U.S. Responses to the Policies and Practices of Nazi Eugenics

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Introduction

As a method to improve the human race by taking control of reproduction, eugenics, meaning “good in birth,” was first developed in 1883 by Francis Galton, and involved encouraging the breeding of the fittest (positive eugenics) and discouraging, if not prohibiting, the breeding of the unfit: those with assumedly inheritable diseases and undesirable physical or mental qualities (negative eugenics). By the early twentieth century, this pseudo-science had been planted firmly in the United States, where proponents of the theory had established eugenic-oriented organizations and advocated the adoption of particular mandates to sterilize those deemed unsuitable for reproduction. Often categorized as the feebleminded, these individuals were characterized as lacking productivity, exhibiting mental deficiency, or otherwise falling under the category of “imbecility” or “idiocy.” As early as 1907, the efforts of eugenic proponents had culminated in the establishment of the first eugenic law in the United States: a forced sterilization statute in Indiana aimed at “criminals, idiots, rapists, and imbeciles” living under the state’s custody or within its institutions. Though the legality of these procedures were questioned, after the Supreme Court ruled in 1927 that sterilizations statutes did not violate due process, more states began to implement their own policies. By 1930, thirty states had passed eugenic laws, ultimately resulting in an estimated 65,000 sterilizations.

American eugenics, however, cannot be understood without acknowledging the historic context in which it is situated. The victims of forced sterilization were oftentimes women and men of color who were targeted on the basis of prevailing racist sentiments during the Jim Crow

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2 Such organizations include the American Eugenics Society, the Galton Society, and the Race Betterment Foundation.
3 Wilson, “Eugenics.”
4 Kersten, “Indiana passes first eugenic sterilization statute.”
5 Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200, 47 S. Ct. 584 (1927).
6 Page, State-Sponsored Injustice, 90; 76.
Era, and as a means for preventing the birth of children viewed as potential public charges.\textsuperscript{7} In essence, American eugenics has been described, in part, as “the biological justification of white supremacy.”\textsuperscript{8} Such a claim is evidenced too by the long-standing anti-miscegenation laws in a majority of states during twentieth century,\textsuperscript{9} race oriented immigration policies, and the racial biases in medicine during the 1930s in general, perhaps most notably in the longitudinal Tuskegee syphilis study.\textsuperscript{10} These eugenic policies of racial engineering and the clear prejudices held against minorities are reminiscent of laws promulgated by the Nazis, and it is unsurprising that, although American eugenics did not engage in the systematic removal of an entire race, it nevertheless served as a model for the Nazis in terms of citizenship and race law, one Californian eugenics leader going so far as to say that American eugenics “played a powerful part in shaping the opinions of the group of intellectuals who [were] behind Hitler in this epoch-making program.”\textsuperscript{11}

Leading up to the 1930s, the United States was a “global leader in ‘scientific eugenics,’”\textsuperscript{12} and its influence and collaboration with German eugenicists resulted in the 1933 Nazi sterilization Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring.\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, the American legal culture that institutionalized Jim Crow, anti-miscegenation, and forced sterilization appealed to Nazi lawyers when constructing a German equivalent. These Nazi lawyers “made repeated reference to American models and precedents in the drafting process that led up to the Nuremberg Laws and continued in their subsequent interpretation and application.”\textsuperscript{14} The Nuremberg laws were thus informed by existing American paradigms of

\textsuperscript{7}Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 79.
\textsuperscript{8}Ibid, 112.
\textsuperscript{9}ACLU, “Map.”
\textsuperscript{10}Nix, “Tuskegee Experiment.”
\textsuperscript{11}Christianson, \textit{The Last Gasp}, 101.
\textsuperscript{12}Whitman, \textit{Hitler’s American Model}, 8.
\textsuperscript{13}Kühl, “The International Context,” 27.
\textsuperscript{14}Whitman, \textit{Hitler’s American Model}, 12.
racial engineering and prejudice, even if the Nazis undoubtedly authored a distinctly cruel and
distinguishable variety of racism and ethnocentrism. Nonetheless, though the connection has
been made between the United States and Nazi Germany, scholarship has yet to direct any
significant attention to the manner in which the American public reacted to the policies and
practices of Nazi eugenics when unquestionably racist and ableist policies were on the books
domestically. Given that public opinion oftentimes varies regionally (especially when
considering the historically conflictual North-South relationship in the United States), and that
Nazi Germany would become a pronounced enemy of the U.S., determining perceptions of Nazi
eugenics and potential changes over time is valuable study in understanding America’s role as an
observer and influencer of Nazi policies and therefore the holocaust itself. The following
research thus endeavors to begin filling the gap in the existing literature by engaging in the
following question: to what extent did the United States favor, oppose, or remain neutral to Nazi
eugenics, and is there a correlation between opinions of Nazi eugenics temporally: before and
after U.S. involvement in the Second World War, or spatially: by U.S. region?

