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A Conquering Race: The Birth of Social Darwinism in Pre-War Germany

Andrew T Murphree, Liberty University

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A CONQUERING RACE:
THE BIRTH OF SOCIAL DARWINISM IN PRE-WAR GERMANY

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BY
ANDREW T. MURPHREE

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Popular opinion suggests that certain political and military leaders throughout history are the primary agents for change in civilization; however, such a conclusion represents a serious oversight regarding the powerful potential of emerging worldviews to dictate epochal moments throughout mankind. Certainly, dynamic figures rise to prominence to lead movements of conservatism, progression, and moderation, but the conduit of ideas serves as the essential catalytic force that ignites and sustains these patterns. The Great War of the twentieth century was a complex global conflict of immense proportions, unlike anything the world had ever known. Historians perhaps express the greatest perplexity in the arduous endeavor of unraveling the web of palpable causes for the international conflict. Among such factors for the start of World War I exists none other as radical and comprehensive as Social Darwinism.

Although Social Darwinism was undoubtedly one of the most influential intellectual currents among political leaders in the years leading up to the First World War, its historical lineage can be rather difficult to trace for a number of reasons. To begin with, the term “Social Darwinism” carries an unfortunately broad semantic range. Few ideologies carry more politically charged potency than Social Darwinism, a philosophy of human life that possesses just as much emotive force now than in the two preceding centuries. A prompt database search on the subject will frequently yield articles that were published within the last decade, ranging from scientific outlets concerned with the origins of life to humanitarian publications seeking social justice in the twenty-first century. The vast majority of the aforementioned articles are written with an overt agenda and offer very little by way of historical analysis. Yet another issue is the scholastic shadow of World War II. An overwhelming abundance of academic research on Adolf Hitler’s Germany and Joseph Stalin’s Russia has left little room for the study of Social Darwinism in its earliest stages of political development. However, Social Darwinism was
indeed an important philosophical catalyst for global conflict at the dawn of the twentieth century, particularly in pre-war Germany.

Social Darwinism represents the logical outworking of Charles Darwin’s biological premises concerning the survival of species in nature, ‘Darwinism Proper,’ as it were, with a humanistic, sociological twist.¹ Mankind, with his capacity for rational thought, sees the inherent biological struggle for the ‘survival of the fittest’ not as a passive naturalistic struggle, but rather an active battle for human supremacy where lines are drawn along racial and nationalistic boundaries—not with respect to a difference of species. The irony of such a worldview is magnified by Jasper Doomen’s assessment of Darwinism as a philosophy of Platonism in his article “Comprehensive Darwinism.” Historically, Social Darwinists have consistently viewed this process as a pathway to the perfect society. On the struggle for survival in nature, Darwin himself wrote “When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply.”² However, as the horrors of the Great War would demonstrate, Social Darwinism is a far cry from a gateway to utopia.

The vision of a superior and unified German society materialized at a time long before 1871, the year that Germany’s twenty-five different kingdoms and states merged together. Historian Laura Tharsen explains, “Because there was no unified German state at the time, national identity in the early nineteenth century was not tied to a territorial understanding of the

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¹ Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, the work of scientific literature where he first published his biological ideas, was published in the United Kingdom in 1859.

nation, but rather a cultural and ethnic definition of Germaness.”

In the absence of a modern territorial conception of a nation, members of the German Confederation were united by a common culture, language, and ethnic heritage, which proved to be an equally formidable bonding force. External forces also contributed to early German nationalism, such as Prussia’s militarized resistance to Napoleonic hegemony. The struggle for control of Alsace-Lorraine in the Franco-Prussian War resulted in the natural dissolution of regional and class loyalties, paving the way for a strong national identity grounded in German nationalism. As it turns out, early German nationalism would become the bedrock for Social Darwinism in Germany in the decades following the 1871 unification.

As Richard Weikart notes, while Darwinian Theory found its roots in Britain, its most significant initial impact was found in Germany: “Reflecting back on the 1860s, the Darwinian popularizer Ernst Krause characterized that decade as a time when the struggle for existence was ‘the highest principle of explanation.’” It was only a short matter of time before philosophers, economists, and sociologists began to transpose this paradigm of the natural world for use in their own respective disciplines. One of Germany’s most important Social Darwinists in the late nineteenth century was socio-political writer Albert E. F. Schäffle. Schäffle believed in the necessity of the “collective struggle” (Collectivkampf) and was one of the first German intellectuals to articulate how warfare was to fit into this new system: “One expression of the collective struggle for existence is war, which Schäffle characterized as ‘an elevating and

4 Ibid., 118.
stimulating force.” In this abstract discussion of war as a cog in the Social Darwinian machine emerged a more tangible justification for international conflict, namely nationalistic and economic motivations achieved through heightened militarization.

