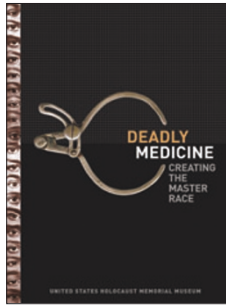


The unwanted

**Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race**

Edited by Dieter Kuntz

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Reviewed by Elof Axel Carlson

Reading *Deadly Medicine* is like reading an autopsy report on a person you know. It is painful and disturbing, yet forces you to examine some of your most terrifying fears. The book accompanies an exhibit at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. It is a big book—better suited to a coffee table than a bookcase. The seven invited authors who wrote the background for each segment of the escalating horror did a good job. They recognize the complexity of how scientists get sucked into support of the state even when the ideology of the state goes against their original training and beliefs. It is particularly unsettling that the science that contributed most to what the book's subtitle calls 'creating the master race' is genetics. If physicists feel guilt for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, so, as this book brings out, do geneticists for 'deadly medicine', which originated in part from the eugenics movement not just in Germany, but in almost every industrial nation of the first half of the twentieth century.

The book begins with an introduction by Susan Bachrach, the exhibit's Project Director, which provides an overview of the seven commissioned essays, each written by a respected scholar. They include "German Eugenics 1890–1933" by Sheila Faith Weiss, "International Eugenics" by Daniel J. Kevles, "Nazi Sterilization and Reproductive Policies" by Gisela Bock, "The Science of Race" by Benoit Massin, "Nazi Euthanasia Programs" by Michael Burleigh, "From Euthanasia to the Final Solution" by Henry Friedlander and "Reflections of a German Scientist" by Benno Müller-Hill. All of the essays are abundantly illustrated with primary source photographs and documents, most of which had not been published before and were pulled from archives throughout Europe and North America. You see the propaganda posters. You see details of the inmates in asylums in Weimar, Germany and on their way to being gassed a few years later as 'unwanted' Germans (only a small number were Jewish). The term 'unwanted' is qualified by the authors of these articles; these Germans were wanted by their families, who were terrified when they disappeared in large numbers in 1939 and massive numbers of them were suddenly announced as dead. In the haste to rid the asylums of

the psychotic, the retarded and the malformed, families were sometimes sent two urns of ashes instead of one. Artifacts belonging to unknown people were sometimes packed into the urns by those transferring the ashes from a common pile.

The path to the Holocaust described in these essays is more truncated than it could have been. By 1890 there had been almost 200 years of degeneracy theory, in England and France especially, that identified unfit people in much the same way that it was used in the late nineteenth century. Long before eugenics was given its name by Francis Galton in 1883, the same view of protecting the public from the spread of degenerates was argued in coffee houses by the middle class who resented the tax drain of social failures on their income. Notably absent are discussions of the French physicians Benedict Morel and Max Nordau, whose books on degeneracy inspired several generations of physicians in interpreting social failure as a mental deficiency. Nordau, who earned his medical degree in Budapest, became a journalist in Vienna and finally settled in Paris as a social critic, upped the ante by including Dickens, Zola, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rodin and other writers and artists as moral degenerates. His classification of these people as pathological had a strong influence a generation later on Germany's perception of 'degenerate art' and on the perception of essentially normal people as morally degenerate.

This is a minor omission in a comprehensive book that presents a balanced assessment of how things spiraled out of control. The authors recognize that eugenics was popular among social reformers, scientists and politicians whom we still revere. It appealed to socialists, communists and fascists in the 1920s. What made it appealing, several of the authors remind us, was the view, accepted almost universally, that the individual's duty is to the state and not to self interest. Scientists will squirm as they read about the careers of the architects of Nazi race hygiene. They started out as respected physicians and scholars in psychiatry, anthropology, anatomy and genetics, especially Fischer, Lenz, Rüdin, von Verschuer and Baur. They shared a common value that corrupted their science. They were all patriots to their country. Some were ambitious and embraced the Nazi Party because it gave them a feeling of aiding the state while advancing their science. Müller-Hill particularly wrestles with this issue of whether we can classify these contributors to 'deadly medicine' as practicing pseudoscience instead of legitimate science. He properly points out that this is not as easy as we wish it to be. Some sold out for money and promotions and thus bring to mind Hannah Arendt's phrase "the banality of evil." But many were better described by Müller-Hill as being caught up in "this contagious mixture of science and ideology that was so very destructive."

What pulls the reader into this book is not the essays themselves, informative as they are, but the accompanying reproductions. The curators and editors (more than 50 are listed) did a superb job of bringing to life the institutions, asylums, university laboratories, propaganda exhibits, internal expositions and artifacts for examining, measuring, probing, classifying and killing those whose lives were deemed worthless or a threat to the genetic health of a people. It is a painful experience to read this book, but like bitter medicine, it restores our sense of what it means to be human. ■

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