
Nazism in the Classroom

Lisa Pine looks at how lessons in the classroom were perverted in the service of the Third Reich.

Whilst most governments seek, or have sought, to imbue their nation's youth with correct values and ideals, those regimes of an authoritarian nature have attempted to do so with greater thoroughness—in part, to create a consensus for their rule and ideology. This is clearly demonstrated, for example, by the way in which Mussolini's regime reformed the education system in Italy, introduced state textbooks and set up youth organisations in order to instil Italian youth with Fascist ideology.

In Austria, too, the clerico-fascist regime of 1934–38 attempted to inculcate its beliefs in Austrian youth by similar means. But perhaps the most striking example of this type of youth manipulation through ideological 'education' was the Nazi regime, which introduced sweeping reforms into the German school system reinforced by the activities of its youth groups, the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls. It went so far as to utilise school textbooks as propaganda tools, with which to disseminate its ideology.

The socialisation of youth was already a prominent part of educational activity during the nineteenth century, when the publishers of children's literature and textbooks clearly recognised that they could be used to shape a child's view of the world by disseminating social values. Story books, as well as history books, were used to diffuse positive social values, but also more negatively to disseminate racist values by means of stereotyping, with such tales as *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899). Racial ste-

reotyping in school books was based upon distorted generalisations, as well as pseudo-scientific and religious justifications, and was reinforced by the use of vivid descriptions and illustrations. This kind of indoctrination was seized upon eagerly by the Nazi government.

The Nazi *Weltanschauung* or 'world view' served as the basis of all educational activity in the Third Reich and became an instrument of justification and legitimisation for the actions of the regime. The concepts of racial superiority, 'national community' and leadership stood at the centre of the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, and were directly applied to principles of education which was no longer aimed at benefiting the individual, but instead, was directed towards the creation of an entire generation of German youth that would be strong, prepared for sacrifice, and willing to undertake its responsibilities towards the 'national community', a notion based upon mass emotion, not rationality. As such, children were pedagogic objects, subjected to the arbitrariness of the system.

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler had already laid out his ideas about education and what it should entail. He claimed that the highest task of education was to consist of the preservation, care and development of the best racial elements. Education, in the Nazi state, was understood in terms of racial selection, so that only the élite would reproduce. This was, of course, reflected in all policy, not just educational policy. Young 'Aryan' children had to be made aware of the differences between people who fitted into the 'na-

tional community' and those who did not. In Hitler's words: 'No boy and no girl must leave school without having been led to an ultimate realisation of the necessity and essence of blood purity'.

In December 1934, Wilhelm Frick, the Minister of the Interior, announced that 'the political task of the school is the education of youth in the service of nation and state in the National Socialist spirit'. Similarly, according to Bernhard Rust, the Minister of Education, the purpose of school textbooks was to achieve 'the ideological education of young German people, so as to develop them into fit members of the national community... ready to serve and to sacrifice'.

To this end strict censorship was imposed upon the publishing industry. Certain titles 'blacklisted' by Josef Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, were removed from circulation as 'alien' or 'decadent' literature. Censorship was implemented by Philipp Bouhler, the Director of the Party Censorship Office, in conjunction with Bernhard Rust at the Ministry of Education. At first, publishers often reprinted pre-Nazi schoolbooks, with only slight amendments, such as the insertion of swastika flags and Party slogans. However, by the late 1930s, when new writing and illustrations serving the regime became more widely available in greater quantities, school textbooks were employed more blatantly to represent Nazi ideals. Old textbooks were replaced by new editions which incorporated the central tenets of Nazi ideology. These were written by authors approved by the Ministry of Educa-

tion and the National Socialist Teachers' Association. Whilst some of these were by named authors, others were anonymous. For example, many primers and readers were compiled and edited by 'an expert team of German educators'.

The lack of subtlety of approach in the regime's unashamed utilisation of schoolbooks for propaganda purposes revealed itself, for example, in primers, where the first page consisted of the words 'Heil Hitler', with children portrayed raising their arms in the Hitler salute. A picture of Hitler usually appeared on the frontispiece, sometimes alone, but more usually showing him with a child or group of children.

