

Resistance on Tour: Behind the Scenes

Written by Liz Crow

Learning from the past

When Liz Crow, the artist behind *Resistance*, first learnt the detail of Aktion-T4, she knew it was an area she wanted to represent in her creative work.

Aktion-T4, was a programme of mass-murder authorised by Hitler in 1939 and targeting the nation's disabled people. Transported from institutions to death centres, by the close of war, more than quarter of a million disabled people had been slaughtered.

Liz: "This is an episode of history that is virtually hidden, yet the values that underpinned it still echo through disabled people's lives today. What stays with me is the part that disabled people played in bringing Aktion-T4 to a close. How do you resist in extremis? Yet some people did."

Over a decade in the making, *Resistance* is a powerful, honest and hopeful work that transports us from a little-known but significant moment in our history to the present day, inviting us to reflect on how we can shape a better future.

Resistance immerses the audience in the action of dramatic and documentary film and surrounds them with 'whispering' voices and photographic portraits. It reveals the horrors of Aktion-T4, but also asks what this period of history means for us now, disabled or not. How can we learn from these terrible events to shape a society that delights in diversity?

Historical background

In the decades before the Holocaust, international interest in eugenics had been building. The belief that the human race can be improved by encouraging people with 'desirable' physical characteristics to reproduce and preventing those with 'undesirable' characteristics from doing so was gaining increasing support. Advocates included writers George Bernard Shaw, Virginia Woolf, HG Wells, Emile Zola, food industrialist William Keith Kellogg and birth control activist Margaret Sanger. Eugenics courses in universities were funded by Carnegie and Rockefeller.

The rise of Nazism in Germany made possible a move from eugenic theory to systematic practice. In order to create a 'perfect' race of people possessing similar physical characteristics, the Nazis attempted to remove disabled people from the national gene pool.

With Hitler's rise to power in 1933, a propaganda campaign was mounted portraying disabled people as 'burdensome and other' and paved the way for the general population to accept what came next. The Nazi regime rapidly introduced a series of measures to stop a new generation from inheriting impairments from their parents. These included placing disabled people in institutions, compulsory sterilisations, a ban on marriages between people with certain impairments, and the abortion of babies with impairments. On 1 September 1939, these were overtaken by Aktion-T4, a wholesale attempt to wipe out disabled people and the first chapter of Nazi genocide.

Public health officials were required to register disabled people and basic information was sent to the Aktion-T4 headquarters. There, three doctors selected those to be killed. Patient lists were then sent to 'observation institutions' where those selected were made ready for transfer to 'euthanasia institutions', transported in grey buses with blacked-out windows like the one in the historical drama in *Resistance*. These were known throughout the country as the 'death buses'.

On arrival patients had a medical examination, which allowed the doctor to identify a plausible 'cause of death'. Photographs were taken of the patients to record their 'physical inferiority'. This was supposedly for 'scientific research', but was actually for use as propaganda to justify the programme. Patients were then shown into a cellar 'shower room', which held between 40 and 150 people, and the door was sealed. A doctor released poisonous carbon monoxide gas into the room and observed as the patients died over a period of around ten minutes. The patients were then piled up next to the cremation ovens.

Although Aktion-T4 was to be kept secret from the general public, people began to discover the truth. Local people saw the smoke of the cremation chimneys and smelled burning flesh, while relatives noticed anomalies on death certificates.

In the small town of Absberg disabled residents refused to board the bus and, according to the local Nazi leader, were taken away 'in the most conspicuous manner imaginable'. Dismayed townspeople assisted their friends and neighbours in their struggle against the guards. Hitler was concerned that this resistance would damage support for the regime and brought the official killing to an end in 1941.

At least 70,000 disabled people were killed during the official Aktion-T4 programme but this was also followed by an unofficial period of 'wild euthanasia' in which individual medics carried out their own killings in institutions throughout Germany using starvation, poisoning, shooting and electric shock treatments. The final death toll is estimated at 250,000 but this number could well be higher, since many disabled people who were slaughtered in concentration camps do not appear in these statistics.

