

The Eugenics Movement

Eugenics were a group of sciences aimed at controlling hereditary factors in an effort to improve the human race through biological and social means. It was by no means a NAZI creation. The principle that the white race was superior was widely accepted in both intellectual and mainstream thought in America and Europe during the 19th and early 20th century. After Darwin published his landmark principles of evolution, important writers in America and Europe began to develop a new science which they called eugenics. Many eugenic laws were passed in America and other countries, especially Protestant countries, aimed at sterilizing retarded individuals--often youths. The NAZIs in fact used American laws to justify their program, but built a much expanded program aimed at not only retarded children and adults, but physically handicapped children as well. At first the NAZI program focused on sterilization, but eventually it evolved into the T4 euthanasia program--state sanctioned murders by medical personnel.

Racial Superiority

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The Eugenics Movement

Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, was the pioneer for eugenics. Darwin's landmark work on natural selection had been widely accepted by the turn of the 20th century by scientists if not by the general public. This an increasingly sophisticated understanding of genetics gave rise to the Eugenics Movement in the late 19th and early 20th century. Eugenics has been described as the science of improving the human race through the careful selection of parents. As practiced in the early 20th century it is probably best described as a movement than a science. Galton and others were convinced that a control of human reproduction would result in an improvement of the human species, increasing the proportion of intelligent, emotionally stable, and healthy people.

Perceived Crisis

Eugenists argued that a recurring trend in civilization was that the population evolved toward a lower level of intelligence. Married couples of high intelligence tended to have fewer children than couples of lower intelligence. Over generations this tended to increase the number of individuals of lower intelligence. Eugenists promoted a variety of measures to reverse these trends. There were both positive and negative measures. Positive measures included compulsory education and administering charity so as to promote desirable births. Negative measures included sterilization, birth control, segregation of genders in schools and

other institutions, prevention of miscegenation, and marriage laws. To this list the NAZIs added murder.

"Good" Characteristics

Eugenicists argued that Those with "good" characteristics would be encouraged to have children. Those with "bad" characteristics would be sterilized or otherwise disadvantaged. The problem, of course, was in defining just what constituted an improvement. Many promoting the program focused on outward physical characteristics which were easy to observe usually resembled themselves. As a result, the eugenics movement became associated with the widely held racism of the late 19th and 20 century in both America and Europe.

National Programs

Eugenics gained an immense following in America and European countries. We believe that eugenics programs were implemented in quite a number of countries, although we have only limited information at this time. Generally speaking, those countries where racist ideas were most accepted, were the countries with the most important eugenics programs. There was also an eugenics program in Australia which took half-caste children away from aboriginal mothers.

America

No where were the principles of eugenics more accepted than America. Eugenics was adopted by the [Oneida Community](#) in the mid-19th century. The first American eugenics law was passed in Indiana in 1907 and by 1936 there were 35 states that had such laws. As a result, large numbers of individuals in America were forcibly sterilized--primarily poor children taken in by state institutions. We do not have an estimate yet of the actual number of people sterilized. As these operations were sometimes conducted covertly, an accurate assessment is probably not possible. The mentally ill and retarded were the most frequent victims of this program. There were also, however, children and youths sterilized. These included unwed mothers and boys in reformatories and orphanages, especially if they were judged to be retarded. The extent of the sterilizations varied widely from state to state, but was most pronounced in states that were largely Protestant because of the opposition of the Catholic Church. There were also large numbers of sterilizations conducted on blacks in the South by the largely white medical establishment. These were known as Mississippi appendectomies. An outgrowth of the eugenics movement was the popularity of beautiful baby competitions in the early 20th century.

Australia

Australia also had an eugenics program that was pursued much longer than other countries. We do not know the full extent of the program. We do know that it was applied against the country's aboriginal population. Like the NAZI Lebensborn program, it was aimed at kidnapping children from their parents. Overtime Australians had begun to notice half-caste children being raised by Aborigines. Almost always this meant children of white Australian fathers being raised by Aborigine mothers. Apparently some Australians were offended by the site of children who looked white being raised by Aborigine mothers. As a result, laws were passed to give authorities the legal right to remove these children from their mothers.

