

To what extent did the american eugenics movement influence adolf hitler's final ...

[People](#), [Adolf Hitler](#)



Introduction Over the course of World War II, approximately six million Jewish people and another six million Romani people, homosexuals, and other undesirables were systematically murdered by the German Third Reich. Many perished while in concentration camps in the infamous gas chambers. While these gas chambers remain the most enduring and horrifying symbol of the Holocaust today, the roots of the Holocaust can be traced, among others, back to the American eugenics movement of the twentieth century and the Social Darwinism that pervaded the era.

By examining the American eugenics movement, one can try to better understand the weight of influence the American eugenics movement had on Adolf Hitler's systematic attempt at annihilating millions of people. Issue The word eugenics is derived from the Ancient Greek root *eugenes* meaning good genes or well born, and was first coined by Francis Galton in 1881 (Friedlander 4).

Indeed, eugenics is defined as the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding, according to leading American eugenicist, Charles Davenport (qtd. in Friedlander 4). Eugenicists believed that, like eye color and blood type, social traits could be passed down on to future generations as well, justifying the fact that criminal records and apparent feeble-mindedness ran in families. By breeding out these undesirable characteristics, such as mental illnesses, future generations would be free from the stain these undesirables imposed upon the rest of society (Friedlander 5). At the turn of the twentieth century, this idea of the survival of the fittest perfectly summed up the growing population concerns

throughout the world, and prompted scientists to search for a solution that curbed the impending Malthusian apocalypse (Darwin 120). Eugenics was the clear answer to many. After all, many reasoned, it was not the educated who were having an overabundance of children, but the mentally and physically unfit who produced offspring who were burdens upon society. Thus, only the fittest and deserving should be able to reproduce, ensuring the purity of the genetic pool. Joseph Arthur de Gobineau called race the driving force of human history and called the Aryan race the most intelligent people (qtd. in Kaldjian, Sofair 312). Interestingly, Gobineau asserted this claim thirty years before the infamous Francis Galton coined the word eugenics, indicating that the Aryan perception did not originate as Hitler's way to persecute the Jewish population. Instead, the Jewish populace became the victims for an idea that had been present years before.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, Germany was fully involved with the eugenics movement. Many proponents of Social Darwinism agreed that medical care had interrupted the natural struggle for existence by preserving the weak, (Kaldjian, Sofair 312). In 1915, psychiatrist Alfred Hoche encouraged the German state to revolutionize itself by turning into a higher organism called the Volk, a quasi-mystical image which portrayed society as an organism with its own health and identified human beings as functional or dysfunctional parts of a whole (Kaljdian, Sofair 312). It was this idea that drove German eugenicists as they saw the world in which they lived come crashing down upon them in the aftermath of World War I. . Harry Bruinius asserts that the U. S. was the pioneer in the legal, administrative, and

technical aspects of sterilization and that the Nazis used these legislations in new and unprecedented ways (16). The dawn of the twentieth century witnessed the shift in American society from an agrarian to an urban society almost overnight during the Progressive Era (The Progressive Movement). Progressives saw themselves as the arbiters of a 'new' America, in which the ideals of the founding fathers could find a place within the nation's changing landscape, (The Progressive Movement). This rapid shift in ideals and customs disturbed many of the native, Protestant, middle-class because it seemed as if society was being overrun by the so-called inferior immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe (The Progressive Movement). These immigrants were sure to be the downfall of the U. S., and many Progressives believed that by taking care of these so-called less intelligent and less wealthy people, society's problems would dissipate.

This fear and anxiety concentrated towards the lower class culminated in the rise of the eugenics movement in the U. S. According to *War on the Weak: A Portrait of Eugenics*, eugenics was the result of an America unwilling to make social changes, an upper class fearful of its labor counterparts. Eugenics placed the blame of a social quandary on [the] individual, industrial, scientific, and political bearents of the time (*War on the Weak: A Portrait of Eugenics*). Eugenicists believed social boundaries inherently separated the intelligent from the unintelligent, and it was in the lower class- where the unintelligent were most abundant- that eugenic research was concentrated (Friedlander 6). Social ineptitude was supposedly the result of an unsatisfactory gene pool, and the only way to rid society of these unfit genes

was to sterilize individuals who were carriers of hereditary anomalies. Most who were sterilized around this time were poor white immigrants and African Americans, with these decisions only justified further by the already ingrained racial prejudices of the time. Eugenicists saw this weeding out of the unfit as an accelerated form of natural selection, when in effect it was really just artificial selection, (Pernick 1768). Soon, immigration tests included genetic testing as eugenicists effectively started re-weaving the very fabric of the American social structure, (Black, War Against the Weak 186-187). While the Americans were busy building up their eugenic programs, they were also helping the Germans grow their own burgeoning eugenics program.

