

# Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/digital-resources/articles/7424,Nazi-crimes-on-people-with-disabilities-in-the-light-of-international-law-a-brie.html>

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## Nazi crimes on people with disabilities in the light of international law - a brief review

Ethnic cleansing committed by the Nazis during World War II focused mainly on the Jewish community was not the only course of eugenic thought. People who had been harmed by birth - the disabled and mentally ill, were not spared the torturers wearing German uniforms.



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## **T4 or the eradication of worthless life**

The development of eugenic thought and desire in preserving the German race led to the mass murder of millions of innocent civilians. Victims, who did not die on a battlefield bearing arms, but ordinary people who were brutally murdered in the name of Nazi ideology. Unfortunately, people with disabilities and mental illnesses accounted for a notable percentage of these pointless deaths.

Central to this issue is Aktion T4, the T4 representing Tiergartenstasse 4, the address of the Chancellery department set up early in 1940 to accommodate the Aktion T4 programme. The purpose of the programme was the complete elimination of “life unworthy of life” (Ger. *Vernichtung von lebensunwertem Leben*), in other words, individuals with different kinds of defects and disabilities, developmental disorders and, above all, mental disorders. People classified to this group were recognized as useless in society and as economic burden on the state which, in the face of intensive military operations underway, was unwarranted from the viewpoint of the Nazi government.

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## **“Eugenic Darwinism”**

The beginnings of the intellectual trend called eugenics took root in Germany as early as in the 1920s. At that time two medical doctors, Alfred Hoche and Karl Binding, brutally interpreted Darwin’s evolutionary theory in a booklet entitled “Permission for the destruction of a life deprived of value” (Ger. *Die Freigabe der*

*Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens*). According to their beliefs, humanitarianism manifested by saving every human life contradicts with natural law, where weak individuals die as a result of so-called natural selection. Therefore, it is justified to eliminate all disabled people by way of involuntary euthanasia, because the natural environment would in any event not provide them with the chance of survival.

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## **Forced sterilisation (1933)**

The Nazis began to realise the vision of societal “purgation” as soon as they took power in Germany. In 1933, on 14th of July, the Act on Preventing an Inheritably Burdened Progeny (Ger. *Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchst*) entered into force, under the power of which, individuals with inheritable diseases such as: mental retardation, schizophrenia, psychosis, epilepsy, and alcoholism, were involuntarily sterilised. The estimated number of people who fell victim to this procedure was in the region of 350,000. A few years later, on 18 August 1939, the Reich Committee for the Scientific Registering of Hereditary and Congenital Illnesses was established, its purpose being the registration and classification of newborns with unwanted health issues.

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