

# The Experience of the Deaf During the Holocaust

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The *völkish* state must see to it that only the healthy beget children. . . .Here the state must act as guardian of the millennial future. . . .It must put the most modern medical means in service of this knowledge. It must declare unfit for propagation all who are in any way visibly sick or who have a disease and can therefore pass it on.<sup>1</sup>

-----Adolf Hitler

The eugenicists, educators and National Socialists in the 1930s and early 1940s, devastated the deaf community and left a broken and complex history of the deaf during the Holocaust. These actors, motivated by the ideals of racial hygiene, which were neither singularly anti-Jewish nor specifically Nazi, targeted the handicapped community through legal persecution, involuntary medical experimentation, and physical extermination, all of which explicitly linked the Third Reich's treatment of the handicapped to the broader genocide of the Holocaust. Yet, the deaf community has been, from a scholarly perspective, a largely neglected aspect of the Holocaust. Henry Friedlander, a leading scholar of the Holocaust, articulates "In the United States, even in Germany, few are aware that during the Nazi Era human beings –men, women, and children—with impaired hearing were sterilized against their will, and even fewer know that many of the deaf were also murdered."<sup>2</sup> This lack of awareness begs the question of why actions against the deaf have been ignored despite heavy research in the Holocaust, as well as why recent historians have now noted that the deaf community can no longer be discounted as victims.

The life of the disabled and deaf throughout history has not been researched extensively and is an often unrecognized subject. However, since the mid-1980s, much new work from scholars has arisen. In an essay from 2003 that introduces the idea of disabilities as another "Other," Catherine Kudlick, a history professor at University of California invited scholars to

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<sup>1</sup> Adolf Hitler in Suzanne E. Evans, *Forgotten Crimes* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004), 95.

<sup>2</sup> Horst Biesold, *Crying Hands: Eugenics and Deaf People in Nazi Germany* (Washington D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1999), 1.

“...think about disability not as an isolated, individual medical pathology but instead as a key defining social category on par with race, class, and gender.”<sup>3</sup> Kudlick explains that this field, “...challenges long-held perceptions that relegate it to the unglamorous backwaters.”<sup>4</sup> What exactly are the “unglamorous backwaters?” In effect they have amounted to an exclusion of the deaf as worthy of historical study and specifically as victims of the Holocaust. This is an ironic affirmation of the Hitlerian assessment of the disabled and one that forces us to evaluate how deeply ingrained eugenicist notions have remained in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Despite well documented and brutal persecution, recognizing the deaf as victims has not always been agreed upon. In his introduction to Horst Biesold’s *Crying Hands*, one of the first monographs on the deaf under the Third Reich, Henry Friedlander acknowledges, “After the war, disabled victims were not recognized as persons persecuted by the Nazi regime.”<sup>5</sup> The postwar German state did not see sterilization as a form of racial persecution; rather the law of compulsory sterilization had followed legal procedure -- a procedure that both pre- and post-dated the Third Reich. As late as 1989, the German state still had not recognized the deaf as Holocaust victims. The impact on scholarship has been direct. Since the German state did not recognize acts of persecution against the deaf as part of the Holocaust, many scholars similarly ignored their experiences as an aspect of the Holocaust; perpetuating the treatment of the deaf as second class.

However, scholars who have begun to study the deaf community during the Holocaust, now acknowledge that the deaf are in fact true victims of the Holocaust. In fact, “Disabled people were really the first victims of the Nazis. Mass sterilization of deaf people began in 1933

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine J. Kudlick, “Why We Need Another ‘Other,’” *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (2003): 746.

<sup>4</sup> Kudlick, 765.

<sup>5</sup> Biesold, 11.

as soon as Nazis came into power.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, eugenicist ideas had a history that stretched back decades prior to the *Machtergreifung*. With Hitler’s established authority in the Reich, legalized sterilization, unremitting eugenicist propaganda, and a broad demand during the Depression for a constant reduction of expenditures, were only the beginning of the victimization of the deaf once Hitler seized power.<sup>7</sup> Just two years into his regime, in a discussion with Gerhard Wagner, the Reich Physicians’ Leader, Hitler identified that if war were to come, he would implement the killings of the handicapped.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, by 1935 no such unambiguous statements about genocide of Jews existed, making Hitler’s eugenicist stance vis-á-vis the handicapped almost a prerequisite for the Holocaust.