Primers contained numerous stories and poems about Hitler, who was portrayed as an omniscient, generous and benevolent man. One such piece entitled 'A Happy Day' from the *German Reader for Elementary Schools* (1936) describes the mounting excitement of school children in their anticipation of a visit by Hitler to their village.

Nazi symbols were often used in conjunction with domestic themes in order to make them familiar and more accessible to small children. An illustrated story, in a primary school reader entitled *My First Book* (1935), shows children helping their mother decorate their home with a swastika flag, roses and a painting of a swastika. Here, a political message was delivered through familiar, familial channels of consciousness. Another story in the *German Reader for Elementary Schools* (1938) about unemployment and its effects on family life was also used to political effect. It tells of a distressed mother whose husband is unemployed. The family are experiencing severe financial hardship, and can afford only potato soup for dinner, instead of meat. The father has been shot in the foot during the First World War and has not worked since. In this story, the Nazi regime rescues the family from the clutches of poverty and misery, by specifically helping the war-wounded man. The story ends with the father returning home triumphantly one day, with the news that he has a job starting the next day, working with 200 others on the construction of a new bridge. This brings

tremendous joy to the family and meat back to their dinner table.

The theme of young children 'helping the *Führer*' appears in numerous textbooks from 1939 onwards, when the government was clearly concerned about shortages of raw materials and the war effort. One story tells of a boy who collects old materials for recycling from his home and the homes of his relatives. Another, in a book entitled *Happy Beginnings* (1939), with an illustration of a family sitting around the dinner table, deals with the *Eintopf*. This was the 'one-pot' dish that German families were encouraged to eat instead of their usual meal on one Sunday of each month, in order to save money which was instead to be donated to the needs of the state. In this story, one of the children tells her parents that she used to think that the *Eintopf* meant that there was a large pot outside the town hall, and that all the people went there to eat. Her brother laughs at her, but their father admonishes him, saying that the girl at least now understood what the *Führer* meant. There is a knock at the door and the collector appears. One of the children is told to go and fetch the money, and to give double that day, as it is the father's birthday. This story explained the political significance of the *Eintopf*, using the family context to instil the message.

In *Fables for Lower Saxony* (1939), a mother asks her daughters to fetch potatoes from the cellar in baskets to fill up a sack for the Winter Relief Organisation, whose motto was 'no one shall go hungry, no one shall freeze'. They bring up three baskets of potatoes and ask if this is enough. Their mother tells them to bring up another basket, as the sack is not yet full, emphasising that they should be pleased to make sacrifices for the Winter Relief Organisation and, hence, the state.

The Nazi idealisation of the mother features heavily in the textbooks of the period. There were ordinary stories of children preparing a special treat for their mother's birthday or for Mother's Day, aimed at young children, but in reading books for older children, depictions of the mother could be found under the sub-heading of 'heroes of everyday life'. This sense of the mother being raised to a heroic position was one that the regime

clearly wished to instil in children. For example, one schoolbook includes a play for Mother's Day, in which four councillors are portrayed, contemplating ways to relieve the mother of her many burdens and duties. Just as they are considering the possibility of finding someone to help the mother, a woman appears at the door. The councillors ask her if she is a wife and mother, to which she replies that she is. They then ask her if she takes care of her family, to which she answers that she does—from dawn to dusk. However, when the suggestion is made that some assistance might lighten her burden, she firmly rejects the idea, claiming that mothers love their domain and are happy to toil from early in the morning until late at night for their families. After she goes, the councillors conclude their session by deciding that 'mothers do not want to be relieved' of their tasks and duties.

Bucolic life, untainted by the depravities of urbanisation was accorded a special significance during the Third Reich. The Nazi 'Blood and Soil' doctrine defined the strength of the nation in terms of an idealisation of peasant values and the sacredness of the German soil. The regime excoriated many aspects of life in the big cities, not least the tendency of young couples to limit the size of their families. Urbanisation leading to the 'death of the nation' was a recurrent theme.

This comes across especially strongly in certain textbooks, such as *Country Folk and Agricultural Work* (1939), aimed specifically at pupils in rural areas, to demonstrate to them their own importance and value in maintaining a healthy nation. The rural family was portrayed as the 'archetype of a true family'. Textbooks went to great lengths to show that what was regarded as a family in the big cities, was often not a true family, but a distorted image of one. A husband and wife living in a city, without children, but with domestic pets instead, could be described at best as a 'household', but not as a 'family'.

