

Review Essay

Review Essay: Selling Eugenic Killing: The Nazi Propaganda Campaign to Support the Liquidation of the Disabled

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1. Introduction

In this essay, I will review the motives behind the Nazi program to eliminate the disabled, the propaganda that promoted it, and the factors that limited its full implementation. I start by discussing the origins of the Nazi program in the writings of two German scholars of the 1920s as well as in the eugenics movement. I then briefly review the history of that program. I argue that in a propaganda battle there are two ways films can work together to advance a program or message: reinforcing and contrasting. After discussing some propaganda films that supported the program through either reinforcing or contrasting tactics, I conclude by looking at what kept it from being fully implemented.

2. The Origins of the Nazi Eliminationist Eugenics Doctrine

As historian Tom Stadler has noted, “[j]ust as the Nazis [embraced but] did not invent anti-Semitism,” they embraced but did not invent the ideology of eliminating the mentally and physically disabled.¹ In Germany, the case for the state killing the disabled was advocated by

¹ Tom Stadler, “Karl Binding on Life Unworthy of Life,” *Revealing Documents*, accessed online at: https://revealingdocuments.com/pdf/Karl_Binding_on_Life_Unworthy_of_Life.pdf.

two German scholars, Karl Binding (1841–1920) and Alfred Hoche (1865–1943), in their book published in 1920—the same year the Nazi party was founded—*Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life*.² Their book consists of two long essays: “Legal Explanation,” written by Binding, a legal scholar, and “Medical Explanation,” written by Hoche, a professor of medicine and a forensic psychiatrist.

Focusing on the legal case for eliminating the disabled, Binding suggests several categories of people whom the state should kill. First, he includes those who have a painful terminal illness or are mortally wounded. Second are those he calls “incurable idiots,” meaning those born with mental disabilities or who have become mentally disabled by disease, and so are not mentally competent to give their consent. He dehumanizes these people as “the fearsome counter-image of true humanity . . . who arouse horror” in other people. Third, he includes comatose people who, if they ever did regain consciousness, would have “nameless suffering,” a concept he nowhere defined. Such people are also incapable of choice.³

Binding’s view is that the decision to terminate these people would be made antecedently by a state “permissions board” after permission has been requested from the patient’s doctor, the patient himself, or someone to whom the patient has given authority (such as a family member). If, because time is limited, an individual takes the “mercy” killing of any of these disabled people upon himself, that individual would have to disclose his actions to the permissions board and face its judgment. The “mercy” killing should be painless, although Binder does not suggest any mechanism to achieve this.⁴

² The book was originally published in 1920 by Verlag Felix Meiner in Leipzig, Germany. It was later translated into English and appeared as Karl Binding, “Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life: Its Extent and Form,” *Issues in Law and Medicine* 8, no. 2 (1992): 231–68. All citations are from this later article version of the text.

³ Binding, “Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life,” pp. 247–49.

⁴ Binding, “Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life,” pp. 251–53.

Binding offers four justifications for his proposals. (1) The cost of caring for these disabled in “power, patience, and capital investment”—squandered to preserve those “lives not worth living”—is huge. (2) These resources can be used to improve the lives of healthy people and those who are curably ill. (3) Many of these disabled would find death welcome.⁵ (4) While errors in this state regime of putative euthanasia would invariably occur, people die from systemic errors all the time anyway.⁶

In addition to the influence of Binding and Hoche’s book, the general popularity of eugenics in Western countries in the 1920s also formed the basis for the Nazis’ eliminationist stance toward the disabled. A brief review of the history of eugenics is thus in order here.

While the origins of eugenics ideology can be traced back to Plato, whose *Republic* (c. 378 B.C.E.) advocates selective breeding to improve the human race, its modern version was promoted by Francis Galton (1822–1911), who came up with the term “eugenics” in 1883. Galton was a cousin of Charles Darwin and was deeply influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution. Eugenics, as envisioned by Galton and others, was taken to be a scientifically based policy program.

Early on, eugenics supporters distinguished between positive and negative eugenics.⁷ Positive eugenics means promoting breeding “superior individuals” from “good stock.” Negative eugenics refers to prohibiting the breeding of children of “defective stock.” However, I would suggest that many such policies are on a slippery slope.

