

## Disguised eugenics: scrutinising the involvement of Nazi doctors in the “Euthanasia” program

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### Abstract

In former times, the eugenics movement had gained a great deal of traction in many parts of the world – especially in Europe – owing to its claim of improving human nature by controlled mating. Propelled by fascist propaganda and misplaced beliefs in eugenical principles, the “Euthanasia” program in Nazi Germany commenced with the intention to eliminate perceived biological threats and preserve the purity of the gene pool. Popular support from doctors had amplified this movement into what is remembered as one of the most devastating crimes against humanity – systematised mass murder. Although we can now acknowledge the reductionistic theory of the movement, without much deliberation, it becomes difficult to stop history from repeating itself. This article aims to explore the power dynamic in Nazi Society – among the leaders, the doctors, and the public – and analyse the consequences of the abuse of medicine as a political tool and as a means for social control.

### Introduction

On 1 September 1939, Germany’s dictator Adolf Hitler signed a decree authorising certain physicians across the country to grant “merciful death” upon the incurably ill.<sup>1</sup> Stemming from the Nazi party policy of racial hygiene, the so-called “Euthanasia” program (enclosed in quotation marks due to its use as a camouflage term) aimed to prevent the unfit -mentally, physically, behaviourally- from propagating and “corrupting” the Germanic gene pool. The Doctors’

Trials, first of a series of thirteen trials conducted in Nuremberg, Germany, after the end of the Second World War explores the records of the defendants: 20 of whom were doctors with charges related to murder.<sup>1</sup> An analysis of the accounts from the Trials shines light on the doctors’ part in the tragic “Euthanasia” program, and the convoluted power they possessed in orchestrating social change during the Nazi era.

### The eugenic motive

The need to conquer in the Nazi worldview comes from two social pillars – race and space.<sup>2</sup> Its notion that humanity is divided into different racial groups that must compete for survival, is parallel to ideas from Social Darwinism, which lays the foundation for eugenics. Hitler believed in the popularised theory of eugenics, which surmised that controlled selective breeding could improve humanity. This supplemented the unfounded Nazi belief in the existence of an “Aryan” race – the master race destined to rule over all other races.<sup>3,4</sup> With the racial hygiene policy crediting physique, intellect, and ability as hereditary, public health authorities bought into the movement to “euthanise” the “dysgenic” people and preserve the integrity of the nation. The enlistment of physicians as a means to fulfil political agenda eventually catapulted the fascist crusade to its ultimate extreme – mass murder.

In an excerpt from the Nuremberg Trials, a witness accounts that the “Euthanasia” movement began with physicians aiming to ensure

social welfare and racial supremacy by eliminating perceived biological enemies.<sup>1</sup> Questionnaires filled out about psychiatric unit inmates (often schizophrenics and epileptics) were sent to a clandestine jury of psychiatrists, that decided quite arbitrarily who would be murdered.<sup>5</sup> Initially sentencing ill patients to carbon monoxide gas chambers, now experts in medical killing, doctors used techniques like starvation and deadly drug administration. With doctors and the government reigning over the future gene pool of the population, what started as riddance of disabled people, transpired into doctors actively exterminating Jews, Gypsies, and other minorities.<sup>5</sup> By 1945, over 275,000 people were killed including babies and children,<sup>6</sup> but this was not even close to the end of the tyranny. With strong antisemitic notions prevailing in the country from centuries prior, the effectiveness of this program appears to have also laid the groundwork for one of history's most destructive catastrophes – the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup>

## The power gambit

Looking back at the atrocities committed by the Nazi Doctors, no amount of justification could excuse the abuse of medical practice. Some defendants in the testimony rationalised that they were not killing by their own authority, but simply obeying the laws of the State.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, German medicine placed a lot of emphasis on valuing conformity to authority during the Nazi reign,<sup>7</sup> branding doctors with a sense of duty and the need for order. The paternalistic attitude donned by the physicians seems to be the consequence of similar authoritarian outlooks in the society, seeping into the practice of medicine and conforming it to the Nazi ideals. With the fear of treason and their propensity to be patriots, little resistance was provided to the horrors propagated by the Nazi regime.<sup>8</sup>

But if Nazi ideology had controlled the practice of medicine in society, is the crime not on the hands of the doctors? The power dynamic in Nazi society was clearly laid out – with the government directing medical society and the doctors determining who was valuable enough to remain in society. In a setting with no legal regulations present for breaking their Hippocratic oath to “Do No Harm,” doctors had the ability to play God while still being puppets in the Nazi regime. But it was clear that it was the patients who faced the brunt of the deal – especially those belonging to the “inferior” races.<sup>9</sup> In the realm of Nazi medicine, a physician's role was amplified as an authoritative figure extending their healing powers to “fix” radical social issues. By promoting the racial status quo and its medicalisation, doctors overlooked that their duties were not based on the social priorities of the State and disregarded the ethical pillars of beneficence and non-maleficence. The oppression of patients of minority races on unrightful grounds with no regard to human dignity elucidates what it meant to be in their place during that era – powerless in what happens to them.

## Piecing together the present

George Santayana once wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>10</sup> This stands true to the practice of medicine across centuries as we sometimes have considered science from previous generations to be the absolute truth, discrediting how dynamically the field changes with new observations, discoveries and shifting perspectives in society. Although eugenics is now classified as a pseudoscience with no scientific validity,<sup>11</sup> it can be argued that attitudes promoting the value of some sections of society, alluding to eugenics, persist today. Racism is still one of the biggest issues to be tackled in today's society – even in the medical sphere<sup>12</sup> – so we cannot live under the façade that all it takes are a few guidelines to tackle discrimination.

Moreover, euthanasia remains a contested topic till date, even if its current form as a method to relieve a patient's suffering by painlessly ending their life holds no semblance to the treacherous Nazi practice.<sup>13</sup> With families finding it difficult to make decisions on behalf of the severely ill and traces of concepts like “life without value” still

persevering, society's stance on euthanasia as an acceptable practice remains divisive.

## Conclusion

Nazi medicine raised questions about whether bureaucratized practice of medicine can be productive in a society. It is not. Ethical relativism suggests that we cannot judge the past with morality of today's standards, but there is no doubt that Nazi medicine was one of the darkest chapters in medical history. While Hitler excused the “Euthanasia” program from a utilitarian standpoint,<sup>8</sup> in recent times it becomes evident that a shared decision-making approach for treatment with doctors and patients collaborating ensures the best outcomes<sup>14</sup> and upholds patient autonomy. As future healthcare professionals with great medical power, we must accept our responsibility in delivering good medical practice by learning from the past and promoting equal treatment for all.

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Hi, I'm Rishika. I was born in India and lived in Dubai before I moved to Plymouth to study medicine. Currently, my academic interest lies in the brain and all of its eccentricities. I love reading books and watching movies and feeling guilty about doing too much of that.