

'It's all over now.' The dentist Helmut Kunz and the killing of Reich Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels' children at the end of the Third Reich

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Key points

The article examines the life of the dentist Helmut Kunz, his function in the Third Reich, and his role in the murder of the Goebbels' children.

It provides some information about the role of German dentists during the time of National Socialism (1933-1945) and the post-war era.

Finally, it discusses the way in which Germany dealt with its Nazi-past immediately following the war, which was dominated by concealment.

Abstract

Joseph Goebbels, Reich Propaganda Minister of National Socialist Germany and one of the most powerful Nazi politicians, committed suicide at the end of the Second World War together with his wife, Magda, thus escaping his political responsibilities. Prior to committing suicide, the Goebbels' conspired to murder their six children, and to this end, enlisted the help of the dentist Helmut Kunz. Not until 1959, however, did Kunz stand trial on six counts of aiding and abetting in a homicide. Using extensive court records, this article examines the life of the dentist Helmut Kunz, his function in the Third Reich, and his role in the murder of the Goebbels children.

Introduction

Just a few hours before the Red Army captured the *Führerbunker* under the New Reich Chancellery in Berlin on May 1, 1945, Reich Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels committed suicide together with his wife Magda. Their children had already been murdered, in order to avoid capture by the approaching Soviets. The question of who was responsible for killing the Goebbels children is still, to this day, hotly debated.

One prime suspect is the dentist Dr med. dent. Helmut Kunz, an *SS-Sturmbannführer* (major in the SS) who was transferred to the bunker hospital in April 1945. In 1957 the public prosecutor's office in Münster (Westphalia) launched investigations against Kunz, and in 1959 he was charged on six counts of aiding and abetting in a homicide.¹

Who was Helmut Kunz? According to witnesses who were in the *Führerbunker* at

the time, the dentist played a key role in the killings. However, information regarding Kunz is limited to brief comments on his presumed involvement in the murder of the Goebbels children;^{2,3,4} a complete biographical investigation has yet to be conducted. Ernst Günther Schenck,⁵ for example, who worked as a doctor in the bunker hospital, mentions Kunz only in passing.^{6,7} This paper attempts to comprehensively examine Helmut Kunz's biography as well as his involvement in the Goebbels case.

Material and methods

Research for this paper drew on archival sources in the State Archives of NRW (six-volume trial file),⁸ Kunz's SS file,⁹ and additional primary sources in selected university archives.

Results

Helmut Friedrich Kunz was born on 26 September 1910 in Ettlingen, Baden, Germany not far from Karlsruhe. Kunz's father Gustav was an accountant, merchant, and factory owner; both his father and his mother, Clara, were Protestant.¹⁰ Kunz came of age during the First World War and belonged to the generation known as the *Kriegsjugendgeneration*^{11,12} (war

youth generation), but did not fight at the front – whether, and to what extent, this missed opportunity to prove himself¹³ had any effect on him remains unknown. Kunz passed his final school exams in Offenburg in 1928,¹⁰ and began studying law at the university in Heidelberg, but switched to dentistry after three semesters. Kunz moved to Jena, and later to Leipzig, where he graduated in 1933 after passing the state dental examination.^{14,15}

SS and NSDAP membership

After receiving his license to practise dentistry in Jena, Kunz found employment as an assistant dentist, working for two months in Strasbourg in the Alsace region, and then in Blankenhain and Buttstädt. After returning from Strasbourg in February 1934, Kunz joined the SS on 30 April 1934.¹⁶ The question of why Kunz joined the SS – was it for reasons of social pressure, opportunism, or ideological conviction – cannot be answered. There can be, however, no question regarding Kunz's essential willingness to join the SS, as membership in this organisation was voluntary until the early 1940s.¹⁷ What is striking is how soon Kunz joined the SS after returning from the Alsace. It should, however, be noted that Kunz joined the SS later than many other dentists: According to a

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study, 128 out of a total of 219 SS dentists had joined the organisation by the end of 1933, and the majority (102) of these 128 joined in 1933 alone.¹⁸ Although he had joined the SS in 1934, Kunz only became a member of the NSDAP on 1 May 1937.¹⁶

In March 1936, Kunz established a dental practice in Lucka (in the Altenburg district of Thuringia). All signs indicate that he worked there until the beginning of the war.¹⁰ In July 1937, Kunz married Ursula, with whom he had three children.¹⁶

On 9 June 1939, Kunz received his doctorate in dentistry from the university in Leipzig with a thesis entitled *Investigations into dental caries in schoolchildren, taking into account how long they were breastfed*.¹⁹ The NSDAP's Public Health Office, which aimed to document the level of health of the general population for use in racial programmes, provided assistance in composing the questionnaire upon which Kunz's thesis was based.

