

Finding Ivy

a life worthy of life

The British-born victims of the Nazi war on disabled people



Ivy Angerer, a British-born victim of Aktion T4, murdered at Hartheim, Austria. Source: personal archives of the Angerer family. Date and photographer unknown.

From 1940-1941 around 70,000 adults with mental or physical disabilities living in institutions across Germany and Austria were systematically killed under a Nazi-led programme called 'die Aktion' or 'Eu-Aktion', which after World War Two became known as 'Aktion T4'. The victims were deemed to have “lives unworthy of life” and were “useless eaters”, a term used to describe their inability to work and thus meaningfully contribute to society. Whilst the killings were stylised as mercy deaths, they were in fact murderous actions directed at people considered to have little or no societal value, whose care was seen to constitute an unnecessary economic burden.

The killings were carried out in a very systematic and highly organised way by doctors, nurses and civilian ancillary staff. The perpetrators were voluntary participants, willingly carrying out the directions of the Nazi state. Their targets were the ‘mentally deficient’, the mentally ill and people with physical or sensory impairments.

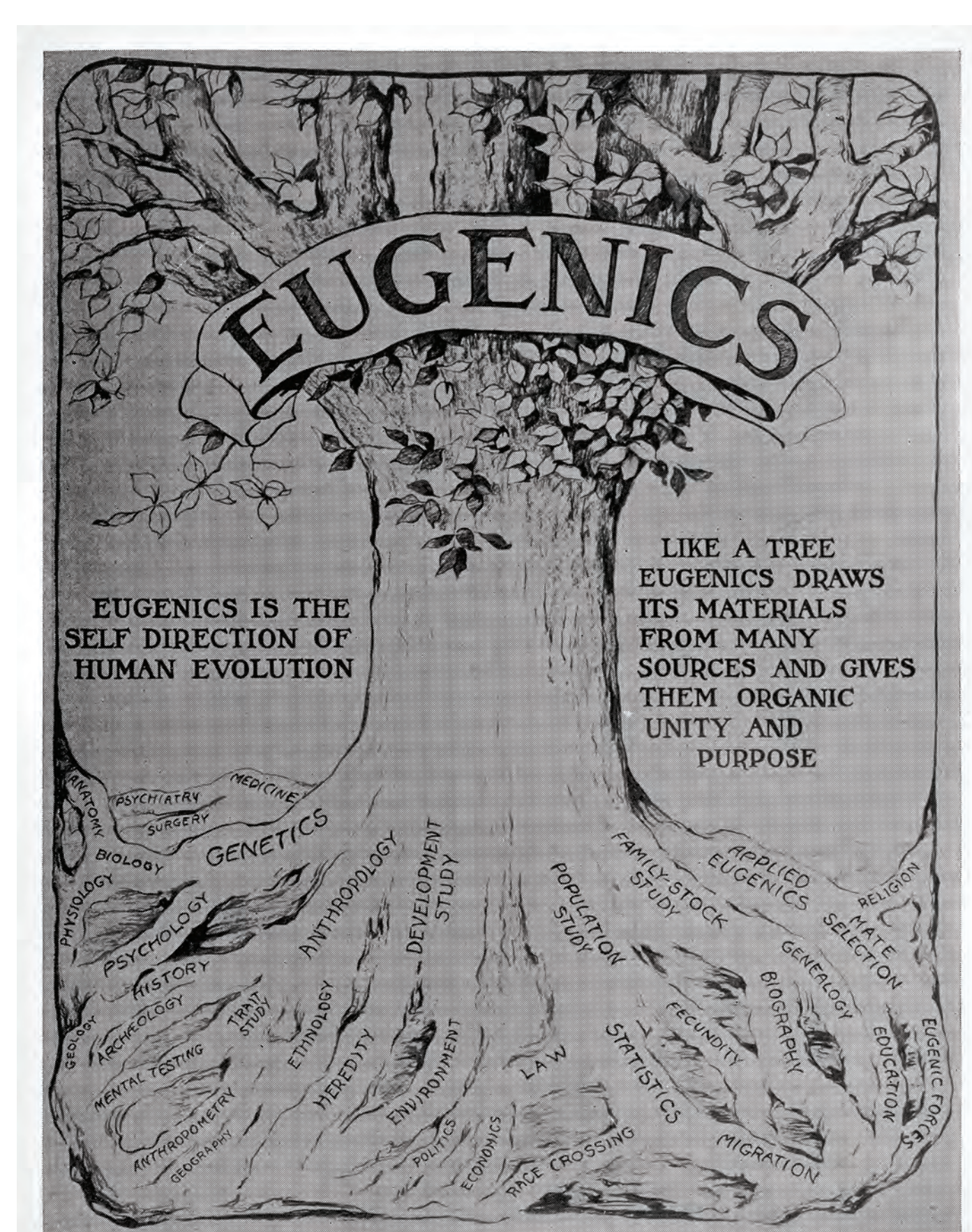
Nazi ideology adopted the ‘science’ of eugenics (meaning ‘good birth’), which argued that people who were physically or mentally impaired ‘polluted’ the race; unless removed from society and prevented from ‘breeding’ they posed a threat to the future of civilization.

