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Silent Witness

The Children of Hitler's Germany

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Title: Social Eugenics practices with Children in Hitler's Nazi Germany and the role of social work 1937-1945.

Key Words: Social work, Nazi social policy, Nazi Germany, ethics

Abstract

This paper will explore the role of social work in Germany pre- and during the Nazi regime. The paper will examine the role and implications of social work in the implementation of Nazi social policy in German society and the ramifications. Moreover, the paper will examine whether social workers had a voice, in the implementation of social policy of the National Socialist Worker's Party (Nazi Party). This paper is written from the perspective of a Western Gentile reviewing the implications for social work as a profession involved in the Nazi social policies of the day and the lessons learnt. This paper is not a criticism of contemporary European social work.

Silent Witness

The Children of Hitler's Germany

1. Social Eugenics practices with Children in Hitler's Nazi Germany and the role of Social Work, 1937-1945

The senseless killing of men, women and children more than 60 years ago, haunts humanity. The Holocaust is still a thorn in our side; never far away is our sense of questioning of how humans commit such acts of evil and whether these events could be played out again.

This paper discusses the killing of children and adolescents in Nationalist Socialist (Nazi) Germany. Rogow (1998) argues that children with disabilities, orphans, juvenile delinquents and non-conformist young people in Nazi Germany were Hitler's unwanted children; subsequently Hitler ordered the killing of thousands of children who did not fit his "super race" ideal. The paper will also explore the role of social work in carrying out Hitler's social eugenics policies.

The reign of Nazi government was one of propaganda and terror for those who came under Nazi control. No one was safe: children turned against parents, friends against friends, citizen against citizen, (Rogow, 1998). Safety was ensured only for those who toed the Nazi party line. Mind control, secrecy, fear and lies ruled the tyrannical system of the Nazi movement. The climate in Nazi Germany from 1939 onwards, if not earlier, was dangerous for those who did not fit the ideal of the Aryan race. Those who did not conform to Nazi beliefs were under threat of work camps or even death. By the end of 1941 no one was safe from Hitler. If one did not have correct social genetics or did not conform to the Nazi ideals and values they were at risk. Few were safe, least of all members of the Jewish race.

From this climate of mistrust, insecurity and total dependence on the Nazi state emerged the policy of social eugenics which was also known as social hygiene. This policy was embraced by Hitler and the party to keep the "Aryan race" pure from defect and unwanted foreigners. The government determined who was fit to live and fit to reproduce. If the government determined you were not to reproduce, you were forced into a sterilization procedure (Rogow, 1998).

It was a fable that only children with severe disabilities were killed under Hitler. No child was safe. Children of foreign/inferior breeding (Jewish, Gypsy and non-white children), those with hearing or sight impairments, physical disabilities, emotional or behavioural disorders, mental health problems, intellectual disabilities and speech difficulties were all liable to be removed from caring institutions or from their families to brutal institutions which, in the most part, led to death (Rogow, 1998). Orphans, as well as teenage non-conformist and teenage delinquents, were also subject to horrific measures under Hitler's social eugenic/social hygiene policies.

This arbitrary policy could change at any time or extend further into the population. The measurement instrument used to deem a child not fit for the Aryan race was based on pseudo scientific measures, supported by faulty scientific rationale.

The removal of “defective” children from the community in Germany was developed for two reasons: firstly, as a result of the social eugenic policy of the day; and secondly, to send a message to the community that the Nazi government was in control of the public and private lives of German citizens (Peukert, 1987). Tactics of fear and control in maintaining power and authority were for the most part effective (Rogow, 1998).

Hitler and the Nazi party were experts in power and control. Opposition to their policies or criticism was not tolerated and a visit from the SS was commonplace. The belief that German parents approved of the killing of their children is challenged by hundreds of cases that were brought to the courts during that time, accusing the hospitals of negligence and causing the deaths of their children. Pre-Nazi Germany had a progressive system of rehabilitative education for children with disabilities. Germany in 1922 had an integrated approach for children with needs. Children with learning and developmental needs were integrated into community schools long before Western countries implemented this approach (Rogow, 1998). All this was reversed when Hitler came into power.

In Hitler’s Germany, Nazi bioscience and racism were common in all aspects of social, health and educational policies. Social Darwinism and eugenics claimed that social problems could be solved by preventing people with mental health problems or intellectual disabilities from having children.

Laws were implemented so that only people of genetic value (determined by the state) could marry and produce children (Peukert, 1987). Arbitrary criteria such as suspected intellectual delay, poor work habits and delinquency were used as a system of social selection. This served as a powerful message to the citizens of Germany: conform or suffer the consequences.

2.Social Eugenics and Social Work, Campaign against the Vulnerable

As early as 1943, Genetic health Courts were created for the sole purpose of enforcing Nazi health laws and decrees (Peukert, 1987). Public health officials, doctors, teachers and social workers were also required to report children who were deemed to have a disability or emotional problem (Rogow, 1998). The hunt for Hitler’s unwanted children was intense and exhaustive. Hitler was personally involved in the plan to kill children and adults with disabilities. Hitler even went so far as to make propaganda films. *Victims of the Past* was a film made to persuade the public of the necessity of eliminating children and adults with genetic defects for the good of Germany; this film was shown across Germany.

It is well documented that doctors, nurses and to a lesser extent, social workers, were involved in Germany’s social eugenics policy. Social workers worked in institutions where the children with disabilities resided. They were also given the task of seeking out children in the smaller communities and determining if they were “fit” or “unfit” to live. Stories of mothers hiding their children from the authorities including hiding from nurses and social workers were common. In the 20th Century a consistent theme of the state controlling particular minority group’s lives and determining whether, in effect, they should live or die. Social work has a stormy past in carrying out the bidding of the government, for example the “Stolen Generation”. Up until 1973 it was government policy in Australia to remove certain children from Indigenous families and relocated the children to white families or to brutal institutions.