At the front with the *Waffen-SS*

On 17 June 1939, only a few days after receiving his doctorate, Kunz was drafted into military service. According to his own later statement, Kunz began active duty as a medical officer on 18 January 1940¹⁰ and joined the *Waffen-SS* in August 1940.¹⁶ As an *Untersturmführer* (Second Lieutenant in the SS; the lowest SS officer rank), Kunz was assigned to the inaugural battalion of the *SS-Totenkopf-Division* (Death's Head Division), a battalion which was established at the end of 1939 and made up of SS camp guards at the Dachau concentration camp.²⁰ On 27 September 1941, Kunz was seriously wounded on the Eastern Front by shrapnel in his lung.^{16,21,22} No longer in any condition for service at the front, Kunz was then detached to a replacement battalion in December 1941.¹⁶ In February 1942, after his recovery, Kunz was initially transferred to the SS medical office, but was transferred several times after that, eventually landing in the office of *Reichsarzt-SS* Ernst Robert Grawitz in October 1943. Here, Kunz worked for Hugo Blaschke,²³ the supreme dentist of the SS, the head of dentistry for the *Waffen-SS*, and Hitler's personal dentist. Kunz later reported that he also occasionally worked in Blaschke's private clinic in Berlin.²¹

During the final year of World War II, Kunz had to deal with several personal blows. In April 1944, one of his three children fell seriously ill. In January 1945, Kunz's daughters Maren (1) and Maike (4) were killed in an Allied air raid.^{16,22,24}

In the Reich Chancellery

On April 23, 1945, Kunz was officially transferred to the bunker under the Reich Chancellery as head dentist. Around this time, Blaschke left Berlin on Hitler's orders.^{21,23,25} One of Kunz's first patients at the bunker was Magda Goebbels, who had moved into the bunker in late April, together with her husband, Joseph Goebbels, and their six children. Kunz treated a pus-filled abscess under a bridge in Magda Goebbels' lower jaw, which healed without complications.^{21,26,27,28} As an acknowledgement of the successful treatment, Goebbels arranged for Kunz to take his meals in the so-called *Führerbunker*, which was otherwise reserved for Hitler's closest confidants.^{4,21,26}

By this time, Magda Goebbels was already mulling over her options regarding both her own suicide and the killing of her children. According to other bunker residents, both she and Joseph Goebbels rejected all offers to evacuate the children.^{29,30,31}

Later, during Kunz's trial, an SS-NCO reported that Magda Goebbels categorically rejected any kind of life in a post-National Socialist world: *'Mrs Goebbels was out of her mind; for herself and for the children there was only one Germany; that was National Socialist, and she did not want to live in another one'*.³² Hitler's personal pilot, Hans Baur, made a similar statement. Magda Goebbels emphasised that she had not given birth to her children *'so that they might later be paraded around in the Soviet Union or in the US as the children of the propagandist Goebbels'*.³¹ Regarding her own life, Goebbels considered a life without her husband, who intended to fall together with Berlin, as senseless.^{26,27}

Kunz outlined his version of the series of events as follows:

A few days after her successful dental treatment, Magda Goebbels called Kunz and requested his assistance in the killing of her children. Kunz vehemently refused, explaining that he had recently lost two of his own children. Goebbels then confided that Hitler had, in actuality, already assigned the task of killing the children to Ludwig Stumpfegger,³³ his personal physician, but Goebbels was fearful that Stumpfegger would not be able to carry out the orders if events moved more quickly than anticipated. When Kunz once again refused to participate in the killing of the children, Goebbels made clear that this was not to be understood as a request, but as a direct order from Hitler himself.

In an attempt to escape the order, Kunz left the bunker and sought refuge in the field

hospital installed in the Hotel Adlon, but shortly after his arrival, he was summoned back to the Reich Chancellery by a telephone call.

On the morning of 1 May 1945, shortly after Hitler's suicide, Magda Goebbels told Kunz that there was no way out, and he should be prepared. Kunz, however, claimed that he had been able to reach a compromise: Since he had repeatedly refused to kill the children, he was only to inject them with a dose of morphine, and Magda Goebbels would then administer the lethal dose of poison herself. On the evening of May 1, Kunz injected the children with morphine, but shortly afterwards Magda Goebbels turned to him in tears, as she found herself unable to kill her children. Once again, Kunz rejected her request, and was thereupon asked to fetch Stumpfegger. At first, Stumpfegger also refused because he *'was not there to kill other people's children'*.²¹ Only when Kunz threatened to inform Joseph Goebbels did Stumpfegger acquiesce, and subsequently entered the children's room with Magda Goebbels. Upon exiting the children's room, the visibly broken Magda Goebbels told Kunz that it was all over. Shortly thereafter, Magda and Joseph Goebbels committed suicide.²¹

