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Dr. Arleen Tuchman: Eugenics

As a society, we tend to look at World War II in a far too black and white sense. Obviously, the allies did not commit as many atrocities as Germany and Japan, but that does not mean they fought completely justly. This is a similar argument to the one that Dr. Arleen Tuchman made when discussing eugenics. She stated that her thesis was “We can’t say the German physicians during WWII are monster doctors.” As shown by both in the WWII course and Tuchman’s argument, the allies and America in particular committed some immoral acts that sully the name of “the Good War.”

The United States is closely tied with the history of eugenics. Eugenics is the belief and practice of the betterment of the genetic quality of the human race. The person who coined this term was named Francis Galton. Galton was an ardent social Darwinist, which was ironic as he was Charles Darwin’s half cousin who deplored the notion of social Darwinism. Galton proposed that the British government impose positive and negative eugenics. Tax breaks for those with fit genes and sterilization and segregation for those with “feeble minds.” Indiana passed the first eugenics-based compulsory sterilization law in 1907, making the United States the first country in the world to do so. A few years later the US lead the world in Eugenics laws, meaning that they had the most marriage, immigration, and sterilization laws out of any nation. In 1927, the issue of forced sterilization was brought in front of the Supreme Court in the case *Buck v. Bell*. The court upheld compulsory

sterilization of the unfit. Eugenics was completely socially acceptable, yet some people were still able to push the envelope of what was acceptable. The Chief Surgeon at the German-American Hospital in Chicago, Harry J. Haiselden promoted and practiced infanticide for race betterment. Haiselden released a film in 1917 titled *The Black Stork*, which was fictionalized account of one of his infanticides.

In Germany, eugenics was taken to a whole new level. While the US sterilized a fairly large number of people, Germany was in the order of hundreds of thousands of people sterilized. They also had no problem with killing the already living unfit. The T4 program was designed by the Nazi regime to force euthanasia to keep the “racial hygiene” of Germany. Special teams were made to secretly dispose of children born with physical deformities in Nazi sympathizing hospitals. They also evaluated the state of many people in mental institutions and asylums, killing those they believed that were “life unworthy of life.”

Many of the atrocities that occurred in the name of eugenics were allowed to happen under the watch of Germany’s physicians. The Nazi regime used propaganda to dehumanize people with mental and physical disabilities as well as Jews, which the doctors bought into. There was a large amount of anti-Semitism within the German medical community, and the proportion of Nazis among doctors was higher than any other field of work. Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess explained the connection the best by stating, “National Socialism is nothing but applied biology.” But how could all these doctors ideally sit by as other human beings were being killed after taking the Hippocratic Oath, a set of ethical standards that a new physician must promise to uphold? A famous Nazi physician named Fritz Klein justified the

extermination of Jews by stating, "My Hippocratic oath tells me to cut a gangrenous appendix out of the human body. The Jews are the gangrenous appendix of mankind. That's why I cut them out."

The US was not without its moral lapses in terms of its physicians. A group wanted to study the affects of syphilis, so they decided to observe a group impoverished sharecroppers who had syphilis. The researchers never told the sharecroppers that it was actually syphilis, thus letting it spread to their partners and children. They also actively discouraged penicillin as a treatment option, as that would cure them. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident. There was also an experiment that took place in Guatemala, where Americans infected 700 locals with bacteria strains and tried to treat it with penicillin. There were no regulations on experimenting on humans until after the Tuskegee syphilis experiment was exposed in 1972.

This lesson on eugenics mirrors the moral behavior of the axis powers and the allies in WWII. The axis powers perpetrated more immoral acts than the allies in both eugenics and WWII. Sterilizing hundreds of thousands of people solely because they did not meet their standards of fitness that the government believed that they needed to have is morally wrong. Then, to take it a step further and kill both deformed children and mentally and physically handicapped adults is unforgiveable. The systematic extermination of these people was similar to that of the holocaust. These handicapped individuals were so horribly dehumanized that the doctors, who had taken an oath to uphold ethics in their place of work, really did believe that they were doing the ethical thing. These people were seen as a cancer to the health of

Germany as a whole, so they were really just doing their country a favor by ridding the nation of these vermin. This is exactly how many of the Nazi guards felt while gassing the Jews. These people were subhuman so there was no reason to feel bad for taking away their worthless lives.

Another aspect that one can see eugenics as a parallel to WWII as a whole is that America was the complete “good guy” in eugenics, just as they were not in WWII: the US did have some moral lapses. Forced sterilization for any reason is not American, yet it was held up in the Supreme Court due to the pervasiveness of the theory of competition at the time. The American public was so obsessed with being a pure race that they took away freedoms from their own citizens. They also did not want any foreigners tarnishing the blood lines of the country, thus the US had very restrictive immigration laws; so strict that we sent a boatful of Jewish people back to their deaths in the gas chambers of Europe. The active discouragement of the use of penicillin for the Tuskegee sharecroppers was as good as dropping a bomb on these people when they reached an older age, as they knew that this would shorten their lives, but they wanted the research more. This is similar to the unit 731 incident, where the US let an obvious war criminals walk just to get their information in the interest of national security. The US was fighting a moral fight in an immoral way.

Eugenics and WWII are deeply interwoven, affecting each other in various ways. Without eugenics WWII may never had happened, and without WWII we may never have seen the full extent of this barbaric practice on humans. Dr. Tuchman was justified in saying that we cannot look at the Nazi physicians as monsters, as the US was doing similar acts on a lesser scale.