From patients to “lives unworthy of life”: Psychiatry and institutional slaughter under the Nazi regime.

The slaughter of hundreds of thousands of the mentally ill under the Nazi regime is classed as one of the greatest medical crimes of all time” (1) and “unique in the history of psychiatry” (2). The most vulnerable in society were shunned by those supposed to care for them. This essay attempts to explain what happened to the mentally ill under the regime and how such atrocities were able to come about.

The Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases was introduced only a few months after Hitler came to power (3)(4). Diseases thought to be hereditary included “schizophrenia, cyclothymia, epilepsy, huntington’s chorea, severe alcoholism and congenital mental deficiency”. From the year of 1935, if not earlier, the slaughter of the mentally ill had been planned, but was only initiated in the shadows that war provided (3). The “German Society for Psychiatry”, the “German Society of Neurology” and the “Society for Racial Hygiene” were forced to merge in 1935 (5). By August 1941, over 70,000 people with mental illness were put to death. Eventually, the public found out about and spoke out against these deaths, so the euthanasia programme was withdrawn. This did not mean the end of institutional slaughter, however. The murder carried on until the end of the war, by means of lethal injection and starvation. Psychiatrists became experts at systematically killing their patients. In total, 300,000 died at their hands (6).

Approximately 350,000 people, with schizophrenics making the vast majority, were sterilised by the state (5)(6). Many schizophrenics would travel to Switzerland for treatment to avoid sterilisation being imposed on them in Germany (3). On the assumption that schizophrenia and epilepsy were hereditary illnesses, thousands affected were sterilised or put to death in an attempt to keep the “Volkskorper”, the “Population Body” healthy. The scientific evidence that formed the basis of these misguided beliefs was severely lacking. Perhaps the Nazis were willing to overlook that if it meant they could get a step closer to their aims. In the paperwork salvaged from Hadamar Euthanasia Centre, it was apparent that the reasoning behind sterilisation was not so much “hereditary… as they were social” (7).

To strengthen the Aryan race and the State at the same time, it became clear to Hitler that the earlier a “useless eater” was eliminated, the better. He proposed that around 750,000 infants be put to death a year. This was supposedly to shield the populace from the dangers of degeneration and the (exaggerated) rise in the numbers of the mentally ill that threatened them. Naturally, it also meant that the money and resources that would have been given as welfare to these people could be saved for the State’s own purposes (8)

Although the Nazis exploited psychiatry systematically and institutionally, the theories had been born from years of misguided research. Nazism took these already existing ideas and made them the justification for unimaginable atrocities. Hitler’s philosophy barely contained an original idea (7). The crimes against humanity seen at the times of the Nazis were based on misguided principles that had been present in the wider scientific community for quite some time. The principles behind psychiatry were fuelled more with the intention to systematically eliminate the mentally ill, than with the desire to help and heal their suffering. The political climate at the time was such that any perceived drain on society had to be eliminated. The mentally ill were seen as a burden on economics and society as a whole, a disease better off cured than allowed to fester (6).

In 1859, Darwin published “On the Origin of Species” (9). Originally, he hadn’t given much thought to the evolution of humans. In time, he found it regrettable that weak individuals could carry on reproducing and increasing in numbers. His ideas spread rapidly through England and subsequently through the world. From his theories, a new theory of social Darwinism arose. Survival of the fittest no longer applied simply to the animal and plant kingdom, but to humans as well. Lacking a selection pressure, it was thought that humans lost the impetus for growth and would become subject to degeneration over time. The idea became so prominent that some even feared the total collapse of civilised society at the hands of these weaker humans. It became apparent to the people of the time that evolution had to be taken into the hands of humans. From social Darwinism, it was only a small jump to the theories of “racial ideology” and “racial hygiene”. Alfred Poetz, the man who coined these terms published a book on the matter as far back as 1895 (5). We find the origin of eugenics not in Germany, but in England, with Sir Francis Galton. In 1869, he published “Hereditary Genius” where he popularised the idea that through selective breeding, the human race could be improved. He suggested trying to breed an elite form of human, more intelligent than the rest. Meanwhile, the more “unfit” in society were to be eliminated. Despite being neither doctor or biologist, Galton exerted a sizeable influence in both fields throughout the world (5) (10).

