

Euthanasia Program

(*Aktion T4*, T4 Operation), term meaning "mercy killings," which the Nazis used to euphemistically refer to their systematic extermination of certain groups including the mentally ill, aged, disabled, and others. The Euthanasia Program, code-named T4, was part of the Nazis' attempt to preserve the purity of the master race—in order to create a superior group of "Aryans," the Nazis needed to destroy all those with racial defects.

The Nazis first began cutting out undesirable elements of their society in the 1930s, with the forced sterilization of children of black fathers, those with genetic diseases, and repeat criminals. By late 1939, Hitler appointed Dr. Karl Brandt and Philip Bouhler heads of the Euthanasia Program. These men hired a staff of medical doctors and established four euthanasia centers in Germany during the first half of 1940, in Grafeneck, Brandenburg, Hartheim, and Sonnenstein. Residents of welfare institutions, some Concentration Camp inmates, the chronically sick, the mentally and physically disabled, homosexuals, and even sick German soldiers were brought to these centers and gassed, shot, or killed by lethal injection. By the end of that year, almost 27,000 Germans had been killed as part of the program; by August 1941, more than 35,000 more had been exterminated.

The Euthanasia Program was officially closed down on September 1, 1941, due to growing public pressure, including a sermon delivered by Bishop Clemens Galen in Muenster on August 3. However, the Nazis secretly continued their "mercy killings" all the way up to the end of the war. The Euthanasia Program staff was transferred to *Aktion Reinhard*, and different Nazi institutions took over the killing. According to sources at the Nuremberg Trials, there were 275,000 victims of the Euthanasia Program, other sources estimate about 200,000 victims.

One of the most heinous aspects of the Euthanasia Program was the fact that its staff members were trained medical doctors, sworn to help care for their patients, not destroy them because of a racial difference. At its inception, the program was even illegal—and yet the Euthanasia practitioners seemed to have no moral, religious, or legal doubts about what they were doing.

