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The Victims: Did the Nazi T-4 Euthanasia Program Discriminate among Victims in the Targeted Groups?

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The Victims: Did the Nazi T-4 Euthanasia Program Discriminate among Victims in the Targeted Groups?

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Full Text:

The Victims: Did the Nazi T-4 Euthanasia Program Discriminate among Victims in the Targeted Groups?

Nancy C. Unger and J. Michael Butler take up the question of the targeting of Jews for elimination in the Holocaust. Was this emphasis a special case or part of a broader spectrum of elimination policies designed to rid Germany of all groups designated as undesirable by Nazi ideology—including homosexuals, Gypsies, and the mentally ill?

Unger argues for the specificity of the targeting of the Jewish population for extermination by comparing it to the case of homosexuals. Homosexual men were incarcerated in the death camps, and many were killed in the course of the Holocaust, but, Unger argues, their targeting was quite different and far more selective than that of Jews. As she notes, not all homosexual men were incarcerated, and their treatment in the camps was substantially different from that of Jews. This difference in treatment does not minimize the brutality or depravity of the victimization of male homosexuals but marks it as a specific case, not to be identified simply with the assault on European Jewry that was the central feature of German exterminationist policy. Unger's article suggests that each target of the Holocaust was special and that to imagine otherwise is a simplification that does not do full justice to the victims of the death camps.

Butler argues that though the final structure of the extermination camps was centrally focused on the Jewish population, the techniques and practices that camp directors employed derived from a more conceptually broad eugenic euthanasia program initiated in 1939. Looking back to nineteenth-century German race theory, Butler suggests that an intellectual climate increasingly friendly toward the goal of a spurious racial purity in Germany enabled a euthanasia program to begin that initially targeted disabled children, the chronically ill, and the aged. Jews became a target as the program became more successful, as Germany expanded, and as public outcry about the initial targets of the T-4 program (collective euthanasia programs headquartered in a Berlin villa at Tiergarten Street Number 4) grew. Carefully describing the tools developed by the T-4 program, Butler asserts that the Holocaust was a more successful and larger-scale version of extermination programs that were already under way in Germany.

Is the Holocaust different from other genocidal assaults? Or, are there common features in all genocides? These are among the questions raised in this section—questions that

remain vital as contemporary society grapples with the aftermaths of genocides in many different places. Questions about history and debates about answers are crucial in understanding not only the past but also the present as well.

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Viewpoint: Homosexuals received different treatment from other targeted groups

The Jews were not the only victims of the Holocaust. While homosexuals were indeed targets of Nazi hatred, those persecuted expressly for their homosexuality were victimized in drastically smaller numbers, in different ways, and for different reasons than were Jews. Several factors distinguish the treatment of homosexuals from the persecution of Jews, and also from fellow non-Jewish prisoners, including trade unionists, communists, Gypsies, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Among the non-Jewish prisoners in the camps, homosexuals marked by the pink triangle lacked the racial, religious, or ideological identity and unity of their fellow prisoners. Moreover, they suffered some of the harshest conditions and were frequently treated as the lowest of the low. But more than their harsh treatment, small numbers and lack of group identity set them apart.

During the period of Nazi domination, some men known to the authorities to be homosexuals, including several prominent members of the art world, were (unlike Jews, prominent or otherwise) expressly excluded from persecution. Another major difference between the persecution of Jews and the persecution of homosexuals was that the total number of people sent to concentration camps exclusively for the crime of homosexuality (somewhere between 5,000 and 15,000, with 10,000 being the generally agreed-upon best estimate), virtually all were men. Although lesbians were sometimes designated as such within the camps, sexual relations between women were not illegal under German law. Men convicted of homosexual acts (under the infamous Paragraph 175 of the German criminal code, expanded in 1935 to include all forms of male homosexual contact) and sent to prison were not deemed "unworthy of life," a designation applied to Jews. In the majority of cases men convicted of homosexuality were spared the camp experience. Those who were not spared landed in concentration, rather than extermination, camps, although the end result—death—was frequently the same. The final distinction between the Jewish and homosexual experiences was that the legal persecution of homosexuals continued for decades following World War II (1939–1945), while the story of their victimization at the hands of the Nazis remained, until quite recently, zealously repressed.