Methodology

The research consists of a discourse analysis of archival data from national, regional, and
local newspapers from the period immediately after Hitler’s chancellorship in 1933 through the
end of the World War II in 1945. The sources have been accessed from online archival
newspaper repositories including timesmachine.com and newspapers.com. Specifically, the data
was sourced from newspaper articles in which both the terms “Nazi” and “eugenics” appeared
together. The sources containing these terms were analyzed chronologically and in their entirety,
and were subsequently coded in three separate categories based on the degree to which the
source (in which the term appears) exhibited a favorable, antagonistic, or neutral response to the
policies and practices of eugenics in Nazi Germany. Attention was paid to spatial and temporal
variations and changes to determine if the communicative aims of public media in the United States were potentially influenced by the orientation and location of existing American race laws as well as the U.S.’ eventual involvement in World War II.

Analysis

The year 1933 saw the rise of Hitler and the dismantling of democratic institutions in Germany.\textsuperscript{15} The Nazi Revolution was accompanied too by the expulsion of communists from government and the beginning stages of the persecution of Jews, asocials and the disabled. Building on the studies of early Germany eugenicists like Alfred Ploetz, eugenic organizations expanded, and by 1933, the German Society for Racial Hygiene, having been bolstered by the newfound authority of the National Socialists, sought to legitimate eugenics as a scientific field and influence policy.\textsuperscript{16} Such is the contextual backdrop of the early stages of eugenics upon the rise of Adolf Hitler. In the United States, views of early eugenic oriented activity in Germany were relatively variable, and the principal concern of American newspapers was the establishment of forthcoming eugenic courts. Many newspapers recounted the opposition toward these courts by the catholic clergy, but in themselves did not provide a recognizable opinion on the matter. They were instead neutral and explanatory. Others however, clearly disfavored the measure. One article by the Associated Press, appearing in newspapers across the country, referred to the sterilization effort as “Typical of the Nazi effort to extend complete dictatorship over the citizenry.”\textsuperscript{17} In contrast, though fewer in number, other newspapers commended the establishment of the eugenic courts by highlighting the viewpoint of certain Californian authorities, the state whose existing laws, according to the article, inspired the German plan for sterilization. For the Germans to follow California, the law was expected to “prove an aid to

\textsuperscript{15} Bergen, \textit{War and Genocide}, 71.
\textsuperscript{16} Kurbegovic, E. “German Federation.”
\textsuperscript{17} Brockman, “Storm of Opposition.”
social and economic betterment.” Nonetheless, by the end of 1933, no singular view of Nazi eugenics reached a consensus, though favorable perspectives were less prevalent.

Eugenics became concretized as an institutionalized feature of Nazi ideology in 1934 and 1935. The eugenic courts, enabled by the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Children, became effective in January of 1934. Later, in June of 1935, the legal basis for persecuting homosexuals, who were viewed as deviant threats to national reproduction, was established. In September of 1935, the Nuremberg Race Laws, which included the “blood protection law,” were passed and subsequently expanded. As in 1933, American perspectives remained variable, but more of the sources (most of which were written by the Associated or United Press) examined during these years chose not to express a clear opinion. The majority of these neutral articles outlined which demographic could be subject to sterilization, referencing the feebleminded and incurables, Afro-Germans, and even children. Newspapers also addressed the inadequate number of German weddings as described by the Nazis and amendments made to eugenic laws to appease the clergy. Though these articles outlined the reality of the eugenics laws, they did not explicitly detail a definite opinion. Of the favorable views toward Nazi eugenics, a majority indirectly supported the policy, or were written in the perspective of American eugenicists. One California newspaper article in particular, however, written by Estelle Lindsey, commended the marriage expectations of German youth to marry principally for a healthy progeny, stating that she wished the “president would invite [the Nazis]

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19 “Persecution of Homosexuals.”
20 “The Nuremberg Race Laws.”
23 Associated Press, “Children not to Escape.”
24 Associated Press, “Nazi Weddings Fall Short.”
over here to educate our boys and girls to accept some such program.”

