

**How Sympathy Struck — A Study of American Public Opinion
on Eugenics Surrounding WWII**

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Abstract: Eugenics was once considered a popular, progressive scientific movement, but following WWII and the atrocities performed by Nazi Germany, the term “eugenics” has come to connote the worst of humanity’s known crimes (i.e. forced sterilization, mass euthanasia, torturous medical experiments, etc.). The history of eugenics presents this downfall as simple fact: when news of Nazi Germany broke out, the world reacted unanimously to denounce the eugenics ideology. But it is not the nature of public opinion to turn backwards over itself when challenged, and especially not overnight. This paper aims to examine both how and why American public and scientific opinions on eugenics changed immediately following WWII. I will specifically focus on primary sources that report on or react to the news of Nazi eugenics by following the information as it was released via the New York Times, a leading American newspaper in the period of Nazi Germany. Then, I will evaluate the articles found in the context of human sympathy and morality to determine how eugenics was vilified soon thereafter.

“Eugenics Seeks to Improve the Natural, Physical, Mental and Temperamental Qualities of the Human Family”

Carnegie Institution of Washington Department of Genetics (1927)

“Eugenics is an immoral and pseudoscientific theory that claims it is possible to perfect people and groups through genetics and the scientific laws of inheritance”

National Human Genome Research Institute (2021)

Introduction

The concept of eugenics originated in Francis Galton's 1883 book titled *Inquiries into the Human Faculty and Its Development*, and at the time meant little more than "the science of improving stock" and "the conditions under which men of a high type are produced." As a movement, eugenics steadily attained global popularity among intellectuals, scientists, and great thinkers of the time. The American Eugenics Society was founded in the early 1920s alongside other national societies such as the Eugenics Education Society in Great Britain, the Swedish Society for Eugenics, and the Mexican Eugenics Society for the Improvement of Race. Eugenics was understood by the public as an adage of preserving "good" traits while eliminating "bad" ones through selective breeding. In the United States, the American Eugenics Society grew in membership, reaching over 1,200 members at its peak in the 1930s, and worked to disseminate eugenics ideology through "Better Babies" and "Fitter Family" contests in addition to publication of *Eugenical News*. Eugenics ideology even entered legislation, with a reported twenty-seven states having laws in place to sterilize the feeble-minded or insane (Kaempffert, 1933).

Eugenics was not without its scholarly opponents, but by the 1930s, the National Socialist Party in Germany (hereafter referred to as the Nazi Party) received unique attention for its radical adherence and application of eugenics thought. Eugenicists at the time praised Hitler for Germany's initiatives to sterilize the unfit or to establish consanguinity among the Aryans. However, as war broke out and as news of the Holocaust surfaced and spread, the unimaginable atrocities committed with the justification of racial purification stained the name of eugenics. Historical accounts claim that this period was largely responsible for the vilification and shunning of the eugenics movement, but why was this the case? This paper attempts to answer

that very question: How did news of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany trigger a moral response from both the public and scientific communities, resulting in the relatively rapid condemnation of eugenics ideology? Through a primary study of the New York Times, a leading American newspaper in the period of Nazi rule in Germany, I assert that after a gradual release of Nazi eugenics initiatives, the detail and scale of suffering that was brought to light after the events of the Holocaust evoked mass sympathy for the Jewish people and, broadly, those who had been victimized by eugenics. It was this sympathetic response that drove the development of anti-Nazi rhetoric, and with it, the label of eugenics faced the same process of defamation.

Section I: Contextualization of Human Morality and Sympathy

It is obvious to say that the Holocaust and Nazi treatment of Jews in the period of Hitler's rule is horrific, traumatizing, abhorrent, and, as we'll soon see it put, "one of the major disasters of all time" ("Save Doomed Jews, Huge Rally Pleads," 1943). It is the nature of this statement's obviousness that is worthy of dissection. Why, upon hearing of the events, is this response so universal and intense? To answer this question, I emphasize the role of human morality and sympathy, and in doing so, lay the groundwork for my central argument. Please note that for the purposes of this paper, both morality and sympathy are reduced through scientific principles and logic, for I cannot attempt to explain the true complexity and nuance of the topic in this brief setting.

In his book *The Science of Sympathy*, historian Rob Boddice makes the claim that human morals are constructed, and I agree. Morals can change in different times and in different places, and there are countless examples to prove this truth. Slavery in the United States, ritualistic

human sacrifice of ancient times, and the differences in acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals worldwide are all displays in the variation of morals both in time and place. He explains that from a Darwinian standpoint, one where altruistic actions have developed an empirical understanding of goodness, morals are functional; they become “a building block for civilization” (Boddice, 2016).

