

Racial Eugenics in the United States and Nazi Germany: A Comparative Study

Unit Written by: Judith Sandeen Bartel

Hill-Murray School

Maplewood, MN

Regional Education Coordinator- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Grade Level: 11 & 12

Subject: Holocaust Studies, American or World History, Values or Ethics class, Ethics of Medicine, Biology, Economics

Time Required: Entire unit requires about 10 days in 50-minute class periods.

Overview and Background of Unit

The focus of this unit is to help students make the critical connection between the eugenics movement in the United States and the Nazi racial science movement in Germany. Students will understand that while there were some profound differences, the study of racial sciences in the United States was alarmingly similar to Nazi practices, in that both movements required the endorsement and cooperation of public policy makers. Just as the Nazi government encouraged, and eventually required, sterilization of those considered “unfit,” Supreme Court Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes upheld a landmark decision regarding forced sterilization in the United States case *Buck v. Bell*.

Goals for Student Understanding

Students will:

- Explore assumptions about race and examine their own attitudes towards those assumptions.
- Understand how the American eugenics movement was connected to the social and political climate of the time and identify examples of eugenics policies from American history.
- Examine the role of government in the furthering of the Eugenics movement in the United States and Germany.
- Examine primary sources including government documents, court documents, and photographs.
- Draw conclusions about the development of a society from examining primary source documents.
- Describe how science has been misused to influence public opinion.
- Compare and contrast the Eugenics movement in the United States and Nazi Germany.
- Examine the role of personal values in their own lives.
- Translate primary source documents into common language.

- Draw conclusions based on photographic evidence.

Outline of Unit

I. Lesson I- The Biology of Race

- Day One-** Race- examining our own views
- What is race? Is it biological or social?
 - Activity- Handout 1 *Race Questions* Have student quietly answer the questions on the handout. When all students are finished, discuss answers in small groups. The teacher should circulate around the room stopping at each group to join the discussion. When all groups are finished, address the last question as a class- When did you first discover that race matters?
- Day Two-** PBS video **Race: The Power of an Illusion**, watch the first segment. A study guide to accompany the video is available at pbs.org.
- After finishing the video or in place of it, give students Handout 2- “Definition of Race” from the *American Museum of Natural History* – discuss in small groups.

II. Lesson II: Eugenics in the United States

- Day Three-** Put together a packet of about 10 photos from the Eugenics web site- <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/>. Sample photos are included in the folder titled *Eugenics*. Include pictures from the Agricultural Eugenics, Fitter Family Contest, Baby Contest, Circus People, etc. Primary source documents should also be included such as *Harry Laughlin's Model Sterilization Law (make sure students keep this for later use)* or the *Oliver Wendall Holmes ruling on the Buck trial*.
- In small groups, as they look at the photos, have students complete the questionnaire *What Society is This?* Give students 15-20 minutes to discuss. The packets of photos can be the same or different for each group.
- Have each group present on their society.
- Homework: Read *Three Generations of Imbeciles*.** This document is reprinted with the permission of the Facing History and Ourselves Organization. There are some lesson and discussion ideas at the end of the article that can be removed before photocopying.

III. Lesson II- Buck v. Bell

- Day Four-** If available, watch clip from video *The Lynchburg Story: Eugenic Sterilization In America*, Source: Filmmakers Library. The Buck v. Bell clip is about nine minutes in to the video.
- Read the following quote by Oliver Wendall Holms:

Upon reviewing the case, the Supreme Court concluded "that Carrie Buck is the probable potential parent of socially inadequate offspring, likewise afflicted, that she may be sexually sterilized without detriment to her general health and that her welfare and that of society will be promoted by her sterilization. It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their

imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes. Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

- c. **Day Five and Six-** Have students split into two groups, present day, pro-sterilization and anti-sterilization. Give students one or two days to research their topics. Suggestions of topics to address would include:
 - i. Crime rates
 - ii. Cost of care v. Federal budget deficit
 - iii. Child abuse rates
 - iv. Drug abuse rates
 - v. Should women on welfare be sterilized?
- d. Choose 3 students randomly to debate on each side. Switch other students in and out occasionally until everyone in the class has an opportunity to participate.
- e. **Homework: Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper (present day) trying to convince the general public that certain people should not be sterilized.**

