

Book Reviews

BENNO MÜLLER-HILL, *Murderous science: elimination by scientific selection of Jews, Gypsies, and others: 1933–1945*, trans. George Fraser, Oxford, New York, and Tokyo, Oxford University Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. xvi, 208, £15.00.

Murderous science is a short, complex book with an importance that extends far beyond the purview of World War Two historians. Müller-Hill's contention is that anthropologists, geneticists, and psychiatrists created, supported, and implemented Nazi racial-inferiority laws and policies. Moreover, there is a direct line from the 1933 job-exclusion laws that saw German scientific and other institutions hastening to cast out their Jewish colleagues, through the laws that enforced sterilization on hundreds of thousands of German citizens who had incurable racially-significant "diseases" (1936–9), past the murder (so-called "euthanasia") of deformed children and asylum inmates of all ages (1938–40), directly to the extermination of millions of Jews, Gypsies, Poles, and others at Auschwitz, Chelmno, Treblinka, and the like between 1939 and 1945. Here, from 1943 on, it was physicians who greeted the incoming masses and, with a wave of the hand, sent men, women, and children to immediate death, or to labour before dying.

The fulminations of Adolf Hitler against the Jews, the Gypsies, the Poles, and others were based on the assumption of explicit and unalterable genetic differences. When these fevered claims became a central plank in the platform of the National Socialists, there was no shortage of geneticists, anthropologists, and psychiatrists scrambling to maintain research funding by shifting their goals to coincide with those of the Party. This book outlines some of the ramifications of this relationship.

One component of this book is a detailed chronology of the identification, proscription, and extermination of "those who were different". This opens the first of two main sections of the book, the narrative historical account of this process and the vital roles played in it by various German scientists. Step by step, the scope of activities widened. One particularly significant event was the passage of a sterilization law in 1933. By its terms, carefully devised by a committee of scientists, sterilization could be ordered to combat a wide range of "hereditary" conditions.

The other section of *Murderous science* contains excerpts from interviews with 13 Germans either related to central figures in the scientific community of the Third Reich, or themselves participants in various ways in the racial-inferiority studies. Müller-Hill interviewed many more individuals relevant to this book, but the published transcripts are those that have been reviewed by the interviewees and approved for publication. It has become a truism of post-war investigations of Nazism that almost no one interviewed was himself a Nazi or knew what was going on. This phenomenon, combining in different individuals varying portions of deceit and psychological blocking, recurs throughout Müller-Hill's research: "These learned men wanted to know nothing, and so there came into being a remarkable community of self-blinded internal exiles coexisting with the annihilators, those who did not go all the way to the final solution" (p. 23).

Murderous science is not a book about the technology of the Holocaust. Rather, and far more importantly, it is a book that demonstrates the disastrous results that follow from unthinking obeisance to one of the sacred cows of science: objectivity. Judicious and directed objectivity is crucial in carrying out specific tasks of research. An experiment must be designed objectively so that the investigator's informed guess as to the probable result can be either sustained or negated: both possibilities must exist. But objectivity can be perverted, and it is this perversion that Müller-Hill documents—and that must be noted by contemporary scientists and ethicists, for the danger lurks constantly on the fringes of science.

Perhaps the most dangerous perversion is the separation of science from the rest of life. The Nazi scientists who proceeded with their studies of racial differentiation without recognizing what their conclusions meant in human terms are guilty of false objectivity. Thus there was in Nazi Germany and, perhaps, is today some feeling that "In science all that really matters is getting interesting, accurate results as quickly as possible; there is simply no time to talk to patients" (p. 102).

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Once the Nazi scientists convinced each other that the results of their racial “investigations” were correct, then both the ability and the need to apply moral, subjective criteria lessened. After all, when one is dealing with sub-humans the ground rules change; no need for compassion, for concern, for human suffering, when the sufferers are not human.

Everyone who attempts to understand the butchery of Nazism ultimately locates, somewhere in the flow of time from 1933 to 1945, an explanation or excuse for the Holocaust. No explanation, no excuse, is sufficient, but eventually the mind needs to effect closure on all topics, even this. For me, the operative explanation has been that there were, of course, a few monsters, but for the average German, who probably was no worse a person than you or I, the predicament was stark: follow orders or become, yourself, a victim. If the explicit motto, Sin or Die, fits, it explains a great deal. One of the mental tests one submits oneself to, one of life’s countless “what ifs”, is, “What if I were faced with a demand either to do an amoral act or to suffer dire consequences?” At 2.00 a.m., in the dark, the honest answer is usually that one doesn’t know. But it is not difficult to envisage decent people, including perhaps even oneself, who will fail the test and carry out the amoral act. Now, at least for certain groups of scientists in Nazi Germany, Müller-Hill suggests that the motto was actually, Sin or let someone else do the sinning. The relevant passage states: “As documents and my interviews show, anyone who wanted to do so succeeded in escaping the ‘honourable’ task of participating in the extermination process. This was possible because there were other experts pushing forward to take their places” (p. 89). This alters completely one’s judgement of the sinners.

Müller-Hill’s book is profoundly distressing and convincing, because it displays believable people behaving in believable though abhorrent ways. It has, however, one serious deficiency. He knows it well and identifies it in his Introduction. The work is not a finished study, but rather a preliminary work. He has made a sound beginning, but either he or some other historian must finish the task so that we will have “the comprehensive book which is still lacking” (p. 4).

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GALEN, *On examination by which the best physicians are recognized*, edition of the Arabic version with English translation and commentary by Albert Z. Iskandar, *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum Supplementum Orientale IV*, Berlin, DDR, Akademie Verlag, 1988, 8vo, pp. 213, DM 98.00.

It is not every day that a classical text so full of interest is published for the first time. *Kitāb miḥnat al-ṭabīb* is an Arabic translation, made in the ninth century by Ḥunain, of an otherwise lost work of Galen on how to choose one’s physician. The answer is obvious: choose Galen, but in giving this advice Galen ranges widely over many aspects of medicine, education, and society, from quacks to Asclepius cult, and from problems of urbanization to reminiscences of the good and great. For the social historian, this is a wonderful new source of information; for the Galenist, an opportunity to see the hero at his most vituperative; and for the medical man, a chance to glimpse how doctors in antiquity ought to have been trained, and, occasionally, were. In its abundance of new information on the workings of Roman society in the Antonine period (c. AD 177, although the editor would prefer 175), this is potentially the single most important text to have appeared since the seventeenth century. Dr Iskandar must be thanked most heartily for making this work available at last, and for providing the non-Arabist with a translation into English. He bases his Arabic text on two manuscripts, one in Alexandria, the other in Bursa, supplemented by quotations and allusions in other Arabic authors, not least in Rhazes, whose use of this work he shows to have been far more extensive than Ullmann, for example, had suggested.

But inevitably, as with any *editio princeps*, difficulties still remain. It is best to regard the English translation as representing Ḥunain’s version rather than Galen’s Greek original, for a comparison between Dr Iskandar’s English and the Greek of Thucydides at 8,4 shows what a gulf may lie between. So, for example, the inconcinnities of syntax at 1,3 may be attributed to Ḥunain’s attempts to render into Arabic a complicated Greek sentence. But at times the English