It was at this time that several of the bunker residents attempted to break through Soviet lines and leave Berlin. During this attempt, Stumpfegger committed suicide.^{31,33} Kunz, however, remained at the bunker with the remaining residents, and was captured by the Red Army on May 2.¹⁰

The Soviet occupying forces investigated the deaths of the Goebbels children and questioned several witnesses, including Kunz.³⁴ During his interrogation on 7 May 1945, Kunz testified that Magda Goebbels had poisoned the children herself, and he had been there to witness the act. Kunz described the course of events in great detail. However, on 19 May 1945, Kunz corrected his statement and charged Stumpfegger with assisting in the killing of the children. Stumpfegger, who had committed suicide while attempting to escape Berlin, could no longer be questioned in this matter.

Kunz repeated this version of the events at his later trial in the Federal Republic of Germany,^{35,36} and did not deny that he had drugged the children with morphine. A Soviet investigation report stated that the children had not died from a morphine overdose, but of hydrogen cyanide poisoning.^{1,37} Kunz was aware of this report.

Kunz spent more than ten years as a prisoner of war (POW) in the Soviet Union; almost seven were spent in detention awaiting trial. On 13 February 1952, Kunz was sentenced to 25 years in a prison camp by the Moscow Military court.³⁸ According to Kunz, one of the reasons for his conviction was his involvement in the killing of the Goebbels children.³⁹ On 20 October 1955, Kunz was granted early release from the Soviet captivity after Konrad Adenauer, the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, negotiated the repatriation of the last German prisoners of war back to Germany. Kunz was one of the last POWs to return home from the Soviet Union. By this time, he already was in poor health; he suffered from liver and stomach problems due to protein deficiency, and these were compounded by his lung injury from the war.⁴⁰

Upon his return to Germany, Kunz claimed that he had been convicted by the court in Moscow because he had been an NSDAP member and had provided medical care to high-ranking members of the Nazi regime. Kunz remained silent regarding his involvement in the killing of the Goebbels children,³⁸ presumably to avoid attracting attention and having new charges brought against him. He returned to his family in Karlsruhe. In February 1956, Kunz accepted an unpaid position as a guest student at the University Dental Clinic in Münster (Westphalia) in order to re-qualify as a specialist in dentistry.^{41,42} After attaining his new qualifications, Kunz worked in several dental practices, and was also employed as a consulting physician by the newly-funded German Armed Forces.^{1,43}

In February 1957, Kunz settled in Freudenstadt in the Black Forest and opened his own practice there.^{44,45,46} Only one month later, he and his wife divorced, and Kunz received custody of their 15-year-old son, Michael, the only one of their children to survive the war.⁴² In 1958, Kunz remarried; his second wife, Annemarie, moved to Freudenstadt from the Ruhr area and worked in Kunz's practice.³⁹ Kunz maintained this practice until his death.

Very soon after settling in Freudenstadt, however, Kunz was targeted by the public prosecutor's office in Münster (Westphalia) in the newly-established state of North Rhine-Westphalia. During the process of documenting Hitler's death, an investigation which was conducted by the court in Berchtesgaden (Bavaria), Kunz was accused by the former SS-NCO Harri Mengershausen of killing the Goebbels' children.^{47,48} On 6 February 1957, the

public prosecutor's office submitted a request for the opening of a preliminary investigation against Kunz.⁴⁹

According to Mengershausen, on the evening of 1 May 1945, Kunz reported to a group of bunker residents that 'on the orders of Dr Goebbels (...) he was to kill the Goebbels children by injection'.⁵⁰ Kunz repeated this statement at a later time in a conversation with Mengershausen: 'Dr. Kunz explained on this occasion once again that it had been extremely difficult for him to carry out the killings. Again, he emphasised that he was forced to carry out Dr Goebbels' order'.⁵⁰ Mengershausen's statement, however, is questionable, as both witnesses named by Mengershausen denied ever having had a conversation with Kunz. One of the two witnesses even threw doubt on Mengershausen's claim that he had been there at the time of the killings, as this witness stated that Mengershausen had by that time already left the bunker.^{51,52} One character evaluation outlined Mengershausen's 'tendencies towards dishonesty and egocentrism'^{25,53} and in fact, Mengershausen, when confronted by Kunz, recanted large parts of his statement: 'I do not want to claim that Dr Kunz said he had to kill the Goebbels' children with a syringe. (...) It may be that only syringes were mentioned, and that I drew the conclusion that they were lethal injections'.⁵⁴

