The Global Context of German Eugenics in the Nazi Period

Stefan Nielsen-Sperb

Scientific developments in the nineteenth and twentieth century played a key role in the development of racial policy in Nazi Germany. The National Socialist regime manipulated scientific theories, specifically those that identified physical traits as more desirable than others, to legitimize the superiority of “Aryan” people over other racial groups and to establish programs of forced sterilization for certain groups in society. This aspect of the Nazi manipulation of science was not formulated isolated from or contrary to broader scientific developments in the Western world. Rather, historians argue that the eugenics policies that the Nazis employed after 1933 were strongly inspired by the earlier eugenics movement in the United States.

However, American influence on future eugenics developments in Nazism is often overstated. Although it is important to highlight the collaboration of American scientists with their “colleagues” in Nazi Germany, this collaboration should be considered part of a broader eugenics movement rather than a bilateral collaboration between two specific (pseudo)scientific communities.

Critical analysis of the roots of the eugenics movement shows that eugenics not only determined how the Nazis formalized their ideology into law, but showed that many countries justified legal measures, such as compulsory sterilization of those considered unfit or “feeble-minded”, with seemingly scientific arguments about traits that deemed some people
inferior to others. Eugenics was a mass movement that had an impact across Europe, in North America and indeed in Germany well before the Nazi Party’s ascension to power.

Prior to discussing how American scientists influenced Nazi eugenicists, it is necessary to make some general observations. First, it is important to differentiate the politics of science from the consciousness of scientists of the time. Governments and political forces could have a strong impact on the establishment and evolution of scientific disciplines. Even if scientists claimed that they were objective or apolitical, their research was often deeply impacted by politics. This was especially obvious in the impact of Nazi racial policy on the German scientific community. Eugenics may have been a wider scientific movement, but in Nazi Germany specifically it was deeply intertwined with racism and anti-Semitism.

The idea that biology—or religious equivalents of biology—creates a social order and thus that humans were naturally unequal was not invented by the Nazis. The Roman consul Menenius Agrippa (d. 493 BC) crushed a plebeian rebellion with the argument that different classes depend on each other and rebelling against each other would make as little sense as different organs of one body rebelling against each other. The discoveries of Charles Darwin had a strong impact on the theories of late nineteenth-century scientists who began to consider natural human inequality a fact. Scientific models that placed whites at the top of a hierarchy and “coloreds” at the bottom were mirrored in popular prejudices—and the same applies to the idea that the wealthy were wealthy because they were more intelligent than the poor. Scientists of that era assumed that human differences were hereditary and unalterable, despite having no evidence to support such a claim. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso proposed, for example, that there was a biological basis for criminality and that people were “born for evil.” Lombroso went so far as to call entire groups of people inherently criminal and to claim that “epilepsy [is] a mark of criminality.” The word “eugenics” was coined by the Englishman Francis Galton in 1881, and American eugenicist Charles Davenport defined the term as “the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding.” Eugenics developed within the larger realm of Social Darwinism, which claimed that Charles Darwin’s theories on evolution and natural selection could be applied to human society. It can be broken down into positive eugenics, which promotes the reproduction of desired traits, and negative eugenics, which aims at excluding certain people from reproducing. Eugenicists tried to link individual traits, such as lower intelligence or other “abnormalities”, to entire groups of people whom they deemed inferior.

Nazi Germany was not the only country that enacted laws based on eugenics or Social Darwinism. In 1928, the Swiss government passed a law that made it possible to forcibly sterilize the mentally ill and “feeble-minded”, i.e. those who were considered of low intelligence and incapable of producing value for society, if public health officials deemed them incurable and likely to produce “degenerate” offspring. This law had minimal effect; twenty-one people were sterilized because of this legislation. In 1929, Denmark became the second European country to pass a eugenics law which required sterilization, followed by Norway in 1934, Sweden and Finland in 1935, Estonia in 1936, and Iceland in 1938. Other countries that passed eugenics laws included Mexico, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary and Turkey.

