



The Nazi Biomedical Vision: Disability as Justification for Murder

Nazi Germany was founded on a vision of the “Deutsch Volk,” the Aryan race of white, healthy, athletic “*ubermensch*.” A person with a disability or chronic illness offended this vision and was to be eliminated in furtherance of racial purity. As early as his publication of *Mein Kampf* in the mid-1920s, Adolf Hitler declared that the sacred racial mission of the German nation was to be “assembling and preserving the most valuable stocks of basic racial elements [and]...slowly and surely raising them to a dominant position” (Lifton, 1986, p. 24). Sterilization to Hitler was “the most modern medical means” for achieving the “millennial future” for the German people. Thus, the Nazis, upon achieving power in 1933, established a sterilization program, which over a span of three years, sterilized some 225,000 people, almost ten times the number so treated in the previous thirty years in the United States. As Lifton (1986) put it, “the entire Nazi regime was built on a biomedical vision that required the kind of racial purification that would progress from sterilization to extensive killing” (p. 24).

People who were sterilized between 1933 and 1936 were almost always people with disabilities. Directors of various institutions in Germany were encouraged to sterilize in order to eliminate the possible hereditary influence of a wide variety of conditions – blindness, deafness, congenital defects, and “crippled” states. Soon the “Deutsch Volk” vision of a pure Aryan race led to efforts to sterilize not only the weak and impaired but their relatives, anyone who might be a “carrier” of these “defects.” Even these persons with mental disabilities who were physically healthy were swept up in the sterilization net.

As Lifton (1986) recognizes, “anyone trained in American medicine has personal experience of doctors, nurses and medical attendants colluding in the death of patients, usually children, who have been extremely impaired physically and mentally. *But those practices have been restrained by legal limits and strong public reaction, and have not developed into a systemic program of killing those designated as unworthy of living*” (emphasis added) (p. 46). In Nazi Germany, the legal machinery of the courts swung into place behind the doctors and authorized their involvement in mass sterilization and murder all in the name of the “Deutsch Volk.” People could appeal to special courts established for the review of sterilization decisions, but over 90 percent of appeals were rejected.

It was but a short step from sterilization to euthanasia—direct medical killing. Marked for death were children and adults with mental retardation, mental illness, epilepsy, chronic illness, deafness, blindness, and other disabilities—people judged as “lebensunwertes leben,” life unworthy of life. Some 200,000 disabled men, women and children were murdered by the Nazis simply because they were disabled. The Nazi biomedical vision filtered down to the German masses.

German doctors spearheaded the feverish assault on people who for one reason or another did not meet the racial standards of Aryanism. According to these doctors, German collective life was a medical matter, and any organism that posed a threat to or divergence from this collective “Volk” was to be “treated.” As Gerhard Hoffman (quoted in Lifton, 1986), who wrote under the pseudonym, “Ernst Mann,” put it as early as 1922, “misery can only be removed from the world by painless extermination of the miserable!,” a process to be taken over by doctors, “the true saviors of mankind” (p. 44).

SOURCES

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