

**THE
HOLOCAUST
AND
HISTORY** The Known,
the Unknown, the Disputed, and
the Reexamined

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The T4 Killers

BERLIN, LUBLIN, SAN SABBA

Those studying Nazi crimes and Nazi criminals have always asked two fundamental questions: "Who committed these crimes?" and "Why did they commit them?" I shall attempt to answer these questions by examining the T4 killers.

The term "T4" designated the mass murder of the handicapped; it was euphemistically called euthanasia and was initiated on Hitler's orders in late 1939 and directed by the Chancellery of the Führer (KdF). To hide this killing operation, the KdF created various front organizations that operated from headquarters at Tiergartenstrasse 4 in Berlin, therefore known as T4. To accomplish their task, the T4 killers invented the killing center, using modern industrial methods to accomplish mass murder. They established and operated six such centers—Brandenburg, Grafeneck, Hartheim, Sonnenstein, Bernburg, and Hadamar—and murdered there more than seventy thousand German "Aryan" nationals before T4 decentralized its killings in August 1941.

The so-called euthanasia program was not the only killing operation involving the KdF and T4. The KdF was also involved, from the beginning, in the implementation of the Final Solution, the mass murder of European Jews and Gypsies. In 1942 the KdF dispatched selected members of the T4 staff to Lublin to run the killing centers of Operation Reinhard: Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Applying the methods they had invented to kill the handicapped in the Reich, the T4 killers murdered at least one and three-quarter million human beings in the Lublin camps. After the completion of Operation Reinhard in 1943, the KdF posted their men as a group to Trieste. There, in addition to other duties, the T4 contingent created a concentration camp and killing center in the Risiera di San Sabba, a former rice factory in the San Sabba district of the city of Trieste.¹

An analysis of the T4 men is particularly valuable for a variety of reasons. First, they invented, directed, and operated history's first technological killing operation. Their project—the first one Nazi Germany implemented—served as a model for all that followed. Second, most of them were amateurs with no previous killing experi-

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ence who mastered their killing profession on the job. Third, as they did not belong to any one paramilitary organization and were secretly recruited from a variety of places, they tell us a great deal about the process of selecting killers. Finally, they first murdered handicapped Germans, and later Jews and Gypsies; we therefore have to look beyond antisemitism for their ideological motivation.

One further introductory comment is warranted. These perpetrators of the Holocaust were dull and uninteresting men. Although they were competent at their jobs, most lacked imagination, had pedestrian minds, and led conventional lives. These facts emerge from their postwar testimonies, and even more clearly from the few surviving personal letters. Their writings were bureaucratic, their speeches were cliché-ridden, and their postwar testimonies evasive, insensitive, and self-pitying.

The chief perpetrators—Hitler and his intimates—set policy, but they left the implementation of mass murder to a group of managers. The careers of the T4 managers were lackluster until the Nazi revolution lifted them from obscurity. An extraordinarily small number of men managed T4: Viktor Brack (chief, KdF office II), Werner Blankenburg (Brack's deputy), Dietrich Allers (second T4 business manager), Hans-Joachim Becker (T4 accountant), Gerhard Bohne (first T4 business manager), Friedrich Haus (T4 personnel officer), Hans Hefelmann (KdF office IIb), Richard von Hegener (Hefelmann's deputy), Adolf Gustav Kaufmann (T4 inspector), Friedrich Robert Lorent (T4 finance officer), Arnold Oels (T4 personnel officer), Fritz Schmiedel (T4 finance officer), Willy Schneider (T4 finance officer), Gerhard Siebert (T4 transport officer), Friedrich Tillmann (T4 office manager), and Reinhold Vorberg (KdF office IId).² Five of them—Brack, Blankenburg, Hefelmann, von Hegener, and Vorberg—were officials of the KdF before the killings; the others came on board to help run the killing operation. But even this number is deceptive.