Let us start with positive eugenics. This can refer to voluntary positive eugenics, meaning the encouragement of what some group or government deems superior individuals to marry and have children, perhaps by rewarding such couples for having more children. However,

⁵ Binding, “Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life,” p. 246.

⁶ Binding, “Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life,” p. 254.

⁷ Philips K. Wilson, “Eugenics,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (updated August 26, 2024), accessed online at: <https://www.britannica.com/science/eugenics-genetics>.

this can also refer to involuntary positive eugenics, for example, the coerced mating of superior individuals.

There is also a spectrum of negative eugenics. Voluntary negative eugenics refers to the discouragement of mating between “inferior” or “defective” individuals, perhaps by urging such individuals not to have children because their children will be born “defective.” On the other hand, involuntary negative eugenics involves preventing “defective” people from having children, often by forced sterilization or forced abortion.

This leads to the issue of policies for dealing with existing “defective” individuals, including babies, children, and adults. This is where eugenics becomes a premise for so-called euthanasia. Eugenic euthanasia refers to the support for or imposition of “euthanasia” to improve the gene pool of some group, be it a nation, race, or tribe.

The term euthanasia refers to “mercy killing” (literally, in ancient Greek, “good death”) and is meant to connote killing someone to end their suffering. By this definition, “eugenic euthanasia” would be an oxymoron because it would entail killing people not for *their* supposed benefit but for the “*people’s*” benefit—what the Nazis termed “racial hygiene.” I will use a more honest term for this phenomenon: eugenic killing. Again, there are distinctions worth making here.

Passive voluntary eugenic killing refers to the encouragement of suicide among the disabled by the regime in power, perhaps by showing them supposedly painless ways to kill themselves. Active voluntary eugenic killing would be the killing of the disabled with their consent, for example, by giving lethal injections to such individuals who request it.

There is also involuntary eugenic killing. Passive involuntary eugenic killing would allow targeted “defectives” to die without their consent, perhaps by withholding life support from members of the targeted group. Active involuntary eugenic killing would involve outright killing members of the targeted group, for example, by lethal injection or gassing.

The U.S. rapidly embraced eugenics and passed many eugenics laws, with prominent American leaders vigorously promoting it. The

first was passed in Connecticut in 1895, aimed at prohibiting marriages between “epileptic, imbecile, and feeble-minded” people. In 1897, Michigan introduced the first forced sterilization bill, which mandated the castration of various types of criminals and “degenerates.” While it did not pass, it became a template for later laws. In 1907, Indiana became the first state to adopt a forced sterilization law. Twenty-nine other states also enacted such laws.⁸ We often forget that in 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of compulsory sterilization laws aimed at the “feeble-minded” and others by an 8-to-1 vote,⁹ leading to 70,000 Americans being sterilized under such laws between 1907 and 1963.¹⁰

Adolf Hitler was, from early on, deeply influenced by the American eugenics program in particular. While he was in prison in 1924, Hitler studied eugenics textbooks, especially those written by Leon Whitney (president of the American Eugenics Society) and Madison Grant (who reviled Blacks, Jews, Slavs, and others). Hitler wrote Whitney in the early 1930s, saying that Grant’s book, *The Passing of the Great Race*, was Hitler’s “Bible.”¹¹

It should be noted that the association between German and American eugenics programs was reciprocal.¹² Just as U.S. books on

⁸ An excellent documentary on American state laws mandating forced sterilization is *The Lynchburg Story: Eugenic Sterilization in America*, directed by Stephen Trombley (Worldview Pictures, 1994).

⁹ *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200 (1927).

¹⁰ Adam Cohen, “The Supreme Court Ruling that Led to 70,000 Forced Sterilizations,” NPR *Fresh Air*, March 7, 2016, accessed online at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/03/07/469478098/the-supreme-court-ruling-that-led-to-70-000-forced-sterilizations>.

¹¹ See Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916); Edwin Black, “Hitler’s Debt to America,” *The Guardian*, February 5, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/feb/06/race.usa>.

