

Social Outcasts in Nazi Germany

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Of all Nazi atrocities, the extermination of the Jews has, rightly, commanded the most attention from historians and the general public. But this understandable preoccupation with the horrors of Nazi anti-Semitism has led people to overlook the fact that the Jews formed only one, albeit the major, target in a broad campaign directed against a variety of groups who were considered to be 'alien to the community' (*Gemeinschaftsfremd*), and who were often defined in biological terms. Only recently have historians begun to focus their attention on this hitherto neglected sphere of Nazi policy and action.

Nazism arose in the aftermath of defeat and revolution. In the view of its leaders, and notably Hitler, the main cause of Germany's collapse had not been military defeat but the disintegration of the home front weakened by years of incompetent leadership, corroded by pernicious ideas of liberal democracy, Marxism and sentimental humanitarianism, and sapped by biological decline which was the result of ignoring the principles of race and eugenics. Their main domestic goal was to create out of the German people, riven by divisions of class, religion and ideology, a new and unified 'national community' (*Volksgemeinschaft*) based on ties of blood and race and infused with a common 'world view'. They believed this united national community would then possess the requisite morale to enable Germany to make a bid for the position as a world power to which she had long aspired. The members of this national community, the 'national comrades' (*Volksgenossen*), were expected to conform to a norm based on certain criteria. A normal comrade was expected to be of Aryan race, genetically healthy (*erbgesund*), socially efficient (*leistungsfähig*), and politically and ideologically reliable, which involved not simply passive obedience but active participation in the various organisations of the regime and repeated gestures of loyalty (the Hitler salute, etc.).

On coming to power the Nazis were determined to discriminate against, or persecute, all those who failed to fulfill these criteria and were therefore regarded as being outside the national community. There were three main types of these outsiders which, although they overlap, can be conveniently considered as separate categories. Firstly, ideological enemies - those who propagated or even simply held beliefs and values regarded as a threat to national morale. Secondly so-called 'asocials' - the socially inefficient and those whose behaviour offended against the social norms of the 'national community'. And thirdly, the biological outsiders - those who were regarded as a threat because of their race or because they were suffering from a hereditary defect. It is with the last two of these categories that this article is concerned.

The third category, that of biological outsiders, consisted of two main groups: those considered undesirable because of their race (the non-Aryans), and those who were unacceptable on eugenic grounds because of hereditary defects which posed a threat to the future of the German race and/or rendered them socially ineffective. Although the racial and eugenic theories which defined these groups were in some respects distinct- not all eugenists were anti-Semitic for example - they shared common origins in biological theories of the late nineteenth century and a common perspective in viewing mankind primarily in biological terms. Individuals were not seen as possessing validity in themselves as human beings and were not judged in terms of their human qualities, but their significance was assessed first and foremost in terms of their physical and mental efficiency as members of a 'race' and they were seen primarily as collections of good or bad genes.

The theory of eugenics - the idea of improving the 'race' through the encouragement of selective breeding - had become increasingly influential in many countries during the 1920s and 1930s. Germany was no exception. It flourished against a background of concern about declining birthrates and particularly about the destruction of a generation of the healthiest members of the nation in the First World War. There was also growing concern about the impact of modern improvements in welfare, hygiene, and medical care in ensuring the survival of increasing numbers of those with hereditary defects who were thereby allegedly prodding a deterioration of the race. Moreover, during this period it was fashionable to attribute many social ills to heredity - criminality, alcoholism, even habitual

prostitution, and pauperism. Some on the Left were attracted by eugenics. They tended to make a sharp distinction between the 'genuine' working class and the *Lumpenproletariat*, the 'dregs' of society. Eugenics appeared to offer the prospect of eliminating the *Lumpenproletariat*, traditionally seen since Marx as the tool of reaction.

