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The Fatal Conceit: Swedish Education after Nazism

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Abstract: In the aftermath of the Second World War, Sweden dismantled an education system that was strongly influenced by German, Neo-Humanist pedagogical principles in favor of a progressive, student-centered system. This article suggests this was in large part due to a fatal misinterpretation of the education policy on which Nazism was predicated. Contrary to scholarly and popular belief, Nazi schools were not characterized by discipline and run top-down by teachers. In fact, the Nazis encouraged a nationwide youth rebellion in schools. Many Nazi leaders had themselves experienced the belligerent, child-centered war pedagogy of 1914–1918 rather than a traditional German education. Yet, Swedish school reformers came to regard Neo-Humanism as a fulcrum of the Third Reich. The article suggests this mistake paved the way for a school system that inadvertently came to share certain traits with the true educational credo of Nazism and likely contributed to Sweden's recent educational decline.

Keywords: National Socialism, Neo-Humanism, progressivism, Sweden, war pedagogy

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“A strong, dominating, unshockable, gruesome youth is what I want ... I want no intellectual education. Knowledge spoils youth for me. I'd like them to learn only that which their instinct for play inclines them to.”

– Adolf Hitler¹

In 1976, the historian Daniel Horn published a pioneering article on the education system of National Socialist Germany in the *History of Education Quarterly*, addressing a central aspect of Nazi schooling that most scholars up to then had overlooked or at least had not fully taken into account: its disorderly and chaotic character. “Concentrating on ideology,” Horn noted, “these authorities have long contended that the Nazi educational revolution consisted largely of an attempt to create a ‘new man’ for the totalitarian regime through an adoption of its ideology in the schools that functioned in an authoritarian manner after the introduction of an absolute leadership principle or *Führerprinzip*.”² Official decrees did call for such a “total” education, in which discipline and obedience would be perfectly maintained and the individual would have no say in educational matters.³ However, Horn’s examination of what actually happened during the period 1933–1945 showed that German schools were, in fact, not run top-down by dedicated Nazi teachers, who practiced authoritarian modes of instruction.

Instead, the Hitler Youth (*Hitlerjugend*, henceforth HJ) had been permitted, even encouraged, by the National Socialist party to revolt against the educational structures and authorities of Germany in a fashion that evokes comparison with the

¹ Walther Hofer, ed. *Der Nationalsozialismus: Dokumente 1933–1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Bücherei: 1957), 88.

² Daniel Horn, “The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich,” *History of Education Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1976), 425

³ See, e.g., Peukert Detlev, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Isaac Leon Kandel, “Education in Nazi Germany,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 182, no. 1 (1935); Lisa Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany* (New York, NY: Berg, 2010).

anarchistic and nihilist behavior of the adolescent Red Guards during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.⁴ Indeed, the rebellion had “kept schools in perpetual turmoil, disrupted the educational process, undermined the status and prestige of the teachers, and brought about such a catastrophic decline in academic quality that it placed Germany in jeopardy of losing its technical and industrial preeminence.”⁵

These findings went against the grain not only of the traditional view of National Socialist education in historical scholarship,⁶ but also against popular imagination. In many European countries, although not, as we shall later see, Germany, the experience of National Socialism became important in shaping new pedagogical norms and practices in the decades after the war. The traditional hierarchical teacher-student relationship, erroneously believed to have been rigidly enforced in National Socialist Germany and to have functioned as a catalyst and fulcrum of the regime and its crimes, was gradually abandoned in favor of “progressive” student-centered learning, and curricula emphasizing critical thinking skills rather than factual knowledge. Never again, the thinking went, would the “banal” evil of ordinary people prone to follow authority and incapable of individual moral reflection lead to events similar to the Holocaust.⁷

⁴ For a discussion of the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the Chinese educational system and examples of the striking similarities between Maoist and National Socialist thinking on education, see, e.g., Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962–76* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

⁵ Horn, “The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich,” 426.

⁶ For the traditional view of National Socialist education, see, e.g., Isaac Leon Kandel, *The Making of Nazis* (New York, NY: Columbia University, 1935); George Frederick Kneller, *The Educational Philosophy of National Socialism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1941). German sources that lend support to the traditional interpretation include Rolf Eilers, *Die nationalsozialistische Schulpolitik. Eine Studie zur Funktion der Erziehung im totalitären Staat* (Cologne and Opladen: West-deutscher Verlag, 1963); Hans-Jochen Gamm, *Führung und Verführung. Pädagogik des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: List, 1964); Karl Christoph Lingelbach, *Erziehung und Erziehungstheorien im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Weinheim: Beltz, 1970).

⁷ For such explanations of the Holocaust, see, e.g., Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1963); Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1992).

Yet, arguably, no country went further in this direction than Sweden. Germany had since the mid-1800s been Sweden's most important cultural role model, a fact reflected in the Swedish education system, which was heavily based on German pedagogical ideas. Immediately after the Second World War, however, Swedish politicians and social reformers severed cultural ties with Germany and began to dismantle the established school system. As this article will show, this was in large part due to a fatal misinterpretation of the National Socialist educational goals and, by extension, National Socialism itself. It was believed that the school practices of the Third Reich were closely related to those of the old educational order in Germany, and thus indirectly also to the practices in Sweden at the time. In fact, however, senior Nazis turned against the old order and reconnected, if anything, with the aggressive, child-centered "war pedagogy" that they themselves had experienced as youths during the First World War, and which became an important wellspring for the National Socialist movement itself.

Based on their mistaken assumptions, the Swedish reformers set out to create a new, radically individualistic school system that aimed to develop a free and critical personality in students by offering them significantly greater influence over their studies, but inadvertently came to share certain traits with the true educational credo of National Socialism, as well as the pedagogy that helped spur its rise. Moreover, we will suggest that, in the long run, their mistake was a contributing factor in Sweden's recent educational decline.

This article thus considers the consequences of the historical failure, in Sweden and elsewhere, to recognize the nature of education in the Third Reich and the Nazi movement's true pedagogical underpinnings. Its principal contribution is that it provides a novel interpretation of the development of Swedish education after the Second World War. There are of course other important explanations for Sweden's pedagogical shift, including socio-economic and cultural changes, but, we argue, the

mistaken educational lessons drawn from Nazi Germany were a key impetus for the changes and the speed of the policy U-turn.

The article consists of six sections. After this introduction, we begin our discussion of education in National Socialist Germany with a section on the Janus-faced nature of National Socialist rule. The third section discusses the functioning of the National Socialist education system, with a particular focus on the HJ assault upon German schools, and its links to the war pedagogy that senior Nazis belonging to an older generation experienced. The fourth section then outlines the post-war German response to the experience of Nazi education. The fifth section contrasts this response with the educational lessons that Swedish intellectuals and policymakers drew from the National Socialist era and discusses how this led them to overhaul the Swedish school system. The sixth section summarizes and concludes the article and suggests avenues for future research.

The Authoritarian Veil

The Nazification of German schools began immediately after the National Socialist party's accession to power on January 30th, 1933. In the first months, Jews and educators suspected of potential disloyalty were dismissed while other teachers were mobilized into Nazi organizations, such as the National Socialist Teachers' League (*Nationalsozialistischer Lehrerbund*, NSLB). At this early stage, the existing educational structures were left otherwise intact. However, within just a few years, the new regime was interfering heavily in the school system.⁸ Independent and denominational schools were overtaken and subsumed within the state-run system, often through staged referendums in which parents came under pressure to "consent" to the

⁸ Charles Glenn, *Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Historical Study of Parental Choice and State Control* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2011), 156–57.

changes.⁹ Indeed, parents who did not support the restructuring were threatened with the withdrawal of child support and other welfare benefits. Propaganda campaigns attacking monks and priests serving as educators in Catholic schools, depicting them as pedophiles, were also used to solicit the support of parents and students.¹⁰

Soon the party's educational revolution also extended into occupied territories beyond Germany.¹¹ For example, all non-public Austrian schools were dissolved just months after *Anschluss* on March 12th, 1938. Josef Bürckel, *Reichskommissar* for Austria, explained the National Socialists' rationale for this policy: "We must take care of the preservation of our nation in this world. This only is possible if care is total care, therefore the school must belong to the state, upon which devolves the responsibility for the future."¹²

Under National Socialism, the school system thus appeared to be a typically authoritarian and centralized institution. "Total" education was the *Leitmotif* of the new school, the focus of which officially "moved away from the individual to the requirements of the state and the 'national community'."¹³ Of course, the pervasiveness of such overtly state-oriented attitudes were not unique to the field of education; the National Socialists often justified their actions by referring to the purported needs of the state. However, their authoritarian style of governance was, in fact, mostly a way of veiling truly radical and subversive policies.

⁹ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory* (London: Little, Brown, 2015); Anonymous, *The Persecution of the Catholic Church in the Third Reich: Facts and Documents* (London: Burns Oates, 1940).

¹⁰ Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory*, 103.

¹¹ De facto or de jure annexation into the Greater Germanic Reich before and during the Second World War was, as a rule, accompanied by the closure of all private and denominational schools. For a longer discussion of this point, see Appendix B in Gabriel Heller-Sahlgren, "Smart but Unhappy: Independent-School Competition and the Wellbeing-Efficiency Trade-Off in Education," *Economics of Education Review* 62, February (2018).