In contrast, the opposing views were more numerous, critical, and appeared in newspapers across the country. The so-called “ten commandments” directing the positive eugenics policy of Nazi marriage based on successful reproduction was not only attacked as an ideology “blithely circumscribing women’s sphere,” but also as one keenly concerned with racialism, whereby “American negro lynchings [were] reported with great zest,” and no satisfaction would come until “the maximum of blue-eye, blue ribbon babies” had been produced. In terms of the negative eugenic policies, newspapers indicated that the idea to sterilize the unfit of an entire nation “astounded many people.”

A prominent ethics professor from Fordham University called the process “folly” and criticized the pseudo-science itself, claiming that “eugenic sterilization of the unfit would not even rid the world of the unfit.” Others raised the questions of autonomy and civil rights, writing that within Germany, no newspapers “raised the issue of encroachment on personal liberty.”

By the end of 1935, American media began to increasingly associate Nazi eugenics as a radicalized departure of the American model, which amassed less controversy. The neutral accounts were still the most numerous, and favorable views were still present, however, a progressively antagonistic trend was developing.

Through 1936 to 1938, further eugenic policy initiatives were pursued by the Nazis. In 1936, for example, the Reich Central Office for Combatting Homosexuality and Abortion was formed to prevent any obstruction to the Nazis reproductive aims, and in 1937, Hitler ordered the sterilization of the mixed children of German mothers and Africans who had served in the

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26 Lindsey, “Log of the Good Ship Life.”
27 Associated Press, “Troubles of their Own.”
28 Ibid.
30 “Bad Eugenics.”
31 Associated Press, “400,000 German Defectives.”
32 “The Biological State: Nazi Racial Hygiene”
French army in the Rhineland. By the end of 1938, not only had existing state-sanctioned anti-Jewish sentiment culminated in the Kristallnacht pogrom, the vision of euthanasia based eugenic policy loomed in the background. As these eugenic visions of the Nazis began to take a more developed shape, so too did American views, and an unfavorable perspective began to slowly dominate journalism across the country, though neutral and favorable views of Nazi eugenics, now fewer in number, still existed. Between 1936 and 1938, the neutral perspective focused greatly on German weddings and matchmaking, a process through which the Nazis would “act as Cupid” to increase the number of appropriate Aryan marriages. Similarly to 1934 and 1935, the favorable views were primarily written in relation to a eugenicist’s perspective and unsurprisingly tended to neglect ethical counterarguments. One such eugenicist, a gynecology professor at Johns Hopkins named Edward Richardson, lauded the achievements of the Nazis by noting that under Hitler, the German people were in “superb condition.” Others commended the Nazi birth rate and were regretful that the U.S. was not pursuing a similar policy for racial preservation. In an article from the Washington D.C. based non-profit, Science Service, Nazi sterilization plans were called a “Herculean task,” a “systematic, wholesale attempt to meet the problem” of inheritable disease and the handicapping of desirable qualities. In contrast, news articles that criticized Nazi eugenics in these years, focused on the illogic of eugenic court “quizzes,” and others directly attacked Hitler. Helen Welshimer of the Newspaper Enterprise Association wrote that to explain a eugenic policy that overlooks love, “the German overlord” must not have “read enough idealistic literature in his youth.” Another writer in Tennessee wrote

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33 Dyrbye, “Adolf Hitler orders the sterilization.”
34 Bergen, War and Genocide, 127.
36 “Germans Under Hitler.”
37 “Startling Figures Reveal Possibility.”
38 Science Service, “Human Pedigrees.”
that Hitler had the German people “absolutely under his thumb,” and there were apparently “no limits to what the Nazis [were] willing to attempt.”

As in the preceding years, no universal view toward Nazi eugenics had been established in American media, but it is apparent that, in general, those who favored it had a vested interest in the subject domestically, whereas those who opposed it, criticized its irrationality, immorality, and tendency toward tyranny.

