

Genetics, Politics, and the Third Reich



Samantha Marmet
004835596
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Background

The mystic utopia of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or people's community, was the centerpiece of Nazi ideology. Predicated on the stigmatization of "the enemies of the people," *Volksgemeinschaft* called for the exclusion and annihilation of the Jewish people in the pursuit of a perfect Aryan society. Zygmunt Bauman was one of the first scholars to argue that the Holocaust was a "genocide with a purpose," calling modern genocide an element of social engineering meant to bring about social order (Weiss-Wendt and Yeomans). It is a mistake to believe that eugenics and racial anthropology were inventions of the Third Reich. The seeds of Nazi ideology had been planted for decades, and had flourished both in and outside of Germany prior to the Third Reich. Unlike other genocides of the twentieth century, leaders and politicians of the Third Reich aimed to scientifically justify genocide using human genetic sciences. Thus, human geneticists and German politics served to reinforce each other in a Faustian bargain: a willingness to sacrifice anything to satisfy a limitless desire for power (Weiss).

Genetic Concepts

The rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's scientific work on inheritance became the basis for modern genetics in the early twentieth century. According to Darwin's theory of evolution, plants and animals best adapted to their environment lived to reproduce and transfer their genes to the next generation via the process of natural selection. Darwin's focus on "survival of the fittest" was borrowed from sociologist Herbert Spencer, who believed people could genetically pass on learned qualities, such as morality, to their offspring (Weikart). The evolutionary idea of fitness became interpreted in the context of what high society valued: capitalism and political

power. This social Darwinism provided a natural justification for “might is right,” or that the strong will succeed while the weak perish.

The eugenics movement was initiated by Sir Francis Galton, who defined it as “the science of improving human stock by giving the more suitable races of blood a better chance of prevailing over the less suitable” (Weiss). Described as a virulent racist, Galton called for selective breeding for both promoting favored characteristics while eradicating “bad” ones; he hoped to improve mankind by propagating the British elite. Eugenics merged anthropology and Darwinism into something German scientists later termed “racial and social biology” (Weiss). The eugenics movement emerged in Germany in the late nineteenth century, calling for *rassenhygiene* (racial hygiene) to improve the hereditary of all of humanity. German scholar Schallmayer’s cost-benefit analysis theory, which correlated biological vitality and the scope of state power, dominated the racial hygiene movement. He feared that neglecting hereditary fitness would eventually result in the downfall of the state (Weiss). This demonstrates the use of eugenics as a vehicle for political power.

By the early twentieth century, racial thinking had become a science, and was intensified by post-World War I tendencies to think in racial and national terms. *Principles of Human Heredity and Racial Hygiene* by Fischer and Baur was the first textbook of human genetics in Germany, and was organized into several sections: a general intro to genetics, constructing race and genetic racial differences, and racial hygiene (Muller-Hill). The concept of racial hygiene, characterized by a fear of “contamination” and rapid social degeneration, dominated the eugenics movement in twentieth century Germany. While the eugenics movement swept through

Germany, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party) rose from the ashes of a defeated Germany after World War I.

Social Darwinism was a central tenet of Nazi ideology, which focused extensively on the “struggle for existence.” Nazis believed Darwinism also provided evolutionary explanations for the development of human races and validated scientific evidence for racial inequality (Weikart). Nazi ideology held that different and unequal races were locked in the struggle for existence, and that the only way for their own race to triumph over this struggle was to procreate more and territorially expand (Golomb). In this sense, social Darwinism promoted a collectivist ideal: people should prioritize the good of society over the welfare of the individual. Adolf Hitler regularly invoked Darwinian concepts in his writings and speeches, writing in his *Mein Kampf* that “the stronger must dominate and not blend with the weaker, thus sacrificing his own greatness.” The Nazis observed a strict hierarchy of the human race, placing the Aryan master race at the top. Hitler virulently opposed miscegenation, or “race mixing,” because he believed it hindered evolutionary progress by contaminating the superior Aryan race with inferior genes. The “Aryan race” was hierarchical as well, with the Nordic people regarded as the highest stock of Aryans. According to Hitler, the Nordics developed their hard work, moral fiber, and physical prowess because of the harsh northern climate; the strongest, most hard working, and cooperative individuals survived, exemplifying Darwinism’s survival of the fittest (Golomb).

A Nazi perversion of the Darwinian understanding of humanity shaped Nazi racial ideology, particularly the tenets of Aryan supremacy, anti-Semitism, and antimiscegenation (Weikart). Human evolution and genetic concepts were integral parts of Nazi racial policies, which promoted eugenics as the best way to save and propagate the Aryan race. The Nazi

regime's emphasis on biology and heredity, as well as Hitler's dictatorship, silenced critics as Nazi eugenics permeated German society and institutions. Jews became considered "alien" and were purged from universities, research institutes, hospitals, and public health care. Under the "Blood Protection Law" of 1935, relations between Jews and non-Jewish Germans were criminalized; this was one of several measures controlling the marriage and reproduction of Jews with the goal of eliminating Jewish genes from the population (Muller-Hill). The party's desire to craft a genetically pure German national community, or *volk*, led Nazi bureaucrats to actively seek the help of human geneticists and scholars to help advance their racial goals at home and abroad. Hitler's political manifesto *Mein Kampf*, in which he endorsed eugenics as a means to preserve the most valuable racial elements, became a foundational book of National Socialism. It was this amalgam of science, politics, and ideology that culminated in the answer to the "Jewish question" that had persisted in Europe for decades: the expropriation and annihilation of the Jewish people.