Much of the pioneering work on sexuality, including same-sex sexuality, was carried out by German Jews. For decades prior to the Nazi rise to power, leading sex researcher Magnus Hirschfeld promoted homosexual rights, engendering much controversy even

among his fellow sexologists. His Scientific-Humanitarian Committee sought to alter Paragraph 175, which, beginning in 1871, defined sexual activities between men (or between men and animals) throughout the German Empire as perverse offenses, punishable by imprisonment for up to four years in conjunction with a loss of citizenship. In 1910 Hirschfeld abandoned his belief that homosexuals constituted a biologically distinct gender. However, an unintentional result of his previous, tireless efforts to identify homosexuals as a “third sex” was widespread acceptance of homosexuals as not just medically unique but morally inferior.

The confluence of anti-Semitism, antifeminism, and homophobia in the sexual ideology of Nazism first curtailed, then prevented, and finally destroyed all German sex research and a flourishing sex-reform movement. Although the same-sex sexual activities of early Nazi leader Ernst Röhm and others active in Adolf Hitler’s rise to power were hardly secret, Hitler never approved of homosexuality, which he considered a weakness. Some six years before the Night of the Long Knives (1934)—that resulted in the death of Röhm and other high-ranking SA officials, including several known to be homosexual—Hitler’s National Socialist Party formally declared, “Those who are considering love between men or between women are our enemies. . . . Therefore, we reject all immorality, especially love between men, because it deprives us of our last chance to free our people from the chains of slavery.” In 1933, in one of their earliest official acts of terror, the Nazis plundered the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, established by Hirschfeld in 1919, destroying an enormous body of research and photographs.

The 1935 redrafting of Paragraph 175 expanded the range of sexual acts that were punishable offenses to include same-sex kissing and fondling, and even passive observance of such acts. The following year the Federal Security Department for Combating Homosexuality and Abortion was created in the Berlin Gestapo headquarters. Along with a comprehensive antihomosexual propaganda campaign came many acts of terror and brutality as police and the Gestapo targeted meeting places, clubs, and associations reputed to be frequented by homosexuals.

The 1936-1937 show trials were designed to discredit the Catholic Church by presenting it as a hotbed of sexual depravity. However, the Nazis were disappointed in the results. Of a total of 4,000 members of monastic orders, for example, only seven were found guilty of crimes under Paragraph 175. The effort to

spur a massive exodus of the faithful from the church was a colossal failure. The persecution of homosexuals, however, remained a Nazi mainstay. In 1937 head of German police Heinrich Himmler declared, at his elite SS training academy, that homosexuals were not just “cowards” but also warned, “If this vice continues, it will be the end of Germany,” because only “nations with many children can gain supremacy and mastery of the world.” By this logic, German male homosexuals were a greater threat to national security than were gay men of the countries conquered by the Nazis (where treatment of homosexuals following occupation varied from place to place). The systematic registration and persecution of homosexuals increased as the Gestapo registered some 90,000 German homosexual men (of an estimated total of 1.2 million) from 1937 to 1939 alone.

Persecution of German homosexuals intensified and targeted virtually all levels of society. Scholar Richard Plant estimates that between 50,000 and 63,000 males, including nearly 4,000 juveniles, were convicted of homosexuality from 1933 to 1944. Even members of the German military were not exempt. Of the roughly 4,800 men sentenced for same-sex activities in 1941, more than 1,100 were in the armed forces. Although ever stricter directives were enacted to punish gay men in the military, with the increasing manpower shortages after 1943, these policies were

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not enforced. Accusations of homosexuality, however, continued to be frequently included in charges against persons perceived as enemies of the Reich.

Conviction on charges of homosexuality guaranteed punishment but usually not detention in a concentration camp. In one study of Gestapo files from three German regions, about 80 percent of men accused of homosexuality were sent to prison. The length of sentence depended upon the number of proven sexual partners. So-called protective custody and detention in concentration camps was ordered in 7 to 10 percent of the cases, with 325 of 413 men in “protective custody” placed in Lichtenburg concentration camp. In July of 1940 Himmler declared that men who had engaged in sexual practices with more than one male partner were to be taken into “police preventive custody” after their release from prison. Exceptions included men who had been castrated and medically proved not to be at risk for homosexual relapse.

