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Zwei Jahrtausende Deutsch-Jüdische Geschichte

Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race

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The mentally handicapped and the mentally ill are a cost factor. In Nazi Germany those that were deemed incurable were registered with the authorities. Experts from the elite of German medicine then selected those individuals who were of no use to modern science. This selection disproportionately affected “unproductive” persons, i.e. the sick who were no longer able to work. They were killed. The objective of these murders was the creation of a genetically healthy “Aryan race” in Germany.

This development had its roots in the modern scientific disciplines of genetics and eugenics, whose original aim was to fight epidemic plagues. Social Darwinists soon joined the debate and gained increasing influence after the First World War. They believed that social welfare and relief programs distorted the “natural” selection of the weak and ill and burdened the state with high expenses. What’s more, a biologicistic concept of social structures had established itself in the mid-nineteenth century, one that viewed states, cities and local communities as organisms. The idea of a “national body” (Volkskörper) became one of the most effective metaphors, and it took on an aggressive edge even before the birth of the Nazi state, since it could be used to promote the idea that ill, unproductive, and foreign persons needed to be “excised” in order to restore the health of the nation as a whole.

After Adolf Hitler’s ascent to power, racial ideology became a powerful driving force behind political thought and action. “National Socialism is applied ethnogeny,” is how Erich Ristow put it in his 1935 work *Erbgesundheitsrecht* (Hereditary Health Law).

To implement this ideology, state-run health offices concerned with hereditary and racial welfare were established throughout the German Reich. They also kept

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“hereditary health files” for all citizens of Germany, an enterprise that included the genetic registration of psychiatric patients. The entire population of Germany and the nations it annexed was subject to a huge experiment that involved family counseling and support for genetically healthy “Aryans,” on the one hand, and the forced sterilization and killing of patients declared genetically diseased or “incurable” (including Jews, Sinti, Romani, etc.), on the other. Politicians, scientists, and physicians worked hand in hand in the process.

After proclamation of the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring in July 1933, only a few years elapsed before commencement of the mass murders that were euphemistically described as “euthanasia.” Between 1933 and 1945, over 210,000 mentally handicapped and mentally ill persons were murdered in Germany and Austria alone. Four hundred thousand men, women, and adolescents were forcibly sterilized, and large numbers of people were maltreated and killed in the course of the medical experiments. Afterward, the physicians, nurses, and organizers of these mass murders made use of their experience in new places, at the death camps of Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec. The T4 murder campaign became the model for the murder of millions of European Jews, which began shortly thereafter.

Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race is the first major survey exhibition to present this link. It was conceived by the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., for an American audience and shown there with great success. Through the prism of historical distance, the exhibition expertly sketches out the complex subject matter. The theses are clearly highlighted, and the images have been carefully selected and arranged for their emotional impact. Whereas the architecture of the Washington show used tiled rooms to suggest a cold clinical atmosphere and aroused empathy with reconstructed gas chambers and ghetto barricades, the Jewish Museum Berlin—located in the immediate vicinity of the original sites—relies on the impact of the documents and objects themselves. In the section on “euthanasia,” the summary-style presentation is supplemented with a close-up perspective: the events are examined in greater detail with case histories from Berlin and Brandenburg. This section forms the core of the exhibition.



The mass murder of the sick was carried out in numerous operations and by various means. The centrally organized Operation T4, which takes its name from the address of the responsible authority at Tiergartenstrasse 4 in Berlin, was one of the best known. It took place between January 1940 and August 1941 in six killing centers that had been set up in existing mental hospitals on the territory of the German Reich. Operation T4 was planned in summer 1939, at the same time as, but separately from, the mass murder of children that was organized and executed in specially established children's wards (Kinderfachabteilungen) by the Reich Committee for the Scientific Registration of Severe Hereditary Ailments. After Operation T4 was halted, the murders continued in a decentralized fashion under the direction of the mental asylums themselves, where physicians assisted by T4 headquarters killed patients with an overdose of medication or through deliberate starvation. The exhibition presents the Obrawalde mental asylum near Meseritz in present-day Poland as an example of one of the principal sites of the decentralized euthanasia program—a site where many patients from Berlin and Brandenburg were murdered.

We know who their murderers were, and many are presented in the exhibition. Unlike the original exhibition, the Berlin show also includes a moving documentation of one of the murder victims, Martin Bader, featuring photographs, documents, and personal objects. Bader stayed at the sanatorium in Schussenried before being transferred to the Grafeneck killing center. Together with his diary, the letters he wrote to his family from there paint the picture of a buoyant man who contracted a form of Parkinson's disease after a bout of Spanish Flu as a young adult and was often unable to work. These privately owned documents will be shown in Berlin for the first time. They are a stroke of luck, as we usually have to rely on medical files to reconstruct the victims' lives—on reports, findings, photographs, and other information that was usually noted through the clinical eyes of physicians and nurses and often provides little insight into the personality of the patients.



For a long time the people who underwent forced sterilization or were killed in “euthanasia” programs were not recognized as victims of the National Socialist regime. It was not until the 1980s that journalist Ernst Klee published his comprehensive research, triggering a public debate about the murder of the sick. American historian Henry Friedlander rekindled the discussion in professional circles in 1995 with his book *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution*. Afterward a young generation of historians, psychiatrists, and other healthcare professionals began re-examining the subject in Germany. Several years ago, the spectacular discovery of 30,000 medical files from Operation T4 in the archives of the former East German Ministry of State Security unexpectedly broadened the scope of research. Awareness of the murder of the sick has grown significantly. An expanded memorial at the former site of T4 headquarters near Philharmonic Hall in Berlin is being planned and an historical exhibition at the Wittenau sanatorium will open shortly.

Current discussions on stem cell research and genetics in Germany are influenced by the historical experience of National Socialism, as are the debates on medically assisted suicide and legislation in the areas of health and long-term care. These discussions raise the question of whether lessons can be learned from National Socialist health policies and practices. And if that is the case, which ones? These questions will be addressed in a two-day conference organized in collaboration with the Topography of Terror Foundation and the Institute of Medical History at Charité Hospital in Berlin. The program will be supplemented by lectures presenting new research on the murder of the sick and Nazi medical crimes. In addition, bus tours will be offered on two weekends to the sites of National Socialist medicine in Berlin. Reservations for these events can be made through the Jewish Museum Berlin at www.jmberlin.de/toedliche-medizin.

A companion book to the exhibition will be published by Wallstein Verlag. It features five essays by renowned scientists that convey insight into the background of the “deadly medicine”; twelve biographies that examine the lives of the victims of racial policies; and biographies of the murderers, most of whom continued to



work as physicians and nurses after 1945. (Tödliche Medizin: Rassenwahn im Nationalsozialismus, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2009, € 16.90)

Margret Kampmeyer

Dr. Margret Kampmeyer heads the exhibition project at the Jewish Museum Berlin.

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