Philosophy and Politics

The Nazis wrongly conflated the German word "ehre" (honor) and "Aryan" (the honorable people). "Aryan" is a historical racial concept which typically describes Indo-European languages, but became misapplied to describe *Herrenvolk*, or the pure German race (Kay and Stahel). Hitler believed that blonde, blue-eyed Germans had the "purest blood" of all people on Earth, and viewed non-Aryans as impure and evil. These inferior people — Jews and Romani gypsies — were a threat to the existence of the master race, and thus the strength and purity of the German nation. Racial pseudoscience validated these claims; the research of Dr. Robert Ritter described gypsies of mixed German blood as "the products of matings with the

German criminal asocial subproletariat,” asserting that they are racial inferiors and incapable of true social adaptation (Kay and Stahel). The Jews and Roma in Germany and German occupied territories had never tried to take land, start a war, or been an economic or political threat; their demise was purely racially motivated. Hitler’s sordid fascination with establishing a pure master race led to the ethnic cleansing of Jews and Roma on racial grounds: it was an effort to rid the Aryan gene pool of “genetic contaminants.” This extreme ideology — Hitler’s utopia of a racially pure Germany — planted the seeds for the extermination of undesirable populations in the Holocaust.

Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power* describes a force, neither good nor bad, that empowers all things to be. Nietzsche posits that everything we do is an attempt to assert our selves into our world; we project the authority of our ego above the authority of the egos of others (Golomb). The notion of will to power demonstrates how the need for power may dominate over a human’s desire to simply stay safe, and explains why people risk their lives for the rewards of moral goods. The open endedness of Nietzsche’s philosophy enabled Nazis to draw a biological interpretation of will to power to justify their conquests through *lebensraum*, the Nazi ambition to expand territorially.

The pseudoscience of eugenics twisted Mendel’s science of heredity and fused it with philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of “superman,” or the *ubermensch*. To Nietzsche, man is incomplete, while the *ubermensch* is a goal: man is waiting to become something more than just man, and to do this, he must go beyond good and evil and establish a new set of values (Golomb). Nazi ideology appropriated Nietzsche’s philosophical notion of the *ubermensch* to

encourage Aryan supremacy by referring to ideal members of his Aryan master race as the *ubermensch*.

Fascism was a necessary tool to implement Nazi racial ideology because it prioritizes the nation over the individual, who exist to serve the nation. Fascism combines authoritarianism, nationalism, militarism, and totalitarianism, emphasizing the importance of a unified national community (United States Holocaust Museum Encyclopedia). Hitler promoted facism to advance the welfare and power of the German *volk*, uniting ethnic Germans while excluding minorities within the German state, who were viewed as existential threats to Germany's health and unity. The Nazi regime framed World War II as the ultimate struggle for the survival of the *volk*, thus justifying radical measures of exterminating the Jews and other "undesirables," such as the Roma and the mentally and physically disabled.

Nazi Racial Policy

The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics, was founded in Berlin in 1927 (Muller-Hill). The institute had three departments: the department of anthropology, the department of genetics, and the department of racial hygiene. Through these institutions, research carried out was used as ammunition for scientific legitimacy. Scientists further legitimized racial science by holding public lectures and participating in national conferences. Ordinary school teachers were supported by the scientific elite because they disseminated this racial science to promote racial views of the state to German children (Muller-Hill).

Nazi racial-hygenic research also targetted an often forgotten population in the Holocaust, the Romani people, colloquially called "gypsies." Nazi scientists categorized Romani

people into two distinct categories: those who were “racially pure” and those who were gypsy *mischlinge*, or of mixed German blood. The distinction was significant to the formation of racialized policies the Nazis undertook against the Roma. Because the Romani people originated in India, “racially pure” Roma — those perceived as having little to no Germanic mixing — were not completely demonized in the eyes of the Nazis because of their true Aryan heritage (Magalit). Gypsy *mischlinge*, in contrast, were people of mixed Romani and German heritage, believed to have inherited their asocial elements from criminal German ancestors. They were stigmatized as parasites supporting themselves on the backs of German toil through crime and receiving welfare handouts. The differentiation between pure gypsies and gypsy *mischlinge* imbedded itself in Nazi racial policy: pure Roma (which made up less than 20 percent of the Romani population) were allowed to live “freely” but separate from the German population in certain regions of the Reich, while gypsy *Mischlinge* were deported to concentration camps because their “contaminated blood” was a threat to the Nazi’s messianic vision of a prosperous national Aryan community, the so called *Volksgemeinschaft* (Magalit).