In 1925, Hitler outlined in Mein Kampf how he wanted to apply Social Darwinism to German politics. He claimed that the mixing of different “breeds” led to the deterioration of the “superior race”, which causes a physical and mental degradation and the “drying up of the vital sap.” Hitler further divided humans into three subsets—founders of culture, bearers of culture and destroyers of culture. The “Aryan” race, he states, is the only race representative of the first group, the founders of culture; it

---

2 Ibid., 2.
4 Ibid., 2.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 3.
7 Ibid., 4.
8 Ibid., 5.
9 Proctor, Racial Hygiene, 96-97.
10 Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf (Middletown: Free Thought Library, 2015), 125.
creates great structures and leads progress for humanity. He also asserted that Japan and other countries in Asia were merely built on the foundations laid by the “Aryan” peoples of Europe and America. The only traces, as he continues, of “Aryan” traits in Asia are the lighter tint of skin and certain remnants of culture. Hitler then states that the Jewish people have developed an instinct for self-preservation as the “chosen people.” He argues that while other peoples took part in “great revolutions”, the Jewish people idled, unchanged, for the past two thousand years. The intelligence of the Jewish people, Hitler goes on, is not a result of inner evolution, but the result of the lessons of other people. He says that the Jews have not had a civilization because they do not have the creative ability. Jews are, he argues, inherently destructive rather than constructive to society.

Hitler also details some policy points in Mein Kampf that he would later implement as Führer. He writes that human communities only thrive when they facilitate the work of individuals and utilize their work for the betterment of the community, and that the community has no right to hinder individuals from rising above each other; rather, it should promote it. Hitler also wrote that the Marxist movement was purely a strategy of Jews to eliminate the significance of personality in every sphere of life. He additionally develops the concept of Lebensraum, an idea which would come to dominate his foreign policy once he came to power. He states that the duty of a “people’s state” is to secure the existence of the race that is incorporated within the state, taking into account a “natural proportion” between the population and resources, and argues that the current proportion of population and resources in Germany is disastrous. Hitler then states that the German nation could assure its future only by becoming a world power, for the last two thousand years, as he writes, was a defense of national interests.

The Nazis implemented racial policy within months of coming to power. Wilhelm Frick, the Reich Minister of the Interior, announced the formation of the “Expert Committee on Questions of Population and Racial Policy” on June 2, 1933, which consisted of scientists who supported Nazi racial theory and was meant to propose new racial policy for the government. In the first meeting, Frick called for the reversal of “a host of threats to the health of the German people,” which included the declining birthrate, an aging population, the influx of immigrant Jews, and the increase in “mixed and degenerate” offspring. Frick estimated that about 500,000 people in Germany were “genetically defective” but stated that his estimate may be too low as some experts considered the number to be as high as 20% of the total German population. Policymaking came shortly after.

On July 14 of the same year, the National Socialist government enacted the “Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring”, or “Sterilization Law”, which could force individuals to be sterilized if a “Genetic Health Court” deemed them to be suffering from a genetic illness, including, but not limited to, “feeble-mindedness”, “genetic

11 Ibid., 125-127.
12 Ibid., 131.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 131-132.
15 Ibid., 191-193.
16 Ibid., 268-270.
17 Proctor, Racial Hygiene, 95.
blindness”, “genetic deafness”, “manic-depressive insanity”, and “severe alcoholism”. On November 2, Walter Schultze, the newly-installed Bavarian Health Inspector, stated that the Sterilization Law would not be sufficient to stop the “horde of psychopaths, feeble-minded and other ‘inferior types’ threatening the German race.” His even more radical position would soon be adopted by the Nazi regime.

On September 15, 1935, the Reichstag, in a special session convened to mark the second-annual Nuremberg Rally, enacted the “Nuremberg Laws”, a set of measures that sought to “cleanse” the German population. The Reich Citizenship Law differentiated between citizens and residents, which excluded Jews from the privileges of citizenship. The intent was to deprive those of “non-German” blood of all civil rights. On the same day, the “Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor” (“Blood Protection Law”) was announced. It initially banned marriage and sexual relation between Jews and non-Jews, but would later be expanded to include other “non-Aryans”. This was different from the Citizenship Law because it sought to separate Jews and non-Jews in reproductive and familial spheres. A final measure was put in place in October when the Reichstag passed the “Law for the Protection of the Genetic Health of the German People” (“Marital Health Law”). This law required couples to submit medical exams to determine if there was “racial damage” before they could be married.

