Edith Sheffer, Asperger's Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018)

Imagine a medical world in which the language of care determines which children are supported and which are left to die. Edith Sheffer uncovers this disturbing reality in *Asperger's Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna*. Rejecting the familiar post-war image of Hans Asperger as a protective clinician, Sheffer places him within a medical culture that adapted itself to the demands of the Nazi state. His notion of "autistic psychopathy," she argues, emerged from a system that judged children by their perceived ability to be shaped into members of the national community. Drawing on extensive archival material, Sheffer traces how routine clinical decisions could steer children either towards support or towards institutions such as Spiegelgrund, where many were killed. This interpretation matters because it sheds light on how professional authority can absorb and reproduce political values, raising wider questions about how vulnerability and worth are defined. This review outlines Sheffer's argument and structure, situates her work within the relevant historiography, examines her use of sources and methods and evaluates the broader strengths and limitations of her approach.

Building on research that has shown how medicine shaped Nazi child policy, Sheffer directs attention to the diagnostic language and routine judgements through which clinicians classified and evaluated children. Her approach develops a key insight from Henry Friedlander's *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, which demonstrated that early killing programmes emerged from within medical institutions and were justified as administrative or therapeutic measures. Sheffer brings this insight into the everyday world of Vienna's clinics, showing that the assumptions behind these programmes were already present in ordinary assessments

that placed children into categories of promise, difficulty or abandonment. In doing so, she shifts attention from the outcome of violence to the professional habits that helped create the conditions for it. Sheffer's book also forms part of a wider re-evaluation of Hans Asperger that emerged in 2018. In the same year, Herwig Czech's landmark article *Hans Asperger, National Socialism, and 'Race Hygiene' in Nazi-Era Vienna* dismantled the post-war image of Asperger as a protective figure, presenting evidence of his cooperation with the regime's system for managing difficult or disabled children. Sheffer contributes to this broader reassessment by situating Asperger within an environment that encouraged clinicians to judge children according to their perceived social value. She shows that his decisions reflected widely shared assumptions in Viennese child psychiatry where clinicians judged children through a language that linked behaviour to their perceived value to the community. Taken together, these contributions redirect the historiography from viewing doctors as mere implementers of Nazi measures to examining how their own ways of interpreting children made those measures effective. Sheffer shows that the danger emerged from the professional habits that shaped how clinicians thought and acted - habits that aligned easily with the regime's priorities. This shift provides a deeper insight into how medical authority reinforced the wider machinery of harm within the Nazi state.

Having outlined the wider historiographical context, it is useful to summarise how Sheffer develops her argument across *Asperger's Children*. The book opens by describing the Third Reich as a "diagnosis regime" in which "doctors judged children's minds and determined their fates" (p.13). This idea frames the whole study; Sheffer argues that Hans Asperger's clinical judgements reflected a professional culture that linked a child's value to their perceived capacity to integrate into the collective. The early chapters trace Asperger's

formation within the interwar discipline of Heilpädagogik, where medicine and moral assessment were closely connected. Sheffer shows how clinicians were taught to interpret traits such as discipline, responsiveness and emotional control as indicators of a child's future prospects: assumptions that informed Asperger's own categories of who might be guided towards conformity and who was seen as unlikely to adapt. As the narrative moves into the years of the Third Reich, Sheffer follows these ideas into the institutions where decisions about children's futures were made. She traces how Asperger participated in assessment pathways that shaped whether children received support or were steered into more dangerous settings. The Spiegelgrund clinic, part of the child-killing network, becomes central to this analysis. Drawing on case files, administrative documents and the limited survivor testimonies that exist, Sheffer illustrates how routine descriptions of behaviour could justify exclusion and, for some children, lead to their deaths. The later chapters examine how Asperger moved through wartime Vienna and the post-1945 decades, highlighting how he came to be remembered as a more benign figure in a society that preferred to downplay its involvement in Nazi policies.

Now that I have established her argument, it is necessary to consider the evidence on which *Asperger's Children* is built on. The book relies overwhelmingly on archival material such as clinical files and administrative records that reveal how children were evaluated within Vienna's medical and welfare systems. Reading these files as instruments of decision-making rather than routine paperwork allows her to trace how diagnostic labels directed children along sharply different institutional pathways. Sheffer also identifies structural patterns within the surviving material. She uses small quantitative samples to show how institutional networks shaped children's outcomes; for example, she notes that "in one sample of 312

children… almost a third" had been referred through a single welfare office (p.182). This approach enables her to move beyond individual case studies and reveal the broader processes that guided children into increasingly dangerous settings. Survivor recollections appear in the book, though Sheffer uses them cautiously and mainly to clarify how institutional categories were experienced in practice rather than as primary evidence of events. Taken together, these archives form a tightly focused source base that allows Sheffer to connect institutional systems with individual lives, showing how everyday documentation acquired significant moral weight within Nazi child psychiatry.

One of the book's most compelling strengths is the way Sheffer reshapes our understanding of how Nazi child medicine operated. Rather than treating the killing programme as something driven only by explicit orders or specialised institutions, she shows that its foundations lay in the ordinary diagnostic routines of clinicians who believed they were acting responsibly. By tracing how labels such as "educable" or "alien to the community" (p.13) were created and applied, Sheffer demonstrates that medical judgement itself became a mechanism of selection. This represents an important contribution because it shifts attention away from a narrow focus on perpetrators and towards the wider professional culture that helped sustain exclusion as a clinical practice. For general readers, the book makes plain how children could be channelled into institutions like Spiegelgrund through what seemed to be routine assessments; for specialists, it offers a precise account of how seemingly supportive clinical labels could acquire coercive force. Considered collectively, these insights show how Sheffer advances existing scholarship by revealing that systems of exclusion were embedded not only in ideology but in the everyday reasoning of medical professionals.

There are, however, important gaps that shape what the book is able to show. Very few children survived Spiegelgrund and the recollections that do exist come from a narrow group whom Sheffer describes as “entirely male… even as the gender ratio of children killed appears to have been roughly even” (p.185). These accounts also represent only a small subset of experiences: most of the interviewees were classified for social rather than physical reasons, meaning that their memories cannot speak for children with other diagnoses or vulnerabilities. As Sheffer notes on page 185, such testimonies “do not represent all of the experiences of children victimised at Spiegelgrund,” and the perspectives they offer are shaped by distance from the events themselves. This makes it difficult to recover how children across the institution understood or navigated the systems that governed their lives. In addition, the book’s focus on Vienna (while appropriate for its aims) leaves open questions about how far these diagnostic cultures operated across the wider Reich. These limitations reflect the structural difficulty of writing a history in which most victims left no record of their own. Even so, the book’s core achievement stands: it shows with clarity how the clinical frameworks of Nazi Vienna shaped children’s life chances with devastating consequences.

Asperger’s Children shows with unusual clarity how ordinary clinical routines shaped the treatment of children in Nazi Vienna. By tracing how professional judgements were formed and applied, Sheffer reveals the administrative and intellectual frameworks that supported the regime’s aims. This approach enriches our understanding of Nazi medicine by highlighting the role of everyday institutional practices rather than only the most visible acts of violence. For readers new to the subject, the book explains how ideas that appear neutral

gained enormous authority within a system that defined children's value in political terms. The contribution of Sheffer's work lies in making these processes visible and in showing how the history of medicine is essential for understanding how the Third Reich functioned. It offers a clear reminder that institutions devoted to care can also become instruments through which exclusion is organised and justified.