Another aspect of rural family life that was deemed positive by the Nazi regime was the inclusion of the grandparents in the home. In this extended family, both the grandmother and grandfather had their roles and duties to perform. The

other advantages of emphasising their presence was to make children more aware of their ancestry.

All this related back to the issue of German blood. Much use was made of genealogy and family trees to establish purity of race. On this theme, there were texts entitled, for instance, 'You and Your Ancestors', which asked pupils: 'Do you know what kind of blood runs through your veins? Do you know your father and your mother, and have you yet seen the ancestry of your forefathers?' One writer of such a text claimed to have traced his own family tree back to around 1500, and to therefore know what blood type flowed through his veins. The presentation of ancestral knowledge in an exciting and colourful manner highlighted its importance, encouraging pupils to take an interest in their own ancestry and to consider the fact that one day they themselves would be the ancestors of a future family—as branches of a family tree would continue to grow. In addition to the pupils' books, there were a number of aids to teachers which suggested ways in which these issues could and should be taught. Another approach used, apart from actively involving children in their own ancestry, was the inclusion of numerous poems and stories about heredity, blood and kinship.

The main benefit to be derived from genealogical activities was awareness, both of an individual's own traits, and, more importantly, of his membership of the 'blood community' of the German nation. Of course, the ramifications of this went much further, by suggesting that those of non-German blood, or who could not definitively prove to be of German blood, were 'inferior'. Fundamentally, the purpose of such texts was to highlight the sense of continuity between children, their parents, their grandparents, their great-grandparents and so on. They emphasised the idea of blood flowing from the past, to the present and the future, pulsing in the veins of a family generation after generation. One book sought to demonstrate the inheritance and transmission of family characteristics through the generations by considering the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. It illustrated Bach's family tree, in order to show that in his family there

were no fewer than thirty-four 'musically competent' people, of whom approximately half were 'outstandingly gifted'. This particular example was part of a comprehensive chapter dealing with heredity, race and family. Within this context, blood was the most important symbol, for 'German blood' was the guarantee of the future of the nation.

The Nazi preoccupation with 'the order of nature' formed the basis of a number of texts. For example, in one story, a husband and wife decide to exchange roles. The husband takes over the cooking, whilst the wife goes out into the fields to do his work. After a disastrous day for the man—who previously thought his wife had the easy option in staying at home and cooking—he tells her that it is better 'not to reverse the order of nature'. The implications of this are crystal clear in relation to Nazi ideology.

In a similar vein—but more related to Nazi pseudo-scientific racial thought—was a fable appearing in the *German Reader for Secondary Schools* (1942), whose substance was as follows: A cuckoo meets a nightingale in the street. The cuckoo wants to sing as beautifully as the nightingale, but claims that he cannot do so because he was not taught to sing when he was young. The nightingale laughs and says that nightingales do not *learn* to sing, but are *born* with the ability to sing. The cuckoo, nevertheless, believes that if only he could find the right teacher, his offspring will be able to sing as beautifully as the nightingale. His wife has a clever idea. She decides to lay an egg in the nest of a hedge sparrow. When the mother hedge sparrow returns to her nest, she is surprised to see the strange egg, but decides to take care of it as if it were her own. When the eggs hatch, a young cuckoo emerges among the fledgling sparrows. He is nourished and cared for in exactly the same way as them, but he does not grow into a hedge sparrow. In fact, the older he grows, the more noticeable his differences become. When he tries to sing, he cannot. Despite growing up in the nest of a hedge sparrow, he grows up to be a true cuckoo.

This story was used to pose the questions: 'What is more important? The race from which one stems, or the nest in which one grows up?' The issues raised

in this fable are particularly significant, reflecting both the debate about inherited versus acquired characteristics, and the rudiments of Nazi racial ideology.

