

# newsupdate

## Nazi death programme bodies found



**Annie Makoff**

The remains have been uncovered of what appear to be 220 disabled victims of Nazi Germany's notorious Aktion T4 programme, in the grounds of an Austrian psychiatric hospital (*above*).

The bodies, discovered by a construction firm digging on the site of the institution near the town of Hall in the Tyrol, were examined by experts who have confirmed that the burials took place between 1942 and 1945 and are likely to be those of disabled and mentally ill patients.

Until now, it was thought that Aktion T4 murders in Austria were confined to just one so-called "hospital"

but the discovery of the Tyrol mass graves suggests that the programme was more extensive.

Aktion T4 was the Nazis' term for a euthanasia programme that sought to "cleanse" the "master race" of disabled and mentally ill people and those with hereditary and incurable diseases. Though on a much smaller scale, it's often seen as paralleling the extermination of Jews.

Men, women and children with an illness or disability became victims of the programme. Medical staff throughout the Third Reich were instructed to hand over disabled or sick babies to the authorities.

Liz Crow, founder and

director of creative media company Roaring Girl Productions (currently touring with their film *Resistance*, specifically about the Aktion T4 programme), said: "The scheme was the Nazis' first official programme of murder.

"It targeted disabled people and became the blueprint for the Final Solution to wipe out Jews, gay people, gypsies and other social groups. As with the majority of disabled people murdered in this way, it's unlikely we'll ever identify the people exhumed from Tyrol's mass grave."

Richard Rieser, founder of Britain's first Disability History Month, believes that thousands more disabled

people were murdered under the scheme than has been admitted to.

"There were at least six castles and about 40 hospitals in Germany that practised Aktion T4," he said, "so I'm not surprised that more graves are being found elsewhere. The German government has put the number of Aktion T4 victims at 250,000 but the likelihood is that the number is significantly more.

"Even when the Americans walked into hospitals across Germany in 1945 and 1946, the murders of disabled children and adults were still continuing."

He added: "This gives us pause for thought. We know very well that there are still plenty of people who hold the view that disabled people are unworthy of life, as the Nazis deemed us. This is why it's so important to understand what happened, and for it to be a part of history that everybody learns from, so mistakes of the past are not repeated."

The Austrian government has vowed to conduct a thorough investigation into the discovery. Current construction work on the former hospital site has been postponed and the exhumation of the graves is expected to begin in March.