

Book Review

Title: *Deaf People in Hitler's Europe*

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Reviewer: Beth Omansky

An unexpected bonus of *Deaf People in Hitler's Europe* is that it records Nazi policies and treatment of all disabled people, not just deaf people, as the title might lead one to believe. This edited reader is divided into four sections: Racial Hygiene; The German Experience; The Jewish Deaf Experience, and Concluding Thoughts. Each section contains an introductory essay by one of the editors followed by writings of various contributors. This book is a fine addition to the small but growing body of evidence about how disabled people were treated in the Holocaust.

The first section provides a thorough historical report about the T-4 program, the result of a symbiotic partnership between legislative, military, and medical branches of the German government. Under the guise of supposedly compassionate "euthanasia," T-4 "killing centers" were housed in psychiatric hospitals where methods of mass genocide were devised, tested, and perfected on "those not worthy of life" (p. 23). In 1939-1940, 80,000 disabled people were killed in T-4 hospitals.

In the sections about the treatment of deaf people specifically, we learn this history is full of contradictions. A film made in 1932, *Verkannte Menschen (Misjudged People)* by Wilhelm Ballier, championed the rights of deaf Germans. This was the last time during that era deaf people were portrayed in positive ways. Early on in the rise of Nazism, some deaf people formed their own community through sign language, but these groups, along with formal Deaf organizations were subsumed into the Nazi Association of Deaf People, the REGEDE (the Reich Union of the Deaf of Germany). Many deaf people were forcibly sterilized while others profited socially by supporting the Nazi effort and being ranking members of REGEDE.

The authors provide a mostly balanced view, not shying away from chronicling negative actions of the deaf community, e.g., deaf Germans betraying deaf Jews. However, Heberer (2002) writes what could be interpreted as an apologist explanation as to why some deaf people turned deaf Jews over to the Nazis, explaining they did not have access to much news, and dismissed anti-Nazi information as enemy propaganda.

As the climate of hate worsened, teachers of the deaf reported their students for sterilization or abortion in compliance with the 1933 and 1935 racial hygiene laws, which declared Jews, Gypsies, and disabled people to be "unfit" (Friedlander, 2002, p. 31). As

time went on, deaf people were targeted for sterilization, marriage prohibitions, and death.

A salient theme for all to remember, and a particular point of interest to disability studies is that the German medical community was more than compliant in the abominations of what the Nazis sometimes referred to as “applied biology” (p. 34). In fact, doctors were leaders in the Nazi movement in larger percentages than any other profession. Those in the current disability movement who question the merits of genetic screening, the Human Genome Project, etc. might be interested to know the Nazis had genetic counseling centers to help screen for hereditary impairments. The marriage of eugenics with national socialism proved fatal to nearly 12 million people.

The third section of the book poignantly records how deaf Jews were dealt with by the Nazis, and how they were assisted by hearing Jews in concentration camps. The final section of *Deaf People* calls for more research into the contradictory history of Deaf people in the Holocaust. Despite some overlaps in information from chapter to chapter, this book is a good source of information about disability and the Holocaust. Anyone who is interested in Deaf Studies, eugenics, Holocaust Studies, the treatment of minority groups, in general, or in disability as a category of Otherness will find this a worthwhile addition to their library.

References

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