

## READING 8

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### *The Scientists of Annihilation*

The Allies also indicted the scientists who made the Holocaust possible. Among them were physicians who performed “medical experiments” on concentration camp inmates as well as the engineers and technicians who helped create the technology of mass death. Leo Alexander, a psychiatrist who served as a consultant to the Secretary of War of the United States on duty with the Office of the Chief Counsel for War Crimes in Nuremberg, summarized his own findings.

A large part of [German] research was devoted to the science of destroying and preventing life, for which I have proposed the term “ktenology,” the science of killing. In the course of this ktenologic research, methods of mass killing and mass sterilization were investigated and developed for use against non-German peoples or Germans who were considered useless.

Sterilization methods were widely investigated but proved impractical in experiments conducted in concentration camps. A rapid method developed for sterilization of females, which could be accomplished in the course of a regular health examination, was the intra-uterine injection of various chemicals... The injections were extremely painful, and a number of women died in the course of the experiments. Professor Karl Clauberg reported that he had developed a method at the Auschwitz concentration camp by which he could sterilize 1000 women in one day.

Another method of sterilization, or rather castration, was proposed by Viktor Brack especially for conquered populations. His idea was that x-ray machinery could be built into desks at which the people would have to sit, ostensibly to fill out a questionnaire requiring five minutes; they would be sterilized without being aware of it. This method failed because experiments carried out on 100 male prisoners [resulted in] severe x-ray burns...on all subjects...

The development of methods for rapid and inconspicuous individual execution was the objective of another large part of the ktenologic research... Poisons were the subject of many of these experiments. A research team at the Buchenwald concentration camp, consisting of Drs. Joachim Mrugowsky, Erwin Ding-Schuler and Waldemar Hoven, developed the most widely used means of individual execution under the guise of medication treatment – namely, the intravenous injection of phenol or gasoline.<sup>7</sup>

It was left to the engineers, however, to develop the technology for mass death. When the Russians entered Auschwitz-Birkenau, they found records that detailed the construction of the crematoriums, complete with precise costs and calculations of the number of corpses each furnace could incinerate in a single day. The Russians captured four of the engineers who designed and built the furnaces for a company called Topf and Sons. Historian Gerald Fleming recently uncovered a transcript of their interrogation by the Russians. On March 5, 1946, Kurt Pruefer, one of the four, was asked:

How often and with what aim did you visit Auschwitz?

*Answer.* Five times. The first time [was] at the beginning of 1943, to receive the orders of the SS Command, where the “Kremas” were to be built. The second time [was] in spring 1943 to inspect the building site. The third time was in autumn 1943 to inspect a fault in the construction of a “Krema” chimney. The fourth time [was] at the beginning of 1944, to inspect the repaired chimney. The fifth time [was] in September-October 1944 when I visited Auschwitz in connection with the intended relocation [from Auschwitz] of the crematoriums, since the front was getting nearer. The crematoriums were not relocated, because there were not enough workers...

*Q.* Did you see a gas chamber next to the crematorium?

*A.* Yes, I did see one next to the crematorium. Between the gas chamber and the crematorium there was a connecting structure.

*Q.* Did you know that in the gas chambers and the crematoriums there took place the liquidations of innocent human beings?

*A.* I have known since spring 1943 that innocent human beings were being liquidated in Auschwitz gas chambers and that their corpses were subsequently incinerated in the crematoriums...

*Q.* Why was the brick lining of the muffles so quickly damaged?

*A.* The bricks were damaged after six months because the strain on the furnaces was colossal.

*Q.* What motivated you to continue with the building of the other crematoriums as senior engineer with Topf?

*A.* I had my contract with the Topf firm and I was aware of the fact that my work was of great importance for the national socialist state. I knew that if I refused to continue with this work, I would be liquidated by the Gestapo.

On March 7, the Russians also questioned Fritz Sander about the crematoriums. He expressed concern about the strain on the furnaces.

I decided to design and build a crematorium with a higher capacity. I completed this project...and I submitted [it] to a State Patent Commission in Berlin.

This “Krema” was to be built on the conveyor belt principle. That is to say, the corpses must be brought to the incineration furnaces without interruption. When the corpses are pushed into the furnaces, they fall onto a grate, then slide into the furnace and are incinerated. The corpses serve at the same time as fuel for the heating of the furnaces...

*Q.* Although you knew about the mass liquidation of innocent human beings in crematoriums, you devoted yourself to designing and creating higher capacity incineration furnaces for crematoriums – and on your own initiative.

*A.* I was a German engineer and key member of the Topf works and I saw it as my duty to apply my specialist knowledge in this way in order to help Germany win the war, just as an aircraft construction engineer builds airplanes in wartime, which are also connected with the destruction of human beings. [Mr. Sander’s design was never carried out.]<sup>8</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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Physicians are bound by the Hippocratic oath. It is a vow to help the sick and abstain from any act that may be harmful to the patient or that has an ulterior motive. The oath specifically prohibits the giving of deadly medicine or poison to anyone or suggesting that others give it. How far did Nazi physicians stray from that oath? What responsibility does a physician have to his or her patients? To society?

To what extent were doctors and health-care professionals in the Third Reich guided by ideology rather than the interests of medicine and their patients? What aspects of their training may have led Nazi doctors and other health professionals to overemphasize techniques and medical technology at the expense of patient care?

The Americans also tried sixteen Nazi jurists, including an acting minister of justice, who drafted the special regulations that deprived many people of the basic rights of a fair trial, ordered their indefinite transfer to concentration camps, and ultimately deprived them of life; as well as prosecutors who charged and judges who condemned them to death on trumped-up charges. The court declared that the judges hid the “murderer’s knife” beneath their judicial robes. What did they mean? What is a judge’s responsibility? How did the judge Alexander describes violate that responsibility?

Just a few years after the trials, American scientists and physicians secretly experimented on prisoners and mentally retarded children to discover the effects of radiation. Most Americans knew nothing of the tests until Energy Secretary Hazel O’Leary opened the records to the public in 1993. Use newspapers and magazines to research the story that reporters then discovered. Many have argued that the experiments violated people’s trust by