The period between 1939 and 1941 saw great transformations internationally. In September of 1939, the Nazis had instigated war by invading Poland, prompting the ghettoization of Polish Jews. By the end of this period in 1941, the United States was officially at war with Germany as well. Between these years, the Nazis had incorporated euthanasia into its eugenic policy, beginning first with the disabled in the racially motivated T-4 program, during which the Nazis experimented with a multitude of killing methods. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this period can also be characterized as one which saw a notable shift in American media. Though neutral and favorable views toward Nazi eugenics were still prevalent, they were presented indirectly while also recognizing Germany as an enemy, even before U.S. involvement in the war; otherwise, the articles were strictly opposed. For example, a Californian writer claimed that the United States was weak in comparison to Germany because it had not advanced a robust positive eugenic policy. Another Californian man believed that eugenic legislation was necessary if the U.S. were to overcome a “clever and ruthless enemy.”

The neutral articles, once again, referenced the Nazi goal of expanding the Aryan race through breeding, and may have even been implicitly unfavorable by underlining German policies that would have reasonably been considered as outlandish to the American public. Regardless, the majority of sources disfavored Nazi eugenic policies. The New York Times called the practice “totalitarian,” and other writers

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40 “Nazis Go in for Matchmaking.”
41 Bergen, War and Genocide, 160.
42 “Declining Population is Cause for American Apprehension.”
43 “Contrast in Eugenics.”
mocked the Nazi ideology’s “insanity” that was unethically promulgated by a dictatorial regime. Even American eugenicists began to distance themselves from the Nazi variety. In a published letter, the Euthanasia Society of America condemned the Nazis’ “mercy killing” of the disabled. They attacked Hitler by claiming it would to be the “acme of unreason to attribute… possession of an iota of the sentiment of mercy” to “that sadist madman.” Furthermore, the society argued too that never could Hitler: the “proclaimer of an absurd theory of racial superiority, one rejected by scientific authority in every free land, be credited with understanding of eugenic principles.” Clearly by 1941, even proponents of eugenics in the United States were repulsed by the version in place in Nazi Germany.

By 1942 and 1943, the euthanasia program had begun operating outside of public view, but the murders nonetheless continued and had been expanded to concentration camps. This period was characterized as well by an increase in massacres in truly genocidal proportions: by the Spring of 1943, “about 75% of the approximately 6 million who would be killed were already dead.” The American government had been made aware of these catastrophes through the resistance efforts of the persecuted, and the events were indeed presented in public media as well. The myth that the American public was unaware of Nazi massacres grossly neglects the reality of the archival data, which, understandably, is accompanied by a nearly universal condemnation of Nazi eugenics in American newspapers. Absent from much of the relevant sources were favorable or even neutral accounts. At this point, the prospect for spinning a positive tale on Nazi eugenics became an exceptionally difficult task in light of this incriminating

44 “Hitler’s Ideology.”
45 Philbrick, “Euthanasia vs. Murder.”
46 Ibid.
47 Bergen, War and Genocide, 164.
48 Bergen, War and Genocide, 237.
49 Such as the efforts made by Jan Karski.
50 Shapiro, Why Didn’t the Press Shout?, 43.
evidence. Instead, opposition was the overwhelming viewpoint of American media. The New York Times wrote, for example, that the Nazi embrace of negative eugenics was an “amazing retrogression” in medicine,51 and the nationally syndicated writer, Joseph A. Breig, denounced the implementation of euthanasia, declaring that the Nazis “inhuman doctrine” had “established gas-chambers, concentration camps, and machine-gun arenas where they “relieved the suffering” of the aged, the ailing, the nonconformists, and those whose grandparents had been so indiscreet as not to be blondes.”52 In circulation across the country was another condemnation by Catholic bishops in Germany who attacked the “peculiar Nazi methods of eugenics” as animal-like.53 That this message was publicized alongside a resounding anti-Nazi attitude in general, suggests that despite the viewpoint being German in nature, its tone would have resonated with the prevailing sentiment of the American public. Gone were the days of variability; by the end of 1943, U.S. media had greatly shifted to a blanket disapprobation of Nazi eugenics.

In the final years of the war, the eugenic aims of the Nazis had, in large part, been carried out, and yet the mass killing program continued through 1945. Record number massacres occurred in killing centers in the summer of 1944, followed by death marches in the fall as the allied forces gradually liberated the concentration camps.54 In the United States, the anti-Nazi tone in media had not subsided, but the furor of 1942 and 1943 had perhaps lessened. Nonetheless, the public’s view had not changed. Nazi eugenics amounted to an “insane babble about the master race, pagan barbarisms, sadistic tortures,”55 that “[struck] at the foundation of democracy.”56 These were not revelatory statements, but instead a continuation of a marked abhorrence toward a perverted and cruel Nazi ideology which had existed since 1933 but had