Ironically, the elevating force Schäffle spoke of in Social Darwinism was the reflection of a trending philosophy known as animal reductionism. Popular in late nineteenth-century psychology, a rudimentary field hardly classifiable as a legitimate discipline, this school of behaviorism closed the gap in understanding the interspecies interactions of man and animals. In 1904, future Yale University President James Rowland Angell provided a strong endorsement of animal reductionism in his seminal book entitled *Psychology: An Introductory Study of the Structure and Function of Human Consciousness*. In the publication Angell argues, “The evolution of race has been notoriously sanguinary, and we should feel no surprise…that under the excitement of actual combat the old brute should display the cloven hoof.” And yet, despite Angell’s expectations for violence in anthropology, mankind poses a peculiarity in his distinct brand of calculated savagery. Historian Paul Crook explains, “Naturalists pointed out that murder and war were virtually unknown among non-human primates and most other species (except for warfare among socials insects such as ants).”

Animal reductionism was an earthshattering concept to popular thought upon its arrival; however, this theory presented an incomplete picture of human behavior, failing to fully explain mankind’s propensity for ideologically charged warfare. The Great War of 1914-18 would give theories of human violence a new lease on life. Looking back to the first holocaust of the

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6 Ibid., 479.


twentyfirst century, Oxford pragmatist F. C. S. Schiller remarked, the war “revealed all too clearly how ferociously unchanged beneath the thin veneer of civilization lurked the old bête humaine, and how illusory was the event of moral progress.” Nonetheless, men like Schäffle saw potential in the Darwinian framework to create a new ethical framework: “Theoretically the theory of evolution leads undeniably to the demand for the continued development ethics in the sense of evolutionary ethics.” Shortly after Schäffle penned these words, certain members of German society would indeed entertain the notion of evolutionary ethics.

The birth of Social Darwinism in pre-war Germany came at a time of serious ethical and moral crisis. Weikart comments, “Though the anti-clerical philosophers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had generally retained the fundamental tenets of Judeo-Christian ethics, many intellectuals of the nineteenth century no longer found traditional morality satisfying.” The rise of historicism created a new spirit of skepticism among intellectuals regarding the certainty of traditional moral tenets. The spread of Darwinism in its native biological thesis contributed to the acceleration of these controversial new viewpoints in society as well. Additionally, urbanization acted as yet another important factor in the rise of Germany’s social turmoil during this time. The frenzy and disorientation of city life created a unique sense of dislocation for urban residents, who often chose to abandon traditional religion and ethics in a defiant response. By the final decade of the nineteenth century, progressive German citizens would commence in taking measures to institutionalize secular ethics.

Founded in October 1892, the German Society for Ethical Culture forged a path for secular morality in Germany. American professor Felix Adler began the initiative after forming a similar council in the United States. In his drive for membership, Adler launched the society at just the right moment: “The time was propitious for such an endeavor, since Prussia passed a new school law in 1892, which tried to enforce greater religious orthodoxy, thereby arousing the ire of secular intellectuals.”

In its earliest months of existence, the Ethical Culture Society was successful in exploiting the widespread dissatisfaction of alienated secular scholars, which propelled membership numbers to over two thousand while establishing local chapters across Germany.

The Ethical Culture Society was not an overt promoter of Darwinism by any means. As a matter of fact, members were intentional in their refusal to endorse any particular comprehensive philosophy. Their approach was to remain as inclusive as possible in recruitment tactics, avoiding passionate debates in metaphysics. However, as Weikart elaborates, this disarming refusal to be dogmatic made staunch secularists resentful: “It was precisely this agnosticism on metaphysical questions that alienated those who believed that ethics and morality could not be understood apart from a more comprehensive worldview.”

Among the dissatisfied Darwinists in attendance at the launch meeting in Berlin was Ernst Haeckel, a German zoologist and philosopher who preferred a far more domineering approach to ethics.