The managers, all born between 1900 and 1910, were unexceptional for men of their age group. Though a few had professional degrees, most had worked in business after high school. None was well established when the Nazis came to power in 1933. Although the professional careers of the T4 managers were ordinary, their past politics proved an advantage under the Nazi regime. Almost all had joined the Nazi movement in their early or middle twenties, prior to Hitler's assumption of power. Several were members of the SA, three also of the SS. Brack, the leader of the group, had the most impressive party connections: his father had delivered one of the Himmler children, and Brack had served as Himmler's driver before he worked for Philipp Bouhler. Several had been junior bureaucrats in the German civil service. Still, these young men held only auxiliary, not leading, party positions.

For these young men, jobs at the Chancellery of the Führer provided access to influence, power, and future advancement. These jobs spelled professional success. In addition, these jobs brought personal benefits. Thus Kaufmann, drafted into the navy, wanted a safe rear area job ("Druckposten") to enable him to visit his sick wife.³ Becker, who was released from military duty for poor health, did not like his wartime civilian assignment in Danzig and wanted to use his connections to get a better job.⁴ Allers had been drafted and was a noncommissioned officer stationed in Poland; he apparently did not like this low status and obtained his appointment at T4 through his mother's intervention with Blankenburg.⁵ Oels was unemployed

after his discharge wanted to leave his another job.⁷

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after his discharge from the Waffen-SS following the French campaign.⁶ Lorent, who wanted to leave his assigned post in occupied Poland, visited the KdF to get himself another job.⁷

We may ask how these men were selected. Obviously, it was not an open competition. Instead, a variety of factors determined recruitment: party credentials, availability, required skills, and—especially—nepotism. Among the KdF staff, Brack moved from driving Himmler to serving as Bouhler's adjutant; von Hegener was a brother-in-law of Hans Reiter, president of the Reich Health Office; and Vorberg was Brack's cousin. Bohne and Allers came with legal experience. Becker was a cousin of the wife of Herbert Linden, the physician in the health department of the Reich Ministry of the Interior who served as liaison with T4. Kaufmann, Lorent, Haus, Schneider, and Schmiedel were friends or acquaintances of Brack. Linden had met and recruited Tillmann. Oels's Viennese lady friend worked at Hadamar and told him to apply at T4. Siebert was a cousin of Brack and Vorberg.

Most of these men, then, were selected primarily for their loyalty to the party and to those who recruited them, but their technical knowledge, such as office management and accounting, were also qualifications. There is no evidence that those who defined the hiring requirements and who recruited were looking for expertise in killing people. Still, willingness to collaborate in a killing enterprise was a job requirement. Since the men newly hired by T4 were either relatives or friends of the KdF managers and had solid party credentials, we may assume that their willing collaboration was never in question. We know of no instance where a manager recruited by the KdF refused to join. Some left after a short period with T4, of course, but there is no evidence that they did so because they morally objected to their assignment. Rather, they simply moved on to other jobs. The departure of Gerhard Bohne in the summer of 1940 was caused by his opposition to the way the euthanasia killings were implemented, not out of moral concerns about the procedure itself. Bohne criticized the personal behavior of T4 personnel: sexual licentiousness, misuse of resources, and arrogant conduct involving local staff and visiting dignitaries at the killing centers. His aim was to improve efficiency, not to stop the killings. Bohne simply argued that "loose morals soon lead to a general decline of government service."⁸

These men were "Schreibtischtäter," bureaucratic killers, but they were not as distant from the killings as is usually assumed. Almost all visited the killing centers, saw the victims, and watched the gassing. The lawyer Dietrich Allers, the T4 business manager who married a secretary who had worked at Hartheim, visited the T4 killing centers numerous times, as well as the extermination camps in the East; in the spring of 1944 he assumed command of Sonderkommando Trieste. These managers thus knew what they were doing and had seen the final results of their actions.

