



Nazi Experiments

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History 395

The Nazi regime began building concentration camps in 1933, and, by 1945, they had established 20,000 camps, all to imprison millions.¹ Along with the Jewish people, many Poles, Gypsies, Soviet POWs, homosexuals, and Jehovah Witnesses – all of whom were “considered sub-human by Nazi standards”² – were placed into camps throughout Europe; “[t]hese facilities were called ‘concentration camps’ because those imprisoned there were physically ‘concentrated’ in one location.”³ In December 1941, to help facilitate Hitler’s “final solution,” the first extermination camp was opened in Chelmo.⁴ Out of the thousands of concentration camps, there were a few major locations where experiments were performed: Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, and Ravensbrücke.⁵

The Jewish people and other “sub-humans” had no chance to escape the Holocaust and were immediately sent to either a concentration or an extermination camp. Not only were the people discriminated against, torn from their homes and families, killed or worked to death, they were also used as test subjects. Instead of using rats, the Nazi doctors chose to perform inhumane experiments on the Jewish prisoners. The experiments were done by force and victims experienced excruciating pain because no anesthesia was used; this caused many deaths and most survivors left with serious disabilities. The Holocaust was a horrific and frightening time for the Jewish people, resulting in the killing of nearly six-million people; “[i]n addition to the six million Jewish men, women and children who were murdered at least an equal number of non-Jews was also killed,” by no other means than deliberate murder.⁶

Although many Jewish people suffered as the Nazis used their bodies in sadistic experiments, much of the data discovered could potentially be used in modern medicine to save many lives today. Using the data has been a controversial issue over the years and a struggle to decide if it would be a greater ethical issue to use data that was taken immorally and disrespect those who died, or to not use the data, and allow those alive to suffer.

The Nazi doctors knew exactly what they would do with the Jewish people, and Heinrich Himmler chief of the SS, was directly in charge of their orders to exterminate or experiment. Every experiment fell into one of three categories: military research, pharmaceutical, or racially motivated experiments.⁷ Military experiments were aimed at ensuring the survival of soldiers in the German army; these experiments consisted of freezing victims for hypothermia research, testing potable seawater on gypsies, high-altitude simulation tests to benefit pilots, and finding cures for war wounds. Pharmaceutical experiments were focused on finding cures or treatment for the diseases and illnesses that were a direct threat to the German military and citizens. Some of the diseases encountered were small pox, tuberculosis, typhus, typhoid fever, yellow fever malaria and hepatitis. This category also included experiments with mustard and phosgene gas, bone-grafts, and sulfanilamide drugs. The last set of experiments was categorized as racially motivated because the Germans sought out to advance the Aryan race with genetic and racial goals. The Nazi doctors experimented with sterilization, artificial insemination, twins, and even had a Jewish bone collection.⁸

Malaria was a common disease among citizens of the German-occupied countries; therefore Heinrich Himmler ordered Dr. Klaus Karl Schilling⁹ to perform experiments in concordance with this. Between February 1942 and April 1945, over 1,200 prisoners at the Dachau concentration camp were experimented on to investigate possible treatments, and vaccinations, for malaria.¹⁰ Dr. Schilling usually picked healthy individuals for his experiments, sent them to get x-rays first,

- 1 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, *Nazi Medical experiments*. (accessed March 20, 2009).<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005168#RelatedLinks>
- 2 American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, *Jewish Virtual Library*. 2009. (accessed April 20, 2009) <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cclist.html>.
- 3 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, *Nazi Medical experiments*. (accessed March 20, 2009).<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005168#RelatedLinks>
- 4 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, *Nazi Medical experiments*. (accessed March 20, 2009).<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005168#RelatedLinks>
- 5 Linda M. Woolf, Ph.D. *Webster University Nazi Science*. (accessed 04 15, 2009) <http://www.webster.edu/~woolfm/deathcamps.html>.
- 6 American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, *Jewish Virtual Library*. 2009. (accessed April 20, 2009) <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cclist.html>.