It is important to note that eugenics was already in Germany and in other countries by the early twentieth century (Levine). The US was evidently at the forefront of the movement, however, and truly catapulted the eugenics movement to international acclaim with the International Eugenics Congress of 1912 (K?? hl 14). In addition to the Congress of 1912, the U. S. directly influenced Germany's eugenics movement through financial funding and intellectual sharing. The robber barons of the Progressive Era- Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and E. H. Harriman- were all proponents of eugenics and funded not only research institutes in the U. S but in Germany as well (Black, Eugenics and the Nazis). Cold Spring Harbor, the oldest U. S. eugenic institution in New York, was directly funded by the Carnegie Institution in 1904 (Black, Eugenics and the Nazis). The Harriman railroad fortune bribed many U. S. charities to purge the biggest cities of immigrants,

but this paled in comparison to the role the Rockefeller Foundation played in the eugenics game (Black, *Eugenics and the Nazis*).

Charles Davenport's institute at Cold Spring used to be the center of the eugenic world for German researchers, (War Against the Weak, Black 263). This soon shifted when the Rockefeller Foundation donated \$250,000 to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute, which became the leading eugenic research center in Germany (Black, *Eugenics and the Nazis*). This new institute allowed German eugenics advancements to skyrocket and supported race hygienists like Agnes Bluhm to research alcoholism and heredity (K?? hl 20). America was quickly becoming the primary investor for the eugenics movement as well as a scientific roadmap, (Black, *Eugenics and the Nazis*). Adolf Hitler followed American eugenics with an almost obsessive fervor. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler writes: There is today one state, 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). He imitated Harry Laughlin's Model Sterilization Law almost verbatim when creating the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring, and in less than two years, over 150,000 Germans became sterilized (Bruinius 17). Laughlin was so influential to the German movement that he received an honorary degree from the University of Heidelberg, thanking the German eugenicists for reaffirming the common understanding between the two nations (War on the Weak: A Portrait on Eugenics).

U. S eugenicists looked upon this with approval, and Dr. Clarence Campbell, a Manhattan socialite gushed in admiration of Hitler and asserted that the

only difference between the Jew and the Aryan is as insurmountable as that between a black and white, showing that the ideological tendencies of many leading figures in both German and U. S. society concurred with one another (Bruinius 283). A German newspaper article published in 1939 claimed the U. S. as hypocritical in this sense: The Nigger would well be surprised that the white American becomes outraged at the elimination of Jews from German universities, while they do not even consider the exclusion of Negroes from many American universities (K?? hl 99). When eugenicists visited early Nazi Germany, they claimed that Jewish persecution had nothing to do with religion, and instead was just a large-scale breeding project (K?? hl 160). However, the relationship between the U. S. and Germany began to cool in the late 1930s as World War II loomed ever closer and some eugenicists recognized the negative consequences of the implementation of eugenic principles (K?? hl 97). This, along with the realization that Anti-Semitism was at the heart of Nazi policy pushed even more people away (K?? hl 97).

While the U. S. eventually distanced themselves from German eugenic ideals, there is no question that these two nations had, at one time, worked as closely as brothers on a project that both believed would purge the world of unnecessary people. But did the U. S. eugenics movement influence the Nazi treatment of the Jewish populace during World War II? Or did other factors play a more important role in Nazi behavior? Opinion Germany was in turmoil at the beginning of the twentieth century, with a failed war in its recent past and a heavy weight in its future. There is no question that this shaky environment provided the perfect breeding ground for how Hitler

treated the Jewish populace. The combined factors of the crushing economic depression, inflated German nationalism, ingrained Jewish racism, Nazi rise to power, and willingness of the medical profession created an intertwining web of causes and effects that ultimately led to the growth and implementation of German eugenic ideas, and thus, these can be pointed to as the short term causes of World War II. However, these factors did not as heavily influence the German eugenics movement as the American eugenics movement did in the twentieth century. The American eugenics movement is therefore seen as the pathway that German eugenicists took to implement the Final Solution in their quest to eradicate the Jewish population. The United States' eugenics movement is also tagged as the most important long-term cause of the Holocaust because it allowed the short-term causes of the war to culminate to an inescapable point where war was inevitable due to the pressures placed upon the German state.

There is no way to justify the actions of men and women who are willing to go to any lengths to eradicate a fraction of the population. By wrapping the concept of eugenics in an artificial bubble of pseudoscience and passing it off as a solution for the betterment for all the world, eugenics became the ultimate human ploy to turn humanity into an insensible human hierarchy. While there is no doubt that the intellectual outlines for eugenics were formed in the United States, it is also important to remember that Hitler's race hatred sprung from his own mind, reminding people of humanity's fallibility in its own ideas (Black, Eugenics and the Nazis). However, it is even more imprudent to dismiss the similarities between the German and

American eugenics movements because doing so would deny a common humanity and insult the memories of those who perished during the Holocaust and World War II (Kaldjian, Sofair 317). While some claim that there is no single tipping point for such a complicated and iconic time in history, the fact remains that the United States played a crucially integral role in the Final Solution that cannot and should not be ignored, especially when the actions of Germany are taken into account as well. The Holocaust remains a symbol of humanity's faults in its own belief system, and that no entity, no matter how good its original intentions are, can fully escape the repercussions of its subsequent actions. One thing is certain: no one will ever forget the Holocaust and the intricate facets it has revealed about human nature; and the factors involved in its causation, whether minor or major, have secured their infamous places within the annals of history.