

COMPULSORY STERILIZATION, EUTHANASIA, AND PROPAGANDA: THE NAZI EXPERIENCE

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I. COMPULSORY STERILIZATION, 1933-1939

When Adolf Hitler took power in Germany, one of his top priorities was to purify the race and to build the genetically pure Aryan man. It was an objective he had discussed in his early manifesto, *Mein Kampf*. One of the first major laws passed by the Nazi regime in 1934 was the forced sterilization program of those with hereditary illnesses. This program was intended to develop eventually into a full-scale program of euthanasia for those judged “unworthy of life,” especially the mentally and physically disabled. To prepare public opinion in greater Germany, a systematic and widespread propaganda campaign was put into effect to provide the scientific and political rationale for these proposals and to build support among the public at large.

The Nazi propaganda program took advantage of a well-developed German film industry that was already being retooled as an instrument of the state in order to maintain and expand backing for the regime. The general pattern of slick, well-produced films utilized repetition of misleading and erroneous scientific information and statistics, coupled with powerful emotional images that confirmed pre-existing prejudices and stereotypes. These techniques were particularly effective when applied to the forced sterilization program and to the euthanasia program that would follow when public opinion was sufficiently prepared. These techniques were also used to inform and indoctrinate those personally involved in carrying out the initiatives and to help maintain their level of commitment.

The scientific and medical communities that would implement these programs were already well-disposed to accept their theoretical underpinnings. Eugenics was firmly established in both the United States and in Europe as a science that claimed to find mental and physical illness to be hereditary and considered certain undesirable anti-social behavior patterns

as capable of being passed from one generation to the next. As early as 1920 Karl Binding, a legal specialist, and Alfred Hoche, a psychiatry professor, had published an influential book entitled *Permission for the Destruction of Unworthy Life*. Hoche in particular advocated the idea of an organic state that must amputate any useless or diseased limb in order to assure the survival of the body politic. A series of training films were produced to indoctrinate medical personnel. They were widely shown at medical conferences, and we have evidence of one that was viewed at a 1935 national meeting of the Nazi party.¹

One early 16mm film *Erbkrank* (“The Hereditarily Ill” or “The Genetically Diseased”), variously dated as 1934 (U.S. National Archives) or 1936 (Bundesarchiv, Koblenz) was presented as an educational documentary by the NSDAP, the agency for racial affairs of the National Socialist Party. It begins by citing the influence of the “Jewish Liberal thinking” that led to a situation in which mentally ill and handicapped patients were being cared for in “palatial” sanatoriums by “the cream” of the medical profession, the best-educated, best-trained, and healthiest nurses and doctors. These idyllic scenes are intercut with contrasting scenes of average, hard-working German families living in abject poverty within over-crowded hovels, and the implication is that their situation is the result of the same misguided policies: “Healthy families are housed in sheds that are falling apart and in dark alleys, but for the insane... palaces have been built.” This was a particularly telling argument for the average German worker, impoverished during the terrible economic times of the Weimar Republic.

The film argues that the hereditarily ill become guilty only when they transfer their illness to their offspring. These genetic diseases come from the parents, who may not show any visible signs of it. Jews and Blacks, in particular, are considered to be common carriers of these defective genes and to make up an especially large proportion of the mentally ill population. The only solution is to stop transmission, and it is the duty of the state to do this. Anything else is dereliction of duty on the part of the government. The problem is presented in Darwinian terms: only the healthy will succeed in the new state and become “good Nazis” capable of building the Thousand Year Reich.

Statistics are presented which show the number of mentally ill as having increased by 450% in the previous 70 years while the total population has grown 50%. This information is used to support a projection that within fifty years there will be one mentally ill person for every four healthy people.

Part two of the film *Erbkrank* begins with the portrayal of an idiot “Nigger Bastard” from the Rhine Valley. Mental as well as physical traits, it claims, are inherited and will continue to be inherited. Although silent, the film carefully reinforces the economic burden of the mentally ill and the compounding of this problem over generations by the repeated use of slates in between film clips detailing the health-care costs in ridiculously precise numbers. These slates show how much each person or family is costing the state up to that point and then projects how much caring for them will cost over the course of their lives. For example, “This mother and son, together in institutions, so far has cost 29,016 reichsmarks.”

One statistic shows the cost of the upkeep of these mental institutions at 1.2 billion reichsmarks, while the administration of all local and national government costs only 713 million marks. The amount spent to keep one “life-unworthy retard,” born out of wedlock in an asylum, for 22 years “could have helped 40 poor families with many children to start a settlement.” The idea that these people were an economic drain on the state is not just an exaggeration; it is probably not true at all, for patient-labor is believed to have made most asylums self-sufficient.

