

Petra Fuchs, Maike Rotzoll, Ulrich Müller, Paul Richter, Gerrit Hohendorf.
"Das Vergessen der Vernichtung ist ein Teil der Vernichtung selbst"; Lebensgeschichten von Opfern der nationalsozialistischen "Euthanasie";
 Goettingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007. 387 pp. EUR 29.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-8353-0146-7.

Andrea Sommerauer, Franz Wassermann. *Temporaeres Denkmal: Prozesse der Erinnerung.* Waescherei P Kulturprojekt im PKH-Hall in Zusammenarbeit mit Franz Wassermann: StudienVerlag, 2007. 320 pp. EUR 24.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-7065-4375-0.



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Both books under review are dedicated to reviving and sustaining public memory of the victims of the Nazis' secret wartime campaign to "purify" the German *Volk* by killing its institutionalized physically and mentally disabled members. The program was initiated under the code name T4 in October 1939 by a secret *Führer* order backdated to coincide with the start of the war on September 1. There is by now an extensive scholarly literature on the "Euthanasia" program and its perpetrators, but the books under review offer a different, more consciously victim-centered approach than most earlier scholarship on the subject.[1] Each of these books in its way seeks to res-

cue euthanasia victims from anonymity and to restore the uniqueness and particularity of individual experiences. Both reject a detached academic approach in favor of active empathy, and—in keeping with a more general trend in recent Holocaust literature—are animated by a determination to save euthanasia victims from being forgotten. The editors of both volumes are at least implicitly critical of public officials in their respective countries (Germany and Austria) for having done too little to keep alive the memory of euthanasia victims.

The title of editor Petra Fuchs's *"Das Vergessen der Vernichtung ist ein Teil der Vernichtung selbst;" Lebensgeschichten von Opfern der*

nationalsozialistischen "Euthanasie" comes from Jean Baudrillard's quote--"[d]as Vergessen der Vernichtung ist Teil der Vernichtung selbst"--that psychologist Harald Welzer used in his 1997 collection of essays on scholarly treatments of the Holocaust, *Verweilen beim Grauen*, the result of a four-year research project supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft at the Psychiatric Clinic of the University of Heidelberg and its Institute for the History of Medicine (1997).[2] With similar objectives, Fuch's book contains twenty-three representative biographies of victims of "Aktion T4" in 1940-41, based on their official medical files as well as on correspondence or interviews with family members when available. The project involved the detailed investigation of three thousand files taken from a collection of thirty thousand T4 case files discovered in the Stasi (*Staatssicherheit*) archives of the former GDR (German Democratic Republic) in the early 1990s. The project had both a quantitative and what the editors call a "qualitative" dimension, the latter embodied in the representative biographies. These mini-biographies are intended not merely to convey information about individual lives, but also to evoke from readers an emotional identification with the plight of euthanasia victims.

The work consists of five chapters that summarize the current state of knowledge about the Nazi euthanasia program and deal with methodological questions. Maike Rotzoll provides a brief guide to the history of institutions for the mentally disabled in Germany, identifying the growing obsession with "racial hygiene" in the wake of the First World War as crucial to the acceptance, with only token resistance, of compulsory sterilization, and then "euthanasia," by institutional psychiatrists. However, Rotzoll points out that this ready acquiescence was not the inevitable result of developments within the psychiatric profession, but required the political climate created by Nazi rule. Gerrit Hohendorf also emphasizes the importance of the experience of the First World War

in his chapter tracing the intellectual and ideological roots of "euthanasia." The myth that the best members of the nation had died on the battlefield prepared the German public to accept the physical elimination of "geistig tote Ballastexistenzen" (Hohendorf in Fuchs, p. 38) in order to regenerate the nation and reverse the results of the war.

Fuchs attempts to extract some statistical data from the admittedly limited sample of cases examined by the Heidelberg researchers. She does not find any dramatic differences from the general population in the social background of victims (all classes and income groups were represented in roughly the same proportions as in the general population), but she does come up with some fascinating details. Women outnumbered men among adult victims but boys outnumbered girls among minors. Fuchs concludes that the inability to do productive work was the decisive criterion in the selection of adult victims, "[d]ie ökonomische Brauchbarkeit der Kranken stand unter den Selektionskriterien ganz im Vordergrund" (Fuchs, p. 64). "Bildungsunfähigkeit" (Fuchs, p. 64) was the decisive criterion for minors. Unruly behavior was also an important criterion; a majority of victims were described as refractory, while a majority of survivors were credited with good conduct. Jews, though numbering only 0.44 percent of the sample (fewer than in the population at large), were the only group of victims whose selection was based solely on their "race." Victims in the sample ranged in age from three to eighty-seven. The average length of institutionalization was twelve years; the longest institutionalization of any of the victims whose records were examined was fifty-seven years. In the two remaining introductory chapters, Paul Richter discusses the merits of biographical case studies as opposed to statistical methods, and Ulrich Müller addresses the problems presented by using medical histories as sources for biographical information.