During the 1920s a number of doctors and psychiatrists in Germany began to propose a policy of sterilisation to prevent those with hereditary defects from procreating. Such a policy of 'negative selection' had already been carried out on a limited scale in the United States where the technique of vasectomy had been developed and was first applied by a prison doctor in 1899. With the economic crisis which began in 1929 such proposals gained increasing support among those involved in the welfare services, since they appeared to offer the prospect not only of substantial savings in the future but also of facilitating the release of some of those in institutional care without fear of their producing defective offspring. Towards the end of 1932 the Prussian authorities prepared a draft law permitting the voluntary sterilization of those with hereditary defects. Those who drafted the law had felt obliged to make sterilization voluntary since they believed that public opinion was not yet ready for compulsion. The logic of the eugenic case, however, required compulsion and, significantly, the Nazi medical experts who took part in the preceding discussions had demanded compulsion. The sterilization issue was given priority by Hitler himself who overruled objections from his Catholic Vice-Chancellor, von Papen. On July 14th, 1933, within six months of its coming to power, the new regime had issued a Sterilization Law ordering the sterilisation - by compulsion if necessary - of all those suffering from a number of specified illnesses which were alleged to be hereditary.

Apart from the moral issues raised by the question of compulsory sterilisation as such, the criteria used to define hereditary illness were in many respects exceedingly dubious. Thus, while there could be no doubt about the hereditary nature of some of the diseases specified, such as Huntington's Chorea, others such as 'hereditary simple-mindedness', schizophrenia, manic depressive illness, and 'chronic alcoholism' were not only more difficult to diagnose but their hereditary basis was much more questionable. Moreover, even if it were granted, the elimination of these diseases through the sterilization of those affected was an impossible task in view of the role played by recessive genes in their transmission. Finally, although an impressive apparatus of hereditary courts was established to pass judgment on the individual cases, the evidence used to justify proposals for sterilization sometimes reflected more the social and political prejudices of the medical and welfare authorities involved than objective scientific criteria. Thus a reputation for being 'work-shy' or even former membership of the Communist Party could be used as crucial supporting evidence in favour of sterilization. From 1934 to 1945 between 320,000 and 350,000 men and women were sterilized under this law and almost one hundred people died following the operation. After the war few of those sterilized received any compensation for what they had suffered since they could not claim to have been persecuted on political or racial grounds. The new measure appears to have had at least tacit support from public opinion. It was only when people found members of their own families, friends and colleagues affected by it that they became concerned.

The Nazis claimed that sterilisation was an unfortunate necessity for those with hereditary defects and that once it was carried out the sterilized were thereby in effect restored to full status as 'national comrades'. In practice, however, in a society in which health, and in particular fertility, were key virtues the sterilized were bound to feel discriminated against, and the fact that they were forbidden to marry fertile partners underlined this point. However, for those who were not merely suffering from hereditary defects but were socially ineffective as well the future was far bleaker. Already in 1920 a distinguished jurist, Karl Binding, and a psychiatrist, Alfred Hoche, had together published a book with the title: *The Granting of Permission for the Destruction of Worthless Life. Its Extent and Form*. In this book, written under the impression of the casualties of the First World War, the two authors proposed that in certain cases it should be legally possible to kill those suffering from incurable and severely crippling handicaps and injuries - so-called 'burdens on the community' (*Ballastexistenzen*). This proposal assumed, first, that it was acceptable for an outside agency to define what individual life was 'worthless' and, secondly that in effect an individual had to justify his existence according to criteria imposed from outside (i.e. he had to prove that his life was worthwhile). These assumptions were indeed implicit in the biological and collectivist approach to human life which had become increasingly influential after 1900.

With the take-over of power by the Nazis it was not long before this biological and collectivist approach began to be transferred from theory into reality. In addition to the sterilisation programme, this took the form, firstly, of a propaganda campaign designed to devalue the handicapped as burdens on the community in the eyes of the population and, secondly, of a programme of systematic extermination of the mentally sick and handicapped - the so-called Euthanasia Programme, a misleading title since the term 'euthanasia' was in fact a Nazi euphemism for mass murder.

The euthanasia programme began in the spring or early summer of 1939 when the parents of a severely handicapped baby petitioned Hitler for the baby to be killed. He agreed to the request and ordered the head of his personal Chancellery, Phillip Bouhler, to proceed likewise in all similar cases. Bouhler set up a secret organisation to carry out the programme which initially covered children up to three years old, later extended to twelve-sixteen years. By the end of the war approximately 5,000 children had been murdered either by injection or through deliberate malnutrition. In August 1939 Hitler ordered the extermination programme to be extended to adults, for which the *Fuhrer's* Chancellery set up another secret organisation. So large were the numbers involved - there were approximately 200,000 mentally sick and handicapped in 1939 - that a new method of killing had to be devised. Experts in the Criminal Police Department came up with the idea of using carbon monoxide gas. After a successful trial on a few patients, gas chambers were constructed in six mental hospitals in various parts of Germany to which patients were transferred from mental institutions all over the Reich. By the time the programme was officially stopped by Hitler in August 1941, under pressure from public protests, some 72,000 people had been murdered.

