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REVIEW BY DAVID FREIS, UNIVERSITY OF MÜNSTER

It does not happen every day that a study about the history of medicine in mid-twentieth-century Austria makes it onto the book review pages of leading international journals and newspaper—especially so when the protagonist is not the inventor of psychoanalysis, but a pediatrician who even at the time played a fairly limited role in the development of his discipline and of medicine in general. There are at least two reasons for the exceptional success of Edith Sheffer’s *Asperger’s Children*. The first is that it is a good read, well-written and well-structured, informative, and accessible to a broader audience. Sheffer tells her story clearly, with judgement and compassion, and with a sense for poignant single-sentence summaries. The second reason is that, while even most medical historians know little about Dr. Hans Asperger himself, he is nevertheless a household name. The term ‘Asperger syndrome’ was popularized in the early 1980s to describe a disorder on the autism spectrum and has since been included in the tenth revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) and the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV). Although the eponym was struck from the fifth edition of the DSM in 2013, the diagnosis is still prevalent in child psychiatry, and has become a common cliché in popular culture. A book tracing the origins of ‘Asperger’s’ back to the Nazi era certainly had good chances of arousing considerable public interest.

The person behind the eponym has so far received little attention. Asperger was a child psychiatrist in Vienna and conducted his research at a time when the city was part of Nazi Germany, publishing his study on ‘autistic psychopathy’ in 1944. Yet, unlike many of his close colleagues, some of whom had been directly involved in the mistreatment and murder of children who were considered to be biologically ‘inferior,’ he was long considered innocent. In the post-war period, Asperger even fashioned himself as a Catholic opponent of Nazism, who took personal risks to protect the children in his care from the horrors of Nazi ‘euthanasia.’ This story has not withstood historians’ scrutiny. Two 2018 publications—an extensive article by the Austrian historian Herwig Czech⁶ and Sheffer’s book—have used previously unexamined archival documents to deliver a devastating double blow to this narrative of heroic opposition. Both authors come to very similar conclusions: The right-wing Catholic Asperger accommodated himself to the Nazi regime, legitimized ‘racial hygiene’ policies, and even actively cooperated with the child ‘euthanasia’ program. While he was not among the main perpetrators of Nazi medical crimes, Hans Asperger was at best a morally compromised opportunist with barely enough distance between himself and the Nazi doctors to pass as untainted in his post-war career.

However, although he is the book’s protagonist, this is not a biography of Hans Asperger in any traditional sense. Like other authors who follow the recent trend of writing the biographies of illnesses instead of those of their discoverers, Sheffer is interested less in Asperger himself than in the diagnosis that later brought him to eponymic fame. Her aim is to uncover the historical conditions in which the concept of ‘autistic psychopathy’ emerged. Hence, her argument is not about indicting Asperger for his collaboration with Nazi medicine—Sheffer repeatedly distances herself from any simplistic and moralizing finger-pointing—but about showing how the diagnosis itself was a product of Nazi child psychiatry. Evidently, this is a far greater challenge to our present understanding of autism, as it calls into question the underlying normative assumptions of the diagnosis rather than just the name given to one specific subtype. Apart from obvious differences in genre and style, this is also where Czech’s article and Sheffer’s book most clearly diverge. Czech focuses on Asperger’s political views and actions, and his personal culpability, but shies away from linking his contributions to autism research to Nazi ideology.⁷ Sheffer, by contrast, unambiguously states that “Asperger’s diagnosis of autistic psychopathy emerged from the values and institutions of the Third Reich” (13).

In ten chapters, Sheffer explores the ideology and practice of Nazi child psychiatry in Vienna, from the creation of a sophisticated system of social welfare institutions by the city’s socialist governments in the interwar years to the murder of

⁶ Herwig Czech, “Hans Asperger, National Socialism, and ‘Race Hygiene’ in Nazi-Era Vienna,” *Molecular Autism* 9:1 (2018), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-018-0208-6>.

⁷ Czech, 32.

biologically ‘inferior’ children in the *art nouveau* pavilions of the Spiegelgrund clinic in the first half of the 1940s. Hans Asperger and his Curative Education Clinic played only a minor role in the network of institutions that screened, diagnosed, and transferred children to their deaths. In some chapters Asperger is only a marginal figure, or—as in chapter 8, which recounts the experiences of surviving Spiegelgrund patients—entirely absent. Nevertheless, the narrative always returns to Asperger as the book unveils the local institutions and ideological and medical debates that made up the historical context in which he practiced and wrote, and shows the deadly consequences that his diagnoses and decisions could have for his patients.

Sheffer boldly situates Asperger and his concept of ‘autistic psychopathy’ at the center of a history of Nazi medicine. As she claims, Asperger conceptualized “autism and Nazism as inverse states of being”. Pathologically unable to create and maintain social bonds, ‘autistic psychopaths’ were directly at odds with the Nazi ideal of an organic national community. After all, Sheffer points out, “‘fascism’ comes from *fascio*, Latin for ‘bundle,’ and ‘autism’ from *autos*, Greek for ‘self’” (220). For Asperger’s patients, this distinction was a question of life and death. As social connectedness became a central political norm of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*, those mentally unable to conform found themselves outside the community. While Nazi medicine was willing to use its resources on those it considered redeemable, it was also ready to expunge those it deemed untreatable. This dialectic of “annihilation and cure” has been a common theme of much of the historiography on Nazi medicine in the last two decades,⁸ and it was also at work in the practice of Asperger and his colleagues, who were supportive of some patients but had no qualms about sending others to their likely deaths.

