

## **Lest We Forget: Eradicating the 'Useless Eaters' in the Third Reich**

Richard Rieser

The Nazis murdered at least 240,000 disabled people, according to the Government of Germany, who in 2005 issued an apology to their relatives. How did doctors, nurses and others trained to save lives end up planning and killing thousands of disabled Germans?

Drawing on the development of a false science called 'Eugenics' developed in the UK and America, Hitler and the National Socialists instituted measures for compulsory sterilisation of men and women suffering from hereditary diseases in July 1933 soon after coming to power.

In ancient Greece, which was made up of city states they relied on warriors to maintain their power and empire. Physical or mental impairment was viewed as an unacceptable weakness. Aristotle and Plato taught that disabled babies should be killed. This was the start of eugenics.

Over 2000 years later, in the wake of Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection, his cousin Sir Francis Galton decided to apply the theories to human society. This entailed arguing that feeble minded and disabled traits should be should be got rid of from the gene pool through sterilisation.

These ideas soon became popular and in the USA led to laws on compulsory sterilisation of born deaf women and for those with an IQ below 70 in 33 states.

As migration to the USA shifted from Western Europe to Eastern and Southern Europe eugenicists campaigned for genetic monitoring of immigrants and Ellis Island was set up for this purpose with over 100,000 immigrants being sent back to Europe as medically or genetically unfit for American citizenship.

In the UK the Mental Deficiencies Act of 1913, argued for by Winston Churchill, was passed and led to the incarceration of up to half a million disabled people in single sex mental deficiency hospitals.

Hitler drew on these ideas and in 'Mein Kampf' (1923) argued for the killing of those suffering from incurable and painful diseases.

So on the first opportunity after coming to power Hitler introduced the sterilisation Law 1933( see Law for the Protection of Germany translated on this section of the website). "(1) Anyone suffering from a hereditary disease could be sterilised by means of a surgical operation if it could be expected with some certainty, according to the experiences of medical science, that his posterity would suffer from serious physical or mental hereditary disease.

(2) Persons would be considered as hereditarily diseased in the sense of this law if they suffered from any one of the following diseases:

is to be regarded as inheritably diseased within the meaning of this law:

1. congenital feeble-mindedness
  2. schizophrenia
  3. manic-depression
  4. congenital epilepsy
  5. inheritable St. Vitus dance (Huntington's Chorea)
  6. hereditary blindness
  7. hereditary deafness
  8. serious inheritable malformations
- (3.) In addition, anyone suffering from chronic alcoholism may also be sterilized.”

This was expanded in 1935 into a law "to safeguard the hereditary health of the German People". This introduced compulsory termination where either partner had hereditary impairments such as deafness.

However, Hitler was still far from the objective he had proposed in 1923. The next phase involved a propaganda campaign with a series of documentaries distorted through lighting and cutting to show 'the life unworthy of life' of many in institutions and the need to get rid of the 'burden on the German worker'-'the useless eaters'. These films were shown in all German Cinemas between 1936-1939. 'Ich Klage An', a full length drama was also made and screened on the need for mercy killing.

The propaganda began to work and families wrote to Hitler asking for help to kill their poor disabled relatives out of an act of mercy.



Hartheim Castle, a "euthanasia" killing centre where the physically and mentally disabled were killed by gassing and lethal injection. Hartheim, Austria ([USHMM Photo](#)).

Germany was still nominally a Christian country. An opinion was obtained from Professor Joseph Mayer - a well known Catholic Professor of Theology - which argued in Christian terms that 'Mercy Killing' could be accepted. The Pope's representative and leaders of the Protestant Church were also consulted on this opinion and although not happy did not make any objection in public. Hitler set up T4 which got its name from number 4 Tiergarten Strasser, Berlin where Reichsleiter Bouhler and a medical expert Dr Brandt were planning a programme of extermination of disabled people.

A number of propaganda films and advertisement posters were widely circulated by Joseph Goebbels, Propaganda Department to prepare the German Population for giving up their family members to put them out of their misery for 'mercy killing'.

Hitler was petitioned by some parents to kill their disabled children. The Knauer Child in 1937 became the first and the beginning of a much more sinister plan to be launched as war broke out. First clearing the hospitals of long term disabled inmates and then extending much wider.

