EUTHANASIA IN NAZI GERMANY

PHIL-422-01
PHIL-522-01

Goal

This new course will explore how approximately 300,000 people with disabilities were murdered in a program that deceptively claimed to provide its victims with a “good death.”

Overview

The content of this course will be divided into four major sections: (1) the plight of German institutionalized patients after World War I and initial discussions of “euthanasia” (1918-1933); (2) Hitler’s views about people with disabilities; the Nazi eugenic sterilization program; and cost-saving measures introduced at the expense of institutionalized people (1933-1939); (3) the Nazi “euthanasia” programs for “Aryan” children and adults, as well as for other targeted groups (1939-1945); and (4) post-war trials of participants in Nazi “euthanasia” (1945-1950).

We will begin by looking at the situation in German institutions for the mentally ill and intellectually disabled after World War I. A key document from this time was a short book published in 1920 and entitled Permission for the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life. This book was written by lawyer Karl Binding and physician Albert Hoche. We will read an English translation of this book. We will follow up by reviewing the results of an opinion survey published in 1925 by asylum administrator, Ewald Meltzer.

After Adolf Hitler’s accession to power in early 1933, the campaign against people with intellectual disabilities and mental illness gradually escalated. We will examine several of Hitler’s statements about disabled people, then briefly review the eugenic sterilization program launched in Germany in January 1934. We will also examine cutbacks in expenditures for institutionalized disabled people in the later 1930s, as the German economy was militarized. One result of these cutbacks was an increase in mortality rates among residents of institutions.
The direct killing of institutionalized people began under cover of war in the last four months of 1939. Both Polish and German and patients were caught in the initial wave of killing. Almost simultaneously, a special “euthanasia” program for children with disabilities was instituted. Beginning in January 1940, a centralized adult “euthanasia” program (called T-4) was organized in Berlin and carried out in six killing centers scattered throughout the German Reich. When this program was criticized by several opponents, it was officially “stopped” in August 1941. However, systematic killing programs for both children and adults continued unabated, but in a more decentralized fashion, through the end of World War II.

We will attempt to understand how “euthanasia” was employed at various stages between 1939 and 1945 and to study what means were employed in the effort to deceive family members of patients as well as the general public. We will also examine the arguments put forward by proponents of “euthanasia,” attempts to provide a legal basis for the program, and the arguments put forward by its opponents.

After 1945 both U.S. military tribunals and courts in the eastern and western zones of Germany (later the German Democratic Republic and the German Federal Republic) sought to try the major participants in the “euthanasia” program. We will look, in particular, at the Nuremberg Medical Trial.

Guests

The author of the principal U.S. book on euthanasia, now retired, will be invited to participate in a session of this seminar. We will also discuss the challenges of raising a child with intellectual disabilities with a parent of an affected child.

General Requirements

Weekly readings; periodic journals; a field trip; a biographical presentation based on the life of a perpetrator, opponent, or victim of “euthanasia”; and a final term paper. There is no final examination.

Textbooks


**Brief Outline**

**Week 1 (January 11):** Introduction to the course

**Week 2 (January 16 and 18):** Primary-source overview: Noakes and Pridham

**Week 3 (January 23 and 25):** Primary sources: Adolf Hitler’s advocacy; Paul Braune’s opposition

**Week 4 (January 30 and February 1):** Secondary-source interpretation: Burleigh I

**Week 5 (February 6 and 8):** Secondary-source interpretation: Burleigh II

**Week 6 (February 13 and 15):** Secondary-source interpretation: Burleigh III

**Week 7 (February 20 and 22):** Secondary-source interpretation: Burleigh IV

**Week 8 (February 27 and March 1):** Two recent essays: Browning and Schmidt

**Spring Break**

**Week 9 (March 13 and 15):** Critical analyses: Aly and Aly and Roth

**Week 10 (March 20 and 22):** Secondary-source interpretation: Friedlander I

**Week 11 (March 27 and 29):** Secondary-source interpretation: Friedlander II

**Week 12 (April 3 [Passover] and Easter Break):** Secondary-source interpretation: Friedlander III

**Week 13 (April 10 and 12):** Secondary-source interpretation: Friedlander IV

**Week 14 (April 17 and 19):** Primary source: The Nuremberg Medical Trial

**Week 15 (April 24 and 26):** Evaluating the past; learning for the future
Required Readings

Week 1 (January 11): Introduction to the course

Week 2 (January 16 and 18): Primary-source overview: Noakes and Pridham

   January 16: Noakes and Pridham, pp. 389-413
   January 18: Noakes and Pridham, pp. 413-440

Week 3 (January 23 and 25): Primary sources: Adolf Hitler’s advocacy; Paul Braune’s opposition

   January 23: Hitler on the treatment of people with disabilities
       *Readings to be provided
   January 25: Paul Braune’s memorandum on patient transfers
       *Reading to be provided

Week 4 (January 30 and February 1): Secondary-source interpretation: Burleigh I

   January 30
       Burleigh, DD, pp. 1-42.
   February 1
       Burleigh, DD, pp. 43-90.

Week 5 (February 6 and 8): Secondary-source interpretation: Burleigh II

   February 6
       Burleigh, DD, pp. 93-129.
   February 8
       Burleigh, DD, pp. 130-180.
Week 6 (February 13 and 15): Secondary-source interpretation: Burleigh III

February 13
Burleigh, DD, pp. 183-237.

