

Cyankali [Cyanide] (1930)

Abstract

This clip from the controversial 1930 film *Cyankali* shows the newlywed protagonist, Hete Fent, pleading with a physician, Dr. Möller, to help her get an abortion because her husband has just lost his job, and the impoverished couple cannot afford to start a family. Möller denies her request, even though he has just prescribed an abortion to his previous patient, a visibly well-to-do woman who almost certainly had paid him a bribe for this service. Möller goes so far as to pull down a bound copy of the German criminal code and have Hete read the relevant passage that punishes the procedure. He also warns her of the dangers of an illegal abortion. Hete nevertheless makes it clear that she plans to get an abortion one way or another, and, in a later scene, visits a woman who gives her a fatal dose of cyanide in a botched attempt to induce a miscarriage. The film had to submit to extensive edits before the censors allowed it to premiere in Berlin on May 23, 1930, and it continued to generate controversy throughout its run.

The movie *Cyankali* adapted for the big screen the physician Friedrich Wolf's 1929 theatrical drama of the same name, and it represented one of many cultural productions at the time that addressed the issue of abortion and its illegality in the Weimar Republic. The earlier 1926 film *Kreuzzug des Weibes* [Woman's Crusade], for instance, also portrayed abortion as a deadly procedure, and, like *Cyankali*, it similarly depicted female lay abortionists as incompetent and even villainous. The historian Cornelia Usborne has questioned such representations, however, noting that the (mostly female) lay abortionists achieved roughly the same patient outcomes as the (mostly male) gynecologists did, and the lay abortionists charged less than physicians and tended to approach their clients with greater empathy.

Throughout the Weimar Republic, Germans engaged in heated debates over §218, the paragraph of the criminal code that punished those who received or provided abortions. Several infamous scandals and trials—including one in 1924 that charged 93 women from 17 different villages near Limburg with having gotten the procedure—kept the issue in the headlines. The Reichstag reformed the law in 1926, when it reduced the penalties for women who had received an abortion, and again in 1927, when it legalized abortions for medical reasons, but the government never repealed §218 entirely, despite widespread and ongoing agitation by the KPD and the SPD to do so. Indeed, the author of *Cyankali* himself, Friedrich Wolf, faced charges in February 1931 for having allegedly helped nearly 100 women to receive abortions. He and his physician colleague Else Kienle, who also stood accused, fled the country before the trial could take place.

Source

[Newspaper clipping]

Medical Weekly.

The number of abortions in Germany is estimated at between half a million and 800,000, with approximately 10,000 deaths among them (!). Doctors report cases in which criminal abortionists have even administered cyanide (Prussic acid) to patients in order to perform abortions.

This most murderous of all poisons, which can only be obtained by devious means, invariably led to an agonizing death for the unfortunate girls.

[Sign] Dr. Möller, General Practitioner.

Dr. Möller: "As your former GP, I have confirmed that you have a lung condition and recommend that you terminate the pregnancy."

Hete: "You must help me, doctor!"

"The week-long lockout... we barely have any bread or potatoes. How are we supposed to feed a child?"

Dr. Möller: "Unfortunately, the law does not take economic hardship into account. But I would be happy to examine you to see if you have any physical ailments."

Hete: "I suffer from nothing but poverty!"

"It will have no place to lie down, no diaper, no basket, no food..."

"Aren't you a human being, a doctor who is supposed to help..."

Dr. Möller: "I would love to help if I could...But the law ties our hands as doctors!"

[Dr. Möller shows Hete Article 218 in the German Criminal Code]

Intertitle: "Article 218. A woman who kills her fetus in the womb or by abortion, or who allows it to be killed by another, shall be punished with a prison sentence. Similarly, anyone who kills a fetus in the womb or by abortion shall be punished. Attempted murder is punishable. Anyone who commits the offense described in paragraph 2 without the consent of the pregnant woman or for commercial gain shall be punished with detention in a penitentiary. Anyone who provides a pregnant woman with a means or tool for aborting the fetus for commercial gain shall be punished in the same way. If there are mitigating circumstances, the prison sentence shall not be less than three months."

Dr. Möller: "Did you know that 10,000 women die every year as a result of illegal abortions?"

Hete: "How can you still be a doctor [under these circumstances]?"

Dr. Möller: "What are you going to do?"

Hete: "Go where I can get help."

Dr. Möller: "Miss, don't go to some place where they use dirty instruments and injure you or even give you potassium cyanide...both mean certain death!"

Hete: "But you...you are practically sending me there!"

Dr. Möller: "The state will help you with childbirth allowances, admit you to a public hospital and continue to care for you and your child after the delivery."

Source: *Cyankali*, dir. Hans Tintner, Atlantis-Film, 1930. Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv, Filmwerk ID: 347.
<https://digitaler-lesesaal.bundesarchiv.de/video/347/686702>

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