The German medical community applauded the passing of the Nuremberg Laws; several medical journals hailed the measures that the regime had taken. One such journal, the Deutsches Ärzteblatt (German Journal of Medicine), called the Blood Protection Law a measure of historic importance, because, as the journal put it, it would protect German blood from foreign racial elements. They added that the Marital Health Law complemented the earlier Blood Protection Law. Already relatively early in the Nazi period, there were journals on racial hygiene that called for such measures. Walter Gmelin, head of the health office in Schwäbisch-Hall, wrote an article promoting both positive and negative eugenics. The positive eugenic measure that he had called for was to support “valuable genetic lines” and to provide incentives for families of good stock. Gmelin also applauded the Sterilization Law and called for more negative eugenic measures like marital sanctions, birth control, and more power to confine individuals to psychiatric facilities. Physicians actively participated in the administration of the Nuremberg Laws and claimed that their views on racial hygiene should be considered. Five of the seven members of the committee responsible for supervising the adjudication of the Blood Protection Law were medical doctors. Given that the medical press was self-censored, there was no (written) opposition towards the Nuremberg Laws in any medical journal. Physicians had even been considered pioneers in the creation of the Laws. Fritz Bartels, a leading figure in the Nazi Physician’s Organization, praised his deceased colleague Gerhard Wagner as being “forever remembered” in connection with the Nuremberg Laws.

![Chart to describe Nuremberg Laws, 1935. Source: Wikimedia Commons](image)

This does not mean there was no opposition to the new racial laws within the medical community. There were instances where physicians protested the dismissal of Jewish colleagues. One such instance was when Professor Emil Abderhalden tried, unsuccessfully, to get a two-year delay of the dismissal of Dr. Ernst Wertheimer. But the most organized and sustained resistance against the Nazis was done by communist groups. Georg Groscurth, a professor of

18 Ibid., 95-96.  
19 Ibid., 131.  
20 Ibid., 131-132.  
21 Ibid., 133.  
22 Ibid.  
23 Ibid., 134-136.
medicine in Berlin and member of the illegal antifascist resistance circle, *Europäische Union*, helped provide Jews with forged passports and certificates of “Aryan” identity.²⁴

Nazi eugenics policies also extended to those who were deemed medically ill. In 1938, a father wrote to Hitler to get permission for a “mercy death” for his son. The father’s son was born blind, feeble-minded and without an arm and a leg. Karl Brandt, escort doctor for Hitler and future administer of the Aktion T4 euthanasia program, was authorized to grant the request if the facts of the letter were true. In the end, the physician in charge of the child agreed to have the child killed. The Knauer Case, as it was called later, would be used as a model for making decisions about euthanasia, though it was controversial when it was made public. In 1939, an advisory committee was formed to prepare for the killing of deformed and mentally disabled children. On August 14, 1939, two weeks before the invasion of Poland, the committee delivered a secret directive to all state governments to have any child born with deformities be registered with local health authorities. Questionnaires were sent to doctors in Germany to determine if there were deformed or ill babies under their care. These questionnaires would go to Hans Hefelmann, the coordinator of the operation, who slated children to either die (with a “positive” sign) or be allowed to live (with a “negative” sign). Those children who were sent to die would be injected with morphine, given tablets, or gassed with cyanide or chemical agents. One doctor at the Eglfing-Haar hospital near Munich had children in his hospital starve to death to pretend that they died from natural causes.²⁵ In July 1939, Hitler went further and authorized a program for adult euthanasia. The first lists of disabled or “mentally ill” people were received in October of the same year and reviewed by 48 medical doctors; the first murders of mental patients were committed during the invasion of Poland. The first large-scale operation of adult euthanasia was committed at Brandenburg in early January 1940, and became a model for future operations, now collectively referred to as Aktion T4.²⁶

