

[Madison Grant \(1865–1937\)](#) ^[1]

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Madison Grant was a lawyer and wildlife conservationist who advocated for [eugenics](#) ^[4] policies in the US during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his 1916 book, *The Passing of the Great Race; or, The Racial Basis of European History*, Grant argued that what he called the Nordic race, which originated from northwest Europe, was biologically and culturally superior to all other people, including other Europeans. Grant drew from his now-discredited claims to lobby for laws in the US that restricted immigration, legalized sterilizing people against their will, and prohibited interracial marriage. Adolf Hitler referred to Grant's book as his Bible and it was listed during the Nuremberg Trials in the late 1940s as evidence that [eugenics](#) ^[4] did not solely originate in Germany. Grant's advocacy of [eugenics](#) ^[4] shaped policy that restricted reproductive freedom and immigration in the US and helped legitimize genocide in Europe.

Grant was born 19 November 1865 in New York City, New York, to Caroline Amelia Manice and Gabriel Grant. Grant's father was a health commissioner and a surgeon who received a Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions at the Battle of Fair Oaks during the Civil War in 1862. Both of Grant's parents could trace their ancestors to some of the first settlers of several New England colonies. Grant was the eldest of four children. The Grant siblings spent many weekends and summers at Oatlands, a country estate in Long Island, New York, built by their maternal grandfather. Grant's biographer, Jonathan Spiro, suggests that Oatlands sparked Grant's interest in wildlife and [natural history](#) ^[5]. As a boy, Grant collected reptiles and [fish](#) ^[6] on the grounds of the estate, which also contained gardens, rare trees, and a tropical conservatory.

Grant's early education consisted of private instruction and extensive international travel. Throughout his childhood, Grant received a private education in the US that was supplemented by trips abroad with his father. According to his future colleague Harold E. Anthony, who studied North American mammals in the early twentieth century, on one of Grant's boyhood trips, Grant recalled reciting Homer's *Iliad* during a visit to the site of ancient Troy in present-day Turkey. At the age of sixteen, Grant moved to Dresden, Germany, for four years of private tutoring in Classics, the study of ancient Greece and Rome. In his years living in Dresden, Grant traveled to the Middle East, North Africa, and every country in Europe.

In 1884, Grant was admitted as a sophomore to [Yale University](#) ^[7] in New Haven, Connecticut. He was allowed to skip the freshman year curriculum due to his high scores on the entry exam and graduated in 1887. Grant then earned a Bachelor of Laws degree from Columbia College, now [Columbia University](#) ^[8], in New York City and became a member of the New York Bar in 1890. Grant opened his own law practice, but he did not need to work to earn a living because of his family's wealth, according to Spiro. Instead, Grant spent most of his time socializing in exclusive New York society clubs or participating in big game hunting expeditions in the US and Canada.

Big game hunting served as Grant's entry point to the burgeoning conservation movement and its broad social network. In 1893, Grant accepted an invitation to become a member of the Boone and Crockett Club, a social [organization](#) ^[9] for gentleman hunters who abided by specific rules of sportsmanship. The club was founded by Theodore Roosevelt, who later served as the twenty-sixth President of the United States from 1901 to 1909. According to Spiro, Roosevelt and Grant became friends as they had similar upbringings and interests. Grant quickly became a devoted member to the Boone and Crockett club and helped push the club members to lobby for state and federal policies to protect North American game from over-hunting for meat, thus ensuring the future of hunting for sport. With Roosevelt's support, Grant helped found the New York Zoological Society in 1895 and the Bronx Zoo in 1899 to promote wildlife conservation and the study of animals.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Grant helped found numerous conservation organizations and parks, such as the Save-the-Redwoods League and Denali National Park in Alaska. He also promoted the work of scientists who discovered new species of mammals and supported the development of [natural history](#) ^[5] collections. In 1919, Grant served as a founding member for the American Society of Mammalogists, a society dedicated to promoting the study of mammals, of which he stayed a member throughout his lifetime. Though Grant's hunting expeditions ended after he began using a wheelchair in his later years due to chronic arthritis, he continued his conservation efforts until his death. According to Grant's colleague Anthony, Grant was one of the most influential people in the environmental conservation movement because he belonged to so many scientific societies and maintained such an expansive social circle. In Grant's biography, Spiro observes that many conservation advocates in Grant's social circle saw [eugenics](#) ^[4] and conservation as compatible movements. Spiro writes that Grant was attracted to both US movements due to a fear of extinctions, from extinctions of wildlife to the extinction of Grant's own supposedly endangered race.

Grant promoted the ideals of the [eugenics movement](#) ^[10] in the US throughout the early twentieth century. The [eugenics movement](#) ^[10] aimed to increase reproduction among people eugenicists claimed were superior and prevent the reproduction of those they considered inferior, often through [sterilization](#) ^[11]. The [eugenics movement](#) ^[10] is based on the long-discredited claim

that [humans](#)^[12] can be grouped into distinct, pure, races and ranked in terms of alleged biological superiority. Grant published his first [eugenics](#)^[4] book *The Passing of the Great Race; or, The Racial Basis of European History* hereafter *The Passing of the Great Race*, in 1916. Starting from the false assumption that Europeans, Africans, and Asians are distinct groups, Grant argued that Europeans, while allegedly superior to Africans and Asians, could be further classified into distinct races. He subdivided Europeans into three races corresponding to geographic and environmental regions that he called Nordic, Alpine, and Mediterranean. He argued that the Nordic race, also called the Aryan race in Germany, was not only superior to the other races but responsible for all notable human achievements and progress. Grant traced the history of European civilizations and argued that all cultural achievements were due to an influx of Nordics into a particular society, while an increase of people of inferior races caused all instances of collapse or so-called degeneration.