Eugenic thinking originated in Britain in the late nineteenth century and was quickly and enthusiastically adopted by influential followers in the United States and Europe. It was supported across the ideological spectrum, on both the left and right. Eugenic theory was used by the Nazi state as a justification for the extermination of humans deemed ‘unfit’.

The fatal collision of the science of eugenics and the fascist ideology of Nazism was a disaster for disabled people in Germany and Austria. The murderous nature of the Nazi regime meant that there were no qualms about carrying out mass killings of those deemed unfit to live, in the quest for an Aryan utopia.

This Anglo-Austrian-German research project has uncovered a previously unacknowledged aspect of the history of Aktion T4: 13 of its victims were born in Great Britain. Most were the sons or daughters of German or Austrian immigrants working in Britain at the time of their births, and who had returned to their homelands before the Second World War. Others were from wealthy Anglo-German or Anglo-Austrian families who moved between countries.

Through painstaking research, we have uncovered the personal stories of these victims for the very first time. In sharing them through this exhibition we have endeavoured to facilitate an act of remembrance whilst restoring the dignity and respect that these people have been deprived of for too long. We also hope that the exhibition will serve as both a warning and an educational tool for the future.



THIRD INTERNATIONAL EUGENICS CONGRESS, NEW YORK CITY, AUGUST 21-23, 1932
Introductory Wall Panel "The Relation of Eugenics to Other Sciences," based on a paper by Dr. Harry H. Laughlin, Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, New York

Introductory wall panel 'The Relation of Eugenics to Other Sciences' used in the 3rd International Congress of Eugenics (1932) Source: Wellcome Collection.



The Proliferation of the Unfit, Volk und Rasse, August 1936.



A poster entitled 'Hier trägst Du mit' (Here you Contribute) used as an illustration in the German publication 'Biologie für höhere Schulen' (Biology for Secondary Schools) by Jakob Graf (circa 1940)

The Killing Programme



Brandenburg

View of a cell building and the prison barn of the old Brandenburg an der Havel penitentiary, around 1900. Source/copyright: Archiv der Gedenkstätte Brandenburg an der Havel.



Sonnenstein

The Sonnenstein killing centre in the winter of 1940/41. In the background, in the centre, house C 16, the site of the Aktion T4 mass murders. Source/copyright: Archiv der Gedenkstätte Pirna-Sonnenstein.



Bernburg

The killing building of the asylum in Bernburg, 2006. Source: Wikicommons.



Hartheim

Schloss Hartheim showing the garage where the buses entered the castle. Source/copyright: Hartheim Memorial Centre. Date unknown.



Hadamar

Hadamar killing centre with rising smoke from crematorium 1941. Photo presumably by Wilhelm Reusch. Source/copyright: Gedenkstätte Hadamar, Sammlung, FS 4.



Grafeneck

Shed in which the gas chamber in Grafeneck was located. Source/copyright: Gedenkstätte Grafeneck. Date unknown.



Selection for death was based on the assessment of an individual in terms of diagnosis, prognosis and ability to work. From its headquarters at Tiergartenstrasse 4 in Berlin (hence ‘T4’) the programme asked teams of doctors to examine brief assessment forms completed by the personnel of care homes, psychiatric hospitals and other forms of institution. Despite never meeting any of the people, the doctors selected those seen as unfit to live, marking the assessment paper with a ‘+’ sign.

