

## READING

## Protesting Medical Killing

From time to time, as the Nazi “euthanasia,” or medical killing, program continued, families, religious leaders, or hospital personnel raised awkward questions about the fate of the disabled in hospitals, asylums, and institutions. The government either denied wrongdoing or refused to answer questions because of the need for secrecy in wartime. But the silence of both medical and political officials could not stop the gossip or the speculation.

As knowledge of the “euthanasia” program spread, a few people began to take a stand against it. Among them were Friedrich von Bodelschwingh and Paul Gerhard Braune. Both men were ministers in the Confessing Church and also heads of institutions that served disabled adults. The “euthanasia” program relied on questionnaires filled out by the administrators and medical professionals at such institutions to identify targets for medical killing. Once Bodelschwingh and Braune realized how the questionnaires were being used, they refused to fill them out. They stated their objections to key Nazi officials and stalled other officials as long as possible to keep their patients alive.

Both men were afraid that if they took a public stand, their patients might be endangered. So they worked behind the scenes to get the policy of “euthanasia,” or medical killing, changed. In July 1940, Braune sent top government officials a long report with detailed evidence of the murders. In it, he asked:

How far does one want to go with the extermination of so-called lives unworthy of life? The mass actions up to now have shown that many people have been taken who were in large part clear and of sane mind. Where does the limit lie? Who is abnormal, anti-social, who is hopelessly ill? . . . It is a dangerous venture to abandon the integrity of the person without any legal foundation. . . . Will it not endanger the ethics of the entire population, when human life counts for so little?<sup>1</sup>

A month later, Braune was imprisoned for “sabotaging measures of the regime in an irresponsible manner.” His fellow pastors in the Confessing Church gave him very little support.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 110–11.

Most wanted more proof before they were willing to take a stand. The few who spoke out were from villages and small towns, and they were not heard beyond their own communities.

Since Bodelschwingh was a well-known and respected Protestant leader both within and outside of Germany, the Nazis did not arrest him. But in September 1940, a German aircraft bombed Bodelschwingh's Bethel Hospital, killing 11 handicapped children; the Nazis blamed the bombing on the British. Bodelschwingh continued to try to protect his patients from the Nazis throughout the war.<sup>2</sup>

In May 1941, the Reich Committee for the Scientific Treatment of Severe Hereditary and Congenital Diseases began sending questionnaires to homes for the elderly. A few months later, Clemens August Graf von Galen, the Catholic bishop of Münster, asked his congregation, "Do you or I have the right to live only as long as we are productive?" If so, he argued, "then someone has only to order a secret decree that the measures tried out on the mentally ill be extended to other 'nonproductive' people, that it can be used on those incurably ill with a lung disease, on those weakened by aging, on those disabled at work, on severely wounded soldiers. Then not a one of us is sure anymore of his life."<sup>3</sup>

Bishop von Galen's sermon generated outrage against the "euthanasia" program. He had it printed and read from the pulpit in Catholic churches in Germany. The British broadcast portions of the sermon on radio stations that could be heard by Germans, and they printed it on leaflets and dropped them across Germany and other countries in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Three weeks later, Hitler responded to the outrage by signing an order officially ending the "euthanasia" program. In fact, however, it did not end but continued quietly throughout the war and may have claimed 100,000 more lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 92–93.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 117.

<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 97–99.

## Connection Questions

1. What do you think inspired Braune, Bodelschwingh, and von Galen to ask questions and speak out when most of their fellow Germans either supported the Nazi medical killing policies or remained silent?
2. Through his sermon, how does von Galen define his universe of obligation? What argument does he use to justify his beliefs about who is deserving of care and protection?
3. What does the reading indicate about the Nazi government's concern for public opinion, even after years of propaganda and terror?
4. When a few people spoke out, why do you think others chose not to join them in protesting the deaths of innocent people?