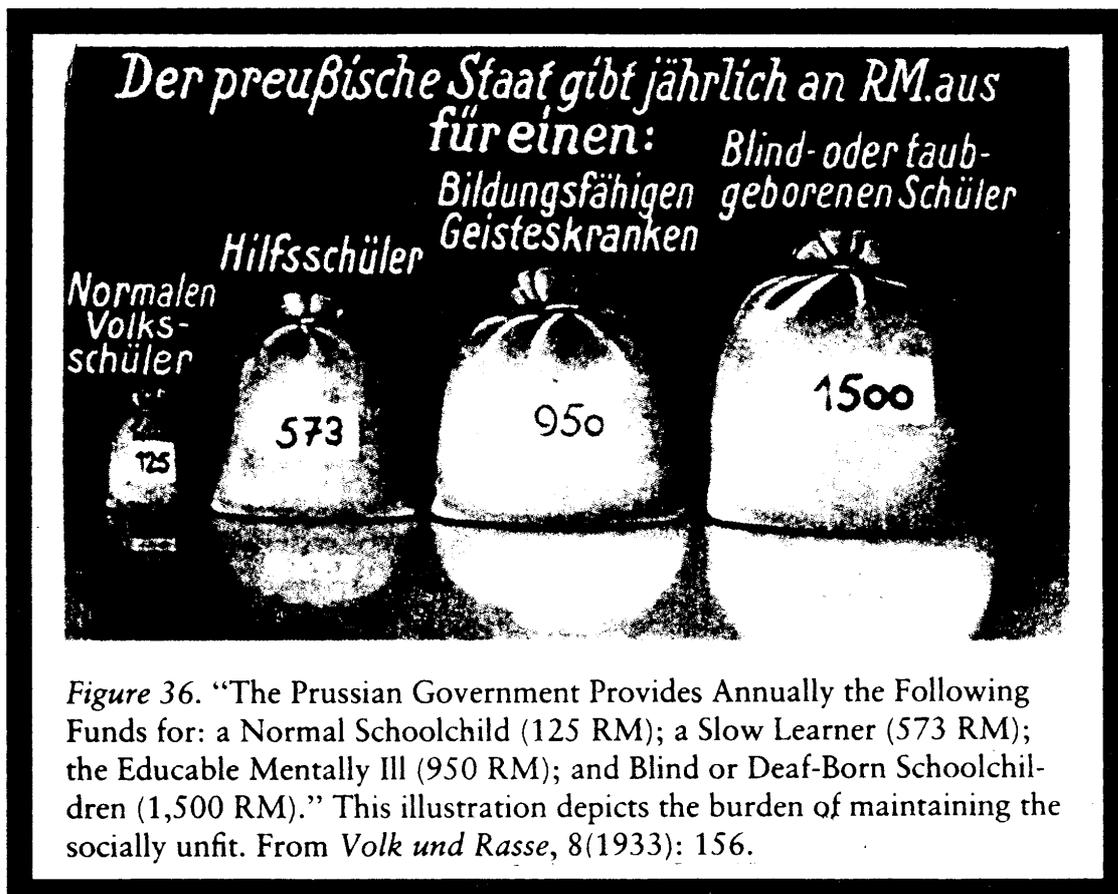


Figure 36. "The Prussian Government Provides Annually the Following Funds for: a Normal Schoolchild (125 RM); a Slow Learner (573 RM); the Educable Mentally Ill (950 RM); and Blind or Deaf-Born Schoolchildren (1,500 RM)." This illustration depicts the burden of maintaining the socially unfit. From *Volk und Rasse*, 8(1933): 156.

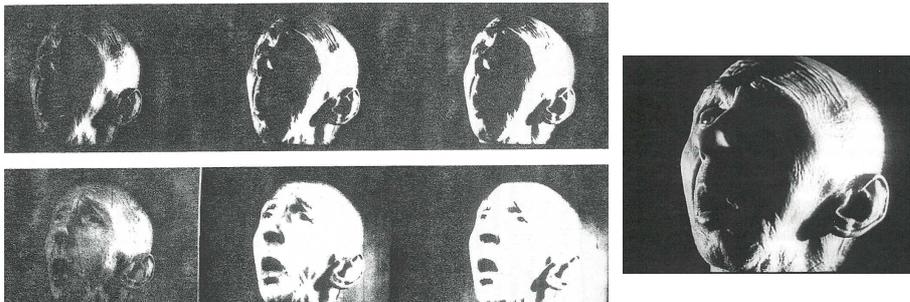
**Prussian Government 1937 Ad to show waste of money educating disabled children**

*'Euthanasia' and racial warfare*



"You are bearing this too," informing the 'German worker' that a hereditarily ill person costs 50,000 RMs to maintain until he or she has reached the age of 60. (from *Death and Deliverance - 'Euthanasia' in Germany 1900-1945* by Michael Burleigh)

## Nazi Propaganda Films



Sequence illustrating lighting techniques used in Nazi propaganda film *Erbkrank III*. 1936. The Nazis made 7 short films shown in cinemas to get the people to see why they should get rid of disabled people. Here different up lighting is being used to make the inmate of a mental hospital seem more frightening.



