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Book Review

***Asperger's Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna***

**by Edith Sheffer, W.W. Norton & Company, 2018. 317 pp. \$27.95**

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“Today Germany, tomorrow the world!”<sup>1</sup> This popular Nazi party slogan reveals the importance of the future, as embodied by children, in the worldview of Nazi regime and their supporters. Yet, the regime qualified this emphasis on children. Only the ‘racially pure’ members of the Third Reich could be incorporated into the *Volk*. Edith Sheffer enriches our understanding of this distinction in *Asperger's Children*. Departing from existing literature, Sheffer eschews traditional top-down examinations of doctors in Nazi Germany. Rather, she examines the life of Hans Asperger from multiple levels: his writing, the racial beliefs shared by his peers, and most poignantly, the stories of his victims. Sheffer’s work is an invaluable contribution to the literature on childhood in Nazi Germany. It will likely remain a staple in the historiography for decades to come.

The primary argument of *Asperger's Children* asserts that Hans Asperger’s diagnosis of autistic psychopathy developed from the institutions and ideology of the Third Reich. This image of Asperger challenges previous historiographical trends by examining the actions of a Nazi-sympathetic doctor through a micro-historical lens. Sheffer notes that while Asperger was not a member of the Nazi party, he joined numerous far-right organizations such as the *Fatherland Front* and *Bund Neuland*.<sup>2</sup> More disturbingly, Sheffer asserts that Asperger “participated in Vienna’s ‘children’s killing system’ on multiple levels (...)” (16). Asperger’s approach to child psychology embodied Nazism’s two-sided nature where some individuals

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<sup>1</sup> The original German phrase, as adopted from a Hitler Youth song written by Hans Baumann, was “*Heute Deutschland, morgen die Welt*.” See „Lieder der Hitlerjugend,“ *Demokratische Blätter* 7 no. 78 (1935).

<sup>2</sup> The *Fatherland Front* was Austria’s single-party, far-right government prior to the German annexation in 1938 and *Bund Neuland* was an ultra-conservative Catholic youth association.

could be ‘treated’ to meet Nazi racial standards while others had to be ‘excised’ from the community.

The early chapters of the book describe Asperger’s background and the broad outlines of Nazi racial ideology. The key here is the close connection between the murder of disabled children and the regime’s later attempts at mass murder. In this context, Sheffer’s contribution to the field can best be seen from the perspective of the general public. Few know that “child killing was the Reich’s first system of mass murder” (20). During this program, the regime murdered 5,000 to 10,000 children (mostly non-Jewish) due to their mental and physical disabilities. These children were referred to hospitals by doctors such as Asperger. The hospitals then served as killing centers through the administration of poisonous injections. As Sheffer correctly notes, this crucial step in the path to mass extermination remains largely unknown among non-specialists.

Sheffer discloses the book’s central thesis in her examination of Asperger’s definition of autistic psychopathy. In his 1944 dissertation, Asperger defined this diagnosis as “a disturbance of the adaptation to the environment (...) [that caused] failure of the instinct functions and disruption of relationships with other people” (84). Asperger’s diagnosis rests upon measuring the level of children’s sociability. However, Sheffer’s novel contribution comes from her linkage of this definition to Nazi ideology. Asperger’s theories concerning autism were *directly informed* (author’s emphasis) by Nazi notions of community and the dangers of deviating from authority. This transformation of Asperger’s beliefs is visible in his writing between 1935 and 1944. While he first advocated for care and attention for disabled children, by the mid-1940s, Asperger contributed to a program of mass murder. Accordingly, Sheffer asserts that Asperger can be viewed as complicit in the murderous crimes of Nazi Germany, both in ideology and practice.

While the value of *Asperger’s Children* is evident in its argument, Sheffer’s methodology

marks a departure from previous studies of childhood during the Holocaust. Founding works in the field, such as Deborah Dwork's *Children with a Star*, largely focus on particular stories using oral histories and postwar testimonies. Sheffer seeks to amend this paradigm by conducting what Saul Friedländer terms "an integrated history"<sup>3</sup> – a chronological study which examines life under Nazism from all perspectives and levels. Building upon Friedländer, Sheffer combines stories and testimony from the children themselves with ideological notions that influenced Asperger. This expert analysis provides the reader with a near-complete picture of Asperger's role in contributing to Nazi racial goals.

Furthermore, Sheffer situates her analysis of Asperger within the larger historiographical trend of rethinking Nazi racial ideology. Traditionally, studies of Nazi racial policy focused on the mass murder of European Jews. Sheffer seeks to expand this concept when she calls the murder of individuals with disabilities, including children, "psychiatric genocide" (95). The process of murdering disabled children was both state-sponsored and systematic – certainly fitting the prevailing legal definitions of genocide. This scholarly intervention is perhaps more impactful for scholars unfamiliar with Nazi Germany, as the reconceptualization of murder in the Third Reich has largely been debated in the historiography since the 1990s. Nevertheless, Sheffer's emphasis on the murder of children brings this trend into sharper focus.

A superb contribution to the field, there is very little to room for improvement in *Asperger's Children*. Sheffer's weakest moment comes with her moral evaluation of Asperger, arguing that "one cannot escape the fact that Asperger worked within a system of mass killing as a conscious participant, very much tied to its world and to its horrors" (237). While Sheffer presents evidence suggesting Asperger worked closely with the practitioners of mass

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<sup>3</sup> Saul Friedländer, 'An Integrated History of the Holocaust: Some Methodological Challenges,' in *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. Dan Stone (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2012), 182.

murder, she falls short of establishing the extent to which he was a conscious participant. The evidence presented in *Asperger's Children* paints the picture of a doctor heavily influenced by the racist and far-right ideas present at the time. Yet the extent to which Asperger actively participated in the process of child murder, such as the killing process at the Spiegelgrund facility itself, remains to be seen. He clearly was friendly with the physicians who physically ordered the killings, but one wonders where to precisely locate Asperger in the process of child euthanasia. Was he just a cog in the machine, or did he actively take the initiative to send children to their deaths?

In her concluding chapter, Sheffer notes that long after the practice of murdering children ended in 1945, caregivers at Vienna's children's homes would taunt children with the threat of being sent to these killing centers (223). The legacy of the so-called euthanasia program extended well into the postwar era. This fact demonstrates the enduring significance of studying the life of Hans Asperger. Long before Jews, Roma, and Poles were being gassed at Birkenau, doctors and nurses were murdering children in the heart of Vienna. "Today Germany, tomorrow the world," notes the Nazi slogan. Edith Sheffer demonstrates that the world of tomorrow had little room for the children of Vienna.