IV. Lesson IV- Nazi Eugenics

- a. **Day Seven-** Distribute copies of the *Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Ill Offspring*. In pairs, have students translate each paragraph into a more easily understood form and come up with at least 2 ramifications of each paragraph. Present to the class and have students take notes on each presentation. Compare with *Harry Laughlin's Model Sterilization Law*, which was discussed in a previous lesson.
- b. **Homework: Journal:** What values do you have that would be compromised by these laws? Where did these values come from and how do the needs and challenges of everyday life affect what you value? Write about a time when you compromised your values because it was more convenient.
- c. **Day Eight-**Using the Deadly Medicine Power point included, discuss the Nazi Eugenics Movement.
- d. **Day Nine-** Pass out the *Pyramid of Hate* handout included in this file. Have students discuss the last part of last night's homework- write about a time when you compromised your values because it was more convenient. If you had to place that event on the pyramid, where would it be? View scene 1- The Value of Life- of the Deadly medicine DVD included in this unit. After the video, discuss the following question;
 - i. **Are your values fixed?**
 - ii. **Where do values come from and how do the needs and challenges of everyday life affect what you value?**
 - iii. **How do people lose their values? Does it happen gradually or overnight?**

- e. **Day Ten-** Distribute *Estimated Savings from T-4 Program*, the *Are You Sharing the Load* Poster, and *Math Questions from Nazi Textbook*. Discuss the following questions in small groups:
 - i. Is this Propaganda? Why?
 - ii. Why would the Nazi party focus much of their propaganda towards the youth of Germany?
 - iii. Show Nazi Propaganda Power Point
- f. Watch scene II from *Deadly Medicine* DVD- Party at Hadamar.
 - i. What would explain the change in the attitude of the nurse?
 - ii. Is it right to assign different worth to different individuals (“non-humans with a face”)?
 - iii. Is one group of people more valuable than another?

Homework: Answer the following questions:

1. What types of things do you think have to be in place for the progression of hate to continue? (e.g. laws that allow discrimination)
2. Where did the characters in the drama fall on the pyramid? Give specific examples in both scenes of the drama.
3. What needs to happen for a person to move up the Pyramid of Hate?
4. What needs to happen to stop the progression of hate?

Unit Evaluation- Write a comparative essay discussing the similarities and differences of the eugenics movements in the United States and Germany. Make sure to reference the sources we have used during this unit.

Purpose of Unit

This unit allows students to connect historical climate to the policies and attitudes prevalent in the early 1900’s. Through a comparison study of U.S. and Nazi eugenics policies, students will see that there were similarities in ideology and policy. These lessons can be used as part of an in-depth study of the Holocaust, as part of a values or racism course, or in a science course discussing the ethics in the medical profession.

Resources and handouts: Background Materials

Video Resources

Josef Mengele, Medical Madman of Auschwitz A & E home video.

The Lynchburg Story: Eugenic Sterilization In America, Source: Filmmakers Library.

Hitler’s Master Race, HBO Video

Race: The Power of an Illusion, PBS video

Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race, Educational materials on science, medicine, and the Holocaust complementing the special exhibit, distributed by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Web Resources

Facing History and Ourselves, <http://www.facinghistory.org>

The Image Archive of the American Eugenics Movement
<http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/>.

United State Holocaust Memorial Museum, <http://www.ushmm.org>

Print Resources

Black, Edwin, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*

G. K. Chesterton , Michael W. Perry, *Eugenics and Other Evils: An Argument Against the Scientifically Organized State*

Facing History and Ourselves, Holocaust and Human Behavior. Brookline, MN 1994.

Facing History and Ourselves, Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement, Brookline, MA,

Nicosia,F. R., and Huener, J. (Eds.) (2002). *Medicine and medical ethics in Nazi Germany: Origins, practices, legacies*. New York: Berghahn Books.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, (2004) *Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race*, Editor, Dieter Kuntz.

Resources and Handouts: Materials Used

Lesson 1-Biology of Race

Facing History and Ourselves, “Three Generations of Imbeciles,” Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement.

Power point: Race Betterment Posters, 1915, photos used with the permission of Facing History and Ourselves.

Race Video Question- adapted from the PBS teachers guide for *Race: The Power of an Illusion*.