¹² Chicago Daily Tribune, "Austrian Nazis Order Church Schools Closed," September 2nd 1938, 1.

¹³ Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 3.

Indeed, as has been pointed out by the political scientist Franz Neumann, in *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944*, the superficial appearance of the political system in Nazi Germany did not cohere with its inner reality.¹⁴ In fact, the idea of the absolute state was ideologically rejected by both Alfred Rosenberg, a key adviser to Adolf Hitler, and Hitler himself, and was merely used rhetorically to legitimize the elimination or weakening of competing political institutions, such as the German *Reichstag*. Once the authority of the state had been strengthened and central power was in the hands of the National Socialists, they set to work on refashioning the state itself and subsuming it into the party.

“The revolution of [January 30th], 1933, does not continue the absolutist state under a new name,” Rosenberg explained in an article in the party organ *Völkischer Beobachter* in January, 1934; “it places the state in a new relation to the people ... What has taken place in 1933 ... is not the establishment of the state’s totality but of the totality of the National Socialist movement. The state is no longer an entity juxtaposed to the people and the movement, is no longer conceived as a mechanical apparatus or an instrument of domination; the state is a tool of the National Socialist philosophy of life.”¹⁵ In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler had expressed similar anti-state sentiments, writing that “Human rights break state rights.”¹⁶ Addressing the party congress of September, 1934, he also said: “The state is not our master; we are the masters of the state.”¹⁷ What emerged from this rejection of state supremacy was, according to Neumann, an essentially arbitrary and inconsistent political system that raised the question of whether Germany still existed as a cohesive state.

¹⁴ Franz L Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009 [1944]). The title Neumann chose for his analysis of National Socialist Germany is noteworthy in this context. Behemoth was Thomas Hobbes’s metaphor for state decay and the antithesis to Leviathan, the strong state.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁶ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Band I (1925), Christian Hartmann et al., eds., *Hitler, Mein Kampf: Eine Kritische Edition* (Munich and Berlin: Institut für Zeitgeschichte, 2016), 99.

¹⁷ Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944*, 65

The National Socialist resentment against the state, which would have been wholly foreign to truly authoritarian movements such as the Italian Fascists,¹⁸ has also been noted by the historian Timothy Snyder in *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, but in a slightly different context. Snyder demonstrates that Hitler was far from an authoritarian defender of statehood, instead labelling him a “biological anarchist”¹⁹ interested in German state institutions only as a temporary means of destroying other countries’ states in a racial, rather than national, struggle. States, laws, and borders were, in the minds of Hitler and other National Socialist theorists, artificial, even “Jewish,” conceptions to be eliminated and not preserved. However, according to Snyder, Hitler recognized that such a revolutionary idea would have little popular support, and skillfully camouflaged it with conventionally authoritarian and nationalist rhetoric.

This incongruence between overt ideology and actual intentions formed an intrinsic part of National Socialism. As observed by Hermann Rauschning—a radical conservative in the vein of Oswald Spengler and former party member, who publicly abandoned National Socialism in 1934—in *The Revolution of Nihilism*:

The outsider overlooks above all the essential distinction between the mass and the elite in the new revolutions. This distinction is vital in every field. That which is intended for the mass is not applicable to the elite. Program and official philosophy, allegiance and faith, are for the mass ... National Socialism as a whole is not just theatrical scenery, however. It is both, scenery and true revolutionary dynamism. But it is one for the mass, the other for the ruling elite and its members.²⁰

¹⁸ Indeed, the motto of Italian Fascism was: “Everything inside the state, everything for the state, nothing against the state.” See, e.g., Martin van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 204.

¹⁹ Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), 52.

²⁰ Hermann Rauschning, *Nihilismens revolution: kuliss och verklighet i tredje riket*, trans. Alf Ahlberg (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1939), 31.

As it turns out, something similar appears to have been achieved with the German education system under National Socialism. As we show later in this article, while the National Socialists were highly successful in presenting an image of the schools as ruthlessly collectivistic and orderly, the opposite was true in practice.

The Youth Rebellion

Despite Josef Bürckel's words about how the future of Germany strongly depended on the quality of its schools, many senior National Socialists never believed in the value of education. In fact, the political culture of National Socialism had a strong anti-intellectual tilt and Hitler himself "was filled with a juvenile contempt for all formal education and learning," which he termed "mere pumping of useless knowledge," as well as for the teaching profession, which he declared "fit only for incompetents and women."²¹ Stemming in part from their anti-Semitism, the National Socialists even denigrated the traditional concept of intelligence.²²

It consequently did not matter to the National Socialists, or most of them, what happened to Germany's academic prowess. But not only did they have little interest in students' educational achievement: in line with their view of the German family—another ostensibly revered institution in the Third Reich—they also considered schools to be key obstacles to the National Socialist strategy of molding and fostering the support of the German youth by isolating it from its natural, sociocultural context.²³ According to leading National Socialists, "camps and boarding schools would shape

²¹ Horn, "The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich," 426.

²² See Heiner Rindermann, *Cognitive Capitalism: Human Capital and the Wellbeing of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 61. According to Rindermann, the National Socialists believed that "intelligence measurement would be an instrument 'of Jewry' to 'fortify its hegemony'" and that "selection in schools according to intelligence would stand for a 'system of examination of Jewish origin.'"

²³ Horn, "The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich." See also Lisa Pine, "The Family in the Third Reich," (London: London School of Economics and Political Science [PhD diss.], 1996).

youth who were free from the errors and the softness imposed by families and by schools."²⁴

What was deemed important in the new Germany was inflaming generational tensions and pitting the young against the old, thereby seeking to transfer children's loyalty from parents and teachers to the National Socialist movement: "In 1933, his first year in power, [Hitler] boasted that 'your child belongs to us already today. Who are you? You will pass away, but your descendants already stand in a new situation. In a short time, they will not know anything else.'"²⁵

In stoking generational conflict, the HJ became a paramount institution. Over time, 98 percent of German adolescents between 10 and 18 years of age came to be members of the organization,²⁶ and they were given extraordinary privileges that did not extend to most adults in Germany, including "the right to carry daggers, wear uniforms, and issue commands—all of which tended to inflate juvenile egos."²⁷ It was not uncommon to find youngsters who "adopted a 'feudal tone' and drove around the streets in cars with screaming sirens."²⁸ Hence, quite naturally, HJ members developed "a distaste for the schools that kept them in a subordinate capacity and recognized them only as students."²⁹

Many also picked up the message from Hitler and other senior National Socialists, most importantly the leader of the HJ, *Reichsjugendführer* Baldur von Schirach, that the teachers of the old, conservative school were simply wasting their time. For example, in a book published in 1934, von Schirach, echoing Joseph Goebbels, had declared that "youth is always right" and that students would only

²⁴ Glenn, *Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Historical Study of Parental Choice and State Control*, 155.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁶ Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory*, 104.

²⁷ Horn, "The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich," 427.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 428.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

respect youthful and dynamic educators who could be counted as “real men” (*Kerle*): “Those among the teachers who are *Kerle* will know how to turn a dusty classroom into an adventure. Those who cannot, cannot be helped. We can only hope that this type will soon die out.”³⁰

Soon, students across Germany were rejecting the authority of their teachers and refusing to do the schoolwork assigned to them under the banner of HJ slogans like “Youth must be led by youth.”³¹ Classrooms became scenes of utter chaos. The situation was aggravated by the fact that marches and other physically exhausting HJ activities took up most of the students’ time and left them little energy for school.³² Constantly tired, the children were, in effect, primed to engage in delinquencies, and there was no parental pressure to do otherwise: “It was difficult—and sometimes dangerous—to forbid a child to do what many children were doing ... Boys and girls of the HJ carried their new confidence and belief into the home and challenged traditional notions of parental control ... For many fathers and mothers, caution and silence replaced candor and guidance.”³³ As a result, the HJ “often managed to override any moral socialization within the family.”³⁴

Teachers—including those who were enthusiastic National Socialists yet still believed that the academic mission of schools was important—often attempted to curb the abuse from their students but were placed at a significant disadvantage since the

³⁰ Ibid., 431. In the preface to his 1929 novel *Michael*, Goebbels had written: “Youth is always right in any conflict with old age.” See Joseph Goebbels, *Michael, a German Fate on Diary Pages*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York, NY: Amok, 1987 [1929]), 3. According to the historian Frank B. Tipton, the novel reflected “the attitudes of Nazi leaders, both toward the educated elite and toward the masses. *Michael* becomes a student but is distressed to find the universities full of weak-willed pale faces, the ‘bespectacled high-brows.’” See Frank B. Tipton, *A History of Modern Germany since 1815* (London: Continuum, 2003), 370.

³¹ On HJ slogans, see Jean-Denis G.G. Lepage, *Hitler Youth, 1922–1945: An Illustrated History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2009), 83.

³² Horn, “The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich,” 428–29.

³³ Lepage, *Hitler Youth, 1922–1945: An Illustrated History*, 83.