The film also charges that “due to the ignoring of natural law and a false view of Christianity, even the worst criminals were not punished but rather kept in an institution if there was any sign of mental deficiency.” The film purports to demonstrate how criminal tendencies are hereditary, one of the more extreme claims of eugenics. It also shows a close correlation between illness and criminal behavior.

Erbkrank concludes with the question: “May we burden our future generations with such an inheritance?” The answer is obvious, a new moral imperative: “The prevention of hereditary illness is a moral law. It means practical love of your neighbor and utmost respect for God-given natural laws.”

This was all by way of criminalizing and dehumanizing handicapped

people with the ultimate object of ridding society of them. The first step was to sterilize, with or without consent, those identified as carriers of bad genes. In 1936 a “talkie” (or sound-film) entitled *Opfer der Vergangenheit* (“Victims of the Past”) was made at Hitler’s command for mass consumption, co-produced by the NSDAP and the Reich Propaganda Ministry. It enjoyed a mandatory showing in all German theaters after March 1937. It is the first film (part documentary, part drama) for general audiences that addressed the prevention of a new generation of the hereditarily ill through the sterilization of the mentally ill.

Opfer der Vergangenheit again plays on the costs associated with keeping mentally ill or horribly crippled “useless eaters” in “palaces with beautiful gardens” where their criminal tendencies and misery can be passed on to future generations. The Darwinian imperative and the moral obligation to redress past failings are spelled out in the commentary: “Life is a fight for existence. Only the strong will in the long run succeed. All the weak will perish. In the last few decades mankind has sinned. We have not simply preserved unworthy life. We have allowed it to breed. The reproduction of unworthy life is to be prevented by law.”

According to the film, the law of natural selection has been misunderstood (and thus violated) to the detriment of society. Such high-quality and expensive care is given to the sick in mental institutions that they reach old age—“this life-span costs the nation thousands.” Images of deformed and crippled patients are accompanied by a narrator’s voice saying: “All of this suffering could have been avoided if one had simply hindered the further spread of these hereditary sicknesses. The protection against the spread of hereditary illness is a customary command. It basically equals the highest respect for God-given rules of nature.”

The film takes the line that it was “ethically required” to feed and care for these people and to keep them from injuring themselves. “But,” it says, “we also gave them the capacity to pass on their suffering to their children.... If we restore the important law of selection, we then restore the success of those very laws given us by our Creator.” And who is to be the instrument of God’s will? Who will restore the natural order and preserve the sacred gene-pool of the Aryan race? The hero of this drama, filmed for viewing by average German citizens, is a highly educated and respected

leader of the community: “the physician, who thereby becomes the protector of the people and of hereditary health.”

The movie shows its star, the doctor, meeting with a woman who is to be married in order to determine her fiancé’s genetic suitability. He tells her that he has come in a new role, not as healer but as consultant, as a trusted guide to the new science, as one who can be told all the family secrets. “The man from yesterday” is portrayed as one ignorant of the scientific advances now available to enrich and protect the race by assuring healthy and productive children. Without specifying the exact deficiency, the doctor explains that the fiancé’s case “is always becoming more and more complicated.” He warns that “we will hinder your reproduction—such sad cases should no longer live among our healthy children. Sterilization is a heroic approach.” He then repeats the statistics on how the number of mentally ill has grown and will eventually destroy the race. “The new law,” the doctor concludes, “is not man meddling in God’s work, but rather the restoration of laws of nature that humanity has succeeded in breaking.”

Other 16mm films like *Das Erbe* (“The Inheritance”) hammer home the theme that the weak perish and the strong survive according to the natural law and God’s order. Through footage of stag beetles battling and plants fighting for survival, the point is made that “we all live in a battle in which the weak are eliminated.” Once again this wisdom is imparted by a doctor, a scientist who studies the natural world where war and survival are the rule. Techniques of horse and dog breeding are explained, with the implication that they can be applied to racial breeding.

The example of an American family called the Kallikaks, a staple of the Nazi propaganda films supporting sterilization, is trotted out to demonstrate how bad genes and illnesses can be widely distributed through otherwise healthy families, bringing misery in their wake. Another often repeated image appearing in the background is a dictum attributed to Adolf Hitler: “He who is not healthy and able, both physically and mentally, may not immortalize his body in that of his child.”

Another influential film from the late 1930’s, *Was Du Ererbt* (“What you have inherited”) set out to demolish the liberal idea that environment could influence physical and mental capabilities. It stressed the correctness of eugenics: “Despite favorable environmental conditions, inferior inherited

traits or dispositions cannot be gotten rid of.” The film begins thus: “The power and purity of the race are granted only once. Once they decay they can never be regenerated.” In this way the importance of protecting against inferior blood is stressed and the history of great cultures that perished because of such mixing is reviewed. Scapegoats are designated: “In order to assure the decay of our race, the Jew preached the glorification of prostitution. Dilapidation, downfall, and agony were the results.” In a chilling harbinger of policies to come, reference is made to the “130,000 people vegetating in asylums, ruined in mind and body.”