140,234 psychiatric patients died during the First World war “especially through lack of nutrition and inadequate care” (7) (11). Now this was nothing like the organised slaughter that occurred during the years of the Second World War, but it shows a lack of care for the mentally ill and that they were unworthy of resources that could better suit the needs of rest of society.

Before the third Reich, the psychiatric field began researching into and producing theories about the perceived threat that the mentally ill posed to society. It was postulated that “madness - like other forms of social pathology – was now seen as the product of degeneration and decay. So, far from being the victims of civilisation and its stresses, the mad were instead its antithesis, the dregs of society who were a biologically inferior lot” (12). Emil Kraeplin, one of the most famous psychiatrists of the 19th century was a leader of the research into eugenics and “degeneration”. He argued the root of all mental illness was simply genetic impurity (13). Unsurprisingly, this idea was music to the ears of a regime dedicated to the creation of the perfect Aryan, which would be “distinguished, not only by his blood, bone structure and colouring, but also by the internal and intangible qualities of character” (14). Kraeplin had been considered the leader in German psychiatry but his work was shown to be a barely concealed ideology, allowing the severance of ties between patient and psychiatrist during the Third Reich. (6)

Psychiatry was faced with many conditions, including schizophrenia, for which a cause and a cure were not known. In the 1930s, eugenics seemed to promise a solution to these struggles (3). In England, eugenics was supported by many. Dr C P Blacker, secretary of the Population Investigation Committee wrote several papers on the topic and tried to encourage “healthy, intelligent, socially useful and free from genetic taints to have large numbers of children”. Lacking appropriate treatment for many mental illnesses, he also proposed the sterilisation of “a small group of antisocial, backward, and highly fertile people who form about 10% of the population – the so-called social-problem group” (3).

Similar thinking was apparent in America too. Law was passed in Connecticut in 1985 that dictated “No man or woman either of whom is epileptic, or imbecile, or feeble-minded, shall inter-marry, or live together as husband and wife when the woman is under forty-five years of age”. Many authorities promoted operations to sterilise those deemed feeble-minded or idiots. Pennsylvania nearly passed an act in 1901 that would make it legal to carry out an “operation for the prevention of procreation” on these people. By 1928 in the United States, 27 states passed laws that encouraged the sterilisation of the “mentally defective” (4).

To try to understand the deplorable acts committed by the Nazis, we must consider their views about not only mental illness, but illness of the population in general. As Hitler famously said, “We see our people as one body of flesh and blood” (7). Under the Nazis, you were not an individual, with your own hopes and aspirations. You were a small part of one unified people and as such, you had to play your part. Your mind and body were not yours. They belonged to the state. With a population of one body, Nazism sought to eliminate any pathology in that body. The mentally ill were named “Untermenschen” or “sub-human” (8). Using such terminology helped to de-humanise and isolate those with mental illness, making it easier to justify their deaths.

 Another reason to eliminate the mentally ill from the population was they were seen as being unable to work and contribute to society. Part of what made an Aryan was their ability to work hard and contribute to the state. In an economically challenging time if a member of the population was not pulling their weight, they had to be cut loose for the benefit of all. In the earlier years of the war, psychiatry was much concerned with converting the mentally ill into a useable workforce. As time went on, this project was abandoned in favour of simply killing them (7).

To aid the war effort, beliefs about the mentally ill needed to change to fit the needs of the time. Propaganda focussed heavily on exaggerating the financial costs the general population paid for looking after the mentally ill. This gained a lot of popular support for the euthanising of “lives not worth living” (6). In Hitler’s “Appel an die deutsche Kraft” speech, he described the “breakdown of our People” and those responsible for it. The mentally ill, as well as Jews and other groups were blamed. They became a scapegoat for the population to despise (15). Propaganda spread at the time was cleverly worded to justify their deaths. These people were not killed or gassed, they were “euthanised” and put out of their misery. To be euthanised is to be done a favour. A just act.

