

The American Influence on Nazi Eugenics and Sterilization

Brittany Fugate

Dr. Bruce Hall

History of the Third Reich

December 7, 2018

Eugenics is defined as “the study of or belief in the possibility of improving the qualities of the human species or a human population, especially by such means as discouraging reproduction.”¹ The Nazis believed that studying and carrying out eugenics was the key to creating the Master Race. In 1933, the Nazis passed “The Law for the Protection of Hereditary Health,” which condoned sterilization if an individual possessed undesirable traits, such as “congenital feeble-mindedness, schizophrenia, manic-depression, congenital epilepsy, inheritable St. Vitus Dance (Huntington’s Chorea), hereditary blindness, hereditary deafness, serious inheritable malformations, and chronic alcoholism.”² Many people believe that sterilization laws and eugenics efforts began in Germany, however, eugenics was being studied in the United States before the Nazis studied it. The first sterilization laws were passed in the United States in 1911. The American influence on Nazi eugenics is evident due to the parallels on the mentality towards those they deemed unfit and conditions that warranted sterilization. The American studies on eugenics and sterilization helped influence the eugenics movement and the mandatory sterilization law in Nazi Germany.

Eugenics in the United States began around 1904 when Zoology professor Charles Davenport founded the Station for Experimental Evolution. In 1910, Davenport founded the Eugenics Records Office, and its primary purpose was to study and analyze family genetic traits and create a study file for families. The file included “individual analysis cards, field worker

¹ Dictionary.com

² "The Nuremberg Laws." Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed November 19, 2018.
<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/law-for-the-protection-of-hereditary-health>.

reports, pedigree charts, and special trait studies.”³ Determining desirable traits was the key to eugenics and caused scientists to wonder if they could breed out undesirable traits. This wondering caused mandatory sterilization laws to be passed in states such as California, Indiana, New York, Kansas, Michigan, and Minnesota⁴. Twenty-two out of fifty states had sterilization laws in place. These laws were implemented as a “means of controlling ‘undesirable’ populations – immigrants, people of color, poor people, unmarried mothers, the disabled, the mentally ill.”⁵ In the state of California, more than 20,000 men and women were sterilized⁶, and the eugenics program there inspired the Nazis. In the United States, a total of 70,000 American citizens were sterilized⁷.

³ Tom. n.d. “Archives.” Alfred D. Hershey - Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory - Library & Archives. Accessed November 20, 2018. <http://library.cshl.edu/special-collections/eugenics>.

⁴ “Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States.” n.d. PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed November 20, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/>

⁵ “Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States.” n.d. PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed November 20, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/>

⁶ “Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States.” n.d. PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed November 20, 2018. <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/>

⁷ “The Supreme Court Ruling That Led To 70,000 Forced Sterilizations.” NPR. March 07, 2016. Accessed November 22, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/03/07/469478098/the-supreme-court-ruling-that-led-to-70-000-forced-sterilizations>.

The 1934 film, *Tomorrow's Children*, directed by Crane Wilbur, is an example of how sterilization laws were implemented in the United States. Diane Sinclair plays Alice Mason, a young woman who works to support her family. Her boyfriend, Jim Baker, wants to marry her, but she is worried that she will not be able to take care of her family if they marry so she turns him down. Alice is the only employed member of her household, and her mother had just returned from the hospital after having a stillborn child. A physician comes to the house to check on Mason's mother and attempts to help the family by putting them on welfare.⁸ The next day, a social worker and public health official comes to the Mason house, and they tell Mr. and Mrs. Mason that they and their daughter Alice must be sterilized to receive welfare to "prevent them from further passing down their genes."⁹ Mr. and Mrs. Mason agree, and they are taken to be sterilized. When Alice returns home after work, the social worker and public health official are waiting for her so they can take her to be sterilized as well.¹⁰ When her fiancé hears about the sterilization order, he and Alice go to the courthouse in an attempt to appeal the order, but the judge will not overturn her sterilization order. Come to find out, Alice is not biologically related to her parents, and the judge agrees to overturn his rule because she is not actually related to the parents who raised her. Despite being a work of fiction, this film does well in portraying how sterilization was implemented in the United States.

⁸ *Tomorrow's Children*. Directed by Crane Wilbur. Performed by Diane Sinclair and Carlyle Moore Jr.

⁹ "The Embryo Project Encyclopedia." Temperature-Dependent Sex Determination in Reptiles | The Embryo Project Encyclopedia. Accessed November 20, 2018. <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/tomorrows-children-1934>.

¹⁰ "The Embryo Project Encyclopedia." Temperature-Dependent Sex Determination in Reptiles | The Embryo Project Encyclopedia. Accessed November 20, 2018. <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/tomorrows-children-1934>.

