

# The Passing of the Great Race; or The Racial Basis of European History (1916), by Madison Grant

In 1916, eugenicist Madison Grant published the book *The Passing of the Great Race; or The Racial Basis of European History*, hereafter *The Passing of the Great Race*, where he claimed that northern Europeans, or Nordics, are biologically and culturally superior to the rest of humanity. Charles Scribner's Sons in New York City, New York, published the volume. Grant claimed that the Nordic race was at risk of extinction and advocated for the creation of laws in the US to decrease the population of people he considered inferior. According to Grant's biographer Jonathan Spiro, Grant's book synthesized a range of racist and pseudoscientific eugenics claims in prose that was accessible to the public. In the US, *The Passing of the Great Race* was praised by politicians, including former presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge, and cited as justification for laws that restricted immigration based on ethnicity and nationality. Adolf Hitler referred to *The Passing of the Great Race* as his Bible, and during the Nuremberg Trials in the 1940s, Nazi leaders who were prosecuted for war crimes committed during World War II presented the book as evidence that eugenics did not solely originate in Germany but rather had deep roots in the United States.

Grant was a lawyer and wildlife conservationist in New York City who helped found eugenics organizations in the US during the early twentieth century. With the support of his friend Theodore Roosevelt, who later served as the twenty-sixth President of the United States from 1901 to 1909, Grant co-founded the New York Zoological Society in 1895 and the Bronx Zoo in 1899 to promote wildlife conservation and the study of animals. Grant also helped establish numerous conservation organizations and parks, such as the Save-the-Redwoods League and Denali National Park in Alaska. According to Spiro, Grant's interest in conservation naturally led to his interest in eugenics, as Grant saw both movements as a way of preserving the old country from threats of extinction. Following the publication of *The Passing of the Great Race*, Grant took an active role in many influential eugenics organizations in the US, including the Eugenics Research Association, The Galton Society for the Study of the Origin and Evolution of Man, the American Eugenics Society, and the International Commission on Eugenics. He was also a member of two anti-immigration lobbying groups, the American Defense Society and the Immigration Restriction League.

In *The Passing of the Great Race*, Grant calls on the US to enact an extensive eugenics program. Francis Galton, the half-cousin of the naturalist Charles Darwin, first coined the term eugenics, Greek for "well-born," in 1883. Galton and other proponents of eugenics advocated to restrict reproduction to improve the human species through selective breeding. By allowing only people who they believed to be of good stock to have children, eugenicists claimed that governments could eradicate disease and disability and curb overpopulation. Galton described two dimensions of eugenics. He called the first positive eugenics, which encouraged people he considered superior to have more children. In contrast, what Galton called negative eugenics programs attempt to prevent the reproduction of people eugenicists judged to be, to use Grant's terms, defective and worthless. Grant argued that negative eugenics was a more practical course of action to pursue in the US because he believed it would be much easier to identify and eradicate the people with the worst genetics than to select a group of people with the best genetics, and restrict the right to have children only to them.

In addition to Galton's eugenics works, Grant drew from earlier attempts to classify humans into hierarchies according to race. Starting from the now-discredited assumption that Europeans, Africans, and Asians are distinct groups, Grant believed that Europeans, while overall allegedly superior to Africans and Asians, could be further classified into distinct races. Anthropologist

Franz Boas called *The Passing of the Great Race* a modern retelling of works by Joseph Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, even though Grant does not explicitly cite them. Gobineau's 1853 *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (*An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*), written in France, asserted that all humans could be categorized as one of three races, white, black, or yellow, and that a racial subgroup of Aryans existed within the white race that were superior to all other races and largely responsible for all major advancements in history. Chamberlain's 1899 book *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (*The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*), written in Germany, built off of Gobineau's arguments to reaffirm that Aryans were superior to all other races and specifically denounce Jewish people as an inferior race.