³⁴ Mary Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence Through the German Dictatorships* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 140.

anarchic climate in the schools was tacitly approved of by the regime. As illustrated by the opening quotation, Hitler wanted to give the aggressive instincts of the young, as long as they were directed at the institutions of the old social order, free reign. This was congruent with Hitler's worldview, in which, according to Timothy Snyder, "the law of the jungle was the only law."³⁵ Educators were thus "called upon to give up 'all autonomy, all unfriendly, self-seeking tendencies and all opposition' and were threatened that failure to achieve a rapprochement with their students would be regarded as a manifestation of 'ill-will or malevolence.'"³⁶

Only by degrading themselves and adopting the rhetoric of their politicized students could teachers hope to receive any respect and avoid being reprimanded. The NSLB, for example, "called for far-reaching changes in teaching methods and the replacement of older, inflexible teachers while echoing the [students'] demand that 'a new spirit of youth enter the school and that education receive a new, lively, youthful style.'"³⁷ Not surprisingly, against this background, Germany came to experience a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. In fact, no new teachers could be recruited. In late 1939, the Reich Interior Ministry deemed that "it would require 'an authoritative decision on the highest level,' presumably by Hitler, and a final halt of the HJ's actions against the teaching profession" to turn matters around.³⁸ However, no such decision was issued, despite the pleas from Education Minister Bernhard Rust, who had unsuccessfully attempted to reprimand the HJ as early as 1933.³⁹ Consequently, the destructive attacks on schools continued throughout the war.

³⁵ Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, 1.

³⁶ Horn, "The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich," 432–33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 435.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 438.

³⁹ The split between Rust and Hitler, and other senior National Socialists, is also evident from the following quote by Hitler, made in August, 1942: "[W]e have made progress in the field of education, in spite of having a pedant at the head of the Educational Department. With another in control, progress would have been more rapid." See Pine, *Education in Nazi Germany*, 22.

Also unsurprising is that academic achievement dwindled quickly and dramatically. According to a memorandum published in 1939 by the Nazi Teachers' Association of Hamburg, "the disruption of the school had produced a thirty percent drop in achievement levels since 1933. Unless something drastic was done to halt the process, these teachers warned, 'Germany was threatened by a loss of her world position.'"⁴⁰ Reports written by the Security Service of the SS, the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), also showed that German universities were shocked at the incoming students' limited knowledge.⁴¹ One SD report from 1942 revealed that "new university students had no historical or linguistic training, that medical lecturers had to abandon Latin terms, and that science students could no longer solve equations, use logarithm tables, or compute fractions."⁴²

One instructor even noted that his university students could not explain the changes of the season—and mistook Leonardo da Vinci for an Italian movie star. The same teacher asked in despair: "How can such people become the intellectual leaders of the new Reich?"⁴³ It is evident that they could not. It is not even implausible that the foundering state of the German schools contributed, to some extent, to Germany's war defeat.⁴⁴ What the activities of the HJ, in combination with the absence of parental and teacher authority, did produce, however, was men and women with a cruel disregard for human life.

⁴⁰ Horn, "The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich," 438.

⁴¹ See Heinz Boberach, ed. *Meldungen aus dem Reich. Auswahl aus den geheimen Lageberichten des Sicherheits-Dienstes der SS 1939–1944* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1965).

⁴² Horn, "The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich," 440.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Support for this observation comes from the historian Andrew Roberts, who claims that ideological choices hampered Germany's chances of winning the war. He also notes that in key areas "where pure intellect had an appreciable influence on the outcome of the war ... the Allies won the battle of the brains. 'It is comforting to be reassured,' as [the British military historian] John Keegan has put it, 'that our lot were cleverer than the other lot.'" See Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War* [Google Books version] (London: Allen Lane, 2009), ch. 18.

This is illustrated by the fact that many of the same youngsters who went through the chaotic education system of National Socialist Germany would later play a crucial role in Nazi atrocities. Young people showed themselves to be “the most willing to engage in or condone violence.”⁴⁵ As a result, the street violence of the 1930s, including the pogroms during *Kristallnacht* between November 9th and 10th, 1938, was to a large extent perpetrated by members of the first HJ generation, born roughly between 1915 and 1922.⁴⁶ In contrast, these events were met with “rather widespread disapproval ... among older Germans where, for more or less the first time since Hitler came to power, the phrase ‘ashamed to be German’ was widely used.”⁴⁷ In fact, noting the negative response from adults, Hitler was quickly forced to deny having had any responsibility for *Kristallnacht*.⁴⁸

Thus, while high-ranking Nazis were recruited from an older generation, which we address below, they depended on youth to carry out the most conspicuous acts of violence necessary to realize their goals:

By the late 1930s, it was predominantly the HJ generation that were in positions charged with controlling and exercising violence towards older Germans. In 1938 nearly 80 percent of SS-*Totenkopfverbände* members [who were responsible for guarding the concentration camps] were from the first HJ generation (year groups 1915–1922). Many of these men would form the ranks of the Waffen-SS, which would recruit a further 48,894 men in 1940, the majority of whom were born from 1920 to 1922.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence Through the German Dictatorships*, 151.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, 137–51.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁹ Ian Rich, *Holocaust Perpetrators of the German Police Battalions: The Mass Murder of Jewish Civilians, 1940–1942* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 38.

In addition, “the overwhelming majority of the junior officer positions of the police battalions involved in the mass shootings of 1941 and 1942 in eastern Europe were part of ... the first HJ generation.”⁵⁰ Women, and particularly young women, also became perpetrators of violence: “What distinguished the female cadre of young professionals and spouses who made the Holocaust possible—the women who went east during World War II and became direct witnesses, accomplices, and perpetrators of murder there—was that they were the baby boomers of World War I, conceived at the end of one era and the start of another.”⁵¹

“Young people,” as the historian Mary Fulbrook has noted, “appear to have internalized Nazi ideology to a higher degree than did older Germans who had prior belief systems in the light of which to assess the Nazi onslaught.”⁵² The difference was palpable even in comparison with people who were just a few years older than those born into the HJ generation. As one report presciently put it at the time: “it’s the young people who bring real enthusiasm into the Nazi stable ... I would almost say: the secret of Nazism is ... its youth.”⁵³ Many adults instead “seem to have simply withdrawn into a more-or-less sullen silence” as the National Socialist revolution continued and intensified in the wartime years.⁵⁴ In no small part did the National Socialist education system contribute to the unique fanaticism of the young. In fact, as one observer noted, fervent pro-Nazi political expressions were incentivized by schools: “The more enthusiastic [the young] become, the easier are the exams, and so the easier it is to get a position, a job ... nothing much is being asked of them, quite the contrary, knowledge is being openly condemned.”⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁵¹ Wendy Lower, *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 16.

⁵² Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence Through the German Dictatorships*, 138.

⁵³ Ibid., 137.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 139.

Thus, against this background, the suggestion that it was an authoritarian and orderly educational system that ultimately paved the way for Nazi violence and genocide appears ill-founded.⁵⁶ Instead, the evidence suggests that it was an anarchistic reaction to the old German schools, instigated by the HJ, that underpinned the National Socialist regime and, by extension, taught young people to transgress moral boundaries, ultimately preparing them to become active perpetrators of the Holocaust and related crimes.

Senior National Socialists and chief Holocaust engineers, such as Hitler's deputy Martin Bormann, the head of the SD Reinhard Heydrich, *Reichsführer SS* Heinrich Himmler, Rudolf Höss, the creator of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, and Baldur von Schirach, also spent formative years in an education system that was in many ways more similar to Nazi education than traditional German schooling. Indeed, German youths who, like these and other high-ranking Nazis, were born from 1900 to 1908 experienced not the old educational order, but so-called war pedagogy (*Kriegspädagogik*),⁵⁷ which disrupted the established pedagogical practices of many primary and secondary schools in Germany during the period 1914–1918, and aimed at turning students into avid supporters of the war effort.

Despite its militaristic name, war pedagogy was “supposed to be a method of ‘the heart’ that encouraged enthusiasm for the national cause” and encouraged

⁵⁶ It may potentially be argued that the conservative school system attended by most older Germans contributed to their passiveness and, indirectly, to the continued violence. However, the idea that a different education system would have encouraged a more active resistance seems rather dubious. Adult Germans faced an impossible situation in which their own children were leading an assault upon German culture and society, and it would have been difficult to put up resistance irrespective of the type of schooling received. Indeed, it would have required extraordinary courage and resolve. The fact that older Germans offered any moral resistance at all in the immediate pre-war years, as Nazi violence directed at Jews escalated, is thus quite noteworthy. In any case, it is beyond doubt that the old German education system did not produce adults prone to *actively* support the National Socialist movements or its violent transgressions—in sharp contrast to the education received by young Germans during the years 1933–1945.