¹² The ties between the American and German eugenics movements are explored in the fine documentary *In the Shadow of the Reich: Nazi Medicine*, directed by John Michalczyk (Etoile Documentary Group, 1997).

eugenics deeply influenced Hitler, American eugenicists took note of Germany's eugenics programs in the 1930s. Harry Laughlin, Director of the Cold Spring Harbor Eugenics Center for twenty years, toured America to show German eugenics propaganda movies, including to high school audiences.¹³ In 1934, Joseph Dejarnette—superintendent of a Virginia State Hospital where eugenic sterilizations took place—said, “[t]he Germans are beating us at our own game.”¹⁴

3. The Creation of the Aktion T4 Program

Hitler's commitment to an aggressive eugenics program was evident from the first. His regime acted against the disabled in three phases: first, a massive wave of forced sterilizations; second, an overt targeting of the disabled for eugenic killing; and third, a covert targeting of the disabled for eugenic killing.

The first phase was implemented only six months after Hitler took control of the German government. In July of 1933, his regime enacted the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring, which required compulsory sterilization for patients suffering from alcoholism, epilepsy, Huntington's Chorea, schizophrenia as well as from poorly defined conditions such as “imbecility” and “social deviance.” Between 1933 and 1939, between 300,000 and 500,000 victims were involuntarily sterilized under this law—an average of at least 80,000 per year.

The second phase of Nazi eugenics was Aktion T4, which was the name of the National Socialist program for mass killing of those considered by the regime to be disabled.¹⁵ “T4” is short for Tiergartenstrasse 4, the address of the Chancellery Department set up to

¹³ John Michalczyk, “Films, Eugenics,” *Encyclopedia.com*, accessed online at: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/films-eugenics>.

¹⁴ Black, “Hitler's Debt to America.”

¹⁵ For a good overview of this program, see Maike Rotzoll et al., “The First National Socialist Extermination Crime: The T4 Program and Its Victims,” *The International Journal of Mental Health* 35, no. 3 (2006): pp. 17–29.

house German physicians appointed to select the disabled to be involuntarily “euthanized.”

The Aktion T4 program started in October 1939. It was authorized not with a formal “Führer’s decree”—which would have had the force of law—but only a “euthanasia note” entrusting Hitler’s doctor, Karl Brandt, with the power to carry out the program. Hitler signed the note in October 1939, but he backdated it to September 1st—the day World War II in Europe officially started. This was done to justify the claim that the regime was opening hospital space to accommodate wounded soldiers.

While the killings started immediately in hospitals, one of the first killing centers was set up at Hadamar in January 1940. By the end of 1940, nearly 10,000 people had been killed there.¹⁶ Five other killing centers were also set up that year. The initial focus was on killing babies and young children, typically by administering lethal doses of sedatives. That allowed the more squeamish medical professionals to view killing the disabled as just putting children designated as defective “to sleep” as if they were animals in a shelter.¹⁷

The victims were taken mainly from private psychiatric hospitals and nursing homes as well as from asylums for epileptics and the mentally impaired. Those targeted for liquidation were often removed by grey buses with windows blacked out—buses that soon became notorious. They were taken first to transit centers where they remained for weeks or months before being taken to the extermination centers. There, they were killed typically by being gassed with carbon monoxide and then cremated.

To mask what they were doing, T4 bureaucrats would send a victim’s next of kin condolence letters along with phony death certificates that said that the victim had died of natural causes. Such letters also requested directions on where to send the urn containing the

¹⁶ Rotzoll et al., “The First National Socialist Extermination Crime,” p. 18.

¹⁷ “Unworthy to Live,” *Facing History.org* (updated August 2, 2016), accessed online at: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/unworthy-live>.

victim's ashes. In reality, each urn contained ashes of different victims combined haphazardly.¹⁸

In August of 1941, in the face of rising vocal public protests by church leaders such as Bishop Clemens von Galen and growing public disappointment with the progress of the war, Hitler officially ended the Aktion T4 program.¹⁹ However, the murderous bureaucracy was retained and killing of the disabled continued until the end of the war. This was the third phase, sometimes referred to as “wild” euthanasia.

By the end of the eliminationist program, upward of 300,000 disabled people were killed.²⁰ Key practices of the program—shipping large numbers of targeted individuals to killing centers, gassing the victims and cremating the bodies, and even removing victims' teeth containing gold—were soon applied to Jews, Roma, and other groups during the massive Holocaust that ensued.

4. Propaganda Films Supporting the Elimination of the Disabled

A government selling a policy or program to its citizens is similar to a battle. A battle (during a war) is a coordinated series of military actions against a foe using various weapons. By analogy, we can define a propaganda battle as a coordinated campaign using various media, such as newspapers, films, books, art, and so on.

