

The Horrifying American Roots of Nazi Eugenics

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Global Research, June 28, 2022

[History News Network](#) 1 September 2003

Region: [Europe](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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This was originally published on San Francisco Chronicle in September 2003.

Hitler and his henchmen victimized an entire continent and exterminated millions in his quest for a co-called “Master Race.”

But the concept of a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed master Nordic race didn’t originate with Hitler. The idea was created in the United States, and cultivated in California, decades before Hitler came to power. California eugenicists played an important, although little known, role in the American eugenics movement’s campaign for ethnic cleansing.

Eugenics was the racist pseudoscience determined to wipe away all human beings deemed “unfit,” preserving only those who conformed to a Nordic stereotype. Elements of the philosophy were enshrined as national policy by forced sterilization and segregation laws, as well as marriage restrictions, enacted in twenty-seven states. In 1909, California became the third state to adopt such laws. Ultimately, eugenics practitioners coercively sterilized some 60,000 Americans, barred the marriage of thousands, forcibly segregated thousands in “colonies,” and persecuted untold numbers in ways we are just learning. Before World War II, nearly half of coercive sterilizations were done in California, and even after the war, the state accounted for a third of all such surgeries.

California was considered an epicenter of the American eugenics movement. During the Twentieth Century’s first decades, California’s eugenicists included potent but little known race scientists, such as Army venereal disease specialist Dr. Paul Popenoe, citrus magnate and Polytechnic benefactor Paul Gosney, Sacramento banker Charles M. Goethe, as well as members of the California State Board of Charities and Corrections and the University of California Board of Regents.

Eugenics would have been so much bizarre parlor talk had it not been for extensive financing by corporate philanthropies, specifically the Carnegie Institution, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Harriman railroad fortune. They were all in league with some of America’s most respected scientists hailing from such prestigious universities as Stanford,

Yale, Harvard, and Princeton. These academicians espoused race theory and race science, and then faked and twisted data to serve eugenics' racist aims.

Stanford president David Starr Jordan originated the notion of "race and blood" in his 1902 racial epistle "Blood of a Nation," in which the university scholar declared that human qualities and conditions such as talent and poverty were passed through the blood.

In 1904, the Carnegie Institution established a laboratory complex at Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island that stockpiled millions of index cards on ordinary Americans, as researchers carefully plotted the removal of families, bloodlines and whole peoples. From Cold Spring Harbor, eugenics advocates agitated in the legislatures of America, as well as the nation's social service agencies and associations.

The Harriman railroad fortune paid local charities, such as the New York Bureau of Industries and Immigration, to seek out Jewish, Italian and other immigrants in New York and other crowded cities and subject them to deportation, trumped up confinement or forced sterilization.

The Rockefeller Foundation helped found the German eugenics program and even funded the program that Josef Mengele worked in before he went to Auschwitz.

Much of the spiritual guidance and political agitation for the American eugenics movement came from California's quasi-autonomous eugenic societies, such as the Pasadena-based Human Betterment Foundation and the California branch of the American Eugenics Society, which coordinated much of their activity with the Eugenics Research Society in Long Island. These organizations—which functioned as part of a closely-knit network—published racist eugenic newsletters and pseudoscientific journals, such as *Eugenical News* and *Eugenics*, and propagandized for the Nazis.

Eugenics was born as a scientific curiosity in the Victorian age. In 1863, Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, theorized that if talented people only married other talented people, the result would be measurably better offspring. At the turn of the last century, Galton's ideas were imported into the United States just as Gregor Mendel's principles of heredity were rediscovered. American eugenic advocates believed with religious fervor that the same Mendelian concepts determining the color and size of peas, corn and cattle also governed the social and intellectual character of man.

In an America demographically reeling from immigration upheaval and torn by post-Reconstruction chaos, race conflict was everywhere in the early twentieth century. Elitists, utopians and so-called "progressives" fused their smoldering race fears and class bias with their desire to make a better world. They reinvented Galton's eugenics into a repressive and racist ideology. The intent: populate the earth with vastly more of their own socio-economic and biological kind—and less or none of everyone else.