There were connections between such crimes in Nazi Germany and medical practices in the United States. American eugenicists were among the strongest supporters of German racial practices. The Nazi administration went as far as to say that the US was the model for their eugenic policy.²⁷ The scientific community in Germany even used a United States Supreme Court case as a source of justification.²⁸ *Buck v. Bell* declared the sterilization of Carrie Buck, a woman from Virginia who was deemed “feeble-minded”, constitutional because, as Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes put it, “three generations of imbeciles are enough.”²⁹ The eugenics movement in the United States was backed by the highest court in the United States as well as by Congress. Immigration laws in the United States that limited immigration from non-Nordic countries were lauded by the Nazis, and American eugenicists embraced their ties with Nazi physicians.³⁰

The Nazis examined the immigration laws of the Early Republic in depth for their racial policies. For example, during the First Congress of 1789-1791, the Naturalization Act of 1790 was passed, which granted naturalization to any free white person who had lived in the United States for two years; Nazi commentators took interest in the law and asserted that it was uncommon for its time. Nazis were especially fascinated with the immigration policy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. California started with limiting Chinese and Japanese immigration in the 1870s, which was later also implemented on a national level. The Immigration Act of 1917 prohibited citizenship from being granted to people from most of Asia, which the law described as a home for, among other things, “alcoholics”, “anarchists”, “criminals and convicts”, “idiots”, and “prostitutes and vagrants”. Then came the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924, which defined people from Northern and Western Europe as desirable races and those from

Eastern and Southern Europe as undesirable for citizenship. The French criticized the laws; French literature expressed the need for immigration to break the trend of American racism. American immigration laws also caught the attention of the German journalist and publisher Theodor Fritsch, a noted anti-Semite, who wrote that American immigration law “offered a parable on the dangers of ignoring race in favor of a foolish egalitarianism.” The immigration law of the United States would provide a blueprint for the Nazis to contain the number of Jewish citizens of Germany.

The Nazis also examined how the United States treated minorities, such as African-Americans and Native Americans—who were considered second-class citizens—and made it a model for their own racial laws. Until 1924, Native Americans were treated as nationals rather than citizens, and Puerto Ricans were treated “foreign to the United States in a domestic sense,” much like the Germans would treat the Czechs. Black people received citizenship only after the Civil War through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, but with the end of Reconstruction in 1877, they lost most of their political rights in the South, particularly voting rights through measures such as the literacy test and poll taxes. Many German intellectuals, such as Max Weber and Eduard Meyer, took note the unequal rights of American citizens. When the United States acquired the Philippines and Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American War, their populations were legally categorized as “non-citizen nationals” through the Insular Cases. The Insular Cases had gained notoriety in early twentieth-century Europe, especially Germany. Later, some Nazi jurists would express admiration for the “life and immediacy,” along with the “living legal intuitions” of the American people. The American system thus formed the framework for the Nazis to create a new category of second-class citizens as “nationals without citizenship rights.”

German eugenicists were especially close with their colleagues in California, where more than half of all sterilizations in the United States occurred. Eugenicists in California frequently discussed such activities with German colleagues. A pamphlet that was mailed to German administrators describing California’s practices became very influential in Nazi Germany; Hans Harmsen, the chief propagandist of the protestant church for eugenic measures, justified racial sterilization with material from the Californian pamphlet. Arthur Gutt and Herbert Linden, who helped draft the Sterilization Law, also referenced the pamphlet. German propaganda outlets, seeking to gain more acceptance for the sterilization laws in Germany, cited a survey of the Human Betterment Foundation in California which claimed that 90% of those who were polled and who had some knowledge about forced sterilization approved of such measures.

There was mutual admiration between eugenicists in Nazi Germany and California. Californian scientists organized an exhibition on the German eugenics program, and the Southern California branch of the American Eugenics Society promoted the event by stating that the German government’s eugenics program portrayed the “need for sterilization.” California scientists lauded the Nazi regime for implementing the principles that had been previously developed by colleagues in Germany.

