

## Nazi Eugenics: The Inconsistent Excuse for Oppression and Euthanization

During World War Two, Nazis spread a fear of passing down “undesirable traits” to future generations, which resulted in the sterilization of 400,000 Germans (USHMM “Sign Language”). This mass sterilization targeted people of marginalized groups because of their supposedly crippling physical or mental characteristics – a general effort in the Nazi Party otherwise known as eugenics. However, sterilization was not the only way eugenics victims were attacked by the Nazi party during World War Two. The targets of eugenics were unjustly sterilized, killed, and oppressed for any belief or attribute deemed as a threat to a “perfect” German population, all under the false justification of scientific weakness, as Robert Wagemann experienced after being oppressed for unclear and inconsistent reasonings. This pseudoscientific stereotyping continued to suppress the targets of eugenics after the war.

The Nazi eugenics program was based on the idea that certain physical or mental attributes were scientifically debilitating or dangerous for the general population if passed down or exhibited. They assigned social value to traits that were coveted but risk and detriment to physical or mental flaws. This was often portrayed as a disability in Nazi media, but “undesirable” was a convenient title

that covered anything the Nazis distained, including race, low intelligence, religious or moral beliefs, poor strength, and most blatantly physical and neurological disabilities (USHMM “Oral History”). These beliefs were, of course, inaccurate and prejudiced, and the Nazi party utilized these beliefs for the persecution of marginalized groups and portrayed or packaged it as an attempt to “protect” the German people.

Helga Gross, in her teenage years, was sterilized against her will because she was deaf, despite being fully capable, which the Nazis acknowledged. Gross grew up in a school for the deaf. She learned how to function in general society including reading lips and using verbal communication (USHMM “Sign Language”). However, she and her fellow classmates were subject to forced sterilization. Still, the Nazi Party tried to convince her to join, as even they were able to recognize that because Gross was given all the proper accommodations, she wasn’t any less able than most German citizens (USHMM “Sign Language”).

As Nazi goals were desperate and vague, they often relied on suspicions and hearsay to identify those who were seen as “unfit,” as shown by August Alzen’s experience. At age 24, Alzen was sent to be sterilized for being “feeble-minded.” The Nazis actively ignored Alzen’s co-worker’s praise in order to diagnose as feeble-minded (USHMM “Sterilization Order”). This drastic jump from hearsay to life-changing medical procedure is explained by the rationale of the Reich at the

time. Targets of eugenics had already been persecuted for years at this point, and it had become a part of the culture among the common people and in the medical field. “Undesirable” or “crazy” was no longer an unjust and inaccurate descriptor of disabled people, but an insult serving as an explicit threat to others to stop whatever it is they were doing before they too were targeted (USHMM “Nazi Euthanasia”). This instilled paranoia in the German population: Who was a threat? Who was going to get carted away to get killed next? August Alzen was unfortunately one of the many people injured in the hysteria.

Established by Dr. Pfannmuller, the Hungerhausers would take sickly children from hospitals and transfer them to institutions where they would be fed as little as possible to starve (Lifton 98). Doctors received orders from Nazi institutions to deal with their more “hindering” patients. If they spotted any sort of flaw, they would often take away newborns and bedridden patients and euthanize them, excusing it as unfortunate circumstances to the family (Jewish Virtual Library “Nazi Euthanasia”). This was most prevalent in the two Hungerhausers, institutions founded around 1943 after Aktion T4 – the name of the Nazi effort to kill targets of eugenics via the infamous gas chambers – was officially discontinued (Lifton 98). However, despite the shutting down of Aktion T4, eugenics-based killings still occurred legally until the mid 1940’s. Unlike the previous T4, which mainly focused on adults and elderly, this new mass-murder

was mainly aimed towards children in need of medical attention. They pivoted from gas to injections and starvation, leading to the formation of the Hungerhausers (Lifton 96).