Ultimately, thousands were sterilized and many died during the procedure. By the late 1930's Hitler turned his attention to putting into effect a policy of euthanasia, the mercy-killing of “life unworthy of life.” He hoped that several years of sustained propaganda had prepared both the public and the scientific and medical communities to see euthanasia as a logical and reasonable follow-up to the forced sterilization project.

II. EUTHANASIA, THE T-4 PROGRAM, 1939-1945

Hitler understood from the start that the concept of systematically murdering thousands of handicapped German citizens would be controversial and contentious within German society. The Gestapo's vast system of informants provided him with a highly accurate version of public opinion polling, broken down by age, occupation, and religion. The sterilization program had been generally supported by the populace, who came to accept the racial, scientific, and economic arguments that were used to justify it. But the euthanasia program called for a more cautious treatment. Early indoctrination films on supporting sterilization had effectively stigmatized and criminalized the mentally ill and disabled. But these films had also promised that the living ill would be taken care of—only their procreation would be stopped: “The hereditarily sick are innocent of what they inherited from their parents. They will receive the best care until the end” (from *Victims of the Past*).

There is evidence that in 1933 Hitler spoke to Hans Lammers, the chief of the Reich Chancellery about killing the mentally ill. He seems to have been well aware of the political difficulties such a program would face. Professor Karl Brandt, an eminent doctor who would become a key figure

in the euthanasia project, quotes a senior doctor as saying that Hitler told him in 1935 that “If war should break out, he would take up the euthanasia question and implement it.... The public resistance which one could expect from the churches would not play such a prominent role amidst the events of wartime as it otherwise would.”ⁱⁱ

In 1939, shortly after the invasion of Poland, Hitler was true to his pledge. He quietly authorized Brandt, his personal physician, and others to begin the murder of the disabled and mentally ill, both adults and children. The project was run from a villa at #4 Tiergartenstrasse in Berlin, hence the name T-4. The primary justifications and themes of the T-4 program were:

- 1) Racial purity based on scientific eugenics in order to purify the gene-pool and to build a stronger master race by killing off defective genes.
- 2) Economic efficiency: to save money by cutting excess welfare costs (a big political issue even under the liberal Weimar Republic).
- 3) Compassion: both the disabled and society would be better off; also, bed space would be freed up for the anticipated casualties of the war.

The project succeeded in at least the last of these objectives. Some 70,000 asylum inmates were killed in a relatively short time, from late 1939 to August 1941. As many as 200,000 may have been killed overall.ⁱⁱⁱ

The need to develop an efficient, cost-effective means of mass-murder presented something of a challenge. Train crashes were staged, explosives were set off in bunkers filled with Russian psychiatric patients, and so on, but all these initiatives were found wanting in one way or another. The Nazis finally hit on carbon monoxide gas-poisoning, using rooms outfitted with fake shower heads. An efficient transport system was organized, with regional holding asylums channeling patients to six large, relatively remote castles that were converted to the first killing centers.

Hartheim Castle, the center for Austria, was a site where more than 18,000 mentally ill and handicapped people were killed. It proved so effective that several thousand prisoners from a nearby concentration camp were also gassed there. Now it is a residential complex, except for the fake shower room which was recently made into a memorial. Ironically, a brand new state asylum is just across the street, replacing the one whose wards

were emptied under the T-4 program.

It was a very well-organized system. In Hartheim they kept elaborate graphs and flow-charts, now known as the Hartheim statistics, in order to show how much money, coffee, bread, and so on would be saved through the projected end of the war in 1951.

Later there was a direct technology-transfer to the mass death camps in Eastern Poland, where Jews were found to have the ultimate disability. Ninety-two key doctors were transferred to make use of the expertise gained in the T-4 program, where all killing was done by doctors. Simon Wiesenthal, the famed Nazi hunter, suggested in an interview with this author that the T-4 program was deliberately overstaffed in order to provide training for the hard-core personnel, mostly doctors, who would help with the scaled-up, much larger gas chambers used in the Jewish holocaust.

The T-4 program needed to identify potential victims, particularly children with mental or physical defects. The Nazis introduced payments to doctors and midwives who notified the authorities about such patients. For deciding which people to kill, there was an intricate centralized system of review by doctors and psychiatrists in order to maintain a veneer of scientific and medical legitimacy. These reviewers never saw the patient but were paid on a piecework basis for each case considered. Thus there was an incentive to go through as many as possible, and one doctor processed some 15,000 in one month.