Dr Lang (Wiemann) consoling a distressed Hanna Heyt (Hatheyer) in a scene from ' I Accuse'. Hanna's vivid descriptions of the terrifying terminal condition she wishes to pre-empt through ' mercy killing' corresponded precisely with the sort of language used by the Nazis to denigrate the disabled and mentally ill.

### **Propaganda films in the Third Reich**

Hitler's Germany used film to great effect to reach the masses. As well as feature films, film was used as documentary propaganda. The Racial and Political Office made five films:

- Suden der Vater (Sins of the Fathers, 1935)
- Abseits von Wege (Off the Path, 1935)
- Alles Leben ist Kampf (All Life is a Struggle, 1937)
- Was du ererbt (What you have inherited)
- Erbkrank III (Heredity III, 1936).

This film, intended to criminalise, degrade and dehumanise the mentally and physically impaired was silent and shot in black and white. The victims were manipulated to make them appear horrific, with superimposed captions of the cost of keeping them alive. Using direct interviews with disabled people, cleverly lit and staged, filmed from below and cut to make them appear very different from ordinary workers, it made the audience sympathise with compulsory sterilisation and, later, mercy killing. By Hitler's order, it was shown in all German cinemas.

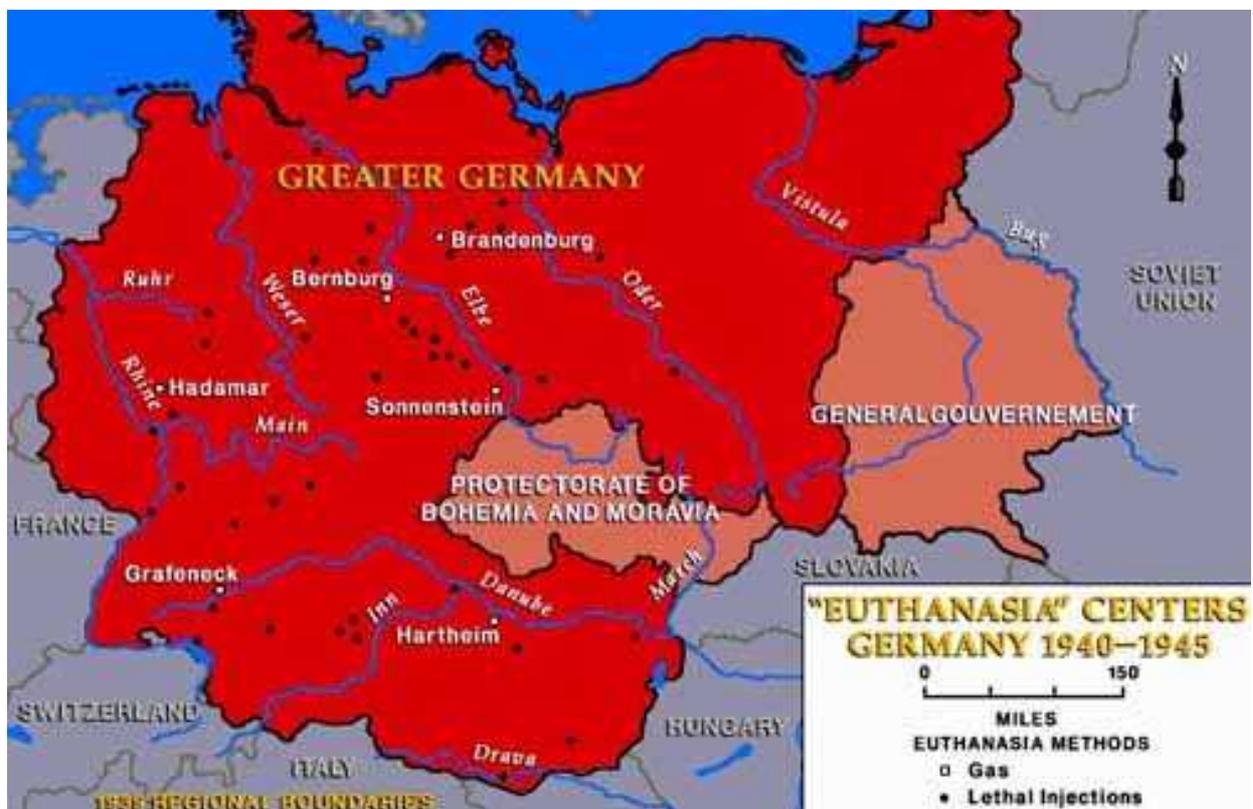
### **Let the killing begin**

In October 1939 after war had been declared Hitler issued a secret decree backdated to 1st September spuriously based on a letter from a parent. T4 developed a programme to expand the authority of physicians, who were designated