Propaganda can be coordinated in at least two different ways, though. Reinforcing (coordinated) propaganda involves advancing the same policy by reiterating or amplifying the same message. Reinforcing propaganda films, for example, present essentially the same sorts of images, characters, and actions to support the same policy. The second form of coordinated propaganda is contrasting (coordinated) propaganda. Such propaganda advances the same policy with different, contrasting, but complimentary messages. Contrasting propaganda films, for example, present different cases for the same policy by using different sorts of images, characters, and actions.

¹⁸ “Euthanasia Program and Aktion T4,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, October 7, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/euthanasia-program>.

¹⁹ “Unworthy to Live.”

The films we will briefly discuss are of both sorts. Let's start with the reinforcing films. During the period from 1935 to 1941, the Nazi regime's Office of Racial Policy produced a series of films that pushed the policies of eugenic forced sterilization and killing including: *Die Sunden der Vater* (*Sins of the Fathers*),²¹ *Abseits vom Wege* (*Off Track*),²² *Das Erbe* (*The Inheritance*),²³ *Erbkrank* (*Inherited Disease*),²⁴ *Was du erbt* (*What You Inherit*),²⁵ *Alles Leben ist Kampf* (*All Life Is Struggle*),²⁶ *Opfer der Vergangenheit: Die Sunde wider Blut und Rasse* (*Victims of the Past: The Sin against Blood and Race*),²⁷ *Dasein ohne Leben* (*Existence without Life*),²⁸ *Geisteskrank* (*The Mentally Ill*),²⁹ and *Ich klage an* (*I Accuse*).³⁰

A good account of the propaganda battle to sell sterilization and liquidation of the disabled is found in the fine 1991 documentary *Selling Murder*.³¹ As the documentary notes, the first two films targeting the

²¹ *Die Sunden der Vater*, directed by Herbert Gerdes (Bundesarchiv, 1935).

²² *Abseits vom Wege*, directed by Herbert Gerdes (Rassenpolitisches Amt der NSDAP, 1935).

²³ *Das Erbe*, directed by Carl Hartmann (Excentric Film Zorn, 1935).

²⁴ *Erbkrank*, directed by Herbert Gerdes (Rassenpolitisches Amt der NSDAP, 1936).

²⁵ *Was du erbt*, directed by Herbert Gerdes (Rassenpolitisches Amt der NSDAP, 1938).

²⁶ *Alles Leben ist Kampf*, directed by Werner Huettig and Herbert Gerdes (NSDAP Reichsleitung, 1937).

²⁷ *Opfer der Vergangenheit: Die Sunde wider Blut und Rasse*, directed by Gernot Bock-Stieber and Kurt Botnar (Amstleitung Film, 1937).

²⁸ *Dasein ohne Leben*, directed by Hermann Schwenninger (Bundesarchiv, 1941).

²⁹ *Geisteskrank* (Bundesarchiv, 1941).

³⁰ *Ich klage an*, directed by Wolfgang Liebeneiner (Tobis Filmkunst, 1941).

³¹ *Selling Murder: The Killing Films of the Third Reich*, directed by Joanna

disabled—*What You Inherit* and *Inherited Disease*—were poorly produced silent shorts that were shown only to Nazis and Nazi sympathizers. The Nazi regime ordered the films destroyed at the end of World War II, but some footage was later found in an East German repository. The footage portrays the mentally and physically disabled as strange and repulsive, as “life unworthy of life.” This propagated the view that the disabled are somehow different and disgusting.

Selling Murder then discusses *Victims of the Past*, noting that this film was a required screening at all 5,300 German cinemas. We see a portion of the film and understand its social-Darwinist message, telling us that while in nature the weak die quickly, the Germans as a nation supported “defective” people by letting them live in comfortable institutions at great financial cost. Moreover (the film claims), the number of defective people has multiplied at a rate nine times higher than that of the normal population. This film explicitly raised the issue of the economic danger of massively draining national resources to care for these “unproductive” people—characterized as “useless eaters”—and the demographic threat they posed of replacing “healthy” people. The film advocates compulsory sterilization against a backdrop of images of the “defective.”

