

WHO 60th Anniversary Global Health Histories Seminars

LUNCHTIME SEMINAR,
Thursday 3rd July 2008
12.30 – 14.00, Library Meeting Room

In Pursuit of the Nazi Mind: Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Politics 1940-1950

(Professor Daniel Pick, Birkbeck College, University of London)



Soon after World War II, WHO's first Director-General, Brock Chisholm, said: 'The world was sick, and the ills from which it was suffering were mainly due to the perversion of man, his inability to live at peace with himself.' In this presentation, Daniel Pick suggests that this so-called world 'sickness' or 'perversion', so deeply influenced by the experience of fascism, created an important new role for clinicians in war-time and post-war politics. Debates about Nazism and 'denazification' became linked with questions of individual and collective mental health.

Various post-war international organisations found themselves charged with restoring not just prosperity and social order, but a sense of collective sanity. Yet the idea of sanity itself also came under renewed scrutiny. Some claimed that Nazism required a new representation of the psyche, and of group psychology. What was the evidence for an 'authoritarian personality'? What were the consequences of work on political psychopathology? How did specific case studies undertaken of Hitler, Hess and other leading Nazis contribute to post-war understandings of the mind and the group? And, finally, if fascism really was viewed as a kind of sickness, what prospects could there ever be of a cure?

Co-organized with The Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine, University College, London
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Nuremberg Trial prosecutors interrogate Nazi Rudolf Hess.