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Posted 9/14/2003 6:47 PM
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Health and Behavior

Book explores eugenics' origins

By Dan Vergano, USA TODAY

Hard as it may be to believe, Adolf Hitler wrote fan mail, finding time in the early 1930s to express his admiration of the American leaders of a vaguely scientific movement called eugenics.

In his new book, *War Against the Weak*, investigative reporter Edwin Black makes the case that 20th century American proponents of eugenics — the belief that controlled breeding can improve humanity — had substantive ties to the architects of Hitler's racial extermination machine.

Black documents many links, such as the Hitler letters, between the American eugenicists and Nazi Germany prior to World War II, including how one prominent eugenicist's book, Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, became Hitler's "bible."

Eugenics came into vogue in the early 20th century. With a name coined in 1883 by British anthropologist Francis Galton, who hoped to see arranged marriages improve mankind, the movement eventually led to racist laws, such as ones prohibiting miscegenation, in many U.S. states, and the sterilization of more than 60,000 mental and moral "defectives."

"It's startling how much Hitler idealized American eugenics," Black says. His book required two years of research by dozens of volunteers who culled records from about 110 archives, diaries of eugenicists, case records of their victims and research reports on removing the unfit from humanity. The research builds on Black's best-selling book, *IBM and the Holocaust*, which looked at Nazi use of data-processing technology to fill concentration camps.

In *War Against the Weak*, Black lays bare the veins of collaboration between American eugenicists and Nazi scientists. There was financial support of genetic research and travel by Nazi doctors from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Carnegie Institution of Washington, and Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, a leading genetics research institute. There was research collaboration and reports on the Nazi efforts in respected journals like the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA). Black also describes:

- Biologist Charles Davenport, head of the Eugenics Record Office based at Cold Spring Harbor (N.Y.) Laboratory. He wrote eugenics textbooks widely used in universities and high schools and led drives for sterilization laws that eventually emerged in 33 states. He supported "racial hygiene" concepts.

- The lauding of eugenics by prominent Americans, including Alexander

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Graham Bell and Woodrow Wilson.

- The career of one Harvard-credentialed doctor, Edwin Katzen-Ellenbogen, an original member of the Eugenics Research Association created in 1913, who ended up as a physician prisoner and SS collaborator at the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Black says the labs and foundations he contacted, such as Cold Spring Harbor, were open to examining their past and are committed to legitimate scientific work today.

Science historian and geneticist Elof Carlson of the State University of New York, Stony Brook, argues that Black does not capture the scope of historical bigotry and global racism.

The author of last year's *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea*, Carlson says that "liberals, left-wing ideologues, social reformers, people of good intentions, scholars, and totally innocent scientists all contributed to the eugenics movement" — not just a few malevolent scientists. (Black does note that Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger was "a bigot if not a racist" who associated with eugenicists.) "Evil movements try to pick legitimate science to bolster their fanaticism," Carlson adds.

"As an editor today, it's embarrassing," says physician Catherine DeAngelis, editor in chief of JAMA, who describes her journal as unremittingly hostile to eugenics today. As far back as a century ago, she notes articles in her journal were critical of eugenics, alongside other reports extolling the movement.

And elsewhere, Carlson notes, influential geneticist Hermann Muller denounced the American Eugenics movement as racist, elitist and sexist at the 1932 International Congress of Eugenics. A "Eugenics manifesto" signed in 1939 by 15 leading geneticists denounced race and class-based Eugenics, as well as the atrocities carried out in Nazi Germany.

After World War II, as Nazi atrocities became more widely known, eugenics largely disappeared. For example, the journal *Eugenical News*, changed its name to *Social Biology*, still published today but devoted to genuine demographic health trends research.

The U.S. history of forced sterilizations is becoming more well-known: Last year, North Carolina's eugenics past was widely reported, resulting in the April repeal of the state's involuntary sterilization law.

Black worries that genetic engineering today poses the same dangers, expressing concerns about insurance coverage failing people with suspect genes, and parents augmenting children with "superior" genes in coming generations.

But DeAngelis sees echoes of eugenics in the plight of uninsured Americans. The sense of entitlement that led the best and the brightest to call for removal of the unfit allows 40 million to go without health insurance now, she says. "We don't castrate people anymore, but by not providing them access to health care, we still mistreat the weak and the poor."

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