This abuse of power and ever-changing reasoning for euthanasia was especially prevalent in the experience of Robert Wagemann, who from birth had to fight for his right to live with his family. During his mother's labor, complications came up, and as a result Wagemann's hip was destroyed during birth. At age five, Wagemann was called in by a university clinic to be examined, and the doctors discussed ways to euthanize Wagemann. His mother overheard and ran away with her son (USHMM "Oral History"). Robert Wagemann eventually ended up in an elementary school, but here his problems began again, as not only disabled, but a J's-witness. Those with "undesirable" traits also had to keep track of their other "strikes," their traits outside of the physical and mental that could also be punished. Robert Wagemann testifies that because his disability was not hereditary, the Nazi party had no real reason to kill him. But with the addition of him being a J-witness, the "second strike" comes into play, and so getting rid of him became much more "justified" (USHMM "Oral History"). The Nazis would look for any excuse to eliminate threats to their perfect community, and disabled people were well aware of that. As a J-Witness, Wagemann wouldn't participate in the Nazi salute. As Wagemann explained, "Oh, Wagemann there. What's going on with him and why

isn't he doing like the rest is doing? ...And uh, well, the next day, the priest in the party uniform came. So did the mayor and the policeman. ...And they wanted to pick me up" (USHMM "Oral History"). His oddities weren't simply features but crimes for which he had to be investigated and punished for. Eventually, Wagemann and his family hid in their barn until the war was over.

Once the war had ended, Wagemann and his family no longer felt safe in Germany, and they continued to face discrimination. People would often disavow the victims' experiences, as the "science" of eugenics was still widely regarded as factual. Ideas from the same Reich institution that tried to kill Wagemann at birth, known as Euthanasia Programme, were still seen as legitimate in the post-war world. The Germans refused to give compensation to the victims of sterilization and euthanasia or their families (USHMM "Oral History").

There was nothing wrong or dangerous about Wagemann's broken hip. But to the Nazi party, it didn't matter his hip injury was not hereditary or crippling. The letter from the chief of institution for feeble-minded in Stetten, Dr. Frank, from September 6, 1940, said, "Since then this practice has reached tremendous proportions... The basis for this practice seems to be that in an efficient nation there should be no room for weak and frail people" (Jewish Virtual Library "Nazi Euthanasia"). In the Nazi population, there was no room for people with "flaws" of

any kind. Their existence was regarded as a tumor on the German population and was worthy of persecuting the “flawed” one and their family.

In the modern world, where it’s easy to look back on old sciences as delusional, we have to consider how our own knowledge – true and false – paints our views of others. The Nazis let the flawed “science” of eugenics warp how they viewed their own citizens, not as people but as a list of negative and positive attributes. Although our biases may not be as extreme, they can be just as harmful. Viewing autistic people as inherently stupid or genius, or physically disabled people as inherently unable to care for themselves is a commonly perpetrated stereotype. While those stereotypes lead most modern-day people to feel pity and a want to help disabled people, you are also able to see how those same stereotypes initiated the Nazis’ response of wanting to eliminate them. In 2020, Lindon Cameron, an unarmed 13-year-old autistic boy was shot by a police officer while having a meltdown. The police had been called to help Cameron to a hospital and were warned ahead of time that law enforcement was a trigger for him. Still, one of the police officers viewed him as a threat during his meltdown and fired shots.

Throughout the research process of this essay, I’ve found I don’t tend to get large impacts from more factual sources, rather from more personal accounts. It’s easier to grasp what a person from a minority feels and needs when it comes from their own account, or accounts from loved ones. It gives you a view removed from

your own outside influences when they are able to explain not only what happened but why and how it affected them in a personal way. We are only able to deeply understand the horrors targets of eugenics were put under by hearing their stories, and likewise we need to listen to the stories of minorities both past and present to improve. While we can use scientific study of disabilities, intelligence, or other hereditary traits to help us explain why people might act or look a certain way, we shouldn't assign any moral values to it or use it as an explanation for every individual whom it might affect. I will continue to search for these first-person accounts, or for institutions run by minorities themselves, so I and others can do our part in listening to their stories and to what they need.

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