

### 1.1. Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race

*The following text is the narrative of an online exhibit developed by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2004. The entire exhibit can be viewed at <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/deadlymedicine>.*

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From 1933 to 1945, Nazi Germany's government led by Adolf Hitler promoted a nationalism that combined territorial expansion with claims of biological superiority—an "Aryan master race"—and virulent antisemitism. Driven by a racist ideology legitimized by German scientists, the Nazis attempted to eliminate all of Europe's Jews, ultimately killing six million in the Holocaust. Many others also became victims of persecution and murder in the Nazis' campaign to cleanse German society of individuals viewed as threats to the "health" of the nation.

#### **Weimar Eugenics, 1919–1933**

Following Germany's defeat in World War I and during the ensuing political and economic crises of the Weimar Republic, ideas known as racial hygiene or eugenics began to inform population policy, public health education, and government-funded research. By keeping the "unfit" alive to reproduce and multiply, eugenics proponents argued, modern medicine and costly welfare programs interfered with natural selection—the concept Charles Darwin applied to the "survival of the fittest" in the animal and plant world. In addition, members of the "fit," educated classes were marrying later and using birth control methods to limit family size. The result, eugenics advocates believed, was an overall biological "degeneration" of the population. As a solution, they proposed "positive" government policies such as tax credits to foster large, "valuable" families, and "negative" measures, mainly the sterilization of genetic "inferiors."

Eugenics advocates in Germany included physicians, public health officials, and academics in the biomedical fields, on the political left and right. Serving on government committees and conducting research on heredity, experts warned that if the nation did not produce more fit children, it was headed for extinction. A growing faction, linking eugenics to race, championed the long-headed, fair "Nordics" as "eugenically advantageous" and discussed "race mixing" as a source of biological degeneration. Eugenic ideas were absorbed into the ideology and platform of the nascent Nazi Party during the 1920s.

#### **International Eugenics**

German proponents of eugenics were part of an international phenomenon. The English scientist Francis Galton coined the term eugenics, meaning "good birth," in 1883. German biologist August Weissmann's theory of "immutable germ plasm," published in 1892, fostered growing international support for eugenics, as did the rediscovery in 1900 of Austrian botanist Gregor Mendel's theory that the biological makeup of organisms

was determined by certain "factors" that were later identified with genes. (The term gene was first used by a Danish scientist in 1909.)

Reform-minded proponents of eugenics worldwide offered biological solutions to social problems common to societies experiencing urbanization and industrialization. After classifying individuals into labeled groups using the scientific methods of the day—observation, family genealogies, physical measurements, and intelligence tests—they ranked the groupings from "superior" to "inferior." When perfected, surgical sterilization became the most common proposal for preventing unproductive "inferiors" from reproducing and for saving on costs of special care and education. But sterilization gained only limited political support. Catholics objected to interfering with human reproduction, and liberals decried the violation of individual rights. Before 1933, the passage of national statutes legalizing "voluntary" sterilization of inmates of prisons and state mental hospitals proved politically feasible only in Denmark, where the law was little used. Eugenicists more successfully promoted sterilization laws in individual provinces, cantons, or states in Canada, Switzerland, and the United States.