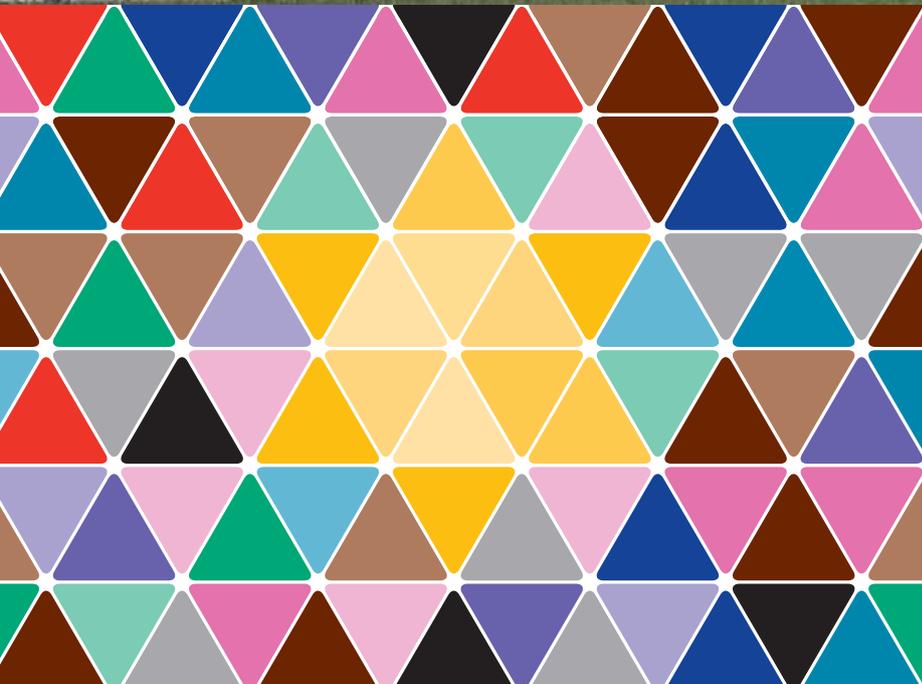




Disabled people and the Euthanasia Programme



Mosaic – Victims of Nazi Persecution



Disabled people and the Euthanasia Programme

On 14th July 1933, the recently established Nazi government announced a law which legislated violence against a minority of Germans. Called the “Law for the Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases”, from 1 January 1934 it was now legal to sterilize anyone suffering from a list of wide-ranging diseases which the Nazis believed could be transmitted genetically. This included people with learning disabilities, blindness, deafness, epilepsy, depression, alcoholism – and in particular, the mentally or physically disabled.

The Nazis wanted to sterilize these people because they argued that they threatened the purity of the German “race”. By preventing them from having children, it was felt that in time these “disabilities” could be removed from the Aryan gene pool; at the same time, these “diseases” were associated by the Nazis with “asocial” behaviour, which was also a danger to the Third Reich. In short, these people were considered to be “life unworthy of life”: a burden on, and a threat to, the so-called thousand-year Reich.

These beliefs were not entirely new, and drew on various ideas about public health, race, science, eugenics and national efficiency which were popular across the globe. Between 1934 and 1939 around 300,000 people were sterilized – often against their will. Although Germany was not the only country to do this (Sweden and certain states in America for example, also introduced sterilization laws), it was among the most enthusiastic. Sterilization was accompanied by propaganda, ensuring that these people were increasingly marginalised from society.

With the outbreak of war, a new policy emerged. In the summer of 1939 the family of a severely disabled child wrote to Hitler requesting permission for “mercy killing”. Hitler dispatched his personal physician to investigate, and instructed him to administer “euthanasia” if appropriate. This was formalised and extended by Hitler in October 1939 when he signed an authorization. At the same time, leading officials and politicians (including Hitler) were already discussing and planning for a systematic programme to kill a large proportion of those deemed to be mentally or physically disabled. Although some involved would later claim that this was undertaken out of human compassion, the reality was entirely different: people were to be killed because they

did not fit with Nazi ideology, and because their deaths were seen as bringing practical and material benefits. These included the freeing-up of bed spaces in hospitals and other such institutions and efficiency savings through reduced financial costs.

In late summer 1939 the “children's euthanasia” programme began, although it was not formally authorized until Hitler empowered officials in a note signed in October and backdated to 1st September. Now, all children with a “severe hereditary illness” were to be registered, before a team of “experts” would decide on account of this registration form whether they would live or die. Those selected for death were transported to special children's wards established in hospitals with parents being told this was to provide specialist care and treatment. On arrival children would occasionally be observed, before death was caused either through deliberate starvation or a lethal combination of medicines. After bodies were cremated en masse, urns with collated ashes would be sent to parents together with a certificate announcing a fictitious cause of death.

Soon after children's “euthanasia” was started, the murder of adults began. The process followed the model of the children's programme, but on a much larger scale: greater collaboration among hospital staff and institutions was needed and a more complex bureaucracy was required, leading to the creation of an administrative centre housed in a villa located at Tiergartenstrasse-4 in Berlin. From now, the euthanasia programme was known as the “T4 Aktion” – just one of a host of pseudonyms used to both deceive the public and mask the direct links that the policy had to Hitler.

A crucial difference between the child and adult programmes was the method of killing, as after experiments in the winter of 1939-1940 death by

carbon monoxide gas became the norm. Subsequently six killing centres were established in former prisons or existing specialist hospitals, including Brandenburg, Grafeneck, Hartheim Castle, Sonnenstein, Bernburg and Hadamar. Those sentenced to death would be asked to undress before being led into gas chambers disguised as shower rooms. After the room was sealed, qualified doctors were then supposed to administer gas before orderlies would clear the room and begin cremation shortly after all had perished.

On 24th August 1941, Hitler officially ordered the end of the T4 programme. For some time the killings had been an open secret in Germany, with public criticism – such as that voiced by Cardinal von Galen – threatening to undermine popular support for the regime. More brutally however, the programme had by now achieved its initial target of removing some 70,000 people from German asylums and specialist institutions. Yet the halt order did not bring about an end to the killing of “life unworthy of life”. The children's euthanasia policy went on regardless, whilst doctors not only continued to murder mentally and physically ill adults but also geriatrics, bomb victims, and foreign workers.

Those experts involved in the planning and implementation of euthanasia were also kept in a job, although a slightly different one: in the summer of 1941 a number of T4 personnel began to select “sick” prisoners in the concentration camps, in a programme known as “Aktion 14f13”. Shortly afterwards, their expertise was also utilised in the construction of the first death camps in Poland where the victims would not be “disabled” Germans, but European Jews. By 1945, it is estimated that around 5,000 children had been killed by Nazi “euthanasia”. The total number of people killed through the child and adult programmes is believed to be at least 200,000.



Further materials will become available through the course of the joint project.

For further information go to National Union of Teachers www.teachers.org.uk and Holocaust Educational Trust www.het.org.uk

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