Such excitement was not confined to California. Joseph DeJarnette, a leading figure in the

---

32 Whitman, American Model, 37.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 37-38.
35 Ibid., 38-42.
36 Whitman, American Model, 42.
37 Kuhl, Connection, 42-44.
38 Ibid., 44-45
39 Ibid., 45.
The Global Context of German Eugenics in the Nazi Period

There are, however, arguments that the American-Nazi eugenics connection may be overstated. For instance, there was strong dissent against eugenics by some American scientists, and it could be argued that the Nazi eugenics program was part and an extension of the broader scientific racism movement of the early twentieth century. The Nazis were not the progenitors of such a movement; many countries saw similar movements in support of eugenic policies long before and, indeed, after the Nazis came to power.

There was, for example, a social movement in the Canadian province of Alberta to implement eugenic policies in reaction to an influx of immigrants amid growing concerns over “feeblemindedness.” Western Canada became a launchpad for eugenics programs because of nativist sentiments over such immigration increases and the fact that there were many social reformist organizations active in the area. The United Farmers of Alberta, the majority party in Albertan politics in the 1920s, and its branch organization, United Farm Women of Alberta, sought to enact sterilization laws that would maintain racial purity. Their efforts would materialize in a law put in place in March of 1928; the Sexual Sterilization Act established the Alberta Eugenics Board, which operated for forty-three years, even after the end of the Nazi Party. It approved 4,739 cases for sterilization, 2,834 of which were carried out. Originally, candidates for sterilization were recommended by physicians or psychiatrists from four hospitals from the region and reviewed by the Board, and patients would then be interviewed and asked for personal consent or consent from a legal guardian; i.e., sterilization was not forced. Despite this, Alberta’s sterilization rate was four times that of the United States, because eugenic laws in the United States were largely nominal, while Alberta applied its laws—albeit loosely. The Minister of Health, Dr. Wallace Cross, complained that four hundred people were sterilized out of the two thousand that, in his view, qualified for sterilization. He argued that the sterilization laws were too restrictive and proposed that the Alberta Eugenics Board should be able to force people to be sterilized. His sentiments were echoed by Dr. Charles Baragar and by the Edmonton Bulletin. The amendment to the Sterilization Act gained traction and finally passed in 1937, when the eugenics movement seemed to be in decline.41 Alberta shows that there were movements before and even during the Nazi years that enacted or supported the enactment of different eugenics and sterilization policies, and that such policies were not especially unique to Germany or the United States.

Eugenics as a scientific movement had existed in German history long before the Nazis came to power. The idea of sterilization was already actively discussed in 1892. The psychiatrist August Forel advocated for sterilization as an act of sacrifice, comparing it to the sacrifice of soldiers who died for their country in war. Heidelberg gynecologist Edwin Kehrer sterilized at least one patient to prevent him from reproducing in 1897. In 1903, the psychiatrist Ernst Rudin proposed the sterilization of alcoholics at the Ninth International Congress to Combat Alcoholism held in Bremen. His proposal was, however, defeated. In 1914, several bills were proposed in the legislature to allow voluntary sterilization that were eventually thwarted. By the end of the Weimar Republic, there were journals that advocated for forced sterilization. Nonetheless, sterilization remained illegal in Germany until the Nazis came to power.42

Anti-Semitism was not unique to Nazi medical professionals either; it thrived in Germany hundreds of years before the Nazi Party existed. Jewish people started entering the medical profession in the

---

40 Ibid., 45-46.
Middle Ages in Germany, as they were not allowed to own land or hold public office and were barred from many other professions. In 1678, the first Jewish student matriculated at a German medical university, but Jews could not graduate before 1721. Larger numbers of Jewish students started entering medical universities when the universities eased restrictions in the middle of the nineteenth century. According to the 1871 census, only one percent of the population was Jewish, while their number in the medical profession amounted to sixteen percent at the end of the nineteenth century. Before the First World War, anti-Semitism was nationalistic and meritocratic. Anti-Semitic parties had been on the rise since the late nineteenth century, receiving over 12,000 votes in the 1887 election and 350,000 votes immediately before the outbreak of the War. These anti-Semitic voters later largely coalesced around Hitler after Germany's defeat in the Great War; many were soldiers returning home from war to a broken economy. Moreover, they saw an increasing number of Jews fleeing Russia and entering Germany as living conditions in the former broke down. Among them were physicians who competed with German physicians. Jews were then blamed by many for the lost war and the economic troubles during the 1920s.