To designate convicted homosexuals within the camps, badges imprinted with “175,” or insignia bearing a large letter “A” (generally understood to indicate anal intercourse) were replaced from about 1937 forward with pink triangles sewn onto camp uniforms. The bearer of a pink triangle could be considered “incurably sick” and therefore a candidate for extermination. There was, however, another alternative. While Jews were targeted for extinction because of their alleged inherent and unchangeable inferiority, the Nazi goal was, ostensibly, to eliminate homosexuality by the “reeducation” of

homosexuals. Experiments designed to cure homosexuality included those carried out by Danish SS Sturmbannführer and endocrinologist Caril Vaernet. With the German SS Hauptsturmführer and surgeon Gerhard Schiedlausky, Vaernet implanted synthetic hormones in fifteen human subjects, resulting in more than one death. Homosexual prisoners in Buchenwald were also subjected to castration (some on a “voluntary” basis, in the hope of being released) and others were made the subjects of experiments to develop immunization against typhus fever, resulting in many agonizing deaths.

The Nazis targeted every Jewish man, woman, and child for extermination. Homosexuals were targeted on a far more selective basis. Affection between German Aryan women was generally accepted as evidence of women’s more emotional and affectionate nature. Unlike their male counterparts, women who preferred intimate relations with their own sex were perceived as not precluded from the heterosexual activities vital to the much-desired rising birth rate. Generally, German women were perceived to be carrying out their “natural sphere” as dedicated wives and mothers, providing soldiers for future Nazi conquests and “outbreeding inferior races.” Lesbianism alone was rarely the cause of persecution, since it was not a crime. Nonetheless, six lesbians were arrested from 1933 to 1944. And although technically exempt from Paragraph 175, women thought to be sexually involved with other women exclusively (as with men suspected of sexual involvement with other men) were considered generally suspect, closely scrutinized, and subject to arrest on other charges. Lesbians identified as such within the camps, like their male counterparts, suffered unspeakably and were subjected to, among other tortures, repeated rapes.

A case study of male homosexual inmates in Buchenwald reveals that the first prisoner listed as a “175er” was registered in January 1938. The numbers declined to just a few in the early part of 1940 because 27 homosexuals were sent to the notorious Mauthausen, a concentration camp for “serious criminals, inmates with little chance of reeducation.” Altogether, some 500 men were brought to Buchenwald as punishment for their homosexuality, representing about 25 percent of the total inmate population. During 1942 there was a peak in the number of homosexuals sent to camps, accounting for about 25 percent of their com-mitals, but information on the numbers, treatment, and ultimate fate of gay men sent to all camps remains fragmentary.

Incomplete records are not the only barrier to learning about homosexual victims of the Holocaust. With homophobia rampant, and sexual acts between consenting males remaining a criminal offense in Germany for decades, survivors were often reluctant to come forward to tell their stories. Certainly, the Nazis’ ability to tap into and intensify preexisting homophobia ensured that gay men sent to camps were not just brutalized by their captors but distrusted and ostracized by their fellow prisoners. Homosexuals were almost never, for example, granted the minor positions of power among the prison population that came with tasks such as the distribution of food or labor assignments. The heterogeneity of homosexuals, who came from all walks of life and were in all other

ways equally diverse, made difficult any bonding through group identification among themselves. Although homosexual practices existed throughout the camps among members of virtually all designations of prisoners, men marked with the pink triangle were ostracized, frequently segregated, and consigned to the lowest caste in camp. Attractive young men, homosexual and heterosexual alike, could sometimes curry favor as *Pup-penjuvenen* (toy boys) to more powerful inmates,

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or even guards and camp officers, but such relationships were frequently unstable and fraught with danger.

The surviving records reveal the mortality rate of homosexuals to be higher than that of political prisoners or Jehovah's Witnesses. Wolfgang Roll's study of Buchenwald reveals that about 50 percent of inmates identified by the pink triangle died, exclusive of the unknown percentage who died among the 238 transferred from Buchenwald to other camps. Homosexual men sent to Buchenwald were targeted for "extermination through work" in the quarry with the result that 75 percent of the homosexual deaths recorded by the SS occurred within a period of six weeks after the prisoners' arrival in camp. Although the Nazis distinguished among "normal" homosexuals, "relapsed" heterosexuals, and "homosexual Jews" (the last being doubly stigmatized throughout the camps), the number of homosexuals not designated as such among the Jewish (and non-Jewish) dead remains unknown.

While all Holocaust survivors suffered immeasurably, those persecuted expressly for their homosexuality faced unique difficulties after liberation. Unlike Jews, many were the only members of the families to have been in a camp; yet, their release was frequently met with ongoing ostracism rather than reunion. Others suffered from the judicial decision of some of the liberation armies that time served in a camp did not constitute prison time, and therefore jail terms for the crime of homosexuality still needed to be completed. None were granted even the minimal restitution made available to Jews, political prisoners, or other former inmates.