The individual biographies, making up more than two-thirds of the book, certainly achieve the

emotional effect that the editors desire. In conformity with German laws for the protection of privacy (which in this case would seem to partly undermine the intent of the study), the last names of victims are given only as initials. The case studies make for painful and infuriating reading. They record numerous instances of willful intransigence or indifference in the bureaucratic and medical decisions condemning victims to their fate. It is difficult not to be overwhelmed by this record of official cruelty. Among the most heart-breaking cases are those of children entrusted by their parents to institutional psychiatric care in the 1920s and early 1930s; even before the Nazis came to power many of these parents were frustrated in every effort to regain custody of their children. Equally poignant are the cases of institutionalized adults whose relatives were foiled at every turn in their efforts to persuade the authorities to release patients to the care of their families. Most of the affected families were under no illusions about Nazi purposes and the fate intended for their disabled relatives. Many victims were also aware of their impending fate but utterly powerless to stop it. Well-chosen pictorial illustrations of individual victims and the killing sites as well as excerpts from family correspondence and medical documents magnify the power of these life stories. The sense of injustice is compounded by the fact that in some cases "Wiedergutmachung" after the war was refused to victims' families on the grounds that the victims of euthanasia did not meet the criterion of "political persecution."

The second book under review marks an even greater departure from conventional academic scholarship. *Temporäres Denkmal: Prozesse der Erinnerung* is the richly illustrated documentation of a project initiated by the young Austrian performance artist Franz Wassermann in 2003 with the cooperation of the journalist and historian Andrea Sommerauer and the active support of an organization of physicians and psychiatrists known as "Wäscherei P." This ongoing

project is dedicated to reviving the memory of and paying tribute to the approximately 360 patients (all of whose names, birth dates, birth places, home towns, and dates of deportation are listed at the outset) who were transferred from the psychiatric hospital in Hall in the Austrian province of Tirol to the euthanasia sites at Hartheim and Linz-Niederhart for killing in the years 1940-42. The title of this "Erinnerungsbuch" (memory book) suggests that the participants in this project wished to avoid the pitfalls of a permanent memorial, which can too easily serve as a substitute for serious reflection or as an excuse to forget. The book documents five "processes" in the continuing project of reviving the memory of the victims. The first process, entitled "Strassen Namen geben," involved petitioning the governing councils of all affected towns to name a street after each of the victims from that particular town. Secondly, the public was called on to provide pieces of clothing to be made into memorial quilts—referred to as "Tücher der Teilnahme"—for each of the victims. Thirdly, "Erinnerungszeichen" in the form of porcelain plaques, if possible with pictures of each victim, were to be implanted in trees to form a "Park der Erinnerung" (Park of Memory). The fourth process, entitled "Die Rückgabe," describes a performance by Franz Wassermann in which members of the audience were invited to write the names of each victim on the physician's smock that Wassermann had put on over his pin-stripe suit, white shirt, and necktie. The project culminated in what the authors call "Das lebende Archiv," a living archive that serves as an invitation to relatives to contribute photos, anecdotes, newspaper articles, letters, and similar memorabilia to the archive kept for each victim. Several blank pages are provided at the end of the book for readers to fill in any gaps or inscribe new information. A foreword by the president of Austria Heinz Fischer gives the project the official blessing of the state.

Neither book deals directly with the Jewish Holocaust, a much more difficult and troubling

topic for most Germans than the "euthanasia" program, in which most of the victims were ethnic Germans. Nonetheless the connections to the Holocaust are clearly drawn, especially in *"Das Vergessen der Vernichtung ist Teil der Vernichtung selbst."* Both books attest to the continuing strength of Germany's and Austria's cultures of remembrance and offer further evidence that those states' commitment not to forget the atrocities of the Nazi era now forms an integral part of their respective national identities. Both books, especially the more scholarly *"Das Vergessen der Vernichtung ist Teil der Vernichtung selbst,"* can also be read as responses to recent criticisms of dispassionate structural social history for suppressing questions of personal agency and failing to take sufficient account of the perspectives of victims.[3] The contributors to these two books, many of them members of the third postwar generation born in the 1960s and 1970s, are very conscious that disinterested, objective methodology can sometimes serve as a form of repression of memory and guilt. They unapologetically affirm their political engagement and are commendably up front about their goal of influencing attitudes and policies in the present to prevent a revival of the lethal prejudices of the past.

Notes

[1]. See especially Ernst Klee, *"Euthanasie" im NS-Staat. Die "Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens"* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1983) and *Dokumente zur "Euthanasie"* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985); Götz Aly, *Beiträge zur nationalsozialistischen Gesundheits- und Sozialpolitik* vol. 1 (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1985); Götz Aly, *Aussonderung und Tod: Die klinische Hinrichtung der Unbrauchbaren* Götz Aly, *Reform und Gewissen: "Euthanasie" im Dienst des Fortschritts* vol. 2 (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1985); Götz Aly, ed., *Aktion T4, 1939-1945: Die "Euthanasie"-Zentrale in der Tiergartenstrasse 4* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1987); Hans-Walter Schmuhl, *Rassenhygiene, Nationalsozialismus,*

Euthanasie. Von der Verhütung zur Vernichtung "lebensunwerten Lebens" 1890-1945 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); Götz Aly, Peter Chroust, and Christian Pross, eds., *Cleansing the Fatherland: Nazi Medicine and Racial Hygiene* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[2]. Harald Welzer, *Verweilen beim Grauen* (Frankfurt: Edition Diskord, 1997). The University of Heidelberg research project also provided much of the documentation for a book published the following year: Wolfgang U. Eckart, *Die nationalsozialistische "Aktion T4" und ihre Opfer: Historische Bedingungen und ethische Konsequenzen für die Gegenwart* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008).

[3]. See for instance, Rüdiger Hohl and Konrad Jarausch, eds., *Versäumte Fragen: Deutsche Historiker im Schatten des Nationalsozialismus* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2000); and Nicolas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die west-deutschen Historiker: Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003).

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