

Book Review

Title: *Forgotten Crimes: The Holocaust and People with Disabilities*

Author: Suzanne E. Evans

Publisher: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2004

Cloth, ISBN: 1-56663-565-9, 224 pp.

Cost: \$26.00 USD

Reviewer: Fred Pelka

Forgotten Crimes: The Holocaust and People with Disabilities recounts in brutal detail the history of the Nazi campaign of extermination against Europeans with disabilities. The volume comes out of the Disability Holocaust Project, established “to shatter the silence that has surrounded the fate of people with disabilities during the Holocaust,” to heighten “public awareness about the current desperate plight of people with disabilities” around the world, and “to relate pre-Holocaust Nazi concepts to pernicious contemporary attitudes and enhance awareness of the existing stigmatization of people with disabilities” (p. 5).

Written by Suzanne E. Evans, a lawyer, journalist, and historian, the book traces how the Nazis were able, in only six years, to murder perhaps three quarters of a million Europeans with disabilities. So widespread were the killings that entire disability communities were virtually swept out of existence. “The deaf community of Germany has yet to recover fully from its almost complete annihilation by the Nazis” (p. 126). Evans also traces how this initial campaign became the model for the subsequent murder of millions of Jews, Roma, gays, and other “undesirables.” The use of gas chambers as weapons of mass extermination, for example, was first tried on adults and children with disabilities. Physicians, nurses, and other “helping professionals” were not only co-opted into serving genocide, but were in fact often the instigators of some of the worst atrocities against people with disabilities, including the use of children for pseudo-scientific experiments. After the war the “overwhelming majority of the participants in the disability killing programs quietly escaped punishment,” (p. 146) while disabled victims of Nazi atrocities have yet to receive formal compensation or even official recognition for their suffering.

Though the book describes events that took place in Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, its discussion of attitudes toward people with disabilities is relevant today, particularly given the resurgence of eugenics and the controversy over physician-assisted suicide. As Bengt Lindqvist writes in his introduction, “In a world where the deliberate medical killing of a newborn, solely because of the infant’s disability, is a matter of serious discussion as an ‘ethical’ issue among both academics and physicians, the Nazi experience cannot be ignored or forgotten” (p. 11).

Forgotten Crimes would be a valuable aid to any college level disability studies or general holocaust studies curriculum.