Why did they agree to manage mass murder? Historians have offered a number of common sense explanations, which they have applied to the managers as well as to the rank and file who did the actual killings: authoritarianism, careerism, duress, and peer pressure.⁹

Duress does not apply.¹⁰ These men maneuvered to get their jobs and left when it became personally convenient. Peer pressure does not apply. Although there was

Kameradschaft, or esprit de corps, there was also a great deal of back-biting and infighting. Authoritarianism did play a role, because they all believed in the Führerprinzip, and they were all the Führer's men. But Hitler had first commissioned Leonardo Conti, State Secretary of Health in the Reich Ministry of the Interior, to manage the killings, and the KdF had maneuvered to get this commission away from him. It was therefore not a direct order to be obeyed but a plum to be sought.

Career considerations were undoubtedly the most important reason why the T4 managers agreed to direct the killings. A job at the KdF placed them close to the center of power. These young men had reached positions commonly considered important and influential. In addition, these jobs involved an assignment that was secret, sensitive, and significant. They operated at the center of events.

A good example of the pride generated by a mixture of careerism and authoritarianism is Hans-Heinz Schütt, a thirty-eight-year-old junior manager who served in the office at Grafeneck and later also in Sobibor. In a letter to his stepbrother on the occasion of the boy's confirmation, Schütt told him that they were living in "an age . . . never previously experienced by a German," also pointing out that "there is only one victor, and this victor will determine the future of Europe, even the entire world. And this victor is Adolf Hitler." In passing, Schütt reveals the reason his job is so attractive: he is "happy and proud," because he is a member of a Sonderkommando "known possibly only to 100 people in this large German Reich."¹¹

These jobs also involved other benefits. First, they provided a secure berth at the home front, with no stigma for all and even medals for some. Second, they provided material benefits, including monetary allowances, travel, and expense accounts. Third, they brought power over others, the right to command, and the ability to make life-and-death decisions. T4 managers exercised this power and appeared to others as arrogant men of influence.

One motivation—ideology—is missing from this analysis. Historians have argued that Nazi ideology was an important motivation that led the perpetrators to comply with murderous orders.¹² This argument is usually advanced concerning the murder of Jews and focuses on the antisemitism of the perpetrators. Obviously, antisemitism as a cause is too restrictive when applied to men who started their killing careers murdering German non-Jews. Instead we must point to the larger eugenic and racial ideology of the Nazis, one that included hostility toward the handicapped as inferior ("minderwertig") and toward Jews and Gypsies as aliens. The T4 managers undoubtedly shared this hostility toward those perceived as inferior and alien, as they shared most other tenets of Nazi ideology. After all, they were Nazis.

But most Germans shared these beliefs. Except for political opponents incarcerated in the concentration camps and their sympathizers, most Germans accepted Nazi ideology, at least in part. Yet except for a few fanatics such as Irmfried Eberl and his wife, this ideology served as a necessary justification for most T4 killers but was not the only reason, as mentioned above, that they agreed to carry out the dirty job of killing.

For reasons of space, I must omit physicians, chemists, police officers, and ministerial bureaucrats in analyzing the T4 perpetrators. Unlike Robert Jay Lifton, who has advanced a theory of "doubling" as an explanation, I see no special problems

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men looking for work, to the government building to see a certain Kaufmann. There I was asked about my current wages. They laughed when I told them that I had been earning 25 RM per week. They then told me and the others that we would be sent to Hartheim and that we would earn more money." In Hartheim Nohel was assigned work as a stoker and he remained there until the end. He did receive the promised higher wages: 170 RM per month, plus 50 RM family separation allowance, 35 RM stokers' allowance, and a 35 RM premium for keeping quiet. Further, "because the work [as stoker] was very strenuous and nerve-shattering, we also received a quarter of a liter of schnapps every day."²⁰

After the war, many T4 rank-and-file killers claimed that they had cooperated only under duress. But in more than thirty years of postwar proceedings, no proof has emerged that anyone who refused to participate in killing operations had been shot, incarcerated, or penalized in any way, except perhaps through transfer to the front—but this, after all, was the destiny of most German soldiers.²¹ Punishment, even incarceration in a concentration camp, was a real possibility only if members of the staff talked about the killings to outsiders. All had to sign an oath of silence. One secretary at Grafeneck was committed to a concentration camp by Viktor Brack because she talked about her work; she was released through the intervention of Werner Heyde.²² Regardless of the truth and fiction of such stories, punishment had nothing to do with a refusal to participate.