Selling Murder then discusses the docudrama *The Inheritance*. In this film, an attractive young female lab assistant watches a film her professors are producing. That film within a film shows “the survival of the fittest” in the animal world, which prompts her to ask, to the evident approval of her professors, “So animals pursue proper racial policy?” The film then shows very selective pictures of the disabled in asylums to suggest the notion of not just sterilization, but also the outright elimination of the mentally and physically disabled. The film ends on a contrasting note by showing healthy young women proudly marching, Hitler youth boys energetically playing, and Wehrmacht soldiers heroically standing at attention. It was only a few years later that the regime started killing disabled children.

Next, *Selling Murder* discusses two films produced internally by T4 staff to reassure those engaged in mass murder. The first film,

Mack (Domino Films, 1991).

Existence without Life, was apparently destroyed in 1945. However, the producers of *Selling Murder* were able to recreate it from the original script. We again see exaggerated pictures of disabled people, with selective lighting from below their faces to distort them to look menacing and even diabolical. We see a professor deliver a lecture, during which he tells the audience that the number of mentally and physically “defective” is 400,000, requiring 2,000 doctors and 40,000 nurses and attendants. The mentally ill are portrayed as hopelessly deranged, needing to be fed by tube. It is “unnatural” to make so many healthy young people care for the “incurably idiotic and mad.” The professor calls for “euthanasia” for the pathetic creatures while we see pictures of the inmates of an asylum in the background.

The second film produced by T4 staff, *The Mentally Ill*, is a pseudo-scientific film arguing that while psychiatric medicine has made some advances, there are still many incurably mentally ill. This film explicitly calls for the killing of such people, arguing that every normal person would prefer death to such an existence. The original film actually showed the insides of a gas chamber in action, with a patient dying peacefully on a bed.

Selling Murder then reviews some of the growing popular resistance to this form of killing and explains how it led to the slickly produced major film *I Accuse*, which more than 18 million Germans saw. Its plot centers around a beautiful young pianist who develops multiple sclerosis. She begs her husband, a doctor, to kill her; eventually, he does so by giving her an overdose of some drug. We watch her die peacefully in his arms. The film then turns into a courtroom drama when the doctor is put on trial for murder. The film argues that those who are incurably ill and want to die should be legally allowed to do so. Here, the film sophisticatedly confounds voluntary and involuntary killing, that is, assisted suicide and outright murder.

Selling Murder observes that despite these films, public opposition to the liquidation of the disabled continued to grow, so the program was officially halted. However, it actually continued until the end of the war, setting the pattern for the liquidation of the Jews by the same or similar means. The documentary ends by showing some of the footage taken by the U.S. Army of numerous corpses being exhumed when Hadamar was liberated.

We have seen that the Nazi regime had several professed rationales for the eliminationist actions directed at the disabled. The first was an economic rationale: the cost to society of maintaining the disabled. The Nazis emphasized this not merely by pointing to the monetary costs of caring for the disabled, but also the opportunity costs in diminished resources available for “ordinary” medical patients—especially soldiers wounded in battle—and for other social needs such as education and military defense. Remember that Hitler backdated the letter authorizing the T4 program to the start of the war (that is, to September 1st, 1939).

The second was a justice rationale: expending money to keep alive those “useless eaters” shortchanges normal, hard-working Germans, especially soldiers who risk their lives for their country. This was simply unjust, the Nazis urged.

The third rationale was a eugenic rationale: those with hereditary mental and physical disabilities will reproduce freely and “crowd out” those with “healthy” genomes. Again, the Nazis tied this rationale to patriotism: while those “unworthy of life” freely reproduce, many of the strong, healthy Aryan youth are dying on the battlefield.

The Nazis also put forward a fourth rationale: an aesthetic rationale. This is what informs contrasting film propaganda, which takes us to the next section to explain and examine it carefully.

5. Contrasting (Coordinated) Propaganda

The Nazis produced several films that portrayed what they regarded as ideal specimens of Aryan people. These included, for example, *Glaube und Schönheit (Belief and Beauty)*³² and *Hitlerjunge Quex (Hitler Youth Quex)*.³³ The former promotes the ideal of Aryan female beauty and the latter promotes the ideal of Aryan male handsomeness. By far, though, *Olympia* was the most widely viewed film glorifying the ideal of “healthy” people.

³² *Glaube und Schönheit*, directed by E. K. Bletzig (ZeitReisen Verlag, 1938).

