

Hot and cold – the long lasting impact of enlightenment health care and politics on Balneology

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During the second half of the 18th C. the philosophy of enlightenment had found its way into science, medicine and health care. Population politics was one of the main results of these concepts and therefor the prosperity of a state was defined as a numerous healthy working and consuming population. Based on economic theories health care was seen as an important means to increase the population and therefor raise the prosperity of a state. In the Habsburg countries it was an important issue to develop a centralised and clearly structured health care system, that would include all levels of population. But also other European countries followed this idea usually with different measures.

It is well known, that treatment with water esp. thermal water has a long tradition and that the positive results of treatments at spas was well known. The quest for improvements in health care lead to chemical analyses of thermal water and the search for evidence of these therapies, but also to the concept, that also cold water without any additional ingredients, could be used for therapies. The idea of hardening the human body with cold water and improving the resistance to diseases was the basic concept of various forms of treatment with cold water – and of course a very cheap one.

Step by step cold water therapies were mainly suggested for prophylactic purposes and the treatment of the poor population as therapies at spas were expensive and more or less restricted to higher classes. However, during the 19th C. seawater treatments especially at the Baltic Sea and certain parts of the Northern Sea became popular health care resorts also for higher classes, which might be connected to the political situation between the German countries, esp. Prussia, and Habsburg countries. Perhaps this has to be seen as a consequence, that warm spas are located mainly in Central and Southern Europe and access was not that easy anymore. The development of Prussia as a leading state in differentiation to the Habsburg countries could be one aspect for the preference of cold water in the Northern regions of Europe – based on the natural fact, that there are not that many hot springs in Northern Europe.