

# Burrow lectures on Eugenics and the Nazi Conscience

## Spotlight



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA

By Travis Gulbrandson  
travis.gulbrandson@plaintalk.net

One of the reasons the Nazis were so effective in convincing German citizens to be complicit in their crimes was because they portrayed participation in them as a kind of moral obligation. These efforts helped the people doing the crimes “maintain a moral center while doing something profoundly immoral,” said David Burrow, Ph.D., associate professor of history at the University of South Dakota.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of this is that this end was not entirely achieved through coercion, he said.

“The Nazi conscience suggests some of the ways in which ordinary people were complicit in the Nazi state, which is a disturbing thought which most people don’t want to think about,” Burrow said. “We don’t want to think that ...

people would willingly be complicit.”

Burrow discussed this issue in the presentation, “Eugenics and the Nazi Conscience,” which he gave three times last week in I.D. Weeks Library.

The lecture used the concept of the “Nazi conscience” as described in the work of Claudia Koontz of Duke University, which illustrates how the Nazis worked to convince ordinary Germans that the regime’s ideas on eugenics were not only ethical, but that to follow them would be a moral obligation.

The idea of eugenics was not created by the Nazis, Burrow said. It was an international scientific movement started in the 19th century, and the term itself was coined by Francis Galton.

“The basic idea of eugenics was that you wanted people that you thought were genetically healthy to thrive and have more children, and the



people that were not genetically healthy, you would not want them to reproduce,” Burrow said.

Galton was thinking more in terms of social class – it was the Nazis who added the component of race, Burrow said.

“Galton’s idea was to try and come up with a way ... to encourage the right people to have children, and discourage the wrong people,” he said.

Often referred to as “social Darwinism,” the concept takes only the

competitive aspect of Darwinism and nothing else, Burrow said.

“(Charles Darwin’s) ‘The Origin of Species’ is about how bird species in the Galapagos adapt and fill a niche,” Burrow said. “But, the bird species with more adaptive beaks don’t go out and eradicate the other birds.”

The Nazis looked at it through their own racial theories – the idea that population was divided into competing races which were defined by genetic stock and could not be changed.

While Burrow said this concept doesn’t stand up as science, the Nazis used it as the basis for their crimes, and used it in the communications to ordinary Germans.

The Germans were encouraged to think of people not as people, but

as categories – the sick, the unwell, the asocial, the Jude.

“It’s easier to think, ‘Well, we’re just going to euthanize the sick,’ rather than, ‘We’re going to euthanize Hans,’” Burrow said.

During his presentation, Burrow shared posters, booklets and magazines designed to encourage Germans to think that helping the “weak” or “disadvantaged” is an unethical practice.

One poster showed a picture of a mentally challenged young woman and the amount of money that would be “wasted” if the state were to provide for her care.

“You were supposed to look at this photograph and think, ‘She would be better off dead,’ and not, ‘I hope someone’s taking care of her. I hope she’s living a

pain-free and pleasant existence,” Burrow said. “You’re supposed to think her life is hopeless. It has no value.”

While it seems hard for many to believe, these campaigns were widely successful, he said.

“We can’t know what people were thinking,” Burrow said. “Obviously, the Nazi conscience was fortunately not completely enacted, but something is clearly at work.”

It’s a different view than that of an “I say, ‘Jump,’ you say, ‘How high?’” mentality, he said.

The lecture was made possible by a grant from the South Dakota Humanities Council, and ran in conjunction with “Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race,” a traveling exhibit from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum now on display at the library.

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