

The first phase of 'euthanasia' 1940-1941

With the start of the Second World War in September 1939, many areas of the economy and social life were geared towards the war effort. The murder of patients from psychiatric hospitals and care facilities was organized by the state in order to free up financial resources and nursing staff, as well as to create the necessary hospital space for wounded soldiers. However, the Nazi regime did not provide any legal legitimisation and the murder campaign was concealed behind the term 'euthanasia' (ancient Greek for 'good death').

The administration for the implementation of the murder campaign was based at Tiergartenstraße 4 in Berlin from the beginning of 1940. The so-called Central Office comprised a total of four front organizations:

- Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft Heil- und Pflegeanstalten - Registration of victims
- Gemeinnützige Krankentransport GmbH - transport
- Gemeinnützige Stiftung für Anstaltspflege - establishment and operation of the gas killing centres
- Central clearing center (from 1941) - regulation of finances

The Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft Heil- und Pflegeanstalten (RAG) sent registration forms to every psychiatric hospital and nursing home, which had to be completed for the patients according to specified criteria and then sent back to Berlin. The RAG then forwarded the completed registration forms to three of the 30 or so medical experts involved, who used the form to give their opinion on the life and death of the patients.

After the selection, RAG sent the names of the people who were to be killed to Gemeinnützige Krankentransport GmbH (Gekrat). The latter then compiled corresponding lists. Depending on the location and infrastructure, either trains with additional carriages or buses stationed in the killing centers were used for the journeys. For reasons of camouflage, Reichspost buses were used, which had to accommodate up to 40 patients and three to five accompanying persons.

The purpose of the transfers quickly became known in the original institutions. Despite this, very few institutions endeavored to protect the people entrusted to them from being transported away. From January 1940 to August 1941, over 70,000 people died in the gas chambers of six killing centers.

By the late summer of 1941, there was noticeable unrest among the population in the vicinity of the central 'euthanasia' centers, accompanied by increasing protest from church circles. Those responsible therefore decided to decentralize the murder campaign. In a second phase of 'euthanasia', people were now killed in around 100 psychiatric clinics by depriving them of food and overdosing them with medication.

Bernburg Euthanasia Center

In January 1940, the first killing center in Grafeneck Castle in the south of the German Reich started, followed in February by the killing center in the old prison in Brandenburg/Havel to the west of Berlin.

In Brandenburg/Havel, however, the location of the facility in the center of the city quickly led to problems. Local residents noticed the cremation of corpses. For this reason, the search began for a new location, which was finally found in Bernburg.

The state sanatorium and nursing home, which opened in 1875, offered a closed building complex that did not directly border on a residential area. Nearby psychiatric clinics were available as possible intermediate stations for the logistics of the transports.

The clinic was divided up at the beginning of November 1940. Six of the buildings were evacuated and became the gas murder center under the name 'Bernburg Sanatorium and Nursing Home'. All other buildings remained a psychiatric hospital under the new name 'Anhaltische Nervenlinik'. In the basement of one of the six buildings, workmen built a gas chamber, a dissection room and two stationary ovens for cremating the corpses. The first transport arrived on 21 November 1940.

The arriving buses traveled directly to the grounds of the 'Bernburg Sanatorium and Nursing Home'. Initially, the inmates got off in front of the building, which was equipped with a gas chamber, and entered the corridor on the ground floor through the left-hand entrance as shown on the plan. However, as this area was visible to outsiders, a garage was later added behind the building and an opening was made from there into the corridor.

Administrative and nursing staff first checked the identity of those arriving and supervised the undressing of the people. As part of a mock examination, the doctor on duty selected the most plausible cause of death for each person, which was later written on the death certificates. He also searched for scientifically interesting illnesses. There were only a few exceptions to the killings, for example in the case of mistaken names.

After registration, the people had to gather in the large room in the center of the ground floor. They had already handed in their personal belongings, as well as their clothes. Nursing staff made sure that the patients entered the gas chamber.

The last transport arrived in Bernburg on 15 August 1941. By this time, over 9,300 patients had been murdered. Although the facility was not closed after this, the number of staff was significantly reduced. Those who remained took part in another murder operation in 1942, the so-called special treatment 14f13, the aim of which was to murder prisoners from concentration camps who were unable to work. Over 4,500 people from six concentration camps died in Bernburg alone between March and October 1942.

In the late summer of 1943, the buildings of the killing center were returned to the psychiatric hospital. Significant parts of the killing center were preserved, but it is not known why they were not dismantled.

Victims

Of the approximately 14,000 victims of the Bernburg killing center, around 11,000 are currently known for certain. However, for many of these people, no more than a name and dates of birth and death are available today. Their lives often remain hidden and can often only be reconstructed through meticulous searches in archives and co-operation with relatives. Research is made more difficult because in the case of both the patients and the concentration camp prisoners, relatives were given false dates of death in order to cover up the murders.

Perpetrators

The employees of the Bernburg 'euthanasia' center were not all committed National Socialists who participated in the 'euthanasia' crimes out of conviction.

The majority of them were deployed in accordance with the 'Ordinance to ensure the supply of manpower for tasks of particular importance to state policy' of 13 February 1939. This so-called compulsory service was issued by the relevant labor offices. However, there were also other ways of gaining access, such as commanding members of the military or the SS or, in the case of civilians, being referred by acquaintances.

Only a few endeavored to leave the facility again. The main reasons for staying and joining were uncritical subordination, faith in the state, good pay and careerism.

The employees of the 'sanatorium and nursing home' lived in communal accommodation on the grounds of the killing center. In order to avoid enquiries, contact with the population of Bernburg and in particular with the employees of the Anhalt psychiatric hospital was undesirable. A relatively closed group of mostly young men and women was formed, who also spent their free time together. Friendships developed and some of the contacts even led to permanent partnerships.

Post-war period/prosecution

US troops first arrived in Bernburg in April 1945. From July of that year, the town belonged to the Soviet occupation zone.

The first investigations in Bernburg took place in October 1945. The facility had already been closed for two years; the more than 100 employees of the 'euthanasia center were no longer in the region. The cover names used by the perpetrators in correspondence with relatives initially led to the search for people who did not even exist. In addition, the existence of four occupation zones with different political orientations and a lack of social interest made prosecution more difficult. Nevertheless, most of the trials against perpetrators from 'euthanasia' centers took place during this period, including those from Bernburg.

The 3D model was based on statements made by perpetrators from the 1960s as part of investigations by the Hessian Public Prosecutor General's Office. It is striking that many perpetrators made contradictory or even trivializing statements and often discredited the victims. In relation to the murder of prisoners in Bernburg, perpetrators sometimes did not want to remember exactly what had happened. Due to the lack of survivors, the reports on the events at the killing center remain very one-sided, which makes it all the more important to critically scrutinize the perpetrators' statements. The reconstruction of the events is also made more difficult because the hospital used the buildings of the former killing center for therapeutic purposes from 1943 and the rooms were partially remodeled.