It is important to remember that no doctor was coerced into participation. They were given time to think it over, and there is no evidence of any sanctions being applied to the few doctors who refused to get involved. The theories that justified the program were generally accepted by the medical community. This was, after all, a society very concerned with race and purity of ancestry, so there was great psychological shame associated with having defective children. Every time someone came up for a job or promotion, a racial taint would come up. There was a 1925 study by an asylum director, showing that many families wanted their insane relatives killed. They just did not want to know about it—they did not want to be part of the decision. They thought it should be done covertly, so that they could simply be told that their child had died—precisely what happened

fifteen years later.

Hitler had originally intended for this to be a public program with wide public support, building on his successful propaganda campaign for sterilization. He drafted a law that would legalize the euthanasia program. But the outcry from those whose Christian beliefs and values were offended, mainly Catholic and Protestant Churches, caused him to table the draft legislation. An influential bishop, Clemens von Galen, delivered an impassioned sermon in August 1941, condemning the program from the pulpit of the Lambertkirche. The sermon made the rounds of the diocesan churches as a pastoral message.

Shortly afterwards Hitler ordered the program discontinued. The killing continued, however, on a less formal, decentralized basis and in a more covert fashion, primarily directed against children, since most adult asylum inmates were already dead. The quiet killing of children was particularly sensitive, and so it was carried out by the use of slow overdoses or starvation rather than by mass gassing.

Throughout this period the Nazi propaganda machine was called upon to bolster public support for the euthanasia project and to deflect opposition from organized religion. A popular feature film called *I Accuse* was released in 1940 to support the idea of euthanasia. A woman with multiple sclerosis asks her husband, a doctor, to kill her, and he does so to the accompaniment of another doctor mournfully playing a piano in the next room. It was a huge release—nearly 20 million saw it in wide distribution across greater Germany.

Other films were not intended for public distribution. They took as their audience the staffs of the euthanasia centers. There was a continuing need to indoctrinate the perpetrators of the slaughter in its proper conduct and execution. Most of these films were destroyed by the Nazis before the end of the War. Some of the original raw footage was mislabeled and sat undiscovered in the basement of the East German Archives in Potsdam until 1990 when British scholar Michael Burleigh stumbled across it. The scripts were also found, and they indicate that footage had been shot through a porthole of the early gas chambers while people were actually being gassed and that this footage was intended to be included in the finished films. Although this particular footage has never been recovered,

there is some evidence that these films were shown to various audiences, such as the families of T-4 personnel, in order to test their reaction. But the films were never widely released.

An examination of the eight surviving rolls of raw footage for one such film, *Dasein Ohne Leben* (“Existence without Life”), reveals many of the themes established in the earlier propaganda campaign. Images of horribly crippled and deformed patients, babies without arms or legs, an insane inmate banging his head against the wall, animal-like screaming, and so on predominate, along with pictures of healthy, well-trained caregivers feeding and tending their helpless charges.

CONCLUSION

The Nazi propaganda effort in support of forced sterilization and euthanasia was in many ways a classic campaign to win public acceptance and understanding of a controversial policy. It was built on accepted scientific theories current at the time and took them to their logical conclusion. The triumph of eugenics and social Darwinism provided the scientific footing to justify many actions that would otherwise have been reprehensible. The propaganda also provided a moral sanction for these activities by claiming to restore God’s order to Christian Germany, an order that was upset by the advent of liberal Jewish doctrine. This was a theme that the Nazis used to great effect.

The message also appealed to base self-interest, stressing the benefits to each individual as well as the greater good of society. Reducing the economic burden of the handicapped while compassionately putting them out of their misery and purifying the race for the coming age of German domination was appealing in many ways. It provided a quiet way for relatives of the handicapped to be relieved of their shameful burden without suffering public reprobation; in fact, they were given to believe that the general interest was served by the disappearance of such people.

It is interesting to note that Hitler was ultimately swayed from carrying out his full euthanasia program because of public opposition, particularly from the religious community. He had to be satisfied with a secret, illegal program rather than the formally approved institutionalized project which he had hoped for. In the final analysis, the propaganda campaign was

unable to overcome the moral revulsion of the German people to the killing of the disabled and the mentally ill.

NOTES

i. See Hugh Gregory Gallagher, “Slapping Up Spastics’: The Persistence of Social Attitudes toward People with Disabilities” in *Issues in Law and Medicine* 10/4 (1995) at p. 407.

ii. Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance: Euthanasia in Germany, 1900-1945* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994) p. 97. I am deeply indebted to Burleigh’s book throughout this paper. See also Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Pathology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

iii. Burleigh, p. 4.