

Statement by the German Society of Human Genetics on the Occasion of the Proclamation of the "Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases Act" 75 Years Ago.

On July 14, 1933 the National Socialist government of the German Reich announced in Berlin that it had passed the "Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases Act"¹. In an official statement the government tried to justify the goal of this statute by declaring, "In this way the racial corpus gradually can be cleansed and pathological genes eliminated by sterilization"².

At the root of this law was the NS regime's intention to clothe its ideology of selection in biological jargon. However, contrary to its assertion that the statute would be "a truly social act for families with members affected by hereditary diseases"³, the new law served the NS regime as a basis to brutally and systematically violate the fundamental human rights of targeted citizens whose lives the regime deemed "unworthy". An estimated 400,000 persons were needlessly sterilized without their consent, and as a consequence several thousand of them died⁴. However, this was just one of the measures by the NS government in depriving handicapped individuals in Germany of their human rights, which eventually culminated in the mass murders of the so-called euthanasia programs.

Unfortunately many German physicians, geneticists, and other scientists were actively involved in preparing the contents of the law, formulating its pseudoscientific basis, and implementing its compulsory measures. Abusing their scientific authority, several geneticists even helped carry out the law by serving as referees for the "Hereditary Health Courts".

In view of the state of knowledge of genetics at the time, their actions were indefensible, since it should have been clear that the eugenic measures planned were not only morally wrong but also biological nonsense. As early as 1908, Godfrey Harold Hardy in Great Britain and Wilhelm Weinberg in Germany presented mathematical proof that recessive mutations predisposing to disease are much too numerous to be eliminated from the gene pool of a population by eugenic measures. Likewise it was known that the causes of many of the "hereditary diseases" listed in the act, e.g., alcoholism, schizophrenia, bipolar psychoses, or epilepsy, are only in part genetic and therefore cannot be tangibly affected by eugenic measures. Thus, this act, which was based on false premises, is also a historic document of the failure of scientists to function professionally.

german society of human genetics
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After 1945, the development of human genetics in Germany was biased by the continued presence of some of its previous representatives in university positions. Not until the '60s and '70s and especially the foundation of the German Society of Human Genetics (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Humangenetik*, GfH) in 1989 was a conscious effort made to begin anew by redefining the values and goals of the speciality. Since then, as expressed in its position paper⁵, the German Society of Human Genetics explicitly dissociates itself from all eugenic aspirations. The Position Paper of the GfH, which has been updated several times, defines the well-being of individuals and their families as the primary goal of its activities.

The members of the GfH, aware of their historical responsibility, are committed in their professional functions and in public discourse to advocate respect for all individuals and their natural genetic diversity. They reject any form of discrimination based on ethnic characteristics or on genetically determined diseases or handicaps.

Berlin, July 14, 2008

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The German Society of Genetics (GfG) identifies with the principles of this statement and fully endorses its contents.

Prof. Dr. Alfred Nordheim, Tübingen
(President of the GfG)

¹ Reichsgesetzblatt I, p. 529.

² Reichsanzeiger 1933 No. 172.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bock, G.: Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus: Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik, 2nd edn, Münster 2006.

⁵ The Position Paper and all statements of the GfH are accessible on the Internet: www.gfhev.de