Kunz, in turn, incriminated Stumpfegger and Magda Goebbels, both deceased, without specifying who had actually carried out the killing.⁵⁵ Werner Naumann, former State Secretary in the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda and long-time friend of the Goebbels family, claimed that Magda Goebbels alone was responsible for the death of her children – and that he himself had led her to the children's room: 'So I led Frau Goebbels to her children's bedroom in accordance with her request and opened the door of the room. I saw no one in the room except the Goebbels children (...). After Frau Goebbels went in the room, no one else entered'.⁵⁶ According to Naumann, Magda Goebbels informed Joseph Goebbels that the children were dead, 'with words that left no doubt that she herself was responsible for the death of the children'.⁵⁶

Professor Werner Haase, a surgeon in the military hospital under the Reich Chancellery at the end of the war, told a completely different story during the Soviet interrogations of 1945: Kunz had visited him on the evening of 1 May and reported, visibly depressed, that the Goebbels family was dead. When asked

whether he had acted alone, Kunz replied that Stumpfegger had helped him.⁵⁷ By the time the proceedings against Kunz opened in 1957, however, Haase was also dead (He died as a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union) and was thus unable to present his version of the events.⁵⁸

Since the suspicions against Kunz could not be substantiated, the public prosecutor's office significantly reduced the charges during the course of the investigations: In January 1959, Kunz was charged on six counts of aiding and abetting in a homicide, and not murder, since the killings were not carried out maliciously, but in the belief that 'it was in the best interest of the children'.^{1,59,60} Only three weeks after the opening of the main trial, however, the proceedings were stayed by the Regional Court of Münster, a decision that was later confirmed by the Higher Regional Court of Hamm (Westphalia).^{61,62}

As justification for this surprising turn of events, Paragraph 6 of the Impunity Act of 1954 was cited. This granted impunity 'for offenses committed under the influence of the extraordinary circumstances of collapse in the period between 1 October 1944 and 31 July 1945 in the assumption of an official, service or legal duty, in particular on the basis of an order [...] unless the offender could reasonably be expected to refrain from committing the offense on the basis of his position or ability to comprehend it, if no more severe punishment than a term of imprisonment of up to three years could be expected'.⁶¹

The specific reasons given for the stay of the proceedings were the extreme conditions in the bunker, Kunz's claim that he was acting on an official order, and, last but not least, the fact that he had already been punished as a long-time prisoner of war in the Soviet Union.⁶¹

In May, the higher court in Hamm dismissed an immediate appeal made by the public prosecutor's office against the stay. Up until the final stay, the public prosecutor's office had insisted that Kunz should have refused to administer the morphine and should not have called in Stumpfegger.^{62,63}

Kunz died at the age of 66 on 23 September 1976 in Freudenstadt.⁶⁴ Only very few newspaper articles about the death of the Goebbels children which included any references to Kunz had been published during his lifetime. Kunz never gained any kind of broader public recognition: In the much-acclaimed movie *'The Downfall'*, for example, Stumpfegger appears in the scene of the children's murders, whereas Kunz does not.⁶⁵

Discussion

Very few phases in Helmut Kunz's life provide any sort of clarity. Helmut Kunz's life was characterised by ambiguities. His true motives for joining the SS remain as much a mystery as his ideological convictions and his actions during the war do. There is no doubt that Kunz was involved in the murder of the Goebbels children, but the question of the true extent of his complicity will never be answered.

What is certain is that Kunz was able to benefit from a particularly advantageous set of circumstances:

Kunz profited foremost from the fact that all the witnesses who could corroborate his testimony were dead – Ludwig Stumpfegger and the Goebbels family, the only ones who could have conclusively put to rest all speculation regarding these crimes, died before the end of the war, as did Werner Haase. Kunz was also fortunate in the fact that Paragraph 6 of the Impunity Act of 1954 could be applied to him. In addition, Kunz could take advantage of the fact that he had already been imprisoned in the Soviet Union – a deprivation of liberty that was taken into consideration during his trial. And finally, that his case was brought to trial only at a very late date – 1958/59 – was also to his advantage, as this was a time when, as is well known, punishments were very mild and the willingness of the German legal system to come to terms with any kind of Nazi past was not exactly pronounced.⁶⁶

What is also highly probable is that Kunz was a staunch National Socialist, indicated by his SS membership. By joining the SS (and also the NSDAP), Kunz made a clear political statement.¹⁸ This is also true for his willingness to network with the Nazi decision-makers and to join their inner circle.

In conclusion, the biography of the dentist Helmut Kunz provides an impressive example of how many Nazi crimes remain unexplained and unpunished to this day, and also paints a clear picture of the state of post-war Germany, which was characterised by repression of the recent Nazi past and the, at best, half-hearted attempt to come to terms with it.

Declaration of interests

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