

Atlantic World Research Network

Graduate Student Prize – 2015-2016

First Prize Winner

Stephen Comer

Title: “Jim Crow at Nuremberg: Global Virginia as the Nazi Model”

This essay successfully demonstrates the widespread transatlantic reliance of German Fascist eugenicists in the 1920s and 1930s on the eugenic models of Jim Crow Virginia and Progressive Era California as Germany crafted and implemented laws to forbid racial intermarriage and to authorize sterilization of the mentally, physically, or racially “unfit.” While not claiming to have found “smoking gun” evidence for exact legislative wording, Comer persuasively shows that the incipient Nazi movement took great encouragement from a wide range of eugenicist opinion leaders in the United States—including the famed Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes—in promoting their Atlantic World, and indeed worldwide, plan of eugenic “racial hygiene.” The essay takes us back to a time when America’s Progressive politicians and leading Birth Control advocates made common cause with Southern Segregationists and German National Socialists to proclaim a settled scientific consensus on “racial integrity” and to convert that consensus into public policy. Comer reminds us that what prevented the United States from achieving the Nazi outcome of nationwide laws mandating sterilization, infanticide, euthanasia, and a “final solution” for the “unfit” was not American moral superiority, but rather a federal constitution which divided legislative, executive, and judicial functions among three coequal branches and which devolved power from national to state and local levels, making it deliberately difficult for the national government to impose any central policy on all states and citizens—however supposedly “Progressive” that policy, and however backed by the “settled science” of those times.