Symbiosis

Human geneticists and German politics served to reinforce each other. Scholar Sheila Weiss examines the relationship between scientists and the Nazi state in *The Nazi Symbiosis: Human Genetics and Politics in the Third Reich*. She calls the relationship between human geneticists and German politicians symbiotic, characterized by a “Faustian bargain”: a willingness to sacrifice anything to satisfy a limitless desire for power (Weiss). Under Nazi Germany, scientists descended into moral abyss. Geneticists helped shape Nazi racial policies,

either directly or indirectly, and their developed ideas of human heredity and genetic concepts were mutually reinforced by Nazi policies.

There were several necessary precursors for the development of this symbiotic relationship, such as the eugenics movement that was deeply embedded in the German scientific community prior to the rise of the Nazi Regime. The symbiotic relationship was also made possible by the existence of a vibrant scientific community in Germany and financial constraints placed on many professionals by the worldwide depression prior to the Third Reich. When Hitler seized power, this instantly placed German eugenicists into the service of the Third Reich. Over 90% of German anthropologists and eugenicists joined the Nazi Party (Weiss-Wendt and Yeomans). Doctors joined the Nazi party in greater numbers than any other profession; by 1942, more than 38,000 doctors were members -- about half of all doctors in Germany (Michalczyk). The financial constraints of the global economic crisis motivated members of the German human genetics community to look to the Nazi Party, whose key focal points were race and heredity, with the expectation that the Nazis would further their professional interests (Weiss). There was remarkable consistency between the views of the Nazis and of the German scientists. The symbiosis between Nazi Germany and German scientists radicalized both human heredity and racial policy: genetics and politics began to serve as resources for each other.

The Third Reich was unique from other regimes, even among fascist countries, because it functioned as a racial state, where the criterion for citizenship was determined by race and heredity (Weiss). Weiss calls the Third Reich a “biocracy”: a government where biomedical ideals and professionals were central for the regime. She also criticizes the tendency to believe the Nazi regime was “misusing” science because it undermines the importance the scientific

community played in the regime as mutually beneficial reinforcers. Weiss follows Mitchell Ash's hypothesis that it is naive to claim that bad governments mobilize scientists to do their bidding, because the relationship between science and politics is mutually beneficial: scientists and governmental authorities are intellectual, political, and financial resources for each other. The Faustian bargain was advantageous for both the Nazis and the scientists, who were more than mere passive pawns in the hands of the regime. The scientific community of Germany was responsible for writing history: German human geneticists helped systematically legitimize their scientific investigations through Nazi racial rhetoric, resulting in the genocide of six million Jews and five million other "undesirables" in the Holocaust. This deadly symbiosis radicalized the science of human heredity as well as Nazi racial policy, and its effects still cast a shadow on humanity's collective memory.

The Banality of Evil

The rise of Nazi Germany could not have happened without considerable public support. Hitler used the Jews and Romani gypsies as scapegoats for the political and economic disorder that defined post-World War I Germany. He promised to return Germany to social order, economic stability, and hegemonic status, which garnered him a lot of public support and approval (Jones). In order for the public to acquiesce to genocide, they must feel indifferent toward or actively desire the destruction of other groups (Finkel, Evgeny, and Evgeny-Strauss). The perpetrators of such atrocities are normal people; they are not psychologically predisposed to sadism, and on average, do not appear to have any psychological abnormalities. The German public turned a blind eye to the anti-Semitic rhetoric in the press and increasingly violent and oppressive anti-Semitic legislation. While the genocide of the Jews were public knowledge, it

was hardly criticized; none of the European resistance movements took a stand for the Jews (Kay and Stahel). European states refused to grant asylum to the persecuted Jews and Roma, so there was no migration. The Jews and Roma were trapped in countries where they were unwanted, but not allowed to escape.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* argues that the doers of these monstrous events are "quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous." It is easier, perhaps even more comfortable, to believe that the symbiotic relationship between human geneticists and the Nazi regime came from a place of evil. However, the scientists that worked to justify Nazi racial policy and genocide are part of a larger banality of evil. The Nazis did not gain control of their government through a coup d'etat, but were democratically elected; this demonstrates the coexistence of normality and bottomless cruelty.

Conclusion

The Holocaust is unique in that it was the product of all-pervasive government policy that called for the systematic, bureaucratic extermination of the Jews and other "undesirable" minorities, such as the Romani people. Central to this government policy were human genetics and the symbiotic relationship between government officials and human geneticists. Adolf Hitler wrote about his extreme ideologies and insidious hatred of the Jewish people in his manifesto *Mein Kampf* years prior to being elected Chancellor. He viewed Jews as enemies of modernity and believed they would never be properly integrated into the rapidly emerging nation-state (Jones). At the same time, he classified Jews as agents of oppressive economic institutions and the urban, transcultural elements that threatened the unity and identity of the *volk* (people). Most notably, Hitler was obsessed with ideas about racial purity and the perceived superiority of the

German “master race,” whom he inaccurately described as Aryan. His fascination with constructing race and a racial hierarchy was deeply imbedded into the framework of the Nazi Party, whose vision was to establish a racial utopia.

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