⁵⁷ See Andrew Donson, "Why Did German Youths Become Fascists? Nationalist Males Born 1900 to 1908 in War and Revolution," *Social History* 31, no. 3 (2006).

children's natural aggressive traits.⁵⁸ It was predicated on a move from Germany's authoritative teacher-led methods of instruction toward "active, child-centered methods,"⁵⁹ which included the use of "autobiographical essays, poems, artwork, and class discussion that called upon the child's imagination and self-expression, rather than rote learning and memorization."⁶⁰ By so doing, "[t]eachers under war pedagogy refrained from crass indoctrination, but they still practiced a form of inculcation, only more subtle and sophisticated than before," and at the same time "reinforced an even more intense nationalism and militarism in many male pupils because they no longer prohibited belligerent and chauvinist expressions."⁶¹

There is considerable evidence that these measures worked and that the students did, in fact, deepen their commitment to the war effort.⁶² Indeed, "[t]he progressive nature of war pedagogy suggests that nationalism and militarism intensified in Germany not because state officials under Wilhelm II ... foisted nationalism on schoolchildren through authoritarian practices, but rather because they encouraged teachers to institute child-centered reforms during an era of national self-mobilization."⁶³ Thus, "[p]aradoxically, the success of an ideology that lent the war popular legitimacy and extolled nationalism and militarism depended on using reform methods that tolerated a modicum of dissent."⁶⁴

In other words, as we have said above, war pedagogy was hardly comparable to the methods that had previously dominated the traditional German education system. This is further evidenced by the fact that "teachers and pedagogical theorists

⁵⁸ Ibid., 342.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Carolyn Kay, "War Pedagogy in the German Primary School Classroom During the First World War," *War & Society* 33, no. 1 (2014), 6.

⁶¹ Andrew Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 60–61.

⁶² See Kay, "War Pedagogy in the German Primary School Classroom During the First World War.," Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914–1918*.

⁶³ *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914–1918*, 60.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 60–61.

circulated the idea that *every* academic subject could and should generate enthusiasm for the war mobilization";⁶⁵ and, indeed, "used the war and the perceived universal enthusiasm as a topic in all academic subjects, from writing to physical science."⁶⁶ A more fitting comparison, therefore, would be with the curriculum changes in the Third Reich, where a so-called *Wehrwissenschaft* (science of defense) and an "education in relation to weapons" more or less subtly came to permeate all school subjects, even mathematics and languages.⁶⁷ One can also see similarities between the old war pedagogy and the extracurricular activities of the HJ, in which "young people went on excursions, camping and hiking trips, and to 'holiday' camps which were actually *Wehrtüchtigungslagern* (military training camps)."⁶⁸

Against this background, it is not surprising that the exposure to war pedagogy during the First World War likely explains why young men of the birth cohorts 1900–1908 were overwhelmingly present in proto-Nazi paramilitary organizations and the Nazi Party itself before 1933,⁶⁹ and also why many of them later became key figures in the Third Reich. Ultimately, it appears that neither a large proportion of the older generation of Nazis nor the young recruits of the HJ received a traditional German education. As the next two sections will show, this fact was recognized by post-war Germany, but not its closest cultural neighbor—Sweden.

The Aftermath in Germany

⁶⁵ Donson, "Why Did German Youths Become Fascists? Nationalist Males Born 1900 to 1908 in War and Revolution," 342.; emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914–1918*, 59.

⁶⁷ Erika Mann, *School for Barbarians: Education under the Nazis* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2014 [1938]), 55. See also Frieda Wunderlich, "Education in Nazi Germany," *Social Research* 4, no. 3 (1937); Gunnar Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget* (Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, 2003), ch. 2.

⁶⁸ Lepage, *Hitler Youth, 1922–1945: An Illustrated History*, 74.

⁶⁹ Donson, "Why Did German Youths Become Fascists? Nationalist Males Born 1900 to 1908 in War and Revolution."

Denazification of Germany's schools was decided as a policy at the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945 and began later that year. However, the Allied victors mostly focused on political purges among German teachers and left the deeper issues untouched. As a result, the future of German education became, at least in the Western zone of Germany, a question for the Germans themselves to decide.

As the historian Johan Östling has pointed out, German pedagogues and other participants in the education debate in the young Federal Republic recognized that the National Socialist system of schooling was not merely alien but hostile to German educational tradition.⁷⁰ The German classicist Werner Jaeger observed, for example, that “[i]n terms of interventions in education the Nazis did everything they could to cut off historical roots and to limit any awareness of tradition to narrow and self-satisfied nationalism.”⁷¹

Precisely because of the National Socialists' vehement disregard for the past, it was widely felt that Germany should return to the old, conservative school and its instruction in the common Western cultural heritage in order to close the traumatic parenthesis in the country's history that Nazism had opened. In other fields, too, there was a tendency to reach back to historical ideals. Indeed, as Östling writes: “Instead of affirming current trends or international impulses, many Germans placed their hope in timeless and supra-individual values.”⁷² German *Länder* thus set about rediscovering the educational ideals that had preceded the National Socialist school system, which primarily meant a revival of the so-called Neo-Humanist tradition derived from 19th century German educational thinkers, such as the philosopher

⁷⁰ See Johan Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, trans. Peter Graves (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2016), 192–96.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 194. It is not surprising that Jaeger, like many of his time, associated National Socialism with nationalism. Hitler and other senior National Socialists deceptively spoke in nationalist terms when addressing the masses. What is interesting in this context is that he recognized the National Socialist break with tradition.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 196.

Johann Friedrich Herbart, who had reacted against what they perceived as the growing materialistic and utilitarian tendencies of their time.⁷³

Herbart believed that every child had a potential for flourishing, which could be realized through intellectual self-improvement, and that a structured, teacher-led education focused on imparting knowledge was the key to ensure this outcome. The idea was not that students would mechanically follow the teacher's prescriptions, but rather that they would internalize and learn to apply knowledge through repetition and practice under the teacher's instruction and supervision.⁷⁴ According to Erika Mann, daughter of the distinguished German author Thomas Mann, this was also how it worked in practice: "[T]he relationship between teachers and pupils, especially just after the [First World] War, was human and dignified, and the teachers themselves distinguished for thoroughness, discipline, and scientific exactness."⁷⁵

The Herbartian teaching ideal thus closely resembled modern pedagogical notions about the importance of the teacher, neither as an agent of control nor as a mere "facilitator of learning," but as someone who leads the work in the classroom by virtue of his or her knowledge.⁷⁶ Such an education, Herbart believed, would "protect the child from a game of chance"—in other words, from random environmental influences—and develop an ability in students to choose "the beautiful and good" over the "tasteless and unethical."⁷⁷ Another leading proponent of Neo-Humanism, the

⁷³ See Bas van Bommel, *Classical Humanism and the Challenge of Modernity: Debates on Classical Education in 19th-Century Germany* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 3–6.

⁷⁴ See Gabriel Heller-Sahlgren and Nima Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen: historien om skolans uppgång, fall och möjliga upprättelse* (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2019), 37–45.

⁷⁵ Mann, *School for Barbarians: Education under the Nazis*, 45. The quote suggests that there was a reaction against war pedagogy, and a restatement of Neo-Humanist principles, in Germany after the First World War, much as had been the case in the immediate years before 1914. See further Kay, "War Pedagogy in the German Primary School Classroom During the First World War."; Donson, "Why Did German Youths Become Fascists? Nationalist Males Born 1900 to 1908 in War and Revolution," 340–41.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., Gert J.J. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁷⁷ Pauli Siljander, "Educability and Bildung in Herbart's Theory of Education," in *Theories of Bildung and Growth: Connections and Controversies between Continental Educational Thinking and American Pragmatism*, ed. Pauli Siljander, Ari Kivelä, and Ari Sutinen (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012), 96.

philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, expected this form of education to “make the meanest day laborer and the most finely cultivated man ... like-minded.”⁷⁸

This was, in sum, a moral philosophy of education in which knowledge was envisioned to enhance students’ character, and it had been embraced in late-19th-century Germany, as well as in other countries that would become the world’s most scientifically and technologically advanced societies in the years leading up to the First World War—particularly after the German educator Tuiskon Ziller and his disciple Wilhelm Rein developed the Herbartian doctrines in even more practical and tangible ways.⁷⁹ In the wake of the disorder and excesses of National Socialism, these ideas had a renewed appeal in post-war Germany.⁸⁰ Thus, at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s “a Neo-Humanist canon set its seal on school life” in Germany,⁸¹ where even those who called for some degree of pedagogical reorientation in the vein of progressive reform pedagogy “retained a Neo-Humanist approach, with markedly conservative elements.”⁸²

The Swedish Lessons from Nazism

Sweden was among the countries that had originally adopted the Neo-Humanist educational program from Germany, which for long was Sweden’s closest cultural

⁷⁸ Bommel, *Classical Humanism and the Challenge of Modernity: Debates on Classical Education in 19th-Century Germany*, 4.

⁷⁹ See Tuiskon Ziller, *Grundlegung zur Lehre vom erziehenden Unterricht* (Leipzig: Heinrich Matthes Verlag, 1865). Ziller and Rein proposed that there should be five formal stages associated with teaching (which were meant to be followed flexibly and not in a rigid fashion): (i) preparation; (ii) presentation; (iii) association; (iv) generalization; (v) application. “In this manner,” Rein wrote, “a child’s acquired idea may be so developed, so welded together in firm, systematic, comprehensive association, that all his knowledge becomes a reliable, personal possession.” See Charles Da Garmo, *Herbart and the Herbartians* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 137.

⁸⁰ Under National Socialism, Neo-Humanism or “the Humboldtian concept of education was criticized for its individualism and its emphasis on intellectual aspirations, which were perceived as factors weakening the *völkisch* community spirit.” See H.J. Hahn, *Education and Society in Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 75.

⁸¹ Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 195.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 196.

neighbor and most important source of inspiration. Indeed, “almost every cultural and social sphere in Sweden was shaped by German conditions” during the period from the mid-1800s to the First World War.⁸³ It is, therefore, not surprising that the Swedish education system, too, came to be shaped by German ideas.