During the next two years under a separate programme also run by the *Fuhrer's* Chancellery under the code number 14F13, the reference number of the Inspector of Concentration Camps, another 30,000-50,000 people were selected from concentration camps and gassed on the grounds of mental illness, physical incapacity, or simply racial origin, in which case the 'diagnosis' on the official form read 'Jew' or 'gypsy'. In the meantime, however, the majority of the personnel who had developed expertise in operating the gas chambers had been transferred to Poland and placed at the disposal of the SS for the death camps which operated in the winter of 1941-42. These notorious death camps - Belsen, Treblinka, Sobibor, Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau - were intended to destroy the other biological outcasts of Nazi Germany, the non-Aryans, of whom the Jews formed by far the largest group. However, the understandable preoccupation with the Holocaust has tended to divert attention from another group which came into this category - the gypsies. For they also suffered genocide at the hands of the Nazis.

Long before the Nazis came to power the gypsies had been treated as social outcasts. Their foreign appearance, their strange customs and language, their nomadic way of life and lack of regular employment had increasingly come to be regarded as an affront to the norms of a modern state and society. They were seen as asocial, a source of crime, culturally inferior, a foreign body within the nation. During the 1920s, the police, first in Bavaria and then in Prussia established special offices to keep the gypsies under constant surveillance. They were photographed and finger-printed as if they were criminals. With the Nazi take-over, however, a new motive was added to the grounds for persecution - their distinct and allegedly inferior racial character.

Nazi policy towards the gypsies, like the policy towards Jews, was uncertain and confused. Initially they were not a major target. With their small numbers - 30,000 - and generally low social status they were not seen as such a serious racial threat as the Jews. They were, however, included in the regulations implementing the Nuremberg Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour of September 15th, 1935, which banned marriage and sexual relations between Aryans and non-Aryans. From then onwards they were the subject of intensive research by racial 'experts' of the 'Research Centre for Racial Hygiene and Biological Population Studies'. The aim was to identify and distinguish between pure gypsies and the part-gypsies (*Mischlinge*) who had been lumped together in the records of the Weimar police. Whereas in the case of the Jews the *Mischlinge* were treated as less of a threat than the 'full' Jews, among the gypsies the *Mischlinge*, some of whom had integrated themselves into German society, were treated as the greater threat. The leading expert on the gypsies, Dr Robert Ritter, insisted that:

The gypsy question can only be regarded as solved when the majority of a-social and useless gypsy Mischlinge have been brought together in large camps and made to work and when the continual procreation of this half-breed population has been finally prevented. Only then will future generations be freed from this burden.

In December 1938 Himmler issued a 'Decree for the Struggle against the Gypsy Plague', which introduced a more systematic registration of gypsies based on the research of the racial experts. Pure gypsies received brown papers, gypsy *Mischlinge* light blue ones and nomadic non-gypsies grey ones. The aim was 'once and for all to ensure the racial separation of gypsies from our own people to prevent the mixing of the two races and finally to regulate the living conditions of the gypsies and gypsy *Mischlinge*. After the victory over Poland the deportation of gypsies from Germany to Poland was ordered and in the meantime they were forbidden to leave the camps to which they were assigned and which were now in effect turned into labour camps. In May 1940, 2,800 gypsies joined the Jewish transports to Poland. However, this deportation programme was then stopped because of logistical problems in the reception areas.