One real life example of sterilization in the United States was Carrie Buck. Buck was a woman living in Virginia, and in 1924, she was set to be sterilized under Virginia's new sterilization law, which allowed for involuntary sterilization of people who were considered unfit. Officials in Virginia claimed that Buck was feeble-minded. She and her mother both possessed "hereditary traits of feeble-mindedness and sexual promiscuity."¹¹ As a result of this ruling, Buck was one of the candidates chosen for sterilization in Virginia. Buck's case was taken to court in November of 1924 and is now known as the Buck v. Bell case. In April of 1927, her case was taken to the United States Supreme Court, and the court ruled 8-1 that Buck and her daughter Vivian should be sterilized because they were both considered feeble-minded. This court case is vital in the study of American eugenics because it is an example of how sterilization laws were implemented and the reason behind sterilizing individuals.

Margaret Sanger is also an important figure in the study of eugenics in the United States. Sanger was one out of 11 children, and when her mother died from tuberculosis, she blamed it on her having too many children. The passing of her mother inspired her to find a way to prevent unwanted pregnancies. In 1916, Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in the country, and in 1921, founded the "American Birth Control League,"¹² an early version of Planned Parenthood.

¹¹ "Buck v. Bell: The Test Case for Virginia's Eugenic Sterilization Act." University of Virginia Historical Collections at the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library. Accessed November 29, 2018.

<http://exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/eugenics/3-buckvbell/>.

¹² "Margaret Sanger (1879-1966)." PBS. Accessed November 29, 2018.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-margaret-sanger-1879-1966/>.

While Sanger is praised for efforts in making birth control more accessible, many people are unaware that Sanger was a proud support of eugenics. In 1932, Sanger gave a speech titled “My Way to Peace,” and she made her thoughts on eugenics and segregation of the unfit well known. In this speech she laid out the details of how she felt the unfit should be dealt with. John Conley gives an overview of Sanger’s speech and eugenics plans in his article titled “Margaret Sanger Was a Eugenicist. Why Are We Still Celebrating Her?” She believed the first step was “control the intake and output on morons, mental defectives, epileptics.”¹³ Sanger believed the next step to take was “to take an inventory of the second group, such as illiterates, paupers, unemployables, criminals, prostitutes, dope fiends; classify them in special departments under government medical protection and segregate them on farms.”¹⁴ Once they were on the labor farm, they could only return to society if they were sterilized and showed they were well behaved. Sanger estimated that “15 million to 20 million Americans would be targeted in this regime of forced sterilization and concentration camps.”¹⁵ She wrote an article titled “The Birth Control Review” where she made her feelings on sterilization abundantly clear. Sanger stated

¹³ Conley, John. "Margaret Sanger Was a Eugenicist. Why Are We Still Celebrating Her?" America Magazine. November 27, 2017. Accessed November 29, 2018. <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/11/27/margaret-sanger-was-eugenicist-why-are-we-still-celebrating-her>.

¹⁴ Conley, John. "Margaret Sanger Was a Eugenicist. Why Are We Still Celebrating Her?" America Magazine. November 27, 2017. Accessed November 29, 2018. <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/11/27/margaret-sanger-was-eugenicist-why-are-we-still-celebrating-her>.

¹⁵ Conley, John. "Margaret Sanger Was a Eugenicist. Why Are We Still Celebrating Her?" America Magazine. November 27, 2017. Accessed November 29, 2018. <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/11/27/margaret-sanger-was-eugenicist-why-are-we-still-celebrating-her>.

that she believes in “the sterilization of the feeble-minded, the insane and syphilitic.”¹⁶ In some of her other writings she strongly encouraged studying eugenics because it would “stop our national habit of human waste.”¹⁷ Sanger was also a supporter of the Klu Klux Klan in the United States and spoke at many of their meetings. She was very proud of her achievement in speaking to the group and boasted this achievement in her autobiography.

The Nazis believed that studying eugenics was the key to creating the Master Race, and scientists in Germany made the decision to pursue Eugenics in Nazi Germany. Many people do not know that American Eugenics efforts were praised in Nazi Germany. In the documentary “In the Shadow of the Reich: Nazi Medicine,” there is a scene from a propaganda video shown in Germany praising the United States for implementing laws on sterilizing the unfit in many states.¹⁸ Hitler was obsessed with creating the Master Race, and in 1933 made a law called “The Protection of Hereditary Health” that stated anyone with undesirable traits should be sterilized, similar to the United States laws passed in 1911. In Hitler’s book, *Mein Kampf*, Hitler “praised the U.S sterilization laws and immigration restriction act.”¹⁹ Although Hitler’s implementation of

¹⁶ Grossu, Arina. "Margaret Sanger, Racist Eugenicist Extraordinaire." FRC. Accessed November 29, 2018.

<https://www.frc.org/op-eds/margaret-sanger-racist-eugenicist-extraordinaire>.

¹⁷ Grossu, Arina. "Margaret Sanger, Racist Eugenicist Extraordinaire." FRC. Accessed November 29, 2018.

<https://www.frc.org/op-eds/margaret-sanger-racist-eugenicist-extraordinaire>.

