

## “Euthanasia” and Operation T-4

In October 1939 Adolf Hitler wrote the following memo: “Reich Leader [Philip] Bouhler and Dr. med. [Karl] Brandt are charged with the responsibility of enlarging the authority of certain physicians, designated by name, so that patients who, on the basis of human judgment, are considered incurable, can be granted a mercy death after a discerning diagnosis.”

Those words authorized a systematic Nazi program to eliminate *lebensunwertes Leben* (“life unworthy of life”). These “worthless” people included mentally and physically disabled Germans and Austrians, children and adults, who were regarded as a blight on the Third Reich’s “racial integrity” and as an unacceptable economic burden for the state. Although Hitler signed the authorization for this so-called “euthanasia” program in October 1939, the document was backdated to September 1—the day World War II began—to create the impression that the “mercy killings” were a wartime necessity.

The euthanasia campaign, called Operation T-4, was code-named after the address of the confiscated Jewish villa at Tiergartenstrasse 4, which was the address of the program’s central

administrative offices. Hitler chose Bouhler, the head of his private Chancellery, and Dr. Brandt, one of his doctors, to oversee T-4. However, responsibility for its day-to-day implementation fell to Viktor Brack and his deputy, Werner Blanken-



berg. Statistics show that under the leadership of these men, 70,000 to 80,000 people—including 4000 to 5000 Jews—became victims of the euthanasia killings.

The Nazis tried to conceal what was happening, but when public protests exploded—many of them from Germany’s Catholic and Lutheran leaders—

Hitler officially halted Operation T-4 on August 24, 1941. Nevertheless, the killing continued in greater secrecy until the spring of 1945. From 1939 through 1945, Operation T-4 and other euthanasia actions murdered between 200,000 and 250,000 disabled people.

Medical personnel selected who would die based on data gathered from hospitals, nursing homes, and other public health facilities. The patients selected to die were transported to one of six euthanasia centers in Germany and Austria: Hartheim, Sonnenstein, Grafeneck, Bernburg, Hadamar, or Brandenburg. The doctors, nurses, and other specialists who worked at these centers employed different methods of murder. Starvation and lethal injection were used at first, but eventually the method of choice was gassing with carbon monoxide in chambers disguised as tiled showers. After gold teeth were harvested, the corpses were burned in crematoria.

Operation T-4 anticipated the Holocaust. The euthanasia program’s ideology of racial purity, methods of destruction, and administrative personnel would play key roles in the “Final Solution.”

500,000 OF THE FINAL SOLUTION ONLY AS 1939 1942 Camps Begin

OUTCRY AGAINST

many and Austria, Jews may not be outside after 8:00 P.M. in the winter and 9:00 P.M. in the summer.

• September 1–October 25, 1939: Operation Tannenberg, carried out by SS *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile kill squads), leads to the murders of Polish Jews and Catholic intellectuals and to the burnings of synagogues in Poland.

• September 2, 1939: In Stutthof, Poland, a subcamp is established for “civilian prisoners of war.” • As 1400 Jews escaping from Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia land on a Tel Aviv, Palestine, beach, British soldiers shoot and kill two refugees.

• September 3, 1939: Great Britain and France declare war on Germany. The

British government cancels all visas previously granted to “enemy nationals”; one effect is that German Jews can no longer immigrate to safety in England. • At a meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, an organization informally recognized as the ad hoc Jewish government of Palestine, David Ben-Gurion vows that Jews will fight Hitler. A total of a million and a half





This German, antisemitic cartoon is entitled "The Progress of 'Modern Art'—Dance with a Prostitute." Pictured is a Jewish "degenerate" artist whose palette bears the words *Schulchan Aruch* (a medieval compendium of Jewish law). Also pictured are a Jewish journalist and a filmmaker, symbolizing the alleged Jewish control of the media. The wealthy, well-fed Jewish man in the foreground dances with a prostitute while dancing on the cross. Other details suggest capitalism (the woman's top hat), Freemasonry (the symbol on the dancer's cummerbund), and African-American jazz (the saxophone).