The superior species the eugenics movement sought was populated not merely by tall, strong, talented people. Eugenicists craved blond, blue-eyed Nordic types. This group alone, they believed, was fit to inherit the earth. In the process, the movement intended to subtract emancipated African Americans, immigrant Asian laborers, Indians, Hispanics, East Europeans, Jews, dark-haired hill folk, poor people, the infirm and really anyone classified outside the gentrified genetic lines drawn up by American raceologists.

How? By identifying so-called “defective” family trees and subjecting them to lifelong segregation and sterilization programs to kill their bloodlines. The grand plan was to literally wipe away the reproductive capability of those deemed weak and inferior—the so-called “unfit.” The eugenicists hoped to neutralize the viability of 10 percent of the population at a sweep, until none were left except themselves.

Eighteen solutions were explored in a Carnegie-supported 1911 “Preliminary Report of the Committee of the Eugenic Section of the American Breeder’s Association to Study and to Report on the Best Practical Means for Cutting Off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the Human Population.” Point eight was euthanasia.

The most commonly suggested method of eugenicide in America was a “lethal chamber” or public locally operated gas chambers. In 1918, Popenoe, the Army venereal disease specialist during World War I, co-wrote the widely used textbook, *Applied Eugenics*, which argued, “From an historical point of view, the first method which presents itself is execution... Its value in keeping up the standard of the race should not be underestimated.” *Applied Eugenics* also devoted a chapter to “Lethal Selection,” which operated “through the destruction of the individual by some adverse feature of the environment, such as excessive cold, or bacteria, or by bodily deficiency.”

Eugenic breeders believed American society was not ready to implement an organized lethal solution. But many mental institutions and doctors practiced improvised medical lethality and passive euthanasia on their own. One institution in Lincoln, Illinois fed its incoming patients milk from tubercular cows believing a eugenically strong individual would be immune. Thirty to forty percent annual death rates resulted at Lincoln. Some doctors practiced passive eugenicide one newborn infant at a time. Others doctors at mental institutions engaged in lethal neglect.

Nonetheless, with eugenicide marginalized, the main solution for eugenicists was the rapid expansion of forced segregation and sterilization, as well as more marriage restrictions. California led the nation, performing nearly all sterilization procedures with little or no due process. In its first twenty-five years of eugenic legislation, California sterilized 9,782 individuals, mostly women. Many were classified as “bad girls,” diagnosed as “passionate,” “oversexed” or “sexually wayward.” At Sonoma, some women were sterilized because of what was deemed an abnormally large clitoris or labia.

In 1933 alone, at least 1,278 coercive sterilizations were performed, 700 of which were on women. The state’s two leading sterilization mills in 1933 were Sonoma State Home with 388 operations and Patton State Hospital with 363 operations. Other sterilization centers included Agnews, Mendocino, Napa, Norwalk, Stockton and Pacific Colony state hospitals.

Even the United States Supreme Court endorsed aspects of eugenics. In its infamous 1927 decision, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, “It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind.... Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” This decision opened the floodgates for thousands to be coercively sterilized or otherwise persecuted as subhuman. Years later, the Nazis at the Nuremberg trials quoted Holmes’s words in their own defense.

Only after eugenics became entrenched in the United States was the campaign transplanted

into Germany, in no small measure through the efforts of California eugenicists, who published booklets idealizing sterilization and circulated them to German officials and scientists.

Hitler studied American eugenics laws. He tried to legitimize his anti-Semitism by medicalizing it, and wrapping it in the more palatable pseudoscientific facade of eugenics. Hitler was able to recruit more followers among reasonable Germans by claiming that science was on his side. While Hitler's race hatred sprung from his own mind, the intellectual outlines of the eugenics Hitler adopted in 1924 were made in America.

During the '20s, Carnegie Institution eugenic scientists cultivated deep personal and professional relationships with Germany's fascist eugenicists. In *Mein Kampf*, published in 1924, Hitler quoted American eugenic ideology and openly displayed a thorough knowledge of American eugenics. "There is today one state," wrote Hitler, "in which at least weak beginnings toward a better conception [of immigration] are noticeable. Of course, it is not our model German Republic, but the United States."