The Nazis strongly believed that a human was either worthy or unworthy of life. Those that could not pull their weight for the benefit of society were unworthy of life. They strived for an ideal, immaculate mind for both the individual and the Volkskorper and anything less than that was unacceptable. Film was a new and promising medium for propaganda and was used a lot. “Victims of the Past” was aired in all theatres nationally. It showed some of the German population living in ghettos, in contrast to the Untermenschen who occupied mental institutions as grand as a palace, despite not contributing to society. It was shown how useless they were to the general population and the film tried to give reasons why they should be euthanised (16). Another film, titled “Erbkrank” or “The Hereditary Defective” aimed to convince the population that mental illness was hereditary and as such, something that could be eradicated. It must be remembered that this was a time before the discovery of DNA and all the complexities of genetics that we understand today. The Nazis were partially correct; there is a genetic link for most mental illness, but they greatly overestimated its importance. In the film, inheritance trees showed how mentally diseased parents gave birth to diseased children. No mention was made that mentally ill parents might give birth to a neurotypical child, or how often an illness was passed on to a child. So it seemed to the population that a schizophrenic, say, would only ever give birth to a schizophrenic child. The mentally ill were said to have more children than other members of society and since they only gave birth to the mentally defective, the numbers of such people would rise exponentially. If action were not taken soon to curb this disease, it would spread like wildfire and the German people would be consumed by it. The only solution they saw was to prevent the bad blood from being spread to the next generation. This meant sterilisation or death (17).

Over time, the population’s perception of the mentally ill shifted towards disdain. As an example of how deeply ingrained the Nazi ideas were in the population, one family even sent a letter to Hitler personally, begging him to euthanise their child, born blind and without a leg. Their child did not match the image of the ideal Aryan and so was not acceptable. Hitler sent his personal doctor, Karl Brandt to see this child. Brandt said of the child’s psyche “at least it appeared to be an idiot”. The child was put to death without further ado (11).

“Germany’s position in psychiatry was pre-eminent in 1933, but by 1937 the field had become unrecognisably altered by political incursions” (3). Hundreds of doctors took part in the mass euthanasia, from filling out forms, organising transport and running the death centres to personally turning on the gas taps. One organised the murder of his own mentally ill mother in law, while another did the same for his brother. Some psychiatrists even went as far as to use these “lives not worth living” for medical experiments. To them, these patients were convenient objects with which to further their knowledge and careers (5).

Doctors became victim to the Nazi ideologies. Despite being in a supposedly caring position, one doctor equated euthanasia to the “killing of animals in human form” (11). If a group is stripped of their status as a human, unspeakable injustices can target them and, in the eyes of the aggressor, this is the only just thing to do. They were not ordered to murder their patients. They were only encouraged to do it (6). 45% of all physicians in Germany joined the Nazi party (6). “There are specific reasons why German elites did not resist Hitler, as much of it having to do with greed, ambition and power as with obedience, fear and cowardice.” (6)

One can make a distinction between those that actively committed these heinous acts and those that stood by and watched as it happened. Those passive observers might not have done anything wrong themselves, but they acted as if everything that was going on was just to be accepted. Their actions, or rather inactions, are just as hard to explain as those that actively participated. There are also those that may not have participated themselves, but supported the crimes verbally or in writing. Robert Gaupp, Karl Bonhoeffer and Hermann Simon, to name but a few were all prominent psychiatrists at the time and they all advocated the Nazi euthanasia and sterilisation programme (5).

After the war a series of military tribunals, called the Nuremburg trials, were held. Of the great numbers of psychiatrists that committed murder and sterilisation, shockingly few were ever prosecuted. Some of these were said to be guilt free because they believed what they were doing was legally constituted (6). Many of the criminals that committed these atrocities were excused of their crimes, as they were believed to lack the insight that what they were doing was wrong or unlawful (5).

