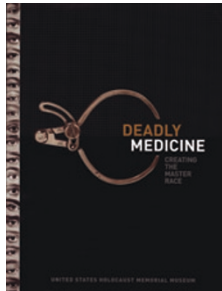


Holocaust science



Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race

Dieter Kuntz & Susan Bachrach, eds.

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Reviewed by Robert N Proctor

I was a graduate student in Berlin in 1980, and to spice up some of the more boring conversations we all find ourselves trapped in, I would sometimes ask my companions: “Why did Hitler kill the Jews?” I got many curious (and some nettled) answers, but one I will never forget was from my aged landlady who, rather defensively, returned: “I am not an anthropologist.”

Anthropologists and human geneticists were important in both planning and executing the crimes of the Nazis—by which I don’t mean just the notorious human experiments (which resulted in the deaths of about 2,000 people). Psychiatric geneticists planned the killing of 200,000 mentally ill and physically handicapped people; anthropologists trained in genetics (such as J. Mengele) selected Jews for killing on the ramps at Auschwitz. Geneticists also helped fashion the laws that barred marriage and, indeed, all sexual traffic between Jews and ‘healthy’ Germans, often pointing to the fact that the US already had similar laws barring miscegenation between blacks and whites. Germans didn’t want the Americans to become the ‘world’s racial leaders.’ And of course many Americans cheered on the Nazi laws.

The volume here under review is the companion text to the exhibit titled *Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race* now running (until October 16, 2005) at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. The museum is famous for its powerful, instructive and chilling exhibits documenting the murder of 6,000,000 European Jews, many thousands of “Gypsies,” and others deemed racially and/or politically or morally suspect. Since first opening in 1993, the museum has attracted more than 20,000,000 visitors, making it the second-most popular tourist destination in the nation’s capitol, after the Air and Space Museum.

The exhibit itself begins with a life-size “glass man” from the German Hygiene Museum displaying the human interior anatomy; this was a popular traveling exhibit in the Nazi era, and here it is used (I think) as a symbol of the intrusive surveillance, exfoliation and manipulation of bodies during the Third Reich. There is a gynecologic chair used for experiments in Auschwitz, and a collection of personal items excavated from the grounds adjacent to Hartheim Castle, one of the six T-4 killing centers, where 18,269 disabled persons were gassed from January 1940 through December 1941. A series of haunting paintings by psychiatric patients are presented, apparently as a commentary on the terrors surrounding them, though the viewer

is not force-fed a particular interpretation. The artists were all gassed as part of the euthanasia campaign in 1940.

The essays in the companion text reviewed here treat the contributions of biomedical scholars to the rise of German eugenics (Sheila Weiss), international eugenics (Daniel Kevles), Nazi sterilization policies (Gisela Bock), the “science of race” (Benoit Massin), the euthanasia operation (Michael Burleigh) and the transition to the Final Solution (Henry Friedlander). Bachrach provides a well-crafted introduction, and Benno Müller-Hill concludes with some “Reflections of a German Scientist.” There is little here that has not been previously published, either by one of the authors or myself in my *Racial Hygiene*, but the essays are excellent and succinct summaries of the events in question. Müller-Hill rightly points out in his contribution that if science is “what the majority of scientists working in the field call science at the time it is being done,” then the crimes here chronicled cannot be dismissed as ‘pseudo-science’ as we are so often led to believe.

But there are some notable omissions: there is little on how the medical profession became so entranced with Nazism—why more than half of all doctors joined the party, for example, and a frightfully large number of these joined the SS. There isn’t much on why geneticists were so attracted to the movement, and how the science of the time was transformed by political currents. We often hear, including in this volume, that Nazi-era genetics was ‘typological,’ for example, when a great deal of the racialist thinking was actually ‘populational’ (which still allowed one to be racist, of course); genetics in Nazi Germany was frightfully modern.

Some of our confusion in this realm could be cleared up if we had a better understanding of the history of the Nazi version of the so-called ‘New Synthesis’ (of evolution and genetics). Another omission: Rudolf Hess’s famous slogan that Nazism was just “applied biology” is cited at several points in the volume, but the fact that Hess was just echoing the geneticist Fritz Lenz (who coined this expression in his 1931 textbook) is never mentioned. More might also have been said about resistant movements within the sciences (and medicine): not everyone fell in step with the Nazis, and the critiques are instructive. Nazi race theories were savaged by socialists, communists and clerics in a number of different countries, from a number of different points of view, and these too must not be forgotten.

Nevertheless, this is a handsome volume, and certainly the most artfully illustrated book on racial hygiene ever produced, thanks to the diligent work of museum curator Susan Bachrach and her many colleagues involved in preparing the exhibit and volume. Many rarely before seen images of racial theory and practice are reproduced here, mostly from Weimar- and Nazi-era posters, films and medical texts, along with anatomic models, equipment and charts from both inside and outside the Reich. Images range from the famous ‘all-seeing eye’ of Dresden’s International Hygiene Exposition of 1911 to photographs from German psychiatric hospitals before and after 1933 to pictures of Eugen Fischer, Fritz Lenz and other leading human geneticists who supported the regime. Many of these images are in vibrant colors, reminding us of the technical prowess of Nazi-era racialism. These are not the events of a remote antiquity.

Further information on the exhibit, including many of the displays and an interpretive commentary by Bachrach, can be found online at: <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/deadlymedicine/narrative/index.php?content=biological>.

The author is a Professor of the History of Science at Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305, USA.
e-mail: rproctor@stanford.edu