When formal schooling was first enacted nationwide in Sweden by the Elementary School Act of 1842, most schools practiced a rather primitive and factory-like form of education known as the Bell-Lancaster method, which relied on older or more gifted students to act as “monitors,” passing on the information they had learned to other students while the teacher directed their movements with bells, canes, and whistles. There were few options in this respect since Sweden at the time was an exceedingly poor country; the method had originally been developed to enable mass education in conditions of scarce resources. However, once the economy improved in the mid-1860s, and more money was funneled into education, the Bell-Lancaster method was officially abandoned in favor of Herbartian pedagogy.⁸⁴ Direct classroom instruction for every student was introduced and teachers were now expected to explain and demonstrate what was taught, rather than having their students merely repeating information without necessarily understanding it.⁸⁵ The first truly national curriculum, which was enacted in 1919, reinforced this educational approach by placing emphasis on genuine content mastery through teacher-led presentation,

⁸³ Ibid., 236.

⁸⁴ For a longer discussion of the history of Swedish schooling, see Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen: historien om skolans uppgång, fall och möjliga upprättelse*, 31–46.

⁸⁵ This is corroborated by a vast number of written recollections submitted by former students in elementary, intermediate, and college-preparatory schools published in Bror Rudolf Hall, “Goda lärare: minnesbilder av f.d. lärjungar o.a.,” in *Uppteckningar om folkupplysningen på 1800-talet: dagboksblad, minnen och referat*, ed. Bror Rudolf Hall (Stockholm: Föreningen för svensk undervisningshistoria, 1941). For example, one former student writes: “The teacher threw all his energy into teaching and was always indefatigable in his efforts to teach and explain. ... I felt both lucky and happy to be able to learn that which I did not previously know. And the teacher *did not hammer knowledge into the minds of the pupils ... he taught* us. Ibid., 259.; emphasis in original.

repetition, and practice, and by matching the sequence of topics to students' maturity and prior knowledge.⁸⁶

In line with the Neo-Humanist notion that knowledge-rich instruction went hand in hand with the development of self-discipline and virtuous habits, there was also a move away from the traditional view of discipline as being synonymous with the imposition of external constraints and punishments.⁸⁷ Instead, a more liberal conception of self-discipline took root in the education system, in which considerable value was placed on the inculcation of non-cognitive skills such as attentiveness, conscientiousness, honesty, reliability, and perseverance.⁸⁸ The idea was that children should internalize societal norms and values, which, in turn, would maintain order in the classroom.

Thus, over the course of a few decades, Sweden completely refashioned its education system along German lines of pedagogical thinking. Throughout the early 20th century leading up to the Second World War—and, indeed, during most of the war itself—there was also broad political consensus around the pedagogical aims and means of the education system. There was, in fact, remarkable continuity in the views of the Social Democrat Arthur Engberg and the Conservative politician Gösta Bagge, who both served as Education Minister during the 1930s and early 1940s. Both supported the Neo-Humanist ideals upon which the school system was built. This spirit of agreement was reflected in consecutive reports from the 1940 Schools Enquiry, as well as other government documents, right up until 1944.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ See Swedish National Board of Education, *Undervisningsplan för rikets folkskolor den 31 oktober 1919* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1920).

⁸⁷ Within the next few decades after the 1860s, corporal punishment ceased to be practiced in most Swedish schools and stages. See Jonas Qvarsebo, *Skolbarnets fostran. Enhetsskolan, agan och politiken om barnet 1946–1962* (Linköping: Linköpings universitet, 2006).

⁸⁸ Inger Andersson, *Läsning och skrivning – en analys av texter för den allmänna läs- och skrivundervisningen 1842–1982* (Umeå: Umeå universitet, 1986), 82.

⁸⁹ Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen: historien om skolans uppgång, fall och möjliga upprättelse*, 71.

In other words, what was known about National Socialist Germany in the 1930s and early 1940s had not triggered a significant reexamination of Sweden's German-inspired school system. It was only toward the end of the war that things changed dramatically, when it became increasingly clear that Germany would be defeated on the eastern front and the full extent of the Holocaust, carried out in those territories, became known.⁹⁰ As thoroughly documented by Östling in his research on the political-cultural effects of National Socialism in Sweden,⁹¹ whole patterns of thought that were perceived to be associated with Nazism were suddenly discredited and stigmatized in public debate. Predominantly, these were conservative and traditionalist outlooks, including even critical attitudes to the victory of modernism in literature and music.

In order to understand why these views were identified as belonging on the wrong side of the *cordon sanitaire*, it is crucial to note the following: National Socialism was interpreted in Sweden not as a revolutionary, almost anarchistic ideology, which sought to dissolve conservative institutions that restrained the individual (including the nation state), but as "a nationalist authoritarian ideology determined to crush the free and critical spirit," and an outgrowth of the conservative institutions and ideals that dominated Germany before the National Socialist era.⁹² Hence, the distinction between what was German and what was inherently National Socialist became increasingly blurred.

In this climate of stigmatization of all things German and confusion over the nature of National Socialism, Sweden's school system came under attack. Many Swedes accepted the image that Nazi Germany had created of its schools as strictly

⁹⁰ As one Swedish historian has noted, the war in the east turned out to be "an enormous humanitarian catastrophe, which confronted neighboring states, such as Sweden, with new moral challenges." See Klas Åmark, *Att bo granne med ondskan: Sveriges förhållande till nazismen, Nazityskland och Förintelsen* [Google Books version] (Stockholm: Bonnier, 2016), ch. 1.

⁹¹ Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 116–68.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 184.

disciplined, harshly run by teachers, and, ultimately, a kind of continuation of the old educational order.⁹³ In doing so, they were influenced by the views of vocal educational theorists—among others, Einar Tegen, a professor of philosophy, who argued that the National Socialist school system mirrored and reproduced the Nazi hierarchy of “authority and blind obedience, from the top right to the bottom,”⁹⁴ and David Katz, a noted German-Jewish exile psychologist at Stockholm University, who asserted that a direct line could be drawn between the old German school that he had known as a child and the events in the Third Reich.⁹⁵ Another major influence, according to the historian Gunnar Richardson,⁹⁶ was the 1942 book *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* by Gregor Ziemer, who had been President of the American Colony School in Berlin.

Ziemer’s book, which was translated into Swedish in 1943 at the urging of “morally, pedagogically, and culturally-politically interested persons” in the Swedish establishment, as the publisher’s preface noted,⁹⁷ presented the author’s reflections about his own encounters with Germany’s educational institutions. Ziemer had sought and been given permission by Education Minister Bernhard Rust to visit a handful of schools, and what he found were perfect models of what was laid down in the official National Socialist curriculum, namely, that “the *Fuehrer Prinzip* is to dominate the lives of the students.” “Boys as well as girls,” Ziemer continued, “are introduced to this leadership principle in school. The teacher is to be a miniature Hitler and Fuehrer in his own classes. He is to brook no opposition and must demand blind obedience.”⁹⁸

⁹³ See Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget*, ch. 3 and 5.

⁹⁴ Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 188.

⁹⁵ David Katz, *Tysk uppfostran – några synpunkter* (Stockholm: Fredshögskolan, 1944), 18.

⁹⁶ Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget*, 91–93.

⁹⁷ Gregor Ziemer, *Fostran för döden: hur en nazist skapas*, trans. Margareta Ångström (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1943), 7.

⁹⁸ *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* (London: Constable, 1942), 19–20.

Furthermore, Ziemer found that the use of class discussion was not permitted. The “lecture system,” he reported, was regarded as “the only safe method of instruction” since “youth,” in the eyes of the National Socialists, “too often abuses freedom.”⁹⁹

Given our exposition of the National Socialists’ true attitudes toward teacher authority, and that Rust himself had unsuccessfully tried to convince the top leadership to intervene and stop the HJ from wreaking havoc in the classrooms, it is plausible that the schools Ziemer visited were mere Potemkin façades, perhaps inspired by how Rust personally wished Germany’s schools to function. Similar Potemkin schools may, incidentally, also have been demonstrated to the Swedish teachers who visited educational institutions in the Third Reich during the 1930s and reported their findings in teachers’ journals. Erik Theander, for example, wrote the following about German education in 1935: “Looking at the strict, straight lines of German youths, standing shoulder to shoulder in brown shirts and red Swastika armbands, it feels as if military exercise regulations have had greater normative influence than the ideal of personality development; molding character under the spiked helmet.”¹⁰⁰ Another Swedish teacher, Einar Lilja, claimed in 1938 that the National Socialists rejected novel pedagogical methods in favor of lessons directed by the teacher’s “firm hand,” which he saw as a consequence of “the new Fuehrer principle.”¹⁰¹

Despite any misgivings we may have about its truthfulness, Ziemer’s book, and others like it,¹⁰² struck a chord in Swedish society and seemed to incriminate the country’s own school system, which emphasized teacher-led instruction and regarded

⁹⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁰ Per Höljeberg, *Utmaningarna mot demokratins skola: den svenska lärarkåren, nazismen och sovjetkommunismen* (Lund: Lunds universitet, 2016), 81; emphasis in original.

¹⁰¹ Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget*, 84.

