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Eugenics not just Swedish policy

Forced sterilization was advocated by left in Europe, U.S.

By Robert Fox and Ben Fenton
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LONDON — Sweden's policy of compulsory sterilization of those officially deemed physically, mentally or morally defective, which led to about 60,000 Swedes being sterilized over 40 years, is no isolated phenomenon.

The revelations from Sweden, followed by a disclosure that 9,000 were compulsorily sterilized in Finland, appear to have exposed a skeleton in the ideological cupboard of the liberal and socialist left in Europe.

Besides Nazi Germany and Sweden, all of Scandinavia, Iceland, Switzerland and much of North America adopted similar measures to improve the racial stock and carried them out for more than

50 years.

In Britain, a bill for compulsory sterilization of certain categories of mental patient was put before the House of Commons in 1931 by a Labor member of Parliament, Maj. A.G. Church, only to be defeated after a full debate.

Sterilization was a component of the program of eugenics, the theory of improving the human race by selective breeding.

The term "eugenics" was coined by Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin, and was fashionable on both the political right and left in Europe. Adherents included John Maynard Keynes, Harold Laski, Julian Huxley and J.B.S. Haldane.

The British delegation to the First International Congress for Eugenics in 1912 was led by Win-

ston Churchill, then Liberal home secretary.

In Britain, eugenic programs of varying severity were continuously promoted by the leftist Guardian and New Statesman.

"These theories of selective breeding were pushed very hard by the grandees of the Labor aristocracy, who took an intense dislike to the lower end of the working class, the lumpenproletariat," said Michael Burleigh, a professor at the University of Wales in Cardiff, whose major study of Nazi Germany is due next year.

The most extreme example of this distaste was the view expounded by the German deputy, Dr. Alfred Grotjahn — curiously a Social Democrat and not a Nazi —

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"who believed that a quarter of the entire proletariat in Germany should be sterilized," according to Mr. Burleigh.

The 60,000 Swedes were compulsorily sterilized under laws passed in 1934. Earlier, in 1921, the world's first institute for the study of "racial biology" was established in the university town of Uppsala.

Under Hitler's Law on Preventing Hereditarily Diseased Progeny of 1933, about 450,000 are believed to have been sterilized. Toward the end of the Third Reich, however, sterilization gave way to blatant murder in the form of euthanasia in mental homes and hospitals.

Sterilization was only one element of the programs and projects

of the supporters of eugenics, and one generally disliked by the British eugenicists who concentrated more on selective breeding through contraception and artificial insemination.

Exponents of selective-breeding techniques became obsessed with such phenomena as twins. Experimentation in this line of research was carried out to a grotesque degree in Germany's mass extermination camps.

Much of the inspiration for the framing of the Nazi laws on sterilization came from America, and from Harry H. Laughlin of the Eugenics Records Office.

He shamelessly promoted compulsory sterilization and the restriction of immigration by mental and physical defectives under the Immigration Act of 1924.

He was part of the campaign that pushed for immigrants to be

given a compulsory IQ test on arriving at Ellis Island. One of his colleagues, Henry Goddard, told Congress that 80 percent of Central Europeans arriving at the island were mentally defective.

In the space of 25 years, about 30 states of the Union adopted compulsory-sterilization policies. By 1945 more than 60,000 are believed to have been sterilized across America. These laws were still valid in 19 states until 1985.

The practice of involuntary sterilization of mental defectives on grounds of eugenics declined only in the late 1960s, and the issue is still very much a live one. In Canada, two provinces, Alberta and British Columbia, also adopted legal sterilization.

In 1995, Leilani Muir brought an action against the provincial government of Alberta for her compulsory sterilization at the age of

14 for being "a moron." In fact, she was a battered child, with a "low normal" IQ.

Alberta's Sexual Sterilization Act of 1928 was only repealed in 1972, and was responsible for 2,800 mentally retarded children and adults losing their reproductive organs.

The cause of sterilization was promoted in Canada by some of the most ardent feminists of their day, as was eugenics in Britain by the likes of Marie Stopes and Mary Stocks.

Feminists are now concentrating on the legacy of the eugenics movement in the debate over sterilization and abortion for inherited disorders through "rogue genes."

The genetic debate is well rehearsed. The revelation from Sweden is how widespread the views of the eugenicists were, particularly those of the left.