To reinforce this conclusion, most recent scholars have been able to agree with historian Suzanne Evans’ conclusion that, “Nazi racism was deeply embedded in the philosophical and institutional structure of German science long before the Nazi euthanasia program began in 1939.”<sup>9</sup> Scholars who recognize that racism, or more broadly race hygiene, was an embedded ideology dating back in its modern forms to the late nineteenth century, understand that the theory of a Master Race was not a creation of Adolf Hitler. Rather, Hitler modified an existing theory and put this theory into practice on a national level with full support of the state. In a forceful statement of continuity, Hugh Gregory Gallagher, a leading historian researching systematic murders of the disabled argues, “The euthanasia killing program was no Nazi

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<sup>6</sup> Vickie Walter, “In der Nacht: An Unusual Exhibit Depicts the Nazi Persecution of Deaf People,” Gallaudet Today, <http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/WorldAroundYou/holocaust/in-der-nacht.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Friedlander, “Registering the Handicapped in Nazi Germany: A Case Study,” *Jewish History* 11, no. 2 (1997): 92.

<sup>8</sup> Friedlander, 92.

<sup>9</sup> Evans, 96-97.

aberration. Rather it was the efficient application through public policy of the theories of leading scientists and philosophers in Western society.”<sup>10</sup>

It is primary to draw from Gallagher’s identification, that the efficiency of a killing program was based on the variable of public policy and opinion. For example, opposition occurred when the outraged German public opposed the murders of the deaf through the T-4 program. When the public became aware, their opposition temporarily extinguished the program in Germany. Although the formalized murders were suspended in Germany, victimization of the deaf did not cease. Rather, “...bureaucratic paperwork thus replaced the indiscriminate violence practiced in the East.”<sup>11</sup> This suggests that the euthanasia program, although momentarily stunted in Germany, continued its development in various Eastern European countries, and with greater violence and carelessness.

With the progression of violence in the East, the significance of the genocide within Germany itself may seem to sink back into the foreground. This shrinking back is simply fictional. Race hygiene programs were still strongly targeting handicapped Germans. Although Nazis faced real challenges from the negative public opinion of the T-4 program, physicians and social workers played an extensive and consistently pro-eugenicist role supporting the circulating victimizing propaganda and “...denouncing their deaf charges. Moreover, the leading German deaf organization, the Reich Union of the Deaf of Germany (REGEDE), largely sympathized with the Nazis, thereby undermining the deaf community at its core.”<sup>12</sup> The REGEDE in 1934 consisted of more than 3,900 members, which included deaf activist Karl Wacker. Regardless of personal beliefs, all members found themselves affiliated with the Nazi Party, as part of the

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<sup>10</sup> Hugh Gregory Gallagher, “Holocaust: Disabled Peoples,” in *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views*, eds. Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Isreal W. Charny, 208-220 (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Friedlander, 89.

<sup>12</sup> Kudlick, 788.

Third Reich's *Gleichshaltung* of all professional organizations. The head of the organization, Fritz Albrechts, had applied the organization and all its members for Party membership.<sup>13</sup> In 1937, on the tenth anniversary of REGEDE's founding, Albrechts describes his action:

Shortly after the Party Congress in Nuremberg in 1933, I put REGEDE under the supervision of the National Socialist party, national direction, central authority for public welfare. Thereby, the infrastructure of the organization, not least in its external aspect, was finally so closely tied to the Third Reich that one could truly speak of a solid foundation.<sup>14</sup>

Deaf advocates who accepted *Gleichschaltung* partially contributed to their victimization. This victimization however, is not singularly the result of *Gleichschaltung*, but an assortment of variables, which Hitler synthesized through the popularized works of various social Darwinians, medical practitioners, and scholars who embraced racialized nationalistic views to identify an Aryan master race, free from those deemed "unfit."