³³ *Hitlerjunge Quex*, directed by Hans Steinhoff (Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft, 1933).

In 1931, the International Olympic Committee chose Berlin for the 1936 Summer Olympics. When Hitler took control of the German government in 1933, he seized upon the games as an extremely useful propaganda vehicle. It was useful in several ways.

First, the Olympics allowed the Nazi regime to show its glorious program of development. The Nazis built a new 100,000-seat stadium for the track and field events and a half dozen gymnasiums and other venues. This was meant to put to shame the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, which used the Los Angeles Memorial Stadium, a 93,000-seat stadium built in 1923.

Second, the regime used the Olympic games to show the world the superiority of German athletes. This was arguably successful. Germany won 101 medals, while the closest competitor was the U.S. with fifty-seven medals. In other words, Germany—with only about half of America’s population (66 million versus 128 million, respectively)—won about twice as many Olympic medals as the U.S.

The Nazis broadcast the games on radio and the new medium of television. But they especially wanted to present the Olympics in film, so they chose the filmmaker who created the hugely successful 1935 propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl—“Hitler’s filmmaker”—to film the games. The result was *Olympia*, a four-hour sports documentary in two parts that she wrote, produced, and directed.³⁴ The Reich Ministry of Propaganda lavishly funded and oversaw the film, which uses many innovative cinematic techniques that have become common in sports documentaries. The film took two years to produce and was released on Hitler’s forty-ninth birthday in 1938. Despite the high production costs, it turned a profit in less than five years. It won widespread praise in Germany and worldwide.

I want to focus, however, on *Olympia* as an example of contrasting propaganda. Let’s review what the film portrays and the messages it attempts to propagate. Part I of the film—“Festival of Nations”—opens with stirring music and scenes of Greek ruins in the mist. This introduced a narrative theme that runs through the whole film:

³⁴ *Olympia*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (Olympia-Film GmbH, 1938).

the games (and, by extension, Nazi culture) were a continuation of classic Greek tradition with the ideals of Aryan physical beauty being the same in both ancient Greece and modern (Nazi) Germany. We see a statue of a muscled male discus thrower that dissolves into a nearly naked, handsome young man throwing a discus. We transition to a scene of bare-breasted, beautiful young women dancing in unison. Here, we see another motif in the film: ideal Aryan men and women are also young. These messages are underscored by seeing a handsome young man light a torch from the eternal flame in Olympia, Greece, setting off a series of runners who carry the torch across Europe to Berlin.

In Berlin, the massive new arena is filled with spectators and we watch teams from the participating nations march in under Hitler's approving eyes. Some of the teams give the Fascist salute as they parade around the arena. After Hitler announces the opening of the games, the runner carrying the torch enters the stadium and lights the fire on a pedestal. We can't help but notice that the torch bearer is a young, handsome, blond-haired man.

The games commence. This part of the film primarily shows track-and-field events that demonstrate the strength and speed of the athletes. Germans dominate the games with men and women winning gold and silver medals in the discus throw and a similar result in the women's javelin throw. Various other track-and-field events show both the strength and speed of the German athletes.

The documentary's second part—"Festival of Beauty"—opens with a nature scene in which a group of handsome, athletic, naked young men swim in a forest lake and then take a sauna bath together. After this rather odd homoerotic scene, we see the national teams marching into the Olympic stadium to take part in events that primarily show athletic grace and agility, starting with gymnastics and various regattas, followed by men's fencing and boxing. After a brief interlude showing scenes—apparently taken from *Belief and Beauty*—of beautiful, nubile young women dancing and exercising with Indian clubs in unison, we return to the stadium for the most prestigious and demanding event: the pentathlon. This is followed by team cycling, steeplechase, rowing, swimming, and diving events. The film ends with the teams marching out of the stadium amid a dramatic light show.

In a recent article, I examined how propagandists can sometimes produce films that differ in major ways from what the government originally had in mind.³⁵ I believe that this is true with Riefenstahl's *Olympia*.

First, Riefenstahl's film shows Jesse Owens, an African-American, winning four gold medals, the most for any athlete in the 1936 Olympics. The Nazi regime surely wanted this downplayed because their intention was to show the superiority of Aryan athletes, but Riefenstahl clearly wanted to glorify the beauty of the human (not just "Aryan") athletic physique.