¹⁸ *In the Shadow of the Reich: Nazi Medicine*. Directed by John Michalczyk. United States: First Run Features, 1995.

¹⁹ Bachrach, Susan D., and Dieter Kuntz. *Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race*. Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008.

sterilization laws was more extreme than the United States, it is important to note Hitler's praise of US efforts to create the perfect society.

Heinrich Himmler, one of the leading Nazi party members and Protection Squadron for the SS, founded the Lebensborn Program in 1935. Lebensborn translates to "fountain of life"²⁰ and this program is not well known because it was kept a secret. The primary goal of the Lebensborn Program was to "reverse the decline and increase the German/Nordic population of Germany to 120 million."²¹ This program gave Aryan women, married and unmarried, the opportunity to become pregnant by "valuable" men. The majority of the male participants in this program were SS officers.²² In 1936, the first Lebensborn home was opened in Steinhöring, a village outside of Munich.²³ In order to participate, men and women had to pass a "racial purity" test, which consisted of having blond hair and blue eyes, and had to be able to trace their German lineage back three generations.²⁴ Because the racial purity test was difficult to pass, the Nazis began kidnapping children they considered "racially pure" and put in Lebensborn centers to be

20 "The Nazi Party." n.d. Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed November 21, 2018.

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-quot-lebensborn-quot-program>.

21 "The Nazi Party." n.d. Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed November 21, 2018.

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-quot-lebensborn-quot-program>.

22 "The Nazi Party." n.d. Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed November 21, 2018.

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-quot-lebensborn-quot-program>.

23 "The Nazi Party." n.d. Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed November 21, 2018.

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-quot-lebensborn-quot-program>.

24 "The Nazi Party." n.d. Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed November 21, 2018.

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-quot-lebensborn-quot-program>.

“Germanized” and were placed with German families.²⁵ Pregnancy out of wedlock was not uncommon in Nazi Germany, especially amongst the Hitler Youth. Teenage pregnancy in Nazi Germany was common due to the encouragement of racial purity. If a teenage girl in the Hitler Youth were to get pregnant, it would have been accepted because she would be viewed as continuing the Master Race.

The connection between the American and Nazi’s studies of eugenics is clear, and the Americans studied eugenics before the Nazis did. There are numerous parallels between the Americans and Nazis when it comes to sterilization and eugenics during this time. The Americans also received praise from Adolf Hitler for their eugenics efforts. American eugenics figures such as Charles Davenport and Margaret Sanger contributed to pursuit of eugenics. They also helped inspire Nazis to create the perfect German no matter the consequences, which led to the Lebensborn Project and medical experiments being conducted. Eugenics is not a well-known part of history, and it is less well known that the Americans contributed to the study of eugenics, but it is a vital part of history to examine.

²⁵ The Nazi Party.” n.d. Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed November 21, 2018.

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-quot-lebensborn-quot-program>.

Bibliography

Bachrach, Susan D., and Dieter Kuntz. *Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race*.

Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008.

"Buck v. Bell: The Test Case for Virginia's Eugenical Sterilization Act." University of Virginia Historical Collections at the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library. Accessed November 29, 2018. <http://exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/eugenics/3-buckvbell/>.

Conley, John. "Margaret Sanger Was a Eugenicist. Why Are We Still Celebrating Her?" America Magazine. November 27, 2017. Accessed November 29, 2018.

<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/11/27/margaret-sanger-was-eugenicist-why-are-we-still-celebrating-her>.

Dictionary.com

"The Embryo Project Encyclopedia." Temperature-Dependent Sex Determination in Reptiles | The Embryo Project Encyclopedia. Accessed November 20, 2018.

<https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/tomorrows-children-1934>.

Grossu, Arina. "Margaret Sanger, Racist Eugenicist Extraordinaire." FRC. Accessed November 29, 2018. <https://www.frc.org/op-eds/margaret-sanger-racist-eugenicist-extraordinaire>.

In the Shadow of the Reich: Nazi Medicine. Directed by John Michalczyk. United States: First Run Features, 1995.

"Margaret Sanger (1879-1966)." PBS. Accessed November 29, 2018.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-margaret-sanger-1879-1966/>.

"The Nazi Party." n.d. Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed November 21, 2018.

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-quot-lebensborn-quot-program>.

"The Nuremberg Laws." Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed November 19, 2018.

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/law-for-the-protection-of-hereditary-health>.

"The Supreme Court Ruling That Led To 70,000 Forced Sterilizations." NPR. March 07, 2016.

Accessed November 22, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/03/07/469478098/the-supreme-court-ruling-that-led-to-70-000-forced-sterilizations>.

Tomorrow's Children. Directed by Crane Wilbur. Performed by Diane Sinclair and Carlyle Moore Jr.

Tom. n.d. "Archives." Alfred D. Hershey - Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory - Library & Archives.

Accessed November 20, 2018. <http://library.cshl.edu/special-collections/eugenics>.

"Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States." n.d. PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed November 20, 2018.

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/>