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Cleansing the Fatherland: Nazi Medicine and Racial Hygiene

Götz Aly, Peter Chroust, Christian Pross

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"The chapters in this volume painfully drive home the point that certainly as far as Germany is concerned, the lessons of the Third Reich have not yet been learned... These significant attempts by younger recruits to the larger medical establishment to change things through eye-opening reflection and analysis, however uncomfortable, need support."?Michael H. Kater, author of *Doctors under Hitler*, in the foreword.

The infamous Nuremberg Doctors' Trials of 1946-47 revealed horrifying crimes ?ranging from grotesque medical experiments on humans to mass murder?committed by physicians and other health care workers in Nazi Germany. But far more common, argue the authors of *Cleansing the Fatherland*, were the doctors who profited professionally and financially from the killings but were never called to task?and, indeed, were actively shielded by colleagues in postwar German medical organizations.

The authors examine the role of German physicians in such infamous operations as the "T 4" euthanasia program (code-named for the Berlin address of its headquarters at Number 4 Tiergartenstrasse). They also reveal details of countless lesser known killings?all ordered by doctors and all in the name of public health. Maladjusted adolescents, the handicapped, foreign laborers too illto work, even German civilians who suffered mental breakdowns after air raids were "selected for treatment." (One physician who persisted in speaking of "killings" was officially reprimanded for his "negative attitude.")

The book also includes original documents?never before published in English?that give unique and chilling insight into the everyday workings of Nazi medicine. Among them:

• Minutes from a 1940 meeting of the Conference of German Mayors, at which a Nazi official gives the assembled politicians detailed instructions for the secret burial of murdered mental patients.

• A pre-Nazi era questionnaire sent by the head of a state mental institution to parents of disabled children. (Sample question: "Would you agree to a painless shortening of your child's life after an expert had determined him incurably imbecilic?" Sample answer: "Yes, but I would prefer not to know.")

• The diary of Dr. Hermann Voss, chief anatomist at the Reichs University of Posen (and later a highly respected physician in postwar Germany), who delights in the flowers blooming outside his window and worries that the overstock of Polish cadavers from his Gestapo suppliers might cause his crematory oven to break down.

• Letters of Dr. Friedrich Mennecke, director of the notorious Eichberg Clinic, who writes with cloying sentimentality to the wife he calls "mommy" and comments offhandedly about visiting concentration camps to select "patients" for death.

Today, as reports of mass death in Europe are once again cast in terms of public hygiene, and as euthanasia is advocated?even applauded?on U.S. television, the relevance of what Michael H.Kater here calls "the lessons of the Third Reich" is perhaps greater than ever. Against this background, *Cleansing the Fatherland* sends a stark message that is difficult to ignore.

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