The bureaucratization and socialization of German medicine largely began under Bismarck, when state supported companies provided medical insurance to the German population. Comprehensive medical insurance began in 1883 and expanded in the following years. Bismarck's objective was to quench revolutionary movements by making these concessions. Many people, however, opposed this form of socialized medicine, which was seen as increasing the power of insurance companies, and went on strike to be allowed to choose their own physicians. The strikes succeeded, and patients were again permitted to choose their physicians. This changed in 1923 when medical insurance companies, supported by the Social Democratic Party, overturned this right. Many physicians saw insurance companies as large, impersonal corporations, and the rise of anti-Semitism became tied to the broader dissatisfaction with the organization of the medical industry. This, in turn, was related to the increasing number of Jews in the profession and the fact that they received more positions within universities and the German government. Jews became an easy scapegoat, as they were seen as taking what should have been “German” jobs. Many Nazi doctors received their education during the 1920s, when nationalism and unemployment were both high, leading to resentment towards the growing influence of the Jews entering Germany. Anti-Semitism was thus rooted in the German medical industry well before the Nazi regime came into power.

The Nazi Party was not the first organization to openly support euthanasia, either. The expression existed before the Party's assumption of power, although it had different expressed meanings. Literally speaking, the word “euthanasia” means “a good death”. Nineteenth-century advocates defended euthanasia as the right to choose the time and manner of one’s death or to minimize pain and suffering at the end of one’s life. Towards the end of the nineteenth and throughout the early twentieth century, euthanasia was suggested as a means of cutting costs or ridding society of “useless eaters”.

At the turn of the century, the concept of euthanasia transformed from the right to die without suffering to the idea of choosing life and death for individuals and groups of people. In 1920, Alfred Hoche and Rudolph Binding proposed extending the concept of “allowable killing” to the incurably sick. In their eyes, the right to life had to be earned and justified, not dogmatically assumed. They also defended the right to suicide. The idea of systematically killing mental patients to reduce the number of “defectives” as part of war efforts gained significant traction after World War I. In 1932, Kilock Millard, president of Britain's Society of Medical Officers, proposed voluntary euthanasia. A bill proposed to the House of Lords in 1936 included the option for voluntary euthanasia. The British Medical Journal then debated for the next five years on the issue of voluntary euthanasia. Several participants in these discussions proposed euthanasia for the (otherwise healthy)

43 Proctor, Racial Hygiene, 142-146.
44 Ibid., 177.
46 Ibid., 178.
47 Ibid.
“mentally retarded” as an option. Many in Britain supported the right to die with dignity as well.48

The intention of this paper is not to diminish the connection between the American eugenicists and the Nazis. The connection between the two communities is real, tangible, and significant. However, it should be understood in the context of a broader eugenics movement that evolved beyond the United States and Nazi Germany. Support for eugenics policies existed in Germany and in other European countries well before the Nazis took power. Both nations were not the only to pursue eugenics programs and many of the core ideological principles of euthanasia and racial politics were established within Germany before the Nazi Party’s rule. In the Canadian provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, there were influential movements to implement programs seeking to fight crime and prostitution while curbing unemployment that were also based on eugenic principles. Such programs were in place in Alberta before, during, and after the years of Third Reich. Eugenics within Germany was not unique to the Nazi period; German doctors had proposed sterilization as a means of sacrifice and to curb alcoholism well before the Nazis took power. Anti-Semitism in Germany did not originate with the Nazis either; hatred towards Jews existed long beforehand and had risen greatly in popular support with the collapse of the world economy in the 1920s and the general disapproval of the medical industry. Euthanasia as a concept predated the Nazis as well, existing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a proposed policy to cut costs and to eliminate those who were considered “burdensome” to society. The current narrative of a direct relationship between the eugenics movements in the United States and Nazi Germany must therefore be changed to one that better frames the movement as a part of a broader, pseudoscientific zeitgeist which was influential throughout the world.

48 Ibid., 179-180.