It is appropriate to ask how difficult it actually was to get away. This is hard to ascertain, because virtually no one openly refused. There is, however, testimony that staff members who wanted to leave were told to approach the T4 manager Adolf Kaufmann, who got them discharged within two weeks.²³ The male nurse Franz Sitter from Ybbs volunteered for Hartheim in October 1940 without knowing the details of the job. After Wirth informed him and swore him to secrecy, Sitter decided to refuse. He asked to see Lonauer and demanded to be released. Lonauer tried to talk him out of it, pointing to the "financial advantages" and to the draft deferment. Sitter insisted and was returned to Ybbs. He was drafted in February 1941.²⁴

Sitter was the exception to the rule; most staff members, despite any personal reservations, continued to do their assigned work. These men and women worked day after day in a factory with only one product: corpses of murdered human beings. They rapidly developed an atmosphere of licentiousness, an attitude that "anything goes." One constantly used stimulus was alcohol, which was freely distributed by the supervisors. One staff member assigned to Hartheim as a photographer found that the stench of burning flesh made it impossible for him to keep any food in his stomach. Wirth prescribed alcohol, and thereafter the photographer was always drunk.²⁵

Reports abounded about drunken orgies, numerous sexual liaisons, brawling and bullying, and the stealing of property of victims.²⁶ The toleration of such behavior by T4 had led to the resignation of business manager Gerhard Bohne, but the other T4 managers knew that they could not impose too many restrictions on those assigned to the secret killings.²⁷ After all, the important task was killing, and the job of managers was to assure that the staff members served the killing process. At Hadamar the staff celebrated the cremation of the ten thousandth corpse with a party.

Assembling in the bathroom, a staff member dressed in a uniform and staff drank beer.²⁸

Even more revealing was the fact that she told her postwar interrogators that she had gold teeth on her desk:

Gold teeth? They were gold teeth. Many of the stokers. He had a beer carton, and that is the amount, and we had

Almost one hundred men from Treblinka. Some of them were led patients to the hospital and patients or near gas chambers during the killing process. Our duties in the East were very hard, killing experience. Young men were chosen. No party affiliation were not posted to the front.

Why did these men do it? The reasons did not differ. Though most were not particularly fanatic, especially after postwar, they did not participate. And the good food and drink were a big factor.

When all is said and done, and women were also involved, self-interest is a satisfactory explanation for actions in the labor camp. As shown by Stanley Milgram, obedience is a fundamental difficulty in the reality of the killing process and saw their agonizing death as a science experiment they could inflict, but they did not avoid knowing who they were doing.

Assembling in the basement crematorium, they covered the corpse with flowers, a staff member dressed as a priest delivered a sermon, the corpse was cremated, and the staff drank beer.²⁸

Even more revealing is the story of the Hadamar secretary Ingeborg Seidel. As she told her postwar interrogator, she did her secretarial work with a carton of gold teeth on her desk:

Gold teeth? They were handed to us in the office whenever there was someone who had gold teeth. Many handed to us? No. They were brought to me in a bowl by one of the stokers. He had a book and I had a book, and we thus confirmed accuracy. We had a little carton, and that is where we kept them until we had accumulated a sufficiently large amount, and we then sent them by courier to Berlin.²⁹

Almost one hundred T4 killers were eventually posted to Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Some of the staff had been stokers, and others had transported, undressed, and led patients to the gas chamber. But many had never been assigned to work with patients or near gas chambers. All of them, however, had been intimately involved in the killing process. One might assume the T4 killers who were selected for further duties in the East were the most dedicated of the T4 staff, those with the greatest killing experience. Yet this was not true, and we may never know why these particular men were chosen. Nothing distinguished them from their T4 colleagues; their background, party affiliation, and T4 jobs did not differ from those of their colleagues who were not posted to the Lublin camps.