With the growth of eugenics, the disabled in Nazi Germany were intently targeted as a community that must be eliminated in order to create a healthy, strong, Nordic master race. Multiple sequential steps were carried out to perform this exclusion of the deaf and disabled. Indeed, this evolving bureaucratic process mirrored the evolution of Nazi treatment of Jews. First a concrete definition of the term disabled was established; the deaf community lied within this classification. Second, the process of registering these handicapped individuals was employed. Third, the deaf and disabled people were subjected to mass sterilizations, and laws against their propagation. Ultimately this process of evolving policies became a program of "mercy killings"<sup>15</sup> and "wild euthanasia."<sup>16</sup> The disabled community under control of Nazi

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<sup>13</sup> Biesold, 91.

<sup>14</sup> Biesold, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Ina R. Friedman, *The Other Victims* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 65.

<sup>16</sup> Biesold, 164.

Germany was thus subjected to mass murders as part of the broader Final Solution.<sup>17</sup> Although there is a need for further research, the deaf community under this systematic process suffered as victims of the Holocaust due to the diverse methods of persecution, experimentation, and extermination under the supervision of the Third Reich. This even included those formally a part of the Nazi Party, such as REGEDE members, as well as medical physicians, attendants, teachers, and some of their own deaf neighbors.

In Darwin's *Descent of Man*, Darwin presents the idea that all human traits – which include moral behavior – vary from one individual to the next. However, these traits are instincts that are inevitably inheritable.<sup>18</sup> With scientific evolution during the early 1900s becoming increasingly prevalent, Darwin's new theory of man brought about an idea of eugenics and "...helped foster biological determinism."<sup>19</sup> Ina R. Friedman, a leading author of the Holocaust, identifies that, "Eugenics is the study of how hereditary traits can be altered and 'improved.'"<sup>20</sup> Eugenists identified the handicapped community by determining various ways in which evolution could and would best occur by predicting the outcome of natural selection through the identification process of analyzing those who had higher levels of intelligence and better health, ultimately categorizing a superior versus inferior race.<sup>21</sup>

With the ideology intact throughout Germany that hereditary behavior is within an individual's genetics or blood, the handicapped community was registered and affected by a racial legislative law, the "Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases."<sup>22</sup> This sterilization "was not intended to be punitive," that is, those ordered to be sterilized were

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<sup>17</sup> Friedman, 65.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 22.

<sup>19</sup> Weikart, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Friedman, 63.

<sup>21</sup> Weikart, 90.

<sup>22</sup> Pine, 126. For additional use see: Evans, 113; Friedlander, 90; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 76; and Biesold, 4, 21, 23, 35, and 84.

not to be viewed as “perpetrators of a crime for which they were receiving punishment.’ Rather, forced sterilization... should be seen as the sacrifice an individual makes as a result of a ‘personal tragedy’ of having been born ‘defective.’”<sup>23</sup>

Years later, Horst Biesold, a former deaf teacher during the 1970s in Germany, heard about forced sterilizations and additional practices of experimentation employed upon the deaf community during the Holocaust. While teaching he noticed that many of the members of the deaf community where he lived were childless. When he asked a deaf friend why this was, his friend replied that the members of the community had been victims of the Law for the Prevention of Offspring. Wanting to learn more, Biesold created a questionnaire that would be used to interview the hundreds of deaf victims, and learn their previously rejected history during the Holocaust.<sup>24</sup> In Biesold’s quest to uncover the stories of the deaf survivors, he received 1, 215 questionnaire responses.<sup>25</sup> Through the sheer number of completed questionnaires, Biesold acknowledged that a significant number of the deaf community throughout Germany was impacted by the sterilization law under its justification as scientific progress. He also came to the conclusion that it was not just Nazi acts that victimized the deaf, but that many deaf institutions collaborated with the Nazi regime as well.