Authorities believed that the Aborigines would eventually die out and that it was desirable to breed the Aboriginal characteristics out of the Australian gene pool. This program continued until 1970. It has recently come to the public attention by a book, *The Rabbit Proof Fence* written by the daughter of one of the children removed. The movie of the same title is largely factual.

England

The eugenics movement was influential in the [orphan transport](#) (many were not really orphans) of British children to the Empire/Dominions. The idea being to populate the Empire with people of British Anglo-Saxon stock. Nearly a quarter million children were transported.

France

France like other European countries had a strong eugenics movement. A founder of the French eugenics movement was Arthur de Gobineau who introduced his theories, 'essay, 'An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races' (1853-55). One of the individuals he influenced was Alexis Carrel (1873-44) who became a major proponent of aggressive eugenic policies during the inter-War era. Carrel was a respected French surgeon and biologist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1912. He became the leading French advocate of scientific racism (early-1930s). He advocated gassing people to eliminate 'inferior stock'. He published a best selling book *L'Homme, cet inconnu* (Man, This Unknown) (1935). Carrel was particularly concerned with the retarded, severely handicapped, and criminal element. He explained in his book how he would deal with the crime problem, the "conditioning of petty criminals with the whip, or some more scientific procedure, followed by a short stay in hospital, would probably suffice to insure order. Those who have murdered, robbed while armed with automatic pistol or machine gun, kidnapped children, despoiled the poor of their savings, misled the public in important matters, should be humanely and economically disposed of in small euthanasic institutions supplied with proper gasses. A similar treatment could be advantageously applied to the insane, guilty of criminal acts." Goebbels was careful about foreign books published in the Reich. Dr. Carrel's book was published in Germany soon after it appeared in France (1936). Dr Carrel added praise for the developing NAZI eugenics program in the preface. He wrote that the German Government "has taken energetic measures against the propagation of the defective, the mentally diseased, and the criminal. The ideal solution would be the suppression of each of these individuals as soon as he has proven himself to be dangerous." Carrel was a vocal supporter of Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français (French Popular Party--PPF). It was Fascist founded in the wake of the NAZI victory in Germany and after the German victory (1940), became the most important collaborationist party. Carrel during the Vichy era used his political and personal connections to promote the idea of creating a Fondation Française pour l'Etude des Problèmes Humains (French Foundation for the Study of Human Problems). French industrial physicians André Gros and Jacques Ménétrier proved very useful in promoting his ideas in Vichy circles. He secured Vichy approval with the assignment to study "under all of its aspects, of measures aimed at safeguarding, improving and developing the French population in all of its activities". Vichy established the Foundation by decree (1941). Carrel appointed Regent and François Perroux General Secretary. Vichy with its limited resources provided very generous funding. One of the first practical results was to draft the Prenuptial Certificate which individuals contemplating marriage were required to obtain. It was made a legal requirement (December 16, 1942). It required a physical examination to ensure that both parties were of 'good health'. The examination was to focus on sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and 'life

hygiene'. Another product of the Foundation was the Livret Scolaire (scolar book). The idea was to follow each students' grades in the secondary system and to study the results achieved. The Foundation also provided the basis for the law instauring occupational medicine, enacted by the Provisional Government (GPRF) after the War (October 11, 1946). The Foundation and Carrel were implicated in the eutenizing of thousands of mentally ill and severely handicapped patients during the Vichy era. These killings as well as Carrel's association with the PPF resulted in charges of collabiration afyer liberation. Carrel died of natural charges before his trial began (1944).

Germany--NAZI

The seizure of power by the NAZIs in 1933 meant that eugenics would be adopted as a important national program by a totalitarian state. A whole new science was created in Germany by eugenicist Dr. Alfred Ploetz--Raz???? (racial hygiene). The NAZIs believed that the German people have been weakened by the contamination of the Jews and other reasons who carried hereditary diseases. The pursuit of racial hygiene was at the center of the NAZI program for a new Germany.

Assessment

Eugenics because of its association with racism and the NAZIs came into disrepute after World War II. Many point out that knowledge of human heredity was limited in the early 20th century when sterilization measures were adopted. Many human defects are not heredity and in the early 20th century, the racial component of many such defects was not established. The greatest problem with eugenics, however, is the tendency to select characteristics to be promoted on the basis of race or ethnicity.