

## Public and Private Memory of the First World War and the British Eugenics Movement

The international eugenics movement, which flourished in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, focused on the improvement of racial groups by controlling demographics. Founded by Francis Galton in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, eugenics only gained significant attention after the turn of the century when the Boer War drove many in Britain to seek a means by which the strength of the average soldier might be improved. Accordingly, prior to the outbreak of the First World War it was widespread for eugenicists and those interested in the application of Darwinian evolution to human society to argue that war was a means by which natural selection could operate in the modern world. In the words of one prominent eugenicist, “the dependence of progress on the survival of the fitter race, terribly black as it may seem to some of you, gives the struggle for existence its redeeming features; it is the fiery crucible out of which comes the finer metal”.<sup>1</sup> For these eugenicists, war was not only an inevitable part of human existence but was in some ways desirable because it offered an opportunity for the weak to be killed on a mass scale.

However, the experience of the First World War seemed to challenge this theory. As veterans returned to Britain and began to join eugenics groups the movement abandoned much of its militarist rhetoric and even eventually denounced war as “dysgenic”. Rather than removing the worst elements from

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bernard Semmel, “Karl Pearson: Socialist and Darwinist,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 2 (1958): 115.

society, these younger eugenicists feared that the best of Britain had been killed, presenting a unique and pressing crisis for the country to overcome. The memory of warfare and bloodshed was thus highly influential on the interwar eugenics movement, as those who had experienced the conflict firsthand rose to positions of prominence and leadership.

This paper shall examine the impact of First World War memory on the development of eugenics ideology. By using several prominent case-studies as a methodological base, I hope to demonstrate that the important and well-documented shift that took place in eugenics during the 1920s and 1930s was largely driven by both collective and individual memory of the First World War, specifically a desire to use the science of heredity to prevent future armed conflict. This, in turn, significantly coloured the responses of eugenicists in Britain to the arrival of the Nazis and their appropriation of the movement's language and ideas. In the present day eugenics is often associated with the abuses of the Nazis, but before 1933 it was common to view it as a progressive creed working for the alleviation of human suffering. While not seeking to rehabilitate this latter view, by evaluating the impact of wartime memory on interwar British eugenicists I hope to show that the movement was more multifaceted than has often been believed and that the First World War was a transformative experience for many of the men and women who became prominent in its advocacy. In a larger sense, this study provides an excellent illustration of the impact that public and private memory can have on a nation's scientific and political establishments.

**KEYWORDS:** Eugenics, First World War, Memory.