51 “Nazified Medicine.”
52 Breig, “One Man’s Opinion.”
54 Bergen, War and Genocide, 291.
55 Monahan, “‘Women in Bondage’ on Fulton Screen.”
56 Shepard, “Says Nazi Doctrines are Part of Eugenic Appeal.”
gained following as the years progressed. In comparison to the previous years, very few neutral and nearly no favorable viewpoints were published. As the war drew to a close, and the allies were assured victory, American media looked back on the leaders that enabled the merciless program. After Himmler’s suicide in May of 1945, for example, the “master of cruelty” was vilified as a sadistic “fanatic of “Aryan” eugenics,” and Hitler too was reviled. A Texas newspaper wrote fittingly just a few weeks after the war’s conclusion that “Hitler’s greatest triumph in eugenics was that he himself left no heirs.” As of September of 1945, the American perspective was thoroughly opposed to Nazi eugenics.

Discussion

The aforementioned progression of the American perspective of Nazi eugenics demonstrates that, despite a relative variability in the early years of the Nazi Reich, American media increasingly disfavored the program, and by the end of the Second World War, a clear and universal condemnation replaced the neutral and favorable viewpoints. The most notable shift occurred between 1939 and 1941, signified by the beginning of the war but nevertheless without direct American involvement. After this period until the end of the war, U.S. media was consistently critical, and the prior variability in perspective of the period before 1939 was conspicuously absent, although clear opposition had existed since 1933. It appears, therefore, that American involvement in World War II was not the most significant factor that influenced how American media perceived Nazi eugenics. Rather, awareness of the radicalization of the Nazi party and the onset of war against American allies may better explain this trend. By the time the U.S. declared war on Germany in December of 1941, the media had, for at least two years, lambasted Nazi policies more often than not. Strikingly, even the favorable or neutral

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57 Smith, “Himmler Kills Self with Poison.”
58 “Ruhr Industrialists.”
perspectives had largely become implicitly derisive by this time. How then, in reference to America’s own racist policies, can this trend be reconciled? It seems, that as information emerged in reference to the fanatical nature of the Nazi’s race aims, coupled with the Party’s goal of territorial expansion as advanced by the invasion of Poland, American writers became more compelled to rebuke the Nazis and distinguish the German form of ethnocentrism as an extremism incomparable to anything that had occurred in the United States. In this instance, racism was categorized by severity. Even if America was guilty in perpetuating prejudice (through eugenic means and otherwise), it was not viewed as commensurate with the exceptional cruelty of the Nazis, and therefore public media perhaps felt justified in omitting the fact entirely. Additionally, regional variability was markedly absent from the sources in general, with the exception of California. Besides a select number of articles that were written by local authors, an overwhelming majority of sources were syndicated nationally by independent journalists or news agency like the Associated or United Press. There was, however, a greater frequency of positive viewpoints in California, the state which boasted the most robust eugenics program in the U.S.\textsuperscript{59} Given that these perspectives came most often from eugenicists, the correlation is reasonable, yet many of these eugenic proponents eventually rejected the Nazi extremist variety as well. Otherwise, in no American region with greater or lesser historical ties to prejudice did a discernable trend emerge, likely due to the ubiquity of nationally syndicated articles: a reality of journalism in the 1930s and 1940s.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Although the Nazis were indeed informed by the discriminatory racial policies of the United States in the creation of their own eugenic model, by the end of the war in 1945,

\textsuperscript{59} Zhang, “A Long-Lost Data Trove.”
American newspapers were largely in opposition to the German form of eugenics. In the years following 1933 leading up to the war, despite favorable views never constituting a majority of the relevant sources surveyed, there was a degree of variability in perspective. Nonetheless, American journalism had shifted to a nearly wholesale condemnation by 1941, even before the U.S. was directly involved in the war. Regional attitudes, with the exclusion of California, however, were not associated with any appreciable patterns: no region was inherently more or less likely to favor, oppose, or remain neutral to Nazi eugenic policies and practices. Therefore, this investigation suggests that American perspectives of Nazi eugenics in general were influenced temporally, though the shift occurred prior to December of 1941. In contrast, the spatial dimension, sans California, was imperceptible given the research design. The evidence does, however, indicate that national unity against a common enemy predominantly transcended and perhaps helped to excuse domestic racial policy in the United States, though these same policies, to some degree, influenced the implementation, but not direction, of Nazi eugenics in the first place.
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