Hitler proudly told his comrades just how closely he followed the progress of the American eugenics movement. "I have studied with great interest," he told a fellow Nazi, "the laws of several American states concerning prevention of reproduction by people whose progeny would, in all probability, be of no value or be injurious to the racial stock."

Hitler even wrote a fan letter to American eugenic leader Madison Grant calling his race-based eugenics book, *The Passing of the Great Race* his "bible."

Hitler's struggle for a superior race would be a mad crusade for a Master Race. Now, the American term "Nordic" was freely exchanged with "Germanic" or "Aryan." Race science, racial purity and racial dominance became the driving force behind Hitler's Nazism. Nazi eugenics would ultimately dictate who would be persecuted in a Reich-dominated Europe, how people would live, and how they would die. Nazi doctors would become the unseen generals in Hitler's war against the Jews and other Europeans deemed inferior. Doctors would create the science, devise the eugenic formulas, and even hand-select the victims for sterilization, euthanasia and mass extermination.

During the Reich's early years, eugenicists across America welcomed Hitler's plans as the logical fulfillment of their own decades of research and effort. California eugenicists republished Nazi propaganda for American consumption. They also arranged for Nazi scientific exhibits, such as an August 1934 display at the L.A. County Museum, for the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association.

In 1934, as Germany's sterilizations were accelerating beyond 5,000 per month, the California eugenics leader C. M. Goethe upon returning from Germany ebulliently bragged to a key colleague, "You will be interested to know, that your work has played a powerful part in shaping the opinions of the group of intellectuals who are behind Hitler in this epoch-making program. Everywhere I sensed that their opinions have been tremendously stimulated by American thought....I want you, my dear friend, to carry this thought with you for the rest of your life, that you have really jolted into action a great government of 60 million people."

That same year, ten years after Virginia passed its sterilization act, Joseph DeJarnette, superintendent of Virginia's Western State Hospital, observed in the *Richmond Times-*

Dispatch, "The Germans are beating us at our own game."

More than just providing the scientific roadmap, America funded Germany's eugenic institutions. By 1926, Rockefeller had donated some \$410,000 — almost \$4 million in 21st-Century money — to hundreds of German researchers. In May 1926, Rockefeller awarded \$250,000 to the German Psychiatric Institute of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute, later to become the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Psychiatry. Among the leading psychiatrists at the German Psychiatric Institute was Ernst Rüdin, who became director and eventually an architect of Hitler's systematic medical repression.

Another in the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute's eugenic complex of institutions was the Institute for Brain Research. Since 1915, it had operated out of a single room. Everything changed when Rockefeller money arrived in 1929. A grant of \$317,000 allowed the Institute to construct a major building and take center stage in German race biology. The Institute received additional grants from the Rockefeller Foundation during the next several years. Leading the Institute, once again, was Hitler's medical henchman Ernst Rüdin. Rüdin's organization became a prime director and recipient of the murderous experimentation and research conducted on Jews, Gypsies and others.

Beginning in 1940, thousands of Germans taken from old age homes, mental institutions and other custodial facilities were systematically gassed. Between 50,000 and 100,000 were eventually killed.

Leon Whitney, executive secretary of the American Eugenics Society declared of Nazism, "While we were pussy-footing around...the Germans were calling a spade a spade."

A special recipient of Rockefeller funding was the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics in Berlin. For decades, American eugenicists had craved twins to advance their research into heredity. The Institute was now prepared to undertake such research on an unprecedented level. On May 13, 1932, the Rockefeller Foundation in New York dispatched a radiogram to its Paris office:

JUNE MEETING EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE NINE THOUSAND DOLLARS OVER THREE YEAR PERIOD TO KWG INSTITUTE ANTHROPOLOGY FOR RESEARCH ON TWINS AND EFFECTS ON LATER GENERATIONS OF SUBSTANCES TOXIC FOR GERM PLASM.