The right-wing, anti-Jewish weekly Polish publication *Samoobrona Naradu* (*National Self-Defense*) lobbied extensively to remove all Jews from Poland. Urging its countrymen to pay heed to their Jewish "problem," the paper led the campaign to "clear Poland of its Jews." This edition carried the following text: "POLAND FOR THE POLES! A feeling of national pride, solidarity, and unity must be aroused. Each of you must lend support to the Polish worker, shopkeeper, et al. JOBS AND BREAD IN POLAND FOR THE POLES!" The cartoon at the top of the announcement portrays a Pole carting Jews off to Palestine.

## Persecution of Homosexuals

Homosexuals were prime targets of persecution by the Nazis, who considered them defilers of German blood. Declaring homosexuality a crime of degeneracy contrary to "wholesome popular sentiment," the regime moved to eradicate it.

From 1933 to 1944, the Nazis convicted and sent to concentration camps tens of thousands of men on charges of homosexuality. There they were humiliated, tortured, subjected to medical experimentation, and killed. An estimated 5000 to 15,000 homosexuals perished behind barbed-wire fences during the Holocaust.

The campaign against homosexuals was especially fierce from 1936 to 1939. In order to identify homosexuals, the Gestapo compiled lists of known individuals, encouraged all citizens to report deviant behavior, pressured victims to denounce others, tracked down names in address books, raided gay bars and clubs, and confiscated subscription lists of gay magazines.

Thrown into concentration camps for "rehabilitation," homosexuals were forced to wear identifying triangular patches of pink cloth. There they were subjected to degradation and sadistic beatings by guards. Many were castrated or became human guinea pigs for hormone experiments conducted by SS doctors. Political enemies of the regime, such as Catholic priests, were also conveniently eliminated through charges of homosexuality.

# 1936

order to block Soviet activities abroad.

- November 27, 1936: Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels declares that film criticism is henceforth banned, freeing the Nazi-controlled German film industry to pursue its own agenda, which includes blatantly antisemitic films. • During the

same period in the United States, Hollywood is self-censored in that it fears dealing with Jewish issues because of the high level of anti-semitism existing at the time in the United States.

- November 29, 1936: Germany's Minister of Agriculture, Walther Darré, declares that democracy





In 1928 the Nazis publicly made known their opposition to the repeal of Paragraph 175, which stipulated imprisonment for same-gender sexual activity. Once Hitler became chancellor, the government moved quickly against gays, forbidding the mention of homosexuality in magazines and closing gay bars. The Eldorado, a popular gay gathering spot in Berlin, was closed in early March 1934. Accusations of homosexuality resulted in imprisonment in concentration camps, where gays were particularly abused.



*Der Giftpilz* (The Poisonous Mushroom) was one of the many antisemitic books written for German children. Highlighting the medieval theme of Jews as Christ-killers, it urges children: "When you see a cross, then think of the horrible murder by the Jews on Golgatha."

## Sinti and Roma

Ever since their arrival in Central Europe in the 1400s, the Gypsies had been social outcasts. In the 1930s, when Heinrich Himmler vowed to rid Germany of "asocials," Gypsies were among the targeted groups.

Consisting of different "tribes" or "nations," these ethnic minorities were called "Gypsies" because they were thought to have Egyptian origins. The Sinti and Roma tribes were the most common in Germany and Austria, respectively. Labeled by the Nazis as racial "inferiors," Sinti and Roma were regarded as so "unfit" that Himmler's circular of December 8, 1938, "Combating the Gypsy Nuisance," recommended "the final solution of the Gypsy question."

Throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, tens of thousands of Gypsies were hunted down and shot or deported and killed in camps. At least 23,000 Roma and Sinti were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. During one night alone—August 2–3, 1944—2897 men, women, and children were gassed there during the liquidation of the "Gypsy family camp." The Nazis and their collaborators killed between 20 and 50 percent—220,000 to 500,000—of the Sinti and Roma, who call this genocide the *Porrajmos*, or "great devouring," of their people.

Team "Final Solution..."

N.B.



• Dorothy Thompson, an anti-Nazi American journalist whose 1932 book *I Saw Hitler* is critical of the *Führer*, is expelled from Germany. • Restoration work begins at *Wewelsburg*, a 17th-century cliff-top fortress in Westphalia, Germany. When complete, the castle will be used by Heinrich Himmler and the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) as a mystical fortress, complete with a

12,000-volume Aryan library and a center for racial research. • In the United States, the American Christian Defenders (the World Alliance Against Jewish Aggressiveness) is founded by antisemitic propagandist Eugene N. Sanctuary.

• Early 1934: Hitler Youth members are turned loose throughout Ger-

many to intimidate members of Catholic youth groups.

• January 1, 1934: The Nazis remove Jewish holidays from the official German calendar. • German laws allowing sterilization of the "unfit," which were passed in July 1933, are promulgated. Hitler orders the German government to undertake a building





Two Polish Jews are forced to dig their own graves. This was a common practice throughout the Holocaust. Not only did this reduce the work of the Nazi murderers, but it also had the effect of further denigrating the victims as they went to their deaths. The dehumanization of the victims made it easier for the Germans to carry out their grisly tasks.



The Jews of the *Generalgouvernement* had to make way for German resettlement in the region. For this reason, increasing numbers of Jews were deported to urban ghettos. This photograph shows a German policeman posting a notice stating that this house has been requisitioned for a German family who will eventually settle in the region. The Jews received no compensation for the property seized from them. This widespread practice contributed dramatically to overcrowding in the ghettos.

- September 17, 1939: Eastern Poland is invaded by the Soviet Union.
- September 20, 1939: All radios owned by Jews in Greater Germany are confiscated.
- September 21, 1939: SS Security Service chief Reinhard Heydrich orders chiefs of *Einsatzgruppen* to establish,

in cooperation with German civil and military authorities, Jewish ghettos in German-occupied Poland. He decrees that all Jewish communities in Poland and Greater Germany with populations under 500 are to be dissolved, so that deportations of Jews to urban ghettos and concentration camps can be accelerated. Further, Heydrich orders the establishment of ghetto *Judenräte* (Jew-

ish councils). The main goals of the ghettoization process are to isolate Jews, force them to manufacture items for Germany, and provide easy Nazi access for murder and deportation.

- September 22, 1939: The *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA; State Security Main Office) is founded.

## Jehovah's Witnesses

From 1933 to 1945, the Nazis imprisoned 10,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, executing more than 200 for refusing military service. As many as 5000 died in concentration camps. Despite persecution, Witnesses clung fervently to their religious beliefs, which did not allow the bearing of arms, and steadfastly refused to swear allegiance to the Nazi state.

Even before the Nazis came to power, SA thugs routinely disrupted Witness Bible-study sessions, beating up participants. After 1933 the regime launched a vigorous attack, banning the organization. The Gestapo compiled membership lists, and raids confiscated illegal literature, such as *The Watchtower*. To defy the ban meant arrest, imprisonment, and loss of jobs and social welfare benefits. Children were shunned, ridiculed, and expelled from school for refusing to give the *Sieg Heil* salute.

In 1935 the Nazis sent 400 Witnesses to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany for rejecting the newly enacted military draft. By 1939 camps held approximately 6000 Witnesses. After 1939 the Nazis deported Witnesses from occupied countries to camps as well. Marked with purple triangular patches, Jehovah's Witnesses continued to proselytize in camps, despite threat of execution, hard labor, brutal torture, and savage beatings with steel whips. Few accepted the Nazi offer of freedom in return for signing a declaration renouncing their beliefs.