Haeckel’s galvanization of the Darwinian framework in Germany was of monumental consequence. Commenting on the compelling nature of Haeckel’s writings, Darwin himself confessed in 1871, “I should probably have never completed [The Descent of Man].”

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12 Ibid., 60.
13 Ibid., 60.
of the conclusions at which I have arrived I find confirmed by…this naturalist, whose knowledge on many points is fuller than mine.”¹⁴ Despite this powerful admission, Haeckel’s groundbreaking independent study in the specialized fields of morphology and embryology has barred scholars from overgeneralizing him as simply another one of “Darwin’s bulldogs.”¹⁵ Haeckel was a nineteenth century Renaissance man, demonstrating his genius not only in the realm of biology, but also in fields as diverse as art and political theory. His diverse intellectual interests resulted in a fascinating synthesis of theories that embodied a fusion of science and art.

In the decade leading up to the outbreak of the Great War, philosophers like Henri Bergson and Eduard von Hartmann speculated over the direction that Darwinian thought would take in terms of interpretation. They concluded that evolutionary theory could undergo both mechanistic and vitalistic, or free-will, transformations in order to fit the needs of various adherents. Regarding Haeckel’s approach to the theory, philosopher Niles Holt writes, “Under challenge from vitalistic viewpoints, German materialism was transformed by Haeckel into an idealistic and semi-vitalistic system quite opposite its origins.”¹⁶ When Haeckel began his academic career in earnest during the second half of the nineteenth century, he was just another popularizer of Darwinian Theory. However, as his generation approached the First World War, Haeckel would adopt a tenacity in his philosophy that resembled a religion of naturalism.


¹⁶ Ibid., 267.
Figure 1. The English version of Ernst Haeckel’s “Tree of Life,” from The Evolution of Man (1879). Public Domain.
Haeckel’s worldview begins with a materialist conception of the human spirit. Expounding on the nature of the soul in his intriguing 1904 publication *Die Lebenswunder (The Wonders of Life)*, Haeckel writes, “The soul of man is—objectively considered—essentially similar to that of all other vertebrates; it is the physiological action or function of the brain.”\(^\text{17}\) His expression of the soul as a physiological byproduct of brain activity was a precursory model for twenty-first century thinkers, and this notion remains prevalent within the scientific community today. This leveling of mankind in nature was formative in the next step of Haeckel’s argument, namely, “that man is part and parcel of the material cosmos and must therefore conform in every sense to the environmental totality if his survival was to be assured.”\(^\text{18}\) Haeckel’s deeply held conviction that man and nature where one serves as the foundation of his infamous philosophy of Monism, which denies the distinction of fundamental dualistic forces in the universe, such as mind and matter, or God and the world.

Haeckel garnered several conservative critics as early as the 1880s when his Monism and Darwinian support appeared to be more of a soft-handed pantheism as opposed to a totalitarian theory of nature. In 1876, the bold German Protestant minister Rudolf Schmid published a foretelling opinion on Darwinian Theory: “[Darwin’s theory is] only an unproven hypothesis that threatens to become a torch, which could reduce the most noble and highest cultural achievements of the past century to a heap of ashes.”\(^\text{19}\) On the contrary, Haeckel envisioned the advances of scientific study to be the only legitimate markers of human accomplishment, arguing “scientific research captures gradually the entire province of human intellectual effort,” and,


\(^{19}\) Rudolf Schmid, *Die Darwinischen Theorien* (Stuttgart, 1876), 3.
moreover, “all true ‘science’ is basically natural science.”\textsuperscript{20} In essence, Haeckel was not only a disciple of Darwinism, but also of Scientism, believing that empirical science offers the most authoritative position in all domains of inquiry, including metaphysics. Such was the viewpoint of Charles Darwin’s mentor Adam Sedgwick, who wrote to Darwin in 1859, “Tis the crown and glory of organic science that it does, thro’ final cause, link material to moral…”\textsuperscript{21} Influenced by these bold claims as Daniel Gasman explains, “the stimulus for Haeckel’s vision of an original unity between mankind and nature is to be detected in the ethnological research and speculation of the second half of the nineteenth century to which Haeckel contributed as one of the greatest anthropologists of all time.”\textsuperscript{22}

Haeckel’s pioneering thought on the ominous direction of human history presented a sharp contrast when compared to the predictions of other prominent intellectuals of his day. “In pursuit of such bleakly pessimistic sentiments that challenged the prevailingly optimistic spirit of the time, gloomy assessments that were advanced even prior to Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844-1900) similar denunciations of the unfortunate suppression of creative instinct in Western culture,” Haeckel’s resistance to the foundation of western civilization was deeply countercultural.\textsuperscript{23} According to Haeckel, ideas expressed in Christianity, for example, promote doctrines of submission and weakness, which have created serious disruptions in the functioning of nature. Moreover, centuries of Western influence on humanity have resulted in a significant

\textsuperscript{20} Quoted in Holt, “Ernst Haeckel’s Monistic Religion,” 268. The emphasis is Haeckel’s.