3. Exclusion Economics and the Children

Under Hitler, special schools, residential facilities and asylums were run down and little capital invested. Money was often siphoned off for “healthy children”. For healthy children, Hitler had free summer camps, generous family allowances and public health care often paid for from money taken from special schools and institutions. From 1941 families with children with disabilities were denied family allowances, however, if the state deemed you a healthy family you were then entitled to family allowance (Rogow, 1998). This economic disadvantage served two purposes: firstly, to place pressure on the non-compliant family via withdrawing money and secondly, to send a message that the State would not support “unfit children”.

Schools were taken over by Hitler’s regime and in some locations if teachers wanted to keep their jobs they had to join the Nazi party. Teachers were controlled as to what and how they taught students. The teaching profession, once highly regarded, received little status in Hitler’s Germany (Rogow, 1998). Schools began to have a shortage of qualified teachers so the number of untrained teachers increased. The decline in the educational systems was disturbing.

What was even more disturbing was the archaic approach taken by Hitler’s residential institutions. Children with mental disabilities were sterilised without consent, boys were kept alive until they were ten, then becoming cheap slave labour for the Nazi Motherland, and those who were not selected for these jobs were killed in the gas chambers (Ziemer, 1941).

4. Forced Institutionalization

Children with disabilities and unwanted children were placed in controlled institutions, where they could be used as free labour or killed. Children as young as twelve were working full time for no pay and long hours. It was common practice to kill mental patients in order to free up a hospital bed for wounded soldiers or simply to keep the welfare costs down (Rogow, 1998). Under Hitler’s regime parents were cajoled, coerced or ultimately forced to give up their disabled children to institutions (Burleigh, 1994). Another tactic to place pressure on families to give up their children to the state was to refuse hospital care to any child with a disability. In the institutions, abuse, violence, hunger and starvation were common and the possibility of death always lingered (Burleigh, 1998).

Moreover, atrocities were carried out by members of the SS, SA, Hitler Youth and League of German Maidens, who for fun took tours of children’s institutions. These “visitors” saw the institutions as a “freak show” and participated in brutal behaviour against the children (Aly, 1993). Violence and degradation were the core values of Nazi Germany, where life was cheap if you did not conform to the “superior Aryan race” model.

5. The Euthanasia Programs in Hospitals and Institutions

Killing certain groups of children was an important priority on Hitler’s agenda. In 1939 Hitler, just a few days after the war began, passed a decree giving permission to doctors to

eliminate children (Kogon, et al 1993). It was referred to as the “Mercy deaths” or the “Program”, where children were planned as the first to go, followed by adults with disabilities (Aly, 1993). Doctors were rewarded handsomely for their involvement in these “special programs”. Despite some belief that the German public supported these killings, secrecy surrounded the euthanasia programs. The myth that children had a quick painless death is debunked by (Burleigh, 1993) as he argues that for many the children’s death was long, drawn out and painful. Experiments on children who had cerebral palsy or other neurological conditions were common in Germany during this period. Experiments while the children were conscious without any pain relief were common practice and once completed the children were “disinfected” (killed). Many a PhD student gained their degree via experiments on children under Hitler’s regime (Friedlander, 1994; Burleigh, 1994).

6. Social Work and Social Eugenics

Nazi biogenetic theory encouraged social workers and social welfare workers to attribute everything that went wrong in the programs to the genetic faults of the children in their care (Peukert, 1987). In most cases it was a “blame the victim” mentality. In reviewing the literature it is difficult to obtain a clear picture of the social work profession during this time. It could be argued that social workers were following instructions and if they did not comply with the Nazi ideology of social eugenics then punishment, loss of career and possible persecution might follow, as was the case with teaching professionals who did not toe the party line.

We can merely speculate from the literature that social eugenics was the current theory in Nazi Germany, a theory held as scientific and therefore good for the whole of humanity. Professionals believed in this questionable science and therefore accepted some of the consequences of decisions made on the basis of social eugenics theories. Failures of the social welfare system were blamed on the untreatability of the child clients, which further endorsed the social eugenics belief. One could possibly argue that social workers were the product of their time and caught up in a theory held up as scientific and good for Germany. Could it be that social workers had little real power and were only doing the work of the government’s policies? It could be argued that social workers had very little real power or opportunity to oppose the government’s policies, except when social workers resigned from their positions as some teachers did under Hitler’s rule. Some would argue that the German social workers were unethical and in breach of recognised universal social work ethics and values in their act of apathy during these periods. Contemporary social work today grapples with the issue of ensuring global social work practices are ethical and value human worth.

7. “Mercy Killings” and Secrecy

Killing disabled children extended to all of the Nazi controlled countries including Austria and Poland. The killing of children and adolescents did not stop until the Allied occupation, 21 days after Germany lost the war, May 29 1945. Among the 250 000 to 350 000 people who were murdered in Nazi euthanasia programs, at least one fourth were children and adolescents (Rogow, 1998).

Silence surrounded the slaughter of unwanted children after the end of the war. There were very few published accounts of the child murders, the doctors and nurses often continued in the same roles and hospitals where the killing had occurred (Rogow, 1998).

Although according to Rogow (1998), the Nazi victimization of vulnerable children were unique in its organisation and in its perversion of science for political gain; it is a lasting reminder of the dangers of making value judgements on human life and of separating science from humanity. The one thing that social work opposes, it colluded with. The very hour when the vulnerable needed an advocate, social workers were silent. In Hitler's Germany the prevailing attitude was that children with disabilities were valueless and demeaned by the general population. This attitude sowed the seeds of discrimination, abuse and even death. Social eugenics unchecked was lethal in Nazi Germany.

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