At the time of Rockefeller's endowment, Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer, a hero in American eugenics circles, functioned as a head of the Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics. Rockefeller funding of that Institute continued both directly and through other research conduits during Verschuer's early tenure. In 1935, Verschuer left the Institute to form a rival eugenics facility in Frankfurt that was much heralded in the American eugenic press. Research on twins in the Third Reich exploded, backed up by government decrees. Verschuer wrote in *Der Erbarzt*, a eugenic doctor's journal he edited, that Germany's war would yield a "total solution to the Jewish problem."

Verschuer had a long-time assistant. His name was Josef Mengele. On May 30, 1943, Mengele arrived at Auschwitz. Verschuer notified the German Research Society, "My assistant, Dr. Josef Mengele (M.D., Ph.D.) joined me in this branch of research. He is presently employed as Hauptsturmführer [captain] and camp physician in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Anthropological testing of the most diverse racial groups in this concentration camp is being carried out with permission of the SS Reichsführer [Himmler]."

Mengele began searching the boxcar arrivals for twins. When he found them, he performed beastly experiments, scrupulously wrote up the reports and sent the paperwork back to Verschuer's institute for evaluation. Often, cadavers, eyes and other body parts were also dispatched to Berlin's eugenic institutes.

Rockefeller executives never knew of Mengele. With few exceptions, the foundation had ceased all eugenic studies in Nazi-occupied Europe before the war erupted in 1939. But by that time the die had been cast. The talented men Rockefeller and Carnegie financed, the institutions they helped found, and the science it helped create took on a scientific momentum of their own.

After the war, eugenics was declared a crime against humanity—an act of genocide. Germans were tried and they cited the California statutes in their defense. To no avail. They were found guilty.

However, Mengele's boss Verschuer escaped prosecution. Verschuer re-established his connections with California eugenicists who had gone underground and renamed their crusade "human genetics." Typical was an exchange July 25, 1946 when Popenoe wrote Verschuer, "It was indeed a pleasure to hear from you again. I have been very anxious about my colleagues in Germany.... I suppose sterilization has been discontinued in Germany?" Popenoe offered tidbits about various American eugenic luminaries and then sent various eugenic publications. In a separate package, Popenoe sent some cocoa, coffee and other goodies.

Verschuer wrote back, "Your very friendly letter of 7/25 gave me a great deal of pleasure and you have my heartfelt thanks for it. The letter builds another bridge between your and my scientific work; I hope that this bridge will never again collapse but rather make possible valuable mutual enrichment and stimulation."

Soon, Verschuer once again became a respected scientist in Germany and around the world. In 1949, he became a corresponding member of the newly formed American Society of Human Genetics, organized by American eugenicists and geneticists.

In the fall of 1950, the University of Münster offered Verschuer a position at its new Institute of Human Genetics, where he later became a dean. In the early and mid-1950s, Verschuer became an honorary member of numerous prestigious societies, including the Italian Society of Genetics, the Anthropological Society of Vienna, and the Japanese Society for Human Genetics.

Human genetics' genocidal roots in eugenics were ignored by a victorious generation that refused to link itself to the crimes of Nazism and by succeeding generations that never knew the truth of the years leading up to war. Now governors of five states, including California have issued public apologies to their citizens, past and present, for sterilization and other abuses spawned by the eugenics movement.

Human genetics became an enlightened endeavor in the late twentieth century. Hard-working, devoted scientists finally cracked the human code through the Human Genome Project. Now, every individual can be biologically identified and classified by trait and ancestry. Yet even now, some leading voices in the genetic world are calling for a cleansing of the unwanted among us, and even a master human species.

There is understandable wariness about more ordinary forms of abuse, for example, in denying insurance or employment based on genetic tests. On October 14, America's first genetic anti-discrimination legislation passed the Senate by unanimous vote. Yet because genetics research is global, no single nation's law can stop the threats.

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Edwin Black is the author of "[IBM and the Holocaust](#)" and "[War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race](#)," from which the following article is drawn.

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