without taking into account the way of thinking of a discipline which so radically redefined the vocabulary of hygiene, fear of epidemics, extermination of parasites, and chemical-technical annihilation that they could easily be perverted not only into metaphors, but also into instruments of extermination, once German medicine had willingly opened itself to such a perversion.

The point of departure is the reaction, in both medical and health policy circles, to the threat of typhus epidemics on the eastern frontiers of the German Reich around the First World War. *Typhus exanthematicus*, more commonly known in Germany as *Fleckfieber*, was undoubtedly one of the most significant infectious diseases threatening and seriously affecting both armies in the field and occupying forces throughout all four years of the war, and especially in the east. Typhus, a typical wartime epidemic, is caused by the micro-organism *Rickettsia Prowazeki*, which can be transmitted between humans only by lice. The disease follows an acute course, is frequently lethal if untreated, but if survived, confers immunity.

The epidemiology of the disease was known at the beginning of the war. Initially, thinking followed the usual rational patterns of taking action against the parasite. The role of the louse was crucial, and the war within the war was still directed exclusively against it. Considerations of cultural and social anthropology were, to start with, largely marginal, although the boundaries were already
porous, as references to ‘Polish’ and ‘Russian’ lice demonstrate, as though nationality could be ascribed to the creatures. The call for ‘the focus of infection to be identified and destroyed’ in accordance with the ‘real purpose of quarantine’ also attracts attention, although it could, perhaps, simply be a lack of linguistic clarity.

This is no longer the case with, to take just one example, Richard Otto (1872–1952), hygiene adviser in the east during the war, and thereafter Geheimer Medizinalrat and chief medical officer of the reserves in Berlin. Otto’s war against typhus in the occupied east explicitly included the Jewish population, which he identified as the main carrier group. Otto saw the ‘big cities with their large, poor, and dirty Jewish population’ as the ‘principal focus of the epidemic’, and he stressed the ‘racially’ determined resistance of the Jewish population. ‘In Poland, for example’, he writes, ‘only 6.4 per cent of the Jewish population who had the illness died, while among the general population, 13.4 per cent of those who developed the illness succumbed.’ The Jewish population, therefore, along with prostitutes, prison inmates, and beggars attracted the special attention of the epidemic hygienist, from the point of view of prevention as well as health education. In addition to the usual epidemic hygiene measures, Otto’s programme also included direct intervention in the cultural autonomy of the identified main focus of the infection, such as, for example, ‘closing Jewish religious schools and houses of prayer’. Epidemic squads looked for sick people who had been hidden, and supervised delousing procedures, during which men and boys had all their hair removed, while women and girls generally had only their heads shaved. While living quarters were deloused, the people who lived there were transferred to quarantine stations.

If any resistance was encountered to these measures, those who were unwilling to comply were arrested and forcibly cleaned. ‘Lists were kept of flats and people’, Otto reports, ‘who, after a first sanitation, were soon found to be dirty and infested with lice again. They were forcibly sanitized or deloused every week until a change was achieved.’ ‘Forced sanitations’ of this sort were undertaken, for example, in Bialystok by the German and in Lublin by the Austro-Hungarian administrations. In Lithuania, Otto reports, between January and August 1918 ‘a total of 19,000 flats in 1,670 places was sanitized. In the process, about 3,500 people with typhus and suspected typhus were discovered, almost exclusively Jews. A good
6,000 people were placed in quarantine. ‘The more the impression was gained that the people concerned were clean, and were training other people to be clean, the more liberally were the restrictions on quarantine administered.’ Weindling impressively demonstrates that behind such ‘successes’ lay education campaigns ranging from the ingratiating inclusion of the Jewish population as a ‘clean people’ to brutal forced delousing.

The campaign against typhus was classically perceived as a war against lice and a cleansing and disciplining of the—predominantly Jewish—civilian population (a radicalization of measures to combat the disease, directed against allegedly ‘racially inferior’ people; typhus as a ‘Jewish sickness’, as ‘Jewish fever’). To these were added, in the case of Otto, a new level of perception, namely, an attempt to cure the disease using serum and chemicals, something which so far had been possible under laboratory conditions only in animal experiments. ‘The discovery that guinea pigs and certain species of monkey were susceptible to infection with typhus’, wrote Otto, ‘allowed researchers significantly to expand our knowledge of the nature of the disease by means of experimental investigations even before the war.’ The logical conclusion of this statement is not spelled out, but it is clear that Otto interpreted the world war as a continuation, on a gigantic scale, of animal experiments by the observation of human populations, and, as will become apparent, also by experiments on humans. Such experiments were conducted from 1917 and included protective inoculation and attempted therapy with serum derived from convalescents, which was administered to members of epidemic squads and POWs. No positive results, however, were achieved.

Yet the First World War merely opened up the scenario of annihilation which, under Nazi rule, was to culminate in the systematic genocide of the European Jews and other ‘parasites’, according to the metaphor used by the criminals. Zyklon-B, developed immediately after the First World War as a delousing agent and long prefigured during the war, was its chemical-technical instrument. Its aim was a radical cleansing and sanitation of the occupied areas in the Russian east within the context of the Generalplan Ost and the Seuchenplan Ost. Based on radical anti-Semitic thinking which held human beings in contempt, its outcome was systematic genocide. Weindling graphically demonstrates the path leading from the obliteration of the pathogen to the obliteration of the human vector, with all its dramat-
ic consequences. In the process, the essential facets of the incompre-
hensible are soberly and factually reconstructed, making the reader
shudder.

This book already ranks as one of Weindling’s major works. It is
meticulously researched in international archives, brilliantly written,
and, after a long maturation process, makes an essential contribution
to our understanding of the horror that has had such a lasting impact
on our present. The Soviet Nobel Prize winner Mikhail Sholokov
once remarked that speed is necessary for catching fleas, but not for
writing books. Weindling has taken his time in producing this excel-
lent work, and we should allow ourselves time, in Bacon’s sense, to
chew it thoroughly and digest it.

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