Though the anti-Semitic views of Gobineau and Chamberlain can be found in *The Passing of the Great Race*, Grant most closely follows the racial classification proposed by economist William Z. Ripley in Ripley's 1899 book *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study*. Ripley examined correlations between geography and measurements of the human body, called anthropometric data. Using that data, Ripley classified Europeans into three distinct races, whom he called Teutonic, Alpine, and Mediterranean, based on features such as stature, eye color, and skull shape. *The Passing of the Great Race* draws so heavily on Ripley's data that the book is one of only two references explicitly noted by Grant in his introduction to the first edition. Grant made one major alteration to Ripley's classification system, changing Ripley's term Teutonic, a word associated with Germany, to Nordic, generally associated with Scandinavian countries. According to Andrew S. Winston, who studies how psychology has historically been used by racist movements, Grant did this to avoid anti-German sentiment of World War I, which was occurring at the time that Grant published *The Passing of the Great Race*.

In *The Passing of the Great Race*, Grant argues that there are three distinct European races and that the supposedly superior Nordic race is responsible for most notable human achievements and progress. In the introduction, Grant expresses that his goal in the book is to explain European history in terms of race, or physical and mental characteristics that he claims are inherited and unchangeable. He also criticizes egalitarian and democratic ideals surrounding equality in the US that he thinks intervene in natural selection, allowing so-called inferior races to proliferate at the expense of superior races. The remainder of the book is divided into two parts. Part one, "Race, Language, and Nationality," is composed of seven chapters that detail Grant's racial theories and advocate for eugenics programs such as forced sterilization and strict laws against marriage between people of different races. Part two, "European Races in History," contains fourteen chapters that trace the prehistory of Europe, outline the purported differences between the three European races that Grant claims exist, and detail the origin and achievements of the allegedly superior Nordic race.

In part one, "Race, Language, and Nationality," Grant argues that democratic institutions that state that all humans are equal are dangerous. The first two chapters, "Introduction" and "Race and Democracy," criticize American democracy. According to Grant, democratic ideals wrongly assume that environmental factors such as education affect human development and achievement rather than heredity. As a result, Grant believes that democracies that average people run are less efficient than aristocracies ruled by men qualified by noble birth. In the chapter "The Physical Basis of Race," Grant explains his now-disproven claims that race is based in biology. Grant asserts that people from Europe, Africa, and Asia represent different species of humans, while different races within Europe constitute subspecies, or populations with distinct characteristics. As of 2021, it has since been proven that all humans belong to the same species according to the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, or AAPA. Furthermore, the AAPA stresses genetic differences among humans are not fixed along racial lines in a way that would justify classifying humans into different biological groups. Grant uses the cephalic index, which is a ratio of skull width to skull length, eye color, hair color, and height to classify people into three European races of Alpine, Mediterranean, and Nordic, the latter of whom he calls the white man par excellence. According to the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, as of 2021, anthropologists know that no combination of physical traits can be used to reliably classify humans into racial groups because race represents social, not biological, categories.

In the chapters "Race and Habitat" and "The Competition of Races," Grant considers how natural

selection occurs in humans of the modern world through disease and competition. Grant criticizes charities and philanthropists for intervening in natural selection through their efforts to assist the less fortunate. Grant explicitly states that the laws of nature require the obliteration of people he classifies as unfit, or not genetically strong enough to survive without assistance. Furthermore, Grant warns of the dangers of what he calls race suicide, where the superior Nordic race declines in population numbers through low birth rates and frequent wars, while inferior races grow in numbers by having more children and ultimately replace the allegedly superior races.

According to Grant, significantly increasing the birth rate of superior races is unlikely to succeed due to the difficulty of restricting the right to have children only to people with the most desirable genetics in a democracy. Instead, he argues that sterilization programs for people of inferior genetics are much better suited to protect people of the Nordic race in the US. Grant is confident that the American public would agree to sterilize ten percent of the population, beginning with those he calls defectives, including criminals and people with diseases and mental illnesses. After seeing the alleged benefits of widespread sterilization, Grant predicts that the American people would willingly agree to sterilize ever-increasing proportions of the community, eventually moving on to those Grant labels as weaklings or worthless race types. In the US, Grant's and other eugenicists' vision of negative eugenics was enacted through state laws like the Virginia Sterilization Act of 1924 that allowed state institutions, such as prisons and asylums for people with mental illnesses, to sterilize people without their consent. After the US Supreme Court upheld sterilization laws as constitutional in the 1927 case *Buck v. Bell*, thirty states passed similar laws, leading to as many as 70,000 forced sterilizations that disproportionately affected poor women of color according to journalist and lawyer Adam Cohen.