After the Nuremburg trials, the report “medicine without Humanity” was written. It argued that “psychiatry had failed by making itself accomplice to the Nazi euthanasia programmes, forsaking its own patients”. Medicine as a whole was equally to blame, “perverting the detached objective attitude of the scientist” and allowing the inmates of concentration camps to be tortured under the guise of a medical experiment” (18) (19). A dramatic shift throughout medicine was needed to prevent something similar happening in the future. A shift that took much too long to happen. It was not until the 1970s that German accounts on the history of psychiatry acknowledged the crimes against humanity committed around World War 2. For a few decades, it was almost as if everything had simply been swept under the carpet, ignored and forgotten about (6).

One would think and hope that after the crimes that arose from eugenics in Germany, the world would move away from anything remotely like it. However, the subject of euthanising disabled infants was a source of much discussion for a long time afterwards. We now have more advanced technology and are able to screen for conditions such as Down’s syndrome at the stage of an embryo and abort the foetus if it is the wish of the parents (5). Is this so different from what the Nazis were trying to accomplish? If they had our technology, would they not have chosen such a method over their own? Are we much different from them in thinking we know when an embryo would be a “life unworthy of life”?

Were the psychiatrists at the time simply worse than the general population? Members of the public didn’t kill those they were meant to care for. Psychiatrists knew they were killing innocents, guilty only of being ill. Following the principles laid out in the Hippocratic oath, we would expect psychiatrists, as doctors, to care for their patients, not to slaughter them. Psychiatrists have a position of power and respect and they abused that position. They were not forced to kill. It was of their own volition. They wanted to kill their patients. It seems to me that such a thing is inexcusable, no matter the rationalisation.

In the scientific community, eugenics was a widely accepted idea. It seemed to promise the answer to many mental health problems that psychiatrists could do little to nothing about. It was genuinely believed that sterilisation and euthanasia was the answer. Years of propaganda drilled these beliefs into the minds of the psychiatrists and the population as a whole. The Nazis promised a utopian society, united as the Volkskorper, with all citizens contributing to something greater than themselves. Everything done was supposed to be for the good of the whole. Those that couldn’t contribute to this were branded as “Untermenschen”, “useless eaters” and “them”, as opposed to “us”. I find that with all of this, it is hardly surprising that normal people could have committed murder and reconciled themselves that it was a kindness. I think what was done was inexcusable, but it is understandable.

As for whether they are worse than the population, it must be remembered that psychiatrists held a position of power, with access to easy means to end a life. The general population had no such thing. If they had, would we expect them to act similarly? I would think so. I think it is easy to say that the psychiatrists here are immoral and capable of doing things that the rest of us simply wouldn’t and couldn’t. It means we do not have to address our own potential to do such harm to so many. Sadly, I think, given the correct political climate and a misguided scientific rationalisation, the potential for such a thing lies in us all.

It has been argued by many that psychiatry is, or at least can be used as, a form of social control. Society’s values are reflected in the types of people that are deemed mentally ill and how such people are treated. To brand someone as ill and impose treatment on them for their own good is to have control over them. The notion that is in the patient’s best interest to be diagnosed and treated can easily mask an ulterior motive. In Nazi Germany, we see the term “euthanasia” used to hide murder in plain sight. It was not the psychiatrists that sought to control the population. They were merely tools wielded by a government that did.

There is no clear answer as to how a profession designed to help and heal managed to turn into something that sterilised and slaughtered. It is this fact that I find the most disturbing. If we knew why and how doctors became murderers, then we could learn from it. Sadly, it seems like the reasoning is complex and eludes us. Who is then to say that history could not repeat itself? Those committing murder seemed to believe it was the just thing to do. Can we really trust our sense of justice on matters that we really know nothing about? We still know pitifully little about the mind and I believe that we should not forget that when dealing with patients. We should all individually question what we do as health care professionals and not just blindly accept the current state of affairs for what they are. The history of psychiatry is fraught with poor choices and misuse. Chances are, we are currently misusing it and we have to keep our eyes open to find what that is.

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