February 15
Burleigh, DD, pp. 238-266.

Week 7 (February 20 and 22): Secondary-source interpretation: Burleigh IV

February 20
Burleigh, EE, pp. 113-129.

February 22
Burleigh, EE, pp. 130-141.

Week 8 (February 27 and March 1): Two recent essays: Browning and Schmidt

February 27

March 1
Ulf Schmidt, “Reassessing the Beginning of the ‘Euthanasia’ Programme” (1999)

Spring Break

Week 9 (March 13 and 15): Critical analyses: Aly and Aly and Roth

March 13

March 15
Götz Aly and Karl Heinz Roth, “The Legalization of Mercy Killings in Medical and Nursing Institutions in Nazi Germany from 1938 until 1941: A Commented Documentation”
Week 10 (March 20 and 22): Secondary-source interpretation: Friedlander I

March 20

Friedlander, pp. 1-38.

March 22

Friedlander, pp. 39-85.

Week 11 (March 27 and 29): Secondary-source interpretation: Friedlander II

March 27

Friedlander, pp. 86-135.

March 29

Friedlander, pp. 136-186.

Week 12 (April 3 [Passover] and Easter Break): Secondary-source interpretation: Friedlander III

April 3 [Passover]: Note: An alternative time for this class session will be available if you celebrate Passover.

Friedlander, pp. 187-216.

No class on Thursday because of Easter Break

Week 13 (April 10 and 12): Secondary-source interpretation: Friedlander IV

April 10

Friedlander, pp. 216-262.

April 12

Friedlander, pp. 263-302.
Week 14 (April 17 and 19): Primary source: The Nuremberg Medical Trial

April 17
*Readings to be distributed

April 19
*Readings to be distributed

Week 15 (April 24 and 26): Evaluating the past; learning for the future

April 24
*Readings to be announced

April 26
No new readings
Course Requirements

The most important requirement for the course is the timely, thoughtful, and critical reading of the assigned primary or secondary sources in advance of the seminar session at which they will be discussed. In general, the reading assignment for a class session will not exceed 50 pages.

Each student will be asked to write a weekly one- or two-page journal in which he or she reacts briefly to the current week’s readings, notes unanswered questions, and generalizes about the readings and/or topics covered to date in the course. The weekly journals should be handed in at each week’s Thursday class session.

Each student will also be asked to assume the character of one of the actors in the history of Nazi “euthanasia.” The actor can be a perpetrator, a victim, or an opponent of “euthanasia.” The autobiographical sketch will be presented in class and submitted in written form. It should not exceed five pages. The major sources that you have used should be listed at the end of the paper. The deadlines for these autobiographical sketches will individualized and will be set during an early class session.

Each student will also be asked to make a visit to a site that is, or can be, related to “euthanasia.” This site visit may be to a library or an archive (for example, the National Archives or the library of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum), to an institution that cares for people with intellectual disabilities and/or mental illness, to a person who cares for someone with a disability, to a professional who treats people with disabilities, or to a disabled person her- or himself. The site visit report should be no longer than five pages. It is due on Thursday, March 1st.

There will be one major writing assignment, a final term paper. This paper can review a book or article not assigned in the course, critique one or more readings assigned in the course, or discuss a topic of your choice. A topic and a list of readings to be used will be due on Thursday, March 22nd. A draft of the paper should be submitted by Thursday, April 19th, if you wish to receive critical feedback on a first draft. The final paper is due on Tuesday, May 8th, 12 days after the last seminar session.

The final paper should be approximately 15 double-spaced pages long for undergraduates or 25 pages long for graduate students. This paper should demonstrate your ability to think and argue philosophically about an ethical dimension of the “euthanasia” program.

There is no final examination in this course.

The components of the final grade will be as follows:

   Final term paper: 35%

   Thoroughness and timeliness of completing reading assignments, as reflected in class participation and journals: 25%
Autobiographical sketch: 20%

Site visit report: 20%

Having encountered and reported instances of plagiarism three times since 2001, I would urge every member of the class to be scrupulous about citing and quoting the work of others. Concretely, if you use five or more consecutive words from an author, please place those words in quotation marks and acknowledge the author at the end of the sentence where the quotation appears. If you paraphrase an author’s ideas, please acknowledge your indebtedness to the author at the end of the sentence containing the paraphrase.

Please review the guidance of the Honor Council’s handbook regarding proper citation of sources. If you complete all assignments on time and submit your own work, you cannot fail this course. If you fail to acknowledge the writings of others properly, both you and I are likely to go through an Honor Council review, and you are at risk of receiving the grade of F for the course.

If you discover that you will need to be absent from a class session, please notify me of that fact in advance. If you find that you are going to have trouble meeting the deadline for a written assignment, please send me an e-mail message in advance of the deadline, and we will try to work out an alternative deadline that is compatible with your current circumstances. Papers that are submitted late without your having made these arrangements in advance will be penalized.

Again, and on a more positive note, the success of this course will depend primarily on your having read and thought carefully about the readings for the week’s seminar session. Please analyze the readings, trying to place them in their historical context. Also, please compare and contrast the primary and secondary sources as you read them.

My hope is that all of us in the course can learn something about what it means to accept moral responsibility, especially when such an acceptance comes into conflict with our own interests or career plans. On the other hand, we will during this course discover how easy it is to become a bystander – never directly harming others but nonetheless remaining silent and doing nothing when we would potentially have been able to help.