¹⁰² See, e.g., Peter Wiener, *Hur ett herrefolk uppfostrats*, trans. Alf Ahlberg (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1944).

discipline as an educational virtue.¹⁰³ The Swedish education system was thus brought into what Östling calls a “Nazi sphere of association,”¹⁰⁴ the reach of which was based more on perception than fact. The 1944 hit movie *Torment*, written by the later world-renowned film director Ingmar Bergman, suggested, for example, that Swedish schoolteachers were influenced by the Nazis,¹⁰⁵ when, in fact, teachers were largely immune to Nazi propaganda and the teacher organizations rejected National Socialism as a creed.¹⁰⁶ (In the movie, a cruel teacher nicknamed Caligula, “a thinly disguised Heinrich Himmler,”¹⁰⁷ inflicts pain and anguish on his students when they cannot recite Latin grammar forms.)

More generally, as we have shown, the Swedish school system was inherently different both from the official image of Nazi Germany’s schools and from the disorderly reality. The connection was nonetheless made, giving a tremendous impetus to plans to reform the education system. Certainly, the movement in favor of such plans and its ideas—a progressivism “with an emphasis on activity pedagogy” grounded in “psychological thinking rather than the European *Bildung* tradition,” in which “the ‘child in the center’ was advocated together with a plea for

¹⁰³ However, in the case of Ziemer’s book, it is noteworthy that the Swedish translation completely changed the meaning of the text by omitting some crucial paragraphs, in which the author discusses the potential educational lesson of Nazi Germany. Ziemer, in fact, did not suggest that democratic states should abandon a teacher-centered and disciplined form of education. On the contrary, he favored an education that produced students who are almost as fanatical about democracy as German students were about National Socialism, utilizing what he perceived to be Hitler’s educational tools: “We hear it said that American schools must be free from discipline, that boys and girls must have liberties, that education must be made as easy and palatable as textbooks and teachers can make it. Hitler has discarded those theories ... Hitler is making Nazis with every means at his disposal ... We give boys and girls freedom and Democracy and Life, but we do not, as we should, train them to realize the benefits of these gifts.” See Ziemer, *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*, 187.

¹⁰⁴ Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 128.

¹⁰⁵ Birgitta Almgren, *Krossade illusioner: fallet Kappner och nazistisk infiltration i Sverige 1933–1945* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 2019), 282.

¹⁰⁶ See Højeberg, *Utmaningarna mot demokratins skola: den svenska lärarkåren, nazismen och sovjetkommunismen*; Almgren, *Krossade illusioner: fallet Kappner och nazistisk infiltration i Sverige 1933–1945*. Almgren notes that Berlin constantly received dejected reports from Hermann Kappner, one of Germany’s most centrally placed influence agents in Sweden, documenting the absence of support for the National Socialist regime among Swedish teachers.

¹⁰⁷ Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 191.

individualization”—predated the Third Reich.¹⁰⁸ However, Germany’s defeat and the mistaken educational lessons drawn from National Socialism created both a political opportunity structure that could be exploited to realize those ideas in practice and a strong sense of urgency regarding the mission of the movement.

Indeed, while there had long been criticism of Sweden’s selective school system,¹⁰⁹ in which only the first six years of elementary school were mandatory for all children, “virtually all the contributions to the debate about the problems of education in the postwar period made reference to totalitarian experience, above all to the experience of Nazism.”¹¹⁰ The need for a new kind of school was now perceived as overwhelming by leading intellectuals of the era, including the theologian Emilia Fogelklou and the sociologist Alva Myrdal.¹¹¹ The latter was an influential thinker in the Social Democratic Party, and an admirer of the American educational philosopher John Dewey,¹¹² who, in a seminal essay, had presented Herbartianism as “an expression of German authoritarianism.”¹¹³

These intellectuals wanted to make a wholesale break with the past and move toward a more “democratic” form of education, aimed not at producing individuals who were mere human automatons enslaved to authority, but instead at developing a free and critical personality in children and adolescents. Their reasoning may be said

¹⁰⁸ Ingrid Carlgren et al., “Changes in Nordic Teaching Practices: From Individualised Teaching to the Teaching of Individuals,” *Scandinavian Journal of Education Research* 50, no. 3 (2006), 302.

¹⁰⁹ Before 1962, education after elementary school (*folkskola*) was divided into two separate, voluntary tracks: (i) intermediate school (*realskola*), which could be followed by college-preparatory school (*läroverk*), and (ii) vocational schooling.

¹¹⁰ Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 190.

¹¹¹ Emilia Fogelklou-Norlind, “Kan man fostra till fred,” *Skola och Samhälle*, no. 3–4 (1945); Alva Myrdal, “Kulturell återuppbyggnad,” *ibid.* Myrdal wrote: “The re-education of aggressive nations is not in itself sufficient: even those of us in more peaceful nations bear the sin of nationalism within us.” See Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 189–90.

¹¹² On the influence of Dewey on Alva Myrdal and her husband, the economist Gunnar Myrdal, see, e.g., Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 105–06.

¹¹³ Johannes Bellmann, “Re-Interpretation in Historiography: John Dewey and the Neo-Humanist Tradition,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 23, no. 5 (2004), 481.

to have been crystallized in the words of the British pedagogue A.S. Neill, whose anti-authoritarian book *The Problem Teacher* was translated into Swedish in 1944: "Today the chief law of school is: Thou shalt obey. But the chief law in life is: Thou shalt refuse to obey. The only obedience of value is the obedience a man has to his inner self. All external obediences are a curse to his growth. In its psychological component this is the conflict between Fascism and Democracy."¹¹⁴

Along with other prominent Social Democrats, Myrdal was appointed as a member of a parliamentary commission set up in 1946 to refashion the educational system. The Schools Commission, which published its final report in 1948, proposed the creation of a new, unitary school system, in which all students would be taught together for the first nine years. It was highly critical of the existing educational structures and reiterated many of the ideas expressed toward the end of and immediately after the war: "It turned," Östling writes, "against what was perceived as a medieval element in the educational aim of the time, with its belief that young people should be brought up to obey and accept authority. It turned against the strong civil service tradition that characterized the Swedish school system: the adherence to establishment thinking, the bureaucratic rigidity, and the inhibition of dynamism."¹¹⁵

The Schools Commission also harshly denounced prevailing pedagogical methods, calling the practice of teacher-led instruction "authoritarian to its core,"¹¹⁶ and criticized the existing educational content. Traditional humanistic subjects, for instance, were said to concern themselves with "dead matter that lacked significance

¹¹⁴ Alexander Sutherland Neill, *The Problem Teacher* (London: Jenkins, 1939), 47. On the influence of Neill in Swedish educational debate, see Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget*, 188.

¹¹⁵ Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 186.

¹¹⁶ SOU 1948:27, *1946 års skolkommissons betänkande med förslag till riktlinjer för det svenska skolväsendets utveckling* (Stockholm: Ecklesiastikdepartementet), 5.

both to an understanding of cultural development at large and to a better understanding of the problems of our own age.”¹¹⁷

As Östling notes, the report represented a complete turnaround from Neo-Humanism, whose ideals had been deemed uncontroversial only four years earlier, in 1944.¹¹⁸ Indeed, in the proposed unitary school system, teachers were to step back from their traditional role as knowledgeable authority figures, charged with leading the work carried out in the classroom. The Schools Commission instead wanted to promote “students’ independence and critical thinking, their will to work and to work independently, their sociality and capacity to co-operate,” and allow “students to develop activities and initiatives themselves.”¹¹⁹ It also called for a curriculum that was grounded in students’ everyday experiences.

What had happened in the intervening years was, as discussed above, a recognition of the crimes of Nazism and their perceived association with the kind of teacher-led instruction upon which the established Swedish school system was based. As the Schools Commission’s first chair, Education Minister (later Prime Minister) Tage Erlander, wrote in his memoirs: “We had during the years of Nazi rule in Europe become aware that one of the most important tasks of the school system is to educate people so that they ... do not become blind to what is happening in society. The school system must provide youths ... with a sense of participation in the shaping of society ... If so, schools cannot at the same time be organized in an authoritarian fashion.”¹²⁰

After a trial period in the 1950s, during which research that found significant academic deficiencies compared to the old education system was concealed,¹²¹ the

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 30.

¹¹⁸ Östling, *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*, 186.

¹¹⁹ SOU 1948:27, *1946 års skolkommissons betänkande med förslag till riktlinjer för det svenska skolväsendets utveckling*, 5.

¹²⁰ Tage Erlander, *1940–1949* (Stockholm: Tidens förlag, 1973), 237.

¹²¹ See Karin Hadenius, *Jämlikhet och frihet: politiska mål för den svenska grundskolan* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1990), ch. 4 and 5.

unitary school system was formally introduced in 1962. The first two curricula of the new system reflected the ideas presented by the 1946 Schools Commission. For example, while students in Herbartian philosophy were believed to mature through the self-disciplined study of domain-specific knowledge, the 1962 curriculum indicated that such traditional teaching was at risk of being dull, stultifying, or even anti-democratic. The curriculum stressed, reflecting the Deweyian child-centered perspective, that schools “should work from norms that the students accept and rules that they help to develop.”¹²² The curriculum enacted in 1969 even more explicitly emphasized that teacher-led instruction and the imparting of knowledge were of lesser importance than stimulating the students’ active role in the learning process.¹²³ All terms associated with traditional knowledge-based schooling, such as “culture” and “education,” had, consequently, been removed from the curriculum by the Ministry of Education.¹²⁴

The new direction for Sweden’s schools caused significant dissatisfaction within the teaching community. As early as at the start of the 1970s, many teachers wanted to leave the profession.¹²⁵ The emergence of widespread and severe disciplinary problems in the unitary school system contributed further to teachers’ dissatisfaction, but the problems were ignored and even denied by the Social Democratic government.¹²⁶ The term “discipline” itself had in the late 1960s been denounced by Education Minister (later Prime Minister) Olof Palme as associated with

¹²² Swedish National Board of Education, *Läroplan för grundskolan* (Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen, 1962), 13.