If morals are constructed, then the innate human impulse for right and wrong comes from sympathy. This claim is supported by the work of Scottish philosopher David Hume and his theory of moral sentimentalism, the idea that reason is a “slave of the passions” and that sympathy enters deeply into our sentiments and drives our actions, which we then perceive as moral (Hume, 1751 & Cohon, 2018). As Boddice describes it, “sympathy then seems to be a vehicle for translating the emotions of others, rather than an emotion in itself. It is an enzyme... that converts external experience into internal experience and helps to fashion responses” (2016). In other words, sympathy allows us to feel on behalf of others and drives our next action. For example, if we speak to a friend who expresses anger for a mutual friend that has been spreading a false rumor about them, we the sympathizer might begin to feel angry on their behalf, and the next time we see this mutual friend, we might draw upon that anger and tell them off. The friend expressing anger therefore represents the external experience, and sympathizing with their anger is what has made the experience internal for us, causing us to act the way that we did. The emotion at hand is anger, and the tool in which it became personal was sympathy.

To understand the difference between what might make us act versus what does, we can consider Boddice’s next valuable description of sympathy, “the rising feeling of distress at the suffering of another” (2016). If distress can “rise,” it follows that one’s level of distress varies and that there is a threshold determining whether or not one will act. Any additional distress

beyond this threshold must thusly contribute to the extent of the action taken. “For sympathy to function in an individual, the justness of the suffering of another had to accord with the potential sympathizer’s own feelings... likewise, when the suffering is distant, abstract, and happening to people we do not know, we may lack the conventions to bring home this suffering to ourselves (Boddice, 2016). This explanation allows a further contextualization of sympathy. Drawing from the previous example of the angry friend and the rumor, what action might have been taken if this person wasn’t a friend at all? Or if the friend had masked their anger and instead replied with “It’s fine.”? We, the sympathizer, might not have acted, because sympathy, while still working, lacked the information or the personal connection needed to cross the threshold of action and evoke a response. Herein lies the concept of the “ethical shelter” coined by Thomas Haskell, which is the grey space within a sympathetic response where people can find comfort in inaction (Boddice, 2016). Escaping the ethical shelter is a difficult task—people are drawn to comfort and seldom wish to leave it behind, but it is precisely such an event that this paper aims to understand.

The worldwide response to Nazi eugenics is one in which sympathy is tantamount to escaping the ethical shelter. Now that sympathy has been adequately characterized, one can observe how key features of the news release led to the shift in mentality for eugenics within the American population.

Section II: Public Release and Response Before the War

The first instances of Nazi eugenics appearing in the New York Times are primarily reportative and include testimony from American eugenicists who express support for the

conventional carrying out of eugenics. Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany occurred in 1933 and soon thereafter, eugenics policies began making their way to American news outlets. The New York Times reported on the issue in stating, "The Hitler government intends to improve the German stock by weeding out the socially unfit" (Kaempffert, 1933). The chosen verbiage throughout the article implies that this "weeding out" has yet to occur, and that it represents a hopeful fiction. It mentions a bill that has only been drafted, a theoretical Aryan movement, and that these are all just "sentiments." The article even includes the opinions from "so high an authority as Professor H. S. Jennings," who claims that, "It is an attempt to place ourselves in line with upward evolution, and as such is worthy of interest and active sympathy" (Kaempffert, 1933). Another article, also from 1933, expresses a similar stance. Titled "Nazis Plan to Kill Incurables to End Pain," the author speaks of a plan, an intention that is yet to become law, but there is a noticeable escalation of action, instead of "weeding out," the jump is to "kill" (Press, 1933). One year later, in 1934, a new headline emerges, "Nazis to Sterilize All Weak-Minded." In this article, the hypothetical premise is dropped and is replaced with one reporting on factual reality that states, "A Nazi party bulletin circulated today called the sterilization program the 'mere beginning' of a national 'purge'" ("Nazis to Sterilize All Weak-Minded," 1934). An article from 1935 features another eugenicist, Professor C. G. Campbell, who supports the Nazi program, and shares that Hitler, under the guidance of anthropologists, eugenicists, and philosophers, "has been able to construct a comprehensive racial policy of population development and improvement that promises to be epochal in racial history" ("U.S. Eugenist Hails Nazi Racial Policy", 1935).

These examples show that prior to the war, Nazi eugenics initiatives did reach the ears of Americans, yet they never aroused sympathy beyond fruitless concerns. The reasons for this are

twofold: (1) the release of information and the escalation of action was gradual and (2) the potential victims were too othered and unrelatable for sympathy to act.