During 1941-42 gypsies and gypsy *Mischlinge* were included in the discriminatory measures introduced against Jews within the Reich and they were also removed from the Armed Forces. However, while there was unanimous contempt for the gypsy *Mischlinge*, Nazi racial experts had a certain admiration for the way in which the pure gypsies had sustained their separate identity and way of life over the centuries, an achievement attributed to their strong sense of race. Dr Robert Ritter suggested that the 'pure bred' gypsies in Germany (*Sinti*) and in the German-speaking areas of Bohemia and Moravia (*Lalleri*) should be assigned to an area where they would be permitted to live according to their traditional ways more or less as museum specimens, while the remainder should be sterilised, interned, and subjected to forced labour. Himmler sympathised with this view and in October 1942 issued orders for appropriate arrangements to be made. However, he ran into opposition from Bormann and probably Hitler and so, on December 16th, 1942, he issued an order for the German gypsies to be transferred to Auschwitz. Between February 26th and March 25th, 1943, 11,400 gypsies from Germany and elsewhere were transported to a special gypsy camp within Auschwitz. Here, unlike other prisoners, they were unable to live together with their families, probably to facilitate medical experiments which were carried out in a medical centre established in their camp by the notorious Dr Mengele. Of the 20,000 gypsies in all transported to Auschwitz, 11,000 were murdered there, while the others were transferred elsewhere. At the same time, thousands of gypsies were being murdered throughout occupied Europe, notably by the *Einsatzgruppen* in Russia. It has been estimated that half a million European gypsies died at the hands of the Nazis. Of the 30,000 gypsies living in Germany in 1939 only 5,000 survived the war.

The gypsies offended against the norms of the 'national community' not only on the grounds of their non-Aryan character (although ironically since they had originated in India they could legitimately claim to be more 'Aryan' than the Germans!), but also on the grounds of their 'a-social' behaviour. The 'a-socials' formed another major category of social outcasts. The term 'a-social' was a very flexible one which could be used to include all those who failed to abide by the social norms of the national community: habitual criminals, the so-called 'work-shy', tramps and beggars, alcoholics, prostitutes, homosexuals, and juvenile delinquents. The Nazis introduced much tougher policies towards such groups, in some cases - as with the Sterilisation Law - implementing measures which had been demanded or planned before their take-over of power. Above all, there was a growing tendency for the police to acquire more and more control over these groups at the expense of the welfare agencies and the courts. It was the ultimate ambition of the police to take over responsibility for all those whom it defined as 'community aliens' (*Gemeinschaftsfremde*). To achieve this goal, in 1940 it introduced a draft 'Community Alien Law' which, after being held up by opposition from other government departments, was finally intended to go into effect in 1945. According to Paragraph 1.i of the final draft:

A person is alien to the community if he/she proves to be incapable of satisfying the minimum requirements of the national community through his/her own efforts, in particular through unusual degree of residency of mind or character.

The official explanation of the law maintained that:

The National Socialist view of welfare is that it can only be granted to national comrades who both need it and are worthy of it. In the case of community aliens who are only a burden on the national community welfare is not necessary, rather police compulsion with the aim of either making them once more useful members of the national community through appropriate measures or of preventing them from being a further burden. In all these matters protection of the community is the primary object.

In September 1933, the Reich Ministries of the Interior and Propaganda initiated a major roundup of 'tramps and beggars' of whom there were between 300,000 and 500,000, many of them homeless, young and unemployed. Such a large number of people without fixed abode was regarded as a threat to public order. However, the regime lacked the means to provide shelter and work for such vast numbers. Moreover, there were advantages in having a mobile labour force which could if necessary be directed to particular projects. The Nazis, therefore, initially made a distinction between 'orderly' and 'disorderly' people of no fixed abode. Those who were healthy, willing to work, and with no previous convictions were given a permit (*Wanderkarte*) and were obliged to follow particular routes and perform compulsory work in return for their board and lodging. 'Disorderly' persons of no fixed abode on the other hand could be dealt with under the Law against Dangerous Habitual Criminals and concerning Measures for Security and Correction of November 24th, 1933, and the Preventive Detention Decree of the Ministry of the Interior of December 14th, 1937, which introduced the practice of preventive detention. Many tramps were also sterilised.

After 1936, as a result of the economic recovery, Germany faced a growing labour shortage and the regime was no longer willing to tolerate either numbers of people of no fixed abode or the 'work-shy'. Apart from their significance for the labour force, such people contradicted basic principles of the national community - the principle of performance and the principle of being 'integrated' (*erfassteingeordnet*). As one Nazi expert put it:

In the case of a long period without work on the open road where he is entirely free to follow his own desires and instincts, he (the tramp) is in danger of becoming a freedom fanatic who rejects all integration as hated compulsion.

