

R.A. Fisher, The Eugenics Society, and the Nazis in 1933

The Eugenics Society was a British organization devoted to promoting the cause of eugenics, founded in 1907 as the Eugenics Education Society. Francis Galton, who coined the term eugenics in 1883, was its first President. R.A. Fisher was for many years a member of the Eugenics Society, and served on its Council for some time. He was a strong supporter of the Society's advocacy of the voluntary sterilization of the "feeble minded", and was a member of the Brock Committee (established by the British Government in 1934) to investigate this issue. The committee reported in favour of "voluntary sterilization, subject to certain safeguards, for a person who is mentally defective or has suffered from severe mental disorder; a person who suffers from, or is believed to be a carrier of, a grave disability which has been shown to be transmissible; and a person who is believed to be likely to transmit mental disorder or defect." The Committee's recommendations were never enacted (Bodmer et al. 2021).

At the end of January 1933, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, and soon established total control of German institutions by the Nazi party, with its notorious anti-Jewish and racist ideology. An article by the General Secretary of the Eugenics Society, C.P. Blacker, reported on the fact that, on July 25, 1933, the German government published a Sterilization Act, which applied to "mental defectives, to mental convalescents and sufferers from hereditary diseases and defects other than mental deficiency and insanity" (Blacker 1933). He gave a detailed analysis of the points in which the German Act differed from the policies of the Eugenics Society, in particular the use of forcible sterilization. Blacker pointed out that, prior to the publication of the German Act, the July 5 meeting of the Council of the Society (at which Fisher was present, according to the minutes) unanimously passed the following resolution "This *Society* deprecates the use of the term Eugenics to justify racial animosities". A translation of the full text of the German Act, and a similar proposal by the Norwegian government was later published in *The Eugenics Review* (Anonymous 1933).

Blacker concluded his article by remarking "That Nazi eugenics is the logical fulfilment of the *Society's* eugenics is doubtless sincerely believed by many people who, on religious or other grounds hate eugenics. ... they will warn the trustful British public that in supporting the *Society's* policy it will, in fact, be unwittingly taking the first step down the slippery declivity that leads to compulsion, bureaucracy and the tyranny of racial or social

majorities. Fellows and Members of this *Society* would therefore do well to seize all available opportunities of pointing out what this *Society* does actually stand for.”

It seems clear, therefore, that, whatever one’s views on the policies advocated by the Eugenics Society, the ruling body of the Society had dissociated itself from the Nazi government’s 1933 proposals, which of course were mild in comparison with the horrors later inflicted on people with mental disorders, the Jews and other minority groups, the inhabitants of occupied countries, and opponents of the regime.

Anonymous. 1933. Eugenic legislation in Norway and Germany. *Eug. Rev.* 25:179-181.

Blacker CP. 1933. Eugenics in Germany. *Eug. Rev.* 25:157-159.

Bodmer WF, Bailey RA, Charlesworth B, Eyre-Walker A, Farewell V, Mead A, Senn S.

2021. The outstanding scientist, RA Fisher: his views on eugenics and race. *Heredity* 126:565-576.

THE EUGENICS SOCIETY

A Meeting of the Council was held at 20, Grosvenor Gardens,
S.W. 1., on Wednesday 5th July, 1933, at 4.30 p.m.

Present:

Mr. Bramwell	In the Chair
Dr. Aikman	
Mr. Chance	
Lady Chambers	
Miss E. Corry	
Dr. Drysdale	
Professor Fisher	
Dr. Austin Freeman	
Professor Ruggles Gates	
Dr. Goddard	
Hon. Mrs. Grant Duff	
Mr. Gun	
Mrs. Hodson	
Professor Huxley	
Dr. Langdon-Down	
Dr. Lewis	
Dr. Schiller	
Mr. Thornton	
and	
The General Secretary.	

Apologies for absence were received from Lady Askwith, Dr. Bond,
Mr. Busby, Mr. Ford, Dr. Gibbons, Mr. Hope-Jones, Mrs. Habback
and Mr. Pringle.

MINUTES. The Minutes of the previous meeting were read and
signed.