

## Deadly excuses

Kristie Macrakis

**Death and Deliverance: Euthanasia in Germany, 1900–1945.** By Michael Burleigh. Cambridge University Press: 1994. Pp. 400. £35, \$59.95 (hbk); £14.95, \$18.95 (pbk).

In addition to some 6 million Jews, 200,000 mentally ill or handicapped people were murdered by the Nazi regime. This year has marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Allied victory over this evil. Anniversaries often stimulate an introspective national examination of the past or at least call the attention of a wider audience to it. *Death and Deliverance* has come out at the end of a burst of literature on the general subject, a deluge which began on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1933 Nazi seizure of power.

At first glance, the volume appears to be yet another book on race hygiene, racial theory and Nazi doctors. But Michael Burleigh, a reader in international history at the London School of Economics and author of *Germany Turns Eastward* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), has instead added another brick to the edifice of knowledge about eugenics, medical science and the holocaust by focusing more exclusively on the euthanasia programme. Although this topic has been written about extensively in German, this is the first comprehensive study in English.

Euthanasia, or mercy killing (from the Greek *eu-thanatos* — easy death), usually means putting people to death, or withholding medical treatment from them, because of a painful or incurable disease. Voluntary euthanasia gives the patient a right to assisted death. In Nazi Germany this definition still held true, but added to the pool were many more cases of mentally ill or physically disabled people who were killed involuntarily.

During the 1920s the idea had already emerged in Germany of placing differing values on life: this notion was spread through Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche's influential book *Permission for the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life*, first published in 1920. 'Lives unworthy of life' were found in psychiatric hospitals and were called "ballast lives" or "empty human husks".

Burleigh sees economic hardship and notions of racial fitness as the initial motives for German euthanasia in asylums during the 1920s and 1930s. This earlier programme escalated into a large-scale covert operation for mass murder during the Second World War. With diminishing economic resources and the necessities of war, the feeding of "useless

eat-ers" could not be justified. After a brief interpretative introduction, Burleigh for the most part lets the voices speak for themselves through extensive quotations of victims and perpetrators.

The Nazi euthanasia programme can be traced back to the fall of 1938 when a father named Knauer wrote to Adolf Hitler asking that his child, who was born blind, retarded and missing a leg and an arm, be allowed a "mercy death". His wish was granted. By May 1939 the child-murder operation had begun when Hitler asked Karl Brandt, his personal physician, to bring together an advisory committee to organize and prepare for the killing of retarded and deformed children. The programme was carried out in strict secrecy.

The state and the medical profession betrayed the trust of parents who decided to place their children in an asylum. The doctors had a standard list of concocted causes of sudden death such as brain oedema, appendicitis and pneumonia, explanations of which were then sent to the parents on institutional stationery. These were often unbelievable, especially, for example, when the child had had an appendix removed months before.

Early in the book we encounter Hermann Pfannmüller, the director of the Egfling-Haar asylum, who murdered children by slow starvation, through reducing their rations of food. Other methods such as lethal injection or poisoning might have attracted too much foreign hate propaganda.

The child euthanasia programme was the first major step leading to T-4, the massive covert adult euthanasia project to exterminate all German mental patients. The code name came from the administrative head office at Tiergartenstrasse 4 in Berlin. As elsewhere in the book, Burleigh provides us with detailed character and biographical sketches of the murderers. Although this is the book's strength it sometimes makes the reader lose track of the analytical framework and historical progression of the murderous project.

The final capstone in this rapid escalation of mass murder was the merging of the destruction of mental patients with the genocide of Jews at concentration camps in an operation with the code name 14f13. Burleigh points out that most of the doctors did not make a distinction between killing for racial, political or medical reasons.

Loathsome figures emerge from this narrative, and Burleigh unreservedly expresses his moral and personal repugnance for some of these doctors. He particularly dislikes Dr Friedrich Mennecke who was responsible for thousands of euthanasia killings and was one of the

T-4 doctors involved in 14f13. Much is known about the 14f13 operation and about Mennecke because he corresponded with his wife every day when they were separated (over the years he wrote some 2,000 letters). Burleigh quotes from one letter only: "this man was so thoroughly appalling — bullying, garrulosity and gluttony being the lesser vices that come to mind." The letters consist of "cloying infantilisms" ("Mein liebste Puttli-Mittlein..."), and Mennecke even describes his bowel movements: "Bim-bim-bim: 7 O'clock. Got up! A right good morning to you, mummikins! Kissy-wissies! You're dozing still, am I right? Now I'm off — to shave! Ahoy! 7:30 a.m. Ready, I've had a shit too...". These are rare glimpses into the mind of a psychopath (who was also a lieutenant SS colonel, which Burleigh does not mention).

With this example, Burleigh rejects the notion of Robert Jay Lifton (author of *The Nazi Doctors*) that the camp doctors lived double lives — killers at work and nice family men at home; rather, he argues that the doctors brought their families into the workplace. The notorious Professor Werner Heyde, for example, brought his wife and daughter to see selections at Dachau.

The 'selling' of murder was done through elaborate propaganda films, and here Burleigh's analysis is effective and graphic in its retelling of many of the infamous stories. The idea that death would lead to deliverance is a common theme in these films. Films about the mercy killing of terminally ill patients with diseases such as multiple sclerosis were used to persuade the audience of the worthiness of euthanasia while conflating it with the killing of mental patients.

The final chapter on the fate of the perpetrators after the war has almost become a standard element in books on the Nazi period. Here, as elsewhere, we witness how most of the worst murderers got off with light sentences and apologetically justified their work as "humane" with little remorse. Some even changed their names and found plum jobs in psychiatric hospitals.

Although the book is a detailed study of the extermination of the mentally ill, it makes little attempt to link this dress rehearsal to the murder of the Jews in concentration camps. Gas chambers equipped with showers were first used on the mentally ill. The technical apparatus for destroying other 'lives unworthy of living' was already there, as was the mind-set about certain categories of life. □

*Kristie Macrakis is in the Department of History, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1036, USA.*