- 7 American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, *Jewish Virtual Library*. 2009. (accessed April 20, 2009) <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cclist.html>. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Holocaust Encyclopedia.” *Nazi Medical experiments*. March 11, 2009. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005168#RelatedLinks> (accessed March 20, 2009).
- 8 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, *Nazi Medical experiments*. (accessed March 20, 2009).<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005168#RelatedLinks>
- 9 Dr. Schilling was a member of the League of Nations Malaria Commission. Mellanby, Kenneth. *British Medical Journal*, “Medical Experiments in Nazi Concentration Camps.” (1947)p. 147
- 10 Spitz, Vivien. *Doctors from Hell: e Horri c Account of Nazi Experiments on Humans*. Boulder: (Sentient Publications, 2005). P.103

then infected them by either using live infected mosquitoes, or by injections using extracts from the mosquito's mucous glands.¹¹ After a couple of weeks, victims would begin to have malaria attacks and that is when the experiment truly began. Dr. Schilling's nurses would then inject the patient with medication during an attack; every attack was an opportunity to test a new drug as a possible cure for malaria. Some of the drugs used were neo-salvasan, quinine, perifer, and atabrine. Malaria itself killed 30 prisoners, while the side effects from the medications killed three to four hundred.¹² Atabrine was developed by the Germans and later used by the U.S. military to prevent malaria.

Experiments on typhus, also known as German *ek eber* ("spotted fever"), were conducted at Buchenwald and Natzweiler concentration camps from December 1941 until February 1945 in order to benefit the German military. The goal for Dr. Eugene Haagen was to test chemical substances and already produced vaccinations for their effectiveness¹³. Haagen obtained the healthier inmates and vaccinated them with *Antityphus* vaccine, then injected them with the spotted fever germ to test the vaccination effectiveness. At the same time, he injected the "control group" with only the spotted fever germ for comparison. After a three to four week period, the victims had spotted fever symptoms and the doctors could determine the effectiveness of having a vaccine compared to the effects of the virus.¹⁴ In order to keep the spotted fever virus alive for testing purposes, a large amount of healthy inmates were also infected with the virus; this resulted in a 90 percent death rate. These typhus experiments were connected to the Bayer pharmaceutical company because they provided the medications to use on ill patients in order to test the various drugs and its efficiency.

Tuberculosis was another threat to the German people, and between December 1944 and February 1945, Nazi doctors performed experiments to discover whether people could possibly have natural immunities to the disease, and also to develop a vaccination. To infect the subjects with tuberculosis, Doctor Kurt Heissmeyer injected the live bacteria into the lungs of his patients at Neuengamme concentration camp.¹⁵ Heissmeyer also removed the lymph nodes from the arms of

children for testing. About 200 test subjects died, but even then, the tuberculosis experiments were not extensive because the Allied forces were approaching.

During WWII, Himmler was afraid that the Allies in Africa would attack the Germans using phosgene gas so he ordered Doctor Bickenbach to find a means of protection against such poisoning. Bickenbach used 52 French concentration-camp prisoners at Fort Ney near Strasbourg, France, led them into an airtight chamber and opened a vial of phosgene.¹⁶ Four prisoners died from the experiment, while the rest had serious lung irritations and later suffered from pulmonary edema.¹⁷

Phosgene, today, is a chemical used in the production of plastics and pesticides. In 1989, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) considered air pollution regulations on the toxic gas. The EPA conducted research on the effects of the phosgene gas for the workers and those who live nearby the manufacturing plants. They discovered that it caused skin, eye, and upper respiratory tract irritation as well as a fluid buildup in the lungs which can result in death by "drowning." The EPA has relied solely on the effects of phosgene gas on animals for human research because they feel it would be immoral to use Nazi data. Also, the former Chief Administrator did not want to use the data because it might open the doors for criticism. The Nazi experiments were conducted on humans, therefore the results on the amount of phosgene that effects humans could be substantially different than those of animals. The choices made by Thomas may not be fair to those actually being exposed to the gas and the feelings about using the data would most likely be different to those exposed.¹⁸

