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Yale Study: U.S. Eugenics Paralleled Nazi Germany

by David Morgan

PHILADELPHIA (Reuters) - U.S. doctors who once believed that sterilization could help rid society of mental illness and crime launched a 20th century eugenics movement that in some ways paralleled the policies of Nazi Germany, researchers said on Monday.

A Yale study tracing a once-popular movement aimed at improving society through selective breeding, indicates that state-authorized sterilizations were carried out longer and on a larger scale in the United States than previously believed, beginning with the first state eugenics law in Indiana in 1907.

Despite modern assumptions that American interest in eugenics waned during the 1920s, researchers said sterilization laws had authorized the neutering of more than 40,000 people classed as insane or "feebleminded" in 30 states by 1944.

Another 22,000 underwent sterilization from the mid-1940s to 1963, despite weakening public support and revelations of Nazi atrocities, according to the study, funded by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Merck Co. Foundation.

Forced sterilization was legal in 18 U.S. states, and most states with eugenics laws allowed people to be sterilized without their consent by leaving the decision to a third party.

"The comparative histories of the eugenical sterilization campaigns in the United States and Nazi Germany reveal important similarities of motivation, intent and strategy," the study's authors wrote in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, a journal published by the American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine.

Eugenics sprang from the philosophy of social Darwinism, which envisioned human society in terms of natural selection and suggested that science could engineer progress by attacking supposedly hereditary problems including moral decadence, crime, venereal disease, tuberculosis and alcoholism.

"The eugenics laws in the United States were virulent, just as they were in Sweden, France and Australia," said Art Caplan, head of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Bioethics.

The U.S. practice ended in the 1960s after being overwhelmed by court challenges and the civil rights movement.

German and American eugenics advocates both believed science could solve social problems, tended to measure the worth of the individual in economic terms and felt mental illness a threat to society grave enough to warrant compulsive sterilization.

And while Nazi claims of Aryan superiority are well known, researchers said U.S. advocates of sterilization worried that the survival of old-stock America was being threatened by the influx of "lower races" from southern and eastern Europe.

There was also mutual admiration, with early U.S. policies drawing glowing reviews from authorities in pre-Nazi Germany.

"Germany is perhaps the most progressive nation in restricting fecundity among the unfit," editors of the New England Journal of Medicine wrote in 1934, a year after Hitler became chancellor.

U.S. Eugenics Movement Waned

But the study, based partly on old editorials from the New England journal and the Journal of the American Medical Association, also demonstrated how the U.S. eugenics movement gradually waned while its Nazi counterpart carried out 360,000 to 375,000 sterilizations during the 1930s and grew to encompass so-called "mercy" killings.

"In the United States, a combination of public unease, Roman Catholic opposition, federal democracy, judicial review and critical scrutiny by the medical profession reversed the momentum," the article said.

The U.S. practice of neutering "mentally defective" individuals was backed by most leading geneticists and often justified on grounds that it would relieve the public of the cost of caring for future generations of the mentally ill.

Sterilizations also took place mainly in public mental institutions, where the poor and ethnic or racial minorities were housed in disproportionately high numbers.

"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," Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in the majority opinion of a landmark eugenics case in 1926.

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