Why did these rank-and-file men and women participate in the killings? The reasons did not differ substantially from those that motivated their superiors. Though most were committed to Nazi ideology, there is no evidence that they were particularly fanatic Nazis. Peer pressure probably helped sustain their involvement, especially after posting to the East, but it does not explain their initial willingness to participate. And there is no doubt that they expected material benefits: a safe job, good food and drink, special allowances, and "brownie points" for the future.

When all is said and done, I am still unable to fathom why seemingly normal men and women were able to commit such extraordinary crimes. Neither ideology nor self-interest is a satisfactory explanation for such behavior. Attempts to replicate their actions in the laboratory must fail, even if experiments seem to show, as did the one by Stanley Milgram, that ordinary men anywhere can commit such crimes.³⁰ But there is a fundamental difference between the antiseptic experimental setting and the grisly reality of the killing centers. The T4 killers confronted real human beings as victims and saw their agony, the blood and gore of the killing process. In Milgram's social science experiment, the subjects might lack the imagination to understand the pain they could inflict, but the Nazi killers, even if they lacked all imagination, could not avoid knowing what they were doing. They understood the consequences of their deeds.

16. ZStL: interrogation Franz Suchomel, February 5, 1963; LG Hagen, Urteil Dubois, 11 Ks 1/64, December 20, 1966, pp. 210–13 (Franz Wolf).
17. Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes Vienna (DÖW), E18370/3: interrogation Margit Troller, Linz, June 25, 1946.
18. DÖW, E18370/1: Kreisgericht Wels, interrogation Stefan Schachermeyer, March 11, 1964; DÖW, E18370/2: Volksgericht des LG Linz, Hauptverhandlung Harrer, Lang, und Mayrhuber, Vg 6 Vr 2407/46 (186), July 2–3, 1948, p. 14 (testimony Schachermeyer).
19. StA Stuttgart, Verfahren Widmann, Ks 19/62 (19 Js 328/60), interrogation Herbert Kalisch, Mannheim, January 25, 1960.
20. DÖW, E18370/3: Kriminalpolizei Linz, interrogation Vinzenz Nohel, September 4, 1945.
21. See Herbert Jäger, *Verbrechen unter totalitärer Herrschaft: Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Gewaltdelinquenz*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt/M., 1982), pp. 94ff.
22. Alice Platen-Hallermund, *Die Tötung Geisteskranker in Deutschland: Aus der Deutschen Ärztekommision beim amerikanischen Militärgericht* (Frankfurt/M., 1948), p. 107.
23. GStA Frankfurt, Anklage Kaufmann, Js 16/63 (GStA), June 27, 1966, p. 31.
24. DÖW, E18370/2: Bezirksgericht Ybbs, interrogation Franz Sitter, March 20, 1947.
25. DÖW, E18370/1: Bundesministerium für Inneres, interrogation Bruno Bruckner, Vienna, May 24, 1962.
26. See Platen-Hallermund, *Die Tötung Geisteskranker*, p. 61. See also DÖW, E18370/1: Bundesministerium für Inneres, interrogation Bruno Bruckner, Vienna, May 24, 1962.
27. GStA der DDR (StA Dresden), Verfahren Nitsche, (S) 1 Ks 58/47 (1/47), vol. 5: interrogation Paul Nitsche, May 2, 1947.
28. *Verlegt nach Hadamar: Die Geschichte einer NS-“Euthanasie“-Anstalt*, ed. Bettina Winter et al. (Kassel, 1991), p. 95.
29. Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden (HHStA), 461/32061/7: LG Frankfurt, Verfahren Wahlmann, Gorgass, Huber, 4a Kls 7/47 (4a Js 3/46), Protokoll der öffentlichen Sitzung der 4. Strafkammer, March 3, 1947, p. 32.
30. For the use of the Milgram experiment as a limited explanation of Nazi behavior, see Browning, *Ordinary Men*, pp. 171–73.