These people were then systematically collected in groups from their institutions by ‘community transport’ buses with darkened windows, which took them to one of the six sites in Germany or Austria converted into specialist killing centres. Five were former hospitals and one a former prison. They had been told they were moving to a new home.

On arrival they were asked to put aside their possessions. They were then undressed, examined and assisted by nurses to enter ‘shower rooms’. These were actually gas chambers.

Once they were all inside and the room sealed, a white-coated doctor would turn on the gas taps from outside. The victims were observed through a spy hole or window by staff until all had died. Their bodies were then cremated, their ashes thrown away. Relatives were sent spurious death certificates, often citing the incorrect place of death, and stating that their family member had died of natural causes.

Although the programme was carried out with high levels of deception and secrecy, it soon became apparent to the public, and to families, what was happening. In the areas surrounding the killing centres people noticed the buses entering full of people and leaving empty. They observed the smoke pouring from the crematorium chimneys. Relatives saw through the faked death certificates and the fabricated stories about their family member’s death.

Remarkably, there was a level of public resistance and criticism of the Nazi regime’s actions, led in some areas by the Catholic church. In the face of this Hitler brought an end to the official programme in 1941, although killings by other means such as lethal injection, deliberate neglect, starvation and freezing continued right up to the end of the war, and even in its immediate aftermath.

By the end of the official programme in 1941, around 70,000 individuals had been killed. Tens of thousands more died in the following years.



Transportation of victims to the killing centres was via special ‘community transport’ buses. Source/copyright: Hartheim Memorial Centre. Date and photographer unknown.



The restored gas chamber section at Hartheim, today a site of memorial to honour those who were killed there. Source/copyright Hartheim Memorial Centre.

Aftermath



Brandenburg Memorial Centre

Aktion T4 was seen by the Nazi leadership as a highly effective system of mass killing. It would be replicated on a much larger scale in the Holocaust. In some cases, gas chambers at T4 killing centres were dismantled and shipped to Poland, to be rebuilt and used for the mass killing of Jews and others. T4 learning was also built into the methods of the Holocaust, such as deception to maintain a calm environment. Killing centres were moved to occupied countries outside the Reich to avoid public opposition. Some staff involved in Aktion T4 became leading figures in the implementation of the Holocaust.

After 1945, as the horrors of Nazi action against disabled people were uncovered, a small number of perpetrators were brought to justice and either hung or imprisoned. However, others were acquitted on the grounds they had followed orders; most were not prosecuted at all. Many continued to work in the post-Nazi state as nurses or doctors, some in leading positions.

While eugenic science became discredited in the United States and Europe because of the horrors it had spawned under Nazism, eugenic thinking did not go away, particularly in the medical profession, and has sometimes emerged in new guises. Somehow the idea that disabled people are not fully human has proved remarkably resilient in some circles.

Parallels still exist between eugenic science and contemporary societies' treatment of their most vulnerable members. There are some widely established and accepted medical practices that arguably have eugenic undertones, and these include pre-natal testing, the abortion of disabled fetuses and the denial of life-saving treatment based on type and level of disability. Ongoing developments in the field of genetics and genomics are also often based on the premise that disability of any kind is to be avoided and prevented at any cost.

We should all reflect on the historical shadows that inform these modern practices.

Lastly, what of those who died? The Nazis considered people with disabilities as worthless people, living useless lives. This exhibition has attempted to show the full and rich lives that each individual lived, amongst their families and communities, whatever the difficulties they faced. Many relatives, descendants of those who died, have enthusiastically helped us to treasure and tell the stories of their family members. The victims were not forgotten outcasts. They were people who are still loved, cherished and remembered.

It was their killers who lived worthless lives.



Irmgard Huber, the former chief nurse at the Hadamar Institute, confers with counsel during a session of the Hadamar euthanasia facility trial in Wiesbaden, Germany (1945)
Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.



Martha Caselton's grandson Günter Ahler in 1952.
Source: Personal archives of Günter Ahlers. Photographer unknown.



Martha's Grandson, Günter Ahlers and his wife (2023)
Source: archive of 'Euthanasia' - Memorial Museum of Lüneburg. Photographer: Dr Carola Rudnick.



What does the future hold?
Photographer: Fiona Yaron Field, Wellcome Collection