

Nazi Human Experimentation and its Role in the Holocaust

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Mitscherlich, Alexander, Fred Mielke, and Heinz Norden. 1949. *Doctors of Infamy the Story of the Nazi Medical Crimes*. New York Schuman. 172 Pages.

Mitscherlich and Mielke's *Doctors of Infamy* is a documentative book that conveys "The Case Against the Nazi Physicians,"¹ a trial that took place from December 9, 1946, to August 20, 1947, in Nuremberg, Germany. The trial featured twenty-three Nazi defendants who were tried for crimes against humanity, specifically human experimentation, during the Holocaust. Nazi physicians like Dr. Karl Brandt and others were exposed for conducting unethical and inhumane medical experiments on prisoners in concentration camps, namely Dachau, Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, and others between 1939 and 1945. In a series of primary documents, Mitscherlich and Mielke draw on correspondence, secret reports, eyewitness accounts, and personal statements to create an informative book that documents the crimes in an unbiased and objective manner.

It is important to note that the central point of this book is not to make an argument regarding the trial or the defendants. Rather, the book was made to "illuminate what actually happened."² There is little commentary from the authors throughout the book, other than mere explanations to provide context and discuss the implications of the primary documents they chose to include. The content should nonetheless be seen as an example of the consequences of tyranny, where entire fields like science and medicine can lose all sense of integrity and succumb to political ideology. This argument is taken up by Michael Kater's *Doctors Under Hitler*, which points to the physicians as victims to Hitler's rhetoric while employing more commentary in the process.

Doctors of Infamy begins with a series of personal statements provided by various members of the prosecution. It is in these statements where the small amounts of commentary and personal opinion in the book are expressed. In general, the statements commend the book for its objectivity while attesting to the jurisprudence of the trial overall.

Following the personal statements, readers are introduced to the first set of human experiments: high altitude (subjection to low pressure), low temperature, and the drinking of sea water. This portion of the book groups these experiments together due to their intention to "close gaps in knowledge of warfare."³ Essentially, these experiments were conducted to address

¹ Alexander Mitscherlich, Fred Mielke, and Heinz Norden, *Doctors of Infamy the Story of the Nazi Medical Crimes*, 1949, p. 146.

² Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Norden, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 154-155.

³ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Norden, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 4

challenges faced by the German Air Force during the war, particularly pilots who had to perform crash-landings in the ocean.

The second set of human experiments included research on typhus and infectious jaundice. These experiments were conducted to test the effectiveness of potential treatment methods proposed by German scientists in response to a possible epidemic in the country.

The next set of experiments readers are introduced to are: the effectiveness of sulfonamide, bone-grafting, cellulitis, and mustard gas. These tests are grouped together for their shared purpose in addressing challenges faced by infantrymen who sustained injuries in combat.

The final set of experiments that are conveyed in the book include the euthanasia program, direct extermination of racial groups and undesirable patients, and mass sterilization. This final set is grouped together for their shared purpose in testing efficient methods to eliminate entire groups of people. Although all of the experiments across the various groups have a role in the act of the genocide, it is this group specifically that exemplifies the process more so than the others simply for its intended purposes.

Following the description of the experiments is an epilogue from the publisher where the aftermath of the trial is conveyed. It is learned that of the twenty-three defendants, fifteen were found guilty, and of that fifteen, seven were hanged while the others were given life sentences. The remaining seven were found not guilty, with exception to one who was still guilty of SS membership despite being acquitted of the charges associated with the medical experiments.⁴

The book ends with an appendix, which explores the meaning of guilt.

Although the book does not take an explicit stance on the acts of the Nazi doctors, it nonetheless provides insight into details of the experiments that align with aspects of genocide that we have studied in class. Through its detail with the inclusion of primary sources, readers can take note of moments that show the barbaric nature of the Nazi doctors in regard to three steps in genocide: discrimination, dehumanization, and denial.

In terms of discrimination, it is important to note that the doctors performed their experiments exclusively on prisoners in their concentration camps, e.g. Jews, Poles, Russians, and clergymen. In their testimony during the trial, the physicians attempt to reason with this selective targeting by arguing that the prisoners were already “condemned to death,”⁵ but this was largely untrue. In a letter from Dr. Sigmund Rascher to Heinrich Himmler, he requests permission to conduct such experiments, while suggesting that the “feeble-minded” be used as subjects.⁶ Even more, in the same letter, Dr. Rascher describes these experiments as “terminal experiments,” meaning that death for the subject was unavoidable.⁷ The death of the test person (TP) was inevitable; even if a TP were to survive the experiment, they would either die of related causes later, or be selected for execution. This is because they were inherently marked to die as being in an extermination camp was a death sentence in itself, an integral part of the Final Solution.