There are almost no first-hand accounts from disabled people affected by Aktion-T4 and confidentiality issues mean that medical records cannot be released. In the Nuremberg Trials, conducted by the Allies following the surrender of Germany, no disabled people were called as witnesses.

Dr Karl Brandt, one of the main perpetrators of Aktion-T4, was found guilty of crimes against humanity and executed along with six others, although he maintained to the last that the programme was an act of mercy. He said, "I am fully conscious that when I said "Yes" to euthanasia I did so with the deepest conviction, just as it is my conviction today, that it was right." Only a small number of doctors and nurses who participated were prosecuted. The fact that the values used to justify the programme of murder were so ingrained meant the prosecution was incapable of securing justice. Having acquitted a psychiatrist who watched his patients die through a peephole in a gas chamber, the court concluded: "we deal with a certain human weakness which does not as yet deserve moral condemnation."

The Chairman of the commission that ran the 'Children's Programme' escaped punishment and published a book in 1962 stating the case for the euthanasia of disabled children. As recently as the mid 1990s physicians active in Aktion-T4 were practising medicine and teaching in universities.

What does it mean for us now?

First they came for the sick, the so-called incurables

And I did not speak out – because I was not ill.

Then they came for the Jews

And I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the communists

And I did not speak out – because I was not a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists

And I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me.

And there was no one left

To speak out for me.

Pastor Niemöeller, 1946.

Director Liz Crow says: “When I first read about Aktion-T4, I wanted people to *know* about this hidden history. What became clear as the project developed was that learning the historical facts was not enough. To compel ourselves to act, we need to understand what that history means for us now and to make an emotional connection to the people involved. The installation sets out to make that connection with audiences and to support them to find a starting point for action.”

As actor Lou Birks says: “This only happened seventy years ago and the personal stories that we heard and the photographs of the people that we saw looked like you and me.”

The historical drama in *Resistance* is based on real events. The protagonist Elise finds the courage and determination to resist oppression and discrimination. She is a reminder that the individual can be powerful in directing change, then and now. But what can *we* do?

Throughout the making of *Resistance*, many people commented on the horrifying capacity of ordinary people to commit such evil. For all the perpetrators who made, and continue to make, appalling choices about how to act, numerous people decide to take extraordinary risks for what they believe in. Maybe we should note the capacity of ordinary people to commit acts of good – and find how to harness this. Change depends on ‘ordinary people’. The values that were used to justify Aktion-T4 – of disabled people as burdensome and pitiable – remain deeply embedded today. The rising hate crime against disabled people and the numerous

physical barriers and prejudices within society can seem overwhelming. Increased pre-natal screening and the abortion of fetuses with impairments, and hurried measures to legalise assisted suicide raise questions about the value of disabled people's lives and even their right to exist.

Even when we want to do the right thing, when the exclusion is on such a vast scale, it can be hard to know where to begin. When change is needed, globally and nationally, at a level of legislation and policy, what part can an individual play? Yet, as one of the voices in the installation says, "If no one speaks out, then nothing changes."

Those voices show that everyday moments and encounters have a profound effect on people's ability to be fully a part of society. And that these moments create a ripple effect that spur others on to become part of the change.

It takes courage to act. Each one of us has to move beyond our fear of doing and saying the 'wrong thing' and take risks. The more we do it, the easier it becomes. The more we do it, the more others will join us.

In the words of another voice in the installation: "I cannot be silent. We can't afford to be silent. We need to fill our space. We need people to know we're here because if we begin to disappear as we've done in the past, we need people to notice that we're missing. We need non-disabled people to be our allies. This isn't an issue about disabled people for just disabled people. This is an issue about society."

By acknowledging inequalities, we can begin to tackle them. Put yourself in the position of another and notice the injustices they face. What would solidarity look like, feel like? We all make a unique contribution to society; we can all make our own resistance. Use *Resistance* as a starting point to discover a direction for your own part in making change. If you could do just one thing, what would it be?