\textsuperscript{21} Adam Sedgwick to Charles Darwin, November 24, 1859, in The Correspondence of Charles Darwin, vol. 7: 1858-1859 (Cambridge, 1991), 397.

\textsuperscript{22} Gasman, Haeckel’s Monism and the Birth of Fascist Ideology, 19.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 23.
evolutionary imbalance between man and nature—an inequity that can only be reconciled through Haeckel’s totalitarian system.

Friedrich von Hellwald, a Darwinian and contemporary of Haeckel, succinctly described the fundamental goal of man within a framework that men like Haeckel, Darwin, and Nietzsche shared in his 1878 publication *History of Culture*: “In nature only One Right rules, which is no right, the right of the stronger, or violence. But violence is also a fact in the highest source of right, in that without it no legislation is available.”

The Darwinian evolutionary worldview leaves no room for intrinsic values of any kind, especially when it comes to the question of human dignity. Despite this fact, Haeckel, Hellwald, and other adherents deified the idea of power and dominance in their philosophy. The natural world poses no formal rules of ecology; simply put, it is survival of the fittest. Gasman adds, “According to Haeckel, human history and culture, all the impressive achievements of mankind, were of scant importance when measured against the significance and glory of nature.”

The incredible accomplishments of individuals like Plato, Cicero, and Shakespeare meant very little to Haeckel, who preferred to worship the rugged glory of corporate struggle in the natural world. In a sobering letter addressed to his father in March of 1864, Haeckel explained the importance of humanity’s “advancement” at the expense of the trivial individual:

I share essentially your view of life, dear father, only that I value human life and humans themselves much less than you… The individual with his personal existence appears to me only a temporary member of this large chain, as a rapidly vanishing vapor… Personal individual existence to me so horribly miserable, petty, and worthless, that I see it as intended for nothing but for destruction.

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26 Haeckel to his father, March 21, 1864, in *Ernst Haeckel: Leben und Werk* (Berlin, 1926), 203-4.
Haeckel’s Monism is not an historical anomaly for its “racism, naturalism, eugenics, or anti-Semitism, or any other ‘scientific’ demand or position which considered on its own, could hardly add up to a fully mature National Socialist or Fascist mentality.” Rather, it is the culmination of these violent sentiments in Haeckel’s totalitarian vision that brings relevance to his system for German dominance at a volatile time in Europe’s history. Haeckel’s questionable ethnological studies coupled with his preexisting commitment to German nationalism resulted in his belief that certain races were naturally inferior to others. The Germanic people groups conveniently held a position atop this anthropological hierarchy. Haeckel saw biological degeneration within his own race as well, which called for eugenic improvement in German society. Practically speaking, such ethnic cleansing would involve cold biological selection at birth and the elimination of terminally ill adults for the purpose of an active competitive advantage on the world stage. In *History of Creation*, which was first published in English in 1880, Haeckel acknowledged that while these callous (and arbitrary, to be sure) decisions to terminate innocent lives may appear to be barbaric, the result of such actions would be a perfect society, free from warfare:

If any one were to venture the proposal, after the examples of the Spartans and Redskins, to kill, immediately upon their birth, all miserable, crippled children to whom with certainty a sickly life could be prophesied, instead of keeping them in life injurious to them and to the race, our so-called “humane civilization” would utter a cry of indignation. But the same “humane civilization” thinks it quite as it should be, and accepts without a murmur, that at the outbreak of every war (and in the present state of civilized life, and in the continual development of standing armies, wars must naturally become more frequent) hundreds and thousands of the finest men, full of youthful vigour, are sacrificed in the hazardous game of battles.  

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27 Gasman, 23.