When examining the aspect of dehumanization, the statement by Telford Taylor must first be taken into consideration. Taylor was a Brigadier General in the US Army and the Chief of Counsel for War Crimes. He outlined ten basic principles of conducting human experiments that should be followed to satisfy ethical, moral, and legal concepts. In short, the basic principles say that human experiments require the consent of the TPs, should not be inherently dangerous, and

⁴ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 146

⁵ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 12

⁶ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 6

⁷ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 4

should be stopped if danger is imminent.⁸ When the human experiments conducted by the Nazi doctors were investigated, it was found through testimony that there was no consent from the TPs, and mortal danger was very apparent with no cessation.⁹ This would be the result of dehumanizing the victims. To the doctors, the prisoners were subhuman, which would act as justification for them to carry out the experiments. Just as the consent of an animal—such as a rat—is not required, the doctors felt the consent of the TPs were not required because they were subhuman. This can be seen further in their collection of skulls for anatomical research purposes; Nazi doctors saw their TPs as mere tools for scientific curiosity.¹⁰

The sense of denial is seen in the sentencing of the twenty-three defendants. In general, all of the defendants testified that they were only carrying out the orders given to them by the military. Even more, they did not feel any remorse or sense of wrongdoing in their actions.¹¹ In Mrugowsky's final words before being hanged, he shouted, "I die as a German officer sentenced by a brutal enemy and conscious I never committed the crimes charged against me." For Gebhardt, his last words were, "I die without bitterness, but regret there is still injustice in the world."¹² This similar concept can be read in Robert Jay Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors* where he performs a psychological analysis on the doctors, examining how they were able to conduct such experiments without their occupations as physicians being compromised.

These stages are relevant because of their ability to act as classifications for a genocide. When trying to decipher whether a situation should be considered a genocide, certain events can be observed that are common among all genocides. These three aspects serve as precedents that can be seen as examples of such behaviors.

In a broader sense, all that should be considered is whether there is a complete disregard for human life. Nothing in this book would be more evident of this lack thereof than Albert Deutsch's note on medical ethics. From Deutsch's discussion, readers learn that the Hippocratic Oath had to be modified after being created two millennia ago in response to the actions of the Nazi doctors. Essentially, new clauses had to be created which include a condemnation of racism and discrimination while emphasizing integrity.¹³

Overall, when examining the book for its presentation and style, it can be said that the content is unbiased and factual. As mentioned, the authors provide little discussion or analysis on the trial itself or the defendants, instead relying on plenty of evidence in the form of primary documents to speak for themselves. Reviewers of the book took note of this, promoting it as a great source for medical and history students as it forces readers to create conclusions and themes for themselves. In essence, the book answers the question of *what* happened, but does not include any answers as to *why* or *how* it happened. Those questions are for readers to answer.

However, as much as the book is great in its descriptions and inclusion of evidence while remaining unbiased, there are nonetheless shortcomings that readers can notice. First and foremost, it can be argued that there is insufficient citing by the authors. An example of this can be found in the inclusion of the final words of the defendants. There are no sources provided for these final words, nor any to support the inclusion of the claim that the hangings took "62 minutes."¹⁴ Other than a lack of sources, there is also an area where more detail and specificity

⁸ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. xxiii-xxv

⁹ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 156-157

¹⁰ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 81

¹¹ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 147

¹² Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 147

¹³ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. xxxviii

¹⁴ Mitscherlich, Mielke, and Nordon, *Doctors of Infamy*, p. 147

can be useful to readers. In the introduction, all twenty-three defendants are named, but plenty of other names are mentioned throughout the book with little context provided. This leads to the question of whether these names are to be grouped together with the twenty-three defendants in a moral sense; are they any less criminal? More? In a way, this can lead to assumptions regarding these names, which should not be the case for a book of this nature. The criminality of a name should not be up for interpretation, it should be abundantly clear.

Nonetheless, the book is exceptionally informative and well-thought out. The dependency on primary sources leaves little room for interpretation while still encouraging readers to explain for themselves what they read and the significance of it in a broader sense, whether it be in terms of historical genocide or medical ethics.

Bibliography

Reviews:

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 - This is an article from Academic Search Complete (ASC). The review is an excerpt in a newspaper article that reviews *Doctors of Infamy*. Braceland summarizes the book while saying that it should be a required reading for medical students as it shows what can happen to people in the medical field who stray from their morals.
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<http://www.jstor.org/stable/19844>.
 - This is a review from JSTOR. Shimkin believes the book is a good source that has insightful comments from the personal statements of Drs. Ivy and Alexander, particularly in their comments on morality in the medical world and the editing of the Hippocratic Oath. While Shimkin hopes that the book can be seen as such a horrific depiction of events that nothing similar will happen again, he nonetheless cannot be entirely confident in such a thought.

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 - This is a Wikipedia article that provides context regarding the original version in German and the subsequent translations in English.

Related Books:

- Kater, Michael H, Charles E Rosenberg, Carolina Press, and Mazal Holocaust Collection. 1989. *Doctors under Hitler*. Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press. [Amazon](#).
 - Kater’s book examines how the Nazi regime invaded the German world of medicine, enforcing and manipulating its doctors into believing in unethical practices. It provides insight into the number of doctors that fell victim to the Nazi agenda, while touching on the few that resisted, showing the sense of corruption under Hitler.
- Robert Jay Lifton. 2017. *The Nazi Doctors Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide : With a New Preface by the Author*. New York Basic Books. [Amazon](#).
 - Lifton’s book explores how Nazi doctors proved to be key roles in the perpetrators of the Holocaust, specifically in their conduction of human experiments. He also performs a psychoanalysis on the doctors and explains how they were able to perform the unethical experiments while retaining their sense of identity as physicians.