The final three chapters of part one advocate for preserving the Nordic race through immigration restriction and laws banning marriage between people of different races. Grant complains that recent immigrants to the US are not the strong Nordics who dominated earlier centuries, but are, as he calls them, social discards and weak refugees fleeing persecution. Grant is also deeply opposed to the prospect of Black Americans obtaining any semblance of equality, for he states that they are only valuable so long as they are subservient to Whites. Grant claims that when a person from a supposedly superior race reproduces with a person of a supposedly inferior race, the child is unequivocally a member of the inferior race. He advocates for a significant expansion of laws that condemn the marriage of people of different races, and even goes so far as to argue that the birth of mixed-race people should be considered racial crimes.

Part two of the book, "European Races in History," attempts to demonstrate that history and human progress can be explained entirely in terms of race. The first three chapters trace the history of prehistoric peoples in Europe. The second chapter, "Paleolithic Man," draws directly from Henry Fairfield Osborn's *Men of the Old Stone Age*. Osborn was a paleontologist and president of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and one of Grant's closest friends. The fourth through sixth chapters draw freely from Ripley to describe the purported characteristics and geographic distribution of the Alpine, Mediterranean, and Nordic races. The seventh through eleventh chapters detail the origins and expansion of the Nordics. According to Grant's history, the greatest cultural achievements in Europe and its former colonies can be attributed to an influx of Nordic blood into a region, while social collapses are due to a loss of Nordic control. In the brief chapter "Racial Aptitudes," Grant claims that people largely inherit moral, intellectual, and spiritual traits, which results in different racial aptitudes. Grant argues that the Alpines are best suited as agricultural peasants, whereas Mediterraneans are superior in art and other intellectual pursuits. In contrast, Grant claims that Nordics are superior soldiers, sailors, and explorers, but above all, they are skillful leaders. The final three chapters consider the relationship between the Nordic race and the Aryan group of languages.

The publisher marketed *The Passing of the Great Race* as a scientific book, but according to a review by Frederick Adams Woods, Grant intentionally wrote the book without any footnotes or in-text citations to make it more accessible and interesting to the public. The first edition, published in 1916, included a preface authored by Osborn, the president of the American Museum of Natural History at the time. A second revised edition of the book published in 1918, followed by a third revised edition in 1920. According to Woods, Grant published a fourth revised edition in 1921

that included a 176-page documentary supplement containing notes and references for some of his claims to assuage mounting criticism from scientists regarding his lack of citations. By the time of Grant's death in 1937, *Passing* had reportedly sold 16,000 copies in the US according to Grant's New York Times Obituary.

According to reviews of the early editions, the publication of *The Passing of the Great Race* caused a sensation and instigated debate in the academic and public spheres. In a 1923 summary of book reviews on *The Passing of the Great Race*, Woods observed that the book was popular among the general public and favorably reviewed in scientific journals such as *Science*, though there were some unfavorable reviews. Woods dismissed the unfavorable reviews as likely written by non-Nordic authors who were angry that Grant called them inferior. He also attributed criticism of the first edition of the book to widespread anti-German sentiment during World War I.

Franz Boas, a Jewish immigrant from Germany and professor of anthropology at Columbia University in New York City wrote one of the most critical reviews of *The Passing of the Great Race*. Boas critiqued Grant's misconceptions about heredity, such as his assumption that physical traits such as skin color operated according to simple Mendelian genetics, as well as his refusal to consider the effect of environment on physical traits used for racial classification. Boas characterized *The Passing of the Great Race* as dangerous, dogmatic, inconsistent, and built on observations selected to justify Grant's own prejudice.