Efforts continue to eliminate the ongoing persecution of homosexuals and rectify the denial of their victimization under the Nazis. Scholars have stepped up the investigations that began in earnest in the 1970s concerning the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. In the 1980s the pink triangle was adopted as a symbol of defiance against discrimination against people with AIDS and against homophobia in general. Along with the rainbow flag, the pink triangle serves as an international symbol of gay and lesbian people.

Not until 1994 were the criminal provisions against homosexual acts finally removed from German law. In 2002 the Paris-based Foundation pour la Memoire de la

Deportation released a report indicating that 210 French homosexuals had been deported to Germany to serve as laborers during the war, contradicting the claims of the French government that there is no evidence of such a deportation. Jean Le Bitoux's *Les Oublies de la Memoire: Le Persecution des Homosexuels en Europe au temps du Nazisme* (Erased from Memory: The Persecution of Homosexuals in Europe During the Nazi Era, 2002) gives special consideration to the French experience. Finally, in 2002 the German Society for Research into Sexuality, in its efforts to achieve collective rehabilitation and compensation for homosexual victims, continued to press for recognition that the injustices suffered at the hands of the German government by no means ended with the fall of the Nazis.

Those victimized for their homosexuality by the Nazis should neither be ignored nor simply (and belatedly) identified as targets of the Holocaust substantially similar to Jews in their treatment. Unlike the Jews of Europe, most homosexuals survived the Holocaust. Additional aspects of their experience set them apart from others who were oppressed, especially Jews: persecution was limited almost exclusively to males; not all males convicted on homosexual charges were sent to camps or targeted for death; and prisoners wearing the pink triangle made up only a tiny portion of Holocaust victims. The fact that homosexuals were so ostracized, both during their camp experience and beyond, also sets them apart. Homosexuals were indeed victims of the Holocaust, but in ways that were frequently substantially different from their fellow prisoners.

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Viewpoint: Trial Nazi extermination programs initially targeted the disabled, sick, and aged, but their function was to develop procedures for the indiscriminate extermination of non-Aryans

The quest for racial purity dominated National Socialist ideology. After Adolf Hitler became German chancellor in 1933, the Nazis implemented many policies to guarantee the survival of a racially pure Aryan state that culminated in the Final Solution. Yet, before six million Jews were murdered in camps throughout eastern Europe, the German government had established programs to eliminate groups they identified as inferior, such as the mentally and physically handicapped, chronic alcoholics, and habitual criminals. Compulsory sterilization and euthanasia laws were two policies that proved indispensable to initiating racial genocide in Nazi Germany. Each policy provided the institutional groundwork, trained medical professionals, and justified the eliminationist mind-set

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required for the elimination of people Nazis identified as racially undesirable. Sterilization and euthanasia, therefore, established an atmosphere where the

annihilation of particular groups was accepted, anticipated, and even desired. The policies Nazis established legally to sterilize and euthanize selected groups were essential in the eventual implementation of the Final Solution.

Racial identity fascinated Germans for decades before the Nazis assumed power. In 1815, for instance, author Ernst Moritz Arndt argued that “mish-mash and bastardization are the main source of degeneration and decline of a people.” In 1899 Houston Steward Chamberlain, an Englishman who became a German citizen, argued that Germans belonged to a racially pure and superior group he called the Aryan race. Aryans, Chamberlain maintained, were the originators of Western culture and the mental and physical “lords of the world.” Their descendants had thus to save society from inferior groups such as Jews and Gypsies. The national obsession with racial purity continued into the twentieth century, as German scientists used eugenics, “the science of fine breeding,” to link racial traits to heredity. The interest in eugenics, or, as Germans called it, “racial hygiene,” increased in 1920 when attorney Karl Binding and psychiatrist Alfred Hoche published *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens* (Authorization for the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life). In their influential book, the scholars reiterated their belief in Aryan superiority and proposed the legal euthanasia of those with hereditary mental and physical ailments to secure a racially pure German state. Binding and Hoche justified euthanasia, Greek for “fine death,” because it maintained healthy Aryan specimens worthy of reproduction and relieved Germany of the social and economic drain that sustaining the handicapped brought. Hoche became the foremost proponent of selective euthanasia during the Weimar era (1919-1933) as his views grew in popularity. German schoolteachers, for instance, had their children calculate the costs of institutional care for the disabled in math classes, while biology students toured state hospitals and wrote essays on the effects of mental degeneracy. Many German citizens in the early twentieth century, therefore, supported euthanizing the infirm for racial and humanitarian reasons. One such person, Adolf Hitler, detailed a belief in Aryan superiority, a commitment to ensuring German racial purity, and a hatred of inferior races such as Jews in his autobiography *Mein Kampf* (1925-1927). When Hitler assumed power in 1933, the racial cleansing of Germany became the Nazi Party’s main priority.

