

December 2006

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Recommended Citation

Goldenberg, Myma (2006) "Book Review: Naomi Baumslag. Murderous Medicine: Nazi Doctors, Human Experimentation, and Typhus," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3: Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol1/iss3/10>

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Book Review

Naomi Baumslag. *Murderous Medicine: Nazi Doctors, Human Experimentation, and Typhus*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005. Pp. 216, cloth. \$49.50 US.

Reviewed by Myrna Goldenberg, *independent scholar, Bethesda, MD*

In *Murderous Medicine: Nazi Doctors, Human Experimentation, and Typhus*, Naomi Baumslag proposes an agenda for research on the connections among medicine, war, and genocide. Building on the groundbreaking work of Robert Jay Lifton, John J. Michalczyk, Howard Fertig, Arthur Caplan, Henry Friedlander, and others, Baumslag sets out to prove that the Nazis rewarded physicians who helped implement the Final Solution, specifically by encouraging the spread of typhus as a means of murdering Jews. By imposing and then neglecting deplorable conditions in the ghettos and camps, Baumslag argues, Nazi doctors “promoted typhus...because ‘natural death’ was cheaper than gassing” (57). Baumslag demonstrates that Nazi medicine distinguished itself by its unprecedented and willing complicity in murdering Jews: the German and Austrian “medical profession as a whole perpetrated and tolerated without protest such widespread atrocities as were performed by German health professionals and researchers during World War II” (126). In her analysis of Nazi medicine, Baumslag catalogs bogus and unethical experiments, largely funded by I.G. Farben, to test typhus vaccines, each experiment more sadistic than the last. She also provides insights into other non-typhus-related experiments and vivisections, aptly labeling them “scientific butchery.” Interestingly, as has been repeatedly acknowledged by medical historians and ethicists, Nazi medicine “produced not a single new cure and not a single important medical discovery” (163).

Baumslag begins with an extensive history of typhus, tracing it back to fifteenth-century Europe, and follows with a discussion of the history of the struggle to treat and eliminate it. While readers will find that they have learned more than they ever wanted to know about lice and typhus, they will also appreciate the level of detail and the scope of the sources Baumslag uses to explain the significance of the disease in the German war against the Jews. Her experience as a physician and her training in public health are evident in her careful description of typhus and its effects on the individual and the community.

In her chapter on the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and its involvement with the Nazi camp system, Baumslag delineates the failure of the ICRC to investigate the conditions of the camps: “the record of the ICRC during World War II is atrocious and indicative of the inherent weaknesses in the organization” (176). She releases her anger at the obvious collusion between the Swiss ICRC directors and German business and military interests, condemning Max Huber and Carl Jacob Burkhardt, the top ICRC officials, for the pro-German decisions that not only led to the unnecessary death by disease of hundreds of thousands of Jews and other prisoners but fed and reinforced the arrogance of the Germans in their determination to ignore the Geneva Convention. Not to be forgotten, Baumslag reminds her readers, is the ICRC’s inadvertent complicity in facilitating the escape of

some of the notorious doctors. The passports and travel papers issued to Nazi doctors guaranteed that they would not face capture, trial, and, ultimately, justice.

Murderous Medicine also constitutes a compendium of vignettes about the doctors who participated in murdering Jews and other victims of Nazi brutality. These doctors were simultaneously preoccupied with preventing epidemics of typhus among the SS and confining the disease to the Jews—a losing battle, because acknowledging the presence of an epidemic among the Germans would demonstrate the failure to control or contain typhus, and hence a failure of Nazi medicine. Baumslag devotes a substantial section of the book to prisoner doctors, some of whom she considers collaborators (Hungarian doctor Miklos Nyiszli, who was Mengele's research assistant) while others acted to reduce the misery of fellow prisoners (Berlin physician Dr. Lucie Adelsberger, who "practiced" in Birkenau). Prisoner doctors, of course, faced a spectrum of moral dilemmas—for example, choosing to assist Nazi doctors to save themselves from hunger and hard labor, or choosing to work with other prisoners while living among them and risking hunger, disease, and selection, or choosing to conceal one's medical credentials, as psychiatrist Viktor Frankl did.

Baumslag closes her richly illustrated book with a discussion of biological warfare and biological terrorism in contemporary military actions. Here she urges the medical profession to become activists in the fight

against the use of biological weapons, whether they take the form of missiles laden with anthrax or the negligent medical treatment of targeted groups. Lessons learned from the Nazi experience indicate that medical professionals play a unique role in society, not only as guardians of public health but also policy creators and enforcers. It was not cultural propagandists who organized the infamous "special treatment" of the Jews: it was the public health officials, the scientific journals, the physicians, the administrators, and the lawyers who feared that the very presence of Jews would endanger their families and ultimately their lives. (213)

Murderous Medicine reflects Baumslag's medical insights and her professional and personal idealism. She is a strong critic of sloppy, unethical, and discriminatory public-health policy; indeed, her book stands as a valuable contribution to the study of Nazi medicine as well as a warning to public-health officials. While appreciating Baumslag's strong sense of morality, I felt her condemnation of some prisoner doctors was, at best, overly harsh and insensitive to the dilemmas and horrors to which they were subjected. Adelsberger, for example, had no family to protect, while Nyiszli believed that by collaborating he was assuring the safety of his family. The book is slightly weakened by Baumslag's irregular and inconsistent documentation, a fault that is likely to inspire historians and political scientists in the field of genocide and Holocaust studies to pursue the ramifications of official medical policy and to investigate the relationship between mass murder and health policy thoroughly and intensely. We can only hope that their work will reinforce and help disseminate Baumslag's plea for her medical colleagues to uphold not only the Hippocratic Oath but also basic human rights.