¹²³ See *Läroplan för grundskolan: Lgr 69* (Stockholm: Utbildningsförlaget, 1969).

¹²⁴ Hadenius, *Jämlikhet och frihet: politiska mål för den svenska grundskolan*, 228.

¹²⁵ Johan Wennström, *Lärare utan frihet: när vänstern och högern kidnappade lärarprofessionen* (Stockholm: Samhällsförlaget, 2014), 48.

¹²⁶ Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget*, 214.

the “ideals of an authoritarian society.”¹²⁷ Yet, a sufficient number of teachers of the old tradition remained in the unitary school system so that the methods used in Swedish classrooms in practice did not change much during the first decades after the war.¹²⁸

The Social Democrats acknowledged and were frustrated by this state of affairs. For example, addressing the 1975 party congress, Schools Minister Lena Hjelm-Wallén said that “we are forced to acknowledge that today’s schools to a large extent are characterized by the classical imparting of knowledge, which has been inherited from school system to school system and fashioned on values from a society completely different from ours.”¹²⁹ Alva Myrdal more bluntly stated that the older generations of teachers had to disappear before the desired changes to the school system could be realized.¹³⁰

What Myrdal did not know was that she, ironically, echoed *Reichjugendführer* Baldur von Schirach (“We can only hope that this [teacher] type will soon die out”).¹³¹ She and the other architects of Sweden’s post-war education policy also failed to realize the similarities between the school system they envisioned and the education system of the Third Reich. Not only did both systems rely on resentment against traditional teacher authority, but both also emphasized the desirability of a more youthful and dynamic form of education, as is shown by our discussion above.¹³² The

¹²⁷ Ibid., 224. It was customary in pedagogical circles at the time to describe all attempts to guide or set limits on children’s behavior as “authoritarian.” See Gunnar Ohrlander, *Kunskap i skolan* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1981), 126–28.

¹²⁸ Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen: historien om skolans uppgång, fall och möjliga upprättelse*, 81–82; Bo Rothstein, *Den socialdemokratiska staten: reformer och förvaltning inom svensk arbetsmarknads- och skolpolitik* (Lund: Arkiv förlag, 2010 [1986]), 114.

¹²⁹ *Den socialdemokratiska staten: reformer och förvaltning inom svensk arbetsmarknads- och skolpolitik*, 114.

¹³⁰ Ohrlander, *Kunskap i skolan*, 126.

¹³¹ Horn, “The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich,” 431.

¹³² The Swedish author and teacher Carl-Göran Ekerwald also remembers advisers who “mocked more senior teachers’ methods and demanded more chaos, play, clamor, jest” arriving in the schools. See Carl-Göran Ekerwald, *Tabula rasa: fragment av ett liv* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2008), 147.

comparison can be extended even further. Indeed, as observed by the educationalist Charles Glenn:

The Nazi understanding of education had definite affinities as well as clear disagreements with [progressive reform pedagogy], which had, for the previous four decades, called for a less intellectual education with more focus on development of the heart than of the head. The Nazi polemic against overintellectual education was consistent with the alternative schooling, which many enthusiasts for child-centered education had called for and in some cases implemented, though with a very different final intention. Reform pedagogy was concerned with development of the unique person on the basis of his or her natural gifts and inclinations, while the Nazi educators wanted to create loyal followers and future leaders; what they had in common was that both minimized what could be learned from tradition and human experience, and sought to create a new humanity through education.¹³³

The closeness and convergence between National Socialism and progressive reform pedagogy had, as we have seen, an antecedent in the war pedagogy employed during the First World War, the child-centered methods of which were believed to “amplify the pupils’ zeal for the war by engaging pupils more personally and bringing the present into the classroom.”¹³⁴ Children subjected to this kind of pedagogy, as discussed earlier, became crucial for the rise of National Socialism, and later served as leaders in the Nazi regime. Thus, not only did the Swedish education reformers inadvertently come to share certain traits with the educational ethos of National Socialism, but they also implemented methods similar to those that spurred Nazism in the first place.

¹³³ Glenn, *Contrasting Models of State and School: A Comparative Historical Study of Parental Choice and State Control*, 158.

¹³⁴ Donson, "Why Did German Youths Become Fascists? Nationalist Males Born 1900 to 1908 in War and Revolution," 342.

However, it is important to note that the dominant idea underlying the Swedish unitary school system was not typical progressive reform pedagogy of the kind that influenced *Kriegspädagogik*, but an even more individualistic variant, in which the responsibility for learning is in practice more or less entirely transferred to students themselves.¹³⁵ This was apparent already in the report of the 1946 Schools Commission, which stressed that “the individuality of the student” should always be “the starting-point of ... education.”¹³⁶ The formulation did not just reflect the view that students’ level of maturity should be considered, but rather that respect should be shown for the feelings of the individual student and his or her degree of interest in the schoolwork, and that collective educational norms and practices should be eliminated.¹³⁷ Indeed, as later explained by Stellan Arvidson, another influential member of the Schools Commission, the ideal was that 30 children in a classroom would study from 30 different curricula.¹³⁸

Of course, due to teacher resistance, such extreme individualization did not take place during the first decades of the unitary school system. Yet, things did begin to change when large groups of older teachers retired in the early 1990s and were replaced by younger ones, who had been trained in anti-authoritarian teacher-education programs,¹³⁹ while “student influence” for the first time was enshrined in law.¹⁴⁰ Echoing Tage Erlander, the original chair of the 1946 Schools Commission, Education Minister (later Prime Minister) Göran Persson declared that “[i]f schools are to raise free and independent persons, then schools themselves must function

¹³⁵ Donald Broady, "Trettio år efteråt – ett återbesök hos den dolda läroplanen," *Kritisk utbildningstidskrift (KRUT)*, no. 127 (2007), 11–12.

¹³⁶ SOU 1948:27, *1946 års skolkommissions betänkande med förslag till riktlinjer för det svenska skolväsendets utveckling*, 3.

¹³⁷ Ohrlander, *Kunskap i skolan*, 122–23.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹³⁹ See Jonas Linderöth, *Lärarens återkomst: från förvirring till upprättelse* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 2016), ch. 4.

¹⁴⁰ Government Bill 1990/91:115, *Om vissa skollagsfrågor m m.* (Stockholm: Swedish Parliament).

democratically,” and that teachers should use “democratic methods” rather than rely on more traditional, “authoritarian instruction.”¹⁴¹ “Practically all regulations, institutions, incentives, and values now pointed in the direction of student-centered education and student influence,”¹⁴² and were embraced not only by the Social Democrats, but also by the center-right parties, including the liberal-conservative Moderate Party.¹⁴³ Consequently, students were given increasingly more responsibility for their own education, assessing their own needs and abilities as well as supervising their own activities at school.¹⁴⁴

A 2003 survey asking 9th graders how often they worked individually without instruction in school found that 50 percent did so several times a day, up from 25 percent in the early 1990s.¹⁴⁵ In mathematics, 79 percent of students reported doing so during every, or almost every, lesson. What emerged from these findings, according to the Swedish National Agency for Education, was an “image of an increasingly isolated and individualized education, in which students are working in isolation from both the teacher and the other schoolchildren.”¹⁴⁶ This view was later corroborated by international comparative surveys. For example, in the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Swedish 8th graders spent more time working individually, without teacher instruction, during mathematics lessons than students in any other participating country.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴² Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen: historien om skolans uppgång, fall och möjliga upprättelse*, 86.

¹⁴³ Johan Wennström, “Marketized Education: How Regulatory Failure Undermined the Swedish School System,” *Journal of Education Policy* (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2019.1608472>

¹⁴⁴ Carlgren et al., “Changes in Nordic Teaching Practices: From Individualised Teaching to the Teaching of Individuals.”

¹⁴⁵ Swedish National Agency for Education, *Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003 – sammanfattande huvudrapport* (Stockholm: Skolverket, 2004).

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴⁷ Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen: historien om skolans uppgång, fall och möjliga upprättelse*, 93.

Thus, in the 1990s and first decades of the 2000s, the individualistic and purported anti-Nazi ideals of the 1946 Schools Commission were, in fact, to a large extent realized. Students were granted considerable freedom to direct their own studies as well as given far-reaching rights, which, as it turned out, often worked against the interests of teachers. Threats and violence against teachers became increasingly common during the early 2000s;¹⁴⁸ yet, the Swedish National Agency for Education and civil courts made it almost impossible to suspend violent students. Even milder disciplinary measures, such as after-school detention, were prohibited, or at least narrowly restricted.¹⁴⁹ (In some cases, the Child and School Student Representative, an arm of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, has ordered financial compensation for unruly or threatening students who have been suspended or temporarily removed from school.) Instead of being allowed to use disciplinary approaches, teachers were called upon to show deference and use dialogue to establish “trusting relations” with their students.¹⁵⁰ In sum, if in the 1970s disciplinary problems were simply ignored, later generations of teachers were, in effect, asked to accept them. Here, too, we find a similarity with the National Socialist school system as it actually existed in practice.