The elimination of racially inferior German citizens began on 26 July 1933 when Hitler enacted the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases. The measure, popularly called the “sterilization law,” took effect on 1 January 1934, demanded compulsory sterilization of the disabled, and led to the sterilization of about 360, 000 Germans, about 1 percent of the total population. Those selected for sterilization were defined as “feeble minded” because they possessed mental illnesses such as manic depression and schizophrenia, but the law also targeted epileptics, those with physical deformities, severe alcoholics, the blind, and deaf individuals. Nazi officials provided crude intelligence tests for state hospitals, special schools, and nursing homes to determine who qualified for sterilization, which occurred primarily through radiation

exposure or chemical injection. On 26 June 1935 the law broadened to provide abortions for women not beyond the sixth month of a "hereditarily diseased" pregnancy. The sterilization law provided a crucial precursor to the extermination of racial inferiors in an idealized Aryan state by identifying those with undesired features and preventing their reproduction. The measure also demonstrates that the State and social welfare took precedence over individual rights in Nazi Germany.

The next step in the effort to control reproduction in Nazi Germany came approximately one month after the establishment of the infamous Nuremberg Laws. On 18 October 1935 the Marriage Health Law prohibited marriage if either partner suffered from diseases the sterilization law named. In addition, couples had to earn a Marriage Fitness Certification before obtaining a marriage license. Nazi officials intended to use the law to begin a national registry that contained hereditary information concerning every German citizen. The Marriage Health Law extended Nazi control over the reproduction of German citizens and justified the intrusion with racial arguments. During the same year the Marriage Health measure passed, Hitler informed Reich physician leader Gerhard Wagner that he intended to kill the German disabled when war began in Europe. Wagner became a prominent supporter of the euthanasia programs as he and his successor, Leonardo Conti, ensured the medical community would become one of the key instruments in the Nazi war against racial impurities.

German euthanasia programs began with the mass murder of children who had mental or physical handicaps. In 1938 Hitler received an appeal from the parents of a child who wanted their disabled infant mercifully euthanized. The 1938 "Knauer baby" incident inspired the Reich to establish thirty Special Children's

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AFRAID TO STIR UP MEMORIES

Gay Frenchman Pierre Seel, in his autobiography, describes the murder of his lover while they were incarcerated in a German concentration camp at Schirmeck:

Days, weeks, months wore by. I spent six months, from May to November 1941, in that place where horror and savagery were the law. But I've put off describing the worst ordeal I suffered, It happened during my earliest weeks in the camp and contributed more than anything else to making me a silent, obedient shadow among the others.

One day the loudspeakers ordered us to report immediately to the roll-call. Shouts and yells urged us to get there without delay. Surrounded by SS men, we had to form a square and stand at attention, as we did for the morning roll call. The commandant appeared with his entire general staff. I assumed he was going to bludgeon us once again with his blind faith in the Reich, together with a list of orders, insults and threats—emulating the infamous outpourings of his master, Adolf Hitler. But the actual ordeal was worse: an execution. Two SS men brought a young man to the center of our square. Horrified, I recognized Jo, my loving friend, who was only eighteen years old. I hadn't previously spotted him in the camp. Had he arrived before or after me? We hadn't seen each other during the days before I was summoned by the Gestapo.

Now I froze in terror. I had prayed that he would escape their lists, their roundups, their humiliations. And there he was before my powerless eyes, which filled with tears.

Unlike me, he had not carried dangerous letters, torn down posters, or signed any statements. And yet he had been caught and was about to die. What had happened? What had the monsters used him for? Because of my anguish I have completely forgotten the wording of the death sentence.