The gradual release of information was a strategic move from the Nazis to avoid global upset. Their Ministry of Propaganda advised the press on what news to put out and when, relying on their “bulky files of newspaper clippings on every aspect of racial theory and antisemitism throughout the world – from Australia to the USA to Scandinavia” (Wiesen, 2025). The articles show an increase in tangibility, from hypothetical talk to official statements; an increase in severity, from “weeding out” to killing and sterilization; and an increase in deregulation. Regarding the “incurables,” Nazis asserted that the opinion of an attending physician and two official doctors would be needed to determine incurability, and that euthanasia would only be considered if the patient “expressly and earnestly” asked for it (The Associated Press, 1933). As an additional example, in the case of the feeble minded, each individual in consideration for sterilization was to be examined with “German thoroughness” and only performed if required (“Nazis to Sterilize All Weak-Minded,” 1934). Eventually, it came out that decisions on euthanasia were being made “quickly and efficiently... their decision on whom to kill based only on a reading of the patients’ files” (Noack & Fangerau, 2007), but it was the tactful omission of these facts that kept Nazi policies from excessive scrutiny.

The other reason for lack of sympathetic response was the separation of relatability between victim and onlooker. Looking back to Boddice, it can be understood that this suffering is too “distant” to stir sympathy. Eugenics victims are categorized, whether they be “socially unfit,” “incurables,” or “weak-minded.” In all cases, the American reader does not consider themselves part of these groups. They are unable to relate, and thus the distress that results from

their suffering is minimal. They are able to reside in the ethical shelter, comfortable because this suffering is only occurring to those dissimilar to them.

Section III: Public Release and Response During and After the War

During the war, news of mass killings reached America, where unimaginably high death tolls paired with descriptive details on how Jews were put to death triggered an intense sympathetic response. As the Allies made their way across Europe in the war, accurate information regarding killings was able to travel back to American ears, and the truths became horrifically evident.

Headlines captured the sheer numbers that had been killed, “Vilna Massacre of Jews Reported: 60,000 Slain in Two Weeks,” “Himmler Program Kills Polish Jews: Slaughter of 250,000 in Plan to Wipe Out Half in Country,” “Nazi Gas Killings of Refugees Cited: Stockholm Paper Reports the Massacre of 10,000 Jews” (Valery, 1942; MacDonald, 1942; 1943). Each of these accounts went into detail regarding brutal, unjust murders against Jews, “The people are packed so tightly that those who die of suffocation remain in the crowd side by side with those still living and with those slowly dying from the fumes of the lime and chloride and from lack of air, water, and food,” is but one example (MacDonald, 1942). Similar testimonies occur in other articles that describe the gas chambers pumped with cyanide or Zyklon gas; mass executions with the usage of machine guns that targeted men, women, and children; and mass graves and crematoriums. Together, they explain the Nazi Party’s horrific creation of a “highly systematized place for annihilation” (Lawrence, 1944). When Allied forces were finally able to infiltrate Germany, the reported death toll spiked to over one million: “Inquiry Confirms Nazi Death

Camps: 1,715,000 Jews Said to Have Been Put to Death by the Germans,” and “Nazi Mass Killing Laid Bare In Camp: Victims Put at 1,500,000 in Huge Death Factory of Gas Chambers and Crematories” (Brigham, 1944; Lawrence, 1944).

Compared to what was known before, this onslaught of information drove Americans to act and to respond. Because of the level of detail suddenly available, the display of suffering brought immense distress to those who bore witness. By numbering the killings and by quoting witness accounts, the crimes of Nazi Germany were no longer “distant” or “abstract,” in the words of Boddice, and the comfort of the ethical shelter broke down. Responses to Nazi politics first came from churches, who had begun disputing eugenics rationale from times of “mere” euthanasia for incurables (The Associated Press, 1933). Letters from the Bishop wrote, “This is actually devilish wickedness, destined to... undermine popular morality and tidiness, and to change humanity into a pack of beasts” (“Nazi Morality on Animals’ Level, German Catholic Bishops Warn,” 1942). In 1943, the public spoke loudly with their presence, as an article titled, “Save Doomed Jews Huge Rally Pleads,” wrote that about 75,000 people in New York attempted to gather at Madison Square Garden to demand that Nazis cease the killing of Jews. Journalists even called for the American public to care, one such example coming from Arthur Koestler, who wrote “The Nightmare That is a Reality,” and spoke in maniacal terms of his own distress, “perhaps it is we, the screamers, who reach in a sound and healthy way to the reality which surrounds us, whereas you are the neurotics who totter about in a screened fantasy world because you lack the faculty to face the facts” (1944). From these examples of response, we observe how once distant and abstract suffering became real and immensely distressing to the American people. Sympathy beyond the threshold of action was a natural consequence. When the war was

won and the opportunity for action complete, the response shifted towards blaming and punishing Nazis.