Racism and anti-Semitism also permeated biology and 'racial science' textbooks which aimed to point out to children the distinctions between the 'Aryan' race and 'inferior' races, for example, by means of craniology. There were also readers, such as *The Poisonous Mushroom* (1938), in which a whole array of anti-Semitic imagery was used, with caricatures, graphic illustrations and vivid descriptions of Jews as hideous, hook-nosed seducers of 'Aryan' women, Christ-slayers and money-grabbing usurers. 'The Jew' was portrayed as 'the Devil in human form'. In many secondary school books, anti-Semitic quotations by Hitler and other Nazi leaders were interspersed with folklore and nationalist literature. This type of racial indoctrination was, of course, just one small part of the Nazis' attempt to create popular consensus for their anti-Semitic policies culminating in the 'Final Solution'.

History lessons were a way of exciting children's sense of national pride and concern about the continued existence of the German state and nation, and about future glories to match—or even to exceed—those of the nation's great heroic past. History was to be looked at 'with the eyes of blood' and its primary function was to serve the 'political, intellectual and spiritual mobilisation of the nation'. Nazi history textbooks often dealt with German history only. Great rulers of Germany's past, such as Frederick the Great, were used to stress heroic leadership, ceaseless service to the state, military successes, and, of course, parallels to Hitler.

The ultimate triumphs of Nazism were given considerable priority in the history textbooks of the period, such as *Nation and Leader: German History for Schools* (1943). The issues of care and protection of the race found their way into history textbooks quite extensively too. Themes such as 'national renewal' were not uncommon in the history books of the Nazi era. Historical atlases showed Germany's greatness in her most historically important and expansive periods, and especially in the Third Reich.

Arithmetic books of the Nazi era also indoctrinated children by pervading the curriculum in a well-established tradition, echoing the religious bodies of the early nineteenth century, which based numerical tasks upon biblical content, and curricula in capitalist societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with textbook calculations based upon stocks and shares and profit-making. The Nazis used arithmetic exercises to propagate their racial and political ideas. The following example, from a standard 1941 textbook is overtly loaded with discrimination against the 'hereditarily ill'. Pupils were given the information that:

Every day, the state spends RM 6 on one cripple; RM 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ on one mentally-ill person; RM 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ on one deaf and dumb person; RM 5 $\frac{3}{5}$ on one feeble-minded person; RM 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ on one alcoholic; RM 4 $\frac{4}{5}$ on one pupil in care; RM 2 $\frac{1}{20}$ on one pupil at a special

school; and RM 9/20 on one pupil at a normal school.

Using this, pupils were to answer questions such as 'What total cost do one cripple and one feeble-minded person create, if one takes a lifespan of forty-five years for each?' and 'Calculate the expenditure of the state for one pupil in a special school and one pupil in an ordinary school over eight years, and state the amount of higher cost engendered by the special school pupil'. This was typical of the way in which data regarding state expenditure on 'hereditarily ill' or 'inferior' people was used in 'education'. The implications of such exercises are patent.

The Nazi regime was not original in its desire to indoctrinate children from an early age and to use school textbooks for this purpose. However, it did so in conjunction with the rest of its policies and with its own specific motivations in mind. Its concern was to create a racially 'pure' 'national community', in which

the development of the individual was of little or no importance. That the Nazi regime used school textbooks so widely and blatantly for the dissemination of its ideology, shows distinctly the lengths to which it was willing to go in order to influence the society it sought to create.

FOR FURTHER READING:

L. Pine, 'The dissemination of Nazi ideology and family values through school textbooks', *History of Education* (1996), vol. 25, No. 1, 91–109; W. Marsden, 'Rooting racism into the educational experience of childhood and youth in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries', *History of Education* (1990), vol. 19, No. 4, 333–353; C. Kamenetsky, *Children's Literature in Nazi Germany* (Ohio University Press, 1984); G. Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich: Race and History in Nazi Textbooks* (State University of New York Press, 1985); M. Burleigh and W. Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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Magazine article History Today. Nazism in the Classroom. By Pine, Lisa. Read preview. Magazine article History Today. Nazism in the Classroom. By Pine, Lisa. Read preview. Article excerpt. In the first of our mini-series on the Nazis and social culture, Lisa Pine looks at how lessons in the classroom were perverted in the service of the Third Reich. Whilst most governments seek, or have sought, to imbue their nation's youth with correct values and ideals, those regimes of an authoritarian nature have attempted to do so with greater thoroughness -- in part, to create a consensus for their