Institutions such as schools for the deaf, as well as religious factions are known to have turned in deaf members of the German community. In a letter to deaf congregants from the Reich Union of Pastors of the Protestant Deaf, the protestant officials stated:

The authorities have ordered that whoever is hereditarily diseased shall have no more children in the future, for our German fatherland needs healthy and sound persons... And you, dear friend, you are afflicted with deafness. How burdensome it is!... And how unhappy your parents must often have been, when they first learned you could not hear...

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<sup>23</sup> Evans, 108.

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix 1 for copy of the original questionnaire.  
Biesold 171-172.

<sup>25</sup> Biesold, 40.



But think it over for a moment: do you want to be responsible for deafness being inherited even further in the future? ...Now this is where the authorities want to help you. They want to protect you from transmitting your affliction...obey the authorities. Obey even when it is difficult for you. We know that all things turn out for the best for those who love God.<sup>26</sup>

By taking advantage of religious authority, there is an implication that all who are deaf must willingly go and obey the authority of law and hand over their bodies for sterilization.

Additionally, schools encouraged deaf individuals to seek medical attention and sterilization.

Gotthold Lehmann, Principal and director of a deaf teacher training program, proposed that several eugenic-related topics should be used in the instruction of teachers for the deaf. This curriculum that he invited was in close affiliation with that of the Nazi regime and use of sterilization. Lehman was a member of the National Socialist Teachers Confederation, and strongly encouraged parents of his deaf students, through various forms such as letter writing, to consent to their children's sterilization. He would still the anxieties of the parents by arguing that the experience of sterilization could be positive and rewarding.<sup>27</sup>

Friedman, in an account of the disabled during the Holocaust, conducted an interview with Franziska, a deaf girl who was given a letter from her teachers informing her that she needed to go to her local hospital to be sterilized. Franziska accounts that her family tried to protest this call, but were halted by threats of death if they did not follow Hitler's orders. In turn, Franziska had the procedure to make her sterile; she described it as one of great pain. Left with feelings of anxiety and depression, Franziska soon found herself to be pregnant. When her doctors realized that she had been sterilized and had still become pregnant they forced her to have an abortion and undergo a second procedure of sterilization. Her experience was not uncommon; often sterilization procedures failed and resulted in forced abortions. Although

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<sup>26</sup> Biesold, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Biesold, 45.

Franziska said she later went on to lead a normal life, she was always saddened knowing her choice to have children had been painfully taken away.<sup>28</sup>

This stage of sterilization however, did not last long. In a discussion with the Reich Physicians' Leader, a question arose as to what to do with the disabled patients in private sector care "...Hitler said that the question of 'euthanasia' would be taken up 'in the event of war' as 'such a problem would be more easily solved in war-time.'"<sup>29</sup> The sterilization act with the onset of the Second World War, hence forth, moved to a more dramatic enforcement of eugenics: euthanasia. The killing program which began in 1939 was justified with the ideas that compassion led to the need for eugenics, as well as that eugenics would solve economic dilemmas: that had been strained due to finances allocated to the disabled community.<sup>30</sup>

Action T-4, named after the address of where the operation began, *Tiergartenstrasse 4*, elected officials which "...moved quickly to institutionalize the authority Hitler had given them. They appointed between ten and fifteen doctors chosen for their 'political reliability' to act as assessors"<sup>31</sup> and assert their personal assessments of disabled patients and determine whether or not physicians should enable killings of these individuals. In October 1939, Hitler signed an authorization for the killings of disabled patients. This authorization "...was not an order, nor did it have any legal basis at all."<sup>32</sup> However, it was used to persuade doctors and civil servants to participate in the program with the assumption that Hitler had authorized the killings.

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<sup>28</sup> Friedman, 67-76.

<sup>29</sup> Pine, 132.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Gregory Gallagher, "Holocaust: Disabled Peoples," in *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views*, eds. Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Isreal W. Charny, 208-220 (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Hugh Gregory Gallagher, "Holocaust: Disabled Peoples," in *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views*, eds. Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Isreal W. Charny, 208-220 (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1997).

<sup>32</sup> Pine, 133.