Section III: Nazi Reasoning and its Role in Eugenics Rhetoric Change

So far, I have aimed to prove that the universality of negative reaction to the events and consequences of Nazi Germany's eugenics initiatives were driven by an immense evocation of sympathy. But why did our response not stop with the denunciation of Nazis, Germany, or even Hitler? Why did it also include eugenics?

From the beginning, Nazi politics were based on eugenical reasoning, first against the unfit and the insane, then against "non Aryans" and Jews. As we've seen, Nazi Germany started its eugenics initiatives with populations like "the feeble-minded," a typical target of eugenics that was popularly deemed to be beneficial in its elimination. But Germany was also known for their desire for racial purity. One New York Times article published a brief piece describing how the German government urged soldiers to avoid becoming intimate with the other races at the start of the war, claiming that "Each intimacy with a people of inferior race means sinning against the future of our own people" (The Associated Press, 1940). The more publicly known tale, however, is that of the Jewish population, who suffered for years of Antisemitic prejudice and discrimination before the Nazis began any elimination. In 1942, the German Catholic Bishops mentioned eugenics directly in their letter of condemnation, writing that it is "the interest of a civilized nation to appreciate the freedom of human personality than to take biological-eugenic measures that cannot even be applied in the animal world" ("Nazi Morality on Animals' Level, German Catholic Bishops Warn," 1942). Similarly, the German Confessional Church wrote in a statement that the traditional traits targeted by eugenics was not to be touched, "To slay human beings simply because they are related to criminals, because they are old or mentally afflicted, or

because they belong to a different race, is not the use of the sword sanctioned by Scripture” (“Religious News Service”, 1944).

As a result, the public understood Nazi motive to be intertwined with eugenics thought, and as sentiments for Nazis grew hateful, so did the sentiment for eugenics. In describing a Nazi on trial in 1946, the writer’s words are tinged with vengeful bias, “He gives the impression of being petty, needing some organization behind him to establish his authority” (Atkinson, 1946). In 1947, a different trial for doctors who participated in the Nuremberg experiments defined the Nazi motive and its relation to eugenics outright, “This was that the victims were physically, mentally, or racially inferior and must be eliminated to make way for the pure-bred master race” (Adams Schmidt, 1947).

This was also around the time when eugenics as a scientific field of study faced debunking. An article published in the New York Times in 1944 shared the recent discovery that conclusions based on the Kallikak family, a founding study of feeble-mindedness within eugenics, resulted from poor study design and meager understanding of genetics (Kaempffert, 1944). In another article, eugenics was called “outmoded” and that the consequences of poor eugenics application such as high birth rate and the overburden of the feeble-minded were nothing more than myths (“Outmoded Eugenics,” 1948).

The American Eugenics society suffered tremendously. In the issues of their primary publication, *Eugenical News*, released following WWII up to 1953, there is no mention of Nazi Germany’s actions aside from a small blurb in issue 35 from 1950, detailing that genocide was recently outlawed by the United Nations and that “history is full of genocide cases,” most recently with more than 6 million Jews having been destroyed by the Nazis (American Eugenics Society). Eventually, the name of eugenics became so sullied that the American Eugenics

Society was forced to leave behind the label. *The Eugenical News* became *Social Biology* in 1969, and the American Eugenics Society was renamed the Society for Biodemography and Social Biology before disbanding entirely in 2019.

While the name of eugenics lost its hold on the scientific community, the leading opinion is that eugenic ideals continued to be perpetuated under different names such as those related to genomics, genetic counseling, genetic testing, etc. “Eugenics,” now completely rebranded as a Nazi motive instead of a scientific movement can no longer represent the hope for genetic betterment of the human race, but the aim still exists and must simply reside under other names.

Conclusion

With the horrors of Nazi Germany’s crimes against Jewish people revealed, it was the scale and detail in which these atrocities were documented that resulted in a universal sympathetic response. When hearing of gas chambers that killed Jews by the hundreds or the thousands slaughtered in just weeks, it would be difficult to not experience distress at the suffering of innocent people. Detail and numbers brought weight to the severity of killings, eliminating any notion of “distance” or “abstractness” that could hinder sympathetic responses from occurring, and in doing so, elevated levels of distress beyond the threshold of action. After the war was complete, this distress was put to action in shaping anti-Nazi sentiment, and as the motivator for the Nazi’s efforts, the eugenics name suffered the same fate. Sympathy struck Americans with the events of WWII and cascaded into a series of responses that forever stained the name of eugenics.

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