Second, I would suggest another divergence in Riefenstahl's film: the portrayal of the strength, speed, grace, and agility of female athletes. While less than 10 percent of the athletes participating in the games were women, about 20 percent of the events shown in Riefenstahl's documentary were women's events. This makes *Olympia* different from *Belief and Beauty*, the latter of which portrayed the ideal German woman as very soft and maternal. One suspects that the Regime pushed Riefenstahl to include the brief interlude of beautiful girls dancing together as a way to counterbalance her portrayal of swift, strong, and athletic women.

In sum, while containing some contrastive scenes, the films discussed above in Section 4 mainly reinforced the message that the disabled are repellent and dangerous. Riefenstahl's film, however, was contrastive in glorifying the ideal of the human body as strong, agile, graceful, handsome, and youthful.

6. Factors Limiting the Full Implementation of the Disabled Eliminationist Project

I conclude by looking at what impeded the Nazi regime's liquidation of the disabled. One factor limiting their eliminationist campaign was the severe labor shortage caused by Germany's rapid rearmament and the increasing number of men inducted into the armed forces. This only increased as the war got underway in 1939 and

³⁵ Gary James Jason, "Artists, Propagandists, and Political Masters: A Review of *Five Came Back*," *Liberty Unbound*, February 24, 2024, accessed online at: <https://libertyunbound.com/artists-propagandists-political-masters/>.

accelerated in 1941, when the war took its toll on the enlisted ranks and German forces started to lose in North Africa and Russia. Empirical evidence of this is found in research conducted by Maike Rotzoll and colleagues. When they analyzed records of the killing center in Uchtsprunge, they discovered that “[t]he main factor protecting the surviving patients [from being killed] seemed to have been their ability to work” and that among those patients who were killed, 54 percent did not work—half of them because they were children. Of the patients who survived, all adults worked, as did 96 percent of the children.³⁶

Relatedly, as I note in my review of the Nazi regime’s own film about the Aryan female ideal, *Belief and Beauty*, that film first appeared just as war was declared on Germany in 1939. However, the regime withdrew *Belief and Beauty*, while *Olympia* continued to be shown.³⁷ It was apparent that strong women were needed to work in the industrial economy, making the softer feminine ideal inconvenient to tout at the time.

Second, there was opposition from some prominent church authorities. The Holy See declared in late 1940 that the euthanasia program was contrary to Divine Law. In the summer of 1941, there were widespread protests across Germany against the program, led by Clemens von Galen, Bishop of Munster.

Third, reports spread from people who suspected or found out that their loved ones had been killed. This sometimes occurred when relatives received a death certificate that was clearly fraudulent, such as a certificate claiming that the victim had died of acute appendicitis when the victim had had their appendix removed years earlier.

In a public declaration, Bishop von Galen had raised a fourth reason for resistance to the Nazi euthanasia program. If it makes sense to kill the mentally ill and physically disabled because they are “useless

³⁶ Rotzoll et. al., “The First National Socialist Extermination Crime,” p. 26.

³⁷ Gary Jason, “Beauty Is in the Eye of the State: A Review of *Belief & Beauty—The History of the Nazi BDM Movement (Glaube & Schönheit)*,” *Liberty Unbound*, October 26, 2018, accessed online at: <https://libertyunbound.com/beautys-in-the-eye-of-the-state/>.

eaters,” then what about soldiers disabled in battle? Are not veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and disabling wounds also “useless eaters”?³⁸ At least some soldiers must have had the same thought. Moreover, what about elderly people who spent a lifetime contributing to society but are now in nursing homes? Are they not also useless eaters? And are they not also far from resembling young, athletic people? In fact, the Nazis did eventually start killing the residents of elder-care facilities.³⁹ This doubtlessly was noticed and condemned by the families of the elderly killed. Yet despite this extensive resistance, the Nazi regime kept killing the disabled until it was at last vanquished in 1945.

³⁸ Matt Lebovic, “80 Years Ago, Lethal Nazi T4 Center Began Euthanizing Germans with Disabilities,” *Times of Israel*, May 9, 2020, accessed online at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/80-years-ago-lethal-nazi-t4-center-began-euthanizing-germans-with-disabilities/>.

³⁹ Rotzoll et. al., “The First National Socialist Extermination Crime,” p. 23.