Lesson 2- Eugenics in America

Photos copied from The Image Archive of the American Eugenics Movement
<http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/>.

Harry Laughlin's Model Sterilization Law, Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement.

Oliver Wendall Holmes statement, Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement.

Power Point: *Eugenics in the United States*, The Image Archive of the American Eugenics Movement <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/>.

Lesson 3- Buck v Bell

Buck v. Bell- Decision, Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement.

Lesson 4- Nazi Eugenics

Power Point- *Deadly Medicine*- Judith Bartel, some slides adapted from presentation created by Renee Kaplan.

Power Point- *Nazi Propaganda*- Judith Bartel- sources for individual slide sited on each slide.

"Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring" from *Eugenical News*, September - October, 1933.

Sample Questions from an "Intelligence Test Form" Used to Establish "Mental and Hereditary Illness", 1933: Quoted in *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945* by Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann (Cambridge University Press) 1991, pp. 139-140.

Estimated Savings From the T-4 Program, *From I. Noakes and G. Pridham, Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945 (New York, 1988), Vol. 2, pp. 1042-43.*

Questions that appeared in two math textbooks used in German schools during the Nazi era: Quoted in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, ed. by J. Noakes and G. Pridham. Vol. 1. Schocken Books, 1983, p. 439.

Pyramid of Hate, Anti-defamation League.

“*You are Sharing the Load*” Poster, from *Death and Deliverance - Euthanasia in Germany 1900-1945* by Michael Burleigh. ***Generations of Imbeciles.***”

Lesson Narrative

Day 1- Introduce the concept of “race”

Before I begin this unit I discuss respectful behavior. Issues of race can ignite passionate responses from students and they should be coached on how to behave appropriately. During the first class period of this unit, I introduce the students to the concept of “race”- both social and biological. I want the students to examine their own ideas about race first, so I have them answer the questions from the *Race Questions* handout. I circulate around the room and make sure they are all taking this seriously. When all students have finished, have them discuss the answers in small groups. Finally at the end of class have students share with the class the first time they discovered that race matter.

Day 2- Race: The Power of an Illusion

This is a powerful video from PBS which discusses the biology of race, or lack there of. There is a wonderful teacher’s guide on-line at PBS.org. If the video is unavailable, the website can give you the information and it can be presented in a lecture or discussion format. Hand out the “Definition of Race” from the *American Museum of Natural History*- discuss this definition in terms of the video.

Day 3- Eugenics in the United States

Before class I put together packets of photos and documents from the Image Archive of the American Eugenics Movement <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/>. You can make all of the packets the same, or different, that is up to the teacher. I have had the photographs I use laminated so they don’t get ruined and can be reused. In groups have students examine the photos and answer the questions of the *What Society is This?* handout. After about 15 minutes each group prepares a short presentation about their society. **Homework: For next day read “Three**

Days 4-6: Buck versus Bell

There are some lesson and discussion ideas at the end of the “*Three Generations of Imbeciles*” article. These can be removed before copying for the students. During this class period the teacher has the option of showing a clip from *The Lynchburg Story: Eugenic Sterilization In America*. I borrow it from the Facing History and Ourselves lending library, but you have to have taken their workshop in order to borrow from them.

I reserve time in the library or PC lab and have student research different side of the Pro and anti-sterilization argument. This is completely up to the teacher. A four corner debate is also an option. Place signs in the corners of the room: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. Then ask questions about certain situations, for

example: criminals should be sterilized, pedophiles should be sterilized, people who drop out of high school, teenage mothers, those on welfare, you get my point.

Day 7-10: Nazi Eugenics

Feel free to use these lessons in any order. Some teachers would prefer to start with the power point lecture. The *Law for the Prevention of Hereditary Ill Offspring* is critical in understanding Nazi Eugenics, so this document should be included at some point. It is also important that all students understand the terminology. There are many resources on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website that are helpful during this unit. You may want to schedule a day in the PC lab to have the students go through the on-line *Deadly Medicine* exhibit. There are also additional lessons using the Pyramid of Hate on the Anti-defamation League website, adl.org. The *Deadly Medicine* DVD contains tons of commentary and oral testimony. Make sure to go through the entire DVD to see what is on it.