Spiro suggests that Grant's views may have been in part a response to changes in the demographics of immigrants entering the US. Beginning in the 1880s, the number of immigrants entering the US doubled, with millions of immigrants arriving from Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and Slavic countries like Russia and Ukraine. Many of the new immigrants settled in Grant's lifelong home, New York City, leading Grant to lament that his city and country were being overrun by people that he and other eugenicists classified as Alpine and Mediterranean races, which eugenicists considered inferior to the Nordic race of Northern Europe. Spiro also notes that very little in Grant's book is original, as Grant apparently included many passages lifted verbatim from other texts. However, his book synthesized the thoughts of many [eugenics](#)^[4] scholars in prose that was accessible to public audiences.

By the time of his death in 1937, *The Passing of the Great Race* had sold 16,000 copies in the US and was on its fourth edition. Grant's work, along with that of other eugenicists, was frequently quoted by politicians during debates on the Congress floor and influenced public figures such as Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge. Hitler's anti-Semitic manifesto that heavily influenced the Nazi Regime in Germany, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), contains passages that refer to *The Passing of the Great Race*. Hitler later quoted Grant's book in his speeches and even sent Grant a letter where he referred to *The Passing of the Great Race* as his Bible. In 1936, the Nazi party included Grant's book as one of the only non-German books on an essential reading list for the field of human heredity.

Following the publication of *The Passing of the Great Race*, Grant took an active role in many influential [eugenics](#)^[4] organizations in the US, often hosting meetings in his New York City home, according to Spiro. Grant was a long-time member of the Eugenics Research Association and served as President from 1918 to 1919. He was also a member of two anti-immigration lobbying groups, the American Defense Society and the Immigration Restriction League. In 1918, Grant co-founded the [Galton Society for the Study of the Origin and Evolution of Man](#)^[13], a scientific society that promoted the study of [humans](#)^[12] in terms of race in service to the US [eugenics movement](#)^[10]. In 1922, he also co-founded the Eugenics Committee of the United States of America, which eventually became the [American Eugenics Society](#)^[14], to promote [eugenics](#)^[4] education and policies throughout the US. Additionally, Grant helped organize and fund both the Second and Third International Eugenics Congresses hosted at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City in 1921 and 1932. The International Eugenics Congresses increased scientific and public awareness of the [eugenics movement](#)^[10] and helped eugenicists such as [Harry H. Laughlin](#)^[15] and Ernst Rüdin gain notoriety. According to Ruth Clifford Engs, who researchers social movements in relation to health science, the [sterilization](#)^[11] model that Laughlin put forth in his book [Eugenical Sterilization in the United States](#)^[16] was later adopted by eugenicists in Nazi Germany. Rüdin was the chairman of the Society of German Neurologists and Psychiatrists during the Nazi regime, and helped author the 1933 German [sterilization](#)^[11] law that led to the forced [sterilization](#)^[11] of tens of thousands of people in the US and hundreds of thousands in Nazi Germany. Grant also served on the International Commission of Eugenics, renamed the International Federation of Eugenics Organizations in 1925.

Grant's reputation as an expert on so-called racial science and his training as a lawyer led to his involvement in drafting and lobbying for immigration restriction. Grant helped Congressman Albert Johnson, a fellow member of the Galton Society, draft the Immigration Act of 1924, known as the Johnson-Reed Act, that established strict quotas restricting immigration of people based on their country of origin. Grant argued that immigration quotas should be changed to only allow a number of immigrants into the country proportional to the number of immigrants that had been living in the US in 1890, a change that would cut the total allowance of people entering the country from 355,000 to 165,000. By using census data from the late nineteenth century to implement that change, the Johnson-Reed Act 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 that Nazi Germany committed. The Act was not overturned until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

In 1933, Grant elaborated on his racial histories and once more called for widespread [eugenics](#)^[4] programs in a new book, *The Conquest of a Continent; or, The Expansion of Races in America*. Grant declared that the violent colonization of North America and the establishment of the United States was the greatest historical achievement of the Nordic race. In the book, Grant claimed that many early US colonists were of superior stock, especially those men who brought their wives and families with them to avoid marrying people of other races. Additionally, Grant claimed that the dangerous environment of the American frontier weeded out biological weaknesses in settlers, making the Nordic race even stronger in many areas of the US. However, Grant asserted that Nordics in the US were nevertheless at risk of dilution through interracial marriage. At that time, Grant and other [eugenics](#)^[4] proponents claimed that having children with a person of another race destroyed racial purity and had negative consequences on the social order, a claim that has since been disproved. According to Spiro, Grant helped politicians pass laws

that prohibited interracial marriage in the southern US. The US Supreme Court did not overturn such laws, called anti-miscegenation laws, until the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* case. Despite his call for Nordics to have many children to prevent the alleged extinction of the Nordic race, Grant never married or fathered children himself.

Grant influenced immigration restriction, forced [sterilization](#)^[11], and anti-miscegenation laws in the US through his publications, political lobbying, and leadership positions in [eugenics](#)^[4] organizations. Writers like Adam Serwer, a political writer for *The Atlantic*, argue that the roots of present-day white supremacy in the US can still be traced to Grant's works. Finally, Grant's work influenced the [eugenics](#)^[4] programs and genocide committed by Hitler and Nazi Germany. *The Passing of the Great Race* was mentioned during the 1945 and 1946 Nuremberg Trials held in Nuremberg, Germany, that prosecuted Nazi leaders 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](#)^[4] programs were inspired by policies in the US and therefore it was hypocritical for the US to try them for successfully enacting the US's own ideas.

According to his obituary in the *New York Times*, Grant suffered from nephritis, an inflammation of the kidneys, for many years. After a week of serious illness, Grant died in his home in New York City on 30 May 1937.

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Subject

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