Sulfanilamide was first being used in 1936 with the German Army in order to treat open wounds and kill bacteria. From 1941 to 1943, on the Russian fronts, the German army had many casualties that suffered due to gangrene infection. In order to test the effectiveness of Sulfanilamide on bacteria, Nazi doctors created war-like wounds on Jewish prisoners. The doctors created wounds on the victims and often rubbed ground glass or wood shavings into the wound and then infected it with bacteria often, streptococcus, tetanus or gas gangrene. As result victims suffered extensive injuries and pain while others died.¹⁹ Sulfanilamide is still used today under doctor's prescription to stop the growth of certain bacteria.

At the Nuremberg "Doctor Trials" of 1946-1947, Telford

11 George J. Annas, Micheal A. Grodin. *The Nazi doctors and the Nuremberg Code : human rights in human experimentation*. (New York: Oxford Press: 2002). P.76

12 Spitz, Vivien. *Doctors from Hell: The Horrific Account of Nazi Experiments on Humans*. Boulder: Sentient Publications, 2005.p. 106

13 Eugene Haagen was an officer in the Air Force Medical service and a professor at the University of Strasbourg. George J. Annas, Micheal A. Grodin. *The Nazi doctors and the Nuremberg Code : human rights in human experimentation*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2002).p.81

14 American-Israeli Coopertive Enterprise. *Jewish Virtual Library*. 2009. (accessed April 20, 2009).<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cclist.html>.

15 American-Israeli Coopertive Enterprise, *Jewish Virtual Library*, 2009. (accessed April 20, 2009) <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cclist.html>.

16 American-Israeli Coopertive Enterprise, *Jewish Virtual Library*, 2009. (accessed April 20, 2009) <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cclist.html>.

17 PBS. *Holocaust on Trial*. 2000. (accessed February 11, 2009) <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/holocaust/experiintro2.html>.

18 American-Israeli Coopertive Enterprise. *Jewish Virtual Library*. 2009. (accessed April 20, 2009).

19 PBS. *Holocaust on Trial*. 2000. (accessed February 11, 2009) <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/holocaust/experiintro2.html>.

Taylor opened with comments that suggested the Nazi Doctors had turned Germany into a “lunatic asylum and a charnel house.”²⁰ It is a common notion that the Nazis abandoned ethics and created a bad name for German science. Is it true to believe that Nazi’s really abandoned ethics, and if they did, would that make their experiments bad science? It depends on what “bad science” really is and if abandoning ethics is the only determining factor in creating “bad science.” Whether people want to accept the experiments or not, they have been done and they cannot be discounted. From the stand of morals and ethics they were unacceptable, but from the stand of science and technology they are advancement: “[a]lthough the data is morally tainted and soaked with the blood of its victims, one cannot escape confronting the dreaded possibility that perhaps the doctors at Dachau actually learned something that today could help save lives or ‘benefit’ society.”²¹

The argument that Nazi experiments are to be considered “bad science,” could be relevant when discussing the health of the patients. Experiments were done on the prisoners considered to be healthy, which means that they were not as wasted away as the rest. However, all the prisoners were “usually malnourished, emaciated, and severely weakened, and thus their physiological responses to the experiments would likely be different from those of normal, healthy people.”²² It is easy to believe that the patients were more susceptible to diseases and illnesses since they were malnourished. Yet, if they were so sick, how did so many survive? Would you call the survivors lucky or were they the results of “good science?” It would be easier to claim the experiments to be pseudoscience if there were no survivors.