The loudspeakers broadcast some noisy classical music while the SS stripped him naked and shoved a tin pail over his head. Next they si"ed their ferocious German Shepherds on him: the guard dogs first bit into his groin and thighs, then devoured him right in front of us. His shrieks of pain were distorted and amplified by the pail in which his head was trapped. My rigid body reeled, my eyes gaped at so much horror, tears poured down my cheeks, I fervently prayed that he would black out quickly.

Since then I sometimes wake up howling in the middle of the night. For fifty years now that scene has kept ceaselessly passing and re-passing through my mind. I will never forget the barbaric murder of my love—before my very eyes, before our eyes, for there were hundreds of witnesses. Why are they still silent today? Have they all died? It's true that we were among the youngest in the camp and that a lot of time has gone by. But I suspect that some people prefer to remain silent forever, afraid to stir up memories, like that one

among so many others.

Source: *Pierre Seel, I, Pierre Seel, Deported Homo-sexual; A Memoir of Nazi Terror (New York BasicBooks, 1995), pp. 42-44*

Departments that began the legal execution of racial undesirables in Nazi Germany. The Chancellery of the Führer (KdF) office governed the endeavor. Hitler appointed his personal physician, Karl Brandt, to supervise the operation, and Brandt appointed Viktor Brack to implement a process of efficient euthanasia. To mask its true intentions, the children's programs existed under the official yet ambiguous title "Reich Committee for the Scientific Registration of Severe Hereditary Ailments."

Before the infant euthanasia enterprise was well underway, Hitler ordered the execution of disabled adults as well. The KdF also supervised the second undertaking and placed it under several agencies that resembled the structure created to euthanize children. Brack presided over both killing programs, headquartered in a Berlin villa at Tiergarten Street Number 4. The collective euthanasia programs thus operated as the T-4 program. Although KdF directed T-4, the organization cooperated closely with the SS and operated secretly under nonexistent agencies such as the Reich Cooperative for State Hospitals and Nursing Homes, the Community Foundation for Institutional Care, and the Charitable Corporation for the Transport of the Sick. The convoluted bureaucracy that supervised the murders of disabled Germans became a pattern Nazis employed over and over again during the execution of many other groups defined as eugenically and socially flawed, such as Jews, homosexuals, communists, and Gypsies.

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The processes of euthanizing children and adults worked in similar ways. In 1939 the Reich minister of the interior compiled information on all German institutions that provided care for the disabled. Staff members at each institution, such as administrators, doctors, nurses, and mid-wives, had to answer questionnaires concerning each of their patients. The forms were returned to the KdF, where approximately forty physicians, most of them psychiatrists who were paid by the number of cases they reviewed, examined the documents and determined who died. They labeled condemned children as "idiots," "Mongols," "valueless," or "malformed," while adults were often declared "incurable." A panel of three physicians endorsed each decision the review board recommended. Those selected for euthanasia early in the program, particularly children, usually died from a barbiturate overdose or starvation. About 6, 000 children died as a result of the euthanasia campaign. Physicians commonly experimented on subjects prior to their death, removed their organs for observation afterward, and took valuables from the dead bodies.

Once the euthanasia programs began, they spread rapidly to remote provinces within the nation. Instead of bringing victims to Berlin or distant urban centers, though, operation leaders began using large vans in mass murder. Patients in outlying hospitals who had no relatives or whom physicians declared “incurable” became the first victims of the gas vans; they were loaded in the vehicles and driven around their territories as carbon monoxide poured from a steel bottle in the driver’s compartment through a hose and into an airtight section where inmates inhaled the noxious fumes. The van operation proved immensely successful to euthanasia directors because it eliminated degenerate citizens in distant provinces without the cost of transporting them to urban areas. In one operation, for example, 1, 558 handicapped residents in East Prussian hospitals died during a two-week period in May 1940. Although mass murder first targeted the German handicapped, the techniques T-4 officials utilized became an indispensable aspect of the Final Solution.

As the conquest of Poland progressed and Germany attained more Lebensraum (living space) for its mythic Aryan peoples, the nation simultaneously encountered more people it considered mentally, physically, and culturally inferior to them. In the fall of 1939, therefore, German euthanasia programs began to evolve into a Final Solution for the nation’s perceived racial enemies, particularly Jews. A new method of execution was needed to kill large numbers simultaneously, and T-4 doctors began to experiment with gas executions. An example of how euthanasia and the Final Solution converged occurred at the Owinski psychiatric hospital in Poland on 15 November 1939 when 1, 100 residents were murdered with poisoned gas. It marked one of the first times Nazis used gas for mass murder and set a precedent for future extermination. On 7 December 1939 Germans used mobile gas vans for the first time to kill 7, 120 patients at the Tygenhof psychiatric hospital in Germany. The new method of eugenic purging proved so successful to T-4 directors that they launched “Operation Euthanasia” in January 1940 and approved mass gassing as the most efficient method of killing.