28 See Figure 1 on page 8 to view Haeckel’s “Pedigree of Man,” an encapsulating view of mankind in the grand scheme of all biological life.

Once again, Haeckel’s shocking rhetoric echoes the thought of his contemporaries, such as fellow German zoologist Robby Kossmann, who declared in an 1880 article, “The state only has an interest in preserving the more excellent life at the expense of the less excellent.”

In addition to the qualitative population measures Haeckel sought to employ, he was also interested in the quantitative improvement of the German state. Josep Llobera, author of *The Making of Totalitarian Thought*, writes, “At another level, the idea of spreading the German Lebensraum, or vital space, was essential; the idea of an expansion towards the East was essential.” Germany’s colonial holdings dominated the nation’s politics in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and imperial expansion was an integral component of *Weltpolitik*, the title given to Germany’s foreign policy in the years following Otto Von Bismarck’s unification measures. As Larsen explains, “The exploitation of colonies was part of the nationalist vision of Germany as a significant world power.” Although this demand for the acquisition of physical territory appears to represent nothing more than a modern iteration of an ancient initiative, Haeckel’s pseudo-scientific justification was actually a prototype for National Socialist “bio-policies” that were to emerge later in the twentieth century, most notably under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. Haeckel’s positions blended nicely with the popular opinion of German colonial supporters, who “supported colonial proscriptions against mixed race marriages and colonial laws establishing racial segregation,” because they “considered protecting the ‘racial purity’ of Germans a top priority.”

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32 Tharsen, “Ethnic Nationalism in Germany,” 121.

33 Ibid., 122.
in the official endorsement of *Weltpolitik* as Germany’s foreign policy position, which Larsen and others contend was a direct contributing factor to the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

Optimists proclaimed the natural decline of warfare up until the very month of August 1914. The Great War quickly destroyed such wishful thinking, yet the men of the belligerent states seemed to welcome the war with a sense of relief. Crook elaborates, “War was seen as an escape from bourgeois dullness and materialism, even a revolutionary act against capitalism, a means of recovering society’s organic roots through martial unity, and a way of spiritual regeneration.”

In an inexplicable stroke of ignorance, substantial segments of western civilization forsook the trappings of modern society in a devolutionary craze. The ideas of men like Schäffle and Haeckel gained serious traction. Crook adds, “Observers of the period spoke, cynically or agonizingly, even voyeuristically, of a new age of blood and iron and *Weltmacht* (“World Power”), of rule by the strong rather than the best, of human aggression rampant.”

The principles of Social Darwinism possessed an undeniable foothold in European civilization at the start of World War I, and Germany was the primary purveyor for such thought.

The watershed influence of Social Darwinism on academia has not diminished much as modern scholarship continues to extract principles from this historic theory. One such derivative discipline that has emerged in the past few decades is sociobiology. Typically traced to Harvard biologist Edward Osborne Wilson’s 1975 bestseller *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, Wilson defines sociobiology as “the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior.”

Wilson’s work represents yet another attempt in recent history to transpose information about

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34 Crook, *Darwinism, War, and History*, 136.


biological life in the natural world to the increasingly complex societies of mankind. Historian Mike Hawkins clarifies, “According to [Wilson’s] own testimony he had concluded that Insect Societies (1971) with the hypothesis that the principles of population biology and comparative zoology that had worked so well for the analysis of the social insects could be extended to the study of vertebrate animals.”\(^{37}\) While some of his academic peers received Wilson’s controversial ideas with skepticism and contempt, sociobiology is not without a storied scholastic pedigree.

In conclusion, the discussion of Social Darwinism in pre-war Germany often blends into the more controversial debate over Germany’s role in what British historian A. J. P. Taylor famously classified as “the struggle for mastery in Europe.”\(^{38}\) Throughout the past century, scholars have attributed the start of World War I to a wide variety of causes: “the existence of submerged nationalities, secret diplomacy with its entangling and opposing alliances, arms races, and heightened and bellicose nationalism all worked together before 1914 to create a situation where the slightest incident—often termed a ‘spark’—would trigger a general conflict.”\(^{39}\) The important factors noted here are part of a far more expansive list that has dominated discussions on World War I in countless books and research articles. Nevertheless, Social Darwinism stands out as an intellectual movement that provided a powerful philosophical framework for unprecedented global warfare, particularly effective in captivating a generation of leading scientists and political leaders in pre-war Germany.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 294.


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 396.
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