During the same period as the above-mentioned changes were taking place, there was also a steep decline in student performance in international surveys like TIMSS, and in diagnostic tests for new university students.¹⁵¹ In addition, teaching became an increasingly unattractive profession, particularly for high-achieving

¹⁴⁸ Maria Jelmini, "Lärare utsätts för hot och våld," *Svenska Dagbladet*, January 31st 2014.

¹⁴⁹ Karin Thurffjell, "Mer kvarsittning i friskolor: 'Ska inte syssla med straff'," *ibid.*, April 14th 2017.

¹⁵⁰ Swedish National Agency for Education, "Ordningsregler viktigare för trygghet och studiero än disciplinära åtgärder," 2018. <https://www.skolverket.se/om-oss/press/pressmeddelanden/pressmeddelanden/2018-10-15-ordningsregler-viktigare-for-trygghet-och-studiero-an-disciplinara-atgarder>

¹⁵¹ See Magnus Henrekson and Sebastian Jävervall, *Educational Performance in Swedish Schools Is Plummeting – What Are the Facts?* (Stockholm: Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences, 2017).

students and children of teachers.¹⁵² While the decline in student performance requires a far closer examination than we can give here, it appears plausible that Sweden's failure to draw the right educational lessons from National Socialism, which, in the long run, resulted in a dismantling of teacher authority and the introduction of radically student-centered pedagogical methods, ultimately contributed to the decline in quality.¹⁵³

Most importantly, however, there is little to suggest that the pedagogy Sweden's post-war reformers sought to abolish had much to do with Nazi atrocities in the way they apparently believed. It was Germany's youth who became the most loyal supporters of the National Socialist regime, willing to engage in violence and even die for Hitler. Their schooling had virtually nothing to do with Germany's old educational order, which, on the contrary, was destroyed by "an organization of politicized, activist youngsters which looked on with equanimity mingled with joy."¹⁵⁴ Similarly, prominent Nazis of an older generation were educated under the child-centered war pedagogy of the First World War, which was crucial for galvanizing enthusiasm for war among children and ultimately helped give rise to the Nazi movement. Had the Swedish reformers been aware of these facts, they may have been more hesitant to actively, and enthusiastically, erode authority in their own education system during the decades that followed.

Conclusions

Few settings evoke imagery of discipline and obedience in popular imagination as the National Socialist schooling system, with supposedly goose-stepping children blindly

¹⁵² See Emil Bertilsson, *Skollärare – rekrytering till utbildning och yrke 1977–2009* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2014).

¹⁵³ Research, in fact, suggests that the fall was causally related to the general shift toward student-centered teaching. For a longer discussion of this point complete with references, see, e.g., Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen: historien om skolans uppgång, fall och möjliga upprättelse*.

¹⁵⁴ Horn, "The Hitler Youth and Educational Decline in the Third Reich," 436.

following strict orders from their teachers. Such imagery is also in line with how the National Socialists themselves portrayed their schools, and how education in Nazi Germany for long was viewed in historical scholarship. The education system in the Third Reich was moreover seen as a direct descendant of the preceding conservative system, which was built on Neo-Humanist principles of structured, teacher-led instruction and hierarchical relationships between students and teachers.

However, we now know that Nazi-German schools, far from being dominated by authoritarian teachers, were characterized by utter chaos. Youth rebellions in the classroom, instigated by the HJ and tacitly sanctioned by Hitler himself, led to a radical decline in student achievement and acute teacher shortages already soon after the Nazi ascendancy to power. There is also considerable evidence to suggest that it was this disorderly education system, rather than the traditional pedagogy of the old German educational order, that helped generate large numbers of active participants in the Nazi street violence of the 1930s, including *Kristallnacht*, and, ultimately, the Holocaust. As in many other social spheres, official Nazi decrees demanding authoritarian practices in schools mostly served to disguise subversive and revolutionary practices aimed at destroying traditional institutions.

Senior Nazis, too, received an education that was vastly different from the Neo-Humanist principles of the old educational order. Indeed, youths born from 1900 to 1908, including several key Nazis who became paramount for the National Socialist movement and regime, experienced instead the war pedagogy of 1914–1918. During these years, curricula and teacher methods were fundamentally changed to glorify the war effort and, much like the school system of the Third Reich, cultivate children's natural aggressive tendencies. Rather than reinforcing the Neo-Humanist type of instruction, war pedagogy also included a move toward child-centered methods, which helped to generate a greater zeal of war among students.

In other words, prominent National Socialists who led the movement to political victory, and became leading Holocaust perpetrators in the Third Reich, spent formative school years in a system that was very different from the one that later, mistakenly, became viewed as a precursor to Nazi schooling. Importantly, the educational anomaly of war pedagogy during the First World War has been highlighted in historical research as a key explanation for why these particular birth cohorts came to dominate membership in, and spearhead, the National Socialist movement after 1918. Moreover, given the similarities between the war pedagogy of the First World War and Nazi education, it seems that this generation to some extent tried to recreate the former when it came to power in 1933.

This article has argued that the misinterpretation of the nature of Germany's school system, before and during the Third Reich, was a crucial factor behind the radical post-war shift in education policy that took place in Germany's then closest cultural neighbor—Sweden. Since the late 1800s, the Swedish education system had been based on the very same Neo-Humanist ideas and practices that dominated German schools until 1933 (with the exception of 1914–1918). However, toward the end of and immediately after the Second World War, as the horrors of the Holocaust were revealed and all things German became associated with National Socialism in Swedish public debate, this system was seen as culpable in Nazi crimes. To help shape “democratic” citizens, the argument went, Swedish schools had to abandon traditional teacher authority and promote student influence. All this stood in sharp contrast to the priorities of post-war Germany, where National Socialist schooling was correctly identified as alien to the country's educational traditions, thus prompting a return to the pre-Nazi, Neo-Humanist ideals.

Ironically and inadvertently, therefore, the Swedish school system that developed after 1945 came to share certain traits with the true Nazi educational credo, including resentment against teacher authority and a strong emphasis on youthful,

dynamic education, as well as the child-centered methods of war pedagogy. While it took time to redirect the inner workings of schools, partly due to strong teacher resistance, the goals of the post-war educational reformers were eventually realized in the 1990s, when older teachers retired and student influence was enshrined in law. These changes were then soon followed by a steep decline in student achievement and deteriorating student behavior. Ultimately, this fall in quality can likely be traced to the post-war policy shift inspired by the misguided educational lessons drawn from Germany.

Certainly, the move toward child-centered teacher practices and student influence was not simply a reaction to the experience of National Socialism. The ideas on which the post-war reforms were based emerged before the advent of the Third Reich. In addition, there are likely unrelated socio-economic and cultural explanations for Sweden's march toward progressivism.¹⁵⁵ Given the fact that the reforms were influenced by psychological ideas, the technocratic tradition within Swedish policymaking, which historically has relied heavily on the advice of social scientists,¹⁵⁶ is also a possible contributing explanation. Thus, our argument is not that the educational lessons drawn from Nazism were the sole factor behind the pedagogical shift, but that it was a key factor instrumental in precipitating the hasty policy U-turn from the educational principles on which the Swedish school system had been based up until that point.

Interestingly, it appears it was not just education policy that changed outside Germany due to a misinterpretation of National Socialism and the forces behind the Holocaust. Future research should closely examine how other policy fields were impacted in Sweden and elsewhere. We suggest studying, for example, developments

¹⁵⁵ See Heller-Sahlgren and Sanandaji, *Glädjeparadoxen: historien om skolans uppgång, fall och möjliga upprättelse*.

¹⁵⁶ Andreas Bergh and Gissur Erlingsson, "Liberalization without Retrenchment: Understanding the Consensus on Swedish Welfare State Reforms," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 32, no. 1 (2009).

in social and criminal policy. As mentioned *en passant* by Gunnar Richardson, the year 1945 and the defenses at the Nuremberg Tribunals marked the transition from a moralizing discourse in society to a psychological one, which views and *understands* (as opposed to judges) criminals and delinquent children as mere victims of environmental circumstances and psychosocial trauma. "In other words," Richardson writes, "Martin Luther had to give way to Freud and Adler, priests to psychologists and physicians."¹⁵⁷

Another fruitful line of research would be to study, in detail, how the Nazis' deceptive appropriation of terms such as "nation" and "nationalism" has tainted the terms as morally suspect, thus barring them from our political language. Related to this, it would also be relevant to study how the Western perception of Hitler as a strong believer in nationhood has influenced post-war discussions and policies on borders, migration, and the nation state. These suggestions are just a few examples; there is potentially an abundance of cases of the "authoritarian veil" of Nazism giving rise to misconceptions that continue to affect democratic societies to this day. Identifying and analyzing such cases is a worthwhile research enterprise indeed.

¹⁵⁷ Richardson, *Hitler-Jugend i svensk skol- och ungdomspolitik: beredskapspedagogik och demokratifostran under andra världskriget*, 213.