Despite Boas's objections, many scientists praised *The Passing of the Great Race*, particularly for its value in communicating racial science to the public. Many reviewers acknowledged a number of scientific flaws, and some recognized that few ideas presented in *The Passing of the Great Race* were novel. However, they still maintained that the book held value due to Grant's ability to synthesize the arguments of earlier eugenics works in an accessible and concise way. *The Passing of the Great Race* had such widespread influence that popular sources such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* and the popular magazine *The Saturday Evening Post* referenced the book. Additionally, a 1921 article by then Vice President Calvin Coolidge published in *Good Housekeeping* echoed many of the ideas presented in *The Passing of the Great Race*, as Coolidge called for immigration restriction and condemned interracial marriages. *The Passing of the Great Race* was influential for politicians working to pass state laws that prohibited interracial marriage in the US. The US Supreme Court did not overturn such laws, called anti-miscegenation laws, until the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* case.

In the introduction to the fourth edition published in 1921, Grant states that his original purpose for writing *The Passing of the Great Race*, making Americans aware of his race concept and the alleged need for segregation, had been accomplished because the book's publication encouraged the US to adopt restrictive immigration laws. After reading *The Passing of the Great Race*, Congressman Albert Johnson, the Chair of the US House of Representatives' Committee on Immigration and Naturalization from the sixty-sixth to the seventy-first Congresses, was impressed by Grant's work and reached out to Grant, establishing a casual correspondence between the two according to Spiro. Grant helped draft the Immigration Act of 1924 that Johnson authored, which established strict quotas for immigration based on nationality. US Senator David Reed co-sponsored the act, so it is also called the Johnson-Reed Act. As the vice president of the Immigration Restriction League, Grant argued that immigration quotas at the time needed to be reduced.

The passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 significantly limited the quota of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, who Grant claimed were undesirable, and prevented nearly all immigration from east Asia. The US Congress did not adjust the quotas in the following decades to accommodate Jewish refugees fleeing the genocide committed by Nazi Germany. The act was not overturned until the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. The Immigration Act of 1924 is often cited as just one step in a long history of racist immigration policy in the US. According to Elizabeth Aranda and Elizabeth Vaquera, who as of 2021, research sociology at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida, present day immigration policies in the US still reproduce racial inequalities and result in severe consequences for people of the demographics they target. According to historian Winston, present-day neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups continue to cite *The Passing of the Great Race* as foundational to their movement.

The German translation of *The Passing of the Great Race* also influenced the eugenics programs and genocide that Hitler and Nazi Germany committed. Spiro articulates that Hitler's manifesto *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) contains passages that seem directly inspired by *The Passing of the Great Race*. Hitler quotes Grant's book in his speeches and even sent Grant a letter where he referred to it as his Bible. When the Nazi regime took control of Germany in 1933, Germany passed the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases, which permitted the Nazi Regime to sterilize an estimated 400,000 people against their will according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. According to Spiro, German anthropologists involved in the passage of the law were influenced by Grant's advocacy for forced sterilizations that he put forth in his book. Some of those Nazi anthropologists, such as Eugen Fischer and Hans F. K. Günther, were even friends with Grant and stayed in contact with him until his death according to Spiro. *The Passing of the Great Race* was mentioned during the 1945 and 1946 Nuremberg Trials held in Nuremberg, Germany, that prosecuted Nazi leadership for war crimes committed during World War II. The defense presented *The Passing of the Great Race* as evidence to argue that many Nazi eugenics programs were inspired by policies in the US and therefore it was hypocritical for the US to try them for successfully enacting their own ideas.

*The Passing of the Great Race* helped legitimize concepts of biological race and encouraged scientific racism in the US. According to Spiro, the public debate inspired by the book's publication contributed to the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 that restricted immigration to the US for forty years. The proposed eugenics programs Grant detailed in *The Passing of the Great Race* also influenced Hitler and the Nazi regime in Germany, who committed genocide in the name of eugenics.

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