As a result, persons of no fixed abode increasingly came to be regarded as a police rather than a welfare matter. Even before 1936 some people designated as 'work-shy' had been sent to concentration camps forming the

category of 'a-socials' who wore a black triangle. A big round-up had taken place before the Olympic games and in 1936 two of the ten companies in Dachau were composed of this category. In the summer of 1938 an even bigger round-up took place under the code word 'Work-shy Reich' in the course of which approximately 11,000 'beggars, tramps, pimps and gypsies' were arrested and transferred largely to Buchenwald where they formed the largest category of prisoner until the influx of Jews following the 'Night of Broken Glass' on November 8th. It has been estimated that some 10,000 tramps were incarcerated in concentration camps during the Third Reich of whom few survived the ordeal. This harsh policy towards the 'a-socials' appears to have been popular with many Germans and was welcomed by local authorities who were thereby able to get rid of their 'awkward customers'.

Having set up a utopian model of an ideologically and racially homogeneous 'national community', the Nazis increasingly sought an explanation for deviance from its norms not in terms of flaws within the system itself and its incompatibility with human variety but rather in terms of flaws which were innate within the individual. As an anti-type to the racially pure, genetically healthy, loyal and efficient 'national comrade', they evolved the concept of a 'degenerate a-social' whose deviance was biologically determined. As the Reich Law Leader, Hans Frank, said it in a speech in October 1938:

National Socialism regards degeneracy as an immensely important source of criminal activity. It is our belief that every superior nation is furnished with such an abundance of endowments for its journey through life that the word 'degeneracy' most clearly defines the state of affairs that concerns us here. In a decent nation the 'genus' must be regarded as valuable per se: consequently, in an individual degeneracy signifies exclusion from the normal genus of the decent nation. This state of being degenerate, this different or alien quality tends to be rooted in miscegnation between a decent representative of his race and an individual of inferior stock. To us National Socialists criminal biology, or the theory of congenital criminality, connotes a link between racial decadence and criminal manifestations. The complete degenerate lacks all racial sensitivity and sees it as his positive duty to harm the community or member thereof. He is the absolute opposite of the man who recognised that the fulfillment of his duty as a national comrade is his mission in life.

These ideas represented a variation on concepts which had emerged from research into so-called 'criminal biology' which had been going on in the Weimar Republic. Nor was this simply a matter of theory. For the Nazis had actually begun to apply the principles of criminal biology in the sphere of juvenile delinquency. This was another area in which the police usurped the responsibility of the welfare agencies and the courts. In 1939 they exploited the Preventive Detention Decree of 1937 to set up their own Reich Central Agency for the Struggle Against Juvenile Delinquency and the following year established a Youth Concentration Camp in Moringen near Hanover. Perhaps the most significant feature of the camp was the fact that the youths were subjected to 'biological and racial examination' under the supervision of Dr Ritter, now the Director of the Criminal-Biological Institute of the Reich Security Main Office. Then, on the basis of highly dubious pseudo-scientific criteria, they were divided into groups according to their alleged socio-biological character and reformability. This process of socio-biological selection pioneered in Moringen was an integral part of the concept of the Community Aliens Law. Thus, according to the official justification of the Law:

The governments of the period of the System (Weimar) failed in their measures to deal with community aliens. They did not utilise the findings of genetics and criminal biology as a basis for a sound welfare and penal policy. As a result of their liberal attitude they constantly perceived only the "rights of the individual" and were more concerned with his protection from state intervention than with the general good. In National Socialism the individual counts for nothing when the community is at stake.

Defeat preserved Germans from being subjected to the Community Aliens Law and a future in which any deviation from the norms of the 'national community' would be not merely criminalised but also liable to be defined as evidence of 'degeneracy', i.e. biological inadequacy, for which the penalties were sterilization and probably eventual 'eradication' (*Ausmerzen*) through hard labour in concentration camp conditions. The Third Reich's policy towards social outcasts stands as a frightful warning both against the application of pseudo-science to social problems and against the rationalization of social prejudices in terms of pseudo- science.

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