The KdF established euthanasia centers for adults at Brandenburg, Grafeneck, Hartheim, Sonnenstein, Bernburg, and Hadamar. One physician managed each facility, all of which contained a receiving area, gas chambers built to resemble shower rooms, a crematorium, and staff lodging. Staff members examined victims upon their arrival at the center, verified their paperwork, took photographs of the condemned, and escorted them to the shower chambers, where pipes pumped carbon monoxide into the enclosures. Doctors observed the deaths through a window, ordered the room ventilated approximately thirty minutes after the procedure began, and pronounced the victims dead. Workers often looted the corpses before their cremation. Approximately 71, 000 patients died during “Operation Euthanasia.” To hide their activities, T-4 officials often sent condolence letters and death certificates with fraudulent reasons for and dates of death to each victim’s family. Program directors often collected premiums from the dead’s insurance companies or charged their relatives for burial fees. As the enterprise continued, however, protests from relatives, clergymen, and the judiciary increased. Hitler officially ended the T-4 program in August 1941 because of its public

unpopularity, but the work T-4 began increased its scope as World War II (1939–1945) progressed.

In July 1941 Reinhard Heydrich took control of the Final Solution, the official response of Nazi Germany to the Jewish Question, and transferred some euthanasia technology and personnel to the killing of Jews. When Hitler officially ended the T-4 program a month later, Heydrich had the entire operation at his disposal and quickly placed its experts, bureaucracy, machinery, and discoveries to work against Jews. T-4 initially placed Jews and non-Jews together in its facilities but began placing them in separate hospitals in early 1940. Within months, Jews died without the required examination those at euthanasia centers received. The murders continued after the termination of T-4 as program directors visited concentration camps and selected

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prisoners to be executed at chambers that continued to operate. The gassing of concentration-camp inmates, predominantly Jews, was declared "Special Treatment 14f13." The gas van became an essential instrument in the earliest stage of the Final Solution. As the German army moved into Russia in 1940, *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) followed closely behind, eradicating Jews and others perceived as racially inferior. The execution method *Einsatzgruppen* units initially used was the firing squad, but the gruesome massacres had a detrimental effect on the perpetrators. SS leaders, therefore, sought a new method capable of mass murder while distancing most soldiers from the disturbing slaughters. They found a solution in the mobile gas vans KdF officials used in their euthanasia program. Heydrich first used T-4 personnel and their death vehicles against Jews at Chelmno, where the vans executed 152,000 inmates. Operation 14f 13 continued until the killing capabilities at facilities such as Auschwitz-Birkenau rendered the T-4 methods obsolete, and the operation provided a clear link between Nazi euthanasia laws and the Final Solution.

Those individuals associated with T-4 who did not assist Operation 14f 13 nevertheless contributed to the Final Solution in several ways. T-4 chemists, for example, conducted experiments with several different gases and execution techniques, while the masons who constructed the gas chambers and crematoriums at Sonnenstein and Hartheim were transferred to the new facilities when T-4 ended. Several T-4 administrators and physicians were reemployed in Jewish extermination camps and occupied positions at Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmno, and Treblinka. The euthanasia of undesirable Germans provided a critical step to the Final Solution, as Heydrich himself recognized and acknowledged with the appointment of crucial T-4 personnel to assist in the Jewish death factories.

The most important function of early Nazi sterilization and euthanasia programs, however, was that they created an atmosphere where the experimentation on and

elimination of humans not defined as racially pure Aryans was acceptable. The sterilization and euthanasia policies also trivialized the death of selected groups who lived within the Third Reich by rewarding those who proved most dedicated to cleansing Germany of racial impurities. Administrators were awarded and recognized for their murderous efficiency, physicians received promotions or new facilities, chemists were granted enhanced research funding, and bureaucrats were given monetary bonuses for the number of individuals they processed through gas chambers each day. In other words, the euthanasia of those designated as racially degenerative in Nazi Germany operated in a manner that made genocide seem normal. The T-4 program killed between 70, 000 and 95, 000 individuals but indirectly led to the deaths of millions more because of the tremendous influence it had on the implementation of the Final Solution.

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