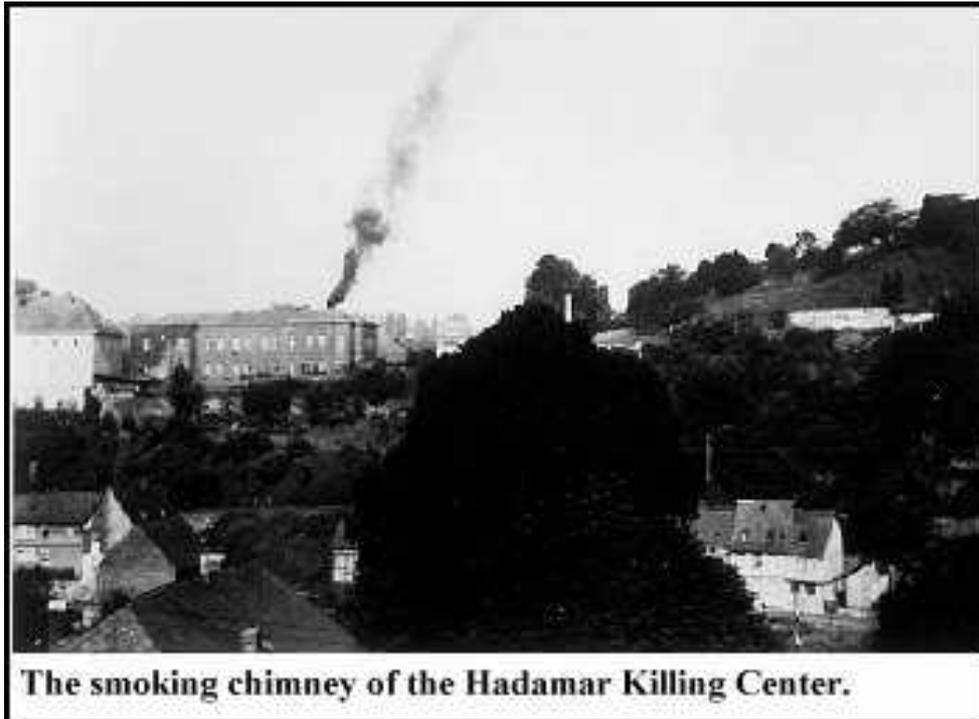
by name, to examine patients who were considered incurable in the best available judgement and after critical evaluation of their condition grant them mercy killing.

It was not 'mercy killing'. It was a programme of mass murder of mentally and physically impaired people. All hospitals were trawled to find the senile, those with learning difficulties and mental health issues, under care for more than 5 years, incapable of work or only capable of routine work. Forms were sent to T4 where they were marked Life or Death.

400 doctors, nurses and SS worked on the programme. After the war only a couple were brought to trial for this. Many went on to be respected Professors of Medicine around the world. At the Nuremberg Trials it was suggested 275,000 patients in hospitals had been killed. The German Government in 2004 apologised for 250,000. Edwin Black (War Against the Weak) has suggested that the figure is nearer 1 million disabled people if one takes account of all the children and disabled people not in institutions in Greater Germany and the Occupied Territories. It is estimate at least 1 third of deaf people were also murdered.



Killing Map of disabled people shows the 6 Hospitals Hadamar, Bernberg, Sonnestein, Hartheim, Bradenberg and Grafeneck- where killing by gas was developed and the many hospitals where lethal injections were administered right up until the end of the War 1945. Killing of disabled children at first this applied only the children up to the age of 3, but after 1941 this project included youths to the age of 16.



