

Science (not so) Fiction:

H.G. Wells' contributions to social degeneration and eugenics in the context of the Holocaust

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BACKGROUND

Many discuss H.G. Wells as a pioneer of science fiction; some may mention his work with social degeneration and eugenics. However, an under discussed component of Wells' work, particularly in *The Time Machine* and *Anticipations*, is how Wells' influence in these pseudoscience topics indirectly contributed to arguably the greatest calamity of the twentieth century: The Holocaust.

KEY QUOTES

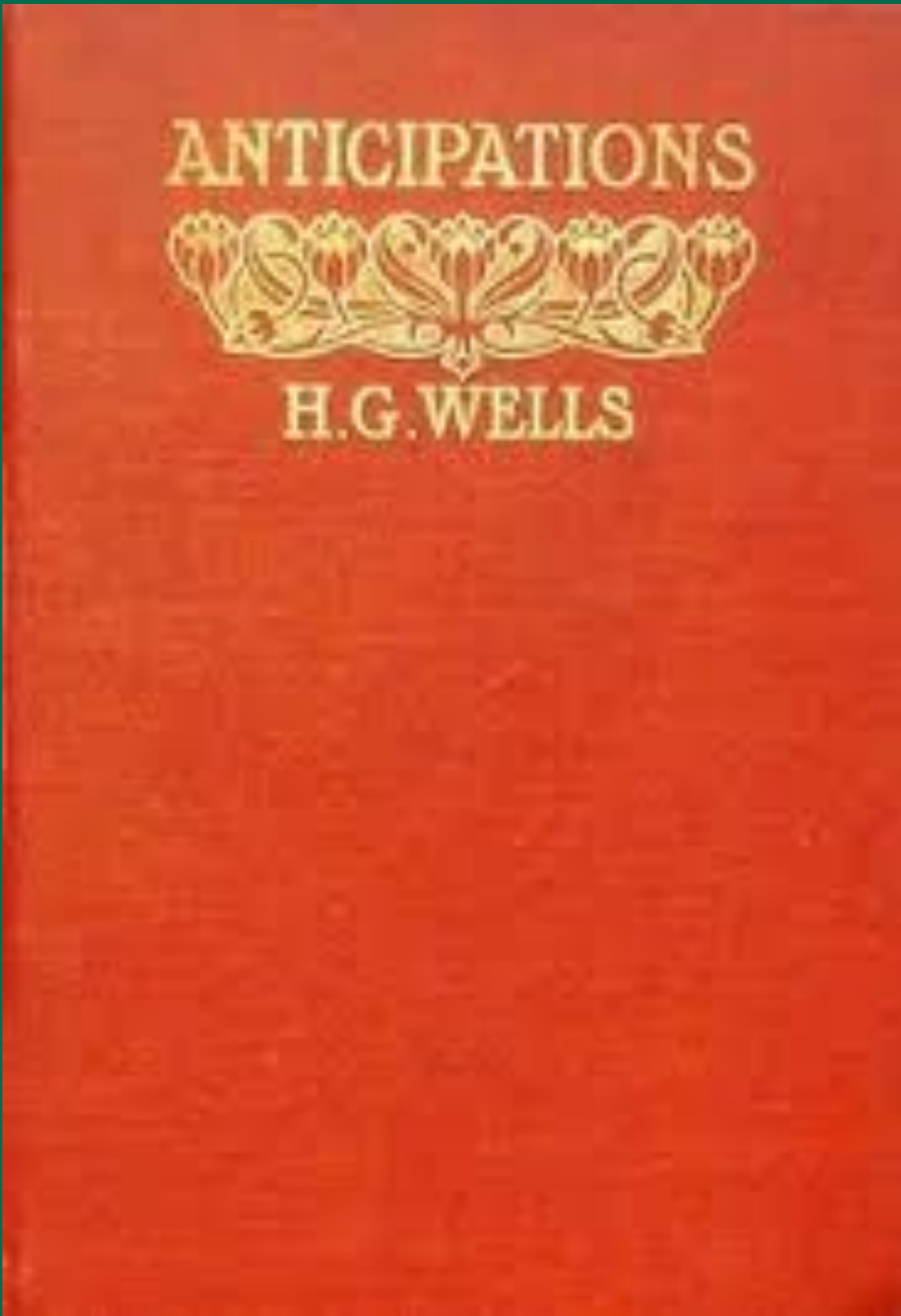
- 1. Wells' in His Own Words: "...whole masses of human population are, as a whole, inferior..." (Wells, *Anticipations*, 281-282).
"The Eloi [future humanoids], like the Carolingian kings, had decayed to a mere beautiful futility." (Wells, *The Time Machine*, 93).
- 2. Wells' Influence: While Wells would attempt to later disassociate from Hitler, calling him a "certified lunatic" (Shepherd), the damage had been done. "Hitler had referenced [Wells'] *The War of the Worlds* when criticising democratic states" (Langlois).

The Time Machine "...has sold more than 8 million copies" (Union Square & Co.).
- 3. Social degeneration's Notoriety: "[Oswald] Spengler wants to show that his Culture, Western Culture, has passed its Cultural stage [degenerated], has entered upon its stage of Civilization and is living out its ending" (Corbett).

H. G. Wells' science fiction popularized early 20th-century discourses of social degeneration and eugenics, which were foundational to the Holocaust.



Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) soared to meteoric popularity. The story revolves around a time traveller's encounter with a socially 'degenerated' future.



The latter part of Wells' *Anticipations* (1901) made explicit his beliefs in genetic 'inferiorities', insinuating his belief in eugenics.

"The minds of all of us... would be perceptibly different if Wells had never existed." – George Orwell



References



H.G Wells

FINDINGS

- Wells, without a doubt, contributed to the conversations of social degeneration and eugenics, significantly in Germany among other nations, "Wells concedes that Germany is 'by far the most efficient power in the world ... better equipped with the resources of modern science, and with her official and administrative classes at a higher level of education and training' (77)" (Sherborne 2). Although the Nazis would later burn works of science fiction like Wells', his nods towards the German nation were what likely got him invited "In 1929... back to give a lecture at the Reichstag" (Sherborne 3).
- Considering the popularity of social degenerative and eugenics theories, combined with the influence of Wells, makes it a safe bet to conclude that Wells' contributed (intentionally or not) to theories that were foundational for the most sinister event of the twentieth century: The Holocaust.

THE BIG PICTURE

When the **Holocaust** is discussed today, it's often spoken about as being caused primarily by general antisemitism; perhaps people will mention the 'Scapegoat' theory (Ludwig 4) or even the 'Backstab' of WWI (O'Malley). Less frequently do much deeper-seated theories like **social degeneration and eugenics** get discussed; and even more rarely are they connected to **seemingly benign origins such as science fiction**.

TAKEAWAYS:

- While it's difficult to establish firm connections when dealing with an event of such magnitude, this research has both established that
- a) Social degeneration and eugenics were popular pseudoscience theories of the early twentieth century. Both created heightened animosity towards minority groups such as the Jews and the disabled.
 - b) Wells contributed to this conversation (inadvertently or not) via his works in science fiction, so...
 - c) Considering that such sinister influences, that could contribute to such a tragic event, could come from seemingly benign places, we should always be aware of who we allow to have influence in our own lives.