

the most recent cases and legal developments in Germany, Britain, USA, Australia, and the Netherlands helps to fill this gap. Taking the approach of a critical commentator on historical sources, the author presents a wide range of positions in the Jewish and Christian traditions, the medical profession, law, and philosophy (including the contributions by Friedrich Nietzsche and Peter Singer). In particular, he examines the influence of Social Darwinist, eugenic, and utilitarian thought on German discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which prepared—via Karl Binding's and Alfred Hoche's notorious *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens* (1920)—the ideological ground for the Nazi “euthanasia” programmes. Benzenhöfer's account of these killing programmes includes some new details on the initial case of active euthanasia performed in 1939 on the handicapped “child Knauer”.

While medical historians will be familiar with several of the key texts discussed in this book, such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) or Adolf Jost's *Das Recht auf den Tod* (1895), the summaries of relevant court decisions and medical guidelines in Germany during the late 1970s to 1990s (partly reprinted in an appendix) are particularly useful. Benzenhöfer's analysis of these recent developments points to the growing importance of patient directives on limitations of therapy in terminal illness (“patients' wills”) and the dangers of proxy consent to withdrawal of treatment in cases of persistent vegetative state. It also illustrates an emerging medical and legal consensus on passive euthanasia, whereas active euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide remain highly controversial and illegal. As for the Netherlands, where active euthanasia is not prosecuted if certain procedural safeguards have been observed, the problem of a “euthanasia mentality”, which may undermine truly voluntary decision-making and hamper the progress of palliative care, is highlighted. The author

abstains from drawing broader historical conclusions or from developing a general ethical position on the subject. Nevertheless, this volume will serve well for teaching purposes and for anyone who seeks concise information on the historical dimensions of euthanasia.

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Bronwyn Rebekah McFarland-Icke, *Nurses in Nazi Germany: moral choice in history*, Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. xvii, 343, £21.95 (hardback 0-691-00665-2).

The promise of this book's title is unfulfilled. It is not an account of the nursing profession in Nazi Germany, nor does it tell us much about moral choice in history. A revised doctoral dissertation, it purports to explain how psychiatric nurses, subject to “an ethical imperative to heal and promote life” dealt with the “moral contradiction” of taking part in “racially motivated compulsory sterilization and ‘euthanasia’ policies” (p. 1). But we learn very little about these nurses—who they were, where they came from, their families, their education, their ages, their religious views, their interactions with one another. Nowhere is there a description of their training, its length, the institutions they attended, the requirements, the admission standards, the practicum, any special courses in mental illness. Many apparently were male but the reader gets no sense of how many and what difference gender made. Were they really “professionals” at all? At times their role seems no different from that of attendants or guards. A kitchen worker at one institution, for example, apparently unremarkable, simply applies to become a nurse. While we are told that many had “less than the desired amount of education”, we do not learn what the “desired amount” actually was.

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The author relies heavily on a journal for psychiatric nurses called (after 1930) *Geisteskrankenpflege* that advised nurses on how to deal with the mentally ill, but there is no indication of how widely read it was and how seriously readers took the advice. Her other principal sources are the records, chiefly of disciplinary cases, of nurses at two Nazi institutions in Berlin and Eichberg, and the postwar record of trials of nurses accused of participation in euthanasia measures. The latter she admits to be of “questionable utility” since their self-justifying testimony was given many years after the war. There are no comparisons with nurses’ training or experiences with sterilization in other countries. Nor does she seem interested in any comparison with how nurses in the Nazi era dealt with the disabled or “physically unfit” to live.

On this slim foundation the author builds a shaky framework of moral choices made by psychiatric nurses in the Nazi era. Without knowing anything about them, their training, their religious and moral convictions, and very little about the institutions they served, we are offered an analysis of their behaviour amidst the most horrific moral trials in modern history. “Conscience did not disappear completely”, she writes, and they participated “in mass murder *with or in spite of a guilty conscience*” (p. 6). The Nazis got compliance by keeping a “safe distance” between most nurses and the actual killing, and by edging the subject of euthanasia away from public discourse. “*Agreeing*” with Nazi policy, she argues, was “different from *not objecting*” to it (p. 8). The lives of nurses, contrary to what we might expect, were not therefore “thoroughly politicized” (p. 202). The author thus claims to have recovered “the moral agency of nurses” amidst the devilish conditions prevailing in mental institutions in wartime Germany (p. 12).

But the evidence for these generalizations is slim. The argument rests at bottom on a select number of disciplinary cases involving nurses at the two institutions. Page after

page is devoted to administrative and legal steps taken to resolve conflicts, often petty, among employees and between them and their superintendents. At times, administrative policy of necessity deviated from strict political doctrine in the interest of order and efficiency. General compliance, even in the case of euthanasia, was the goal rather than total surrender of individual will. “The methods of killing, as far as nurses were concerned”, she writes, “involved no violence and no blood; patients were sent away in buses, or . . . fell into a sleep from which they did not awaken.” Thus nurses were able “to [adapt] to murder . . . with or without pangs of conscience” (p. 210). They were not “able to admit to *themselves*, let alone others, that they knew” (p. 227). Confronted with the fact of massive killing, they understandably argued that they were not responsible “because they had not been directly involved” (p. 238). It is a thin argument, not different from that made by millions of postwar Germans. On the evidence presented, psychiatric nurses were not different from the vast majority of “ordinary Germans” who ducked moral choices when they had to be made.

The subject of the book is clearly an important one. McFarland-Ickes has found a cache of interesting new material. She raises challenging questions. She often writes well. But the central argument, as here presented, has too many weak links to be persuasive. An alert press should have caught these shortcomings. The author is apparently continuing her researches, so perhaps we may look forward to more convincing and better documented studies from her pen in the future.

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