

Reclaiming “The Racial State”: Eugenics, Euthanasia, and the Moral Politics of Historiography

Presenter: Dagmar Herzog

This paper examines long-standing issues in Holocaust historiography: the relationship between ideology and motivation and, more generally, the relationship between evidence and interpretation. It recovers, and recontextualizes, the work of feminist historian Gisela Bock and investigative journalist Ernst Klee. Bock, because of her pioneering research on coercive sterilizations, went up against ex-Nazi psychiatrist Helmuth Ehrhardt in testimony to the Bundestag in 1987. She made the case that the sterilizations had constituted an “integral component of National Socialist racial politics” and that the self-exculpatory and derogatory arguments made by those who rejected reparations represented a “misrecognition of the nature of racism.” Klee, although oft-dismissed by academic historians, triggered a national moral reorientation through his numerous books and articles, culminating in his argument that the “euthanasia” murders had been “the trial run for the Judeocide” (der Probelauf für den Judenmord). Klee advanced a new theory of perpetrator motivation, documenting above all the perpetrators’ pleasures as they went about their grisly labors. Considering the years before the Third Reich, he exposed the eugenicization of theology in the Weimar years, as the Christian churches, and especially the Protestant church, in its defensive-insecure response to widespread secularization and loss of cultural authority, ended up muddling questions of disability and sin and avidly participated in declaring disabled life less valuable than abled. Third, he modeled direct identification with the disabled themselves. The empirical and conceptual contributions of Bock and Klee, among others, would lead by the early 1990s to the rise of a “racial state” paradigm that has, in more recent years, come to be seen as outmoded. What are the consequences for us today of sidelining Bock and Klee’s insights and arguments? What would it mean for the historiography of the Holocaust actively to reclaim “the racial state” paradigm?