

Two Perspectives on Nazi “Mercy Killing”: SS Article from *Das Schwarze Korps* (1937) and Letter from Helene (1940)

Abstract

The Nazi regime openly advocated and practiced eugenics. In 1933 and 1935, the regime passed sterilization laws compelling Germans to submit to sterilization when family medical histories showed patterns of hereditary mental illness or certain genetic conditions. The forced sterilization of men and women who fell under these categories was justified by the supposed need to relieve the nation of undue financial burdens posed by the care and treatment of those “inferior” individuals and to protect future generations.

The first excerpt is an article from *Das Schwarze Korps*, the official SS newspaper. The featured account of a family burdened by a mentally disabled child is characteristic both of National Socialist justifications for sterilization and for their 1939 euthanasia program, known as Action T4 [*Aktion T4*]. The second text is a letter that an epileptic child, Helene, sent from a Liebenau asylum to her father. The letter shows that she was aware of the fate that awaited her. Helene makes recourse to Christian notions of sacrifice to justify her death in a plea to relieve the suffering of her family. Helene’s fate was tragic—only days before her death a review panel had decided to spare her life. That decision did not reach the asylum in time.

Source

I. Article from *Das Schwarze Korps* (March 18, 1937)

Re: the topic of mercy deaths:

In response to our article in the previous issue, a reader writes to us as follows:

“I have a relative, the mother of five children. Four of them are completely healthy as are the parents. There have been no cases of hereditary illness in the families. The fifth child, now two years old, is an idiot. According to the doctors, the mother carried the child too long. When the parents noted, soon after the birth, that the child was not responding to anything, they took it to the best children’s doctor in the area. He transferred it to a hospital. There the professors declared that the child was incurable. It is now in an asylum which brings up idiotic children and cripples at great expense.

The parents pay 100 R.M. per month. The child has cost thousands already. This money is not only lost to the four healthy children, the heavy burden must also prevent the parents from having any more children. The family and the national community not only have to bring up an idiot, they must also lose further births because it is allegedly a humane duty to keep the idiot alive artificially and allow him as far as possible to reach a biblical age. I think there ought to be a law whereby such children could be killed with the agreement of their parents.”

We have already commented on the case of that peasant who was recently sentenced in Weimar to 3 years imprisonment because he killed his grown-up son and heir who had become incurably mentally ill. The man broke the law and had to be punished because he carried out an act which the national community is not yet prepared to do for him, and because he took on a responsibility which legally the state ought to take on. The case described by our reader is even simpler.

If an adult becomes mentally ill, he at least had a personality and has lived consciously. To eliminate him requires a difficult decision, although it will be a release for him and all those involved. A child which is

born an idiot has no personality. It would hardly last a year if it were not kept alive artificially. It is even less conscious of its existence than an animal. One does not remove anything from it if one snuffs it out.

If people say that human beings have no right to kill them then one must reply that humans have a hundred times less right to interfere with nature and keep something alive which was not born to live. That has nothing whatever to do with Christian love of one's neighbour. For, under the term "neighbour", we can only understand our fellow human beings who are capable of responding to the love which we give them. Anyone who has the courage to carry these considerations to their logical conclusion will make the same demand as our reader.

Those who proclaim themselves as the defenders of humanity are usually people who themselves do nothing for the maintenance of the nation's strength and for whom a baptized idiot is preferable to a healthy heathen. No sane person will interpret the biblical saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," in terms of earthly rights for idiots. No one is denying them the other rights. Let them go to heaven.

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Source of original German text: *Das Schwarze Korps* (March 18, 1937); reprinted in J. Tuchel, ed., "*Kein Recht auf Leben.*" *Beiträge und Dokumente zur Entrechtung und Vernichtung "lebensunwerten Lebens" im Nationalsozialismus*. Berlin, 1984, pp. 48–49.

II. Letter from a Patient in the Asylum of Liebenau/Württemberg (October 1, 1940)

Beloved father,

Sadly it had to be. And so today I must send you my words of farewell from this earthly life as I go to my eternal home. It will make you and my other loved ones very very sad. But think that I can die as a martyr which cannot happen without the will of my Redeemer for whom I have longed for years. But father, dear father, I do not want to leave this life without once more begging your forgiveness and that of all my brothers and sisters for what I have failed you in throughout my life. May God accept my illness and this sacrifice as an expiation for it. Dearest father, please do not hold anything against your child who loved you so deeply and think always that I am going to heaven, where we all meet again with God and our loved ones who have died. Father, dear father, I am going with strong courage and faith in God and never doubt His goodness to me, though here on earth we unfortunately do not understand it. We will have our reward on the Day of Judgment. God has commanded it. Please tell my dear brothers and sisters not to be sorrowful but rather to rejoice. I am giving you this little picture to remember me by. And so your child goes to meet her Saviour, embraces you in true love and with the firm promise, which I gave you at our last farewell, that I would endure bravely.

Your child
Helene

Please pray for my soul. Farewell good father till we meet in heaven.

Source of English translation: Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919–1945*, vol. 3: *Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001, p. 422. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

Source of original German text: Letter from 1. October 1940, Ks2/70 Generalstaatsanwaltschaft Frankfurt am Main; reprinted in Ernst Klee, *“Euthanasie” im NS-Staat: die Vernichtung “lebensunwerten Lebens.”* Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1986, p. 332.

Recommended Citation: Two Perspectives on Nazi “Mercy Killing”: SS Article from Das Schwarze Korps (1937) and Letter from Helene (1940), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-5115>> [May 05, 2024].