The pivotal concept linking child psychiatry and racial politics was *Gemüt*. Even in German, this is a complicated notion with very different uses, ranging from everyday language to metaphysics, and Sheffer stresses its ambiguity and centrality by consistently leaving it untranslated – a striking exception in a book where everything else, including the proper names of institutions and newspapers, is rendered in English. This is one of those cases where the distance created by the transposition of the historical sources into another language provides an additional layer of analysis. The exact meaning of *Gemüt* as a kind of social feeling is nuanced and contextual. As Sheffer shows, in his 1944 habilitation treatise Asperger used a specific definition that was directly adopted from some of the main scholars in Nazi child psychiatry, for whom *Gemüt* was a necessary property of any member of the German *Volk*.⁹ Asperger’s understanding of ‘autistic psychopathy’ as a lack or defect of *Gemüt* excluded his patients from the national community.

The juxtaposition of autism and social connectedness allows Sheffer to develop a broader argument about the relation between self, society, and politics in Nazi Germany. As she suggests, Asperger’s creation of a diagnosis was paradigmatic for the way in which the Nazi state operated: “The state became obsessed with sorting the population into categories, cataloguing people by race, politics, sexuality, criminality, heredity, and biological defects. These labels, then, became the basis of individuals’ persecution and extermination” (18). From this perspective, Sheffer claims, child psychiatry in Vienna, with its construction of new diagnostic categories and their deadly consequences, was emblematic of the Third Reich as a “diagnosis regime.” The categories and the practices of this regime were neither rigid nor universally applied. As the case of Asperger illustrates, individual actors in the system had considerable leeway in deciding their patients’ fates. Decisions that led to the mistreatment, forced sterilization, or death of juvenile patients were often haphazard and arbitrary. And while it is obvious that racial categories played a central role in Nazi medicine, the book provides many examples of how the different family backgrounds, class, and gender of the children influenced Asperger and his colleagues’ judgement.

⁸ Angelika Ebbinghaus and Klaus Dörner (eds.), *Vernichten und Heilen: Der Nürnberger Ärzteprozess und seine Folgen* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2001); see also Maike Rotzoll et al. (eds.), *Die nationalsozialistische “Euthanasie”-Aktion T4 und ihre Opfer: Geschichte und ethische Konsequenzen für die Gegenwart* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010); Robert Jütte et al. (eds.), *Medizin und Nationalsozialismus: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011).

⁹ Hans Asperger, “Die ‘Autistischen Psychopathen’ im Kindesalter,” *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten* 117:1 (1944): 76-136.

Conceptualizing the Third Reich as a “diagnosis regime” may provide a compelling way of putting the history of Nazi medicine at the center of the broader history of Nazi Germany. Yet, while it would certainly be interesting to further explore the analytic potential of this perspective, it remains essentially underdeveloped in Sheffer’s book. The key problem is that Hans Asperger was, after all, only a marginal and hardly a representative figure in Nazi medicine. Sheffer and Czech’s research leaves no doubt that Asperger willingly collaborated with child ‘euthanasia’ in Vienna, but he was not involved in the medical and political decision-making that created the system. Even as Sheffer elegantly balances biography and context, there is an inherent limit to how much a story centered on Asperger can tell about the workings of Nazi medicine and the Nazi state. Moreover, the concept of a “diagnosis regime” raises questions that the book does not directly address. How specific was the Nazis’ obsession with categories, labels, and diagnoses? Medicine—and psychiatry in particular—had been creating a plethora of new diagnoses throughout the nineteenth century. The proliferation of diagnostic categories was neither limited to Nazi Germany, nor did it cease in the second half of the twentieth century. As a “diagnosis regime,” Nazi Germany was one part of a broader trend of medicalized bio-politics that was a feature of many projects of modernism. What set the Nazi state apart was not its attempt to define “model kinds of personality” (19), but the murderous brutality it used against those that it categorized as threats to the national community. In Sheffer’s book, the limitations of this perspective become apparent in the continuity that she claims between the social and medical reforms of ‘Red Vienna’ on the one hand, and the horrors of Spiegelgrund on the other. Singling out the Nazi state as a “diagnosis regime” runs the risk of overlooking other approaches to public health and welfare in which improving the lives of some did not mean killing others.

This caveat notwithstanding, the praise that *Asperger’s Children* has received is well deserved. It certainly is among the best and most important recent publications about the history of medicine in Nazi Germany. Sheffer tells a complex story in a way that is emotionally captivating, morally nuanced, and highly topical. What is today diagnosed as ‘Asperger syndrome’ is only indirectly related to Hans Asperger’s research on ‘autistic psychopathy’ conducted in Nazi Vienna. Nevertheless, Sheffer uses the story of the Austrian child psychiatrist to develop a detailed account of the workings of Nazi medicine and the suffering of its victims. This research has implications for how we discuss and diagnose autism today, and it may well be that the eponym ‘Asperger’s’ will soon vanish from the medical manuals.