The final step in the destruction of the deaf was their incorporation into the Jewish Final Solution. “The T-4 centers were thereafter used to kill concentration camp prisoners.”<sup>33</sup> This program of systematic killing of the disabled expanded into Poland and occupied Soviet Union where German public opinion did not matter; however, it did still continue under radar in Germany itself. Through propaganda, Nazis had the German public believing that the services they were providing to the disabled included a painless death. Regardless of this public façade, inside the hospitals and institutions, patient’s experienced forms of “...neglect, abuse and physical and psychological trauma at the hands of doctors, nurses, and other health care workers.”<sup>34</sup> The continuation and creations of these mass killings centers came to look more similar to concentration camps, and the abusive treatment of the deaf became known as “wild euthanasia.”<sup>35</sup>

Although there has been speculation as to whether or not the deaf community of the 1930s and early 1940s are legally valid victims of genocide, the evidence suggesting the deaf and disabled as victims to embedded notions of racial hygiene and eugenics during the Holocaust is overwhelming. Henceforth, the deaf community should and can now be more prominently acknowledged. Although there is still a wide debate on adding disabilities as a field of study in par to race, class and gender, scholars have begun to take initiative to sort through documents on the Holocaust, and conduct new studies in order to acknowledge this community of disabled people and not allow genocide of this nature to occur again.

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<sup>33</sup> Biesold, 10-11.

<sup>34</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 88.

<sup>35</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 88; Biesold, 11 and 64.

Appendix 1: The Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE

(This questionnaire will be kept by Herr H. Biesold.  
Your name will not be release: that is against the law.)

1. Last Name \_\_\_\_\_
2. First Name \_\_\_\_\_
3. Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_
4. Place of Birth \_\_\_\_\_
5. Place of residence from 1933-1945 \_\_\_\_\_
6. Present residence \_\_\_\_\_
7. May Herr Biesold call on you\* He can sign. \_\_\_\_\_
8. Which institution did you attend? \_\_\_\_\_
9. During what period? From 19 \_\_\_\_\_ to 19 \_\_\_\_\_
10. Occupation \_\_\_\_\_
11. Were you sterilized\* \_\_\_\_\_
12. When? \_\_\_\_\_ 19 \_\_\_\_\_
13. Where (city)
14. Who reported on you? Underline the correct agency or person below:  
School (institution) for the deaf      family member      relatives  
Neighbors      political party (National Socialists)      school doctor  
Ear doctor      teacher      supervisor      health authority
15. Are you married?\* \_\_\_\_\_
16. Did the Nazi authorities force you to be sterilized (make threats, say that you had to, etc.)?\*
17. Who wrote the threatening letter? Underline the correct agency or person below  
Party (Nazi)      health authority      school (institution)  
Physician at a hospital      law court

*Please answer the questions on the other side!*

18. Did the police come and take you to the hospital? \_\_\_\_\_

19. Do you still suffer pain from the sterilization operation? \_\_\_\_\_

20. Mental pain (are you often sad, do you feel lonely without children)?\*  
\_\_\_\_\_

21. Physical pain?\* \_\_\_\_\_

22. Where does it hurt in your body? \_\_\_\_\_

23. Below you can write in other comments, tell about other horrible experiences (for example, a Nazi doctor first killed the baby I was carrying).  
\_\_\_\_\_

24. Have you previously applied for compensation?\* \_\_\_\_\_

When? \_\_\_\_\_ 19 \_\_\_\_\_

Where? \_\_\_\_\_

25. Did you know other deaf persons (including mentally retarded deaf persons) who were done away with (killed, murdered) by the Nazis? Please include the names of the deaf Jews who were deported and killed.

Last name \_\_\_\_\_ First name \_\_\_\_\_

Previous school/institution \_\_\_\_\_

Where were they killed (for example, district hospitals and care facilities in Hadamar, Emmendingen, Munster; Auschwitz concentration camp; etc.)?  
\_\_\_\_\_

When were they killed (approximately) \_\_\_\_\_ 19 \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer “yes” or “no” to questions followed by a star (\*)

Place, Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

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