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“HEREDITARILY VALUABLE CHILDREN”

From Himmler's “fount of life” association
to present-day preimplantation genetic diagnosis

Author: Kira Vogt
Supervisor: Helena Pereira de Melo

Abstract

Eugenics, the idea of improving the quality of humankind, have been discussed since the times of Plato and Aristotle. During the *Third Reich*, the National-Socialists used eugenic practices to increase the population of their “master race” and, at the same time, prevent “inferior races” from reproducing. In addition to “marriage fitness certificates” granted only to persons without hereditary diseases, positive eugenics involved the creation of the secret *SS* association *Lebensborn e.V.* (“fount of life”). *Lebensborn* nursing homes were opened in order to discourage single “Aryan” women from aborting hereditarily healthy children of “precious German blood” and to provide them with pre- and post-natal care. As this was not enough to balance the losses in population suffered during the war, children of “Nordic blood” were kidnapped from the occupied Eastern territories and subjected to strict “Germanisation” measures. While the collapse of the *Third Reich* put an end to the operations, they often left the children scarred for life.

The recent developments in modern medicine, with the possibility to screen for hereditary diseases in embryos, have relaunched a heated discussion whether it is ethical to use eugenics. In Germany, the partial legalisation of preimplantation genetic diagnosis is controversial, not only with regard to conformity with the Basic Law, but also in consideration of the National-Socialist abuse of eugenics.

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