A red cross on the form was a death sentence and victims were taken in blacked out buses to 6 castles which served as killing centres. The mass killing methods of the concentration camps were perfected here- Cyclon B gas. Over 300 personnel who learned their lethal craft on disabled people went on to person the camps in Poland where the 'final solution' for the Jewish People took place. The dehumanising of the Guards and personnel on those 'not worthy of life' was good preparation for the mass killing of 'the final solution'. Particularly at Hadamar given the large numbers hardened up to their job of murder it is clear they were also being trained for the Holocaust.

The euthanasia program proved to be a valuable precursor to the atrocities which were to come in connection with the "Final Solution." SS Major Christian Wirth was transferred from his duties at a euthanasia center to take over the supervision of Chelmno, the first of six extermination camps in Poland to become operational. His expertise in mass extermination seems to have been a major consideration. Wirth later served at Belzec, Treblinka and Sobibor. In 1940, Franz Stangl was transferred from one of the euthanasia centers to Sobibor extermination camp where he served as camp commander. He performed so well there that he was transferred in the summer of 1942 to Treblinka [Many years later, in 1970, Stangl was extradited from Brazil to West Germany to stand trial. He was found guilty of joint responsibility for the murder of 900,000 Jews]

There was resistance from families, church leaders and eventually in August 1941 the programme of gassing and burning corpses in crematoria was halted.

**See Cardinal Clemens von Galen - August 3, 1941 speech on this web site.**

However, the killing continued using lethal injections or leaving disabled people to starve and instead of crematoria they used mass graves right up to 1945 in a large number of hospitals.

The 'Not Dead Yet' Campaign against Lord Joffy's Bill for 'mercy killing' and current moves for assisted suicide following the case of Diane Pretty court case

on this history of disabled people. There can be no place for such legalised killing in a society committed to human rights. We should say to the supporters of mercy killing such as Baroness Warnock that disabled people are fully human and no one has the right to kill us.



**Cemetery at Hadamar where victims of “euthanasia” at the Hadamar “euthanasia” killing center were buried. This photograph was taken toward the end of the war. Hadamar, April 1945 (NARA Photo).**

Watch Regent University audio visual website on Eseelesseaters to get more detail of the pseudo scientific background and the Nazi Programme. Dr Mark Mostert. The conclusion is inspired by Dr Mosert’s Christian values, but raises many important issues. 2004 is the date of the site

## **Activities**

**1. Watch the Audio visual web presentation of the useless eaters.**

**<http://www.regent.edu/acad/schedu/uselesseaters/>**

**Now have group discussion and make the arguments for and against what the Nazi’s did to disabled people.**

**2. Draw a time line of how the Nazi ideas developed . Show how they were rooted back in German society and were influenced by Eugenics thinking in the USA and UK.**

**3. Read Bishop von Gallen's sermon against the killing programme. Think you were going to make a short summary of his argument for a news broadcast to get the main points across.**

**4. What was the connection between the Eugenics programme in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust of Jews, Gypsies and Homosexuals by the Nazi's .**

**5. Look at the posters and the film still and suggest how the Nazi Propaganda was designed to effect people.**

**6. Read the 'Letter to a Teacher' on this website. This is from a Holocaust Survivor who went on to become a American High School Principal. Use his arguments to make a list of what the educated doctors and engineers did to disabled people in Nazi Germany.**

**7. Hold a debate in class on measures to bring in assisted suicide and then write letters to the Prime Minister giving your views.**

**8. If disabled people are treated without dignity, locked up in institutions, not given the support they need to take part in ordinary activities, be part of families and have a job then they can be seen as a burden. If on the other and they are first seen as human beings with human rights and dignity then disabled people can play a useful role in society and have a valued life. Today we have the (2006) United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and the Earlier (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights.**

See [http://www.worldofinclusion.com/res/UN/UN\\_Convention.ppt](http://www.worldofinclusion.com/res/UN/UN_Convention.ppt)

and young people and Children's Version

[http://www.worldofinclusion.com/res/UN/lts\\_about\\_ability.pdf](http://www.worldofinclusion.com/res/UN/lts_about_ability.pdf)

**These Human Rights Conventions were adopted by the world in the wake of the terrible human rights abuses committed by the Nazi's. They were not the last abusers. Human Rights abuse is still continuing.**

**Make a list of the key human rights and then suggest how these rights could have been met for someone with mental health issues locked in an institution or a deaf person living in Germany . What type of society would be needed and why could Germany in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich not be able to deliver human rights?**