If data discovered by the Nazi’s in their sadistic experiments could be used to save others, should that data still be disregarded because of ethical issues? Wouldn’t that now become a new ethical problem if doctors denied care to a patient because the data came from Nazi experiments? Who is now considered unethical? Arguably, if the Nazi experiments were so horrific, then only in a case where the denial of medical attention becomes an immense objective and, ultimately a greater ethical issue than the experiments itself the data could then be used.

An article from the Jewish Virtual Library called “The Ethics of Using Medical Data from Nazi Experiments,” acknowledged an analogy of using “tainted” or “bad” medicine. Cohen pointed out a scenario with two patients in the hospital: Patient A is on the verge of death and Patient B is awaiting a

20 Proctor, Robert N. “Nazi Science and Nazi Medical Ethics: Some Myths and Misconceptions.” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* (2000) 335-346.p.335

21 American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, *Jewish Virtual Library*, 2009. (accessed April 20, 2009) <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cclist.html>.

22 PBS. *Holocaust on Trial*. 2000. (accessed February 11, 2009) <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/holocaust/experiintro2.html>.

possible heart transplant from A. Suppose the doctor did not wait until A died and removed his heart anyway. Do you now throw the heart away because it was taken in the act of murder or do you save B’s life with the murdered heart? Keeping both A and B in mind, and ethically-knowing that the doctor killed A, should he let B suffer and die because of it? Suppose the doctor transplanted the heart into B, is he now A’s killer and B’s hero? Where do you draw the line in medical ethics?²³

Using the data from the Nazi medical experiments has been a taboo issue because many believe that using the data will validate the torture and inhumanity sending a message that what the Nazi’s did was “okay.” This could potentially make those using the data responsible for disrespect and dishonor to the victims. One Holocaust survivor said, “As much as I am for scientific research for the betterment of humanity I do feel that the scientific data collected from experiments done on inmates of Nazi concentration camps should not be used. If I would agree, I feel I [would] give a stamp of approval to the ways and means [these] experiments have been conducted and quasi-legalize [them].”²⁴

Arguably not using the experiment data may suggest that the victims died for no reason and their suffering meant nothing. Another Holocaust survivor stated that, “It appears that, at least in some cases, there was an attempt to induce illness by injecting bacteria and then an attempt to cure these illnesses. [T]hat is to say, we served as laboratory animals in the hands of the criminal, Mengele, and this type of research should, of course, be made available to the world.”²⁵

There is no direct link in data that compares modern vaccinations to the pharmaceutical experiments of the Nazi’s; however, the notion that Nazis directly contributed data to modern-day vaccinations is not farfetched. If the Nazi experiments did help with modern vaccinations and the evidence was available, would it be fair to discontinue the vaccinations in honor of the Holocaust victims?

Although many Jewish people suffered as the Nazis used their bodies in sadistic experiments, much of the data discovered could potentially be used in modern medicine to save many lives today. It has been over 70 years since the atrocities and while the past is not erasable, what is done is done and respect is all that can be given. Every individual will choose his own path in the controversy and will either use, or discount, the Nazi experiment data, whether or not lives can be saved: “[w]hat occurred in the Nazi concentration camps has

23 American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. *Jewish Virtual Library*. 2009. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cclist.html> (accessed April 20, 2009).

24 Anonymous survivor of Dr. Josef Mengele’s twins experiments at Auschwitz. PBS. *Holocaust on Trial*. 2000. (accessed February 11, 2009) <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/holocaust/experiintro2.html>.

25 PBS. *Holocaust on Trial*. 2000. (accessed February 11, 2009) <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/holocaust/experiintro2.html>.

influenced patient care, the ethics of human experimentation, and whether doctors can or should cite these experiments in their current research projects.”²⁶ The data should not be fully censored: it should be made available to those doctors with a greater intent in mind, and to those with the ability to verify that the information will be used only to save human lives.

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Spitz, Vivien. *Doctors from Hell: e Horri c Account of Nazi*

²⁶ Kordata, Andrew. “The Nazi Medical Experiments.” *ADF Health* (2006) 33-37. p. 37

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