

Lifton, Robert Jay. *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books, 1986. Xi +561 pp. Foreword, introduction, list, notes, acknowledgements, and index.

Thesis: Lifton offers his study in “the spirit of hope, “ to markedly reveal how the “Nazi doctors” differed significantly from other physicians in other acts of terror or torture throughout history and analyze the institution that allowed for the “prisoners to be ‘threatened inmates while Nazi doctors were threatening victimizers.” (p. xiii) Lifton also wants to understand the “Nazi biomedical vision”

Themes: Lifton investigates and explains not only the chronology from Euthanasia to Final solution as an institution, but also the chronology of the doctors’ psychological devolution from healer to killer. “Only in Germany was sterilization a forerunner of mass murder,”(p. 22) he says.

He begins with a brief aside to the resistance of the medical killings. He states that they were “mostly in limited, isolated, and indirect ways.” (p. 80) He includes a large passage about a Professor Gottfried Ewald who was chosen to be a leading psychiatrist on the Nazi medical killing team. Ewald flat out refused, saying, “On principle, I would not lend my hand to exterminate in this way patients entrusted to me.” (p. 83) Ewald’s widow claimed that the professor was “initially sympathetic to the Nazis.” (85) But after turning down the offer, Ewald made notes of the meeting and contacted the head of his university and the head of his professional organization of psychiatrists and tried very hard to expose the Nazis for what they were.

For those that were involved “Hitler not only had the power of a commander in chief in a political sense, but was also the highest ranking physician.” (p.96) Lifton then gives one hundred plus pages to the evolution of Auschwitz from concentration camp to work camp to annihilation camp. He also discusses how the “medical selections” began as soon as prisoners arrived “on the ramp” and continued throughout their tenure “in the camp.”

Prisoner Doctors were entrusted to the care of other prisoners. Lifton says that all of them that he interviewed were “very clear about the relation of their medical status to staying alive: ‘If I were not in the hospital [as a doctor] I’d e dead too’ or ‘For me to be a doctor has been life saving’ or “we survived because of our profession.””(p. 218) Many assisted the Nazi Doctors.

One Prisoner Doctor says that during the phenol injections performed on those “selected” that “They [the Nazi Doctors] were sop careful to keep the full precision of a medical process—but with the aim of killing. That was what was so shocking.” (p. 254)

Lifton discusses two categories of experimentation: “those sponsored by the regime for a specific ideological and military purpose, and those that were done *ad hoc* out of allegedly scientific interest on the part of the SS doctor.” (p. 269) Dr. Johan Kremer intently studied the effects starvation had on the body and had “the proper specimens” selected and administered phenol directly into the hear and had

“segments [organs] cut out immediately after death.” (p. 292) One surviving prisoner assistant of Kremer said that he “looked upon the prisoners as so many rabbits.” (p. 292). His detailed journal was eventually found and published.

Lifton devotes an entire chapter to Dr. Josef Mengele and his need to “get things done quickly” as one of his surviving prisoner assistant put it. Another, his Polish assistant who studied anthropology said, “he [Mengele] knew there would never be another chance like this.” (p. 357)

All this led to what Lifton calls the “healing killing paradox”. A paradox that disappears he says when it is viewed as “The Nazi vision of killing Jews in order to heal the Nordic Race” (p. 430) Genocide was inevitable.

The main psychological focus of his book is what he calls “doubling”. He explains that is a separation in which part of the “self” acts separately from the whole “self.” In other words, given circumstances such as the environment at Auschwitz was conducive to the psychology of its Nazi Doctors.

Style: Lifton breaks his study into three parts that chronologically detail the psychological shift from “sterilization and the biomedical vision” to “the Auschwitz self, psychologically doubling and the Genocide.” His writing style is very conversational which allowed fluid transition into the interview and survivor testimony that was such a large part of his evidentiary base.

Evidentiary Base: Lifton uses interviews with some of the Nazi doctor themselves. He used “informed consent” forms signed by those interviewed indicating his intent and their assured anonymity and their right to stop the interview at any time. He interviewed survivors; both general prison survivors and surviving prisoner doctors who worked the infirmaries and some that even assisted the Nazi Doctors.

Strengths: Lifton’s book is very well written and thoroughly researched. The primary accounts add testament to the point that Lifton made that these were normal professionals that somehow ended up as murderous physicians as well as allowed for a cautionary tale that “Nazi Doctors doubled in murderous was; so can others.” (p. 503)

Weaknesses: Lifton’s work is more psychologically based research than purely historical. In many cases I believe instances that may not have been in tune with his psychological argument of doubling were omitted. I do not believe that this was to change the meaning but to make his argument less convoluted than it may have been in the interview. A simpler answer, as it were. In nearly every survivor’s interview there were at least three breaks (...) in their story. In any case, it leads the reader to wonder what was left out, and if it may have had some historical significance to the discussion, more than just the psychological profile of the people involved. He also never fully explains how doubling worked throughout the entire entity of medical killings; he just used Auschwitz as a case study and then extrapolated the results outward.